

Belarus Prioritises Latin America, Talks to the US, Influences Development Goals – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Over the past couple of weeks there was marked and clear pause in the active working-level [engagement between Belarus and many EU countries](#). Belarus has focused on strengthening its existing ties, while developing new ones in other regions, mostly Latin America and the CIS.

With their multilateral policy mandate, Belarusian diplomats have persisted in promoting the country's core initiatives, i.e. traditional family and trafficking in human beings.

Belarus also seeks to avoid or downplay any references to democratic values as well as political and civil rights in their official communications and documentation.

Latin America in Focus

Latin America came into clear focus for the Belarusian foreign policy establishment in the second half of June of this year. Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) paid official visits to three Central and South American countries – Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua. All three countries are at varying stages of development with regards to their relationship with Belarus.

Cuba is Belarus' oldest and staunchest ally in the region. It is not by mere chance that cooperation in international organisations has again taken centre stage in their bilateral talks. Belarus is eager to make use of Cuba's weight among

other third-world countries. Cuba, for its part, values Belarus as one of its few European allies.

Both countries also seek to develop mutual trade. Currency-stripped Cuba has agreed to sell its high-quality pharmaceuticals to Belarus in exchange for Belarusian farming machinery supplies. The two countries have also signed a bilateral trade agreement to this effect.

Ecuador is Belarus' new darling in South America. Here, Belarus seeks to build a relationship similar to the one it has been able to develop with Venezuela. As with Venezuela, the focus is on oil, military and technical cooperation as well as agriculture.

Lukashenka has recently appointed Igor Poluyan, the country's presumably best expert on Latin America, as his first ambassador to Quito. Ecuador will soon reciprocate by opening its first diplomatic mission in Minsk.

Vladimir Makei, in his interview to with the main Belarusian state TV channel, insisted that the two countries had made a great deal of progress in implementing the agreements they reached earlier through their presidents. Visa-free travel between Belarus and Ecuador seems to be the most resonant advancement to date. Not many ordinary Belarusians will be able to take advantage of this arrangement, though, as travel costs will be prohibitively expensive.

Belarus is still at quite an early stage in its relations with Nicaragua. With Makei's visit, Minsk hopes to take the dialogue to the highest level.

In immediate practical terms, Belarus seeks to participate in the construction of the Nicaragua Grand Canal, an inter-oceanic waterway that will connect the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Belarus could supply its heavy duty BelAZ lorries and road-building machinery for this project.

Minsk is eager to develop military and technical cooperation and sell farming machinery and other industrial goods to Nicaragua. They are also interested in trying to enter other Central American markets through Nicaragua.

Strengthening Ties with Azerbaijan

On 20 June, President Alexander Lukashenka received Artur Rasizade, the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan and Ilham Aliyev's right hand, in Minsk. A political veteran himself, Rasizade has held his office only two years less than Lukashenka.

Lukashenka stressed the prioritised nature of Belarus' relations with Azerbaijan. He also expressed satisfaction with the current level of cooperation in all spheres. Speaking with Rasizade, Lukashenka emphasised his country's openness to investments from Azerbaijan.

It is worth noting that no reports about this meeting in Belarusian and Azerbaijani media outlets go beyond a short communique from Lukashenka's press service. No other events related to Rasizade's stay in Belarus have been reported on whatsoever. It is possible that the Azerbaijani Prime Minister was in Minsk on a private trip or on a special mission from Ilham Aliyev.

Two days before this odd meeting took place, First Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander Mikhnevich](#) visited Baku to hold foreign policy consultations. Mikhnevich met with his counterparts in the Azerbaijani foreign ministry as well as with several parliamentarians.

The parties discussed the full spectrum of their bilateral relations with economic issues, evidently, dominating the agenda. Besides expanding its exports to a fast-developing Azerbaijan, Belarus is actively seeking to attract investment from the former Soviet Republic.

In his recent interview to the Azerbaijani newspaper

Respublika, Belarusian ambassador Mikalaj Patskevich to Azerbaijan made a pitch for Belarusian investment opportunities. He emphasised the advantages of the vast market of the Customs Union as well as the transit infrastructure of Belarus.

Bogus 'Visit to the US' and Sustainable Development Goals

The Foreign Ministry's press service depicted Deputy Foreign Minister [Rybakov](#)'s recent trip to New York as a 'visit to the US'. This choice of wording normally implies a bilateral event. In fact, no visits at this level are yet possible at this stage of relations between two countries.

Valentin Rybakov went to the UN headquarters to attend a meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. The Group has the mandate to formulate sustainable development goals for the next 10 to 20 years, a plan that is to be approved at the UN summit later this year.

Belarus actively sought to influence the wording of the final document. At this meeting, Rybakov presented a [proposal](#) based on the existing working document. The declared intention was to present the goals in a more concise and easy-to-understand way.

Two amendments introduced by Rybakov stand out. First, Belarus sought to avoid any reference to democracy and human rights, even through the already emasculated the wording by pushing for 'rule of law and an effective and capable institution'.

Besides this, Belarusian diplomats continued to promote its favourite topic of [traditional family values](#). This time around they confined themselves to the cautious language of a 'family-supporting environment'.

However, another Belarusian delegation brought up this topic in a more straightforward way at a high-level meeting of the ECOSOC, which is also dedicated to sustainable development.

Belarus and the US: Discussing International Security

The same week that Deputy Foreign Minister Rybakov debated the sustainable development goals in New York, Belarusian and American diplomats met in Washington, DC to hold the first-ever bilateral consultations on international security. Ambassador Vladimir Gerasimovich, Head of the Foreign Ministry's International Security and Arms Control Department, represented Belarus at this meeting.

The two parties discussed a wide range of issues affecting global and regional security. This list included the non-proliferation of WMDs, export controls, disarmament and disposal of chemical weapons.

Two deputy assistant secretaries of state represented the US at these talks. Currently, this is the highest possible level for the US in its contact with Belarus. Considered alongside the very fact of such consultations, it shows that despite the presence of serious problems in political relations, the United States is willing to maintain a close dialogue with the Belarusian government on issues of international security that may affect the US' own national security.