

On whose side is Belarus in the Syrian civil war?

On 7 September, the Israeli air force attacked the Syrian military's Scientific Studies and Research Centre. According to the *Times of Israel*, Belarusians may have been among those working at the Centre.

Meanwhile, a Bulgarian hacker group recently published documents showing that Silk Way, an Azerbaijani airline that transports arms for Syrian opposition groups, directed some of its flights via Minsk. Concurrently, Russian and Polish media circulated reports of alleged arms deals between Minsk and sponsors of Syrian opposition groups for several millions euros.

Belarus thus is accused of supplying all sides in the Syrian civil war. But available evidence proves that Minsk is an indirect participant. Its involvement in the Syrian conflict as supplier of weapons is limited to working with intermediaries acting on behalf of Western countries and their allies.

Belarus has no missile technology for Damascus

On 15 September, the *Times of Israel* published an article about alleged defence cooperation between the Belarusian and Syrian governments. It quoted Ronen Solomon, an Israeli freelance intelligence analyst, saying there were Belarusians working at the Syrian military's Scientific Studies and Research Center helping Damascus to improve its ballistic missiles.

However, the Syrian opposition website *Zaman al-Wasl* reported it was Russians, Iranians and North Koreans, who had worked at the bombed facility. Solomon told *Times of Israel* "that given the nature of the site and Russia's interests in the region, it's unlikely that Moscow would send experts to such a facility," hence they should have been Belarusians.

He also insisted that "Belarus ... is particularly skilled in improving existing missiles with better guidance systems ... Belarusian companies ... tout also their preparedness to sell technologies coveted by Hezbollah, like anti-aircraft systems, drones and shore-to-ship missiles."

Belarus, however, has little to offer to Damascus in terms of missile technologies. and that little technology it itself acquired in the most recent years. Minsk inherited a great deal of military technologies from the Soviet Union, but has next to nothing to build missiles. In the early 2010s, it even had to ask the Chinese, and maybe also recruited some Ukrainians, to help assemble multiple-launch rocket systems. These types of systems are the most basic for a country intending to master missile technologies. Although this year Belarusian defence companies demonstrated something similar to short-range cruise or ballistic missile at a defence industry exhibition in Minsk, these are not the types of technologies that interest either Syria or its Iranian allies.

Moreover, even if Belarus had something to offer the Syrian government, that would be a doubtful deal for Belarus. Minsk knows these sorts of deals would hardly bring money from an embattled leader such as Assad. It would also undermine Belarusian relations with Assad's opponents, particularly rich, Arab, conservative regimes.

A litany accusations



Bashar Assad in Belarus in 2010. Image: CTV.by

In 2012, *The Atlantic*, a respectable US media outlet, reported that Minsk might be trying to help Syria build fibre-optic gyroscopes for surface-to-surface missiles. No proof has ever been publicly presented.

Nonetheless, since 2012, the US Treasury has maintained sanctions on the Belarusian defence firm Belvneshpromservice (BVPS). The sanctions have been imposed for violating the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act, which forbids supplying these states with any materials and equipment related to weapons of mass destruction or cruise or ballistic missiles.

It is not clear what triggered the imposition of US sanctions. Back in 2012, the media reported that the sanctions had been imposed for Minsk providing Syria with “fuses for general purpose aerial bombs.” But, in fact, it could have been for a deal with any of the three black-listed countries. Indeed, during that period Minsk is documented to have supplied radars to Iran.

Arms for Syrian opposition: How much did Minsk know?

Meanwhile, on 30 August, the Russian web-site *EADaily* published a lengthy piece on alleged Belarusian-supplied arms to the radical Syrian opposition. According to Russian journalists, “Deliveries were implemented through a chain of intermediaries, but Minsk cannot claim ignorance about the

final recipients.”

The *EADaily* article was not the first report about Belarusian arms reaching Syrian opposition via the Balkans. As early as September 2015, American media outlet *Buzzfeed* revealed that a US contractor via a Bulgarian intermediary had bought 700 missiles for “Konkurs” anti-tank systems from Belarus. Moreover, the *Buzzfeed* article alleged that American instructors sent to teach Syrian opposition fighters how to use the systems had passed through Belarus en route to Syria.



Syrian civil war. Image: RT.com

This may just be the tip of the iceberg. In an official report, the Bulgarian Economics Ministry catalogued €37.8m in arms imports from Belarus to Bulgaria for 2015. In 2016, Belarusian arms imports rose to €84.2m.

Most of these deliveries were sent via Romania. This ensured the arms were subject to customs declaration. Therefore, according to official Romanian Foreign Ministry reports, Belarusian military exports to Bulgaria via Romania in 2015 not only included smoothbore arms with a calibre of more than 20mm, but also various arms with a calibre more than 12.7mm, and ammunition, missiles, artillery shells, and bombs. In 2016, the Romanian Foreign Ministry tracked imports of missile systems, artillery shells with a calibre of more than 122mm, RPG grenades, missiles, an armoured vehicle, and aircraft-cannon shells.

These shipments stand out, because before 2015 Belarus scarcely exported arms to Bulgaria. For instance, according to the Bulgarian Economics Ministry, in 2013 Bulgaria imported missiles, artillery shells and military electronic equipment from Belarus worth €411,000.

Arms from Belarus ensures alibis for sponsors of Syrian opposition

Of course, these accusatory reports are shrouded about the final destination of the Belarusian arms. Bulgaria has no need for these weapons. Russian *EADaily*, furthermore, noticed that the exports from Belarus to Bulgaria coincide with the value of official Bulgarian exports of similar arms in similar quantities to the US and Saudi Arabia. It is most likely that the Belarusian arms went to the Syrian opposition.

Oddly enough, Bulgaria itself manufactures almost all the types of equipment and ammunition that it bought from Minsk. Such deals, however, make perfect sense, because Minsk still has these items left over from Soviet times. Such arms, if sent to Syria, would not attract much attention in a country that for many decades had bought Soviet arms.



Delivery of Belarus humanitarian aid to Syria in summer 2017. Image: BelTA.

Nonetheless, the situation is even more complicated. The arms might have gone from Bulgaria to various destinations outside Syria, as well. Hackers from the group Anonymous Bulgaria have recently published stolen documents from Azerbaijani airline company Silk Way. The documents appear to show the company has been transporting arms for the Syrian opposition. The documents also indicate Silk Way had flights originating from Minsk, but not heading for the Middle East. On 14 February, the company reportedly transported ammunition from Minsk via Bulgaria to Afghanistan.

In sum, Western and Russian media regularly speculate on Belarus's alleged ties to various parties in the Syrian civil war. The secretive and relatively unknown Belarusian regime naturally attracts such accusations. In particular, this sort of speculation provides explanations for otherwise murky cases, like that of the Syrian missile centre.

In addition, accusations for alleged Belarusian assistance to either the Syrian government or to the opposition can be used as a political tool against Minsk.

If the allegations are proven, unscrupulous deals in such a conflict amount to a gross violation of international security regulations. The responses by more influential states or a global power like the US or Russia to such a violation would likely be much harsher than their reactions to human rights violations committed by Minsk.

Belarusian defence industries: doubling exports and launching ballistic missile production

On 20-22 May, [Milex-2017](#), an exhibition of defence equipment, took place in Minsk. It featured the first Belarusian ballistic missile. This recent success was one of many for the Belarusian defence industry.

On 18 May, the Chairman of the State Military Industrial Committee of Belarus, [Siarhei Hurulyou](#), announced that from 2011 to 2016 the defence enterprises supervised by his

committee had almost doubled their export volume, earning about \$1bn last year.

These two stories illustrate two different paths the Belarusian arms industry is taking. On one hand, they still earn a considerable portion of their money by cooperating with Russia. On the other, they are diversifying and developing products by working with China, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and many other countries – even going so far as to annoy the Kremlin.

Russia both nervous and glad about the successes of Belarusian defence industries

In an article published in the May issue of the Russian *Natsionalnaya Oborona* defence review, [Hurulyou](#) admitted that 'export remains the main point of interest for balanced economic development of the [*firms subordinated to the*] State Military Industrial Committee.'

Speaking at *Milex-2017* on 20 May, Hurulyou stressed that Russia remains Belarus's [principal partner](#), 'which nevertheless is somewhat nervous and, well, maybe also glad about our successes.' He also mentioned China and South East Asian nations as other important partners.

Belarus could hardly have earned a \$1bn last year without Russia's involvement. This is obvious given [known deals](#), as well as those reported in the media in recent months. The largest deals which did not involve Russia are novelties for the industry: including deals on air defence equipment and related services with Vietnam, Myanmar, and [Azerbaijan](#). For instance, an improved version of the *Vostok-E* radar, which once helped Iran intercept a US drone, has been developed

together with Vietnam. Furthermore, Belarus sold the armoured vehicle *Bars* and the Belarusian-Ukrainian anti-tank missile *Karakal* to Turkmenistan. Minsk also made other minor deals such as selling Poland munition for \$7.7m in 2015. Nevertheless, these deals alone cannot explain the dramatic growth in Belarusian defence export.

Deals on military aircraft and their servicing bring in much more money: the *558th Aircraft Repair Works* in the city of Baranavichy conducts overhaul and modernisation of helicopters and aircraft. Last year, it signed a contract to overhaul twelve *Su-25* aircraft for [Kazakhstan](#). Concurrently, it is also completing the overhaul and modernisation of the second-hand *Su-30K* jets which Russia promised to Angola. The latter contract generates at least as much income as the deal with Kazakhstan.

✘ Belarusian defence industries make the most money not by producing complete systems, but by making components for the systems manufactured by others, especially Russia. The most notable of these include chassis from the Minsk-based factory *MZKT*. The Russian tactical ballistic missile system *Iskander*, some S-400 surface-to-air missile systems' parts, and the mobile coastal defence missile systems *Bastion*, *Bal-E*, and *Bereg* all operate on *MZKT-7930* chassis.

Belarusian sight devices are installed on various Russian anti-tank systems, including the *T-90*, *T-72*, and *T-80* tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. Russian defence industries also use Belarusian fire control systems on various armoured vehicles. Likewise, Belarusian firms supply electronic warfare and some avionics; these are installed not only on modernised *Su-27* but also on the most advanced Russian fighter aircraft *Sukhoi PAK FA (T-50)*.

No wonder the Belarusian defence industries have succeeded in earning more money thanks to the massive modernisation of the Russian army in recent years, which also necessitated

replacing certain Ukrainian components in Russian-manufactured equipment.

Missiles and armoured vehicles: How Belarusian are they?

✘ Minsk, however, realises that these tailwinds can change, and is struggling to diversify. The most remarkable new products presented in the *Milex-2017* included a new missile for *Palanez* and an armoured vehicle called *Kaiman*. Both of them were results of attempts to develop technological branches that had been either non-existent – like [missiles systems](#) – or underdeveloped, like armoured vehicles.

A mock-up of a tactical ballistic missile has attracted arguably the most media attention at the exhibition. It will make recently deployed *Palanez* Belarus-Chinese multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) capable of delivering a conventional 560 kg payload as far as 300 km. Now, the *Palanez* shoots only at 200 km with much [smaller rockets](#).

The Belarusian State Military Industrial Committee admits that the missile was designed under the framework of 'existing cooperation'. This formulation seemingly indicates [collaboration with China](#). Experts at the Moscow-based Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies dismiss it as a version of the Chinese missile *M20*. However, experts have suspected for years that [Ukrainian firms](#) may also be involved.

The Belarusian State Military Industrial Committee announced its plans to conduct initial shooting tests of the Belarusian ballistic missiles this autumn. The committee head boasted of 'having established a complete scientific, experimental, and manufacturing complex – from scratch – which enables Belarus

to design [...] and produce its own modern rocket and [missile systems](#).'

Besides missiles, the Belarusian government has been striving to produce mechanised armoured vehicles in the country. The new combat reconnaissance/patrol vehicle *Kayman* became one of the most celebrated products at the *Milex*.

It was designed by the 140th Tank Repair Works based in the  city of Barysau. The first models of *Kayman* were produced based on the Soviet *BRDM-2*, an armoured patrol car. However, the Works' head designer Volha Pyatrova insist that the final version of *Kayman* is an original product manufactured mostly from Belarusian components.

President Lukashenka ordered the design of such a vehicle three years ago. This month, *Kayman* was officially deployed in the Belarusian armed forces.

Does Minsk supply dysfunctional equipment?

Belarusian defence industries have so far succeeded in maintaining a certain degree of quality in their international cooperation. But on 17 May, the radical opposition web-site *Beloruskii Partizan* published material about allegedly dysfunctional military equipment supplied by Belarus to Azerbaijan in the early 2010s. Some Ukrainian components in the supplied systems reportedly were broken; furthermore, Belarusian firms perhaps paid Ukraine too much.

Numerous foreign media sources, such as the major Azerbaijani media outlet *Haqqin*, quoted the article. However, there is little evidence of the problems described by *Beloruskii Partizan*, which was the only source of information on the case. It claims to possess copies of documents proving the

story but it has refused to publish them so far.

✘ This is not the only unsubstantiated story about the Belarusian arms industries to circulate recently. On 26 April, the French bulletin *Intelligence Online* published an article accusing Lukashenka's government of continuing arms trade with the [Syrian government](#). The bulletin based its story on a meeting between Belarusian Industry Minister [Vitali Vouk](#) and Syrian prime minister Imad Khamis. Official reports, however, do not indicate that they discussed military matters. Belarus has [avoided supplying](#) sensitive items to Damascus for years, and the 76-word story failed to provide any evidence that the opposite is now true.

[Defence industries](#) constitute an important branch of the Belarusian economy. They are dynamic, willing to introduce new products, and diversify markets and partners. Belarusian defence firms remain closely linked to Russia, but that [does not mean they are dependent on it](#).

They are looking for autonomous ways to export their defence products. This certainly angers the Kremlin. Unsubstantiated stories which work to undermine [cooperation with Ukraine](#) and Azerbaijan are just more proof of this.

Belarus-Turkey Rapprochement: Minsk Refuses to Fight for Kremlin and its Allies

On 14-15 April Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka took part in the Istanbul summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

This trip triggered another wave of derisory criticism in the Russian media. Even *Kommersant*, the liberal Russian daily, wrote about the 'demonstrative rapprochement of Ankara and Minsk' against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between Belarus and Russia.

No wonder Lukashenka while in Istanbul met Turkish President Erdogan, whose relations with Moscow remain hostile after the Turkish air force shot down a Russian jet late last year. The Belarusian president even invited Erdogan to visit Belarus. Belarus' recent refusal to support another Russian ally, Armenia, in its conflict with Azerbaijan makes Lukashenka look disloyal to the Kremlin.

Moscow refuses to accept anything but total support for its policies. Anything else, in the Kremlin's view, is treason and enmity. And Minsk refuses to deal in such black and white categories.

Minsk approaching Erdogan and his friends

Minsk is much more interested in [cooperation with Turkey](#) than vice versa. Commenting on recent contact between the Belarusian and Turkish leaders, *Kommersant* argued that Turkish President Erdogan 'is getting a chance to play the "Belarusian card" in relations with Russia.'

So far, however, Erdogan has displayed no interest in doing that. First, his meeting with Lukashenka was just one of a series of meetings he held with participants of the OIC summit of a comparable level.

Minsk is simply consolidating its ties with the block of conservative Middle Eastern regimes associated with the West

Secondly, Turkish officials made no statements to indicate their intention of playing a 'Belarusian card', nor did the Turkish media display any interest in Lukashenka's visit, only mentioning it on the sidelines.

Joining the OIC as an observer, Minsk is simply consolidating [its ties](#) with the block of conservative Middle Eastern regimes associated with the West, like the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, Turkey or [Pakistan](#). It is this block that dominates in the OIC. This foreign policy orientation of Minsk is evident from the meetings Lukashenka had in Istanbul with Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and President of Pakistan Mamnoon Hussain.

Just before that, President Lukashenka's son, [Viktar](#), on 29-31 March visited Qatar, another country that has tense relations with Russia and its allies. Viktar openly met high-level officials of that country.

That demonstrative contact contrasted with Minsk sending to Russia's ally, [Syrian President](#) Bashar Assad, just a delegation of the Belarusian Communist party, a marginal political force. The Belarusian communists brought Assad a message from the Belarusian leadership and a painting with the ambiguous title *Victory Day*.

Armenia angry with Belarusian government

Certainly, only few experts noticed these eloquent details of Belarusian foreign policy in the Middle East. Other moves by Minsk, however, attracted the attention of many Belarusian and foreign media outlets, namely its position on the revived [conflict around Karabakh](#).

First, on 2 April the Belarusian foreign ministry responded to

the beginning of a new round of hostilities in Karabakh with a statement which underlined the inviolability of international borders and territorial integrity. It irritated Armenia because in that context it meant supporting Azerbaijan, which demands recovery of all the territories that belonged to Soviet Azerbaijan.

Despite a harsh reaction from Yerevan, Minsk on 4 April issued a second statement which implied that Belarusian troops could not be sent to participate in foreign conflicts. That meant a blow to the structure of the Moscow-dominated [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO) which Yerevan had hoped to involve in its conflict with Azerbaijan.

Minsk then drew the final line as the Belarusian parliament adopted – also on 4 April – the new national military doctrine. The norm of not sending Belarusian troops to conflict zones abroad has existed in Belarusian legislation since 1991 and the new doctrine merely reiterated it.

✘ But in a tense atmosphere, as Yerevan tried to use the CSTO in its confrontation with Baku, Minsk's adoption of the new doctrine was interpreted differently. The Armenian media, such as *News.am*, saw the rapid adoption of the Belarusian military doctrine as Minsk's response to the new outburst of hostilities in Karabakh.

At any rate, the doctrine indicated Belarusian unwillingness to side with Armenia and undermined the coherence of the CSTO. On 15 April Deputy Foreign minister of Armenia Shavarsh Kocharyan publicly announced that the new Belarusian military doctrine was causing concern for Armenia as a CSTO member. Yet Minsk also knew perfectly well that its moves with regards to Karabakh would also irritate Moscow.

Swimming away from Putin's *Titanic*?

Moscow, as usual, smells treason, but Minsk is just struggling to find a [middle way](#) between Russia and its numerous opponents in the West, former Soviet Union or Middle East. It recognises some interests of Russia which the Belarusian government considers legitimate, and, for instance, [continues to participate](#) in the Single air defence system.

At the same time, Belarus is demonstrating that it refuses to follow those of Putin's policies which have already entangled Russia in political and military confrontation with numerous countries. But Minsk resists these Kremlin policies not on ethical or moral grounds.

The Belarusian leadership apparently believes that these Kremlin policies are doomed and based on shaky grounds. Lukashenka knowingly made fun of Russia's 'historic' claims to Crimea, suggesting that it might mean the transfer of most of Eurasia, including Russia, to Mongol administration, since historically Mongols owned these lands.

According to Belarusian political commentator [Valer Karbalevich](#), after Russia fell out with Turkey last November, "Russia, which had been a source of support [for the Belarusian government], turned into a source of problems. It is time to swim away from [drowning Putin's] *Titanic*."

That would be a difficult task given the irreplaceable role played by Russia in the Belarusian economy. Nevertheless, Minsk has already succeeded in distancing itself from risky Russian and other countries' endeavours in international politics by referring to international law.

Belarus has denied legitimacy to a variety of different political projects, including the secession of Kosovo, South

Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea (though with reservations) and now Karabakh.

It has also consistently refused to support major Russian foreign policy moves: not only in some faraway places like the Middle East but also in Eastern Europe where Minsk struggles to maintain good relations with Ukraine and repair relations with the West.

The recent Belarusian moves on Karabakh and its relations with the OIC demonstrate that Belarus continues to move in the same direction.

Wars in Syria and Ukraine Make Belarus More Important

After the Turkish downing of a Russian aircraft in Syria last month, Minsk refused to join Moscow in its accusations and recriminations against Ankara. It just lamented what happened between its “Russian ally” and “friendly Turkey.” Needless to say Minsk has also not supported any of the Russians sanctions imposed on Turkey.

Belarusian state media openly doubt Moscow's version of what is going on in Syria. That has not gone unnoticed in the Kremlin. Evgeny Satanovski, a political commentator close to the Russian government, puts Belarus alongside Qatar and Turkey as a country which opposes Russia's policies.

Why does Minsk risk challenging Moscow again? It calculates that the new international situation and, above all, the changed geopolitical significance of Belarus enables Minsk to

play its own games. After all, Belarus has improved its relations with the West and after the Russo-Turkish war of words it has become the safest route for gas transit between Russia and the EU.

Pro-Western Friends of Minsk in the Middle East

Actually, Minsk has undertaken its own political line in regards the Middle East over the past decade. Since the early 2010s, it [shifted its focus](#) away from the radical regimes of Iran, Syria and Libya to conservative regimes allied with the West.

At the height of the Syrian civil war Minsk welcomed the then Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu

The Belarusian regime focused its attention on Qatar, the UAE, Oman and also Turkey. At the height of the unrest in Libya, leading to the toppling of an old Belarusian partner, Muammar Qadhafi, Lukashenka headed in summer 2011 for the country which stood behind the Libyan uprising, Qatar. At the height of the Syrian civil war [Minsk welcomed](#) in spring 2013, the nemesis of the Kremlin and Damascus, then Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and later sent high-level officials to meet Davutoglu in Ankara.

Minsk's activities in recent months are merely a less spectacular continuation of existing diplomacy. In the absence of serious contacts [with Tehran](#), or Damascus the Belarusian government preferred deals with their opponents.

On Sunday, the French web-site, Intelligence Online, reported that Moscow had to step in and halt [Minsk selling](#) the UAE some military aircraft. These would be used to train against Russian and Iranian airforces which use similar types of

planes. This is illustrated by the speaker of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament, [Mikhail Myasnikovich](#), who in October described relations between Minsk and Abu Dhabi as “among all the countries of the Persian Gulf, it is the United Arab Emirates with which we have managed to establish the longest, most confidential and large-scale relations.”

Also in October, Minsk welcomed a trade delegation from Iraqi Kurdistan, whose pro-American regime is clearly disliked by Moscow and its allies in the region. In September, a prominent Lebanese businessman and pro-Western politician, Adnan Kassar, visited Belarus to meet top officials, including foreign minister [Uladzimir Makei](#). Kassar has business in the country, but he most probably also facilitated contacts for Minsk in the conservative Persian Gulf regimes.

Evgeni Satanovski wrote an article accusing Minsk of secretly playing against Russian policy in Syria.

Finally last week the Kremlin reacted openly. Russian political commentator Evgeni Satanovski wrote an article accusing Minsk of secretly playing against Russian policy in Syria. He included Belarus in the “Alliance of Backstabbing Nations”, together with such patented opponents of Moscow [like Qatar](#), the UAE and Turkey.

Satanovski, who has recently changed his image from an analyst of purely Middle Eastern affairs to a commentator on any political issue, acts as a mouthpiece for at least a part of the Russian regime. The high-level propaganda shows and programmes on Russian TV, especially those anchored by Vladimir Solovyev, feature him regularly speaking in a pro-Kremlin rhetoric.

Minsk Derides Moscow's Accusations against Erdogan?

The facts which Satanovski quoted are clearly not a smoking gun. He referred to the visit of Qatar's defence minister to Minsk in July, and the probable personal involvement of the ambassador of the UAE in getting an arms deal with Minsk. Minsk undoubtedly perceived the article as a stern warning, knowing the author's proximity to the Kremlin. The text itself initially appeared in a specialised periodical, *the Military Industrial Courier*, which is widely read by Russian politicians, before *Vzglyad* republished it.

Belarus Segodnya, published a brief, yet harsh, criticism of Russian accusations concerning the Turkish government

On 4 December, the web-site of the main Belarusian government media outlet, *Belarus Segodnya*, published a brief, yet harsh, criticism of Russian accusations concerning the Turkish government's involvement in smuggling oil with Islamic State.

Formally, the article appeared as a blog entry, yet this official daily strictly controls everything that appears on its web-site, so it is not just a private opinion. Furthermore, the author, Yury Tsaryk, is closely connected to the Belarusian government and is known as a strategist and thinker of a pro-Western faction in the regime.

The New Geopolitical Situation of Belarus: Risky

yet Favourable

Minsk clearly feels more confident pursuing its own policy which differs from the Russian. This is not only due to the [improvement of relations](#) between Belarus and the EU. Belarus finds itself in a new geopolitical situation and is working effectively in it.

On the one hand, Belarus managed to play some role in negotiations on Ukraine and through that the regime overcame its own international marginalisation. Now, it continues its attempts to become a recognised place for international negotiation. It follows the urgent visit of Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev, on 27-28 November which probably was about possible mediation between Russia and Turkey over their clash in Syria.

Belarus now offers the safest and arguably the best route for an additional Russian gas pipeline

Lukashenka has a chance to succeed in that endeavour. The state secretary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia and Russian General Grigory Rapota, recently discussed the possibility of Belarus as a negotiation centre on the Middle East. By that they also arguably meant the latest conflict between Moscow and Ankara.

On the other hand, Belarus's geopolitical situation changed after the beginning of the Ukrainian war and the Kremlin's conflict with Turkey. The significance of Belarus as a route for transport of Russian oil and gas to Europe has increased. Essentially, Belarus now offers the safest and arguably the best route for an additional Russian gas pipeline.

It means Belarus becomes a more valuable [partner for Russia](#) and the EU. That means Minsk can afford more leeway in dealing both with Russia and EU and profit from this situation. Sure,

the situation is not risk free. At the same time Belarus, as a transit country for gas supplies between Russia and Europe is in competition with other countries, business interests and radical groups in the region.

This risk is the price for the transformation of the country from Europe's backwater to a more active and accepted player in international politics. Not everything depends on Belarus however. The recent moves by Minsk (its position on Syria or the Russian military presence in Belarus) demonstrates, however, its aspiration to use the new geopolitical reality and build up Belarusian independence and [effective neutrality](#).

Belarus and War in Syria, Launch of the Single System of Air Defence – Belarus Security Digest

On Sunday, a rally against Russia's military bases in Belarus took place in central Minsk. This national security issue has become a major theme before the presidential elections next Saturday. And not only inside the country.

Moscow keeps leaking information on the base and putting pressure on Minsk. The situation reminds one of the history of the establishment of the [Single System of Air Defence](#) of Belarus and Russia in 2009. Minsk managed to delay its creation for years and the system still does not function.

Minsk dismissed information about Belarusians providing military technical support for the Syrian government.

Meanwhile, Belarus has been again accused of arming the Syrian opposition and it has been reported that Belarusians helped transport French military cargo for France's intervention in Syria.

Plans for Russia's Military Base: Déjà Vu?

Russia wants Belarus to [immediately accept](#) the Russian airbase and Lukashenka to clearly side with the Kremlin in its current confrontation with Ukraine and the West. The Russian media campaign continues to put pressure on Minsk. On 27 September, Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that the agreement on the Russian airbase in Belarus might be signed by the Defence Ministries of the two countries in October and the base, located in Babruysk, would function as quickly as January 2016.

According to Nezavisimaya Gazeta, the base will include a regiment of Su-27 fighter jets, one air flight of Su-27 trainer jets and one squadron of Mi-8 transport helicopters. It is unknown whether Moscow is going to pay for the base. The newspaper believes that such a rapid deployment of the base is [a response](#) to America's possible deployment of new nuclear arms in Europe.

The situation with the airbase reminds one of how Russia forced Belarus to create a Single System of Air Defence in the late 2000s. Back then, Lukashenka said,

We have signed this agreement because Russia was "making hubbub." Americans and Europeans have warned us [against this]. I said to the Russian leaders: "Look, why create a disturbance? Our air defence is effectively working in the interests of Russia. [...] Why do we need an agreement? To make a PR campaign in the media? Let's wait a little with that." –

“No, no!” So, I said, “Okay, now that it is so necessary, let's sign.”

Minsk and Moscow signed the agreement on establishing the Single Air Defence System in 2009. Then Minsk for years successfully delayed ratification and the coordination of details.

Formally, the governments announced the establishment of the system in 2012. Recently it became known that the system still does not function. The head of the Chief Staff of Aerospace Forces of Russia Pavel Kurachenko, on 8 September announced that the Single System of Air Defence would start working by the end of 2016.

Army Refused to Buy from National Industry?

On 9 September 2015 Belarus signed with a Russian manufacturer a contract about purchasing BTR-82A, armoured personnel carriers for the Belarusian army. Minsk will get them in 2016. It means that the government for unknown reasons has decided to dismiss alternatives offered by Belarusian [defence industry](#).

Belarus produced in recent years at least two similar types of machinery to the one Minsk bought. First, is the Kobra-K, which is a thorough modernisation of the Soviet BTR-70 designed jointly by the Belarusian Barysau 140th Tank Repairment Works and two Slovak firms. Second, is the Umka MZKT-590 100 designed by the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT).

Certainly, both these products represent the first attempts by [Belarusian firms](#) to manufacture such equipment. But these attempts obviously were not welcomed by the national army. It apparently did not buy any of the vehicles. That occurred despite public statements by the Belarusian president about

the introduction of Belarus-made weapons.

Exercises with Russians, Serbs and Chinese

Most exercises conducted by the [Belarusian army](#) involve drills carried out jointly with Russian counterparts. The largest took place on 10-16 September, when Belarus and Russia conducted an operative military exercise called "Shield of the Union-2015" on Russia's territory. More than 8,000 personnel of both countries took part in the drills which included operations by the air force, air defence, infantry and other units.

On 2-5 September, Belarusian special forces took part in a joint tactical drill called "Slavic Brotherhood-2015" with Russian and Serbian special forces near Novorossiysk (Russia). On 30 September-4 October Belarusian Special Operations Forces participated in a military exercise called "Unbreakable Brotherhood" of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The exercise took place in Armenia and involved military and police units of all the CSTO members.

Finally, on 30 September, Belarusian and Russian special forces participated in a joint company-level tactical exercise near Vitsebsk. Speaking to journalists in August, the commander of Russia's Airborne Forces, Colonel General Vladimir Shamanov commented, "interaction with Belarusians is a model for other CSTO countries in terms of development of a partnership between the countries. The bilateral cooperation plan for Russian and Belarusian special forces for this year includes more than 30 joint combat deployments."

On 22-24 September, the 61st Fighter Airbase conducted exercises involving the landing of MiG-29 fighters, An-26 transport aircraft and Su-25 close air support aircraft on a road. Minsk claimed that nobody has ever done that with an

An-26. Representatives of the [Chinese army](#) attended the exercises.

Belarus and Wars in Ukraine and Syria

Minsk avoids risks related to the [conflicts in Ukraine](#) and Syria. On 22-24 September, representatives of Belarus' and Ukraine's armed forces came together in Kyiv for a working meeting to assess the implementation of the Belarus-Ukrainian Agreement on Additional Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in 2015. The representatives also discussed bilateral cooperation in 2016.

On 2 October, the Belarusian State Military Industrial Committee announced that no [Belarusian specialists](#) were currently working for the Syrian government. On 17 March, BuzzFeedNews published a story about the reexport of 700 old Konkurs anti-tank missiles from Belarus through Bulgaria to the US-funded opposition in Syria. The news lacked any proof and many details, such as the time of the transfer. Furthermore, it was published by a web-site which usually does not write about such issues.

Nevertheless, it could be true. Earlier this year, Reuters wrote about an undisclosed UN report accusing Minsk of supplying ammunition to some Libyan forces backed by conservative Arab regimes allied with the West (above all, the traditional Belarusian ally, Qatar). Belarus since the early 2010s refocused its [foreign policy](#) in the Middle East from relations with the West's opponents (for example, Libya, Syria, [Iran](#)) to the West's allies (like Qatar, UAE, Turkey).

Also in September some authoritative Russian military bloggers like Alexander Ermakov revealed that Belarusian firm Transaviaexport was transporting military cargo [for French forces](#) participating in airstrikes in Syria. The reports

concern the flights in August and September and are partially confirmed by the French Defence Ministry.

Belarus Turns to Pro-Western Nations in the Middle East

Belarus's recent leaning towards pro-Western nations in the Middle East follows fast on the heels of rapprochement with the West. On 6-7 May, Joint Belarus-Saudi Committee on Cooperation will meet in Riyadh. On 15 April, Belarus opened an embassy in Qatar.

Establishing closer links with the very centres of conservative Arab bloc allied with the West is a milestone in Belarusian foreign policy. In the past, Minsk enjoyed amicable relations primarily with the so-called radical republican regimes in the Middle East. Saddam's Iraq, Qadhafi's Libya, Assad's Syria, as well as Ahmadinejad's Iran figured among Belarus's main partners.

The shift towards pro-Western monarchies reveals a contradictory, yet pragmatic approach by Minsk. The Belarusian government is looking for quick money to compensate for Belarus's trade deficits with other countries, though some odd deals and alliances have emerged as a result.

Minsk's New Friends Killed Its Earlier Buddies

Commenting on the embassy opening in Qatar on 31 March, deputy foreign minister Alyaksandr Huryanau called Qatar Belarus's "longstanding political partner." This is a remarkable statement given this nation's role in toppling Minsk's former

friends in the Middle East.

Minsk's new approach in the Middle East complements its recent rapprochement with the West

The partnership with Qatar complements Minsk's other policies in the region. Besides establishing closer relations with Saudi Arabia, the Belarusian government has undertaken many other activities in the region in the last two months. It held political consultations with Oman and the UAE, received an Omani parliamentary delegation, sent its representative to a ministerial meeting of the Arab League – dominated by conservative Arab nations, – and sent a delegation to Pakistan, another nation allied with the pro-Western bloc in the Middle East.

What is more, Belarus has enjoyed excellent relations with Erdogan's Turkey and made attempts to befriend pro-Western Kurdistan. Minsk's policies in the Middle East complement its policy of rapprochement with the West. Belarus's attempt to move away from risky partners challenging the West is greatest in the history of its foreign policy to date.

Any Money in Sight?

Belarus's previous, more limited, attempts at partnering with pro-Western states in the Middle East did not pay off as expected. In 2011, Minsk quietly renounced its close partnership with Libya and minimised its ties with Iran and Syria. It secured promises from Qatar of a new level of economic relations and investment. Alyaksandr Lukashenka has designs to create a kind of “Qatari Island,” a huge economic centre built on Arab money in Belarus, though thus far these and other plans have ended up creating nothing but a few hunting estates for Arab princes near Minsk.

A similar fate befell another project publicised over the past couple years – bringing Omani money to Belarus. Omani

businesses received a big swathe of land in Minsk to develop, but in 2012 gave up plans in the Belarusian capital.

Belarus's firm Beltekhekspart reportedly supplied ammunition to Libyan armed groups

Yet trade with the Gulf Arab monarchies has continued to slowly grow. In 2014, Belarus-Saudi commodity trading was valued at more than \$95m. This is almost as much as the last year's Belarus-Iran trade turn over of \$97m.

In addition, Minsk has become involved in murky deals with pro-Western Arab monarchies in other countries as well. This March, Reuters quoted an unpublished UN Security Council report on Belarus, according to which Beltekhekspart was supplying Libyan armed groups with ammunition. Minsk retorted that the deals were legal and involved the Libyan government. Importantly, the groups supplied by Belarus seem to enjoy Qatari support.

Later on, the French specialist bulletin *Intelligence online* added that military equipment might be also supplied by the Belarusian firm to Libyan militias. According to the French publication, Western governments gave tacit support to these supplies.

Away From Iran and Syria?

As Minsk establishes rapport with the pro-Western Arab monarchies, it has been easing the level of contact with their opponents in the region – namely, Iran and Iran's allies. This year, Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei has visited Syria only once, this past February.

Now, Tehran and its allies are displaying more interest in maintaining relations with Minsk. In February, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif came to Minsk, in April, and Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari and Syrian

Minister of Industry Kamaledin Ta'am have visited Belarus.

Yet these contacts are a mere shadow of Belarus's partnerships with these countries in the 2000s, when Minsk would host a new Iranian delegation almost every month. Minsk's recent level of engagement are not only less frequent but also far less meaningful. For example, Iraqi Foreign Minister's visit to Belarus resulted in both parties signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Sports.

Belarus's trade with both Iran and war-ravaged Syria has decreased in recent years. While in 2008, Belarus-Syria trade made up over \$85m, last year it barely exceeded \$30m. Current promises to establish an assembly production plant for Belarusian MAZ trucks in Syria are unlikely to materialise. While Iran may indeed pay for such a project in Syria, the ongoing civil war in Syria makes the actual implementation of the project unlikely in the near future.

To Support the Winners

The Belarusian leadership has not changed its ideological preferences; it had none to begin with

The Belarusian government may go as far as to use its relations with Syria, Iran, and Iraq as a bargaining chip in relations with Western-allied Arab monarchies. The kings of the Gulf's willingness to buy up Iran's allies has already been exposed by Wikileaks, though Belarus can hardly attract the attention of Arab rulers on its own, and as such it is becoming an important ally of Tehran and Damascus and even as a source of military equipment and expertise for Syria, Iran, or Shiite Iraq.

The Belarusian leadership has not changed its ideological preferences; it had none to begin with. Not only does it is seek rapprochement with Western allies in the Middle East, but it has also followed a similar approach in other regions. For

of Foreign Affairs on state television which signalled that Minsk was ready for dialogue with the West.

Economy

[Motovelo disappointed Lukashenka?](#) The head of state visited Motovelo – a Minsk factory that produces bicycles. Journalists reported that six years ago an Austrian investor bought the state's shares in the company, but there were terms set that certain obligations needed to be fulfilled. The investor had to pay off the company's debts, but has not yet fulfilled all his obligations.

Lukashenka visited the factory to check the current production ratio and also to discuss the strengthening of the Belarusian brand in the world. State television also recalled Lukashenka saying that "our economy is oriented for exports". Belarusian journalist pointed out that in Soviet times the factory produced nearly a million bicycles annually. These days, it is supposed to produce 500,000 of them per year until 2017.

The head of the state was rather disappointed with the ongoing situation and asked the managers: "when will you fulfil our agreement?", referring to higher production. The managers showed remorse and then promised to improve the situation. Lukashenka gave them time until 1 January to fulfill all the obligations, otherwise they could lose their positions. The head of the Austrian group, Alexander Muravev, was defending the company and proudly presented Lukashenka a new bicycle model.

During his visit Lukashenka raised the issue of the devaluation of Belarusian ruble. In his words, the state would neither weaken nor strengthen it artificially. It will all depend upon the market mechanisms of supply and demand.

The head of state spoke also about the nation's additional reserves. According to him, those who travel abroad should be required to pay around 100 USD. "We have our own fridges... They

criticise us: it's a poor country, but they [Belarusians] spend 3bn in the EU annually, and then they bring back the junk they bought from abroad", he concluded.

[Scandal with Uralkali to be continued.](#) Belarusian journalists reported that the debts of Uralkali reach over \$2bn. They described the excessive spending of Suleyman Kerimov, the owner of the most crucial proportion of shares in the Russian company Uralkali. The state channel fully portrayed in details Kerimov's luxurious lifestyle: expensive lovers, the number of estates in various countries he has, his ownership of a football club. To make it more vivid, the television cited the commentaries of their colleagues from Russian media, who also remained very critical and ironic towards Kerimov and his current financial troubles.

[A draft budget for 2014.](#) Belarusian journalists reported on the Council of Ministers discussions regarding a forecast of socio-economic development of Belarus next year. The politicians also discussed how to improve the economic situation, for example through diversification of exports and attracting more investment to Belarus. Journalists noted that the politicians also identified the additional sources of inflow of foreign currency. They, however, did not elaborate the topic further. "It will help to strengthen the economic and energy security of the state", the state TV channel concluded.

International Affairs

[Preparations for strategic military drills.](#) Television widely reported on the period of preparations for the joint Belarusian-Russian military exercises West-2013. The media noted that this year the whole programme would take part in all areas known as polygons in Belarus and in two stages. It added that the soldiers would use new types of weapons. This year strategic manoeuvres were characterised by self-defence tactics and will prepare the forces to better secure the

safety of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Journalists reported on how the Belarusian side welcomed the Russian soldiers in a traditional way, with bread and salt. They also made mention of the fact that Alexander Lukashenka approved the programme of the exercises.

Belarus-China keen on tightening co-operation. The state television covered a meeting of Lukashenka with a leader of the Chinese Communist Party, Liu Yonshan. Belarusian journalists noted that “today both countries have many joint projects”. One of them is the Belarusian-Chinese Industrial Park. Belarus also remains interested in more direct investment from China, state TV added. State television commented that Lukashenka proposed to establish in Belarus a Chinese media holding “and in such a way people in Europe and post-Soviet sphere will better know our joint projects and initiatives”.

International position of Belarus. Minsk ready for a dialogue with the EU? Lukashenka met with Uladzimir Makei, minister for foreign affairs. They discussed the current international affairs, among them the establishment of the Eurasian economic union, the situation in the EU, Russia, but also the crisis in Syria. Belarusian state television noted that Makei also raised the issue of relations with the EU and USA. In his words, “Belarus is ready for moving forward. The relations should be based upon equality, and be good neighbourly”.

G-20 Summit: Economy and Syria. Belarusian journalists reported on the Summit of twenty the biggest economies in the world that recently closed in Saint Petersburg, Russia. They emphasised the critical position of Beijing against any potential military intervention. State television pointed out that behind the scenes the Chinese vice-minister of finance expressed his concern over oil prices if the intervention would take place. Herman Van Rompuy, representing the European Council, spoke about European expectations to regulate the conflict in Syria through the UN, as shown by the

broadcast. As Belarusian journalists pointed out, Washington was ready for military intervention regardless of anyone else's concerns, "with or without the international community".

Belarusian TV also drew attention to the financial aspect of the potential intervention, estimated to cost as much as \$200m USD. It noted the statement of John Kerry who said that the Arab countries were keen on contributing to the intervention expenses. Journalists commented saying "if that is true, he still did not reveal the name of these countries. It is also unclear how to judge the fact that the Arab states would sponsor the American war". The state channel concluded that "in any event a decision on military operation against a sovereign state appears to be a serious violation of international law".

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). 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.

Minsk is Looking for New Friends, To Replace the Ones It Lost

Last Friday, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Belarus. According to Belarusian officials and media the minister came just to sign visa abolition and readmission agreements. The Turkish Foreign Ministry added that ministers had, "exchanged views on regional issues mainly Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan." This addition appears to be especially

intriguing since never before has such a high-level Turkish official visited independent Belarus.

Davutoğlu is seen as the architect of new Turkish foreign policy who is pursuing a neo-Ottoman style, and the man backing the Syrian rebels, flew to Belarus for something more than signing two pieces of paper. They could have been signed by a lower-level official. He came to Belarus because Minsk is rumoured to be cooperating with the Syrian authorities while Turkey supports the Syrian rebels.

The United States has even introduced sanctions against some Belarusian firms for their alleged arms deals with Bashar Assad. Davutoğlu's visit could mean that Lukashenka does after all has some weight in arena of international politics and Ankara is seeking Belarusian assistance in toppling the Syrian government.

They Deceived Lukashenka

Apparently, Minsk could benefit from more Turkish investments if it gives up Syria. Furthermore, Davutoglu has stated that Turkey, "was ready to contribute to the integration of Belarus into the international community." It means providing possible help in reviving contacts with the EU and maybe some other Western partners, like NATO and the United States. No doubt, Ankara could do that, but the question is – would it really deliver on these promises? Would Turkey help Belarus after it solves its own problems and Assad has been toppled?

The Belarusian leadership had to consider similar dilemmas a few years ago. The rich Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf did their best to convince Minsk of necessity of limiting its [friendship with Iran](#) and, in return, receive compensation for its loyalty its new Arab friends.

They succeeded for a while. Belarus dramatically reduced its contact with Tehran since 2010. Whereas in the 2000s, almost

every month some Iranian delegation – frequently at the ministerial level – came to Belarus, since 2010 such visits have become rare, despite all attempts by the Iranians to continue cooperating with Minsk. As a result Iranian investment projects began to stumble and an Iranian car production project was suddenly declared senseless.

At the same time Lukashenka publicly celebrated his successes in establishing links with pro-Western conservative Arab monarchs, touting projects like “Qatar Island” in Europe – to be built in the south-western Brest province. But promises of his new friends from Qatar, UAE and Oman never materialised. Minsk felt deceived by these empty promises. Last year, it simply cancelled a huge investment deal with Oman which started at the highest level and included giving a part of the Belarusian capital to Omani developers.

Close Encounters of the Third World

The relations with developing countries has remained generally unstable for two decades. Belarusian diplomats have a difficult task in establishing relations with new countries. In some traditional directions the existing circumstances have prevented Minsk from developing closer relations. The Arab Spring and Iranian nuclear crisis in particular have contributed to the disruption of relations with North Africa, Syria and Iran.

Lukashenka recently lamented, “Of course, it is a pity that we lost Libya, we lost Syria and some other countries.”

An analysis of foreign policy in recent years demonstrates the slowdown in contacts with developing nations and even the collapse with some important players. Lukashenka recently lamented, “Of course, it is a pity that we lost Libya, we lost Syria and some other countries.”

Facing these massive problems Minsk last January even held

consultations on the issue with Russia. In late March, the Belarusian leader personally hastened to rescue the Foreign Ministry and [visited Indonesia, Singapore](#) and the United Arab Emirates.

The problems in relations with the Third World go beyond a political dimension. The trade with developing nations remains extremely volatile and trade volumes with some countries drop and rise every year by margins in the hundreds of percent.

Another problem is diversification. Andrey Yeliseeu of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies in an upcoming study emphasised that in 2012, among the major economic partners of Belarus in the developing world only five – China, Iran, Turkey, Venezuela and Cuba – had diversified their imports from Belarus. To the majority of other developing nations, Minsk sold one or two articles (mainly, potash and nitrogen fertilisers), although sometimes for billions of dollars. Clearly this signals that the most urgent problem surrounding its export markets remain unresolved.

The Belarusian Ruler Waiting for the Rise of China

Historically, Belarus has been a land between Russia and Europe. Each government has wanted to reduce this dependency however possible, including looking for partners outside of Europe and Russia.

The Belarusian regime's biggest hopes lie in a new global leadership lead by China. Lukashenka and his retinue have pragmatically calculated that the new readjustment of powers in the world may happen in the near future. Moreover, they see feel their beliefs have been confirmed by recent international developments – the global economic crisis, EU internal difficulties, and the rise of BRICS countries.

The Belarusian leadership has proclaimed relations with developing nations one of its foreign policy priorities. Some in the opposition insist that since late 1990s cooperation

with the Third World has been a major source of money and other benefits for the Belarusian regime. Uncorroborated [claims](#) to that effect are common place in oppositional rhetoric.

In reality though, Belarus' position in the developing world remains precarious. The share of developing nations in foreign trade is constantly hovering around 10-12% for Belarus. The lucrative arms deals were to be found back in the late 1990s – early 2000s, but have since more or less disappeared. Minsk itself now prefers to stay away from any potential hotspots or doing dealings with radical movements and regimes, yet still fails to find enough new [markets](#).

Thus, in late 2011, the US was able to block Peru's ratification of a military technical cooperation agreement with Belarus. Minsk planned to modernise the Peruvian air force and, after long negotiations, managed to conclude an agreement with Peru. However, the Peruvian liberal opposition resisted the deal with Beltekhexport. Peru21, a media outlet, accused the Peruvian government of cooperating with a Belarusian company that had been sanctioned by the EU and US and continued insinuating arms deals with "Pakistani and Syrian terrorists".

Minsk Willing to Change

Relations with developing nations have given the Belarusian leadership some leverage in balancing relations between the West and Russia. But it would be wrong to describe these relations as an adventurous rapprochement to anti-Western regimes.

The Belarusian ruler can be accused of many things, but ideological rigidity is not one of them.

Lukashenka is going after money and is willing to reshuffle his own foreign policy if he can see an opportunity to benefit

from it. He effectively renounced Qaddafi, tried to replace Iranians with Arabs, and agreed to speak with the Turkish Foreign Minister about Syria. The Belarusian ruler can be accused of many things, but ideological rigidity is not one of them.

The essentially revisionist world view of the ruling elite in post-Soviet Belarus includes some elements which can be considered anti-Western. After all, it has been shaped by the USSR's collapse and the triumph of the Western bloc. But it remains anti-Western only in so far as they can find no place for themselves in the Western bloc. That is why for the time being they prefer to cooperate with anti-Western governments.

The Belarusian regime might be well aware of problems with the West and Russia, yet it [remains hopeful](#). Lukashenka believes that changes in the landscape of global politics caused by some developing nations are imminent. He has repeatedly urged Belarusian officials and businessmen "to go to the places where nobody knows us."