

# Will Azerbaijan help Belarus to become more independent?

On 8 October 2017, Defence Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, visited Minsk. The visit lasted until 10 October. During the visit, Hasanov held meetings with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka as well as with all the senior military leadership of the country.

The Azerbaijani guest probably made an agreement with his Belarusian counterparts on widening military industrial cooperation and supplying Baku with “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems. Azerbaijan deems the new weapons necessary to balance an Armenian military build-up.

## “Iskander” vs “Polonaise”

One should definitely pay attention to the structure of the visit. First, Colonel-General Hasanov met with President Lukashenka. The Belarusian leader’s words during the meeting were vague yet revealing. “I do not want to make excuses about the nature of our cooperation. I just want to say that our relationship does not in any case violate any international treaties or resolutions of the UN Security Council. We are sovereign independent states, and we are entitled to identify the areas of cooperation which correspond to the time and the needs of our countries,” stated Lukashenka.



“Iskander-E” in Armenia. Source: azatutyun.am

Such statements hint at serious intentions of military-technical cooperation, particularly in the supply of

Belarusian “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to Azerbaijan. The arrangements have a certain logic: Armenia’s deployment of Russian “Iskander-E” tactical missile complexes on its territory has forced Baku to look for a symmetrical response.

The “Iskander-E” tactical missile complex can reach targets up to 280 km away. Armenia thus has a missile range that covers almost all of Azerbaijan. With the latest modifications, the Belarusian “Polonaise” system is capable of shooting to 300 km. This modification was presented during the ADEX-2016 military exhibition in Baku last year. Azerbaijan has also shown interest in Belarusian developments in areas of electronic warfare, radar systems, wheel chassis and anti-aircraft missile systems.

## **Belarusian weapons for Azerbaijani oil**

Having discussed the main issues of military cooperation with President Lukashenka, Colonel-General Hasanov spoke on more technical questions to the country’s top military leadership. On 10 October, the Azerbaijani Defence Minister signed a military cooperation plan for 2018 together with his Belarusian counterpart [Andrej Raŭkoŭ](#). As is usual in such cases, the details of the plan remain unknown to the public.

On the same day, Colonel-General Hasanov met with Belarusian State Military-Industrial Committee Chairman [Alieh Dvihalioŭ](#). In addition, Hasanov visited the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant and the “Belspetsvneshtekhnika” state enterprise, which, among other things, deals in arms exports. The Azerbaijani defence minister familiarized himself with the latest modifications to the MLRS “Polonaise,” as well as with air defence and electronic warfare means. At the final stage of his visit to Belarus, Hasanov held a discussion with Belarus Security

Council Secretary [Stanislaŭ Zaś](#).

It is also important to note that Secretary Zaś met with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, during his visit to Baku on 27 September 2017. Once again, military and industrial cooperation represented the main topic of the meeting. Supposedly, the Belarusian security council secretary came with a proposition to Baku and discussed the details with President Aliyev. The following step was Zakirov's visit to Minsk in order to present Azerbaijan's answer and sign the documents.



Zakir Hasanov near MLRS  
"Polonaise". Source:  
bsblog.info

While Baku mainly orients itself around military cooperation, Minsk is also hoping for the growth of economic relations between the two states. There is an assumption that the Belarusian military industrial complex might get financial support from Azerbaijan to develop and produce new weapons. With the economic slowdown Belarus is experiencing at the moment, such collaboration seems optimal for both states.

At the same time, Belarusian authorities are working to [diversify the inflow of energy resources to Belarus](#). Previous deals to supply Belarusian refineries with Azerbaijani oil have been successful. Widening such cooperation is essential for Minsk against a background of continually worsening relations with Russia.

On the subject of propitious Belarusian-Azerbaijani projects in various spheres, one should remember that Lukashenka and Aliyev are on good personal relations. The Belarusian leader visits Azerbaijan as often as Russia and China, which means places high importance on ties with Azerbaijan.

# Loud Yerevan, silent Moscow

The character of Belarusian-Azerbaijani relations raises serious questions in Armenia and Russia, who are Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) members along with Belarus. This situation becomes even more complex when the Belarus-Armenia relationship is taken into account. On the same day Colonel-General Hasanov began his tour of Minsk, Belarusian Special Operations Forces completed their maneuvers as part of the CSTO "Search-2017" military exercises, which took place on Armenian territory. This can serve as a canonical example of the Belarusian authorities' much-touted "multi-vector foreign policy."

But in terms of the Azerbaijan-Belarus relationship, one can expect harsh rhetoric from Yerevan. It is important to remember that at one time Armenia proposed to exclude Belarus from the CSTO. From the end of 2016 to the beginning of 2017, Belarus and Kazakhstan both attempted to block the appointment of an Armenian representative to the position of CSTO head. Supplying strategic weapons to Baku will definitely not make relations between Minsk and Yerevan any better.



Alexander Lukashenka and Ilham Aliyev.

Source: kp.by

One can't expect Russia to publicly show its disapproval of Belarusian-Azerbaijani cooperation. Moscow's options are to try to contain their partnership or to pressure Belarus. The reason for Russia's indirect reaction is clear: Russia itself is the largest weapons supplier to Baku. But Armenian authorities seem to have ignored this fact. They can blame Belarus for destabilizing the region and undermining the national security of a CSTO member-state, but Yerevan will never make the same claims of the Kremlin. Indeed, especially

not after having deployed Russian strategic weapons on its own territory.

The development of cooperation with Azerbaijan plays extremely important role for Belarus in the light of the latest Belarusian security agenda. After the [failure to carry out an information and public relations campaign](#) during the “West-2017” military exercises and a number of provocations from Russia, Belarus is trying to restore its image as an independent actor.

Thus, working together with Baku on strategically important projects should prove to the international community, including close neighbours, that Minsk is a true sovereign player on the international stage and a stable partner in the security sphere. Arguably, this is even more valuable at present than temporary economic benefits for Belarus.

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## **Is the isolation spell broken? – Belarus foreign policy digest**

In November, the Belarusian president held meetings with leaders of Azerbaijan, Russia, Slovakia, Turkey, and a high-level EU delegation.

The Slovakian Prime Minister's visit to Minsk ended a six-year long hiatus in bilateral visits of European leaders to Minsk. Alexander Lukashenka now seems to be more comfortable meeting with European emissaries than with Vladimir Putin.

Negotiations with leaders from ‘Distant Arc’ countries focused

on trade and investment but also had geopolitical significance. Belarus is seeking to avoid being caught in a tug of war between Europe and Russia.

## Lukashenka meets with authoritarian colleagues

On 11 November, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid an official visit to Minsk to hold talks with [President Lukashenka](#). The two leaders signed several bilateral documents, opened the first cathedral mosque in Minsk, and chaired a business forum attended by nearly two hundred Turkish business executives.

✘ Erdoğan was expected in Minsk on 29 July. However, he had to postpone his visit after the fail coup attempt in Turkey. The two countries had been [preparing for the meeting even amidst the crisis](#) in relations between Turkey and Russia, Belarus's closest ally.

Lukashenka and Erdoğan discussed trade and investment relations focusing on cooperation in manufacturing advanced technology products.

Both presidents are aiming for a \$1bn turnover. However, this figure would be hard to achieve. The current growth trend may be explained by Turkey's recent attempts to circumvent Russian sanctions – but this may not be permanent.

Belarus has provided Erdoğan with a convenient example of a European 'illiberal democracy'. Both leaders share a preference for strong presidential power and use of the [death penalty](#). This may facilitate cooperation between the two authoritarian leaders.

On 28-29 November, Lukashenka visited Azerbaijan to meet with

his counterpart Ilham Aliyev and the country's Prime Minister Artur Rasizade. The two countries stick to a [regular schedule of high-level meetings](#) focusing on trade and investment.

✘ Despite close contacts, bilateral trade has remained low in recent years, dropping by two thirds in 2015. Lukashenka has traditionally pitched Belarusian tractors and trucks as well as military equipment.

This year, for the first time, the countries agreed to cooperate in the energy sector. Belarus recently bought 84.7 thousand tonnes of oil from Azerbaijan, likely as a political gesture to show that Belarus is [exploring alternative sources of oil supply](#). Speaking to journalists, Ilham Aliyev sounded uncertain as to the long-term nature and sustainability of these operations.

## **Slovakia breaks Lukashenka's isolation spell**

On 25 November, Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico paid an official visit to Belarus. The last EU leader to visit Belarus with a bilateral agenda was Lithuania's President [Dalia Grybauskaitė in October 2010](#).

In Minsk, the Slovakian official held talks with his Belarusian counterpart [Andrei Kobyakov](#) and met with Alexander Lukashenka. Fico and Kobyakov signed a joint communiqué emphasising cooperation in tyre manufacturing, energy, and the automotive, food, and pharmaceutical industries.

✘ Despite the fact that Slovakia currently holds the EU presidency, the country's prime minister can hardly be seen as representing an agreed-upon European position towards Minsk. Fico has been known to take a divergent position on Russia in the EU, based on the concept of 'Slavonic

solidarity’.

In Minsk, Fico called Belarus ‘a friendly country’ and reckoned that the situation there has improved. He also expressed satisfaction with the abolition of sanctions against Belarus, calling them harmful and meaningless.

Upon returning to Bratislava, Fico had to defend his visit to Belarus and his encounter with Lukashenka on a local television programme. He compared his trip to Minsk to the meeting of [German and French leaders in the Normandy format](#) in Belarus in February 2015.

## **EU officials: “We are not naïve or blind”**

A few days earlier, on 21 November, Alexander Lukashenka received a delegation of the Political and Security Committee of the EU Council. The policy-setting officials held meetings with Belarus’s foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) and opposition activists.

The Belarusian president emphasised Belarus’s role as a ‘pole of stability’ in the region. In return, he sought Europe’s support in strengthening the economic independence of his country.

At a meeting with opposition leaders, The EU delegates asserted that they were ‘not naïve nor blind’ as to problems with democracy in Belarus.

A participant of the meeting told Belarus Digest that the delegation’s attitude towards the opposition had been ‘quite sympathetic’, and that they had displayed a certain level of mistrust towards the authorities. The activist also stressed that this ambiance contrasted somewhat with the dominant mood during similar meetings with Polish diplomats recently.

# Belarus tries to withstand Russian pressure

On the day after his meeting with EU officials, Lukashenka had a five-hour long meeting with his Russian counterpart in Moscow. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin was quick to highlight that this was only a sideline event to the celebrations of the 70th birthday of Patriarch Kirill.

Before the summit, Russia had signalled via Alexander Surikov, its ambassador to Minsk, that the resolution of economic disputes between the two countries would depend on the results of discussions of political issues. Moscow has been blackmailing Minsk into downshifting the pace of its relations with the West while stepping up military cooperation with Russia.

Deadly silence on the outcome of the meeting has provided a clear indication of its failure. No progress was reported on the outstanding issues of gas price and oil supply in the two weeks that followed Lukashenka's visit.

✘ Instead, Moscow has attacked Minsk with its powerful propaganda machine, using its TV channels, media personalities and even the Russian Orthodox Church. They have denounced anti-Russian and pro-Maidan sentiments in Belarus and lauded past Russian imperial figures who played a tragic role in Belarus's history.

Russia has also intensified its efforts to force Belarus into [agreeing on a single visa policy](#). Moscow's weapon of choice has been the [newly introduced prohibition](#) on travel of third-country nations across the Belarus-Russia border. This measure has negatively impacted Belarus's status as a transit country.

Lukashenka's recent diplomatic activities have aimed at finding new sources of exports revenue, investments, and loans

which would compensate the exhausted flow from Russia. These efforts are unlikely to have an immediate pay off. Meanwhile, Russia is stepping up its pressure to bring Belarus back into its orbit.

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## **Belarusian Defence Sector To Benefit From the Conflict In Ukraine**

On 24 July, Russian Ambassador Alexander Surikov revealed Moscow's proposal to Minsk to take over production of several thousand new components used by the Russian defence industry.

Russian official openly stated that the conflict in Ukraine was the issue standing behind their offer. In June, president Poroshenko of Ukraine banned all forms of military technical cooperation with Russia.

Earlier this year the Belarusian leadership proclaimed its intent to reboot its national defence industry which by this point has exhausted nearly all of its Soviet potential.

But Belarusian manufacturers will hardly be able to serve as a substitute for Ukrainian suppliers to the Russian defence industry.

Moreover, Belarusian firms do not work exclusively with Russia, but have a number of other partners. Minsk has also a vested interest in continuing its cooperation with Ukraine in this arena.

**Belarus' Military Export: Tip of Iceberg**

According to the latest data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2009-2013 Belarus' arms exports made up 1% of the world's total sales. The country even reached 16th place in the global arms export's rankings. However, Belarusian military-related exports have been declining from the 1990s.

According to SIPRI, in 2012, Belarus' total weapons exports were worth just of \$97m (with \$69m in sales going to Azerbaijan and \$28m to [Yemen](#)) – perhaps the worst year in terms of arms trading in nearly two decades. The situation improved last year, as exports rose to \$338m (with \$170m in sales going to China and \$168m to [Sudan](#)).

Military analyst Alyaksandr Alesin, speaking to TUT.by, warned that military-related exports from Belarus might be more substantial than is currently believed. Belarusian firms export few ready-to-use types of equipment monitored by international organisations.

They export mostly military electronics, command and control systems, optics, and other components for Soviet and post-Soviet arms and military equipment.

In addition, Belarusian firms focus on modernisation of old Soviet arms. Thus, they recently produced a low-budget version of an air defence system for a developing country by once more "re-modernising" a Soviet SAM system, the S-125 Pechora. A decade earlier, together with the Russians, Belarusian specialists modernised Egypt's Pechoras.

Up to 70 per cent of goods produced by the Belarusian defence industry goes abroad, according to [Siarhei Hurulyou](#), Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee.

There is little internal demand for its domestically produced equipment, a result of its meagre defence budget. This makes the industry susceptible to external demand. The rise in arms exports last year immediately resulted in a 51.4% rise in

production for defence industry.

Last but not least, the SIPRI almost never publishes data on Belarusian military-related exports to Russia, yet the bulk of Belarusian military exports make their way to Russia.

### **Silent Yet Efficient Cooperation with Ukraine**

In recent months, top officials – among them Lukashenka and Hurulyou – have repeatedly spoken about the necessity of avoiding an Ukrainian scenario, one that entails a collapse of the national army after years of neglect towards defence issues.

Hurulyou stated that now national defence industry should be concerned first with supplying Belarus' armed forces with the most modern weaponry and maintain export levels. "Earlier everything was precisely the opposite: [first came] exports and [then] a little bit for the army."

In April, Alyaksandr Lukashenka urged the government to develop its defence industries. He underscored that the potential of Soviet arms had been exhausted and its national defence industries should create new products. Belarusians, according to him, will start producing helicopters and aircraft.

☒Of course, Lukashenka said, Belarus will not be able to manufacture them alone but will need to work together with other nations. It should cooperate with Russia in this regard, but as the Belarusian leader added:

*"Let's try to make arrangements with the Ukrainians so that we can try [to build new weapons] together... Likewise, the Europeans and other [nations] are today also interested in working with us."*

Thus far, however, Belarusian defence enterprises have succeeded in cooperating only with the Ukrainians. Lukashenka

referred to a helicopter production project in Orsha.

In 2012, the largest Ukrainian engines manufacturer Motorsich and Belarusian firm "Sistemy innovatsii i investitsii" came together to implement it. Last September, Orsha Aviation Repair Works started assembling modernised MI-8 helicopters.

Cooperation with Ukraine has been fruitful in other spheres of military production as well. In particular, Belarus and Ukraine have jointly developed the T38 Stilet air defence system, the Skif anti-tank missile system and its most recent modification – the Shershen.

because of disruption of Russo-Ukrainian cooperation and Western sanctions against Russia, Belarusian defence industry will likely gain new opportunities with Russia

Currently, Stilet is being deployed in the Azerbaijani army, while the Skif – in the armies of Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

### **Can Belarusians and Russians Be Partners?**

New developments in Belarusian defence industry would appear to have contradictory consequences for its own future. On the one hand, because of disruption of Russo-Ukrainian cooperation and Western sanctions against Russia, it will likely gain some new opportunities with Russia.



For instance, it is going to establish some aircraft production inside Belarus with the involvement of the leading Russian United Aviation Building Corporation (*Obyedinennaya Aviastroitelnaya Korporatsiya*).

On the other hand, the strategy of national military industry development may collapse. Until now, Belarus has tried to position itself as being "in between" Russia and the West.

First, it closely worked with Russia, because without ties to the Russian defence industries the Belarusian defence enterprises would have immense difficulties in producing their own complete products for sale.

Second, Minsk has tried to enhance cooperation with any other countries willing to cooperate. Among them were some countries which have strenuous relations with the Kremlin, such as Ukraine, Georgia or Azerbaijan.

In due course, Belarus could have established a much more equal partnership with Russia and even achieve its own position of effective neutrality by pursuing this policy.

But now, new lines of confrontation in Europe may limit Minsk's opportunities to work with everybody. The Belarusian defence industry might become more dependent on Russia than it had ever imagined possible. Instead of becoming partners with the Russians, [Belarusian firms risk](#) becoming just part of the Russian military industrial complex.

If put before a choice – either to cooperate with Russia or others, Minsk for now will choose Russia and renounce other partnerships. Therefore, the West should not corner Minsk and force it into making a choice between the parties. In doing so, the West would undermine the prospects of Belarus as a viable independent state.

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## **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 Bronisław 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.

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## **Lukashenka's Anti-Russian Alliance with Georgia Under**

# Threat

This week Lukashenka lost one of his most important allies. Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili lost parliamentary elections and is going to switch to opposition. Belarusian ruler expressed his admiration for Saakashvili which was willing to give up the power.

Saakashvili has been an important channel for Belarusian government to communicate with the West. Of course, Lukashenka is known for his ideas of integration with Russia while Saakashvili is a symbol of pro-Western policy in the former Soviet Union. At the first glance any relations between them look improbable.

Their alliance, however, makes perfect sense and tells a lot about Belarusian regime and intricacies of post-Soviet international relations.

## **Vampires in Tbilisi**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union Georgia opted for distancing from post-Soviet integration. For years it has been paralysed by civil strife and separatist conflicts. Belarus in those years maintained good relations only with Armenia from the whole region. Such line corresponded to the general pro-Russian foreign policy of Belarus at that time. There was not much what Tbilisi could offer Belarus then.

The CIS department of the Belarusian foreign ministry followed this policy well into 2000s. Reviewing a series of extremely critical reports about Georgian government after 2003 revolution sent to Minsk from the only Belarusian embassy in the Caucasus located in Yerevan, Belarus foreign ministry official in charge of the region rhetorically wrote on the document: "Have the vampires come to power in Georgia?"

Initially, the Georgian officials after revolution undertook to promote democracy in fellow post-Soviet Belarus. Georgian parliament discussed the legislative prohibition on Lukashenka's entry to Georgia, Saakashvili wrote articles for International Herald Tribune about liberation of Belarus.

Belarusian authorities detained Georgian citizens for alleged helping Belarusian opposition and intimidated the people at the 2006 elections with tales about Georgian terrorists going to destabilise situation in the country. This situation changed in 2007.

### **Personal Friends against Putin**

It was personal decision of Lukashenka who against advice of his foreign ministry decided to actively develop relations between Belarus and Georgia. Very probably that mediating role to bring two leaders together played a moderately anti-Russian leader of the Ukrain's Orange revolution Viktor Yushchenko. He had surprisingly good relations with the Belarusian ruler and is godfather of the second son of the Georgian leader. Yushchenko was probably also involved in rapprochement of Belarus with Azerbaijan confronting pro-Russian Armenia.

In June 2007, Tbilisi opened its embassy in Minsk. After Russian war against Georgia in summer 2008 Belarusian leadership verbally supported Russia yet effectively helped Georgia. In particular Minsk despite numerous promises did not recognise two break-away regions of Georgia and recommended Belarusians enter separatist regions only through areas controlled by Georgian central government.

Moreover, Belarus did not support Russian-initiated economic blockade of Georgia which was in place since 2006. Lukashenka maintained visa-free regime for Georgian nationals. Belarus actually provided them with an easy channel to visit Russia (which requires visas from Georgians) even at the most tense times in Russian-Georgian relationship.

In 2009, Georgian leadership explicitly changed their position on democracy problems in Belarus, explaining that Belarus “suffers from Russian aggression.” Georgian foreign ministry urged Western nation to abolish sanctions against Belarus.

### **Georgia Defending Belarus in the West**

When the European Union launched the Eastern Partnership, Georgia supported Minsk in the 2010 dispute over who should represent Belarus in its parliamentary forum. Belarus wanted to send the members of its unrecognised parliament to the forum, while the EU invited only the opposition and civil society organisations.

In summer 2010 Minsk was mending fences with the EU and it caused wide-scale confrontation with Kremlin. Then Saakashvili appeared on the Belarusian state TV praising policies of his Belarusian colleague. A major Polish daily Rzeczpospolita even wrote about “Belarus-Georgian Alliance against Moscow.”

Interestingly enough, that did not lead to rise in trade. In mid-2000 trade between two countries was almost non-existent, yet by 2008 it reached just 45 million and later decreased again. Belarusian analyst Aliaksandr Cixamirau warns in an article for Belapan news agency that “anti-Russian ideological component which brings Belarus and Georgia closer to each other, lowers the quality of bilateral relations and makes cooperation between two countries look opportunistic.”

### **Gray Zone of Post-Soviet Politics**

Tbilisi did not give up its Belarusian ally even after Lukashenka fell out with the West because of the 2010 elections. In April this year, Georgia welcomed release of the leader of radical Belarusian opposition Andrei Sannikau and his colleague Zmicier Bandarenka. Moreover, Tbilisi expressed hope that it would facilitate the renewal of direct dialogue between Belarus and the EU, as well as ensure full-fledged inclusion of the country into Eastern Partnership initiative.

Lukashenka appreciated this help. According to his recent statement: "We are grateful and I said that publicly both to Mikheil Saakashvili and all Georgian politicians which supported us at international forums – in Eastern Partnership, the UN, before Americans and Europeans. Saakashvili at all has been a defender of Belarusian policy, and that is true".

Belarusian regime is clearly not staunchly anti-Western. It tries to survive, and to that end it avoids becoming a besieged fortress. In this context relations with Georgian leadership – pro-Western and well connected in the West – play a very big part.

Georgian leader was a good communicator, interpreter and messenger of Lukashenka to the West. Lukashenka also had similar relations with Ilham Alieyev of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan helped Belarus to implement potentially dangerous to Russian interests oil swap with Venezuela and borrowed money when Moscow put pressure on Minsk.

Belarus is not only an Eastern European but also a post-Soviet state. Nations which emancipated from former Russian empire still have a lot of common problems and interests. Among them is the sensitive issue of finding a balance between strengthening national independence and building democracy.

No wonder that Yushchenko and Saakashvili known as democratic revolutionaries in the West find themselves next to the "Europe's last dictator".