

Belarus-Lithuania Relations: Pragmatism Despite Politics

Belarusians and Lithuanians have a long common history which started long before the Grand Duchy of Lithuania 500 years ago. Two nations followed clearly divergent paths only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Lukashenka came to power, he recognised the state border of Lithuania and thus prevented the main source of possible tension between two countries.

Lithuania hosts many Belarusian exile organisations including the European Humanities University but remains cautious about economic sanctions. It supports the liberalisation of the visa regime for Belarusians but was guilty of leaking information to Belarusian authorities which led to the imprisonment of human rights activist Ales' Bialiatski. Two countries cannot agree on several issues, including Belarusian nuclear power plants, but overall their relations remain remarkably pragmatic.

History of Peaceful Coexistence

For more than a half of millennium, Belarusian and Lithuanian people have peacefully lived together in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This experience of coexistence continued after the Russian Empire had annexed their lands, with many Belarusians studying at the Vilnius University.

After the 1917 revolution the Bolsheviks united the Lithuanian SSR and Belarusian SSR into a short-lived single state called Litbel that collapsed due to the Polish-Soviet war. In 1940 Soviet troops occupied Lithuania in compliance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and transferred Vilnius to a newly established Lithuanian SSR.

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Only at the end of the 20th century did these countries go their different ways. Lithuania decided to become a member of the European Union and NATO. At the same time Lukashenka as a leader of Belarus stated that he would not lead his country to a civilised world and built a Soviet-style authoritarian "market socialism".

But it was probably a good choice for Lithuania, because Lukashenka agreed on the existing border between the two countries and did not make any claims to the disputed Vilnius region. In 2007 Belarus and Lithuania finished demarcation of the common border. This year they should allow people living in territories adjacent to the state border to travel without visas a distance of no farther than 50 km.

Why Lithuania Resists EU Sanctions Against Belarus

In 2005 former Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus made a controversial statement that Lukashenka "might attack Lithuania" whereas Belarusian state TV channels broadcasted anti-Lithuanian propaganda. Bilateral relations significantly improved when Dalia Grybauskaitė came to power in 2009. At that time the EU started an engagement policy towards Belarus and Grybauskaitė invited Lukashenka to visit Vilnius for the first time since 1997.

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Lithuania advocates for Belarus in the EU, because it has substantial economic interests in this country. The trade turnover between two nations increased by 162% and exceeded \$1bn in 2011. Moreover, Belarusian companies, especially Belkali and GrodnoAzot, are responsible for more than 30% of

the cargo at Lithuanian Klaipeda port on the Baltic sea that wants to be their main partner instead of the Latvian Ventspils port.

Earlier Minsk stimulated their competition when it was choosing which port should become a dock for tankers carrying oil from Venezuela to Belarusian oil refineries. This was a part of the ambitious project on the creation of [the Eurasian oil transport corridor](#) between the Caspian Sea and the Baltic Sea. However, when Russia promised to Lukashenka [extremely beneficial prices for oil and gas](#), he stopped his attempts to diversify hydrocarbon supplies.

Lithuania's need for economic cooperation with its bigger Eastern neighbour explains why it opposes comprehensive EU sanctions against Minsk. On 5 March Grybauskaitė said in an interview for Agence France-Presse that economic sanctions would only further push Belarus into Russia's sphere of influence.

Lithuania as Second Home for Belarusian Civil Society

Strategic interests do not impede Lithuania to stay one of the most active supporters of Belarusian civil society. Since 2004 Vilnius has become second home for the European Humanities University that Belarusian authorities expelled from Minsk. Nearly 1500 Belarusian students study full-time in the arts and social sciences at the university and the overwhelming majority of them are against the Belarusian regime. Besides, the Belarusian Human Rights House has existed there for several years and the Belarusian opposition will likely open the United Belarus House in Vilnius soon.

Only 170 km separate Minsk and Vilnius thus making it the closest EU capital to Belarus. The 2 million residents of the Belarusian capital need only three hours and \$10 to see how Europeans live, work and relax. Belarus has nearly three times more consumers than Lithuania, that is why local businesses

are truly interested in their visits. Many large Lithuanian shopping malls depend on Belarusian customers. Unfortunately, there is a big obstacle for Belarusians – [the Schengen visa regime](#).

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In November 2007 Lithuania had to increase the visa application from €5 to €60 on the demand of EU institutions and the number of Belarusians tourists significantly dropped. Only recently the cross-border movement has intensified again. In 2011 Lithuania issued approximately 150,000 Schengen visas for Belarusians which is higher by 59% in comparison with the previous year.

Lithuania refuses only 0.17% of Belarusian applications and actively supports the idea of reducing the visa fee for Belarusians. The Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis declared this March that Lithuania plans to issue no-fee long-term national visas for citizens of Belarus.

Bialiatski Case and EU Conflict

The imprisonment of Ales' Bialiatski, a prominent Belarusian human rights activist, reduced Lithuanian officials' trust in Belarusian authorities. The then Lithuanian Department of Justice provided information about his bank accounts to their Belarusian counterparts within the framework of the official procedures established for the combat against organised crime.

Only months later did they understand that Belarusian intelligence services would use the received information for repressing Bialiatski. As a result, the Belarusian court sentenced him to 4.5 years in prison. Consequently, it undermined Lithuania's image as a country that defends human

rights.

Another point of tension is competition between Lithuania, Belarus and Russia on the construction of nuclear power plants in the region. Lithuania opposes the plans of Belarusian authorities to build [nuclear power plant in Ostrovets](#) situated very close to the Lithuanian capital. At the same time Belarus considers the Lithuanian project for the construction of a power plant in Visaginas as ineffective. Moreover, Belarus does not want to extradite former general Vladimir Uskhopchik who allegedly participated in the Soviet troops' bloody assault on the Vilnius' TV tower in 1991.

Successful cooperation between Belarus and Lithuania depends on the future of the EU-Belarus dialogue. More than a month ago Head of the EU External Action Catherine Ashton [recalled all EU ambassadors from Minsk](#) in a sign of solidarity against the deterioration of the human rights situation in the country. This move will definitely not foster common projects and puts prospects of political dialogue between Minsk and Vilnius in doubt.

But despite the diplomatic conflict and the Schengen visa wall Belarusians and Lithuanians manage to maintain healthy economic cooperation and historically close ties.

Is Europe Ready to Tolerate an Anti-Russian Dictatorship?



According to the Economist, some European politicians would be happy to accept dictatorship in Belarus as long as it is not pro-Russian. Mr Lukashenka's anti-Russian rhetoric has recently impressed some Europeans. In particular, Dalia Grybauskaite, Lithuania's president, reportedly told European Union diplomats that a victory by Mr Lukashenka would safeguard stability and limit Russian influence.

Europeans traditionally keep promising rewards to Belarus authorities if the elections are free and fair. However, all signs are that the authorities approach to elections will be as usual despite some cosmetic changes. Although this time there are many alternative candidates and the police tolerates demonstrations, two most important prerequisites of free and fair elections are missing. First, alternative presidential candidates are almost never seen on TV. Neither is there a free discussion about elections. It is difficult to see how voters can support an alternative candidate when they have no access to free information.

Second, the votes are unlikely to be counted. Nearly all elections committees – those who do the actual vote counting – consist of the same people who falsified Belarusian elections in the past. Usually these are employees of state-owned enterprises and their immediate superiors. They know that if something goes wrong, there will be immediate consequences for their employment.

With high unemployment (not acknowledged by the official statistics) and most employers being state-owned the prospect of losing a job looks scary to most people in Belarus. The vast majority of employees in Belarus work on the basis of short-term fixed-term contracts. The system was introduced to make sure that those who are not loyal can be easily made jobless. It is not even necessary to dismiss the dissidents. Their fixed-term contracts are simply not extended.

The alternative presidential candidates view these elections use more as a self-marketing opportunity rather than as a real fight for power. However, it is difficult to blame them. The civil society in Belarus has been nearly wiped out over the last decade. However, the roots and the seeds of the real civil society are still there. Alternative candidates are just tips of those roots which need to be supported.

The alternative candidates should think long-term and instead of promoting their short-term goals, seek donors' support for independent media and other elements of civil society for the years to come. Presidential elections are an excellent opportunity to attract attention to Belarus once again. Hopefully, other European leaders will not follow Ms Grybauskaite's pro-Lukashenka position. It is better to make long-term investments in Belarusian civil society, instead of immoral short-term investments in dictatorship. The European history shows that either anti-Russian or pro-Russian, dictatorships are inherently unpredictable and unstable.

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EU Shows Support for Belarusian Gov't Before Elections



Amid tense waiting for presidential elections in Belarus and possible Russian attempts to influence the situation, 20 October, the President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania visited Minsk. It was a good sign for Belarusian president Lukashenka. After talks, his Lithuanian counterpart made some

meaningful [statements](#):

Lithuania is an EU member and next year it will preside in the OSCE. Using it, we want to help Belarus, be alongside it during the elections. We want to help it to be more open and recognized in Europe.

While Moscow is clearly continuing anti-Lukashenka information campaign and is allegedly trying to reign him in or even oust him altogether, such a visit from the EU and NATO country should be considered as a prudent support from European side. Due to particular nature of relations between Belarus and Russia the West cannot move too openly in supporting Minsk against Cremlin's pressure. Belarusian leader himself [admitted](#):

We are in unfavorable conditions now, and we should think about how we could ensure our independence.

In addition to general strategic support, Belarusian and Lithuanian leaders discussed more specific issues. Minsk has recently enhanced and intensified its regional diplomacy and this time it declared the intent to increase trade with Lithuania up to one billion US dollars. What about democracy? Ms. Grybauskaitė [told](#) of her hopes for Belarus becoming more open and defend human rights after elections.

Lithuania as well as the EU is hopefully looking to Belarus and new elections. Europe is willing to recognize the elections' openness, if you will demonstrate it.

She elaborated more on it,

For a decade Europe as if built a Chinese Wall between itself and Belarus, and it should not be there.

There was also one more important point. Lukashenka publicly

emphasized that two countries can successfully cooperate in energy. Lithuania could provide transit route for Venezuelan oil bought by Belarus to balance the country's dependence on Russian resources. While Venezuela is interested in new markets for its oil, it uses Belarus as a pilot partner to explore Eastern European market. Anyway, Lithuania could gain a lot on transporting oil for Belarus, though Lithuanian route is not definite choice since Minsk is also considering such transit option as Ukraine (dangerous one now that pro-Russian party came to power), Estonia and Latvia.

Of course, Russia does not like Belarusian oil endeavor, since Moscow is considering the region its own backyard. Interestingly, Lukashenka in his quest for non-Russian oil could really make some difference in the region, in particular by implementing his second oil idea – in the Middle East. Minsk could bring first oil by tankers, yet it is quite feasible to merge Caspian oil stream and Middle Eastern and send them for Europe.

Bringing Middle Eastern oil into pipelines meant for Caspian one would be a historical moment for the whole Europe. Especially easy it would be for Iranian oil – there is some infrastructure in place already – but the US are strictly opposing any projects with Iranian involvement. There are nevertheless other sources of oil in that region as well – like in North Iraq. This project could not be implemented by Belarusian or any other single government, but it requires creation of an international consortium. Belarus, however, could show the way by importing Middle Eastern oil. It is not easy for a landlocked nation to use tanker option, but the energy security issues can interest the neighboring countries. The Lithuanian president showed interest in regional energy cooperation.

It is, of course, the entire Baltic Sea region, where we can be useful for you [Belarus] regarding the sea access. Both Belarus and Lithuania are interested in energy independence, or at least in having choice regarding energy resources.

Furthermore, she added,

I am glad to find common language with the Belarusian president as for ensuring energy independence of both states. ... We are willing to openly cooperate. It does not contradict European interests. The EU is interested in energy independence and in maximal diversification of its [energy resources] shipments dependency.

Regardless of oil ambitions, it seems that after a series of Russian moves, the EU finally decided to react and actively engage in Belarus. If so, a Great Game in Eastern Europe is going to be really big one.

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