

# Ostrogorski Academy, Ostrogorski Forum 2017, brain-drain, religiosity – Ostrogorski Centre digest

This June the Ostrogorski Centre launched the Ostrogorski Academy – a nonprofit educational project dedicated to disseminating knowledge of the humanities. The academy is the first Belarusian entirely online ‘university’, based on a series of lectures, tests, podcasts on important and engaging topics.

Ostrogorski Centre analysts discussed how Belarus’s neighbours doubt its sovereignty, brain drain, and religiosity in the country.

The Centre also held in Minsk the Ostrogorski Forum 2017, which focused on foreign policy, security, and identity.

## Ostrogorski Academy

On 19 June, the Ostrogorski Centre officially launched the [Ostrogorski Academy](#) – a nonprofit educational project dedicated to disseminating knowledge of the humanities. The academy is the first entirely online educational platform, based on a series of lectures on important and engaging topics. Each lecture series is read by well-known Belarusian academics and analysts based both abroad and in Belarus; courses also feature graphic illustrations, transcripts of lectures, e-books, podcasts, and links to additional sources of information.

# Ostrogorski Forum 2017

On 19 June, the Ostrogorski Centre held its 2nd Ostrogorski Forum, which was entitled [‘Belarus in the new environment: challenges to foreign policy, security, and identity after 2014’](#). The event and in particular remarks made by the Ukraine’s Ambassador to Belarus were widely covered in the Belarusian media, including [TUT.by](#), [zautra.by](#), [thinktanks.by](#), [Polish radio](#), and [Radio Liberty](#). You can see videos from the conference below.

## Analytics

[Siarhei Bohdan](#) showed that despite all of Minsk’s efforts to present itself as a neutral country, [some of its neighbours doubt](#) not only its neutrality but even its sovereignty and commitment to peace. Minsk’s efforts have failed to please at least some of its non-Russian neighbours, which would like to see Belarus distance itself more clearly from Moscow. The Belarusian government, however, can hardly pursue a policy other than a very cautious and incremental build-up of neutrality if it wants to survive as an independent state.

[Alesia Rudnik](#) analysed [brain-drain trends](#) in Belarus. According to official statistics, Belarus is among the few countries in the Post-Soviet region with more people coming to the country than leaving. Nevertheless, sociologists point to a discrepancy between official statistics and reality. The economic crisis, political pressure, and stagnation of education are just several reasons Belarusians are leaving the country, while the authorities do little to influence Belarusians to stay put.

Paula Borowska discussed a [recent study on religiosity](#) in Central and Eastern Europe by the Pew Research Centre with a

focus on Belarus. According to the study, the overwhelming majority of Belarusians believe in God and affiliate themselves with specific religious organisations. Nevertheless, the number of practising believers who regularly engage in religious activities is far smaller. Unexpectedly, Belarusian Protestants, not covered in the study, might be the de facto leaders on the ground.

## Comments of analysts in the media

On Polish Radio, Siarhei Bohdan argued that [Belarus is moving away from its old security doctrine](#) which ties it exclusively to the union with Russia. The Belarusian government is developing a more balanced foreign policy by creating a variety of partnerships in the area of security. It respects the interests of Russia while attempting to strengthen cooperation with the West.

On Radio Liberty, Yaraslau Kryvoi discussed [how Belarus's presidency of the Central European Initiative](#) could help the country break with its international isolation. Its presidency will garner the attention of the European community, help balance its foreign policy, and boost regional cooperation.

Also on Radio Liberty, Yaraslau Kryvoi discussed the [results of snap elections in the UK](#) and how they could affect London's negotiations with the European Union on Brexit.

Siarhei Bohdan commented for *thinktanks.by* on the [blockade of Qatar by a Saudi-led Arab coalition](#). The ultimate goal of the blockade is to put pressure on Iran, which aims to restore the military part of its nuclear programme. Belarus, which has been actively cooperating with Qatar, is losing an opportunity in the region due to the conflict.

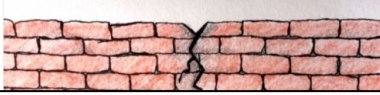
## Jak Łukaszenka stracił swoją popularność

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Lubię to!

Ryhor Astapenia

Tak wielka fala protestów po raz ostatni zaistniała w białoruskich regionach i peryferiach na początku lat 90. W tym roku w lutym i marcu protesty maszerowały przez całą Białoruś: akcje odbyły się w dwunastu miastach, a udział w nich wzięło ponad dwadzieścia tysięcy ludzi.



Ryhor Astapenia wrote an article for the Polish magazine *Kontakt* [discussing the fall in support for Aliaksandr Lukashenka](#) in Belarusian society.

On Polish Radio, Vadzim Smok discussed [a recent series of arrests of important Belarusian businessmen](#). In Belarus, they can not freely do business without informal arrangements with the country's leadership. According to the official version, the businessmen were tried for tax evasion, but the actual cause may also be a conflict in the system of informal relations with the authorities.

Siarhei Bohdan commented to *Deutsche Welle* on the [recent oil agreements between Belarus and Ukraine](#). The Kremlin sees all attempts of its clients to diversify oil supplies in non-economic categories of confrontation – you are either with or against Russia. At the same time, the transition to a new structure of oil supplies from Iran and Azerbaijan via Odessa to Brody and Mazyr, and from there on to Eastern Europe, could change the geopolitical map of the entire Eastern European region.

On Polish Radio, Alesia Rudnik discussed [alcohol policy in Belarus](#). The country continues to occupy top positions in the WHO's world alcohol consumption ranking. What's more, these statistics do not take into account illegal alcohol stock. Although the state claims to be working on some anti-alcohol policies, this seems to be in word only, and alcohol remains extremely affordable.

# Belarus profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following people: [Jury Karajeŭ](#), [Alieh Chusajenaŭ](#), [Iryna Abiełskaja](#), [Mikalaj Lukashenka](#), [Michail Zacharaŭ](#), [Paviel Cichanaŭ](#), [Alieh Rummo](#), [Jury Hurski](#), [Piotr Kraŭčanka](#), [Aliaksandr Džiamidaŭ](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Siarhiej Pisaryk](#), [Aliaksandr Kosinieć](#), [Natalia Nikandrava](#), [Siarhiej Ciacieryn](#), [Siamion Šapira](#), [Fiodar Poŭny](#), [Anatol Kupryjanaŭ](#), [Viktar Marcinovič](#), [Aliaksandr Miažujeŭ](#), [Liudmila Michalkova](#), [Anatol Rusiecki](#), [Marjana Ščotkina](#), [Mikalaj Samasiejka](#), [Siarhiej Michalok](#), [Georgy Ponomarev](#).

# Belarus policy

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

- Andrei Yahorau, Andrei Shutau, Mikalai Katsuk. [Civil society of Belarus: current state and development conditions](#). CET, 2017.
- Andrei Yahorau, Aliona Zujkova, Volha Lashkevich, Ihar Rasolka. [Potential and opportunities for implementing local planning mechanisms in the Belarusian regions to ensure the rights of people with disabilities](#). CET, 2017.
- Sierž Naŭrodski. [Population 50+ in Belarus: the experience of using the instruments of social harmonisation in the EU](#). CASE Belarus, 2017.
- [Monitoring Report on Implementation of Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform \(June-December 2016\)](#). Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, 2016.
- [Monitoring report on implementation of Belarus Roadmap for higher education reform \(January-May 2016\)](#).

Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, 2016.

Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion into the database by [emailing us](#).

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).*

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## **Successful Foreign Policy, EEU Decline, Cross-Border Projects – State Press Digest**

According to Belarusian state-controlled press, 2015 was a successful year for Belarusian foreign policy, as the country strengthened its position in international affairs and relations with key western actors.

The national budget for 2016 reflects the impact of the ongoing economic crisis and will see the government support only the most vulnerable categories of society, *siloviki* in particular.

Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) trade continues to fall because of the regional economic crisis and protectionist policies of the bloc's members. Belarus is gradually abolishing subsidies in the energy sector as part of market reforms.

The regions of Belarus are actively engaging in cross-border cooperation projects financed by the EU. All of this and more

is discussed in the latest edition of State Press Digest.

## Government considers 2015 foreign policy a success

[In 2015 Belarus led a successful foreign policy.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* presents the annual Review of the Foreign Policy Outcomes and Activities of the Foreign Ministry. During presidential elections, which the Ministry sees as the main event, it managed to organise constructive cooperation with international observers. These observers' reports had a significant impact on further positive development of relations with foreign, and especially western, partners.

In 2015 Belarus made a significant contribution to de-escalation of the Ukraine conflict and maintenance of stability in the region. Belarus also continues to promote the concept of “integration of integration” – convergence of the European and Eurasian integration programmes. However, the review regrets that the key problem within the EEU – trade exemptions and protectionism – has not been overcome.

## Eurasian Economic Union demonstrates trade decline

[The new budget will prioritise financial support for police and army personnel.](#) *Narodnaja Hazieta* publishes an interview with MP and member of the standing committee on budget and finance of the Belarusian parliament Valier Baradzienia. According to the



official, the fast economic growth of previous years is over, Belarus is losing markets and its GDP is falling, leading to a budget deficit.

The authorities will cut expenses, but this will not apply to social commitments such as education and healthcare. Salary growth can be expected in the public sector, but it will vary according to each sphere. Teachers may receive additional income from private tutoring and healthcare workers can offer paid services to citizens, while such possibilities are not open to police and army personnel. The state is therefore obliged to protect them, the MP said.

**Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) demonstrates decline in mutual trade.** In 2015 trade within the EEU decreased by 25 per cent, writes *Sielskaya Gazieta*. However, trade within the union has in fact been falling ever since the launch of its predecessor, the Customs Union, in 2011. Stumbling oil prices and sanctions against Russia are only part of the problem. Members of the union continue to put national economic interest above the integration ideal and retain protectionist policies.

In the last year bans on imports of certain categories of goods became standard practice for EEU members. For Belarus this concerns primarily food products, which Russia constantly claims do not meet EEU standards. Moreover, Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) further limits Belarus' export possibilities to the EEU.

**Belarus plans to completely abolish cross-subsidies to the energy sector by 2018.** Today enterprises in fact pay for a large part of the population's energy consumption, *Zviazda* newspaper reports. Belarusians pay 72 per cent of electricity costs, 55 per cent of gas costs and only 17 per cent of heating costs. These subsidies have been a part of the state's social policy throughout independence and received much criticism from Belarus' international creditors who promote market reforms.





[The estates of noblemen of Hrodna region are sold off to investors.](#) The 18th century estate of the Umiastoŭskija noble family located in Iŭje district has been sold at auction to a Jordan businessman for \$55,000, *Respublika* newspaper

reports. According to the auction conditions, the investor has promised to restore the buildings to their original form and turn them into a hotel and a restaurant.

The estate until the auction belonged to a local collective farm and is in a dire state. The authorities have no funds for restoration of architectural heritage, and many similar estates are slowly crumble as a result. Twelve estates in Hrodna region acquired new owners in recent years, but some of them are in no hurry to carry out restoration works and the government even plans to take some of the estates back.

## **Belarus engages in cross-border projects with the EU**

[Hrodna region actively participates in EU cross-border cooperation projects.](#) The local authorities of Hrodna region have prepared around 50 projects for EU-financed cross border cooperation programmes with Poland-Belarus-Ukraine and Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus, *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda* reports. The projects mostly concern healthcare, education and culture.

The programmes require partnership from both sides of the border, and half of the projects already have foreign partners. To present the other half for potential partners, the authorities plan to organise a forum in Bialystok. The Poland-Belarus-Ukraine programme for 2016-2020 will allocate about €180m for cross-border cooperation projects.

[Belarusians will not have to take Russian language exams to receive work permits for Russia.](#) As *Soyuz* newspaper reports, the Russian State Duma passed a law exempting Belarusians from the obligation to confirm their command of the Russian language and knowledge of Russian history and law as a requirement for obtaining a residence or work permit. The norm became effective in Russia on 1 January 2015 and concerned all foreign citizens, including Belarusians.

The regulation caused much opposition in Belarus, where Russian is one of the two official languages and in fact dominates all spheres of life. The problem was widely discussed, and Lukashenka personally lobbied on it during his visit to Russia in December, ultimately receiving approval from Putin.

The State Digest 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.

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## **Belarus and Zimbabwe Aim at “Mega Deals”**

Belarus steps up its cooperation with Zimbabwe in sectors ranging from agriculture to mining.

In mid-November, *The Herald*, a government-owned leading Zimbabwean daily, triumphantly reported the “nod” granted by the country’s President Robert Mugabe to a number of investment deals with Belarus after his meeting with Viktor Sheiman, Lukashenka’s chief property manager.

However, Zimbabwe's failing economy and international

isolation, as well as the chequered history of cooperation between the two countries, cast serious doubt on the prospects of these "mega deals".

## Lukashenka's Grey Eminence Closes "Mega Deals"

[Viktor Sheiman](#) arrived in Harare on 15 November as a personal envoy of the Belarusian president. On 18 November, he met the Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. Mugabe gave the green light to cooperation between the two countries in delivery of mining and agricultural equipment to Zimbabwe, as well as in agriculture.

Mugabe and Sheiman also discussed cooperation in the field of electricity, construction of roads, houses and bridges, and teaching of Zimbabwean students in Belarus. "We are going to big scale bilateral cooperation and this is very optimistic," said Sheiman.



Leader of the Belarus delegation, General Viktor Sheiman

In Harare, Viktor Sheiman also signed a joint venture agreement for the extraction of gold and other precious minerals with the Zimbabwean mining minister and the Reserve Bank's governor.

According to the mining minister, "this agreement seeks to provide a framework for us to access capital equipment and technical know-how from Belarus particularly as it relates to mining on rivers". It is worth noting that Belarus has not been previously known to have any particular experience in river mining.

The servile Zimbabwean government media has described the

recent agreements with Belarus exclusively in terms of “mega deals”, which are supposed to bring prosperity to Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean officials, such as finance minister Patrick Chinamasa and Mugabe’s wife Grace, have been boasting about deliveries of equipment from Belarus at their meetings with businessmen and the local population.

Surprisingly, the Belarusian government-run media, usually overly enthusiastic in their reporting of breakthrough projects with foreign governments, has kept total silence on Sheiman’s trip to Zimbabwe.

## Europe's and Africa's “Outposts of Tyranny”

Belarus and Zimbabwe retain many similarities in domestic politics and international standing. Both countries have very high inflation and irremovable presidents who remain in power through oppression of the opposition and rigged elections. Robert Mugabe has been steering his country since 1987 and is now in his sixth term; Alexander Lukashenka has been in power since 1994 and is in his fifth presidential term.



In January 2005, at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing for the future US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice specifically identified Belarus and Zimbabwe (alongside Myanmar, Cuba, Iran and North Korea) as the “[outposts of tyranny](#)”. Zimbabwe has always obligingly [supported Belarus](#) when the latter has been targeted by critical reports of human rights bodies.

Both countries are currently under the US and EU visa and economic sanctions (though most sanctions against Belarus have recently been suspended). However, Zimbabwe faces less

criticism than Belarus from international human rights bodies.

# Long History of Dampened Expectations

Belarus and Zimbabwe established diplomatic relations in April 1992. Since 2001, the two countries have begun exchanging visits of governmental delegations, initially at the level of ministers. Vice-presidents of Zimbabwe, John Nkomo and Emmerson Mnangagwa, visited Minsk in 2011 and 2015 respectively.

Over all these years, the two countries' relationship followed a predictable pattern. Every Zimbabwean delegation, having visited a dozen Belarusian manufacturers, expressed admiration for Belarus' industrial capabilities and know-how, and showed a great deal of enthusiasm for the prospect of bilateral trade. The Belarusian leader received each such delegation and talked about major contracts and a great future.

However, over this time, these well-publicised trips have had little effect on bilateral trade.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Belarus' exports to Zimbabwe, \$ mln	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.4	12.4
Belarus' imports from Zimbabwe, \$ mln	2.6	2.3	5.5	3.2	4.8

A relative breakthrough happened in 2014 when BelAZ, a Belarusian manufacture of quarry machinery, supplied 17 units of its equipment (dump trucks, loaders and bulldozers) to Hwange Colliery coal mine in Zimbabwe. The machinery was supplied through a vendor financing scheme secured by the regional PTA Bank.

In November 2009, Belarus submitted draft agreements on trade and economic cooperation, as well as on promotion and mutual

protection of investments, to the Zimbabwean authorities for consideration. To date, the first and only fully-fledged legal agreement between the two countries remains a memorandum of understanding between the ministries of justice of Belarus and Zimbabwe signed in Minsk on 22 July 2015.

## Risky Business with a Failed Partner

Viktor Sheiman's trip to Harare followed directly after Vice-president Emmerson Mnangagwa's visit to Minsk in July 2015. The Zimbabwean dignitary then visited a dozen Belarusian manufacturers and met a wide range of personalities, from [President Alexander Lukashenka](#) to the Belarusian equivalent of Santa Claus.

At that time, Belarus and Zimbabwe reportedly signed a memorandum to supply \$150m worth of agricultural, mining, dam and road construction equipment to the southern African nation.

Alexander Lukashenka, welcoming his Zimbabwean guest, also suggested that they set up a vehicle maintenance centre in Zimbabwe that could establish Belarus' entry into Africa. Lukashenka sees Zimbabwe as Belarus' "trade hub in Africa".



Belarus agreed to [finance the supplies](#) of its equipment to Zimbabwe. Signing the agreement with Prime Minister [Andrei Kobyakov](#), Emmerson Mnangagwa pointed out that Zimbabwe's financial institutions guaranteed the entire volume of financing.

According to the agreed timelines, Zimbabwe will start receiving machinery and equipment in the first quarter of 2016. In particular, MAZ, a Belarusian truck manufacturer, has

plans to supply at least 100 trucks with right-hand steering to Zimbabwe.

However, independent media in Zimbabwe has pointed out that previous such "mega deals", including those which Zimbabwe signed with Russia and China, remain mere statements of intent. Zimbabwe has failed to repay loans provided by China totaling about \$1.5bn.

The same fate may await the deals signed this year between Minsk and Harare. Belarus has ventured into a very risky business with a kindred regime notorious for its permanent financial and economic failures.

Another concern about these "mega deals" stems from the kind of personalities involved in their conception and implementation. Emmerson Mnangagwa is Zimbabwe's wealthiest individual who has already faced many allegations of corruption.

Viktor Sheiman usually serves Lukashenka in fostering deals where extreme discretion is required. These factors and the lack of transparency in the financing of these projects cast doubts on the true nature of this cooperation.

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## **New Military Doctrine in Belarus**

On 15 November, Belarusian Defence Minister Andrej Raŭkoŭ appeared on Belarusian Television to discuss a new military doctrine, which he attributed to the arms buildup in neighbouring NATO states surrounding Belarus.

This article explores the background and content – insofar as it is known – of this doctrine and the preparedness of Belarus to meet future contingencies, including the potential development of a “hybrid war.”

## Working with Russia

The series of exercises with the Russian Army that began with [ZAPAD 2009](#), were in anticipation of a NATO threat to the territory of Russia and Belarus that would require a military response. Specifically, the Russia-Belarus operation targeted Poland and Lithuania, and Russian missile carriers TU-95 and TU-160 bombed mock objects in those countries.

Such an approach anticipated the close cooperation of the two armies against the common enemy of NATO. Essentially that approach did not change drastically in the current year, as a joint exercise named “Union Shield 2015” in Kaliningrad in September preceded training sessions with the rapid response forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in Tajikistan.

pursuit of a common military doctrine with Russia has become a liability to the Belarusian government

Another link is that one of the leading figures on military decisions, [Stanislaŭ Zaś](#), confirmed as Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus on 5 November (earlier he served four months as Acting Secretary), holds the rank of Professor at the Russian Academy of Military Sciences.

Yet the pursuit of a common military doctrine with Russia has become a liability to the Belarusian government. At a mundane level, the two armies remain vastly different, not least in salary. Whereas a Russian captain can expect to receive a monthly salary of just over \$2,000, his Belarusian counterpart



brings home a salary of less than \$150 – following a rise in salary from around \$100.

But more important the goals of the two states are no longer in harmony. Belarus fears becoming embroiled in a hybrid war, particularly on its southern border with Ukraine. The Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea in February-March 2014 marked the decisive turning point in Lukashenka's decision to introduce a new military doctrine.

## Embarrassing Memory

In the number of tanks, armoured vehicles and guns per 1,000 troops, Belarus currently ranks first in Europe

In theory, Belarus possessed ample weaponry after its declaration of independence in August 1991. As military expert Aliaksandr Alesin has noted: "We don't have many troops but we have a lot of weapons," most of which were inherited from the former USSR. In the number of tanks, armoured vehicles and guns per 1,000 troops, Belarus currently ranks first in Europe. But in July 2012 it suffered the embarrassment of the intrusion of its airspace by planes from Lithuania piloted by Swedes, which [dropped teddy bears](#) bearing pro-democracy messages over Minsk and other areas, including directly over the residence of the president.

[Belarusian Army: Capacity And Its Role in the Region](#) Belarus successfully formed its own national army in 1992 while making use of favourable premises already available to them after the Soviet Union's collapse.

Understandably the Belarusian authorities reacted furiously, but more important, the event served as a psychological blow to the president and sparked fears—largely unjustified—that Belarus appeared vulnerable to an attack from the air.

# Foundations of the New Doctrine: “The Polonaise”

Following his reelection, the president held three meetings with military leaders on 30 October, 3 November, and 6 November 2015. The third was largely ceremonial coming during Lukashenka’s inauguration ceremony as troops swore the oath of loyalty to the president and country.

On 30 October, Lukashenka reported that a new military doctrine would be introduced in 2016. It would entail a gradual reduction of the size of the regular army from 250,000 to 65,000, along with the restructuring of administrative and support personnel. On 3 November, while visiting an electro-mechanical factory in Dzerzhinsk, the president announced the task of introducing a new generation of modern rocketry. This latter revelation requires some explanatory background.

Its origins lie not in military links with Russia, but with China. Belarus has created [a new rocket complex](#) called “Polonez” (Polonaise), a means to inflict “unacceptable damage” on an attacking enemy. The rockets in question have a range of 200 kilometres (about 120 miles), meaning that they could strike the capitals of all neighbouring states, though they could not reach Moscow. Within range would be military objects of NATO countries: the Baltic States and Poland. China, which produces the missiles, financed the project whereas Belarus’ role is to manufacture the trucks and missile launchers.

Interestingly, however, Belarus will produce and control the missile targeting system. In this way, Belarus has bypassed Russia, which had expressed scepticism about the ability of the smaller state to produce such advanced weaponry. The Polonaise’ local base is the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant MZKT 7390 “Astrology,” and the rockets could deliver a simultaneous

strike on eight targets at the 200 kilometre range.

In addition Belarus also intends to produce its own drones, the formation of its own rapid respond force—in addition to that of the CSTO—and the formation of an army of local self-defence. In all aspects the doctrine emphasises a form of aggressive defence and even a preemptive attack on an enemy about to strike Belarusian territory.

## Problems

In addition to the new concept, the full details of which are unknown outside presidential circles, Belarus must re-equip its existing weaponry though it lacks the finances to do so. Reliance on Russia to subsidise and replenish the Belarusian military fleet backfired when Russia opted to construct [its own air base](#) near Babruisk.

The establishment of the new military doctrine runs counter to Russian plans and also appears to undermine CSTO unity because the course being pursued by Lukashenka is one of neutrality, especially in the conflict between its two neighbours Russia and Ukraine. Yet the fundamental alliance between Belarus and Russia remains and military exercises continue.

Thus the limits of Belarus' military independence appear obvious. Lukashenka seeks a national deterrent free from Russian control. Simultaneously his country remains an integral part of Russian strategic space and needs Russian help for its homeland defence. Lastly, Belarus remains in the Russian-dominated alliance CSTO, as well as the Russia-Belarus Union.

*David Marples and Uladzimir Padhol*

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## **Editorial: Why the EU Lifts Belarus Sanctions**

On Saturday the suspension of most European Union targeted sanctions against Belarus came into effect.

The sanctions were suspended “in response to the release of all Belarusian political prisoners on 22 August and in the context of improving EU-Belarus relations”. Ironically, the move comes a few weeks after the facade presidential election in October 2015.

The move shows that the EU's expectations of Belarus have become much lower. In the late 1990s the West expected from Belarus free and fair elections and greater respect for human rights. A regime change in Belarus looked realistic then. Twenty years later the main expectation of the European Union is not significant political changes but avoiding violence against political opponents and securing the release of political prisoners.

fundamentally, not much has changed inside Belarus over the last decade

Although the European Union is not for the first time changing its policy from one of sanctions to engagement, fundamentally

little has changed inside Belarus over the last decade. Freedom House rankings of Belarus show almost the same scores for democracy, independent media and civil society in that period. The authorities conduct elections which are neither free nor fair, imprison and then release their political opponents and keep civil society under pressure.

The changes in the European Union's approach reflect not so much changes inside Belarus but changes in the regional context. In the late 1990s Russia looked like an emerging democracy moving in the right direction. Lukashenka was an abnormality who had to be ostracised. Belarus as a small and unimportant country was easy to sanction.

Now Vladimir Putin is rigging elections, staging wars in the region and conquering foreign territories. This makes Lukashenka look rather mild. He even appears as a guarantor of peace and Belarusian independence against the background of the Ukraine crisis.

the Belarusian statehood and independence today is more vulnerable than ever

But although Russia is busy with wars in Syria and Ukraine, Belarusian statehood and independence today is more vulnerable than ever. In the post-Crimea world the tolerance for violence in the post-Soviet region has increased. Russia's appetite for influence in the region is growing. Instead of supplying Belarus with war planes, Russia wants to provide its pilots as well.

The minds of Belarusians are also under pressure from Russia. Most people in Belarus watch Russian television as their main source of news, exposing them to high doses of anti-Western propaganda. The Belarusian authorities would like to replace this with their their own propaganda but are [unable to do so without angering Russia](#). For the same reason, the Belarusian regime considers it foolish to make any significant moves

towards the West, and instead prefers to stay in the shadow of Russia.

Lukashenka has made the country extremely vulnerable and dependent upon Russia. This does not mean, however, that Belarus should be punished for it and abandoned because of Europe's fatigue and preoccupation with other problems.

The European Union should not just lower its expectations but take more active steps to become more [visible and influential inside Belarus](#). This should include long-term programmes in the area of education, scholarly exchanges in the framework of the Bologna process, and strengthening the civil and national identity of Belarusians.

Finally, it is important to lower the visa barrier. Ironically, while hundreds of thousands of migrants cross the European border without any visas, Belarusians have to undergo long, expensive and often [humiliating procedures](#) to go to the West. It happens not because the government prevents them from leaving, as in the Soviet times. The main obstacle is that European Union states [prefer to issue short-term visas](#) and charge the full price.

Belarusian nationals face much stricter visa requirements than citizens of Russia or Ukraine. The policy of the European Union towards Belarusians should remain favourable even when the government of Belarus does not want to liberalise or open up the country. It is in the long-term interest of both the people of Belarus and the European Union to do so.

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# Peaceful Elections as a Foreign Policy Tool

In October, the Belarusian foreign ministry worked hard to use the presidential elections as a tool to strengthen the positive trend in relations between Belarus and the West. Foreign minister Vladimir Makei managed not to miss this second chance, after the failure of a similar attempt in 2010.

Belarusian diplomats contacted the domestic opposition through different channels to dissuade it from possible street protests. They also used hand-picked “independent” observers to create a positive image of the elections.

The peaceful elections allowed Europe to decide on the suspension of sanctions against the regime. However, the EU can reimpose them at any moment should Lukashenka abandon his rapprochement policy.

## Talking to the Opposition and Hand-Picking Observers

Belarusian diplomats focused on securing a positive image of the elections in the international media and public opinion. They also sought to prevent any incidents that would jeopardise the progress already achieved in Belarus’ relations with Europe.

Domestically, [Vladimir Makei](#) and other high-ranked diplomats worked to convey a message to opposition leaders in Belarus that Russia might use eventual street protests to stage provocation aimed at sabotaging the positive trends in Belarus’ relations with the West. They did it mostly through Western envoys in Minsk.

Internationally, the Belarusian embassies worked with the usual sympathisers of the Belarusian regime to engage them as “independent” observers or members of the European observation missions at the presidential elections. These are people who are ready to support the regime with positive testimonies, either out of their sincere sympathy for Belarus or in pursuit of lucrative business opportunities in the country.

## “Nothing Abnormal” at Polling Stations

The Belarusian government has often sponsored, fully or partially, the trips of many hand-picked “observers” to Minsk. Many of them, like Mikhail Morgulis, President of the Spiritual Diplomacy Foundation (US), are regulars at presidential elections in Belarus. Unlike the European observation missions, Morgulis and his collaborators tend to praise the elections as “free and fair” .



Thierry Mariani, a French MP, came to Minsk as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) delegation. This former minister, known for his pro-Russian stance, visited fourteen polling stations in Minsk and found “good organisation” and “nothing abnormal” there. However, he took no apparent interest in the vote counting process and [early voting](#), which drew the most criticism from others.

Belarusian diplomats also remained in good working contact with the observation missions of the European institutions. Despite the [critical conclusions of their joint report](#), the ministry refrained this time from criticising them as biased and even avoided commenting on them altogether. [Lidia Yermoshina](#), head of the central election commission, went as



far as thanking the mission for its objectivity.

# Getting the Sanctions Suspended

[Rumours](#) about the imminent recall of the sanctions against high-ranking officials and companies circulated well before the elections. They became almost a certainty after Lukashenka [released](#) all the political prisoners in September.

The EU will first renew the sanctions and then suspend them

The European Union virtually confirmed the veracity of these rumours on 12 October, when the European observation missions made public their preliminary conclusions. Harlem Désir, France's minister for European affairs, announced the decision to suspend the sanctions for the next four months. He made this announcement when answering a question from a reporter after an EU meeting in Luxembourg.

The format of the announcement mattered in this case. Belarus was not on this meeting's official agenda. The EU intends to formally review and action upon the issue of sanctions before they expire on 31 October. In such circumstances, the news could have come from an "anonymous source" or even been postponed altogether under the premise that the observers' final conclusions needed to be studied first.

However, Belarus needed a prompt quasi-official confirmation that the EU would stick to its part of the step-by-step arrangement. In its turn, Brussels wanted to reassure Minsk on the eve of Lukashenka's meeting with Vladimir Putin. Thus, they chose as a messenger the French minister who met with deputy foreign minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) in May 2015 and is familiar with the situation in Belarus.

# Low-Key but Positive Reaction

On 15 October, Dmitri Mironchik, the foreign ministry's spokesman, refused to comment on this announcement but reiterated Belarus' position on the "inefficiency and futility" of anti-Belarus sanctions. He pointed out that the ministry expected their "complete abolition... as soon as possible".

Lukashenka: "The sanctions have been lifted. Get moving!"

Four days later, his boss Vladimir Makei was more outspoken in his reaction. In an interview with a Belarusian TV station, he labelled as "positive" the emergence of such statements. The foreign minister also expressed his understanding of the fact that the sanctions would not be lifted immediately, blaming it on the EU bureaucratic mechanism.

Belarusian president [Alexander Lukashenka](#) sees the repeal of sanctions as a *fait accompli*. "The sanctions have been lifted. Get moving!", he told his ministers at a meeting on 20 October in Minsk, prompting them to expand Belarusian exports.

Announcing the suspension of sanctions, the French minister stressed that they "can be reimposed immediately if this is justified". In fact, the EU will first renew the sanctions and then immediately suspend them.

The definitive lifting of sanctions would mean that the reasons for their introduction no longer apply, which is untrue. Also, it would make their reimposition quite difficult if Belarus lapses into its old ways of serious human rights abuse. The suspension of sanctions will allow the European Union to have Belarus on the ropes, stimulating the government into taking further steps towards the political liberalisation.

Belarus and Europe are now at the very beginning of a complex diplomatic play, trying to squeeze as many concessions from each other without giving ground on matters of principle.

Europe will demand more democratic reforms culminating in free and fair parliamentary elections next year and will be ready to provide economic assistance in return. Belarus will seek economic benefits as a payment for its role as a "donor of security" in the region and try to avoid meaningful political liberalisation.

Starting with the release of political prisoners, Belarus added the "peaceful elections" and minor electoral improvements to the package to obtain a serious concession from the EU. This is a culmination of the rapprochement, which began after the Russian annexation of Crimea.

The next big test for the step-by-step strategy will be in early 2016 when the EU and Belarus will negotiate the full abrogation, or at least further suspension, of the sanctions.

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## **China as An Epic Failure of Belarusian Foreign Policy**

On Friday, President Lukashenka announced that the promised Chinese loan of \$7billion would help Belarus cope with the current crisis.

A week before this announcement, he had gone to China for his eighth visit to Beijing. Is Belarus succeeding in befriending the rising Asian power?

The devil that exists in Belarusian-Chinese cooperation hides

in the details, and statistics on bilateral trade and its structure reveals a bleak picture. Belarus suffers from a huge trade deficit and its exports to China are mostly potash. This is the only thing which Beijing eagerly buys from Minsk in large quantities.

Chinese and Belarusian officials swore to improve the trade balance between both states, but the promised loans have gone to increasing the production of potash, which China needs.

## **Belarus with “Great China”**

Minsk since the middle of the 1990s aspires to closer relations with Beijing. Belarusian officials talking of relations with Beijing frequently use the expression “the great China.” They only call Russia and China “great”. Minsk publicly welcomes Chinese policies even on intra-Chinese affairs. Thus, on 2 July Minsk promptly welcomed the new Chinese Law on National Security, which had been adopted by Beijing the day before.

The entire modern history of Belarus is linked with the People's Republic of China

On meeting Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli on 2 September, Lukashenka said, “The entire modern history of Belarus is linked with the People's Republic of China.” Lukashenka visited China in 1995 for the first time as president, and recently he went to Beijing on his eighth visit. Chinese leaders have come to Minsk twice, in 2001 and May 2015. The visits of various relatively high-level officials occurs regularly, often it occurs every couple of months.

Minsk hopes that the political support it demonstrates to China will pay off in the future because China's rise will unavoidably result in Beijing becoming a global centre of power. So far, however, it is difficult to find tangible

[Belarusian gains](#) from cooperation with China. Nothing illustrates it better than the basic data on volume and structure of bilateral trade.

## Success or Failure in Trade with China?

The Belarusian state news agency BelTA boasted of the governments successes in developing trade with China from \$792.9 million in 2005 to \$3,207.3 million in 2014. It omitted to mention that this trade over in the past ten years constantly ended in a huge, multi-million dollar deficit for Belarus. The last time Belarus had positive a trade balance with China was in 2005.

Even after Belarus in 2014 increased its exports to China (by 39% to \$640 million) and cut its imports from China (by 16% to \$2,373 million), the deficit still made up a colossal figure for Minsk. It was considered to be more than \$1.7 billion.

On 31 August, the Belarusian president signed a Directive on the development of bilateral relations with China. This directive stated that it would try to more than double the volume of Belarusian exports to China (to reach by 2020 at least \$1.5 billion) by improving conditions for bilateral trade. The proposed measures included introduction of electronic quality certificates and assigning more personnel to develop relations with Beijing.

As the following table shows, the structure of Belarusian exports to China looks gloomy. The absolute majority consists of potash fertilisers, with chemical products lagging far behind. In addition, some commodities are exported unprocessed or minimally processed. Exports to China have so far not helped to resolve a strategic task of the Belarusian government, which is to find a market for a machine-building industry. This will save a major branch of the Belarusian

economy.

*Table. Structure of Belarusian Export to China in 2014*

<b>Commodity Type</b>	<b>Volume, \$ million</b>
Potash	495.1
Polyamides	54.6
Software	14
Unprocessed Flax	6.7
Combine Harvesters	6.4
Timber	6.4
Integrated Circuits	4.7

Chinese exports include more advanced products, like computers, communication equipment, spares of cars and tractors, engines, and TV sets. Sure, many of the troubles encountered by the Belarusian government are not unique. They follow the same pattern found in other states that trade with China, as China becomes a global economic power. But compared to others two aspects of this situation stand out.

First, it is China which sells Belarus more value-added products, for example, products which are more technologically advanced and better processed . Belarusian exports to China include very few sophisticated commodities. Even Belarus' national symbol, the flax, arrives in China largely unprocessed.

Second, have all the efforts undertaken in the last two decades to develop relations with China achieved better results for Belarus? In other words, would trade with China look more profitable for Belarus in terms of a trade deficit and export structure, had the Belarusian government since the mid-1990s not committed itself so unreservedly to a partnership with China?

# Potash Dependence

According to Belta news agency, this May the Chinese leader Xi Jinping Belarus promised in Belarus that "China is going to increase import of high-quality and competitive goods from Belarus." Lower-rank Chinese officials explained what Beijing meant by that.

Zhang Dong of China's Commerce Ministry said that respective firms were already working on importing more [Belarusian potash](#) and chemical produce. "China would like to purchase more of these commodities in Belarus."

Indeed, in May, the Belarus Potash Company and the Chinese Sinochem Group signed a memorandum of understanding about cooperation for the next five years. It envisaged sales in 2015-2019 of four million tones of Belarusian potash fertilisers to China. The deal would cost \$1.3 billion.

Beijing wants little more than potash from Belarus.

On 11 September, Belarusian media reported that \$2 billion out of \$7 billion of loans promised by Beijing had been allocated to fund the construction of Nezhyn Mining-and-Processing Integrated Works which should produce even more potash. If so, the promised Chinese loans will serve Chinese rather than Belarusian interests.

Beijing wants little more than potash from Belarus. As Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell noticed in their book *China's Search For Security*, despite China's global significance, it remains a "local power." Outside Asia, Beijing looks only for raw materials (mostly hydrocarbons), technologies, investment opportunities, markets and diplomatic support. Out of this list, Minsk can offer only potash and its voice in international organisations. Both are of limited value to Beijing.

Thanks to cooperating with Beijing Minsk for its part has managed to get some additional political leverage, in particular to resist Moscow's pressure. The [excellent relations](#) established with Pakistan are in part due to Chinese support. Minsk also got strategic gains, for example, by diversifying [its partners](#) in the defence sphere. Yet the economic results, both in terms of [trade and investments](#), look bleak.

Currently Minsk is launching the Belarus-Chinese Industrial Park project in the vicinity of Minsk. There also remains talk of Belarus' participation in the Silk Road Economic Belt, however, it looks like a new desperate attempt to repair the relationship between Belarus and China.

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## **Belarus            Discovers            Its Eurasian Side**

In July, Belarus launched a diplomatic offensive to build ties with regional superpowers like China, India and Brazil seeking to counterbalance the much-publicised overtures its has been making to the West.

The BRICS summit in Ufa, Russia, provided Lukashenka with a good opportunity to meet many leaders of the developing world.

Belarus also succeeded in upgrading its status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, but will Belarus reinvigorate its cooperation with this Asian organisation by using its privileges of an observer?



# BRICS and Belarus

On 9 July in Ufa, [Alexander Lukashenka](#) attended the traditional meeting of the BRICS leaders with the heads of states that are geographically and geopolitically close to the summit's chairing nation – which this time was Russia. He also met with the presidents of Afghanistan, Brazil, Iran, Mongolia and Russia.

The Belarusian leader rejoiced at the fact that "the BRICS countries do not tie cooperation and mutual assistance to any additional conditions". Indeed, gatherings like those of BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation – a group that includes Russia, China and several Central and South Asian nations – have based their cooperation on a number of other issues they have in common, while sidestepping issues of rule of law, human rights or democracy.

Belarus has modest trade relations with most BRICS nations

In Ufa, Lukashenka designated the members of BRICS "powerhouses" of economic development, which are "helping other countries to ensure their post-crisis recovery". However, most of them are far from being in perfect economic shape themselves as of late, as Russia and Brazil are both enduring a recession, and China and South Africa's economies have both slowed down.

The share of Belarus' trade with BRICS, excluding Russia, remains below a meager seven per cent of its total turnover. For example, trade with India – a South Asian giant – stands at \$400m, while the turnover with the second-largest African economy – South Africa – is almost non-existent.

The government hopes that visits by the [Chinese](#) president Xi Jinping (10 – 12 May) and [Indian](#) president Pranab Mukherjee (3 – 4 July) to Minsk as well as Lukashenka's meeting with

Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff in Ufa will give the much needed impetus to improve bilateral trade with BRICS members.

These bilateral efforts may indeed bring some results. However, it is doubtful that Lukashenka's pet idea of the "[integration of integrations](#)" as applied to cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and BRICS will advance beyond a catchy political slogan.

## Who Stands to Gain?

Lately, the Russian public and its politicians have become concerned with Belarus' alleged "re-orientation" towards the West. Frequent meetings between Belarusian and European officials and Minsk's persistent engagement with the [Eastern partnership](#), a project that Russian first deputy prime minister Igor Shuvalov labelled a "grave mistake", creates the impression with many in Moscow that Belarus may be taking the Ukrainian path.

Lukashenka even had to reassure Putin in Ufa, "we are now in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and they will stop reproaching us that we are only looking towards the West". Minsk is avoiding alienating Russia at all costs as the presidential election approaches. Belarus needs Russian loans to support the ailing economy at this critical moment.

Beyond this, Lukashenka's government sincerely believes that Belarus' active participation in multilateral forums and the president's personal contacts with leaders of third-world countries may help significantly increase the country's exports to new markets.

For its part, Moscow sees Belarus' greater engagement in any Eurasian integration project as a means to lead it further away from the West. Minsk seems to be willing to play along while seeking both immediate and long-term economic benefits.

# Is Belarus a Eurasian Country?

From Ufa, the Belarusian delegation returned with a long-sought prize – it received observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This Asian organisation, founded in 2001, currently includes Russia, China, four post-Soviet Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) and, beginning this year, India and Pakistan.

A few days before the organisation's summit in Ufa, Belarus remained pessimistic about the possible outcome of its aspirations to become an observer. Speaking to the Russian news agency TASS on 6 July, deputy foreign minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) said that while most of the group's members supported Belarus in its application, Uzbekistan (for a non-disclosed reason) opposed it.

Back in 2006, even Russia doubted the validity of Belarus' claim to receive any status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Sergei Ivanov, Putin's close friend and Russia's deputy prime minister at that time, said, "[Belarus] is not an Asian country, in contrast to Russia, which is a Eurasian state". Finally, however, Belarus succeeded in proving him wrong and is reinventing itself with a decidedly Eurasian dimension to its image.

In 2010, Belarus received a lesser status as the organisation's "dialogue partner". In this capacity, it managed to attend many working-level events that are focused on the fight against arms and drug trafficking, terrorism, illegal migration, transports and culture.

On 8 July, Russia's president Vladimir Putin made the surprise announcement that Belarus would be elevated to observer status as the member countries had been able to come to an agreement on this issue.

Belarus offsets its open border with Russia by improving its multilateral cooperation with Asian countries

The Belarusian foreign ministry, welcoming this decision in a special statement, stressed that Belarus as a country, which has an open border with Russia, remained "exposed to the same threats and effects as other SCO countries".

Indeed, a large share of illegal drugs, arms and migrants are making their way to Belarus via Russia from the organisation's other members. Illogically, instead of securing its border against such threats, Belarus hopes to overcome them by obtaining observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

In his interview with a domestic TV channel that aired on 12 July, Belarus' foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) claimed that Belarus remained "interested in projects in the areas of energy, agriculture, transportation, communications, telecommunications as well as some other projects". However, economic cooperation is not a priority for the organisation, as security cooperation dominates its agenda.

Belarus enjoys a well-established tradition of cooperation with all members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on a bilateral basis. Its newly gained observer status has little chance of providing any real added value to such cooperation. It looks more like a tool used to sustain the thesis of the multi-vector standard of Belarusian foreign policy and even a means by which Lukashenka can meet with Asian leaders more often.

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# **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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# From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis

Belarus is returning to the international spotlight, but for once, not just as the “last dictatorship in Europe”. The two summits that Minsk hosted in the past year on the conflict in east Ukraine indicate a tentative shift in Belarus’s political alignment.

Yaraslau Kryvoi and Andrew Wilson analyze what the West should do in relation to Belarus in a [paper](#) produced jointly by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Ostrogorski Centre.

Although Belarus was more of a broker than a genuine neutral party at the negotiations that produced the two “Minsk Agreements”, the government has profound doubts about Russia’s assault on its neighbour’s sovereignty.

But despite some changes in rhetoric, Belarus is not adjusting its foreign policy because it wants to change itself. Instead, Lukashenka wants to preserve his system from Russian pressure. But recent moves to strengthen Belarusian sovereignty and nationhood risk undermining his traditional method of balancing between the West and Russia.

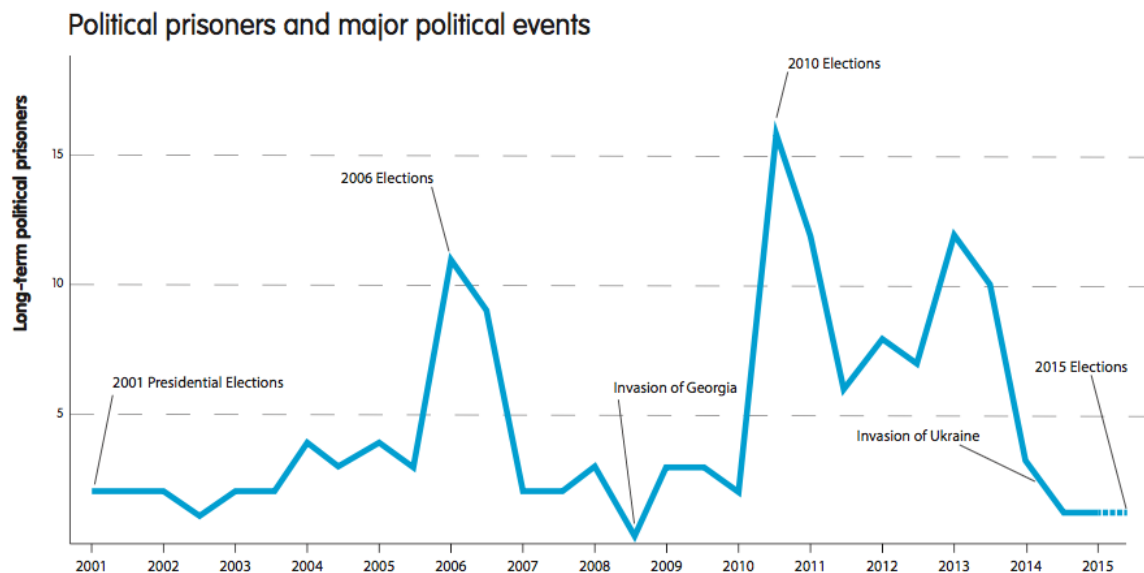


Figure 3: Long-term political prisoners and important political events

Source: The number of political prisoners is based on Amnesty International annual reports, which usually reflect the number at the end of the year.

Lukas

henka's current overtures to the West differ from those he made in the previous period of tentative engagement in 2009-2010. That engagement ultimately failed because of the uneasy balance within a twin-track policy, with Belarus seeking foreign policy insurance against Russia by making token moves towards softening authoritarianism. This time, the second track is different. If the West seeks to engage, it will be by supporting Belarusian statehood, not by encouraging a putative domestic mini-liberalisation.

The EU has two ways to respond, either based on geopolitics and concern about Russia, or based in an effort to strengthen Belarusian society in the longer term. Both would drop the conditionality approach of "more for more" in all but name.

The EU would confine itself to supporting Lukashenka's policy of adjustment towards Russia, but without expecting fundamental change inside Belarus, and without taking steps that might make relations with Russia even worse.

The EU would offer to assist in a more modern form of nation building, one that would gradually empower civil society from within

A more productive approach would be focused on Belarus itself, and would renew the policy of “engagement” without the unrealistic hopes of 2009-2010. The EU would offer to assist in a more modern form of nation building, one that would gradually empower civil society from within. The possibility of fomenting a quick regime change in Belarus has been unlikely since at least 2006.

The policy of engagement with Belarusian society recommended here would not be inconsistent with retaining individual visa bans and targeted sanctions imposed as a proportionate response to political imprisonment.

So, instead of criticising the regime from the sidelines, this approach would aim at patiently increasing if the EU’s presence in Belarus. The focus should be not just on human rights, but more broadly on the rule on law, not so much on quick political changes but more on good governance and fighting corruption. Without a presence on the ground, the EU has no bargaining power.

Such an approach would entail four main strands of EU activity:

- The EU should help to strengthen statehood and national identity politics as well as to counter the Russian propaganda machine.
- The EU should engage more across the board: in the first place, with civil society, which should ultimately create more demand for sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law in Belarus, but it should also interact more with the bureaucracy at all levels.
- Europe should provide indirect economic assistance: conduct a dialogue on economic modernisation and help with WTO membership and with expanding the role of the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.
- The EU should encourage stronger cooperation between

Belarus and Ukraine, to ease Russian pressure on both states.

Countering Russian propaganda will be one of the most important tasks. The EU needs to confront aggressive anti-Western propaganda, which comes primarily from Russian media outlets in Belarus. Making independent media more accessible by means of increased and more effective trans-border TV, FM radio, and internet broadcasting would lead to more demand for democratic change.

At the same time, Belarusians should be given better access to information about the EU, its history and values. Although the EU has a Representative Office in Minsk, much more should be done to promote the EU at universities (for example, by organising public lectures, exchanges, and essay competitions) or for the wider public through civil society organisations. The EU needs to continue supporting Belsat TV, which is based in Poland, but it also needs to go beyond that and empower local voices from within.

Belarusian bureaucracy, the most influential group in Belarusian society, has much less understanding of the EU

In the past, the West has focused on educating human rights and opposition political activists about the EU and its values. But the Belarusian bureaucracy, the most influential group in Belarusian society, has much less understanding of the EU; it mainly gets its information from Russia-dominated media.

Brussels should increase its work in experience transfer and should intensify educational programmes for officials (particularly the younger ones), focusing not on general geopolitical contradictions but on practical technical regulations, standards, and procedures. By engaging officials at all levels in meaningful cooperation, the EU will stimulate appetite for reforms in Belarus.

The EU has paid insufficient attention to the role of national identity in Belarus. For instance, the European Humanities University in Lithuania, one of the largest donor-supported projects, has slowly drifted from being Belarus-focused to catering for a larger group of Russian-speakers in the former Soviet space. However, without the development of a stronger national identity, Belarus could easily become a part of Russia, particularly after Lukashenka is gone.

Civil society groups should be supported, but so should the cautious steps of the Belarusian authorities, who are afraid to anger the Russian nationalists now dominant in Russia. This support should take the form not just of moral encouragement but also of concrete long-term programmes. This is one of the areas in which the interests of the Belarusian authorities, civil society, and the EU coincide.

Belarus receives more Schengen visas per capita than any other country but most of these visas are issued for only a few days or months

Lowering the visa barrier by decreasing visa fees and making them free for many categories of Belarusians would also strengthen pro-European sentiment in wider Belarusian society, as would developing business and civil society contacts.

Currently Belarus receives more Schengen visas per capita than any other country. But most of these visas are issued for only a few days or months, forcing Belarusians to submit repeatedly to expensive, tedious and sometimes humiliating visa procedures. The EU should issue more multiple-year visas for Belarusians who have a good history of travelling to the EU. This should become a rule rather than an exception.

The EU's scholarship programmes, such as the European Scholarship Scheme for Young Belarusians, should be expanded to include exchanges of PhD students and academics. However, it is not enough to help young people leave Belarus and study

at Western universities. It is equally important to create fellowship programmes to support Western-qualified Belarusians in returning to their home country to work in education, public sector, or policy-oriented organisations. That would address Belarus's need for Western expertise and alleviate the brain-drain problem.

Although the Eastern Partnership has largely failed to reach its objectives on Belarus, it is important to keep Belarus involved even just as a formal member of this club, to enable it to cooperate with Ukraine and other countries of the region on matters of mutual interest. Clearly, the current Belarusian leadership remains uninterested in the prospect of joining the EU, which means that it has a very different motivation to leaders of countries such as Ukraine. This means a more individualised approach is needed.

Finally, many of the problems Belarus faces are similar to those of Ukraine. This should lead to the encouragement and funding of cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine at all levels (state and non-state), including common research initiatives, grant programmes, and exchange schemes for academics and policymakers.

- Read full paper [From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis](#).
- Чытаць цалкам [Ад санкцый да самітаў: Беларусь пасля крызісу ва Украіне](#)

# Multi-Vector Diplomacy with Trade in Focus – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

In the first weeks of April, Belarus focused on expanding its ties with Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

Johannes Hahn, the EU "Neighbourhood" Commissioner has become one more senior EU official to visit Belarus in recent months. The last time his predecessor, Štefan Füle, came to Minsk was back in 2010.

On the Asian front, Belarus has managed to take into account the strained web of relations between the region's superpowers – China, India and Pakistan. Officials in Minsk work on the next month's "milestone" visit of China's president to Minsk.

## Preparing Milestone Visit of China's "Paramount Leader"

Belarus and China have been earnestly working on organising the forthcoming visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Belarus. At a special meeting with senior government officials in April, Belarus' President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) labelled the visit, scheduled on 10-12 May, as "unprecedented".

Belarus and China want more tangible results from cooperation

On 8–9 April, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid an official visit to Belarus where he met with his counterpart Vladimir Makei and President Alexander Lukashenka. Concurrently, on 8–11 April, [Alexander Kosiniec](#), head of Lukashenka's Presidential Administration, visited China. More recently, on 17 April, President Lukashenka received Vice Minister of Commerce Zhong Shan. These visits are aimed primarily at preparing for Xi Jinping's visit to Minsk.



Belarus and China both view their relations in terms of being a comprehensive strategic partnership. According to Wang Yi, the two countries have only one issue before them, "to turn the high level of political relations into more tangible and substantial results in terms of cooperation".

Both parties have agreed to join efforts in promoting Xi Jinping's "Silk Road Economic Belt" initiative. They feel that Belarus is an important element of this project, one that has the [China – Belarus industrial park "Great Stone"](#) as its linchpin.

China insists that the Silk Road Economic Belt will play only a complementary role to the various Russian-led Eurasian integration projects underway. However, some experts see the initiative as a competitive project and an attempt to establish China as an alternative pole of influence for Russia's neighbours.

### **Maintaining A Delicate Balance in Relations with Asian Nations**

Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) visited New Delhi on 14–15 April, accompanied by a delegation of major Belarusian manufacturers. He met with India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj (ANI news agency described this meeting as a mere [courtesy call](#)) and called on President Shri Pranab Mukherjee. The Indian president confirmed his plans to visit Belarus soon.

The Belarusian delegation also met with executives from several Indian companies and discussed [military and technical cooperation](#) in the defence ministry.

Belarus seeks to expand trade with India

Both countries have a sound mutual understanding with regards to international matters, in particular, on human trafficking. Meanwhile, bilateral trade is presently sitting at around only

\$400m annually. Belarus is India's second largest supplier of potash fertiliser and India is a key supplier of pharmaceuticals for Belarus.

Belarus seeks to enter the Indian market with its agricultural machinery and lorries. This is an ambitious endeavour as India has a highly bureaucratic and corrupt purchasing process for important contracts. Beyond this, India has highly prohibitive tariffs for imports that aim at stimulating local manufacturing and transfer of technology.

Makei's visit to New Delhi also served as a counterbalance to expanding relations between Belarus and India's biggest rival, China. In the same vein, Deputy Foreign Minister [Valentin Rybakov](#)'s visit to Islamabad on 1–3 April sought to maintain some balance for another regional rivalry, between India and Pakistan. Rybakov led a large delegation of Belarusian officials and manufacturers who conducted negotiations in many areas with a focus on trade, investment and [military](#) cooperation.

### **Emphasising Relations with the Middle East**

The first half of April witnessed an intensive push for greater contact between Belarus and several Middle Eastern nations. Valentin Rybakov visited Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In Doha on 12–14 April, the deputy foreign minister opened a Belarusian embassy, held talks with his Qatari counterpart and met with Prime Minister Al Thani. On 15 April in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Valentin Rybakov held the first round of political consultations between Belarus and the UAE and met with the Emirates' minister of economy.

Rich Gulf monarchies and war-torn countries: trading with everybody

[Qatar](#) and the UAE, two of the richest countries in the region, have of late become Belarus' preferred partners in the region.

The foreign ministry is overextending itself to implement Lukashenka's ambitious plans, especially those formulated during his recent "[breakthrough](#)" visit to the Emirates.

Belarus also sees potential in developing trade relations with Syria and Iraq, two Middle Eastern countries that are now suffering from internal strife.

On 2 April, Belarus and Syria held a meeting of the bilateral commission for trade and economic relations in Minsk. The Syrian delegation led by the ministry of industry also met with Deputy Prime Minister Mikhail Rusy and visited a number of Belarusian companies.

On 8–11 April, the first-ever official visit of an Iraqi foreign minister to Belarus took place. Ibrahim Al Jaafari met with his Belarusian counterpart and held talks with the Belarusian ministries of health, education and industry as well as the Belarusian parliament. This visit reaffirmed the ongoing renaissance of the bilateral ties that was initiated by [Vladimir Makei's trip to Baghdad](#) last August.

Alexander Lukashenka received Ibrahim Al Jaafari on 9 April. At the meeting, the Belarusian ruler identified two areas of cooperation, which should serve as a basis for a new level of relations – trade and military cooperation. He also stressed the potential for providing academic exchanges for Iraqi students in Belarus. However, despite these stated priorities, the two countries have thus far only signed a memorandum on cooperation between the sports ministries.

### **Intense Push for Contact with Europe Continues**

On 16–17 April, Johannes Hahn, the EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, paid his first visit to Minsk. He held talks with Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Makei but also met with Belarusian opposition activists.

Human rights and democracy are not among Belarus' priorities in its relations with Europe

The parties focused their discussion on reforming the Eastern Partnership in the context of its forthcoming Riga summit. "We would like to see [the Eastern partnership] reformatted from its typical take on politics... to closer cooperation in specific areas based on solving economic problems", Alexander Lukashenka stressed.

The Belarusian leader pointed to the transfer of technology, trade, regional security and suppression of cross-border crime, such as illegal traffic in drugs and nuclear materials, as priority areas of cooperation between Belarus and the EU.

While Johannes Hahn's visit was the key event of Belarus' interaction with Europe in recent weeks, several other encounters have complemented the growing web of ties. On the days of Hahn's visit, Belarus hosted senior diplomats from the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany and Poland) and the Visegrad Four (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic). The foreign ministry also held consultations with Estonia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia.

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## **Belarus Engages with the US, Improves Ties with Europe and Post-Soviet Countries – Foreign Policy Digest**

Belarusian diplomacy has been shifting the country's relations with the West into high gear seeking to capitalise on Belarus'

newfound importance for regional stability.

"The Europeans ... are ready to cooperate with us, including for the sake of security in Europe. We say to them that we're always open to [talking]", President Lukashenka claimed while inspecting a riot police unit on 5 March. And indeed several EU and US delegations have visited Minsk lately.

Belarus also held bilateral consultations with half a dozen European countries last month. However, any tangible result from these talks, besides the obvious thaw in relations, has yet to materialise.

The foreign ministry also held a series of consultations with post-Soviet countries centred mostly on economic relations. However, the failure to unite most of the former USSR republics around a celebration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII has become a telling sign of the group's growing disunity .

### **Lukashenka Disregards Protocol**

On 27 February, Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) received Eric Rubin, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. The same day, a US delegation led by Eric Rubin met with Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#).

Lukashenka: No stability is possible without the Americans

Even keeping in mind the United States' role in global affairs, meetings at this level represent a baffling imbalance. A deputy assistant secretary is strictly a mid-level position in the State Department, roughly the equivalent to a deputy head of a department in Belarus' foreign ministry.

Lukashenka may simply have been excited at the prospect of improving relations with the West, seeking to get a sense of

the ongoing negotiations firsthand.

The US envoy expressed his country's appreciation for the positive role Belarus has played in efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine. The Belarusian president, as he revealed in his interview to Bloomberg on 31 March, insistently stated during the meeting that "no stability [was] possible in Ukraine without the Americans", so "they must get involved in [the peace] process immediately".

Belarus and the US discussed the possibility for improved cooperation in trade, non-proliferation, and combating human trafficking. Both parties chose to admit existing disagreements in their press statements. Eric Rubin emphasised long-standing US concerns over human rights and democracy.

### **Belarus – EU: A Bilateral Track**

In late February and March, Belarus sustained the intensity of its interactions with European countries seeking to benefit from a marked thaw in relations while also trying to reformat the existing framework of cooperation.

The talks with Europe have developed simultaneously along two tracks: bilateral cooperation with specific EU countries and cooperation with the EU as an institution focusing on the Eastern partnership, a dialogue on modernisation and visa issues.

Two deputy foreign ministers worked on developing closer ties with Lithuania. While [Alena Kupchyna](#) focused on discussing Eastern Partnership issues with a Lithuanian delegation in Minsk on 27 February, her colleague [Alexander Guryanov](#) went to Vilnius and Klaipeda on 5 and 6 March to look at trade and investment cooperation. Belarus seeks to increase its transit of goods through the Klaipeda seaport, and the Lithuanian authorities are happy to oblige them.

## Belarus deftly exploits Hungary's Eastern policy

These very Belarusian diplomats also worked in tandem in building relations with Italy. On 3 March, Alena Kupchyna hosted her Italian counterpart Benedetto Della Vedova for the first bilateral consultations since 2009. Their most important decision was to schedule the first-ever meeting of an intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation in January 2016 in Rome. Alexander Guryanov went to Milan and Rome from 18 – 21 March to prepare for Belarus' participation in Expo 2015 and strengthen cooperation with the Italian Export Credit Agency SACE S.p.A.

The Hungarian Deputy State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Csaba Balogh headed his country's delegation on bilateral consultations in Minsk on 4 – 5 March where he spoke with Alena Kupchyna and Vladimir Makei. Belarusian diplomats have exploited to the utmost of their ability Hungary's Eastern Opening strategy, a policy proclaimed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2010, making this country one of Belarus' closest partners in Europe.

Also in March, Belarusian diplomats held working-level consultations with their European colleagues from Belgium and Poland in Minsk and the Czech Republic in Prague.

## **Belarus – EU: An Institutional Track**

On 9 March, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna visited Brussels for a fifth round of consultations on modernisation, mapping out the best form of future cooperation. While few details have emerged, human rights may have been in focus.

## Oddly formatted EU delegation visits Minsk

Three days later, Belarus and the EU held a third round of talks on [visa facilitation](#) and readmission agreements in Minsk. Again, officials from both sides have refrained from leaking much information. Rumor has it that both parties are

very likely to ink the agreements at the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga. However, due to technical reasons (e.g. translations into all EU languages, etc.) there is no chance that they will have the documents ready to sign by May.

On 19 March, Alena Kupchyna received a delegation of high-level diplomats from Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. This unusual grouping of diplomats resembled a reconnaissance mission to help the EU understand how far Belarus is ready to go in its relations with Europe in the context of the latest developments in the region. Discussion was confined to the forthcoming summit in Riga.

### **Post-Soviet Relations: Emphasis on Bilateral Component**

Minsk has also focused on strengthening ties with its post-Soviet partners. On 12 March in Tashkent, Belarus and Uzbekistan held the fourth meeting of an intergovernmental commission on bilateral cooperation, with an emphasis on trade.

On 18 – 19 March, Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander Mikhnevich](#) went to Tbilisi to prepare for Alexander Lukashenka's visit to Georgia. His colleague Alexander Guryanov visited Kyiv on 23 March to discuss how to support trade ties that have suffered as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

Post-Soviet countries are no longer united on commemorating WWII

Finally, on 10 March, Alexander Lukashenka received Yaqub Eyyubov, the Azerbaijani First Deputy Prime Minister. They focused on investment opportunities. Belarus has a few joint ventures in [Azerbaijan](#), which manufactures trucks, tractors and lifts. However, Minsk is also interested in attracting Azerbaijani capital to Belarus.



Yet, former Soviet Union republics are quickly growing apart. Their common history is increasingly less binding. This year, only eight post-Soviet countries out of fifteen (Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) supported various efforts to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of WWII, such as a film screening in New York or a joint statement at the Human Rights Council.

In this shifting reality, Minsk's decision to emphasise a bilateral track in its ties with these post-Soviet countries, which are no longer interested in Moscow-centric relations, should finally pay off.

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## **Holy See: Belarus is a Model for Our World**

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, second in line in the Vatican hierarchy to Pope Francis, called an internationally ostracised Belarus a "model for our world".

Visiting Minsk on 12-15 March, he also denounced the West's policy of isolation and promised to provide the Holy See's help in improving Minsk's relations with Europe.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka's trip to the Vatican is now all but settled. Pope Francis' visit to Minsk remains less probable as the Holy See would avoid further alienating Russia.

**Vatican Envoy Gets Exclusive Reception**

Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, received a welcome in Minsk that many heads of state would envy. The cardinal met with all of the country's senior officials, including the president, prime minister, chairman of the parliament's upper house, and foreign minister.

To date, the Catholic Church is the second-largest confession in Belarus after the Russian Orthodox Church. About 15% of Belarusians associate themselves with the former. Interestingly, the share of regular church-goers is much higher among Catholics than among Orthodox believers.

Parolin: Belarus is a model for our world suffering from conflicts□

In this context, Cardinal Parolin has certainly taken comfort in Lukashenka's reassurance that Belarus "would prevent any attempts to favour one church over the others".

The Belarusian ruler can hardly complain about a lack of reciprocity. Meeting reporters in Minsk, Pietro Parolin called Belarus "an example of harmonious coexistence of different cultural and religious traditions". Such statements certainly hearten the much-maligned regime.

### **Holy See Against Isolating Belarus**

Alexander Lukashenka has long sought support of the influential Catholic hierarchy for his attempts to normalise relations with the West. In June 2008, he received Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Pietro Parolin's predecessor, and announced forthcoming talks on the concordat between Belarus and the Holy See.

In April 2009, Pope Benedict XVI held a private audience with Alexander Lukashenka, accompanied by his youngest son Mikalai, in the Apostolic Palace, an event that was seen as a breakthrough in contesting Lukashenka's diplomatic isolation.

Despite some international criticism, the Apostolic capital remains committed to its policy of engagement with Belarus. Pietro Parolin said in Minsk that the Holy See was ready to help the Belarusian authorities improve their ties with the EU. The Vatican envoy has also denounced the EU's policy of isolating Belarus:

*The isolation of a nation, its marginalisation, albeit for reasons which may seem understandable or even noble, is the defeat of diplomacy...*

### **Lukashenka: "We Have Some Issues, Not Problems"**

In return, the Holy See is seeking to improve the Catholic Church's situation in Belarus.

At his meeting with Cardinal Parolin, Lukashenka boasted of having transferred about 300 religious buildings to the Catholic Church. Indeed, the number of Catholic parishes has increased fourfold in the last 20 years.

In reality, the authorities' attitudes towards Catholics remain far from cosy. In 2013, Uladzislau Lazar, a Catholic priest, spent six months in prison after being accused of espionage. The KGB later dropped the charges.

Lukashenka: Opening a theological seminary was my idea

In January 2015, Lukashenka and another senior official accused Polish-born priests of meddling in domestic politics. The Catholic hierarchy called these accusations "a baseless insult... an incitement of ethnic and religious hatred". Following this flare up, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) had to [interfere](#) to defuse tension.

After many decades of government-imposed atheism, Catholics in Belarus have experienced a serious [shortage](#) of local-born clergy. At the same time, they have spent many months trying

to register a theological seminary in Minsk. This bureaucratic heel dragging never prevented Lukashenka from taking credit for this idea.

The government also hinders the development of a small, yet vibrant community of Eastern-rite Catholics, successors of the Uniate Church, which once dominated in the country. Since the country's independence, they have not been able to secure a plot of land to build a church in Minsk.

### **Concordat Put on Hold**

The Vatican's envoy and its Belarusian hosts also preferred keep mum on the issue of a concordat. The parties have accepted that the talks on the matter have stalled.

The Holy See has been seeking an end to negotiations for this international agreement in order to ensure the Church's rights in religious education, appointment of priests and bishops, etc.

The Orthodox Church and Russian ambassador have fought against a concordat

According to Belarus Digest's sources in the Catholic hierarchy, the authorities struggled to water down the first draft and to subordinate it to Belarusian law.

The same sources affirm that the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia's ambassador in Belarus, Alexander Surikov, have been making every effort to prevent the concordat from happening.

As a result, it has become abundantly clear that the concordat is not going to happen anytime soon. The Belarusian authorities have suggested substituting it with specific-area agreements concluded with the local Catholic authorities, thus downgrading the legal framework of relations.

### **Pope Francis Invited to Belarus**

It is now safe to say that Pope Francis, like his immediate predecessor, will give a private audience to President Lukashenka. According to Belarus Digest's sources, the visit is most likely to take place in September, in the midst of Lukashenka's re-election campaign.

However, whether Pope Francis will come to Belarus remains unclear.

Senior Belarusian officials have invited the Pope to visit Minsk. The explicit and [repetitive](#) nature of these invitations indicate a well thought-out plan and not merely a formal gesture.

Most experts agree that Moscow will put more pressure on Minsk in order to prevent the Papal visit from happening. The Russian Orthodox Church regards Belarus as its "canonical territory". They fear [growing influence](#) of the Catholic Church in the countries with predominately-Orthodox population.

Indeed, Metropolitan Pavel, the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, who received a courtesy call from Cardinal Parolin, declared already that the Papal visit was "not on the agenda".

### The Vatican fears to alienate Russia

However, Alexander Lukashenka is perfectly capable of disregarding Moscow's opposition. Despite popular belief, the Orthodox Church has limits to its influence in Belarus. They cannot afford a serious quarrel with the country's secular authorities.

Ironically, the real opposition to the Papal visit will come from within the Roman curia. It has many influential people who believe in possibility of a successful ecumenical dialogue with the Russian Orthodox. They will be strongly against putting it at stake by allowing the Pope to go to an

insignificant "Orthodox" country.

Notwithstanding what happens to the Papal visit, the parties will remain interested in maintaining warm and constructive relations. Minsk needs the Vatican's mediation in its relations with Europe and seeks domestic PR benefits. The Apostolic Capital will continue to seek further improvement of the Church's operating conditions in Belarus.

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## **Russia Pushes For Single Visa Space, Belarus Resists**

Russia is getting serious about the idea of creating a unified visa space with Belarus.

On 3 March, Moscow brought in big guns when Vladimir Putin announced upcoming talks on an agreement providing for the mutual recognition of each country's visas. Belarus has refused to confirm the existence of such plans so far.

The Schengen-like visa arrangement would deprive Minsk of independence in its visa policy and Belarus would become hostage to Russia's confrontational foreign policy. In particular, the single visa space could jeopardise Belarus' relations with other post-Soviet countries, such as Georgia and potentially Ukraine and Moldova.

Thus far, Minsk has confidently withstood this diplomatic attack. However, Belarus' deep entrenchment in the Russian-led integration projects could undermine the country's long-term capacity to resist.

**Transparent Border, Independent Visa Regimes**

Moscow has actively promoted the idea of a single visa space in late 1990s, during the boom years of integration between Belarus and Russia. Passing this authority to a supranational body would have effectively led to Russian control over visa policy.

However, the two parties failed to find common ground on this issue. The Treaty establishing the Union State, signed by Boris Yeltsin and [Alexander Lukashenka](#) in 1999, makes no mention of a common immigration policy.

Belarus and Russia have their own independent visa policies

Like the Schengen countries, Belarus and Russia have no control on their joint border. The citizens of two countries can freely move between them without being subject to document checks. In practice, many foreigners can do the same, risking deportation if they get caught.

Unlike the Schengen countries, Belarus and Russia have their own independent visa policies. A foreigner who has entered either country with a visa cannot go to another country without obtaining the latter's visa first. A holder of a Belarusian or Russian visa cannot claim any privilege when applying for the other visa. Visa-free transit between Belarus and Russia through their international airports remains impossible.

### **Differences Getting Public**

The issue of a single visa space resurfaced in September 2014. Grigory Rapota, the State Secretary of the Union State, called independent visa policies a nuisance for business and tourism. "We should try and create some look-alike of the Schengen visa", he said, claiming that the matter was already under consideration.

Belarus MFA: No talks on a single visa regime

Indeed, businessmen and [tourists](#) from third countries would certainly welcome the introduction of a single visa space. For those travelling to the region, it would mean less paperwork as well as time and expenses. However, the Belarusian authorities have their reservations about the matter.

The next day after Rapota's statement, Dzmitry Mironchyk, the Belarusian foreign ministry spokesman, [denied](#) the existence of any talks on a unified visa regime. He implied that the existing arrangements were largely sufficient: "Belarus and Russia have been successfully carrying out a coordinated visa policy, and we are working on improving our joint action".

As an example of such policy, Dzmitry Mironchyk referred to high-profile incidents when Belarus or Russia have denied entry to foreign "politicians and other characters behaving in an unfriendly manner towards our countries".

Russian MFA: No need to hasten the issue

The Russian foreign ministry commented on the single visa issue on 22 September 2014. They called the introduction of a single visa regime "quite a logical step in the absence of the border control". However, the ministry recognised that "neither Russia nor Belarus had a disposition to hasten artificially the preparation of a pertinent bilateral document". This all sounded very much like an admission of their failure to agree on its need.

### **Visa Regimes: Hard to Reconcile**

The Russian foreign ministry mentioned two obstacles to a single visa regime: potential problems to bona fide travellers and additional costs.

In fact, Belarus and Russia would have to agree on a common list of visa-free countries. As the matter requires the agreement of the third countries involved, this would be a



very ambitious undertaking.

Incongruous visa regimes with third countries are the main obstacle

Thus far, the national [visa-free lists](#) differ quite a lot, the Russian one being longer. There is also the sensitive issue of Georgia. Belarus, unlike Russia, has a visa-free regime with Georgia. As a result, flights from Tbilisi to Minsk are fully booked as many Georgians use this loophole to get to Russia without a visa.

The introduction of a single visa may lead to a drop in visa fees revenue for Belarus, as many visitors may prefer the more developed network of Russian consulates. Nevertheless, the increased revenue from tourism may well offset these losses.

An unilateral visa-free regime for EU citizens, modelled after Ukraine's, would bring even more money in tourism. However, the Belarusian authorities would never agree on it as it would weaken significantly their negotiating position with the current visa facilitation process and eventual visa liberalisation talks with Europe.

### **Withstanding Russia's Pressure**

Despite earlier statements from Russian officials, Putin's announcement that the two countries intended "to prepare an agreement on the mutual recognition of visas issued to citizens of foreign countries" came as a surprise. It certainly was not on the agenda of the two presidents' recent meeting in Moscow.

Dzmitry Mironchyk had the most delicate task of disavowing the Russian president's words. He managed to do it tactfully, but clearly. Mironchyk described the issue as a "complex and difficult" one and stressed that two countries were pursuing an ever more coordinated visa policy. However, the essence of

his comments laid in the following statement: in the time since his previous remarks on this subject, "the situation and [Belarus'] approaches [to it] have not undergone any fundamental changes".

Russia wants to have more leverage in Belarus' policy

Putin's involvement in the matter means that Russia's pressure on Belarus on the visa issue will continue to grow. A single visa regime takes the phantom Union State one (very symbolic) step closer towards a truly unified country, pleasing Soviet-minded voters. Also, the visa regime is an important tool in building political, economic and human relations with other countries, and Russia would love to control it.

A source in the Belarusian foreign ministry confirmed to Belarus Digest that Russia was obstinately probing the firmness of Belarus' position on a single visa regime despite the tepid response Moscow was receiving as of late. Thus far, the ministry has instructions to agree on nothing more than a coordinated visa policy.

Nevertheless, they do not exclude a "change of heart" in the presidential office under Moscow's pressure. Even if the talks eventually start, the Russian initiative has good chances of succumbing to lengthy discussions and never materialise. Belarusian diplomats have earned a reputation as tough negotiators.

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# Should Belarus Join the

# Council of Europe?

On 24-27 February, Andrea Rigoni, rapporteur of the Political Affairs Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), visited Minsk for the first time since 2009. Rigoni has a reputation of being especially friendly toward the administration in Minsk, for which he is criticized by the Belarusian opposition.

Belarus remains the only country in greater Europe that is not a member of the Council of Europe. President Aleksandr Lukashenka has never shown much interest in joining. Being an organisation of values, PACE does not offer its members financial rewards, but requires them to commit to democracy and human rights.

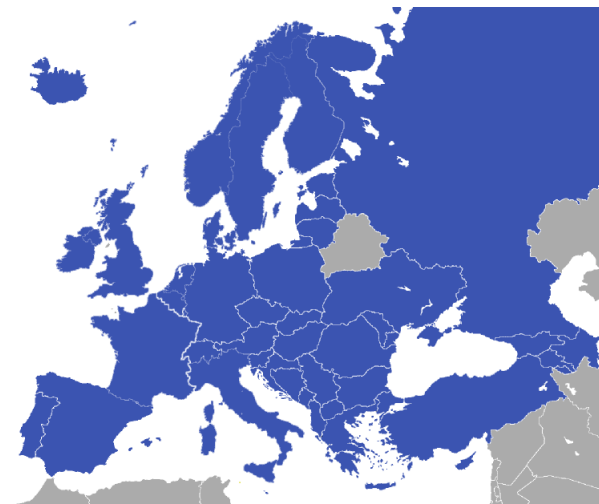
However, Belarusian authorities need to improve their international image, and gaining a special guest status in PACE would help. The problem is that allowing Belarus to obtain this status effectively legitimises its "puppet parliament" and provides Belarusian authorities with an additional platform to disseminate their views abroad. Importantly, PACE is approaching Belarus at a time when the Russian delegation's rights in the organisation have been restricted because of Moscow's intervention in the Ukraine conflict.

## **A Hole in the Map of Europe**

The Council of Europe is an international organisation formed in 1949 uniting all European states, Russia, Turkey and the Caucasian republics. The organisation works to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Although its decisions carry only advisory power, the European Court on Human Rights, one of the bodies under the Council, has jurisdiction over human rights protection in all of the Council's member states.

The Parliamentary Assembly is one of the two statutory bodies of the Council, where Members of Parliament (MPs) from the national parliaments work together.

Belarus obtained special guest status in PACE in September 1992 and later applied for membership. However, in 1997 the organisation suspended the special guest status “because the way in which the new legislature had been formed deprived it of democratic legitimacy.” This happened after Lukashenka had dissolved a parliament that included some of his staunchest opponents, and appointed a new parliament loyal to him.



In 2004 rapporteur Christos Purgurides presented to PACE his [report on the disappeared politicians](#), which led to a break in contacts between PACE and the Belarusian parliament. But the 2007-2010 period saw a warming in diplomatic relations. This happened to coincide with Rigoni's appointment as PACE rapporteur to Belarus. Despite the improved relationship, Belarus did not obtain special guest status, because Minsk refused to fulfil PACE's only remaining demand – a moratorium on the death penalty. Nevertheless, Belarus joined a number of the Council's conventions during this time.

### **Another “Normalisation Visit” from the West**

PACE special rapporteur visits have become a rarity for Belarus – the last one took place in 2009. The subsequent worsening of Belarus-EU relations brought cooperation with this organisation to a halt. In September 2014 Belarusian MPs suggested Lukashenka re-engage with PACE in order “to promote the national interests of Belarus through parliamentary diplomacy.” They received a positive response from the Belarusian leader.

During his recent visit, Rigoni met a number of high-level officials, including speaker of the parliament [Uladzimir Andrejčanka](#), head of the Council of the Republic [Michail Miasnikovič](#), Minister of Information [Lilija Ananič](#), Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makej](#) and others. Afterwards, he also talked to opposition and civil society leaders. The visit occurred in the context of improving relations between Belarus and the EU, and on the heels of several visits by [other western officials](#) to Minsk.

"We have come to Belarus to resume and renew the dialogue," Rigoni said upon his arrival in Minsk. "Our cooperation should be continued. We are ready for it and expect return moves from Belarus." During the meetings, Belarusian officials repeatedly credited Rigoni for his important role in promoting diplomatic relations. This unusual praise of a foreign official has a particular background.

### **The Opposition is Concerned about Rigoni**

In 2014 Rigoni was appointed PACE rapporteur to Belarus for the second time, following his first tenure in 2007-2010, the period of rapprochement between Belarus and the West. Both times, he took over from Estonian MP Andres Herkel, who had a more critical stance towards the Lukashenka regime. Rigoni has gained a reputation within the Belarusian elite as a pragmatist.



In 2009 Rigoni recommended that PACE restore Belarus' special guest status without the country's fulfilling any of the

conditions imposed by the Council. He almost succeeded, as PACE left only one condition on the table – that Belarus terminate the death penalty. This de facto legalisation of the Belarusian authorities' undemocratic conduct obviously irritated the opposition and civil society, who came to view Rigoni as an undesired appointment.

Opposition leaders expressed their concerns during their recent meeting with Rigoni. [Anatol Liabedzka](#), [Siarhej Kaliakin](#), [Paviel Seviaryniec](#) and others opined that the authorities only want Belarus to gain special guest status in PACE and make no further moves, because this status does not impose any serious obligations but allows them to participate in the organisation's work. The activists advised Rigoni not to make any major concessions to Lukashenka before the Belarusian elections, as the nature of the elections will demonstrate whether Minsk is truly committed to European values.

The rapporteur assured the opposition that the Council of Europe will not compromise its values, and that Belarus will have to assume certain obligations if it wants special guest status.

### **Is Belarus Interested in PACE?**

Minsk seems to have little interest in Council membership. On one hand, membership does not confer any financial assistance or other economic support, while on the other, it imposes precisely the type of political obligations that the Belarusian leadership finds so deplorable. Minsk has also learned from the example of Russia, which has had to pay substantial sums to people who sued the state in the European Court on Human Rights.

However, according to [Ihar Hubarevič](#), a former senior diplomat at Belarus' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Belarusian authorities pursue several objectives in their relations with

PACE. First, they seek to legitimise the Belarusian parliament and to reward the handpicked Belarusian MPs with respectable status and foreign travel. More important, they want full access to the Council of Europe's lobby, meeting rooms, and microphones, which can act as a powerful tool for promoting the government's views among European parliamentarians and other officials.

PACE's renewed interest in Belarus fits into the latest trend of normalising relations between Belarus and Europe. This particular track of diplomacy is a dead-end, however. Europe will gain nothing from legitimising the Belarusian "parliamentarians." Unlike the executive branch, they have no real leverage in the government and no say in Belarus' domestic and foreign policy. At the same time, in order to integrate Belarus into pan-European structures, Europe will have to turn a blind eye to the country's many domestic issues.