

What Dangers Do The Clashes In Nagorno-Karabakh Bring For Belarus?

Saturday 2 April witnessed intensive clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijan forces in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The same day Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka ordered the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Relations to start consultations with their Armenian and Azerbaijan colleagues.

Moreover, the Belarusian leader held telephone conversations with Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev and Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan. In spite of Belarus' membership of the OSCE Minsk group, which has been the only more or less active platform for negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since 1992, this reaction of the Belarusian authorities demonstrates their deeper interests and concerns about the situation.

Lukashenka's interests in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Some experts consider Belarusian activities in the current conflict as a continuation of Lukashenka's policy to transform Belarus into a kind of regional Switzerland that provides a reliable platform for solving regional and even global issues.

However, the Ukrainian case remains the only example of relative active Belarusian participation in the process of conflict resolution. Other recent initiatives, including statements to promote Minsk as a place to resolve the Middle Eastern conflict, look extremely odd and ambitious for a

country such as Belarus.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka's interest to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is much older than the Ukrainian war. In November 2009 the Belarusian president rather unexpectedly made several statements on this issue, emphasising Belarusian interests in engaging to resolve other conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

According to some sources the main reason for Lukashenka's peace initiatives was the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to US president Barack Obama in October 2009

There are permanent rumours within the Belarusian establishment that the main reason for Lukashenka's peace initiatives was the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to US president Barack Obama in October 2009. Lukashenka is rumoured to have given orders to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to "win" the Nobel Peace Prize for him.

However, the apparent lack of Belarusian capacity to influence the process, deteriorating relations with the West after the presidential elections in December 2010, the economic crisis of 2011 and Lukashenka's receipt of the parody Ig Peace Nobel Prize in 2013 definitely cooled the president's ambitions.

One might claim that Belarus' more or less successful experience in conflict resolution in the case of Ukraine and recent improvements in relations between Belarus and the West give Lukashenka a new chance to pursue his "peacekeeper" position in the region, regardless of the Nobel Peace Prize. However, the year 2016 differs from the year 2009.

Belarus' interests in the

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

In January 2015 Armenia officially joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) free trade bloc. The absence of a common border between Armenia and the other EEU member states seems non-conducive for economic integration and has caused numerous concerns in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev has expressed these concerns clearly, pointing out the unclear status of Nagorno-Karabakh in the EEU. Belarus refrained from making direct statements on this issue, but the Belarusian authorities have joined their colleagues from Kazakhstan in discussing this issue at a number of working meetings.

The governments of Belarus and Kazakhstan believe that Armenia will play the role of 100% Russian ally in the EEU management and policy-making, and will promote the idea of transforming the EEU from an economic union into a politically and militarily integrated entity.

Armenia considers Nagorno-Karabakh a key issue for its own national survival. No Armenian politician admits even the theoretical possibility of returning Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Armenian officials, as well as society in general, completely understand the growing gap between the military capacities of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia's economic vulnerability compared to Azerbaijan, its full dependence on arms supplies from Russia and Russia's key influence on the dynamics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

the military budget of Azerbaijan exceeds Armenia's military budget eight to nine times

According to some estimates, the military budget of Azerbaijan exceeds Armenia's military budget eight to nine times. Russia has supplied weapons to Azerbaijan worth a total of about

\$5bn, while to Armenia supplies totaled only about \$400m (however, such a comparison should take into consideration lower prices for Armenia).

In this context, official Yerevan is seeking ways to secure sustainable and incontrovertible Russia's support for the Armenian position in the conflict. Russia's intentions to promote deeper integration, including furthering political and military rapprochement, match Armenia's goals. Since Armenia joined the EEU, Russia has strengthened its forces at the Erebuni military airbase and has intensified the integration of the Armenian air defence forces into the Russian air defense system.

Unfortunately, these intentions contradict the interests of Belarus and Kazakhstan, who would like to preserve the purely economic character of the EEU. Both governments understand that Russia and Armenia could use the current clashes as a precedent to strengthen the role of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and / or further deeper integration within the framework of the EEU.

The current Nagorno-Karabakh clashes in the context of Belarusian foreign policy

Belarus' positions on the current clashes appears to be one of the most critical towards Armenia. While Kazakhstan has called for an immediate ceasefire and a solely peaceful solution of the conflict, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has called for strengthening the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

Baku's financial support for Belarus during the gas conflict

with Russia in 2010, as well as close personal relations between Lukashenka and Aliyev, are no secret

This fact demonstrates Belarus' deep concerns about the "politisation" of the current clashes. The issue of the Russian airbase in Belarus, which has still not been officially removed from agenda, sparks these concerns. Even Kazakhstan, which has directly supported the position of Azerbaijan in recent years, has not risked mentioning the principle of territorial integrity.

Until April 2016, Belarus maintained close political and economic cooperation with both main parties of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as a balance between respecting the positions of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Baku's financial support for Belarus during the gas conflict with Russia in 2010, as well as close personal relations between Lukashenka and Aliyev, are no secret.

Despite Azerbaijan's more significant economic importance for Belarus (both in terms of goods turnover and trade balance), the Belarusian authorities have managed to maintain close relations with a part of the Armenian political and economic elite, in particular with businessman and politician Gagik Tsarukyan.

Armenia is deeply bewildered because of Belarus' position

The Armenian authorities reacted immediately. The country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded on 3 April explanations from the Belarus Ambassador to Armenia, emphasising its deep bewilderment because of Belarus' position.

Whether Armenia will forget Belarus' calls for "territorial integrity" and be satisfied with the Belarusian ambassador's explanations remain under question.

Risking relations with Armenia

Neither party in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict expected Belarus' support in the current clashes, nor do they need it. However, Belarus understands that these clashes have a far less local character than they would have several years ago.

Belarus' direct engagement in deeper military and political integration with Russia has become increasingly unavoidable, while it completely contradicts the authorities' intentions. Only an immediate ceasefire and return of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into a "frozen" one can prevent Belarus from a clear withdrawal from further Russian initiatives such as the long-planned airbase in Belarus.

It seems that Belarus is more ready to risk its relations with Armenia than to support de-facto strengthening of Russia's role in the region.

Aliaksandr Filipau

PhD in Political Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Extended Education at the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts; Expert of NGO "Liberal Club"

Belarus refuses to support Russia over Crimea issue at

the UN

Efforts of the Belarusian diplomacy at the main part of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly at the end of 2015 brought mixed results. Alexander Lukashenka's [statements](#) during the high-level segments of the session went largely unnoticed.

Belarusian diplomats did rather well on the issues of human trafficking and international cooperation in recovery of the areas affected by Chernobyl. Anxious to maintain good working relations with the IAEA, Belarus even refused to support Russia's protest over the status of Crimea.

But Belarus' desperate fight against international human rights criticism had no immediate effect. The country's efforts to secure an observer status for the Eurasian Economic Union at the UN failed so far.

Fighting UN human rights procedures

At this session, Belarus came close to declaring an all-out war to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). It has been using all means available to force it into abandoning the practice of special procedures and country-specific resolutions.

☒ Belarus became a target of a country-specific procedure in 2012. Then, the HRC established the mandate of a special rapporteur on Belarus and appointed Miklós Haraszti to this position. Ever since, Belarusian authorities have refused to recognise this mandate and [stubbornly ignored](#) Haraszti's attempts to establish communication with the Belarusian government.

Minsk is no longer eager to cooperate with the HRC's thematic procedures. Michel Forst, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, named Belarus among the states, which failed to respond to his repeated requests for a country visit.

Belarus: a UN body is used for settling political scores

At this session, Belarus strongly defended its “fellows in misery” and voted against the UN resolutions on human rights situation in North Korea, Iran and Syria. The Belarusian delegation maintained that the country-specific mechanisms enabled the “states with the resources to do so” to legitimise their own unilateral measures.

The Belarusian delegation insisted on several occasions that the Human Rights Council was becoming a platform for “settling political scores” and the setting of standards not agreed upon internationally.

This conviction led Belarus to requesting a vote on a resolution on the report of the Human Rights Council. In its vote against the resolution, Belarus was seconded only by Israel, which disagrees with the HRC's treatment of the issue of Palestinians' rights.

Capitalising on the fight against human trafficking

Belarus successfully introduced a resolution on improving the coordination of efforts against trafficking in persons. The resolution adopted by consensus has decided to convene a high-level meeting on this topic at the 72nd session of the General Assembly in 2017, immediately after the general debate.

Alexander Lukashenka will most likely go to New York on this

occasion to score points on his diplomats' [most successful international initiative](#).

Indeed, this Belarusian undertaking enjoys strong support even from the countries, which criticise Belarus on other issues, such as the United States. The representative of Luxembourg, who spoke on behalf of the EU, welcomed the introduction of the resolution by Belarus, as well as its readiness to take views into account during the negotiation process.

Belarus also succeeded in getting itself re-elected to the UN Commission on International Trade Law for another six-year term beginning 27 June 2016.

Rekindling the topic of Chernobyl

After the Belarusian authorities took a political decision in 2006 to [build a nuclear power plant](#) in the country, the Chernobyl disaster moved down on Belarus' foreign policy agenda.

Nevertheless, Belarus is determined to use the 30th anniversary of this [nuclear accident](#) in 2016 to secure further international assistance for the long-term recovery of the affected areas.

☒ On 7 – 10 December, deputy foreign minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) visited the UN headquarters. There he met a number of high UN officials to discuss two priority Chernobyl-related events.

On 26 April 2016, the General Assembly will held a special commemorative meeting, initiated in 2013 jointly by Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, in observance of the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe.

More importantly, in April 2016, Belarus will host a high-level international conference dedicated to the forthcoming anniversary. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other high officials may come to Minsk to attend this event.

The Belarusian authorities expect the conference to help shaping the new strategic plan on Chernobyl issues for the period after 2016, when the current policy framework will expire.

Belarus fails to support Russia in its fight on Crimea issue

Anxious to maintain good relations with the UN agency involved in the post-Chernobyl assistance, Belarus even refused to support Russia in its demarche against the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) by the General Assembly. Russia requested a vote on the resolution, which was always adopted by consensus, because the report of the IAEA spoke of Crimea as "occupied territory".

Russia and nine other countries abstained during the voting. However, Belarus refused to join them. A representative of Russia's closest ally stated after the vote that his country had endorsed the resolution since it supported the IAEA's activities and its annual report.

Seeking international recognition of the Eurasian Integration

The Belarusian diplomacy tried hard to play the card of the country's presidency in the newly-born Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 to strengthen Belarus' international status. The foreign ministry regarded the acquisition by the EAEU of the observer status in the UN General Assembly as a major

point in this strategy. Getting the status was also one of Belarus' declared priorities for the 70th session.

This initiative, which Belarus' delegation tabled at the UN on 19 October, [went astray from the start](#), when Georgia and Azerbaijan opposed it. The two countries used this opportunity to remind the fellow UN member states about their grievances in the bilateral relations with Russia and Armenia respectively.

EAEU's observer status falls a prey to bilateral grievances of ex-USSR countries

The consultations on the EAEU observer status, which went on an almost daily basis, failed to forge a consensus. On 20 November, Azerbaijan reiterated its opposition to this decision noting that its objection was in regards to the presence of Armenia as member. Two countries are at odds over the status of Nagorno-Karabach.

The delegation of Turkey backed up Azerbaijan's position saying that, as the EAEU's founding document was long and had many addenda and protocols, Turkey required more time to examine it.

As the delegation of Belarus was loath to initiate a vote on the draft resolution, the Legal Committee agreed to defer a decision on the request for the observer status to the next UNGA session. Belarus thus failed to secure this status for the EAEU during its presidency in the organisation.

The 70th UNGA session clearly demonstrated that, in order to succeed in multilateral diplomacy, Belarus needs to move further away from the Russian world and embrace constructive cooperation with Western democracies.

Strengthening Links with Autocratic Friends – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Despite his regained ability to travel to Europe, President Alexander Lukashenka's 'social circle' has so far remained limited to leaders of countries that have difficulties in their relations with Western democracies.

In the past month, the Belarusian president has become his country's most diligent diplomat. He welcomed his Serbian and Azerbaijani counterparts in Minsk and travelled to Vietnam and Turkmenistan on official visits, focusing on trade and investment but also working on reinforcing political ties.

However, he had to postpone his most important foreign trip – to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin – due to the two countries' disagreements over relations with Turkey and the Russian air base in Belarus.

Serbia: trading political support for investment

On 18 – 20 November, Serbian president Tomislav Nikolic visited Belarus on an official visit. According to his Belarusian counterpart, Serbia remains Belarus' 'key trade and economic partner in the Balkans'.

Trade and investment issues dominated the bilateral agenda. Trade has been growing steadily since 2009 and reached \$245m

in 2014. However, the two countries are unlikely to reach their [declared target of a \\$500m turnover](#) in the coming years.

Nikolic came to Minsk to launch the latest project of Dragomir and Bogoljub Karic, two Serbian brothers who have been implementing [several investment deals](#) in Belarus. The businessmen have undertaken the construction of multifunctional complex Minsk-Mir at an estimated cost of \$3.5bn, having received undisclosed incentives from the Belarusian president.

At the inauguration ceremony both presidents made public the surprising idea of gathering the presidents of the former Yugoslavian republics in Minsk in 2016 and involving these countries in the construction of Minsk-Mir.

Nikolic also thanked Lukashenka for his continued support of Serbia's territorial integrity. In fact, ten days earlier Belarus voted against admitting Kosovo to UNESCO. This initiative fell three votes short of being adopted.

Azerbaijan: a scheduled meeting of close friends

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev came to Belarus on a one-day official visit on 28 November. As the trip took place only a few days after Turkey downed a Russian warplane, some analysts hurried to suggest that Belarus and Azerbaijan, both close to Russia and Turkey, arranged an express meeting to discuss possibilities for mediating the emerging conflict.

However, these conclusions are groundless. The presidents of Belarus and Azerbaijan keep a [regular schedule of yearly meetings](#). This time around they signed a number of important bilateral documents, which had been drafted well in advance, including an agreement on social and economic cooperation

valid up to 2025.

Lukashenka and Aliyev reiterated the strategic nature of their relationship. However, Azerbaijan fails to see Belarus as a strategic market for its goods. Bilateral trade is strongly one-directional. In 2014, Belarusian exports to Azerbaijan were worth \$318m and its imports from Azerbaijan a mere \$8.7m.

Belarus is looking to further increase its exports and to [attract Azerbaijani investments](#). Azerbaijan may be more interested in military-industrial and scientific cooperation and technology transfers. Both countries support each other in the international arena.

Vietnam: reinforcing an outpost in South-East Asia

[Lukashenka](#) made his first foreign trip following his re-election to Vietnam on 9 December. This was not an intentional tribute to the two countries' strategic partnership.

During his one day visit to Hanoi, Lukashenka met all the  top leaders of the country. Belarus and Vietnam agreed to foster their bilateral ties in a wide range of areas, going well beyond the prioritised trade relationship.

Vietnam has been [seeking technology transfers and industrial cooperation](#) with Belarus, particularly in the petrochemical industry, engineering, and automobile assembly. Reportedly, the Belarusian businessmen who accompanied Lukashenka on this trip signed contracts with their Vietnamese colleagues worth \$350m.

This is a huge amount taking into account the existing trade turnover (only \$169.3m in 2014). Routinely, Belarus and Vietnam agreed to aim at a \$500m turnover in the near future.

The Belarusian president postponed his visit to Moscow, which was originally scheduled for 25 – 26 November. Belarus and Russia explained the postponement as a result of the extreme workload of both Lukashenka and Putin. However, a more plausible explanation is Belarus' unwillingness to jeopardise its relations with Turkey by having to comment in Moscow on the warplane shoot-down incident. Another reason might be a lack of an agreement on the issue of a Russian air base in Belarus.

Turkmenistan: supporting falling trade and playing peacemaker

On his way back to Minsk, Alexander Lukashenka made a stopover in Ashgabat on 10 – 12 December for an official visit and a celebration of the 20th anniversary of Turkmenistan's neutrality.

Bilateral turnover has been falling dramatically since 2013. It amounted to \$67.7m in January- September 2015. As with Azerbaijan, it remains a one-way street with Belarusian exports largely dominating.

✘ The 'flagship project' of the two countries' economic relations remains the Garlyk mining and processing complex for potash fertilisers in Turkmenistan, which is being built by a Belarusian company. Turkmenistan is also one of the largest buyers of Belarusian MAZ trucks.

Furthermore, Belarus has become a preferred destination for [Turkmen students](#). Over 9,000 Turkmens have been studying in Belarusian universities.

On his third day in Ashgabat, Lukashenka used a statement at

an international conference dedicated to Turkmenistan's neutrality to call for dialogue between Russia and Turkey. 'It is essential to find a solution, to make a concession. At least, a way to take a half-step towards each other should be found to de-escalate the tension', Lukashenka said.

It is highly probable that Lukashenka met Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the sidelines of the summit in Ashgabat. However, publicising such a meeting, if it indeed took place, would not be in Lukashenka's best interests. Russian public would be unlikely to respond positively to its ally's contacts with Russia's sworn enemy. It is already unhappy with Belarus' neutrality in this conflict.

Lukashenka has been trying to capitalise on his good personal contacts with a number of foreign leaders, seeking investments and exports revenues for his currency-stripped county. It appears that he is not willing to engage in political liberalisation to gain access to the West's much larger financial assistance and further decrease his dependence on Russia.

Human Rights Pariahs Support Belarus at the UN – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

On 29 October, Belarusian diplomats had another verbal joust on the issue of human rights in New York. They managed to gather significant support from other international pariahs. However, the adoption of a UN resolution stating concern over the human rights situation in the country appears to be a certainty.

The Belarusian foreign ministry also promoted the Eurasian Economic Union, as an integration partner of the EU and as an observer at the UN. They are unlikely to get a quick and positive reaction in Brussels. In New York, they are facing difficulties at fostering a consensus among the UN members.

Human Rights Battle in New York

On 29 October, the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly held interactive dialogues with experts on the human rights situation in some countries.

Miklós Haraszti, Special Rapporteur on the situation of  human rights in Belarus, said in his statement that the human rights situation in the country continued to deteriorate. He expressed much concern over the situation with freedom of opinion and expression, including freedom on Internet.

The special rapporteur described the recent presidential elections as “orchestrated”. He also reminded the committee that Belarus remained the only country in Europe with no opposition represented in parliament.

Miklós Haraszti was appointed a special rapporteur on Belarus in 2012. The government of Belarus has [refused to recognise](#) his mandate. The regime denies Miklós Haraszti’s entry to Belarus and ignores his attempts to establish communication.

In reply, Irina Velichko, a Belarusian diplomat, harshly criticised Haraszti’s conclusions. She claimed that the report on Belarus was “politically motivated and openly biased”. In her opinion, the special rapporteur had distorted the human rights situation in the country and referred to sources containing “only negative information”.

China, Cuba, North Korea, Syria, Russia, Venezuela and Zimbabwe are among Belarus's supporters at the UN

The delegations of the US, the UK, Norway, the Czech Republic, Switzerland and the EU supported Miklós Haraszti's conclusions. However, twenty delegations backed Belarus directly, or questioned the need for country-specific mandates and regretted the politicisation of human rights. The list of sympathisers towards the Belarusian regime has featured China, Cuba, North Korea, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe but also Russia and five other post-Soviet countries.

The heated debate in New York shows that despite the [positive trend in relations](#) with Belarus, Western countries have no intention to cease insisting on Belarus' adherence to its international obligations. In its turn, the Belarusian authorities, notwithstanding their engagement in a [direct dialogue](#) with Europe and the US on human rights issues, have failed to adjust their tactics of stubborn denial of the dire human rights situation in the country.

Reviving the Idea of the “Integration of Integrations”

On 13 October, Andrei Yeudachenka, Belarus' permanent representative to the EU, acting on behalf of the EAEU, passed an aide-mémoire entitled “The Eurasian Economic Union – the European Union: Cooperation Outlines” to an EU official in Brussels. The full text of this document, widely publicised by officials and state-run media, remains unavailable to the general public.

✘ The non-paper has failed to include a single reference to any common values, such as democracy, rule of law, good governance or human rights, as a basis for suggested cooperation. The EAEU sees the “gradual creation of a common

economic space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans” as the ultimate goal of this exercise.

Among the practical instruments, the EAEU countries suggest is the reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers, the approximation of technical regulation systems, and the attraction of direct investment. They also invite the EU to consider concluding a free trade agreement in the future.

The non-paper includes a specific reference to the "integration of integrations", which it describes as a “conjugation and mutual consideration of economic integration processes”.

Since 2011, Belarusian president [Alexander Lukashenka](#) has promoted this idea at any convenient occasion. In September, [speaking from the UN rostrum](#), he described it as “the most topical trend of the modern world”.

The idea of "integration of integrations" looks stillborn

To date, a [comment by Štefan Füle](#), the former EU commissioner, remains the only instance of a positive EU public reaction to the idea of “integration of integrations”. It seems though that it was a personal opinion of an outgoing bureaucrat.

The idea of “integration of integrations” between the EAEU and the EU looks stillborn and nothing more than a nicely coined phrase. However, it does not preclude the Belarusian authorities from actively exploiting the idea at home and abroad. The current Belarusian presidency in the EAEU provides a favourable setting for such an exercise.

EAEU Pushed Through at the UN

Besides presenting the EAEU as an equal partner of the EU, Belarus actively promotes the EAEU at the United Nations.

On 19 October, Andrei Dapkiunas, the permanent  representative of Belarus to the UN, introduced at the United Nations a [draft resolution](#) on granting the Eurasian Economic Union an observer status in the General Assembly.

The Belarusian ambassador insisted that the EAEU's purposes and principles were consistent with the interests of the General Assembly in the fields of sustainable development, international trade, ecology and other areas.

The General Assembly grants observer status to intergovernmental organisations whose activities are of interest to the Assembly. This status enables representatives of an observer organisation to participate in the debate on topics' within its mandate.

Together with an additional speaking opportunity, observer status provides an important form of international recognition, which the EAEU clearly needs. The adoption of this resolution is among the [Belarusian delegation's official priorities](#) at the current session.

On most occasions, the General Assembly grants similar requests without much deliberation. However, this initiative of Belarus and its fellow EAEU members provoked opposition from two delegations.

Belarus' initiative at the UN caused disagreements

The representative of Georgia expressed concern that the organisations' founder, Russia, flouted international obligations by occupying and annexing the territories of its neighbour States. Azerbaijan's representative expressed regret that Armenia, an EAEU member, continued to illegally occupy a part of the territory of Azerbaijan.

These statements have indicated that the draft resolution lacks consensus. A vote on the application to observer status

would seriously undermine the EAEU's international standing. If their efforts to foster consensus fail, the draft's sponsor may have to withdraw it. A decision is expected during the coming weeks.

Belarus Engages Ukraine, Moldova, Improves Ties with EU and US – Foreign Policy Digest

The summer holidays proved to be productive for the relations of Belarus with both "old" and "new" Europe.

Foreign minister Vladimir Makei ended a continued pause in high-level contacts with Belarus' southern neighbour by an unconventional five-day long visit to Ukraine in mid-August. There, he took the risk of enraging Russia by meeting its mortal foe Mikheil Saakashvili in Odessa.

The EU Council significantly reduced its sanctions list against Belarus on 31 July and a US congressional delegation came to Minsk two days later. In exchange, Minsk agreed to discuss human rights with its Western partners, seemingly ending a long tradition of denial of any major problems in this sphere.

Will Minsk's diplomacy manage to continue befriending Russia's foes without alienating its main sponsor until right after the October presidential election?

Step-by-Step Cooperation with the West

On two separate occasions in July, the EU Council removed 26 persons and 4 companies from its Belarus' [sanctions](#) list. On 3 August, the Belarusian foreign ministry called this decision "a step in the right direction yet insufficient" and conditioned the normalisation of relations between Belarus and the European Union by the full withdrawal of restrictions.

On 28 July in Brussels, Belarus and the EU held the first round of a human rights dialogue at the level of experts. Two months earlier, on 14 May, Belarus conducted similar consultations with the United States in Washington, DC.

On 2 – 4 August, a three-person US [congressional delegation](#) led by Dana Rohrabacher, the chairman of the subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and emerging threats visited Belarus. In Minsk, the congressmen met with [President Lukashenka](#), deputy foreign minister [Alexander Guryanov](#), and National Bank chairperson [Paviel Kalavur](#). The parties discussed bilateral relations, human rights and democratisation issues, the state of the Belarusian economy, and regional security, including the crisis in Ukraine.

Belarus implements a step-by-step agreement with the West in the run-up to the election

These decisions and meetings hardly represented a chaotic chain of events. They manifest specific agreed steps in the step-by-step strategy adopted by Belarus and its Western partners in the run-up to the 2015 presidential election. In the near future, one should expect more similar events. The release of [Mikalaj Statkievich](#), the most prominent political prisoner in Belarus, at which Lukashenka hinted during his interview to independent media outlets on 4 August, may become one of the key items in the list.

Ukraine: Trade, Peace-making or Both?

Belarusian foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) surprised many observers with his unusually long 5-day visit to Ukraine. Belarusian media provided scarce coverage to this trip, which took place on 12 – 16 August. The fact that public opinion in Belarus predominantly [sympathises with Russia](#) in its conflict with Ukraine may explain this discretion.

In Kyiv, Vladimir Makei met with his counterpart Pavlo Klimkin and Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko. The parties claimed to have discussed a wide variety of issues, from cooperation in international organisations to joint projects between Belarusian and Ukrainian regions.

Two issues clearly dominated in the visitors' agenda: the conflict in southeast Ukraine and trade relations. The Belarusian minister seized the opportunity to re-emphasise Belarus' merits in the [peace process](#). However, he took care to restrict the country's role to technical and logistic support for the negotiations, stressing that Belarus had no ambitions as a peacemaker.

Belarus unequivocally recognises Donetsk and Luhansk as an integral part of Ukraine

Makei's insistence on the need of strong adherence of all parties in the conflict to the Minsk agreements served to avoid unduly worrying or alienating Russia. At the same time, answering a question from a Ukrainian journalist, he unequivocally recognised Donetsk and Luhansk regions as an [integral part of Ukraine](#).

The visit's topmost priority was the trade relations between the two countries. In 2014, Ukraine was Belarus' second-biggest export destination. The war in Ukraine and the

economic crisis in the region led to a 46.2% [drop in Belarusian supplies](#) to this country in the first half of 2015. Belarus has lost almost one billion dollars in export revenues in this single relationship.

Three weeks earlier, on 24 July, Belarus and Ukraine already discussed the alarming downfall in mutual trade at a meeting of the bilateral trade and economic cooperation commission in Chernihiv, Ukraine. The two countries decided to draft "road maps" of cooperation in the spheres of manufacturing cooperation, energy, transports and logistics.

After Kyiv, Vladimir Makei travelled to Odessa where he met Mikheil Saakashvili, the governor of Odessa region and former president of Georgia. The official explanation for this encounter was Belarus' interest in expanding its use of the transit infrastructure of Ukraine's south seaports.

The peculiarity of this meeting is that Saakashvili remains one of the most hated personalities in Russia, in Belarus' closest ally. However, despite his strong pro-Western views, Saakashvili often supported Lukashenka in his contacts with influential Western leaders, as a token of gratitude for Belarus' refusal to recognise the breakaway Georgian regions.

Eastern Partners Remain in Favour

Despite the widely publicised strategy of opening new markets for its exports, Minsk still seeks to develop trade with its tried-and-tested partners. In May, Alexander Lukashenka [visited Georgia](#). During the recent few weeks, besides sending his foreign minister to Ukraine, Belarusian president received his counterpart from Moldova, Nicolae Timofti, and Azerbaijani prime minister Artur Rasizade.

Belarus will assemble MAZ buses in Moldova

Lukashenka reaffirmed that Chisinau's policy of association

with the EU would not hamper bilateral relations or entail any retaliation from Belarus. Two countries have decided to move from regular trade to manufacturing cooperation. The [knockdown assembly of Belarusian tractors and trolleybuses](#) has already become a success. The next project is to start assembling Belarusian MAZ buses in Moldova. In its turn, Moldova will open a winery in Belarus.

Alexander Lukashenka decorated Azerbaijani prime minister Artur Rasizade with the Order of Peoples' Friendship. These two political long-timers [meet regularly](#) to discuss economic relations between Minsk and Baku. As is the case with Moldova, Belarus prioritises cooperation in assembling Belarusian equipment in Azerbaijan.

Belarus has been persistent in strengthening cooperation with its Eastern Partnership neighbours despite the fact that most of them adopted the policy of estrangement from Russia. Minsk has thus been demonstrating its preference for pragmatic approach and emphasis on trade rather than geopolitics.

Belarus Engages with the US, Improves Ties with Europe and Post-Soviet Countries – Foreign Policy Digest

Belarusian diplomacy has been shifting the country's relations with the West into high gear seeking to capitalise on Belarus' newfound importance for regional stability.

"The Europeans ... are ready to cooperate with us, including for

the sake of security in Europe. We say to them that we're always open to [talking]", President Lukashenka claimed while inspecting a riot police unit on 5 March. And indeed several EU and US delegations have visited Minsk lately.

Belarus also held bilateral consultations with half a dozen European countries last month. However, any tangible result from these talks, besides the obvious thaw in relations, has yet to materialise.

The foreign ministry also held a series of consultations with post-Soviet countries centred mostly on economic relations. However, the failure to unite most of the former USSR republics around a celebration of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII has become a telling sign of the group's growing disunity .

Lukashenka Disregards Protocol

On 27 February, Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) received Eric Rubin, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. The same day, a US delegation led by Eric Rubin met with Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#).

Lukashenka: No stability is possible without the Americans

Even keeping in mind the United States' role in global affairs, meetings at this level represent a baffling imbalance. A deputy assistant secretary is strictly a mid-level position in the State Department, roughly the equivalent to a deputy head of a department in Belarus' foreign ministry.

Lukashenka may simply have been excited at the prospect of improving relations with the West, seeking to get a sense of the ongoing negotiations firsthand.

The US envoy expressed his country's appreciation for the

positive role Belarus has played in efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine. The Belarusian president, as he revealed in his interview to Bloomberg on 31 March, insistently stated during the meeting that "no stability [was] possible in Ukraine without the Americans", so "they must get involved in [the peace] process immediately".

Belarus and the US discussed the possibility for improved cooperation in trade, non-proliferation, and combating human trafficking. Both parties chose to admit existing disagreements in their press statements. Eric Rubin emphasised long-standing US concerns over human rights and democracy.

Belarus – EU: A Bilateral Track

In late February and March, Belarus sustained the intensity of its interactions with European countries seeking to benefit from a marked thaw in relations while also trying to reformat the existing framework of cooperation.

The talks with Europe have developed simultaneously along two tracks: bilateral cooperation with specific EU countries and cooperation with the EU as an institution focusing on the Eastern partnership, a dialogue on modernisation and visa issues.

Two deputy foreign ministers worked on developing closer ties with Lithuania. While [Alena Kupchyna](#) focused on discussing Eastern Partnership issues with a Lithuanian delegation in Minsk on 27 February, her colleague [Alexander Guryanov](#) went to Vilnius and Klaipeda on 5 and 6 March to look at trade and investment cooperation. Belarus seeks to increase its transit of goods through the Klaipeda seaport, and the Lithuanian authorities are happy to oblige them.

Belarus deftly exploits Hungary's Eastern policy

These very Belarusian diplomats also worked in tandem in

building relations with Italy. On 3 March, Alena Kupchyna hosted her Italian counterpart Benedetto Della Vedova for the first bilateral consultations since 2009. Their most important decision was to schedule the first-ever meeting of an intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation in January 2016 in Rome. Alexander Guryanov went to Milan and Rome from 18 – 21 March to prepare for Belarus' participation in Expo 2015 and strengthen cooperation with the Italian Export Credit Agency SACE S.p.A.

The Hungarian Deputy State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Csaba Balogh headed his country's delegation on bilateral consultations in Minsk on 4 – 5 March where he spoke with Alena Kupchyna and Vladimir Makei. Belarusian diplomats have exploited to the utmost of their ability Hungary's Eastern Opening strategy, a policy proclaimed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2010, making this country one of Belarus' closest partners in Europe.

Also in March, Belarusian diplomats held working-level consultations with their European colleagues from Belgium and Poland in Minsk and the Czech Republic in Prague.

Belarus – EU: An Institutional Track

On 9 March, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna visited Brussels for a fifth round of consultations on modernisation, mapping out the best form of future cooperation. While few details have emerged, human rights may have been in focus.

Oddly formatted EU delegation visits Minsk

Three days later, Belarus and the EU held a third round of talks on [visa facilitation](#) and readmission agreements in Minsk. Again, officials from both sides have refrained from leaking much information. Rumor has it that both parties are very likely to ink the agreements at the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga. However, due to technical reasons (e.g.

translations into all EU languages, etc.) there is no chance that they will have the documents ready to sign by May.

On 19 March, Alena Kupchyna received a delegation of high-level diplomats from Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. This unusual grouping of diplomats resembled a reconnaissance mission to help the EU understand how far Belarus is ready to go in its relations with Europe in the context of the latest developments in the region. Discussion was confined to the forthcoming summit in Riga.

Post-Soviet Relations: Emphasis on Bilateral Component

Minsk has also focused on strengthening ties with its post-Soviet partners. On 12 March in Tashkent, Belarus and Uzbekistan held the fourth meeting of an intergovernmental commission on bilateral cooperation, with an emphasis on trade.

On 18 – 19 March, Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander Mikhnevich](#) went to Tbilisi to prepare for Alexander Lukashenka's visit to Georgia. His colleague Alexander Guryanov visited Kyiv on 23 March to discuss how to support trade ties that have suffered as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

Post-Soviet countries are no longer united on commemorating WWII

Finally, on 10 March, Alexander Lukashenka received Yaqub Eyyubov, the Azerbaijani First Deputy Prime Minister. They focused on investment opportunities. Belarus has a few joint ventures in [Azerbaijan](#), which manufactures trucks, tractors and lifts. However, Minsk is also interested in attracting Azerbaijani capital to Belarus.

Yet, former Soviet Union republics are quickly growing apart. Their common history is increasingly less binding. This year,

only eight post-Soviet countries out of fifteen (Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) supported various efforts to commemorate the 70th anniversary of WWII, such as a film screening in New York or a joint statement at the Human Rights Council.

In this shifting reality, Minsk's decision to emphasise a bilateral track in its ties with these post-Soviet countries, which are no longer interested in Moscow-centric relations, should finally pay off.

Belarus OKs European Integration of Moldova, Offers to Promote China in Europe – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#), unlike his Russian counterpart, sees no immediate problems for Belarus in Moldova's association with Europe. However, he is dissatisfied with the existing level of trade and investments in Belarus' relations with most CIS countries.

Belarus succeeded in obtaining a \$24m grant from China. In exchange, the Chinese delegation got a promise of Minsk's help in increasing China's influence in Europe.

Lukashenka Talks to CIS Leaders

On 24 and 25 September, the Belarusian leader paid an official visit to Moldova. Lukashenka and his counterpart Nicolae Timofti focused on trade and economic relations. Belarus is already implementing or developing several knockdown assembly projects for agricultural machinery and public transport vehicles in Moldova.

Lukashenka reassured the Moldovan public that the signing and ratification of the association agreement between the EU and Moldova would not affect the latter's relations with Belarus: "Don't dramatise ... We need to create new forms and look for new ways of cooperation".

On 6 October, Lukashenka received Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov. This move meant to emphasise the importance Belarus attaches to its relations with this fast-developing partner.

The Belarusian leader expressed his dissatisfaction with the current volume of bilateral trade: "For us to have the turnover of \$300m or even \$500m – it is embarrassing even to talk about it". Again, Lukashenka has demonstrated his eagerness to set up a knockdown assembly in Azerbaijan counting on local financing of such projects.

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov visited Minsk on 8 October. Two international outcasts seem to go along rather well. They signed 14 cooperation agreements in different areas.

Turkmenistan has taken serious interest in development of cooperation in academic research and education. The leading project in the economic area is the construction by Belarusian companies of the potash mining and processing facility in Garlyk.

Finally, Lukashenka met with Uzbekistani President Islam Karimov on the sidelines of the CIS summit in Minsk. The official communiqué on the meeting's results is much less

enthusiastic than the reports on similar Lukashenka's encounters with his CIS counterparts.

Islam Karimov even mentioned "many instances of interpretations and speculations in mass media" about alleged contradictions in relations between two countries. This comment served more to confirm these speculations rather than to refute them.

Eurasian Integration Meetings in Minsk

On 10 October, Belarus hosted the summits of three post-Soviet integration structures – the CIS, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Eurasian Economic Community.

The only CIS head of state missing from this gathering was Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. The Ukrainian authorities have yet to finalise their position on the country's membership in the CIS. Besides, Ukraine cannot simply ignore the unwillingness of most CIS 'brothers' to help it in stopping Russia's encroachment on Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Alexander Lukashenka indirectly acknowledged this situation: "It is probably unacceptable that the burning issues that relate to Ukraine are being dealt with somewhere far way, in Berlin or Milan". He spoke in favour of paying more attention to security in the framework of the CIS.

The CIS summit proved to be another routine event. It ended with adoption of 15 documents dealing with humanitarian, law enforcement and other issues. The members of the EAEU also signed an agreement on Armenia's accession to this Union.

Expanding Ties with Latin America

The Belarusian foreign ministry actively seeks to secure a good footing in Latin America. [In June](#), [Vladimir Makei](#) visited Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua. In September, he met with his

counterparts from the last two countries in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA.

Meanwhile, one of his deputies, [Alexander Guryanov](#), made a working tour of Latin America on 24 September – 1 October. In Argentina, Uruguay, Chili and Peru, he met with his counterparts in the foreign ministries as well as with local business leaders and regional governors. The trade and economic cooperation was a dominant topic of most meetings. Alexander Guryanov promoted Belarusian agricultural machinery and heavy duty lorries.

Belarus is actively using Venezuela as a showroom of successful cooperation. In September, Ecuadorian Minister of Industry Richard Espinosa Guzmán visited Belarusian-built plants in Venezuela. He also met there with Belarusian Deputy Minister of Industry [Hienadz Svidzierski](#). The officials discussed prospects for implementing similar projects in Ecuador.

In the same context, Belarus and Columbia held consultations in Minsk on 29 September.

The Belarusian diplomats are doing their best to follow direct instructions of their president. Mr Lukashenka sees great potential in the region's markets, especially after the success in Venezuela.

Maintaining Momentum with Europe

On 29 September – 1 October, Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) visited Brussels for the third round of consultations on modernisation. The parties focused on the issues of transports, energy and environment. Kupchyna seized this opportunity to discuss pressing issues of political relations between Belarus and the EU with some top EU officials.

On 8 October, Belarus and Hungary hold the fifth meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation and a

business forum in Minsk. László Szabó, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, led the Hungarian delegation there.

While the Commission discussed many trade and economic issues, they made an emphasis on development of cooperation in the banking sector. Two major Belarusian banks, Belarusbank and Belagroprombank, signed cooperation agreements with the Hungarian [Eximbank](#).

Belarus and Hungary enjoy strong working relations over several recent years. Hungary's conservative government sympathises with strongmen like Putin and Lukashenka.

Aliaksandr Khainouski, Belarusian ambassador to Hungary, maintains active dialogue with the country's central and local authorities on a wide range of issues. It also helps a lot that Alena Kupchyna, the current Deputy Foreign Minister in charge of relations with Europe, was Khainouski's immediate predecessor in Budapest.

During recent weeks, Belarus also held consular consultations with Croatia and foreign policy consultations with Romania.

China Gives Impetus to the Industrial Park

On 26 September, a Chinese delegation led by Zhang Gaoli, China's Vice Prime Minister, visited Minsk and met with Alexander Lukashenka.

The top-ranking Chinese official came to Minsk to give an impetus to the project of the [China – Belarus Industrial Park](#). The Park is the most ambitious venture in Sino – Belarusian relations and the largest joint project for Belarus.

The visit's immediate result has been a grant of RMB 150m (\$24m) for electrification of the Park. China will issue this non-repayable aid under an intergovernmental agreement signed in Minsk.

During the meeting, Alexander Lukashenka was very enthusiastic about the relations with China. He described Mr Zhang's visit as a "very opportune" one and invited China to invest more in Belarus.

In exchange, Alexander Lukashenka promised to "help to increase China's influence in Europe". It is doubtful that China makes much use of Belarus' services for this matter.

Belarus Prioritises Latin America, Talks to the US, Influences Development Goals – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Over the past couple of weeks there was marked and clear pause in the active working-level [engagement between Belarus and many EU countries](#). Belarus has focused on strengthening its existing ties, while developing new ones in other regions, mostly Latin America and the CIS.

With their multilateral policy mandate, Belarusian diplomats have persisted in promoting the country's core initiatives, i.e. traditional family and trafficking in human beings.

Belarus also seeks to avoid or downplay any references to democratic values as well as political and civil rights in their official communications and documentation.

Latin America in Focus

Latin America came into clear focus for the Belarusian foreign policy establishment in the second half of June of this year. Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) paid official visits to three Central and South American countries – Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua. All three countries are at varying stages of development with regards to their relationship with Belarus.

Cuba is Belarus' oldest and staunchest ally in the region. It is not by mere chance that cooperation in international organisations has again taken centre stage in their bilateral talks. Belarus is eager to make use of Cuba's weight among other third-world countries. Cuba, for its part, values Belarus as one of its few European allies.

Both countries also seek to develop mutual trade. Currency-stripped Cuba has agreed to sell its high-quality pharmaceuticals to Belarus in exchange for Belarusian farming machinery supplies. The two countries have also signed a bilateral trade agreement to this effect.

Ecuador is Belarus' new darling in South America. Here, Belarus seeks to build a relationship similar to the one it has been able to develop with Venezuela. As with Venezuela, the focus is on oil, military and technical cooperation as well as agriculture.

Lukashenka has recently appointed Igor Poluyan, the country's presumably best expert on Latin America, as his first ambassador to Quito. Ecuador will soon reciprocate by opening its first diplomatic mission in Minsk.

Vladimir Makei, in his interview to with the main Belarusian state TV channel, insisted that the two countries had made a great deal of progress in implementing the agreements they reached earlier through their presidents. Visa-free travel between Belarus and Ecuador seems to be the most resonant advancement to date. Not many ordinary Belarusians will be able to take advantage of this arrangement, though, as travel

costs will be prohibitively expensive.

Belarus is still at quite an early stage in its relations with Nicaragua. With Makei's visit, Minsk hopes to take the dialogue to the highest level.

In immediate practical terms, Belarus seeks to participate in the construction of the Nicaragua Grand Canal, an inter-oceanic waterway that will connect the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Belarus could supply its heavy duty BelAZ lorries and road-building machinery for this project.

Minsk is eager to develop military and technical cooperation and sell farming machinery and other industrial goods to Nicaragua. They are also interested in trying to enter other Central American markets through Nicaragua.

Strengthening Ties with Azerbaijan

On 20 June, President Alexander Lukashenka received Artur Rasizade, the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan and Ilham Aliyev's right hand, in Minsk. A political veteran himself, Rasizade has held his office only two years less than Lukashenka.

Lukashenka stressed the prioritised nature of Belarus' relations with Azerbaijan. He also expressed satisfaction with the current level of cooperation in all spheres. Speaking with Rasizade, Lukashenka emphasised his country's openness to investments from Azerbaijan.

It is worth noting that no reports about this meeting in Belarusian and Azerbaijani media outlets go beyond a short communique from Lukashenka's press service. No other events related to Rasizade's stay in Belarus have been reported on whatsoever. It is possible that the Azerbaijani Prime Minister was in Minsk on a private trip or on a special mission from Ilham Aliyev.

Two days before this odd meeting took place, First Deputy

Foreign Minister [Alexander Mikhnevich](#) visited Baku to hold foreign policy consultations. Mikhnevich met with his counterparts in the Azerbaijani foreign ministry as well as with several parliamentarians.

The parties discussed the full spectrum of their bilateral relations with economic issues, evidently, dominating the agenda. Besides expanding its exports to a fast-developing Azerbaijan, Belarus is actively seeking to attract investment from the former Soviet Republic.

In his recent interview to the Azerbaijani newspaper Respublika, Belarusian ambassador Mikalaj Patskevich to Azerbaijan made a pitch for Belarusian investment opportunities. He emphasised the advantages of the vast market of the Customs Union as well as the transit infrastructure of Belarus.

Bogus 'Visit to the US' and Sustainable Development Goals

The Foreign Ministry's press service depicted Deputy Foreign Minister [Rybakov](#)'s recent trip to New York as a 'visit to the US'. This choice of wording normally implies a bilateral event. In fact, no visits at this level are yet possible at this stage of relations between two countries.

Valentin Rybakov went to the UN headquarters to attend a meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. The Group has the mandate to formulate sustainable development goals for the next 10 to 20 years, a plan that is to be approved at the UN summit later this year.

Belarus actively sought to influence the wording of the final document. At this meeting, Rybakov presented a [proposal](#) based on the existing working document. The declared intention was to present the goals in a more concise and easy-to-understand way.

Two amendments introduced by Rybakov stand out. First, Belarus

sought to avoid any reference to democracy and human rights, even through the already emasculated the wording by pushing for 'rule of law and an effective and capable institution'.

Besides this, Belarusian diplomats continued to promote its favourite topic of [traditional family values](#). This time around they confined themselves to the cautious language of a 'family-supporting environment'.

However, another Belarusian delegation brought up this topic in a more straightforward way at a high-level meeting of the ECOSOC, which is also dedicated to sustainable development.

Belarus and the US: Discussing International Security

The same week that Deputy Foreign Minister Rybakov debated the sustainable development goals in New York, Belarusian and American diplomats met in Washington, DC to hold the first-ever bilateral consultations on international security. Ambassador Vladimir Gerasimovich, Head of the Foreign Ministry's International Security and Arms Control Department, represented Belarus at this meeting.

The two parties discussed a wide range of issues affecting global and regional security. This list included the non-proliferation of WMDs, export controls, disarmament and disposal of chemical weapons.

Two deputy assistant secretaries of state represented the US at these talks. Currently, this is the highest possible level for the US in its contact with Belarus. Considered alongside the very fact of such consultations, it shows that despite the presence of serious problems in political relations, the United States is willing to maintain a close dialogue with the Belarusian government on issues of international security that may affect the US' own national security.

Belarus and Azerbaijan: Similar Regimes but Different Treatment by the EU

On 20-21 November, Alexander Lukashenka visited Baku. He held talks with Azerbaijan state leader Ilham Aliyev and they opened the new building of the Belarusian Embassy in Baku. This building became a good sign of the quickly developing relations between the two countries.

Trade between the countries is swelling, partly because of Belarusian weapon exports to Azerbaijan, which irritates both Russia and Armenia. Aliyev is also trying to help Lukashenka with his dealings with Russia and the EU.

Aliyev's record of human rights violations appears worse than Lukashenka's. However, this does not prevent the West from maintaining good relations with the authorities of Azerbaijan, unlike those with Belarus. Belarus has no oil or gas, so its authorities are faced with a much tougher choice—either become Russia's vassal or democratise.

Topics for a Private Conversation

On 21 November, Alexander Lukashenka held one-on-one talks with Ilham Aliyev. Few people know what the leaders of Belarus and Azerbaijan were talking privately about, but they certainly had more than enough topics to discuss.

Belarus sells large quantities of weapons to Azerbaijan is helping it to [modernise its air defence](#). The Azeris remain important customers of the Belarusian defence industry. Minsk,

for its part, continues to tighten its economic relations with Baku. From 2006 to 2012 mutual trade increased six-fold, reaching \$223.3 million, with Belarusians assemble tractors, trucks, and buses in Azerbaijan. Because of the continuous deterioration of the Belarusian economy, even small contracts mean a lot.

Also, the parties could discuss the future of the Eastern Partnership summit. Both countries show little interest in the EU program. However, the West is much more pragmatic in its relations with Azerbaijan. The European Union invited Aliyev to the summit in Vilnius and the Parliament of Azerbaijan participates in the Euronest, the parliamentary component of the Eastern Partnership.

Azerbaijan, like other EU Eastern Partners, supports the Belarusian Parliament to become a normal member in Euronest. It also helped Belarus in conflicts with Russia. In the summer of 2011, Azerbaijan in one day made a decision to give Belarus a \$300-million loan to pay debts to Russia. In that period Azerbaijan also supplied oil to Belarus, having received oil from Venezuela through swap schemes.

Do Their Regimes Differ?

Lukashenka and Aliyev need each other. Although Belarus remains officially neutral in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Belarusian weapon supplies to Azerbaijan [weaken the position](#) of Armenia. Armenia, like Belarus, belongs to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and considers joining the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. The Belarus-Azerbaijan deals also irritate Moscow, which has a rather cold relationship with Baku.

Moreover, both authoritarian regimes profit from each other's existence. For the authorities of Azerbaijan, it is convenient that Western public opinion remains focused on human rights violations in Belarus and Lukashenka's policy, not Aliyev's.

Different Western approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan confirm the existence of double standards. That gives Lukashenka's regime a right to seek from the EU the same attitude towards it as EU has to Azerbaijani authorities, whose human rights record remains worse.

The elites of Belarus and Azerbaijan both govern with little respect of the rule of law. In both countries, parliaments and courts are not free and elections remain non-transparent. In the world rankings these countries often find themselves in close proximity. In the Democracy Index created by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Azerbaijan held the 139th position and Belarus 141st. In the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders Belarus occupies 157th position, while Azerbaijan sits at 156th.

Aliyev, however, is much more repressive to his own people. According to the Baku-based Human Rights Club, Azerbaijani authorities hold in their prison system 142 political prisoners. Moreover, 18 of them are serving life sentences. According to the Human Rights Center Viasna Lukashenka has 10 political prisoners in jails.

Lukashenka at least once, in 1994, won the democratic elections. Ilham Aliyev in fact inherited the presidency from his father. During preparations for Eurovision Song Contest Azerbaijani authorities evicted hundreds of residents from their homes and destroyed buildings to build Crystal Hallemerged, a place for the contest.

The EU approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan remain completely different.

The EU approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan remain completely different. The EU does not impose visa restrictions on the Azerbaijani leadership, it has not introduced targeted economic sanctions. EU top officials regularly meet with Aliyev. Moreover, during his visit to

Azerbaijan, the President of the European Commission Emmanuel Barroso did not meet with representatives of the opposition, and Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski did not even ask Aliyev about any human rights violations.

Will Aliyev Help Lukashenka?

Belarus-Azerbaijan relations remain important to the Belarusian authorities. Lukashenka and Aliyev meet almost every year, as well as other top officials from both countries who visit Minsk and Baku regularly. These meetings, in contrast to Lukashenka's visits to Myanmar and [Singapore](#), do result in much needed contacts.

During Aliyev's most recent visit to the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and Amkodor, the manufacturer of a special type of machinery, the two sides signed new sale agreements with Azerbaijani companies. Lukashenka also invited Azerbaijani investors to take part in the privatisation of Belarusian enterprises.

Lukashenka and Aliyev remain reluctant to lead their countries either east or west. Both feel comfortable as rulers of their own states. Unlike Azerbaijan, Belarus has no oil and gas, on which the West is dependent. Lukashenka remains in a more vulnerable position and is forced to make a choice of either gradually becoming a vassal of Russia or democratising Belarus.

The resource-rich Azerbaijani authorities do not face a similar dilemma. Their support of the official Belarusian Parliament in Euronest shows that they wish to help Lukashenka break his regime's isolation. However, the European Union invested too much effort in the confrontation against Lukashenka, which makes it very difficult to fully recognise the authoritarian Belarusian regime.

Why Belarus Sides With Azerbaijan, Not Armenia

At a meeting last week, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka did his best to persuade the Armenian foreign minister of Belarus' goodwill. But this was hardly convincing – the halcyon days of close relations between the two countries are long gone. Now Minsk is clearly siding with Azerbaijan, even though the latter is opposing Russian policy in the South Caucasus.

The USD 300 million loan given by the Azerbaijani president to Lukashenka this summer and visit to Baku by the Belarusian prime minister in July were just some recent signs of a strong partnership between Aliev and Lukashenka. Besides its neighboring nations in the post-Soviet area, Belarus maintains very close relations with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In the late 2000s Azerbaijan apparently became the single most important customer buying significant amount of weapons from Belarus.

New Friend

In the words of the the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs^{*}, cooperation with Azerbaijan was only activated “in recent years”. Until the mid-2000s, political relations were negligible and trade developed of its own accord. Lukashenka did not get along with former President Heydar Aliyev, a seasoned apparatchik of the Soviet period who looked down on Lukashenka as a young maverick.

Another reason for poor relations in the past was that Minsk tended to follow Moscow's foreign policy line. As a result, it developed relations with Azerbaijan's nemesis – Armenia. In

the aftermath of the Cold War, the only Belarusian embassy in the region was based in Yerevan. In the late 1990s, Minsk finally decided to establish a presence in Baku but the embassy was opened only after a considerable delay in 2006.

However, over the past decade, relations have improved dramatically. In Baku, Heydar Aliyev's son Ilham inherited presidential power in 2003. Already in 2004, the heads of state of Belarus and Azerbaijan broke with precedent by conducting mutual visits. This set the stage for four top-level visits from 2006.

At the same time, Belarus deviated from its stringent pro-Russian political line. Lukashenka found new friends – among them not only Yushchenko of Ukraine and Saakashvili of Georgia, but also Ilham Alyev. In this process, the enhanced international stature of Azerbaijan played an important role, especially after the country launched a new Caspian oil pipeline. Belarus could hope for support from Baku as a natural ally against Moscow in the post-Soviet area. Azerbaijan had long bolstered Russia's opponents; in the past, it even went so far as to establish the GUUAM – an alternative organization to pro-Moscow integration initiatives – with Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Although this organization is now moribund, Azerbaijan's attitude toward Moscow remains unchanged.

A second set of factors are economic. Between 2008 and 2010, Belarus-Azerbaijan trade grew from US\$ 100 m to US\$ 146 m. More important than this moderate increase is the fact that Belarus enjoys a trade surplus, which helps to counteract its immense foreign trade deficit.

Azerbaijan is also helping Belarus to acquire alternative oil sources. Minsk recently began importing oil from Venezuela but direct shipments to landlocked Belarus are difficult. Baku thus agreed to swap schemes by which Minsk gains access to Azerbaijani oil in exchange for Venezuelan oil.

Belarus Turned against Armenia

For Azerbaijan, an added incentive to work with Belarus is to garner support for military liberation of its territory occupied by Armenia and removal of self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabagh Republic. Negotiations in the OSCE Minsk group have rendered no results for years now. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani government has used its growing oil revenues to perennially increase its military budget. But a stronger military will not change the fact that Armenians have Russia behind them. Although Russia wants to preserve Azerbaijan as an ally in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan is eager to change the status quo balance of power. It is only a matter of time before armed conflict breaks out again between Azerbaijan and Armenia and it may occur as soon as the Azerbaijani government sees less sense in tolerating the current situation which helps Armenia to legitimize the present favorable reality for Yerevan.

If such a war should ensue, Belarus will probably side with Baku, the principal buyer of its weapons. It is notable that no arms deals were made prior to 2005 – there is thus an unquestionable link between a stronger Azerbaijani military and the initiation of bilateral arms deals. By contrast, Armenia bought a small number of weapons from Belarus just once, in 2007.

From Cooperation to Alliance

The development of the Belarusian-Azerbaijani alliance is practically a fait accompli. Azerbaijan is openly defending the Belarusian regime from criticism in the West, as the positions of Azerbaijani representatives in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and EuroNest have demonstrated. Alyev is also willing to help Lukashenka financially –in addition to the latest 300-million loan, not so long ago, Minsk borrowed from Baku to pay Moscow for its outstanding claims.

For Azerbaijan, the motives for working with Belarus are

political and economic. The Central Asian state needs all the support it can get if it wants to confront Armenia and Russia, not to speak of its tense relations with Iran. It cannot be very hopeful about Western support, given the influential Armenian lobby there (especially in the US and France). This makes support from former Soviet states all the more important. At the same time, the privatization of Belarusian industries and development of non-Russian oil supply routes is vital – Venezuela is a good example.

For Belarus, cooperation with Azerbaijan is important as a tool to put pressure on Moscow, to obtain financing, and to develop trade. In particular, Azerbaijan may allow Belarus to access non-Russian oil and gas from the Caspian and Middle Eastern regions (Iran and Northern Iraq). The greatest hurdle for such a project would be neither technical nor financial – the infrastructure is mostly already in place. Rather, it is political: the Russians will stubbornly fight to preserve their energy monopoly in Eastern and Central Europe, while the United States will work to block any regional energy projects that involve Iran.

SB

Unwanted Privatization

Last week Russia's President Vladimir Putin reiterated that privatisation of state enterprises is a necessary precondition for further financial support. The International Monetary Fund also insists on privatization in its recommendations. But many in Belarus – both in the government and in the opposition camps – bitterly oppose privatization.

Belarusian authorities still [control](#) the largest and most

profitable enterprises in the country. Nearly full ownership over the economy allows them to maintain tight control over politics as well. For instance, they can put pressure on any state enterprise to dismiss unwanted individuals who then will struggle to find another job.

The workers dislike the idea of privatization too. They know that nearly all state-owned enterprises need to cut their personnel to become more efficient. Keeping them employed is important for the state, but not for future private owners. Directors of state-owned companies also resist privatization because the new owners will inevitably replace them.

According to chairman of Belarus State Property Committee Georgy Kuznetsov, directors of state enterprises are not interested in privatization at all. At his July press conference he gave examples from various parts of Belarus – Lida, Baranavichy and Homel. After investors expressed interest in state enterprises based in these cities, their directors managed to lobby authorities to formulate conditions of privatization which any reasonable investor would refuse to accept. As a result, these enterprises remain state-owned and the directors keep their positions.

Many in the ruling elite and in the opposition are also concerned that Russia will become too powerful if it acquires large Belarusian state enterprises. Vladimir Putin recently admitted that he [considered](#) it very desirable for Belarus to be incorporated into Russia. That made many in Belarus, both on the government and the opposition side, worried. According to a once very influential Belarusian Prime Minister Vyachaslau Kebich, "The main aim of Russia is to totally swallow Belarus."

The Belarusian economy has been subsidized for decades by Russia. When Moscow reduced its subsidies in 2010 the Belarusian economy began to crumble and Russia is clearly

trying to take advantage of it. Belarus is still living through hyperinflation and its national currency has already lost nearly half of its value. Belarus [struggles](#) to gain external financial aid and privatization is the most obvious source of income, in addition to being a precondition for further external loans.

But foreign investors are not particularly enthusiastic about Belarusian privatization. They know that Belarus has an unstable legal regime and much depends on investors' personal connections. Moreover, the United States and the European Union imposed sanctions on a number of Belarusian companies which makes the already poor investment climate in the country even worse. That makes investments in Belarus risky. Russian businessmen well-connected to Kremlin clearly have an advantage over other potential investors.

Because of the non-transparent nature of the Belarusian economy and decision-making, it is usually not the highest bidder but the best connected who eventually signs privatization contracts. Over recent months, Belarus started selling stakes in large state enterprises. The recent example is the largest manufacturer of pump equipment in the former Soviet Union JSC Bobruisk Machine Building Plant. Now the majority belongs to a Russian financial group Hydromashservice.

In some cases the Belarusian government opts for a "delayed" privatization. Russia's Sberbank and Germany's Deutsche Bank agreed to provide a joint two billion dollar loan to state-owned Belkali, one of the world's largest producers of potash fertilizers. The loan was offered on the security of 35 percent of the company's stock. If this loan is not repaid, these banks would be entitled to take over a large stake of Belkali. Earlier this year, the Belarusian government also provided guarantees to the Finance Ministry of Azerbaijan which agreed to extend a \$300-million loan to Belkuskali.

Because of the unattractive investment climate and political risks in Belarus, many enterprises are sold at cheap prices. The authorities are forced to act quickly because of the depth of the financial crisis in the country. Some analysts think that the less control the state has over the economy, the more likely political changes are. Others fear the rise of Russia's influence and nod to examples of China and Russia where despite significant foreign investments political regimes remain undemocratic.

These days privatization is no longer optional for Belarusian authorities. With the advent of the cold season, it will be even more difficult to keep the sinking economy afloat. Without serious structural reforms or massive financial support from Russia, privatization will only help the authorities to win a few years before another crisis. The main problem is that the Belarusian government has neither the intellectual capacity nor the desire to implement serious reforms.

YK