

# **Intensive Dialogue with Europe, South Asian and African Overtures – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest**

Belarus has been making a desperate attempt to introduce its goods to new markets, hoping to compensate for declining exports to many of their traditional destinations, especially Russia.

Over the past few weeks, Belarusian diplomats have concentrated their trade promotion efforts on Asian, African and MENA countries. However, in most of these cases prospects for a major breakthroughs are rather grim with few serious projects to back up their diplomatic activities.

Belarus' European agenda continues to be heavily loaded with meetings and consultations at the highest working level. In June, the agenda's emphasis shifted to consultations between Belarus and several European institutions, focusing mainly on preparations for the forthcoming presidential election in Belarus and engagement on potential post-election cooperation.

## **Intensive Dialogue with European Institutions**

Over recent weeks, Minsk became a pilgrimage destination for emissaries from many European institutions. On 8 June, deputy foreign minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) met with members of the Working Party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia of the EU Council (COEST). On 18 June, she received a delegation from the European parliament and on 1 July, the Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

On 15 and 16 June, Alexander Lukashenka and his foreign minister Vladimir Makei met with two high-ranking OSCE officials, Secretary General Lamberto Zannier and Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Michael Link.

Belarus shrugged off a CEI foreign ministers' meetings in order to host OSCE officials

While Belarusian officials claimed that a wide range of issues were discussed at these meetings, they all clearly had one issue in mind, the forthcoming presidential election in Belarus and the role of European institutions in monitoring said election. Alexander Lukashenka, confident in the results of this October 'exercise' and reassured by Europe's more congenial attitude towards Belarus, has regularly invited international organisations to send their observers to Belarus.

Belarusian officials meetings with their OSCE counterparts were so important for Belarusian diplomats that they virtually disregarded a meeting of the Central European Initiative foreign ministers in Macedonia on 15 June, sending only the Belarusian ambassador to Serbia.

Belarus is relentless in pushing through the idea of the 'integration of integrations'

Recently, Minsk hosted another European event, not directly related to its bilateral relations with Europe. On 29 June, top-level diplomats from six Eastern Partnership countries and several senior EU officials, including Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, met for the fifth round of informal ministerial dialogue with EaP countries.

The foreign ministers of Belarus, Georgia and Armenia, who were joined by deputy foreign ministers from Ukraine,

Azerbaijan and Moldova, discussed the foreign policy agenda, while their colleagues from environmental agencies explored their respective agenda.

[Vladimir Makei](#) used the event to promote [his ideas](#) of stronger cooperation and dialogue between the Eastern Partnership and Russia as well as harmonising the integration processes between the EU and the EAEU. Both ideas have thus far gotten the cold shoulder from diplomats and experts alike.

In the few past weeks, Belarus also held consultations on the deputy minister level with Switzerland, Poland, Croatia, Turkey and Slovenia, in an attempt to maintain the more positive aspects of its bilateral ties with Europe. Belarusian diplomats have been expressing a cautious hope that, in contrast to their prior experience, they will be able to uphold and further develop these ties after the presidential election.

## South Asia High on Agenda

[Alexander Lukashenka](#) personally led a Belarusian diplomatic offensive in South and Central Asia in recent weeks. During his official visit to Pakistan on 28 and 29 May, the Belarusian delegation signed two dozen documents, most of which are, however, interagency agreements of lesser importance.

In Islamabad, Lukashenka voiced some exotic business ideas, which defy both economic logic and developmental realities. First, the president suggested that Pakistan opens hi-tech companies in the [Sino-Belarusian industrial park](#) near Minsk. Second, he invited Pakistani textile entrepreneurs to set up garment manufacturing plants in Belarus.

Official reports failed to make mention of any discussion of potential security and defence cooperation between the two countries, while [Pakistan remains strongly interested](#) in

acquiring new technology from Belarus. Minsk has certainly had to factor in New Delhi's reaction to any kind of cooperation with Pakistan, especially in light of the forthcoming senior-level meeting between Belarus and India.

On 3 and 4 June, Pranab Mukherjee, India's president, paid an official visit to Minsk. As was true with [the Chinese head of state's visit to Minsk](#), Belarusian state propaganda used this opportunity to claim Belarus' special relationship with yet another of the world's economic powerhouses.

Alexander Lukashenka voiced bizarre business ideas in an attempt to lure in investors

The Belarusian authorities identified the establishment of a diplomatic presence in India as the most realistic way to penetrate this [highly protected market](#). Nevertheless, thus far many ambitious projects have failed to pass through India's corrupt and utterly bureaucratic purchasing process and many serious businessmen remain highly sceptical about growing trade with India. Alexander Lukashenka even referred to this attitude during his meeting with his Indian counterpart, inviting the latter to prove sceptics wrong.

The Belarusian president kept voicing his unorthodox ideas by inviting Indian business executives to set up ventures at the Sino-Belarusian Park. So desperate is Lukashenka in attracting residents to the industrial park that he disregarded the strong geopolitical rivalry between India and China.

## **Africa Also in Focus**

In line with Lukashenka's instructions to expand Belarus' export's reach, the foreign ministry recently turned towards both old and new partners in Africa.

Koutoub Moustapha Sano, Guinea's minister for international cooperation, visited Minsk on 16-18 June. To date, the two

countries have had almost no meaningful economic or political ties. In fact, Conakry's government agencies previously disregarded the draft agreements for cooperation in trade and agriculture, which Minsk submitted for their consideration several years ago.

Guinea gets interested in a Belarusian style 'agro-town'

Nevertheless, Belarus still seeks to engage this Ebola-stricken country by pushing for economic cooperation, mostly in agriculture but also in mining and other industries. According to the Guinean foreign ministry, the two countries agreed on implementing three priority projects in Guinea: building an agro-town modelled after similar settlements in Belarus, deliveries of agricultural machinery and accessories, and building a grain silo facility.

Around the same time, Belarusian deputy foreign minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) visited Egypt and Mozambique. He brought with him a large delegation of officials and businessmen, mostly dealing in agriculture and heavy machinery.

In Maputo, Rybakov was received by Carlos Agostinho do Rosário, Mozambique's prime minister. However, the fate of many ambitious joint projects that Rosário's predecessor, Alberto Vaquina, discussed [in Minsk a year ago](#) remains an open question. At that time, Alexander Lukashenka even called Mozambique one of Belarus' "footholds" in Africa – so far, a doubtful proposition.

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# Getting Rid of the Pariah Status, Complaining about Russia, Protecting Conservative Values – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

The days when Belarus was a pariah at most European diplomatic gatherings appears to be a thing of the past.

During his recent trips to Vienna and Basel, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei met with a dozen of his counterparts from European countries. However, Belarus would benefit even more if Makei manages to curb the anti-Western rhetoric all too [common in his public statements](#).

In an unusual development, Minsk publicly brought up its disagreements and quarrels with Moscow in its dialogue with Europe.

Minsk has been much less successful in promoting its latest multilateral initiative – protecting the rights of traditional families. A UN meeting held in New York on 3 December showed little enthusiasm from the international community towards Belarus' conservative views.

## **Makei Meets Europe in Vienna...**

During recent weeks, Belarus' Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) made two official trips to Europe. In addition to multilateral events, the top Belarusian diplomat also managed to squeeze in many bilateral meetings. Later, Makei held several important meetings with European diplomats in Minsk.

On 23 – 24 November, Vladimir Makei went to Vienna to

represent Belarus at a meeting of prime ministers of the Central European Initiative's participating countries. This regional club remains one of Belarus' preferred sites for dialogue with its Central European partners. Many of these countries (i.e., Hungary, Italy, Austria, Serbia etc.) have so far demonstrated more tolerance towards the Belarusian regime than most Western and Nordic EU member states.

Austria is now one of Belarus' most important business partners

The bilateral dimension of the trip was equally important. Vladimir Makei met with his Austrian counterpart, Sebastian Kurz, and Christoph Leitl, the president of the influential Austrian Federal Economic Chamber.

Austria is now one of Belarus' most important business partners. The trade turnover between the two countries has reached \$500m a year. Austria is also the fifth largest investor in Belarus (\$400 m in January – September 2014).

**... in Basel...**

On 4 and 5 December, the foreign minister visited Basel in Switzerland to attend the 21th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council.

At the meeting, Makei spoke about the "unprecedented, for the past few decades in Europe, increase of tension" and "new dividing lines in the region". Predictably, he failed to name the country, which the international community almost unanimously sees as being primarily responsible for provoking and sustaining the "bloody armed conflict" in Ukraine.

Instead, the Belarusian diplomat preferred to put all blame on some – still unnamed – countries, which "push forward their priorities to the detriment of other states" and "use "double standards", political and economic sanctions".

This poorly disguised verbal attack against Western nations did not prevent Vladimir Makei from holding bilateral meetings in Basel with his counterparts from Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Sweden, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Turkey. The talks focused on different aspects of bilateral relations, outstanding issues of the dialogue between Belarus and Europe and cooperation in the framework of international organisations.

### **... and in Minsk**

On 10 December, the foreign minister and, separately, his deputy [Elena Kupchyna](#), received in Minsk a delegation of senior diplomats from the Visegrad Group countries. The political directors of the foreign ministers of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic visited Belarus for the first time in this format.

The Visegrad Four remains an important and efficient channel of dialogue between Belarus and the rest of Europe. One of the topics discussed in Minsk was Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership.

The next day, the EU ambassadors in Minsk were invited to the foreign ministry for an urgent meeting. In the meantime, Vladimir Makei made phone calls to a number of his European counterparts. Belarus needed these extensive contacts with the EU to discuss "problematic issues in the relations between Belarus and Russia as well as the development of the Eurasian integration processes".

Belarus has managed to normalise its dialogue with Europe on the working level

It is very unusual for Minsk to bring up its disagreements and quarrels with Moscow in its dialogue with Europe and more so, to make the fact of such discussion public. Belarus feels confident again about blackmailing Russia with its prospects



for improving its ties with Europe.

Makei's recent contacts with his European colleagues have confirmed that Belarus has managed to normalise its dialogue with Europe on the working level. However, the possibility of the resumption of the highest-level contacts and the further easing or even completely lifting sanctions against it are based on the release of all political prisoners.

### **Building Ties with Vietnam**

On 26 – 28 November, Nguyễn Phú Trọng, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam visited Belarus after his official visit to Russia. In Minsk, he met with President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) and Prime Minister [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#).

In today's Vietnam, the position of the Communist Party's boss is no longer synonymous with leader of Vietnam. Actually, Nguyễn Phú Trọng is ranked only eighth in the party's official hierarchy.

The talks focused on trade, investment and military cooperation. Belarus wants to sell various industrial goods to Vietnam. In return, it is ready to open its market for Vietnamese farm produce, coffee, seafood, garments and woodwork. Lukashenka promised his guest help in accelerating the negotiations on a free trade agreement between Vietnam and the Customs Union.

Belarus pledged to continue provide training for Vietnamese military officers and expand military training programmes in Vietnam. The Asian nation has also taken a lot of interest in getting access to Belarusian technologies, both military and civilian.

Two weeks later, a large Belarusian delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) visited Ho Chi Minh City to attend a regular meeting of the intergovernmental

trade and scientific cooperation committee. By some estimates, in 10 years Vietnam will become the fastest growing economy in the world. Belarus seeks to use this opportunity to capitalise on the Soviet heritage of special relations with Vietnam and secure a strong footing in this country.

## **Fighting for Traditional Family**

Belarus continues to act as the most determined and outspoken [proponent of the traditional family](#).

On 3 December, Andrei Dapkiunas, Belarus' Permanent Representative to the United Nations [spoke](#) at a meeting of the UN General Assembly dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family.

The ambassador vehemently opposed attempts to “blur the moral points of reference” that the family traditionally provided. “Significant strides in the past decades in human liberation apparently have tempted some governments to test the limits of the possible on the family”, he said. Andrei Dapkiunas refused to see “the foundations of the family destroyed and the traditional family values sacrificed in the name of artificial social constructs”.

Some other delegates, i.e. from Russia, Hungary and Egypt, shared Belarus' concerns at the meeting, albeit much less emphatically. However, several other speakers expressed strongly opposed views.

It is hardly surprising that delegations from liberal western democracies supported “diversity in the concept of families, including an acknowledgement of parents of the same gender” (Norway). One of the more dramatic elements of the meeting was that Belarus failed to generate the proper level of support from the developing world. Most third world countries avoided the issue altogether. Moreover, delegates from predominately Catholic countries, Columbia and Brazil, overtly supported the same-sex couple and “open-minded perspective” with regards to

the "family unit".

In the UN and elsewhere, Belarusian diplomats have defended the concept of a traditional family shared not only by the country's leaders but also by most Belarusians. However, unlike with its [proposal on human trafficking](#), Belarus has little chance of capitalising on this new flagship initiative.