

Belarus and Azerbaijan: Similar Regimes but Different Treatment by the EU

On 20-21 November, Alexander Lukashenka visited Baku. He held talks with Azerbaijan state leader Ilham Aliyev and they opened the new building of the Belarusian Embassy in Baku. This building became a good sign of the quickly developing relations between the two countries.

Trade between the countries is swelling, partly because of Belarusian weapon exports to Azerbaijan, which irritates both Russia and Armenia. Aliyev is also trying to help Lukashenka with his dealings with Russia and the EU.

Aliyev's record of human rights violations appears worse than Lukashenka's. However, this does not prevent the West from maintaining good relations with the authorities of Azerbaijan, unlike those with Belarus. Belarus has no oil or gas, so its authorities are faced with a much tougher choice—either become Russia's vassal or democratise.

Topics for a Private Conversation

On 21 November, Alexander Lukashenka held one-on-one talks with Ilham Aliyev. Few people know what the leaders of Belarus and Azerbaijan were talking privately about, but they certainly had more than enough topics to discuss.

Belarus sells large quantities of weapons to Azerbaijan is helping it to [modernise its air defence](#). The Azeris remain important customers of the Belarusian defence industry. Minsk, for its part, continues to tighten its economic relations with Baku. From 2006 to 2012 mutual trade increased six-fold, reaching \$223.3 million, with Belarusians assemble tractors,

trucks, and buses in Azerbaijan. Because of the continuous deterioration of the Belarusian economy, even small contracts mean a lot.

Also, the parties could discuss the future of the Eastern Partnership summit. Both countries show little interest in the EU program. However, the West is much more pragmatic in its relations with Azerbaijan. The European Union invited Aliyev to the summit in Vilnius and the Parliament of Azerbaijan participates in the Euronest, the parliamentary component of the Eastern Partnership.

Azerbaijan, like other EU Eastern Partners, supports the Belarusian Parliament to become a normal member in Euronest. It also helped Belarus in conflicts with Russia. In the summer of 2011, Azerbaijan in one day made a decision to give Belarus a \$300-million loan to pay debts to Russia. In that period Azerbaijan also supplied oil to Belarus, having received oil from Venezuela through swap schemes.

Do Their Regimes Differ?

Lukashenka and Aliyev need each other. Although Belarus remains officially neutral in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Belarusian weapon supplies to Azerbaijan [weaken the position](#) of Armenia. Armenia, like Belarus, belongs to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and considers joining the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. The Belarus-Azerbaijan deals also irritate Moscow, which has a rather cold relationship with Baku.

Moreover, both authoritarian regimes profit from each other's existence. For the authorities of Azerbaijan, it is convenient that Western public opinion remains focused on human rights violations in Belarus and Lukashenka's policy, not Aliyev's. Different Western approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan confirm the existence of double standards. That gives Lukashenka's regime a right to seek from the EU the same

attitude towards it as EU has to Azerbaijani authorities, whose human rights record remains worse.

The elites of Belarus and Azerbaijan both govern with little respect of the rule of law. In both countries, parliaments and courts are not free and elections remain non-transparent. In the world rankings these countries often find themselves in close proximity. In the Democracy Index created by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Azerbaijan held the 139th position and Belarus 141st. In the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders Belarus occupies 157th position, while Azerbaijan sits at 156th.

Aliyev, however, is much more repressive to his own people. According to the Baku-based Human Rights Club, Azerbaijani authorities hold in their prison system 142 political prisoners. Moreover, 18 of them are serving life sentences. According to the Human Rights Center Viasna Lukashenka has 10 political prisoners in jails.

Lukashenka at least once, in 1994, won the democratic elections. Ilham Aliyev in fact inherited the presidency from his father. During preparations for Eurovision Song Contest Azerbaijani authorities evicted hundreds of residents from their homes and destroyed buildings to build Crystal Hallemerged, a place for the contest.

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The EU approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan remain completely different. The EU does not impose visa restrictions on the Azerbaijani leadership, it has not introduced targeted economic sanctions. EU top officials regularly meet with Aliyev. Moreover, during his visit to Azerbaijan, the President of the European Commission Emmanuel Barroso did not meet with representatives of the opposition, and Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski did not even ask Aliyev about any human rights violations.

Will Aliyev Help Lukashenka?

Belarus-Azerbaijan relations remain important to the Belarusian authorities. Lukashenka and Aliyev meet almost every year, as well as other top officials from both countries who visit Minsk and Baku regularly. These meetings, in contrast to Lukashenka's visits to Myanmar and [Singapore](#), do result in much needed contacts.

During Aliyev's most recent visit to the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and Amkodor, the manufacturer of a special type of machinery, the two sides signed new sale agreements with Azerbaijani companies. Lukashenka also invited Azerbaijani investors to take part in the privatisation of Belarusian enterprises.

Lukashenka and Aliyev remain reluctant to lead their countries either east or west. Both feel comfortable as rulers of their own states. Unlike Azerbaijan, Belarus has no oil and gas, on which the West is dependent. Lukashenka remains in a more vulnerable position and is forced to make a choice of either gradually becoming a vassal of Russia or democratising Belarus.

The resource-rich Azerbaijani authorities do not face a similar dilemma. Their support of the official Belarusian Parliament in Euronest shows that they wish to help Lukashenka break his regime's isolation. However, the European Union invested too much effort in the confrontation against Lukashenka, which makes it very difficult to fully recognise the authoritarian Belarusian regime.

Belarusian Defence Industry Recovers from The Last Year's Scandal

Last month, Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro promised his people that very soon Venezuela would possess the most powerful air defence system possible, capable of stopping any attempt at illegal entrances into the country's air space. For years, Belarusian specialists were working on the construction of this facility.

The statement by the Venezuelan head of state means that the Belarusian side managed to sort out this serious crisis which the Belarusian military industry encountered abroad just a year ago. Back then, a light airplane of a Swedish PR-agency illegally entered Belarusian air space. Allegedly, it did so to promote democracy by symbolically [bombarding Belarus](#) with teddy-bears. But as the leading Belarusian military expert Alexandr Alesin recently noted on naviny.by, it might just as well have served to discredit Belarus' military capabilities and defence industry. Recent news show, however, that this has not happened.

Belarusian "Contract of the Century"

The national defence industry has achieved some success over the last decade by specialising in the modernisation of equipment and the development of its own new systems along Soviet technological lines. Especially impressive are its innovations in air defence – no wonder, Belarus has maintained from Soviet times probably the most comprehensive air defence system among all the former Soviet states.

In recent years, Belarus achieved some qualitative breakthroughs by developing new systems and extending its own arms exports – which are not leftovers from Soviet times – and

defence products. For example, Belarusians received contracts for the modernisation of the air defence in [Azerbaijan](#) and apparently sold some of their products to Iran (though Minsk has not admitted as much). Yet the most lucrative contract was, of course, its [Venezuelan one](#).

While visiting Caracas in December 2007 Aleksandr Lukashenka signed with the then president Hugo Chavez of Venezuela an agreement on the construction of a unified air defence system and radio-electronic warfare system in Venezuela. Belarus had to coordinate the project, while cooperating with Russian, Chinese and Iranian companies.

Afterwards, Belarus sent numerous military advisors to Venezuela who had to ensure the complete creation of the air defence system in six years time. It went well up until the Swedish incident of last summer. After the incident, Hugo Chavez allegedly thought twice about the reliability of his Belarusian partners.

Belarusian Defence Industry Vindicated After Last Summer Failure

To reassure him, Belarus sent its leading air defence expert Aleh Paferau to serve as ambassador to Venezuela. He was a perfect figure for that assignment, being the former Belarusian air force and air defence commander. In addition Paferau, while serving as a deputy chairman of the State Military Industrial Committee of Belarus actually participated in the conclusion of the “contract of the century” with Venezuela. And he succeeded. By autumn, the Venezuelan air defence and electronic warfare systems shall be essentially completed, says both Venezuelan and Belarusian officials.

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Of course, another accident also vindicated Belarusian defence industry after its “Swedish failure.” In February, Iranian TV

broadcasted a film about interception of a US drone which entered Iranian air space in December 2011. The film demonstrated how Iran deployed [Belarusian-made Vostok-E](#) system to intercept the American remotely piloted vehicle.

It had an effect and although the US immediately sanctioned two Belarusian enterprises, Minsk could demonstrate some tangible and battle-proven achievements to its foreign friends. In May, as the Vietnamese prime minister visited Minsk, Belarusian officials claimed to have achieved an agreement with Hanoi on selling Belarusian unmanned aerial vehicles to Vietnam. A month ago, Belarus agreed to sell about 20 Vostok-E radar systems to Vietnam, as well as send advisers to train Vietnamese operators for them.

Forever With Moscow?

But Belarus is still rather limited in its weapons business abroad. Any big deal requires the involvement of Russia. Sophisticated Belarusian military products require components produced in Russia or other post-Soviet republics. And it is this dependence on Russia that has increased in the last decade as Minsk has exhausted its stocks of Soviet-era equipment or, often, this equipment simply became obsolete. Now Belarusians are producing the equipment themselves, but their dependence hampers their growth in this field.

The creation of the Venezuelan air defence system illustrates this complementary feature of Belarusian defence industry. Thus, as the command center of the system, Belarus chose its native automated fire control station Bor-1M. In addition, Minsk provides Venezuela with radar equipment and radio-electronic combat systems of its own production. Among them, of course, the above-mentioned Vostok-E developed by the firm KB Radar in Minsk. But that is essentially all, for the remaining components of the Venezuelan air defence system Belarus has to resort to Russian weapons.

As for surface-to-air missiles, most likely the S-125 Pechora-2M on chassis from the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) will be used in Venezuela, after their modernisation at select Belarusian and Russian factories. Some other important components of the Pechoras are also being developed and produced by Belarusian firms, yet essentially the Pechora is a Russian product.

In addition, Venezuela ordered from Russia some items of more modern systems such as the S-300 and Buk-M2E. Once more, Minsk cannot provide such arms itself independently, although the Buk launchers are also installed on Belarusian MZKT chassis. Caracas had also to complement these purchases by buying from Russia some Zu-23s cannons and Igla-S man-portable surface-to-air missiles.

Is Russia Ready to Recognise Belarus as an Ally?

Russian policies towards defence cooperation with Belarus look more like a desire to grab the most efficient Belarusian firms in its defence industry.

Evidently, Belarus has to cooperate with Russia on big arms and defence modernisation deals. There is nothing particularly extraordinary about this, as allied states usually cooperate with regards to their defence industries. Yet Russian policies towards defence cooperation with Belarus look more like a desire to grab the most efficient Belarusian firms in its defence industry than cooperate with them.

The best example is the same MZKT which produces chassis of world-renown quality. The Kremlin some years ago launched a policy of replacing all the components of Russian weapons produced in former Soviet republics with Russian-made ones. Since at least the early 2010s, it made no exception to this rule even for its closest ally – Belarus. The Russian military decided to replace Belarusian chassis of the Russian missile systems with their Russian equivalents which were not even available at the time when the decision was made.

It further led Russia to the idea of buying the MZKT – one of the best Belarusian firms. Moscow has many means to pressure Minsk with its financial troubles into selling the works. This would both undermine the future prospects of Belarusian economic development and will further diminish the importance of Belarus to Russia.

It is precisely these kinds of situations that show Belarusian officials and businessmen the risks of cooperating with Russia. The Russian side apparently is not eager to do business together with Belarusians, but rather it wants to take their business from them. Moscow simply refuses to [accept Belarus as a partner](#) despite its geopolitical significance and strategic proximity and commitments of Belarus concerning its alliance with Russia.

The Belarusian opposition and Western politicians should avoid demonising the Belarusian defence industry and military. It would be wiser to provide them with realistic prospects with a positive future – an alternative to being strangled by Russia. The demonisation of the defence industries and military by reformist forces in the former Soviet republics in 1990s – especially in Russia and Ukraine – brought no good and led to backlash with grave political consequences.