

Is the isolation spell broken? – Belarus foreign policy digest

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

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

Negotiations with leaders from 'Distant Arc' countries focused on trade and investment but also had geopolitical significance. Belarus is seeking to avoid being caught in a tug of war between Europe and Russia.

Lukashenka meets with authoritarian colleagues

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



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

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

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

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

On 28-29 November, Lukashenka visited Azerbaijan to meet with his counterpart Ilham Aliyev and the country's Prime Minister Artur Rasizade. The two countries stick to a [regular schedule of high-level meetings](#) focusing on trade and investment.



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

This year, for the first time, the countries agreed to cooperate in the energy sector. Belarus recently bought 84.7

thousand tonnes of oil from Azerbaijan, likely as a political gesture to show that Belarus is [exploring alternative sources of oil supply](#). Speaking to journalists, Ilham Aliyev sounded uncertain as to the long-term nature and sustainability of these operations.

Slovakia breaks Lukashenka's isolation spell

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

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



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

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

Upon returning to Bratislava, Fico had to defend his visit to

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

EU officials: “We are not naïve or blind”

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

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

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

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

Belarus tries to withstand

Russian pressure

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

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

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



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

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

Lukashenka's recent diplomatic activities have aimed at

finding new sources of exports revenue, investments, and loans which would compensate the exhausted flow from Russia. These efforts are unlikely to have an immediate pay off. Meanwhile, Russia is stepping up its pressure to bring Belarus back into its orbit.

Belarusian MPs at PACE, Cooperation with Turkey, Retirement Age Increases – State Press Digest

Belarus continues to boost cooperation with western partners and is seeking to avoid excessive economic dependence on Russia.

MPs hope to receive special guest status at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) after the issue of the death penalty is resolved in Belarus.

Foreign minister Vladimir Makiej says that the current turbulence in the world has made the west better understand the priority of security over democracy, which Belarus has always pursued.

All of this and more in the latest edition of State Press Digest.

Politics

Belarusians are not yet ready to abolish the death penalty.

Soyuznoye Veche newspaper interviews [Mikalaj Samasiejka](#), a member of the Standing Commission of the House of Representatives on International Affairs, on Belarus' growing cooperation with PACE. The newly elected president of PACE Pedro Agramunt during a meeting with the Belarusian delegation promised to restore the country's special guest status after Belarus abolishes or at least puts a moratorium on the death penalty.

The MP said that the death penalty issue cannot be easily resolved, as the majority of Belarusians still support the policy, though their numbers are gradually declining. The majority of parliamentarians are also in favour of leaving the death penalty in place. Samasiejka also expressed support for the Russian delegation, which boycotted the recent PACE session because of some restrictive measures imposed on it.

West starts to better understand Belarus.

Belarus Segodnya newspaper interviews foreign minister of Belarus [Uladzimir Makiej](#) during the Munich security conference. According to the minister, foreign countries seem to now better understand the reasons for Minsk's behaviour, its decisions and policies. The current turbulence in the world and the EU migrant crisis is making the west appreciate the significance of stability and security, which Belarus has always put before democracy and human rights.

The minister also explained that “the president has set a clear directive to avoid dependence on one economic partner”. The Belarusian economy is highly dependent on exports and Russia accounts for half of the country's trade turnover. This situation brought plenty of trouble after Russia fell into crisis, and Belarus will seek to establish firm economic relations with as many countries as possible to reduce its

dependence on its eastern neighbour.

Security

[Governors prepare to organise territorial defence.](#) Belarusian governors – heads of the six regions and Minsk city – took part in a military drill at the firing field nearby Minsk, reported *Belarus Segodnya*. The military leadership organised the drill as part of its so-called territorial defence training. The governors learned how to shoot with various kinds of guns and how to organise the defence of their region in case of a conflict.

Territorial defence is a military system designed to involve the broadest possible population in defence in case of armed conflict. It works according to the administrative divisions of the state under the command of the executive vertical – heads of regions, who supervise the heads of districts. President Alexander Lukashenka initiated territorial defence drills for regional chiefs to be held on a regular basis.

Economy

[The authorities initiate public punishment case against Ministry of Housing and Communal Services officials.](#) The State Control Committee initiated 17 criminal cases against officials of the ministry and local governments after a sharp rise in the cost of communal services in January, *Respublika* reported. The Committee claims that the officials made multiple mistakes when introducing new tariffs which the government announced earlier in 2015.

Many Belarusians were shocked when they saw the new communal bills for January. The problem received wide attention in the media and among state officials, and Lukashenka had to deal with it personally. Low tariffs on communal services have

traditionally been one of the key elements of Belarusian social model, which must now be reformed because of economic difficulties.

Turkey will expand its projects in Hrodna region.

Hrodzianskaja Praŭda highlights the meeting of heads of Hrodna region with Turkish businessmen. Over the past three years Turkish business has been increasing its presence in the region, with six Turkish-capital organisations currently working there.

The parties discussed a project for a Turkish industrial park in the free economic zone Hrodnainvest. Belarusian officials are offering 300 hectares of land for realisation of the project. Contacts with Turks are increasing as a backdrop to the crisis in Russian-Turkish political relations, which has resulted in a decrease of economic cooperation.

Public policy

The government prepares public opinion for increasing the retirement age.

In 2015 the issue of the rising retirement age became one of the most popular in official media. The state tried to explain to citizens the need for a highly unpopular step. *Vecherniy Minsk* writes that the state currently spends 10 per cent of GDP on pension payments. Belarus has one of the earliest retirement ages in the world – 55 for women and 60 for men.

In Minsk, the youngest city in Belarus, only a quarter of residents have reached this age, while in the countryside they make up the majority of the population. If the current pension system remains in place, after 2050 every working age Belarusian will have to support the life of one pensioner. The authorities plan to raise the retirement age in several stages to 60 and 65 years, but will not announce the final decision until the public is ready.

[Belarusian education system faces serious challenges.](#) The working meeting of the Education Ministry raised a number of problems in the national education system, writes *Belarus Segodnya*. Lukashenka himself recently criticised the quality of school textbooks. The Ministry admits that the system seriously lacks qualified author teams for writing textbooks. Excessive paperwork remains another major school problem, which turns teaching into red tape.

The authorities have also failed to attract foreign students into Belarusian universities. Out of 19,000 students from 98 countries, 50 per cent originate from Turkmenistan, while Russians make up only 5 per cent, and there are even fewer westerners.

Belarusian universities lack programmes in English – for example, the largest university, the Belarusian State University, offers only three such programmes. Meanwhile, one third of candidates and two thirds of doctors of science who teach at universities are over 60 years old. Young people do not want to teach at universities because of poor payment conditions.

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.

2015 Annual Report, Russian Airbase, Economic Reforms –

Ostrogorski Centre Digest

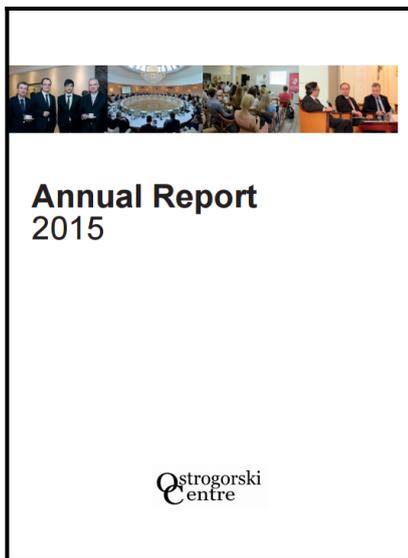
The economy of Belarus shows a long-term negative trend. The need for structural reforms looks obvious even within the elite, and this need for structural reforms is desired especially by international creditors. In the political and military realm, Minsk struggles with Russia's attempts to influence it.

As Alieś Aliachnovič [shows](#) in his piece, the authorities are not ready for large-scale market reforms, but rather slow and partial structural reforms appear inevitable. This is because creditors will monitor the progress of reforms before agreeing to pay the next tranche of funds.

Igar Gubarevich [analyses](#) the acceleration of Belarus-US contacts and concludes that the United States no longer regards Lukashenka as a Russian puppet. In order to contain Russia's growing assertiveness in the region and beyond, the United States may help Lukashenka reduce economic dependence on Russia by assisting with securing an IMF loan and facilitating more trade and investment.

Siarhei Bohdan [argues](#) that the Kremlin is pushing for an airbase in Belarus for political, not military reasons. It seeks to eliminate any vestiges of Belarusian neutrality, which Minsk had built up in the past decade, by distancing itself from numerous Russian policies and looking for alternative partners.

Ostrogorski Centre Annual Report



The Ostrogorski Centre has published its [annual report](#) highlighting the main achievements in 2015 and its plans for the future. In 2015, the centre expanded its leadership team and established new partnerships.

The Centre launched BelarusPolicy.com, a research database in cooperation with the Belarus Research Council and expanded BelarusProfile.com. It is about to release the 2015 issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies.

Analysts at the Centre organised and participated in several Belarus related events in Minsk, Vilnius, London, Berlin and other place. This helped the centre increase its presence in Belarusian and foreign media. The report describes this in detail, with pictures and charts.

Over the next two weeks, the Centre plans to launch a [fundraising campaign](#) to support Belarus Digest and its other projects.

Comments for the Media

Yarik Kryvoi in an interview for the [Belarusian service of Radio Liberty](#) comments on the recent warming in Belarus–EU relations and the EU’s apparent shift of focus from democracy

to the security agenda. He also touched upon the redlines which Minsk does not want to cross in its relations with Russia.

[Polish Radio](#) talks to Igar Gubarevich about the Belarusian authorities latest steps in expanding the countries' exports to traditional and new markets. Minsk tries to boost trade with a wide range of countries, but its efforts may not prove effective because of administrative methods and the kinds of produce that Minsk tries to sell.

Siarhei Bohdan comments to [Polish Radio](#) about recent trends in Belarus' security situation. After the change in the wider-region's security situation Minsk has started to distance itself from Moscow and seek partners in other parts of the world. Besides, Belarus gives more attention to its army and develops its own weapons instead of buying Russian ones.

Igar Gubarevich talks to Belarusian [Radio Racja](#) about Belarus' chances of profiting from the suspension of air traffic between Ukraine and Russia and possible Russian pressure. Belarus has enough capacity to connect Russia and Ukraine, and will not stop benefiting even if Russia were to desire such an outcome.

Siarhei Bohdan discusses in [RFE/RL's Belarusian Service](#) programme the recent developments in Syria's civil war and Minsk's policy in the region. Belarus has for a long time taken the approach of its US allies in the Syrian conflict, and reacted very cautiously to Russian-Turkey tensions over a downed jet. Importantly, the Russian South Stream pipeline project involving Turkey now seems unrealistic, and Belarus may become the host for another pipeline to Europe.

Belarus Profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following personalities: [Dzmitryj Kruty](#), [Aliaksandr Zabarouški](#), [Dzmitry Babicki](#), [Elena Korosteleva](#), [Andrej Jelisiejeŭ](#), [Lianid Zaika](#), [Andrej Laŭruchin](#), [Anatoł Michajlaŭ](#), [Mikita Bialiajeŭ](#), [Vadzim Smok](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Taras Nadołny](#), [Aliaksandr Lukashenka](#), [Michail Orda](#), [Aliena Kupčyna](#), [Juryj Čyž](#), [Aliaksiej Vahanaŭ](#), [Ina Miadzviedzieva](#), [Piotr Mamanovič](#), [Stanislaŭ Zaś](#), [Andrej Raŭkoŭ](#), [Siarhiej Kaliakin](#), [Iryna Kanhro](#), [Anatoł Kapski](#), [Viktar Karankievič](#), [Dzmitry Kaciarynič](#), [Tadevuš Kandrusievič](#), [Uladzimir Kanapliou](#), [Natallia Kačanava](#), [Aliaksandr Kaškievič](#), [Vitał Voŭk](#).

Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update the database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

- Strategic Thought team. [Recommendations to the program of the socio-economic development of Homieł region in 2016-2020](#). Strategic Thought, 2015.
- Uladzimir Akulich, Uladzimir Valetka, Sierž Naŭrodski, Anastasija Charnushevich, Darya Sushkevich. [The second issue of Macroeconomic Review of Belarus in graphs \(January-June 2015\)](#). CASE Belarus, 2015.
- Uladzimir Akulich, Uladzimir Valetka, Sierž Naŭrodski, Anastasija Charnushevich, Julija Trus. [The third issue of Macroeconomic Review of Belarus in graphs \(January-September 2015\)](#). CASE Belarus, 2015.
- Aleksander Avtushko-Sikorskiy, Vladimir Artyugin, Aliaksei Lashuk, Dzianis Melyantsou, Jury Chavusau. [Semi-annual monitoring of the main trends BISS-Trends](#)

[\(January – June 2014\)](#). BISS. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014.

- Aleksander Avtushko-Sikorskiy, Vladimir Artyugin, Aliaksei Lashuk, Dzianis Melyantsou, Jury Chavusau. [Semi-annual monitoring of the main trends BISS-Trends \(July – December 2014\)](#). BISS. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015.

Any partner organisation of BelarusPolicy.com can submit its research for inclusion onto the database by completing [this form](#).

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