Information security, oiling Belarus-Russia relationship, Lukashenka’s sixth term – Digest of Belarusian analytics

While Belarus hedges carefully between East and West, Minsk and Brussels both claim they are eager to deepen ties. Lukashenka and Putin meet for the fourth time over the course of two months. Arguments about oil and gas prices have become a recurring feature of the Belarus-Russia relationship.

Experts see the major threats in 2019 in Russo-Belarusian security relations that are likely to remain the least prone to conflicts. EAST Research Center proposes implementing security measures to strengthen the information security of Belarus. Minsk’s muddled media clampdown could jeopardize the warming of relations with the West.

Lukashenka plans to run for the sixth term in 2020 and might change the constitution. Belarus’ bold attempt to attract foreign investors in IT sector gets restricted by the country’s autocratic regime. Since 1994, the proportion of Belarusian-language education has been shrinking at all levels.

Foreign Policy

How Close Can Belarus And EU Really Get? – This week senior EU official, the Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources Gunther Oettinger visited Minsk and met Alexander Lukashenka (as well as civic activists). Minsk and Brussels both claim
they are eager to deepen ties, but the pace of rapprochement is slow. TUT.by political editor Artyom Shraibman analyzes what realistically can be achieved in Belarus-EU relations.

**Belarus Finds its Foreign Policy Stride** – Yauheni Preiherman, Minsk Dialogue, emphasizes that Belarus hedges carefully between East and West, like a hedgehog and a fox all at once. Over the next five years, the country must ensure that it becomes part and parcel of the mental (strategic) maps of both the West and Russia and specifically as a principal stakeholder in Eastern European stability.

**Cautious Optimism in Belarus’s Growing Geopolitical Leverage** – Grigory Ioffe continues to overview alarmist pronouncements regarding Belarus. In particular, he refers to an interview of NATO former secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen who predicted that unless Belarus launches “reforms leading to democracy and freedom” it would fall victim to war and annexation by Russia.

**Belarus-Russia Relations**

**A Brotherly Takeover: Could Russia Annex Belarus?** – Artyom Shraibman, writing for Carnegie Moscow Center, comments an opinion that the Kremlin’s recent demand to integrate with Belarus further would be an opportunity for Putin to remain in office after 2024. But the journalist believes that if Putin wishes to remain president after 2024, annexing Belarus is rife with unpredictable risks. A better option would simply be to amend the Russian Constitution.

**Belarus’ Balancing Act** – David A. Wemer, Atlantic Council, comments a speech of deputy minister of foreign affairs for Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko at the Atlantic Council on January 30. In brief, Belarus is attempting a delicate diplomatic dance as it attempts to thaw its relationship with the West while preserving its longstanding relationship with Russia.
State Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council Stanislav Zas (on the right) and Deputy State Secretary of the Security Council Vladimir Archakov discuss information security. Source: belta.by

Oiling the Wheels of Belarus-Russia Relations – Arguments about oil and gas prices have become a recurring feature of the Belarusian and Russian relationship. Paul Hansbury, at New Eastern Europe, explains whether this year’s discord is different from earlier bouts, and there is any merit to the speculation of potential changes to the Union State agreement between the two countries.

Alleviating Tensions Between Russia and Belarus: Two Paradigms – Grigory Ioffe analyzes debates on Russian-Belarusian tensions around the so-called oil tax manoeuvre and notes that they fall into two main categories: 1) ones carefully trying to examine the core of the issue and 2) politicized speculators. And in the new year, this latter group has remained vocal.

Security

Review 2018: Security Situation In Belarus Remained Stable – Belarus Security Blog sums up the national security “results”
of 2018. In particular, there was no qualitative change in the security situation in Belarus; it should be regarded as stable. The experts see the major threats in 2019 in Russo-Belarusian security relations that are likely to remain the least prone to conflicts.

**Seven Specific Measures to Strengthen the Information Security of Belarus** – EAST Research Center offers the following measures: increasing the diversity of media sources considering the predominance of Russian content; promoting the Belarusian national identity and culture; the creation of attractive conditions for private investors in the media market; the development of media literacy, etc.

**Beyond Lies: A New Stage in the Belarus-Russia Information War** – In February, Alexander Lukashenka and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, met for the fourth time over the course of two months. Grigory Ioffe believes that at least in one respect, the new stage of Russian-Belarusian tensions is qualitatively different from previous stages: Lukashenka markedly preoccupied with information security.

**Civil Society**

**Is Lukashenka Preparing to Hand Over Power?** – The political editor of TUT.BY Artyom Shraibman breaks down key political developments in and around Belarus to help make sense of them. During his recent Big Talk on March 1, Alexander Lukashenka said that he plans to run for the sixth term in 2020. What does it mean in terms of his political future? To change the constitution.
A session of Belarus’ Security Council on 12 March. Source: belta.by

**Shhh! Belarus Wants You to Think It’s Turning Over a New Leaf** – Amy Mackinnon, Foreign Policy, believes that Minsk’s muddled media clampdown could jeopardize warming of relations with the West. Thus, an ongoing criminal case against the editor in chief of the country’s most widely read news site [Maryna Zolotova, TUT.by] has called into question whether Minsk is committed to reforms that are more than just cosmetic.

**Belarusian Language In 1918-2018. Education and the Press** – Andrei Rasinski, BISS, releases a comprehensive study on the Belarusian language situation over a hundred years. Since 1994, the proportion of Belarusian-language education has been shrinking at all levels. From 1995 to 2018, the number of Belarusian urban preschoolers decreased from 68.9% to 2.3%, while the number of students studying in Belarusian in universities decreased by 103 times, and now this is 291 students.

**Economy**

**Economic Values of Belarusians In 2018** – Daria Urban, IPM Research Center, releases a full report on the analysis of the economic values of the Belarusians, based on a national
survey’s data. The report covers such issues as the attitude of the population to wealth, the level of state paternalism, the level of public expectations from the state, and others. The work was prepared in the framework of the Kastryčnicki Economic Forum (KEF).

**Sixteen results of 2018** – Strategy analytical centre and Mises Center sum up the last year’s socio-economic development of Belarus in 16 nominations. In particular, 2018 was a year of intensifying talk about the problems in the economy, rather than taking adequate and professional measures to solve them. The country continued to work in the mode of Marxist-Leninist patterns and nomenclature Robin Hoods – at the expense of taxpayers.

**Will Belarus’ IT Strategy Loosen Russia’s Tightening Grip?** – Tatsiana Kulakevich, writing for The Globe Post, believes that Belarus’ bold attempt to attract foreign investors and loosening its dependence from Russia by experimenting with its IT sector is restricted by the country’s personalistic autocratic regime, where the state controls most of the economy, the courts, and the media.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

**Next presidential elections,**
the diagnosis of the Belarusian economy- Digest of Belarusian Analytics

TUT.by predicts that six candidates from the opposition will run for the Belarusian presidential elections in 2020. Lukashenka’s alliance with China helps to avoid binary confrontation with Russia and the European Union. Russian media have increased blaming Belarus for infidelity amid the introduction of the 30-day visa-free period.


British Professor of Economics, Anthony J. Evans creates Minsk travel guide. Belarus climbs to the 38th position in E-Government Development Index (EDGI).

This and more in the new digest of Belarusian analytics.

Politics

Who Will Go To Presidency in the Next Election? — Artiom Shraibman, TUT.by, draws up a list of candidates who will probably run for Belarus’ presidential election in 2020. The first candidate will be the incumbent president if to exclude force majeure. Roughly six more candidates from the opposition and other forces will be also nominated. The journalist notes that in recent years the leadership of the opposition has been almost completely upgraded because immovable leadership leads to stagnation.

How did Belarusians react to the Freedom Day? — Thinktanks.by
received the results of the research conducted by the Belarusian analytical workshop (Warsaw) on how the Belarusians reacted to the celebration of Freedom Day (25th March). 21% of the respondents believed that March 25 had to be a state holiday, 32.8% disagreed with it, 44.3% did not have their own opinion on this matter.

**Belarus: A Chinese Solution?** – Tomasz Kamusella, New Eastern Europe magazine, Lukashenka’s skilful navigation in between Russia and the EU suddenly gains another dimension as the Belarusian strongman opens up his country to China. The previously binary choice will become fuzzier with this novel ‘triangulation,’ making it more difficult for one of the prospective three partners to put Belarus in place.

**Belarus Opening up to the World Amidst Russian Accusations of Disloyalty** – Grigory Ioffe stresses that one can hardly point to a more obvious sign of Belarus’s desire to open up to the world than the introduction of the 30-day visa-free period. This new step is occurring against the backdrop of Russia’s sour relationship with the West. Russian publications ever more frequently accuse Belarus of infidelity.

**Economy**

**Belarusian Economy was Diagnosed. Will It be Cured?** – Naviny.by overviews a comprehensive study of the World Bank that names three chronic diseases of the Belarusian economic model: lack of sustainability, imbalance, and inefficiency. Over the past quarter century, the economic model of Belarus has not changed significantly, characterized by a high state presence, and showed different results.
Mandatory sale of the currency is abolished in Belarus, according to the presidential decree signed on July 31. The decision was made ‘in order to liberalize foreign exchange relations and stimulate business activity’.

Belarusian business recognizes the improvement of conditions in 2018 in almost all spheres. This is a finding of the study Liberalization of Conditions for Business conducted among 409 small and medium-sized enterprises. The study was commissioned by IPM Research Center and conducted by MIA company. During 2010-2018, the main barriers to business remain high taxes and unstable legislation.

Reformists in the government strengthen the private sector confidence in the state when it comes to the national currency and economic policy, which manifested in GDP growth. Meanwhile, the Belarusian authorities fear the consequences of comprehensive economic reforms, mainly due to the lack of clear signals from the Belarusian population that it is ready and accepts reforms.

Low official unemployment level – According to the International Labor Organization, Belarus is on the 4th place in terms of unemployment, which corresponds to one of the lowest levels in the world. However, the rating takes into account the official unemployment in Belarus – 0.5%.
National security

The situation in the Field of National Security and Defense of Belarus. June 2018 — In its monthly monitoring, Belarus Security Blog notes that the special services finally made public the cases of violations in the health sector. The experts believe that the reason is upcoming presidential elections. Belarusians observe a PR campaign to raise the ratings of the government and personally Lukashenka as a fighter against corruption.

Civic Control Over the Army. Basic Provisions — Belarus Security Blog outlines a model, which proves the need to strengthen civic control over the military forces. This is particularly urgent for nations that recently freed from totalitarianism and need a radical revision of the relationship between civil society and the military towards their democratization. The related situation in Belarus is considered.

Trump and Putin’s Meeting in Helsinki: Issues for World and Eastern Europe, Recommendations for Belarus — In his analytical note, Yauheni Preiherman notes that the Russian-American summit in Helsinki is a missed opportunity for security in Eastern Europe. With any developments, Minsk should continue its own search for possible points of contact and formats for coordinating the interests of global and regional players.
Belarus’s Second Front: Is Lukashenka Really Afraid of Russia? – Artyom Shraibman, for Carnegie Moscow Center, notes that in the past few years, Minsk has started citing Russia as its main threat. It is an open question whether the Belarusian authorities really believe the Kremlin poses a threat to the country’s sovereignty, or whether they are simply attempting to dress up their usual repressive behaviour in pretty packaging for the West.

Other

Travel Guide to Minsk – British Professor of Economics, Anthony J. Evans describes his impressions upon his visit to Minsk. Military uniform is everywhere, tractors roam the streets. And the absence of a democratic transition casts an intriguing shadow of communist rule. But the city is vibrant, affluent, and spotlessly clean. It feels more like a Baltic city break than an Eastern European industrial wasteland.

Belarus takes the 80th place in investment attractiveness. According to the International Business Compass 2018, Belarus
for the year has improved its position by 7 points and bypassed Russia and Ukraine, which take 95th and 131st places respectively.

**Belarus climbs to the 38th position in E-Government Development Index** (EDGI). The country has moved 11 positions up to make it to the top 40 countries in the Very-High-EGDI level group for the first time. The [UN E-Government Survey](https://www.un.org/egov             ) is compiled for 193 countries every two years.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

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**Analytical paper: Belarus-Lithuania Relations: Common Interests and the Nuclear Dispute**

The Ostrogorski Centre presents a new analytical paper ‘Belarus-Lithuania Relations: Common Interests and the Nuclear Dispute’, written by Ryhor Astapenia.

The paper aims to improve mutual understanding between Belarus and Lithuania. The relations between two countries deteriorated when Belarus officially started the [construction of a nuclear power plant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NPP) (NPP) on the border with Lithuania in 2013.
The issue may dominate dealings between the two countries for a long time to come. Both countries rely on separate facts to support their position while ignoring arguments presented by the other side. Lithuania has a right to raise issues related to the security of the power plant but nonetheless over-politicises the problem.

The Two Truths of the Belarusian NPP and Playing with Security

Belarus and Lithuania disagree even regarding the purpose of the nuclear power station’s construction. The Lithuanian elite believes that the initiative to launch the Belarusian NPP belonged to the Kremlin. According to them, the purpose of the NPP lies in keeping the Baltic States dependent on Russia’s power resources, while renouncing plans for the Visaginas NPP; a Lithuanian power station which was to be constructed on the border with Belarus.

The Belarusian ruling elite saw the Belarusian NPP as an opportunity to decrease their own dependence on gas and, most likely, to stimulate the economy as a whole and the depressed Astraviec district in particular.

The rival narratives only grew as both parties found new arguments to fuel the dispute. The Lithuanian side makes the well-grounded claim that the Belarusian authorities have a problem with transparency. For example, when a 300-ton reactor vessel fell, the authorities initially refuted reports and concealed the incident from the public for several weeks. This gives the impression that, in the event of an accident at the power station, Belarus would not inform Lithuania (and indeed its own citizens), or will do so only when it is too late.
In addition, the construction of the NPP by Belarus does not fully meet the requirements of both the ESPOO Convention and the Aarhus Convention, though in practice many similar constructions go through difficulties in order to correspond with all the regulations of these international conventions. They are based on the good will of the signatories, and even many European Union member states argue about compliance with these Conventions.

Moreover, the Lithuanian side tends to ignore several facts. First, Belarus is coping with the development of the nuclear power engineering excellently according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the regulator (and the lobbyist) of the field. Secondly, Belarus voluntarily agreed to be subjected to the stress-tests of the European Commission. Finally, even Lithuanian energy specialists note that the station complies with high safety standards.

Relations between the two countries appear black-and-white in the sense that relations are very negative in some spheres and as positive in others. Apart from the NPP, military cooperation and intelligence services’ activities remain sore spots in
bilateral relations. Lithuania was probably the biggest critic of the Zapad-2017 military drills held in Belarus and Russia last autumn and intelligence communities of both states look at each other with nearly open hostility.

**Flourishing Economic Relations and Border Cooperation**

However, the irony lies in the fact that, despite a poor reputation, the defence ministries of the two countries cooperate rather successfully. Lithuania was the first NATO country to sign a plan for military cooperation with Belarus. According to the plan, the countries exchange a significant volume of information and hold annual inspections of military objects. The latest such inspection was conducted in October 2017, three weeks after the Zapad-2017 military drills.
In the sphere of economic cooperation and contacts between citizens, relations show notable successes. The two countries are key economic partners: Lithuania remains one of the biggest Western investors in Belarus, having occupied first place among them, and was one of the biggest exporters from the West in some years.

Cross-border movement of people between the two countries grows constantly. The EU Programme for Border Cooperation plays a significant role in this, providing financial resources to maintaining the countries’ interests towards each other. According to an insider, when representatives of the Belarusian organisations cooperate with Western Europeans, they often feel patronised, while “in cases of working with Lithuanians and Latvians, they feel equal and engage in cooperation fully”.

However, the programme has a significant drawback for the
Belarusian partners – the funds within it are allocated disproportionately among the countries. In 2017 the Steering Committee of the programme “Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus” selected 30 projects for funding. Among them, only two projects on the Belarusian side were among the main beneficiaries. In all the others, Belarusian organisations play a secondary or even marginal role. For example, Belarusians might feature as guests at a seminar in Lithuania or Latvia. The Technical Secretariat refused to provide data on the distribution of funds allocated by the European Union between the two countries, although such data exists in another programme of the cross-border cooperation which involves Belarus – “Poland-Belarus-Ukraine.”

How to Improve Belarus-Lithuania Relations

Belarusian-Lithuanian relations have a much greater potential than many think. With the deepening of the Belarusian-Lithuanian ties, Lithuania could play an increasing role in the transformation of Belarus. For instance, at the end of 2017 Belarus signed up to its first “twinning” project, aimed at the support of the Belarusian National Bank and financed by the European Union. The Central Bank of Lithuania serves as the “twin” in this project. This is just one example how the countries can pursue their interests helping each other.

The main problem in Belarusian-Lithuanian relations is the lack of trust between the parties. The states need to learn to put one another in the partner’s place. More specific recommendations include creating a joint mechanism to monitor the Belarusian NPP, expanding bilateral expert-level dialogue, proportional re-distribution of finances from the EU Neighbourhood Program and broader information exchange between the two states’ defence ministries.
So far, Belarus and Lithuania successfully avoided arguments in the spheres where cooperation remains mutually beneficial. Now it is time to ease conflicts on the sore issues.

- Read full paper: Belarus-Lithuania Relations: Common Interests and the Nuclear Dispute

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**Common history that divides Belarus and Lithuania**

On 28 January, Vilnius hosted a performance of the Belarusian ballet *Vitaut* (*Vytautas* in Lithuanian). The performance has courted controversy, with the Lithuanian culture minister describing it as a provocation six months ago.

The ballet shows how joint heritage, instead of uniting the two countries, actually divides them and puts Lithuania on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, it would like Belarus to transform into a Western democracy. But on the other hand, it recognizes that the Western identity of Belarus challenges Lithuania’s own identity since it requires both countries to draw on the same historical heritage.

**Common heritage as the curse**

Western historiography mainly looks at the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) similarly to how Alexander Lukashenka did a couple of decades ago. For many Westerners, in line with this interpretation, the Grand Duchy is a Baltic country. However, in reality, it was an alliance of Balts and Slavs, where the Slavs and their language dominated. For example, Lithuanian Statutes were written in Ruthenian; the
language Belarusians often depict as the old Belarusian language.

With the passing years the history of the Grand Duchy becomes less exclusively linked to today’s Lithuania, either in the West or in Belarus. In 2012, Norman Davies, possibly the most well-known researcher of Eastern European history, published his book *Vanished Kingdoms*, where the chapter on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania opens with a photo of Lukashenka.

Recently, Belarus’s authoritarian leader has showed increasing enthusiasm about the Grand Duchy. In 2017, while discussing school textbooks, he argued that “Belarus needs to introduce into the minds of our people the truth: that Belarus started its history from the states of Polatsk and the GDL.” On 20 January, the commander of the Belarusian interior troops said that even the army now studies the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Many Belarusians enjoy joking that Vilnius belongs to them (as, too, do Poles). It’s no wonder that few Lithuanians
find such jokes funny. They feel that Belarus is like a brother about whom no one knew, but he appeared at the moment a deceased grandmother’s estate was being shared out. Moreover, now the brother comes to Vilnius and starts to teach you the family history.

The ballet that separates

Back in September 2017, nearly six months before the performance, Lithuania’s minister of culture, Liana Ruokytė-Jonsson, described the staging of the Belarusian ballet *Vitaut* as “a demonstration of soft power and a provocation.” The Lithuanian authorities seem worried about the ballet’s dedication to the centenary of Lithuanian independence, and the fact that the Belarusian organisers had not consulted with them about this. The Belarusian embassy in Lithuania immediately responded to Ruokytė-Jonsson on Twitter saying that “the local fashion of absurdity has no boundaries.”

Lithuanian media occasionally write that “Lukashenka has set his sights on the pride of Lithuania” or “The day when Belarusians will say ‘Vilnius is ours’ is coming.” Quite naturally, these ‘clickbait’ headlines bring traffic to
websites, but damage mutual understanding between the two peoples, which has implications for policy-making.

For instance, the Lithuanian authorities seem to fear excessive collaboration with Belarus-centric organisations. The European Humanities University, a Belarusian institute exiled to Vilnius, serves as the most famous example. It receives assistance from a number of international donors, including Lithuania, and almost everyone in the Belarusian civil society remains dissatisfied with the work of the EHU. In 2014, 40 Belarusian intellectuals, including Nobel prize winner Sviatlana Alieksijevich, wrote an open letter in support of preserving the EHU’s Belarusian heart.

The EHU spends at least $150,000 on the annual salary of the rector, despite its provision of a low-quality education. In December 2017, Lithuania’s Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education negatively evaluated the EHU and the Lithuanian Ministry of Education will deprive it of its licence by the end of 2018. But the Lithuanian authorities continue to support Professor Anatol Michajlaŭ, former rector and current president of the EHU. Insiders attribute this to Michajlaŭ’s promotion of a non-Belarus-centric vision of Belarus, which Lithuanians do not perceive as competition.

Disputes around historical heritage also intensify other conflicts, especially the controversy surrounding the Belarusian nuclear power plant. The station, which Belarus began building 55 km from Vilnius in 2013, has become a major stumbling block in bilateral relations, since Lithuania sees it as dangerous for its own security. According to a Belarusian public activist, “If the Lithuanians feel that you do not share their opinion about the Belarusian nuclear power plant, then you are a Russian agent.” Two-thirds of Lithuanians perceived Astraviec power plant as a threat, according to Lithuanian polling agency RAIT. According to another pollster, Spinter, only 6.5% of Lithuanians considered Belarus a friendly country in 2014.
Lithuania’s dilemma

On the one hand, Lithuania feels it should strengthen Belarusian identity in order to acquire a friendly European neighbour. Promoting common heroes such as Vitaut undoubtedly helps to that end.

On the other hand, the strengthening of the Belarusian identity may lead to sharing the history that Lithuania long considered exclusively its. Things became more complicated as both nations are small and long for a strong simple identity.

A dialogue on the two states’ common history might help to build a shared vision of the GDL, but conflicts and misunderstandings such as the one over the nuclear power plant, sow distrust. Previously such dialogue took place during the International Congress of Belarusian Studies that was held annually in Kaunas, Lithuania. However, in 2017 the Congress moved to Warsaw and this year it will take place in Minsk. So, currently it remains impossible to speak about any kind of joint textbook or other historical projects.

Rather, the countries will develop with their own internal inertias. Belarus will rediscover its history, while Lithuania will feel that its history is being stolen. It remains unlikely that it will bring any positive fruits for cooperation between the countries.

Trading favours with Georgia
and Poland, boosting India trade – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

The summer holidays took their toll on the pace of development of Belarus’s foreign relations. Over the last two months, foreign minister Vladimir Makei held only three meetings with his counterparts (from Slovenia, Egypt and Georgia). President Alexander Lukashenka’s state visit to India was late summer’s only highest-level diplomatic event.

Some democratic governments are still willing to prop up the international legitimacy of the rubber-stamp Belarusian parliament. Polish MPs and Georgia’s senior official, for example, met with the handpicked ‘legislators’ to earn favours and concessions from the Belarusian authorities in return.

Restoring balance in relations with South Asia

On 12-13 September, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka paid a two-day state visit to India. This year, the two countries celebrated the 25th anniversary of their diplomatic ties.

Lukashenka has been visiting India at ten-year intervals, with previous trips in 1997 and 2007. Belarus-India relations have clearly stagnated over the last decade, as Minsk placed its bets on India’s geopolitical rivals, China and Pakistan. However, the time may have come to restore the disrupted balance.

In New Delhi, the Belarusian president held extensive talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and met with several other
officials. Lukashenka and Modi reviewed the architecture of the India-Belarus partnership, seeking – according to Modi – ‘to evolve from a buyer-seller framework to deeper engagement, using the natural complementarity between the two countries’.

The head of India’s government emphasised the ‘abundant business and investment opportunities in pharmaceuticals, oil and gas, and heavy machinery and equipment’. The Belarusian President, in turn, promised ‘the most favourable conditions for the functioning of [Indian] business’ in Belarus. He also proposed building an Indian hi-tech industrial park in the country modelled after the Chinese Great Stone Park.

Despite being the world’s fastest-growing economy, India
occupies a modest place among Belarus’s trading partners. In the 2010s, the bilateral trade turnover was generally bumpy. In January-July of this year, the trade figures showed neither negative nor positive dynamics compared to the same period of 2016.

In New Delhi, the two countries signed ten bilateral documents to expand cooperation in a range of areas such as oil and gas, vocational education, sports, agriculture, and science and technology.

Prime Minister Modi also revealed the two countries’ intention ‘to encourage joint development and manufacturing in the defence sector under the ‘Make in India’ programme’. The Belarusian side, meanwhile, remained more tight-lipped about this sphere of bilateral cooperation in its communications about the visit.

Fast-paced ties with Georgia

Georgia’s foreign minister Mikheil Janelidze paid his first official visit to Belarus on 4-5 September. The two countries’ divergent geopolitical orientation has not hindered the fast-paced development of their ties in the spheres of economy, culture, tourism, and foreign policy.

In January-July 2017, the bilateral trade turnover expanded by 28%, attaining $59m. However, the growth rate must increase dramatically if Belarus and Georgia still want to reach the goal of $200m per year which their leaders set in 2015.

The key economic cooperation project is now the assembly of Belarusian lifts in Tbilisi. Belarus is also willing to sell its agricultural machinery to Georgia.

‘Georgia, with its regional transit functions and infrastructural and energy projects, may become increasingly interesting to Belarus’, foreign minister Vladimir Makei told
his Georgian counterpart. In turn, Georgia is taking a keen interest in Belarus’s experience of developing its IT industry.

Political relations between the two countries are flourishing as well: Belarus and Georgia are increasingly coordinating their foreign policy positions. In Minsk, Makei and Janelidze signed a programme of cooperation between the Georgian and the Belarusian foreign ministries for 2018-2019.

‘We have virtually no questions on which we disagree... The Georgians are our brothers’, Lukashenka told the Georgian official. Seeking to please his guest, the Belarusian leader even expressed his appreciation of the fact that the first human beings outside Africa lived in prehistoric Georgia.
Tbilisi values Minsk’s support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. In return, it does not hesitate to take a separate road than other European countries in regard to problems with democracy in Belarus. Georgia was the only European nation to refuse to support the recent UN HRC resolution on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

In Minsk, the top Georgian diplomat met with the leaders of both chambers of the Belarusian rubber stamp parliament, accommodating the Belarusian authorities’ plans to bolster their international recognition. They discussed preparations of the visit of Irakli Kobakhidze, the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, to Belarus in November of this year.

Is recognising parliament part of a barter deal?

When it comes to recognition of Belarus’s puppet parliament, Poland remains the uncontested champion among European nations. On 29-31 August, Ryszard Terlecki, vice-speaker of the Polish Sejm, led a team of Polish MPs and government officials on his second visit to Belarus.

Terlecki inaugurated high-level dialogue between European MPs and their Belarusian ‘colleagues’ in August 2016, thus de facto recognising them as peers, i.e. as a legitimate and viable parliament. Stanisław Karczewski, the Speaker of the Polish Senate, picked up the baton later in December.

In early 2017, Belarusian legislators paid a return visit to Warsaw. Only the brutal treatment of peaceful protestors by the Belarusian authorities in March dissuaded Terlecki from coming to Minsk in April to see his friends in the Belarusian parliament.

This time, Polish MPs held meetings in both chambers of the
Belarusian legislature; they also called on Deputy Prime Minister Mikhail Rusy and deputy foreign minister Oleg Kravchenko. Terlecki and his colleagues also met with activists from the Polish minority in Belarus and Belarusian opposition leaders.

Ryszard Terlecki (right) in the Belarusian parliament. Photo: house.gov.by

‘We are planning to do everything possible to make relations between our countries even stronger’, Ryszard Terlecki said during the visit. It can only be hoped that the Polish politician realises that his fellow MPs in Belarus have no say in this matter.

Polish MPs may be attempting to trade recognition of Belarus’s legislature by an EU country’s parliament for a few concessions from the Belarusian executive branch. Tarlecki happened to mention certain priority concerns during his visit.
Poland wants the Belarusian government to legitimise the unrecognised Union of Poles in Belarus, to facilitate education in the Polish language, to ease restrictions on Polish-born priests and to allow the broadcast of the TVP Polonia channel in Belarus. Polish MPs have also been lobbying for the interests of Polish business in the country.

The Belarusian government has maintained dialogue with Polish officials for a few years. However, except for the noticeable advancement in trade and investment, Poland’s new policy in its relations with Belarus has brought no visible solutions to the key areas of concern.

Similar patterns are observable in Belarus’s relations with other European partners.

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Human rights in Belarus: can dialogue work?

This July, the European Union and Belarus held their 4th round of bilateral dialogue on human rights in Brussels. The parties focused on civil, political, and social rights in both Belarus and Europe.

Belarus hopes to put human rights issues on the back burner in its relationship with the West. At the same time, the country’s authorities understand that avoiding any discussion of this subject could hamper the modest rapprochement between the two parties.

Meanwhile, the West continues to put pressure on Belarus in international human rights bodies, in particular the UN Human Rights Council. In late June, the HRC extended international
monitoring of the human rights situation in Belarus for another year.

Only time will tell which of the two policies – dialogue or critical monitoring – will prove more effective in instigating democratic change in Belarus.

Dubious results of human rights dialogue

Belarus and the European Union held their first round of human rights dialogue in June 2009 in Prague. They discussed a range of problems in a ‘constructive and open atmosphere’. As Belarus objected to the inclusion of civil society activists to the debate at that time, EU officials met with representatives of Belarusian NGOs prior to negotiations.

The regime’s harsh crackdown on the opposition in December 2010 put the human rights dialogue with Belarus on hold. Meetings according to the previous format resumed only in July 2015, at the instigation of the Belarusian authorities, following the thaw in Belarus-Europe relations.

The recent round of dialogue in Brussels focused on freedom of expression, assembly, and association; electoral rights, the death penalty, prison reform, anti-discrimination policy, gender equality, and the fight against violence in the family.

Representatives of Belarusian NGOs were able to speak during part of the meeting. The civil society delegation included the leaders of a human rights centre, a journalist association, and several social initiatives.
According to Aleh Hulak, the chairman of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Belarusian officials made no promises and failed to elaborate on any plans for change. ‘They kept repeating: we’ve heard it, we’ll work on it, and we’ll answer this later. They did not challenge, did not refuse to talk, did not deny the problem’, Hulak said in an interview with the news portal TUT.BY.

Although dialogue may be a better alternative to confrontation, doubts remain about the efficacy of this method. So far, there have been no signs that the authorities intend to take any recommendations into account, in particular when it comes to civil and political rights.

Earlier in June, the EU and China held their 35th round of human rights dialogue. The dismal human rights record of the Chinese government may be a telling testimony to the value of
Still a target for special mandates

Despite their engagement in human rights dialogue with Belarus, Western countries show no signs of going easy on Belarus when it comes to human rights procedures at the United Nations.

On 23 June, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on the situation of human rights in Belarus. Thirty-six European nations, as well as Canada, Japan, and the United States co-sponsored the document.

The HRC expressed its continued concern about the situation of human rights in Belarus, especially the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression. It also noted the ongoing crackdown on human rights defenders, NGOs, and the mass media in Belarus.

The Council urged the Belarusian government ‘to ensure the full independence and impartiality of the judiciary’ and ‘to implement without delay the comprehensive reform of the electoral legal framework’.

Attempting to prevent the adoption of the resolution, a Belarusian diplomat claimed in Geneva that ‘the human rights situation in Belarus [was] not radically different from most countries of the world’ and it did not threaten anyone in Belarus or abroad.

Belarus’s line of argument is that country-specific UN mechanisms are meaningless and useless and direct dialogue with interested countries should be preferred. This argument found support from such human rights ‘champions’ as Azerbaijan, China, Cuba, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Russia,
Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as well as a few other developing countries.

Despite Belarus’s efforts, the Council adopted the resolution on the situation of human rights in Belarus by a vote of 18 in favour (mostly Western countries but also nations such as Brazil, Ghana, Panama, and Paraguay), eight against, and 21 abstentions.

The resolution extended the country-specific mechanism for Belarus for another year; it has been in place since 2012. This autumn, Belarus will have to face another debate on the human rights situation in the country at the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in New York and the subsequent adoption of another resolution.

The authorities’ sworn enemy visits Minsk

Miklós Haraszti, whose mandate as the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus was extended by the HRC, came off victorious after the last session.

The Hungarian human rights advocate was appointed Special Rapporteur for Belarus in 2012. Ever since, the Belarusian government has refused to recognise this mandate and stubbornly ignored Haraszti’s attempts to set up communication.

The Belarusian authorities have claimed that Haraszti’s reports on the human rights situation in Belarus are ‘politically motivated and openly biased’.

In fact, the Special Rapporteur has become one of the staunchest critics of the Belarusian government’s human rights record. In February 2016, a week before the EU lifted its
sanctions against Belarus, Haraszti made a point of stressing the absence of any change in ‘the dismal state of human rights’ in the country.

A persona non grata in Belarus, the Special Rapporteur had to meet human rights activists and representatives of civil society and the opposition outside the country. However, there were rumours about unofficial meetings between Haraszti and Belarusian diplomats in some European capitals.

To everyone’s surprise, Miklós Haraszti visited Minsk in early July. The Belarusian government allowed him to attend – as a ‘civilian’ – a human rights seminar, which was held as a side event of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session in Minsk.

Upon his return from Minsk, Haraszti singled out two key areas of concern regarding human rights in Belarus. The first is the systemic refusal of individual liberties – a permission-based
regime of public life; the second is the cyclical recourse to mass repression.

Haraszti’s trip to Minsk two weeks after the HRC extended his mandate should not be perceived as a sign of change in Belarus’s position on the UN special procedure. The government remains determined to continue fighting international condemnation of its human rights practices rather than bring about noticeable improvements, which would make the special procedure obsolete.

Belarus still hopes to avoid or delay any meaningful change in its human rights policy by instead promoting itself as a regional ‘donor of security’ and a reliable economic partner. In the existing geopolitical situation, the West has to put up with these futile ‘dialogues’ and Minsk’s ‘two steps forward, one step back’ policy vis-a-vis human rights issues.

Nevertheless, full normalisation of relations between Belarus and the West remains impossible without significant progress in human rights and democracy in Belarus.

Belarus’s international presence, official ideology, Eurobonds, and Geely cars – Belarus state press digest

Belarus hopes to expand its international presence when it presides over the Central European Initiative and hosts the summer session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly this summer.
In an Independence Day speech on 3 July, Lukashenka alluded to prominent cultural figures and mediaeval Belarusian polities as important elements of Belarusian statehood. This marks a shift from the usual Soviet-inspired nation-building discourse.

The government is issuing Eurobonds for $1bn and plans to launch assembling production of Chinese Geely cars in the second half of 2017.

This and more in the new edition of Belarus state press digest.

**Foreign policy activity**

*The Central European Initiative meets in Minsk*, as Belarus holds the organisation’s presidency this year, according to the *Minsk Times*. At present, the organisation comprises 18 countries and aims to prevent further dividing lines from growing in Europe. In Minsk, the CEI Foreign Ministers discussed how to adapt the organisation to the new cross-boundary challenges in the region. According to Belarusian Foreign Minister *Uladzimir Makiej*: ‘There is no room for selective dialogue, where those ‘not European enough’ are ignored or set aside. There can be no “one-size-fits-all” political integration and there can be no universal recipe for instant democracy’.

The most sensible European politicians understand this. For example, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto noted that: ‘We advocate a fair approach from the EU towards Belarus and support the removal of sanctions, simplification of the visa regime between Belarus and the EU, and the promotion of Belarus in negotiations regarding membership to the WTO’.

*The summer session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly opens in Minsk on 5 July.* Belarus Segodnia interviewed Permanent
Representative of Belarus to the OSCE Aliena Kupčyna. This session was the first OSCE event of its size in Belarus. According to the article, the choice of Belarus as a venue for the annual session is very appropriate, given the current crisis of European security. Belarus is increasingly perceived as an island of stability: it has no military or protracted conflicts on its territory and makes a significant contribution to the fight against organised crime, illegal migration, and human trafficking.

However, dividing lines in the region continue to grow, despite OSCE declarations. In order to prevent them, countries in the region must first of all scale down confrontation and work to increase mutual trust in the military sphere. Secondly, they should overcome the growing economic fragmentation in the OSCE area and develop economic interconnectedness. Thirdly, the OSCE should help participant states to fulfil their obligations to the organisation, albeit without coercion.

National ideology

Nationalising rhetoric and IT development enter official ideology. Belarus Segodnia published a transcript of Alexander Lukashenka’s Independence Day speech on 3 July. Although such speeches usually feature overly militaristic rhetoric, this time the Belarusian leader alluded to prominent cultural figures in Belarusian history. The authorities seem to be incorporating more and more nationalising elements in official ideology.
Lukashenka mentioned ‘those luminaries and ascetics who created Belarusian statehood, including Euphrosyne of Polatsk, Kiryla Turaŭski, Francysk Skaryna, and Symon Budny’. He called the Principality of Polack ‘our historic cradle’, and stated that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania provided a powerful impetus to military and urban development. Lukashenka also mentioned that both Belarus and Russia have no future if they fail to develop their respective IT sectors.

**Economy**

Tourism fails to grow despite the new visa-free regime. The number of foreigners who have taken advantage of the possibility to enter Belarus visa-free for five days has reached 20,000 as of this summer, writes Belarus Segodnia. Tourist companies prepared interesting programmes in anticipation of an influx of tourists, but no such surge occurred.

Experts note that the introduction of the five-day visa-free regime for citizens of 80 countries remains largely unknown abroad. Most tourists seem to come on business and limit themselves to hotel conference rooms or nightlife rather than visiting local travel agencies.

Assembly production of Chinese Geely cars to be launched soon. A Respublika correspondent visited the Geely plant to obtain details regarding the launch of car production. However, the management refused to disclose the details of their business plan or its expected profitability. Representatives of the plant would not even specify the precise dates of the plant’s official opening, saying only that it would be in the second half of 2017.

Currently, all car components for test production come from China, but after the official launch suppliers will be primarily Belarusian and Russian. The management of the plant
confirmed that there are already pre-orders for the new cars, albeit so far mostly from Russia. The minimum price of a car will be around $12,000 and maximum $26,000-$27,000, depending on the model. Currently, 90% of the company’s employees come from Belarus; the rest are Chinese specialists training Belarusians.

Belarus and Russia demonstrate their innovations at the Fourth Forum of Regions in Moscow. The forum, which was held on 29-30 June, was named ‘Vectors of Integration Development of the Regions of Russia and Belarus in the Sphere of High Technologies, Innovation and the Information Society’, according to Belarus Segodnia. The forum took place at the same time as the Supreme State Council of the Union State; both Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin took part. The Forum of Regions is designed to facilitate the expansion of contacts and to function as a discussion platform.

The exhibition not only displays various achievements, it also shows the real fruits of the economic integration of the two countries. They are laying the foundation for the development of the modern smart economy of Belarus and Russia. It is impossible to be competitive on the global market alone, so the countries need to use their high intellectual potential jointly.

Belarus issues Eurobonds for $1bn. The Finance Ministry has announced details regarding the beginning of a Eurobonds roadshow in the USA and Europe, writes the Minsk Times. Depending on market conditions, Belarus plans to place two issues of Eurobonds for 5 and 10 years. The organisers are the Development Bank of Belarus, Citi, and Raiffeisen Bank
The roadshow format envisages presentational shares and meetings with potential investors and leading analysts. The event is being organised by the top management of the companies involved, prior to the placement of the bonds. Concrete terms for new issues of Belarusian Eurobonds and the volume concerned have not been announced. However, experts expect that it may amount to $1bn.

The state press digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

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A snubbed Makei and an axis of good – Belarus foreign policy digest

Belarus’s recent regression in the human rights field has failed to visibly affect the intensity of its contacts with Europe. However, European governments seem to have taken note of the criticism they received for their initially meek reaction and have been voicing their concerns both publicly and (more often) privately.

Lukashenka’s ‘indiscriminate and inappropriate’ reaction to dissent may have affected the chances of Ambassador Alena Kupchyna to become the next OSCE head. Nevertheless, her personal qualities and professional qualifications may still play in her favour.
Ukraine’s security concerns and Belarus’s economic interests have finally led to an overdue meeting between the two countries' presidents. Both leaders appear to be satisfied with the outcome of this encounter, which was held in an unorthodox format.

Europe talks to Belarus but ‘snubs’ Makei

The harsh suppression of popular protests in the country by the Belarusian authorities has seemingly failed to affect the dynamics of Belarus’s relations with Europe. Regular contacts between Belarusian and European officials, which continued despite active repression, continued unabated in April.

After 25 March, when over 700 peaceful protesters were detained in Minsk, Belarusian senior diplomats held political consultations with their counterparts from Latvia in Riga, Norway in Oslo, and Estonia in Minsk. Meanwhile, the country’s puppet parliament received parliamentary delegations from Poland and Estonia.

On 31 March, the Belarusian foreign ministry held the second round of trade dialogue with a delegation from the European Commission. Two weeks later, in Minsk, the Belarusian government negotiated the development of business ties with Kai Mykkänen, Finland’s Minister for Foreign Trade and Development.

Foreign minister Vladimir Makei attended a meeting of foreign ministers of Eastern Partnership countries and the Visegrad Group on 12 April. Makei took advantage of the event in Warsaw to hold formal meetings with his counterparts from Croatia, Romania, and
Ukraine, as well as European commissioner Johannes Hahn.

Probably the most significant event for Belarus’s relations with Europe during this period was the third meeting of the Belarus-EU Coordination Group held on 3-4 April. Thomas Mayr-Harting, Managing Director for Europe and Central Asia of the European External Action Service, led the EU delegation to Minsk.

The delegation apparently took note of the widespread criticism of the EU’s feeble reaction to recent developments in Belarus. Its post-meeting press release stressed that ‘the actions applied by the authorities… were indiscriminate and inappropriate and… in contradiction with Belarus’ stated policy of democratisation and its international commitments’.

Belarusian diplomats admit in private conversations that, while their European partners show no intention of scaling down bilateral dialogue, they have become highly critical of the recent relapse of the Belarusian authorities. As Alexander Lukashenka confirmed it in his recent address to the parliament. ‘Makei is already afraid to go to [the West]. He's been taken down a notch all over… Wherever he goes, he gets snubbed’, he complained.

Belarus’s ambitions at the OSCE

Senior officials at Belarus’s foreign ministry, as well as the country’s ambassadors, have been striving to enlist the support of their foreign partners for the candidacy of Ambassador Alena Kupchyna to the position of the OSCE Secretary General.

In the race for the Organisation’s top position, Kupchyna is competing with former foreign minister of Finland Ilkka
Kanerva, Czech politician and former European Commissioner Štefan Füle, and former Swiss ambassador to the OSCE Thomas Greminger.

The appointment requires the consensus of all 57 member states. This means that in order to get the post, a candidate should not necessarily be the most popular generally, but rather the least objectionable to the most influential member states.

Thus, Füle’s candidacy has a serious handicap, as he remains on Russia’s travel ‘black list’ in connection with his activities as the European commissioner. Meanwhile, Moscow has formally endorsed Kupchyna’s candidacy.

Kupchyna, now Belarus’s permanent representative to the OSCE, made a lot of friends in Europe (especially in its Eastern, Central, and Southern parts) during her tenure as deputy foreign minister in 2012 – 2016. Her European colleagues know her as a democratically-minded person and a strong proponent of closer ties between Belarus and Europe.

Moreover, Ambassador Kupchyna’s gender may be an advantage over all other candidates. Many European governments attach importance to greater representation of women in top international positions.

However, recent actions of the Belarusian government have dealt a definite blow to Kupchyna’s chances. The harsh response to the protests has interrupted the positive dynamics in the evolution of Belarus’s image in Europe.

Nevertheless, all is not yet lost for the Belarusian candidate. Other important posts need to be filled, and Kupchyna may become a part to a package agreement. A decision is expected by late May – early June.
‘Kyiv-Minsk, an axis of goodness’

The leaders of Belarus and Ukraine have finally found a suitable pretext and format for meeting. This will be their first meeting since the Ukrainian president’s trip to Belarus in February 2015 for the summit that would result in the Minsk-II agreements.

On 26 April, Alexander Lukashenka and Petro Poroshenko met at the site of Chernobyl NPP to commemorate those who died in the Chernobyl disaster. Then, they went over the border to the village of Liaskavichy in Belarus for a working meeting.

Lukashenka’s recent statements about Ukraine as a source of militants and weapons threatening Belarus’s security have created a negative backdrop for the two leaders’ meeting.

However, Ukrainian politicians seem to understand that these claims were made largely for internal consumption. Their resentment over Belarus’s vote at the UN against the Ukrainian resolution on Crimea has also become a thing of the past.

Poroshenko sought reassurance from his Belarusian counterpart about Belarus’s continued neutrality in Ukraine’s conflict with Russia – and apparently succeeded. ‘I received a firm affirmation and assurances from the President of Belarus: no one will ever be able to involve Belarus in a war against Ukraine’, the Ukrainian leader said. ‘We are kindred’, Lukashenka confirmed.

Lukashenka’s main interest in the meeting was to support the positive trend in the trade with Ukraine, which grew by 10.5% last year to attain $3.83bn, after falling three years in a
row. In January-February 2017, the growth was even more spectacular – 29%. Ukraine remains Belarus’s second-largest trading partner, and Belarus is on the fourth place in Ukraine’s list.

Belarus agreed to consider buying electric energy from Ukraine and plans to increase its supplies of oil products to this country. The two countries will also seek greater localisation of assembly of Belarusian machinery in Ukraine. Lukashenka and Poroshenko agreed to meet in Kyiv this summer to finalise several issues under discussion.

While Poroshenko called Russia (indirectly) a ‘demon’, Lukashenka carefully avoided taking sides in the conflict between Belarus’s two neighbours. Nevertheless, he clearly has no intention of sacrificing his country’s economic and security interests just to soothe Russian prejudices against Ukraine.

Will the Kremlin topple Lukashenka?

On 20 January, Alexander Lukashenka described the reactions of Russian officials to the introduction of the new five-day visa-free regime in Belarus as 'groans and wails.'

Recently, rhetoric surrounding Russian-Belarusian relations has become so sharp that some journalists and analysts believe the Kremlin plans to overthrow Aliaksandr Lukashenka or occupy Belarus.

However, off and on conflict remains a fixture of Belarusian-Russian relations. Despite belligerent grumbling, Lukashenka
mostly upholds the Kremlin's interests, promoting cooperation between the two countries.

Would the Kremlin replace Lukashenka and occupy Belarus?

In recent months, people of different political views and backgrounds have begun to voice concerns that the Kremlin plans to replace Lukashenka.

On 4 January, the chief editor of the Belarusian oppositional news source Charter 97 Natallia Radzina stated that 'Russia is currently conducting an operation to depose Lukashenka.' Her colleague Dzmitry Bandarenka had spoken about the existence of documents that prove the existence of a plan to replace Lukashenka a few days earlier.

Meanwhile, on 11 January analysts Arsen Sivitski and Yuri Tsarik, who have warmer attitudes towards the Belarusian authorities, published a report claiming that Russia is considering occupying Belarus. Their conclusion was based on information regarding the Russian Ministry of Defence's plans to send four thousand railway carriages to Belarus next year, which is 83 times more than in 2016.

Although these two claims are coming from very different ideological backgrounds, both sides believe the Kremlin is angry because of Belarus's refusal to support the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine as well as its resistance towards the idea of a Russian base on its territory. Moreover, they believe the Kremlin is angry enough to attempt to get rid of Lukashenka. However, Russia has little chance of replacing the Belarusian president: unlike Ukraine, Belarus has stable public
Relations in conflict

These speculations do indeed seem to hold water given the present condition of Belarusian-Russian relations. Lately, it seems that Belarus and Russia are butting heads on just about every issue.

On 20 January, Lukashenka publicly responded to the criticism of Russian officials, including Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, regarding the introduction of a visa-free regime in Belarus. The Russian government sees this new policy as a threat to its security and hinted that Belarus should create a single visa space with Russia, instead of taking such steps on its own. However, according to Lukashenka, 'they should accept this calmly and focus on their own work.'

One month prior, on 26 December 2016, Lukashenka ignored the summit of the Eurasian Economic Union, where Union heads of state signed the Customs Code, which members had discussed for three years. Although the code was signed by all other members on 26 December, the president of Belarus only agreed to approve it two days later on condition of further negotiations.

It is no secret that the Belarusian authorities are hindering the Eurasian integration project because of the oil and gas conflict between Minsk and Moscow, which has now dragged on
for more than a year. Minsk demands a reduction in the price of gas while Russia seeks to make Belarus pay back their debt for previous deliveries, now amounting to $400 m. In order to encourage Minsk to pay, Moscow plans to reduce its supply of oil to Belarus by 12%, according to claims by Russian business newspaper *Kommersant* from 9 January.

On 26 December, Uladzimir Andreichanka, the head of the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament, stated in Moscow that 'the situation at the Belarusian-Russian border goes beyond the contractual framework and common sense.' In mid-September, the Kremlin closed its border with Belarus for third-country nationals without any prior notice – thus ruining Minsk's plans of becoming a transit country.

Belarus's list of grievances is quite long: Belarusian officials periodically complain about Russia implementing protectionist measures, or that the Russian media and commentators are portraying Belarus in a bad light. On 22 December, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry even recalled a Russian diplomat to protest statements by the head of the Russian Strategic Research Institute questioning Belarusian sovereignty.

Moscow and Minsk fluctuate between love and war

If the present misunderstandings between the two countries were a reason to overthrow Lukashenka or occupy Belarus, the Kremlin would have already done so dozens of times, as the countries have already been through many similar conflicts. But despite all the animosity between Lukashenka and Putin, the Belarusian leader remains simply a difficult ally for the Kremlin – not an enemy.
Belarus-Russia relations after the Ukraine conflict

Moscow will keep Minsk in its sphere of influence for a long time, given the great political and economic significance that Belarus has for Russia.

Even given the conflict in Ukraine, the Belarusian government is less pro-Ukrainian than it lets on. According to information published by Radio Liberty on 4 January, a Belarusian militant fighting against Ukraine in Donbass, who has killed dozens of Ukrainians, freely visits Belarus. The KGB has invited him for talks, but has not opened a criminal case. Previously, Belarusian KGB officials stated that they would prosecute Belarusians who join the fight in Ukraine, on either the Ukrainian or the Russian side. However, evidence shows that the Belarusian authorities remain reluctant to initiate criminal cases.

Although Belarus's rejection of a Russian military base on its territory was certainly painful for the Kremlin, Belarus managed recover from the conflict by announcing the launch of an Integrated Regional Antiaircraft Defense System. Belarusian diplomats have repeatedly refused to support a UN resolution that would have condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Although the Belarusian authorities are making small steps towards promoting their own culture, which Russian nationalists seem so afraid of, Russian culture and media still dominate in Belarus. When Russian television broadcasts reports about a possible re-orientation of Belarus to the West, Belarusian authorities do not block them. Even the recent arrests of several Belarusophobic authors seem relatively insignificant compared to Kazakhstan, where the authorities have consistently been condemning pro-Russian activists for several years now.

Neither does Belarus intend to undermine Eurasian economic integration, as Belarus needs this market to sell its own manufacture goods, while Western countries remain primarily interested in Belarusian petrol. Minsk is slowing down
Eurasian integration to gain concessions from the Russian side, as the Belarusian economic system exists thanks to Russian energy 'subsidies'.

This new iteration of the off and on Belarus-Russia conflict is hardly unique, albeit with one exception. Russia has started to count money and seems reluctant to give Belarus handouts, demanding more loyalty from Belarus. However, this is a far cry from replacing Lukashenka or occupying 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 joined 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.

Belarus on the international stage: a Russian puppet or a skillful diplomat?

On 15 November, at the 71st session of the UN General Assembly, the Belarusian delegation voted against a draft resolution tabled by Ukraine on the human rights situation in Crimea.
This vote, along with Belarus’s failed attempt to adjourn debate on all country-specific texts, was perceived as a trick to torpedo Ukraine’s initiative and has angered many in Belarus and Ukraine. The move has lead to the Belarusian government being labelled a traitor and Russian vassal.

So what is the rationale behind Belarus’s vote at the United Nations? Do Belarusian diplomats indeed take orders from Moscow?

**An unprecedented motion at the UN**

On 15 November, the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly considered four draft resolutions on human rights situations in specific countries, namely North Korea, Syria, Iran, and Russia-occupied Crimea.

The [last document](#) was tabled by Ukraine along with twenty-nine other countries, including the United States, Georgia, and most EU members. The text called Russia 'an occupying power', condemned the human rights violations in Crimea by 'the Russian occupation authorities' and urged Moscow to take specific measures to remedy the situation.

Five days earlier, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko tried to talk his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenka into supporting the Ukrainian initiative at the UN. Lukashenka offered him only a vague diplomatic reply.

The Belarusian delegation in New York took many aback when Andrei Dapkiunas, the country’s ambassador to the UN, proposed to adjourn the debate on all country-specific resolutions. He called them a 'depressively divisive exercise with a known outcome'.
This unprecedented motion was defeated with 32 votes in favour, 101 against, and 37 abstentions.

The draft resolution on the human rights situation in Crimea was later approved by a vote of 73 in favour, to 23 against and 76 abstentions. Belarus was among those nations voting against, alongside Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and several human rights pariahs.

Belarus’s vote and its no-action motion sparked a strong negative reaction among the Ukrainian elite and democratically-minded people in Belarus and Ukraine.

Iryna Herashchenko, deputy chair of Ukraine’s Verkhovna Rada, called Belarus’s vote 'a stab in the back'. Volodymyr Yelchenko, the Ukrainian ambassador to the UN, labelled Belarus’s position anti-Ukrainian, adding: 'We cannot accept the fact that our closest neighbour stands openly against us in the UN'.

Social networks and online forums were swarmed with Belarusians and Ukrainians who characterised the Belarusian government’s actions as pro-Russian, disgraceful, and treacherous.

A convenient alibi on the Crimea issue

At the end of the day of voting, Dmitry Mironchik, the Belarusian foreign ministry’s spokesman, reacted to this outpouring of criticism by saying that 'it does not reflect
reality'. Mironchik stressed that 'Belarus’s position on Ukraine [has] not change[d] a jot', without elaborating on the exact nature of this often ambiguous position.

The foreign ministry explained Belarus’s actions at the UN by underlining Belarus's aversion towards country-specific resolutions on human rights and its 'consistent rejection of the hypocritical treatment of human rights issues'.

Indeed, over the last few years, the Belarusian delegation at UN meetings in New York and Geneva has staunchly opposed all resolutions directed against specific countries even if it meant protecting notorious human rights pariahs. This is not particularly surprising as Belarus itself remains a target of such a resolution in Geneva.

**Elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy.** The study identifies the main elements and manifestations of neutrality in the Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy

Belarus’s decision to submit a no-action motion on the entire agenda sub-item was meant to strengthen its alibi on the Crimea issue. On the same day, Belarus also voted against all other resolutions, citing a principled rejection of this politicised tool.

In fact, this is not the first time that Belarus has explained away the fact that it's vote on a Ukraine-related issue concurred with Russia. It has used certain extraneous considerations as an excuse before.

Interestingly, if Belarus had submitted the no-action motion on the Crimean draft alone, it would have had a much higher chance of success. However, the move against all texts 'in the package' was doomed to fail. Too many countries sought to condemn human rights violations in at least one of the countries singled out. Tellingly, Saudi Arabia – by no means a
human-rights champion – vehemently opposed the Belarusian idea as it had issues with Syria and Iran.

A docile Russian acolyte? Hardly

Mironchik’s arguments failed to convince most critics, who persist in labelling the Belarusian foreign ministry a Russian vassal or, at least, a loyal foreign policy ally. Belarus’s foreign minister Vladimir Makei apparently confirmed the latter assertion on 22 November in Moscow when he reaffirmed that 'the positions of Moscow and Minsk coincide in virtually all issues on the foreign policy agenda'.
Meanwhile, the real picture remains more ambiguous. Belarus refused to follow Russia in recognising the independence of its satellites, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It insisted on maintaining diplomatic relations and a visa-free regime with Georgia, Russia’s enemy.

Minsk continued to strengthen its ties with Istanbul in the context of anti-Turkish hysteria in Moscow. It never sided with Russia in its rhetorical war against the West over Syria.

Belarus’s refusal to recognise the annexation of Crimea de jure and its uninterrupted political, economic, and military cooperation with Ukraine at the height of the crisis in Donbass enraged many in Moscow.

Belarus’s voting record at the UN is empirical evidence of Minsk’s independent foreign policy. Out of the 75 resolutions put to a vote at the 70th session of the General Assembly, Belarus and Russia adopted different positions on 28 texts. On nine occasions, their votes were diametrically opposite.

The voting record at the UN is telling of the wide variety of issues under discussion there. At the last session, Belarus and Russia voted out of sync mostly on nuclear disarmament issues, but also on other disarmament-related matters, Palestine-related issues, and even on human rights. By voting differently from Russia on the IAEA annual report, Belarus in fact failed to support Russia in its demarche related to the status of Crimea.

Some of Minsk’s initiatives at the UN have not pleased Moscow. This was the case when Belarus proposed reforming the process of appointing new UN Secretary Generals.

Belarusian diplomats tried hard to find an alibi for their Crimea vote. However, the true reason for their position remains Lukashenka’s unwillingness to enrage Russia, especially on the eve of his important meeting with Vladimir Putin.
Far from being Russia’s obedient servant in the international arena, Belarus remains conscious of the lines it cannot afford to cross with regards to its foreign policy. This clearly includes supporting a direct international condemnation of Russia or even abstaining on the issue.

Three ‘thorns in the flesh’ of Belarus-Poland relations

Despite some recent positive trends in relations between Belarus and Poland, several unresolved issues hamper their full normalisation.

Warsaw remains largely bound by the European Union’s official policy towards Minsk. The Belarusian authorities are suspicious of Poland’s support of democratic forces in Belarus.

Meanwhile, Poland’s conservative government has recently shown greater independence from Brussels on many policy issues. They have also visibly reduced their support of the Belarusian opposition, to the latter's great chagrin. This has led to tacit approbation from Lukashenka’s government.

However, the primary sources of conflict in the two countries’ relations remain of a purely bilateral nature. Will Minsk be willing to overlook its economic and security concerns and open the way to a full mending of ties?
Local border traffic: still locked

A Belarusian government official, who spoke with Belarus Digest anonymously, outlined three major stumbling blocks to Belarus-Poland relations: locked local border traffic, the divided Polish minority in Belarus, and the problematic Pole's Card.

Implementation of a local border traffic agreement between Belarus and Poland would facilitate cross-border exchanges for 1.7m people (1.1m of them Belarusians) who live near the border.

In addition to being able to acquire expensive short-term visas (currently the only option), these people would become eligible for cheap multi-year travel permits. These documents would allow them to visit relatives and do shopping in the 30-km adjacent border area.

Belarus ratified the local border traffic agreement in December 2010, a few weeks before the violent crackdown on the Belarusian opposition, which led to a deep freeze of Belarus’s relations with Europe. The country then suspended the necessary intergovernmental procedures, thus preventing the agreement from taking effect.

Now, although the most difficult period in bilateral relations is over, Belarus remains reluctant to enact the traffic law. The authorities claim that the existing infrastructure capacities would not cope with the expected increase in cross-border traffic (between 30% and 70%).
The border checkpoints are indeed oversaturated. Dmitry Mironchik, the foreign ministry’s spokesman, admitted on 29 September that Poland’s assistance in securing EU funds to modernise the infrastructure would help to launch the local border traffic.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian authorities fear that the potential hordes of Belarusian shoppers would cause a dramatic increase in non-taxed imports from Poland. This could further undermine the country’s failing economy and weaken the Belarusian currency. In their turn, the Polish authorities would welcome
greater inflows of shoppers to Poland’s less-developed eastern region.

There are also security concerns. Belarus’s security apparatus feels uneasy about increased foreign presence in the border area. It could mean less efficient control over this special-status territory, which includes two major cities, Brest and Hrodna.

**The Pole's Card: an economic and security threat**

The Belarusian government has always been hostile to the Pole’s Card, viewing it as a way for the Polish government to meddle in Belarus’s domestic affairs.

This document, introduced in 2008, grants many rights and benefits to people with nominally Polish roots in exchange for an oath of allegiance to the Polish nation.

The number of eligible cardholders in Belarus may exceed half a million Belarusians. As of December 2015, 77,818 Belarusian citizens received the card.

Many cardholders never thought about their Polish roots before the Pole's Card became available. Most have been enticed by more pragmatic considerations – primarily including access to a free Polish visa, which also allows for travel in the Schengen zone.

The Polish government has ignored repeated requests from Belarus to suspend the programme, which allegedly violates international law, until an advisory opinion of the Venice Commission can be obtained.
Instead, the legislation on the Pole’s Card has recently been amended to simplify the cardholders’ access to residence permits and Polish citizenship. It also provides for financial support of their resettlement to Poland.

Poland wants to encourage immigration from Belarus. The country, which is experiencing a labour shortage, would prefer to attract qualified workers from Belarus over migrants from the Middle East. Belarus can hardly rejoice at these prospects.

The Belarusian government also sees such dual-loyalists as a potential threat to state security. It has already prohibited civil servants and elected officials from obtaining the Pole’s Card. Moreover, a new provision in Polish law authorises the submission of applications on the territory of Poland, making it significantly harder for the Belarusian government to track them.

Polonia: a divided minority

Belarus Digest wrote earlier on the ongoing talks between the Belarusian and Polish governments about the reunification of the two Polish minority associations in Belarus – with the Belarusian authorities vetting the candidates for leadership positions.

The feuding associations, which each call the other ‘phantom’, publicly reacted to the proposed plan after Rzeczpospolita also broke this story.
The independent Union of Poles in Belarus (UPB), which enjoys the support of the Polish authorities, has expressed its “strong opposition to the idea of joining the independent UPB with the puppet organisation of the Belarusian authorities under the same name”.

The unregistered association invited the Belarusian government to enter into direct talks about ways to legalise the underground organisation.

Predictably, the government-controlled UPB has welcomed a unification scenario. “We have extended a unifying hand to them, but they sling mud at us and Belarus”, an official of the registered association complained in an interview.

The same official has asserted that the Poland-backed UPB will have to accept the scenario if pressed by their Polish sponsors. The unrecognised UPB is indeed dependent on Polish money. However, few people doubt the personal integrity of its leaders.

The Belarusian government would never allow most of these leaders to assume an important position in a unified organisation. The authorities perceive a strong, uncontrolled, and legally operating association of the Polish Diaspora to be a potential threat to national security.

Can the three thorns be pulled out?

Of the three major problems, only the issue of local border traffic has a chance of being solved in the mid-term. It would, however, require significant funding from the European
Union. Gradual adaptation of Belarusian security agencies to the country’s greater openness would also help.

The Polish government will not abandon or modify its Pole’s Card programme. The emergence of a strong Union of Poles, which the Belarusian government would recognise but not control, also remains highly unlikely.

The three ‘thorns in the flesh’ can be pulled out painlessly, or ignored, only when Belarus manages to reform itself to become an economically prosperous and democratic country. Until then, more Belarusians will go to Poland to buy staple goods, work, or resettle; and the secret services will continue to suspect visiting Poles of being spies and treat national minorities as potential traitors.

Analytical Paper: Belarus becomes neutral to survive

Ostrogorski Centre releases the first major publication on neutrality in Belarusian foreign and national security policy authored by Siarhei Bohdan and Gumer Isaev.

This trend towards a real neutrality of Belarus increased in the past decade. For a long time it was misinterpreted as Minsk opportunistically moving back and forth between Moscow and the West. Yet by the mid-2010s, these elements of neutrality became a reliable part of Belarusian foreign and national security policy.

This naturally leads one to question whether neutrality is a viable option for the Belarusian state. So far, Moscow accepted although other countries refused to take it serious.
However, that may be the only way for Belarus to survive as a state in current circumstances.

First bigger research paper on Belarusian neutrality

For the purposes of this publication, done by Siarhei Bohdan and Gumer Isayev, neutrality is defined on the basis of modern-time political practice rather than formal legal concepts. Hence neutrality shall mean policies aimed at maintaining distance from political and military blocks and parties to conflicts.

This distance, certainly, differs depending on specific circumstances. It may include formal membership in associations of political and military integration, as well as bilateral security-related arrangements, as long as they do not crucially affect the international position of the country.

Given the extent of Belarusian-Russian entanglement, this paper focuses on the differences between Minsk and Moscow as the main reference point in study. All Belarusian attempts to assert neutrality necessarily start with readjusting the interaction between Belarus and Russia. Therefore, the study looked at the issues in which Minsk’s policy differed from Russia’s without siding with its opponents.

Neutrality or westward drift?
Among the major conclusions of the paper:

- Although the 1994 Constitution of Belarus establishes its aim to become a neutral state, Belarusian neutrality remained a fiction for many years as Minsk remained a loyal ally of Russia.

- However, since the late 2000s the Belarusian government has pursued policies demonstrating effective neutrality. This was the result of a series of ad hoc decisions by Belarusian leadership regarding the major issues of the country’s foreign and national security policies.

- Minsk avoided siding with Russia in its assertive policy in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East, developed relations with Russia’ opponents and opposed the redrawning of post-Soviet borders. Concurrently, the Belarusian government reviewed its own national security policies, limited Russian military presence within its

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Importance for Belarus</th>
<th>Importance for Russia</th>
<th>Importance for the West</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rapprochement with Ukraine since 2006</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapprochement with Georgia since 2006</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapprochement with the SCO since 2006, and increasing affiliation with it since 2009</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>middle to high (since the early 2010s)</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position Regarding the 2008 Georgia War</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Belarus since 2008</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation with the Russian opposition in the late 2000s (Berezovskii)</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative oil supplies in 2010–2012</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refuge for Bakiev after 2010</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-recognition of Crimea annexation since 2014</td>
<td>mediate</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal to side with Russia in Eastern Ukraine conflict since 2014</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal to side with Russia in its conflict with Turkey since 2015</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
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</table>
borders and increased the autonomy of the Belarusian armed forces and security agencies.

- Some Russian commentators have accused Minsk of “drifting” to the West. However, Minsk avoids challenging or confronting Moscow. The policy it now pursues can be better described as neutrality.

**Recommendations: Neutrality requires participation of all major political forces**

The authors of the paper conclude, Belarusian neutrality is being built ad hoc. Thus, it suffers from poor media coverage and weak expert support. The prospects of Belarusian neutrality still remain uncertain, as Minsk still needs it to be recognised in the East and West, as well as by neighbouring states.

There is no doubt that in order to implement some model of neutrality, the Belarusian government has yet to fulfil several challenging tasks. First of all, it requires recognition for Belarusian neutrality from its foreign partners, especially Russia. To do that, Minsk needs to prove that neutrality does not entail a pro-Western or anti-Russian stance.

Belarusian neutrality ought to be acceptable to Moscow. It means self-restraint for Belarusian foreign and national security policy, as well as self-restraint in domestic political debates. Such a policy could succeed and be accepted by Russia and other countries only if supported by a very wide consensus in Belarusian society.
However, most of the opposition, the media independent of the Belarusian government, and the related analytical community would not currently subscribe to neutrality. They would be especially wary of a model of neutrality involving close interaction with Russia (as in the Finnish case after WWII).

This problem is a general one: all other foreign policy and national security options except joining NATO and the EU have been discarded in the region over the last two decades and Minsk would have a difficult time overcoming this mindset. Nevertheless, the current Belarusian government has no other choice but to persuade broader segments of the Belarusian opposition about the necessity of supporting neutrality. It cannot accomplish this until the political regime becomes more pluralist and the constructive opposition has a stake in governance.

This broad public support for neutrality is necessary, *inter alia*, to convince Russia that Belarusian neutrality is the real will of all mainstream political forces in Belarus. Otherwise, there is an extremely high risk — if not certainty — that Russia would perceive Belarusian neutrality as a concept supported only by certain political factions and that it will be discarded by Minsk as soon as the constellation of forces in domestic Belarusian politics changes.

Likewise, in order to persuade Russia that Belarusian neutrality is genuine, Minsk needs a military capacity which would guarantee that Belarus does not compromise Russian security. To do that, firstly, Minsk shall accommodate reasonable and legitimate security needs of Russia. For instance, it can continue cooperating with Russia on air defence. Secondly, it needs to pay attention to Russian security needs and sensitivities in building Belarusian armed
forces, e.g., by deploying appropriate arms systems.

**Predetermined Choice?**

In brief, Minsk, might have no other choice but “to go neutral”. The Belarusian establishment also understands that it is becoming ever more risky to remain Russia’s ally. At the same time, given the geographical location of Belarus, as well as its political economy and cultural ties with Russia, Minsk cannot simply “defect” to Western-dominated blocks and organisations.

Opinion surveys and other circumstantial evidence shows, the majority of Belarusians can choose neutrality. It can also found support among significant segments of Belarusian political, economic and cultural elites.

Other options – like further drift towards any foreign countries or blocs and joining them – might involve Belarus in internal political confrontations. Internal clashes would be supported by foreign powers as the case of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has demonstrated and can end in an open armed conflict. Given Belarus’ current position, which is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, neutrality might be the only way for the Belarusian state to survive, develop, and succeed.

- Read full paper: [Elements of Neutrality in Belarusian Foreign Policy and National Security Policy](#)
- Чытаць аналітычны дакумент: [Элементы нейтралітэту ў беларускай знешняй палітыцы і палітыцы нацыйнальнай бяспекі](#)
Belarus in the Arab World: a one family business?

On 20 September 2016 Minsk hosted the first Oman-Belarus invest forum. More than 40 Omani businessmen held negotiations with over 70 representatives of various Belarusian companies.

The day before the forum, the Omani delegation met with Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who urged the Omani businessmen to invest more in Belarus.

While the Middle Eastern vector of Belarusian foreign policy plays an important role in public declarations, actual trade and business has yet to follow.
Grand plans rather than roadmapping

In August 2016 the Belarusian government adopted a new strategy for export development in 2016-2020. According to this plan, one third of Belarusian exports would go to the Eurasian Union, one third to the EU, and one third to so-called “far arc” countries.

As is often the case with Belarusian state programmes, such ambitious plans are rarely supported by practical follow-through. Statistics illustrate opposing trends in the development of Belarusian exports: Belarus is failing to retain its share of all markets outside Russia. Low quality, high prices on manufactured goods, excessive bureaucracy, and degradation of technology all prevent Belarus from finding new prospective markets abroad.

No place for Belarusian goods in Arab countries?

Despite pretentious declarations about the importance of Arab countries for the Belarusian economy, the actual figures do not support these claims. In January-July 2016 the total turnover between Belarus and the region amounted to around $120m, i.e. less than five per cent of the total turnover.

The following table illustrates Belarusian export (in $m) to Arab countries:
Over the past five years the value of Belarusian exports to the region has remained fairly static: about $250-300m. On one hand this can be seen as a success, given that the total value of Belarusian export has fallen by 35 per cent since 2011.

On the other hand, this also shows the unstable character of Belarusian trade with Arab countries: export and import can fluctuate by 1000-1500 per cent. This is caused by signing one-time contracts without a permanent presence on these markets.

Contrary to widespread belief, Belarus has failed to attain a positive trade balance with all Arab countries. In January-July 2016 Belarus had a negative trade balance with Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Somalia with a roughly $66.5m trade deficit. Moreover, in 2011-2016 Belarus actually lost the Algerian and Lebanese markets. The table below illustrates these trends:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>228.6</td>
<td>300.4</td>
<td>288.3</td>
<td>124.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The variety of Belarusian goods exported to Arab countries also remains very limited. Official documents mention powdered milk, tyres, different kinds of steel, tractors and machinery. Egypt and Jordan are among the most important consumers of these goods, but even here the volumes and amounts of these exports is comparatively low.

Numerous reports indicate that Belarus has become a successful supplier of weapons to several Arab countries, including Iraq, Syria and Sudan, while nevertheless managing to avoid any serious involvement in regional conflicts.

### Personal relations over public interests

Many experts emphasise the importance of personal ties in this process. Belarus has become sadly notorious for its close relations with Iraq during the presidency of Hussein, with Gaddafi’s Libya, with the Sudanese leader al-Bashir, and the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>111.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>-10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>-54</td>
<td>-32.2</td>
<td>-22.2</td>
<td>-46.9</td>
<td>-287.1</td>
<td>-3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>-76.3</td>
<td>-88.7</td>
<td>-65.4</td>
<td>-75.8</td>
<td>-85</td>
<td>-39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>-6.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>-7.7</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-33.7</td>
<td>-4.9</td>
<td>-12.5</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>-340.2</td>
<td>19.682 (with all countries)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Such relations can be seen as a form of mutual support between authoritarian and anti-Western leaders. However, Lukashenka and his family also maintain good personal relations with the Gulf monarchies, particularly with the ruling families in Qatar and the UAE. Belarusian researcher Siarhei Bohdan considers that Belarus's relations with the Gulf States are the main vector in Belarusian foreign policy in the Middle East.

The economic benefits for Belarus of such friendship are dubious, and moreover are a source of much gossip about the nontransparent nature of cooperation, especially in the finance and security sectors.

Some experts believe that Lukashenka's family's hidden billions are stored in Gulf banks. The personal devotion of the president’s eldest son – Viktar Lukashenka – to the Formula 1 races in Abu Dhabi is no secret in the region.

Belarus actively participates in training Qatar’s and the UAE’s security forces, as well as in presenting its weapons at military exhibitions in the Gulf. Russian political commentator Evgeny Satanovski has accused Belarus of working against Russia's interests in the Middle East. According to him, Qatar and the UAE purchase arms for ISIS largely from Belarus.

The Gulf States are among the largest investors in Belarus from the Middle East. However, they invest mainly in lands and resorts, while the financial details of these operations remain unknown.

The Omani case

The Omani case serves as an example of the unstable and personally motivated character of Belarusian foreign policy in the region. Actual relations broke off in 2007 after
Lukashenka’s visit to Muscat. Trade turnover amounted to $7m, with several Omani businessmen working in Russia becoming a driving force for this cooperation. In the following years the trade turnover fell to $1m and all contacts practically ceased.

Belarusian state companies complain about low demand for Belarusian products in Oman. However, the Belarusian company Sohra Group has become a successful seller of Belarusian machinery in Oman and in the Gulf countries in general. The actual scheme according to which business has been unprofitable for state companies but profitable for one private company remains murky.

In 2010-2012 Omani businessmen tried to purchase a large plot of land in the centre of Minsk for the ridiculously low price of $10m but could not reach a final agreement. Even the price itself led to suspicions about the non-business nature of such investments.

Uncertainty and mysteries

Belarus has failed to establish efficient and sustainable economic relations with the Arab countries. Instead of transparent and profitable business, the Belarusian authorities prefer personally grounded backroom dealings with their counterparts in the Arab world.

At certain points in time, Belarus has vigorously sought closer ties with anti-Western Arab regimes but thoroughly avoids any real engagement in regional conflicts.

Nontransparent business schemes and security cooperation with pro-Western Gulf States seem to be the current preference of the Belarusian foreign policy in the Middle East. Its public economic component becomes less significant.
Analytical paper: Belarus-Russia relations after the Ukraine conflict

Since the Russian-Ukrainian conflict began, the Kremlin has persistently tried to expand its control over Belarus, a process that has had quite the opposite effect as Belarusian government policy became more independent in 2014-2015.

There has always existed a paradox in the simultaneous contingency and estrangement in Belarusian-Russian relations.

Estrangement looks the stronger of the two today, evidenced by the decrease in Belarus’ military dependence on Russia and its refusal to allow the establishment of a Russian military base on its territory; the reduction in the Russian economy’s role in Belarus; discrepancies in the foreign policy and media spheres; and conflicts between the political elites of both countries.

These are some of the conclusions found in a new analytical paper Belarus-Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict released by the Ostrogorski Centre today.

Background

This paper examines the integration/disintegration tendencies in Belarus-Russia relations since November 2013, when protests started in Ukraine. The ensuing Euromaidan, annexation of Crimea, and war in the Donbass have considerably altered European politics, including relations between Minsk and
Despite close relations and the formal joint construction of the Union State, which also provides for integration processes, Belarus and Russia are becoming estranged from each other, in numerous ways. There are two reasons for this.

Lukashenka has probably never before taken so seriously the possibility of a Russian military operation inside Belarus.

First, the Kremlin’s policy towards Ukraine led to a rethinking inside Belarusian authoritative circles of the possible steps that Russia could take with regard to Belarus. Alexander Lukashenka has probably never before taken so seriously the possibility of a Russian military operation inside Belarus as he did when he claimed in May 2015 that the Belarusian army needs to be so strong that it is capable of “being thrown from Brest to Vitebsk in half a night to strike a blow”.

Secondly, the decline of the Russian economy lessens the Kremlin’s role as guarantor of Belarus’ well-being. In the conditions of slumping prices, shrinking of the domestic market, and declining GDP growth and forex reserves in Russia, diversification of the Belarusian economy has transformed from wishful thinking into a vital necessity.

Military disintegration: how to say “no” to your ally

Military cooperation has always been the “holy cow” of Belarusian-Russian integration, and the basis for journalists’ and Western experts’ statements presuming that the Belarusian army remains a part of the Russian one.

One of the grounds for such a presumption is the existence of
the Integrated Regional Antiaircraft Defense System which, according to the Russian military, started functioning in 2016. The agreement on its creation was signed back in 2009 and in fact brought nothing new to Russian-Belarusian military cooperation. It looks likely that announcing the establishment of an antiaircraft defense system was aimed at making milder Belarus’ refusal to place a Russian military air base on its territory.

The refusal to create the airbase reflects a broader trend – i.e. Belarus’ attempts to reduce its military dependence on Russia. The presence of so many Belarusian military personnel in Russia has always ensured that there is a mental connection between the Belarusian and the Russian armies – it is hard to find any top Belarusian military official who has not studied in Russia.

However, the number of Belarusian military cadets at the Russian military’s higher educational establishments is decreasing: last academic year there were 447, this year only 374.

The joint Shield of the Union exercises in 2015 gathered 1.5 times fewer military personnel than the 2011 Shield of the Union or West-2013 exercises (i.e. 8,000 participants compared with 12,000). While military exercises seemed all but impossible without Russia before, today the Belarusian paratroopers practice with the Chinese every year.

Although the scope of such training exercises looks miserly in comparison with the exercises with Russia, it shows Belarus’ desire to find new partners.
China, in general, has become a noticeable partner for Belarus. This is most clearly seen in the joint development of weapons systems by Minsk and Beijing, the multiple launch rocket system fire Polonaise being an example.

Failure of the Eurasian Economic Union and economic cooperation

In many ways, Russia's economic decay is responsible for the fact that in only its first year of existence, the Eurasian Economic Union’s (EEU) became a failure for Belarus.

First, the integration project inherited practically all the tariffs (about 600) that existed in the Customs Union. Due to
such mechanisms, about two third of goods and services have been withdrawn from the common market of the EEU. Secondly, economic interaction between the countries has reduced. According to data provided by the Eurasian Economic Commission, the trade turnover of Belarusian goods with the EU countries in 2015 was only 74.8 % of that in 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Volume of export in 2015 (mln $)</th>
<th>Comparison of the volume in % with the volume of export in 2014, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>10 998,1</td>
<td>68,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>28 718,6</td>
<td>77,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>4 886,8</td>
<td>68,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>236,6</td>
<td>73,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>539,7</td>
<td>84,7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Thirdly, although Belarus has introduced unpopular measures like increasing fees for the import of cars, the regulations of the economic union serve Russia’s interests, as evidenced by the continuing economic wars. Fourthly, the importance of oil and gas, which were the key motivators for Belarus to join the EEU, have fallen sharply.

Discrepancies in foreign policy

Russia’s aggressive foreign policy and economic decline have become one of the most important motivators for the Belarusian authorities to normalise relations with the West. Data provided by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) shows that since 2013 Belarus has intensified its
relations with the European Union, and today contacts with the EU outnumber those with Russia.

The BISS data reflects the fact that Belarus started normalising relations with the EU and building up contacts with “developing countries” at the beginning of 2013. This included support for Ukraine’s European integration. This shows that the increase in dialogue with the West started not because of Russia’ expansionist policy, but for internal reasons.

It is nonetheless indisputable that the activation of Belarusian contacts with the world and deepening discrepancies in the foreign policies of Moscow and Minsk in 2013-2014 were in many respects a product of Russia’s foreign policy and economic decline.

It is important to note that Belarus’ normalisation of relations with the West is not an attempt at a geopolitical U-turn. So far, neither Belarus on the one side, nor the
European Union and the United States on the other, have taken any cardinal steps in the form of big economic projects (Belarus still hasn’t even managed to obtain a loan from the International Monetary Fund) and contact in the political and military spheres remains at a low level.

Conclusion

Despite Belarus’ lessening dependence on Russia, relations seem unlikely to come to the point of a dramatic breakdown in integration.

First, Belarus remains overdependent on Russia financially – it continues to receive from Russia loans and “subsidies” – i.e. discounts for oil and gas and access to the common market. Furthermore, it remains highly important to Lukashenka that Russia acknowledges the results of the presidential elections in Belarus. Secondly, Belarus remains an important country in Europe for Russia. Therefore, the Kremlin won’t allow the total disintegration of the two countries’ relationship.

Nonetheless, the process of estrangement will continue further, and this is also connected with the generational changes inside the societies. The number of Belarusians who once lived in the same state as Russia – the USSR – is steadily decreasing and the quantity of people who identify themselves as ethnically Russian is reducing. Also a new nomenclature elite is emerging, interest in Belarusian culture is reviving, and young people are becoming more open to the world.

And the last, but important change: a political class that is accustomed to sovereign power, in which decisions are taken independently, has formed in Belarus.

- Read full paper: Belarus-Russia Relations after the
Ukraine Conflict

- Чытаць аналітичны дакумент: Беларуска-расійскія дачыненні на фоне канфлікту ва Украіне
- Читать аналитический документ: Белорусско-российские отношения на фоне конфликта в Украине

Ryhor Astapenia & Dzmitry Balkuniets