

Belarus's neighbours: patronising and obliging – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

From January to early February 2016, Belarus and Lithuania drifted further apart as their diplomats exchanged tart-tongued statements over the safety of the Astraviec NPP and Belarus's sovereignty. Alexander Lukashenka, who remains unwelcome in the EU, travelled to more sympathetic Egypt and Sudan.

The Belarusian authorities continued with their efforts to restore the international legitimacy of the national parliament in both bilateral relations (with Poland's willing accommodation), and international organisations.

Belarus and Lithuania wrangle over nuclear safety and regional security

Tensions between Belarus and Lithuania [over the completion of the Astraviec NPP](#) near their joint border have continued to escalate.

On 4 January, Lithuania's MFA appointed Darius Degutis as ambassador-at-large for coordination of institutional actions over the NPP. Degutis is seeking the support of other European nations for Lithuania's 'logical, healthy call for the construction of the Astraviec NPP to be stopped'.

So far, Lithuania has not been very successful in forming an international coalition to proscribe exports of 'unsafe

energy' from Belarus. Latvia's foreign minister Edgars Rinkevics recently stressed that his country was not considering any laws to restrict electricity imports from the Belarusian plant.

✘ On 16-20 January, Belarus hosted the SEED mission from the IAEA, which assessed the sustainability of the Astraviec site and the plant's systems. The mission's report will be ready within a few months.

Nevertheless, the mission's format and mandate failed to satisfy Lithuania. On 19 January, the country's foreign minister Linas Linkevičius accused Belarus of selectively applying nuclear safety standards. Two weeks later, in an interview to a Belarusian online news source, the minister characterised the activities of the Belarusian government in regard to the NPP as a 'propaganda game', and resolutely excluded [any possibility of compromise](#) on the matter.

The conflict over the Astraviec NPP has also spilled over to other issues. Speaking to *Deutsche Welle* about the forthcoming Russian-Belarusian joint military exercise Zapad 2017, Linkevičius called Belarus's sovereignty, or 'what is left of it', into doubt.

This provoked an immediate rebuke from Minsk. A spokesman for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Dmitry Mironchik, called the tone of the statement 'patronising and scornful' and accused Vilnius of 'insults and preaching'.

No more obstacles to cooperation with Serbia

On 26-27 January in Minsk, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic held talks with his Belarusian counterpart [Andrei Kabiakou](#). He also met with President [Alexander Lukashenka](#).

The two countries' bilateral trade had plummeted by nearly 60% last year, marginally exceeding \$100m in January – November 2016. Despite the negative trend, Vucic claimed that Belarus and Serbia would still strive to attain a \$500m turnover by 2019 – the goal they had set in 2013.

Belarus and Serbia signed bilateral agreements in the fields of economy, health care, tourism, culture, sport, and military-technical cooperation.

☒ If in previous years Serbia had remained [formally constrained by EU sanctions](#) against Belarus, which Belgrade had voluntarily agreed to undertake, now the two countries are feeling increasingly free to expand their cooperation in all areas.

The Serbian media widely reported on a military donation from Belarus unveiled by Zoran Djordjevic, Serbia's defence minister. In 2018, Minsk will give eight MiG-29s fighter aircraft as well as two Buk-M1 surface-to-air missile systems free of cost to Belgrade. Serbia will pay for their overhaul and modernisation in Belarus.

According to Vucic, Lukashenka reassured him that Belarus fully accepts Serbia's aspiration to become an EU member without seeking to join NATO.

Serbia appreciates Belarus's unwavering [support for its territorial integrity](#). Indeed, unlike Russia, another friend of Serbia, Belarus has no record of recognising and supporting any breakaway entities.

Belarus's delegation to PACE showcases pluralism

The Belarusian parliament sent two of its members to the hearings on Belarus held by the Political Committee of the

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Strasbourg on 24 January.

Andrei Navumovich was chosen due to his status as the head of the parliament's working group on the death penalty – a priority topic for the Council of Europe. [Hanna Kanapackaja](#), one of the two opposition-inclined MPs, served as a token of Belarusian democracy and political pluralism.

✘ PACE had stripped Belarus of its special guest status in January 1997 after an undemocratic referendum held by Lukashenka. Since then, PACE has been inviting Belarusian officials to attend its meeting on an ad hoc basis.

Kanapackaja stated in an interview that the Belarusian authorities had no intention of joining the Council of Europe as a member. 'Their priority is to obtain the status of special guest', she emphasised.

In Strasbourg, Kanapackaja spoke about the need to hold free and fair elections in Belarus; she also voiced her support for the country's full-fledged membership to the Council of Europe and the [abolition of capital punishment](#).

However, her colleague Navumovich raised doubts about the parliament's readiness to abolish the death penalty, stating that he would like to organise hearings on the issue only in 2018. Without doubt, the Belarusian authorities do not think the time is ripe to play this card in their diplomatic match with Europe.

Poland presses ahead with legitimising Belarus's

parliament

On 30 January – 1 February, the lower house of the Belarusian parliament dispatched a high-level delegation to Warsaw.

The team, which included deputy speaker Balieslau Pishtuk and former ambassador Valery Varanietski, held talks with deputy speaker of the Sejm Ryszard Terlecki and speaker of the senate Stanisław Karczewski. They also met with deputy foreign minister Marek Ziolkowski and other Polish officials.

✘ Belarusian MPs expect a return visit of their Polish colleagues in April to discuss a roadmap for future cooperation.

Poland has *de facto* [recognised the appointed rubber-stamp Belarusian legislature](#) as their peers, i.e. a legitimate and viable parliament. Warsaw leads the process among European nations. According to Varanietski, the parliaments of Slovakia and the Czech Republic will soon follow suit.

No convincing attempt to explain the sudden need to 'normalise' this irrelevant entity has been made so far. Ziolkowski, who wrote an extensive article for Rzeczpospolita explaining in detail Poland's 'change of heart' towards the Lukashenka regime, failed to utter a single word on the topic.

Curiously, the press services of both the Polish Sejm and the Senate have not reported on the encounters of their leaders with the Belarusian delegation. It is unclear whether they still feel embarrassed about this partnership or if they do not attach any particular significance to it.

In the near future, Belarus looks set to further improve and intensify ties with most of its partners from Central and Southern Europe. However, the relationship with Lithuania is likely to develop in the opposite direction.

Strengthening Links with Autocratic Friends – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Despite his regained ability to travel to Europe, President Alexander Lukashenka's 'social circle' has so far remained limited to leaders of countries that have difficulties in their relations with Western democracies.

In the past month, the Belarusian president has become his country's most diligent diplomat. He welcomed his Serbian and Azerbaijani counterparts in Minsk and travelled to Vietnam and Turkmenistan on official visits, focusing on trade and investment but also working on reinforcing political ties.

However, he had to postpone his most important foreign trip – to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin – due to the two countries' disagreements over relations with Turkey and the Russian air base in Belarus.

Serbia: trading political support for investment

On 18 – 20 November, Serbian president Tomislav Nikolic visited Belarus on an official visit. According to his Belarusian counterpart, Serbia remains Belarus' 'key trade and economic partner in the Balkans'.

Trade and investment issues dominated the bilateral agenda. Trade has been growing steadily since 2009 and reached \$245m

in 2014. However, the two countries are unlikely to reach their [declared target of a \\$500m turnover](#) in the coming years.

Nikolic came to Minsk to launch the latest project of Dragomir and Bogoljub Karic, two Serbian brothers who have been implementing [several investment deals](#) in Belarus. The businessmen have undertaken the construction of multifunctional complex Minsk-Mir at an estimated cost of \$3.5bn, having received undisclosed incentives from the Belarusian president.

At the inauguration ceremony both presidents made public the surprising idea of gathering the presidents of the former Yugoslavian republics in Minsk in 2016 and involving these countries in the construction of Minsk-Mir.

Nikolic also thanked Lukashenka for his continued support of Serbia's territorial integrity. In fact, ten days earlier Belarus voted against admitting Kosovo to UNESCO. This initiative fell three votes short of being adopted.

Azerbaijan: a scheduled meeting of close friends

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev came to Belarus on a one-day official visit on 28 November. As the trip took place only a few days after Turkey downed a Russian warplane, some analysts hurried to suggest that Belarus and Azerbaijan, both close to Russia and Turkey, arranged an express meeting to discuss possibilities for mediating the emerging conflict.

However, these conclusions are groundless. The presidents of Belarus and Azerbaijan keep a [regular schedule of yearly meetings](#). This time around they signed a number of important bilateral documents, which had been drafted well in advance, including an agreement on social and economic cooperation

valid up to 2025.

Lukashenka and Aliyev reiterated the strategic nature of their relationship. However, Azerbaijan fails to see Belarus as a strategic market for its goods. Bilateral trade is strongly one-directional. In 2014, Belarusian exports to Azerbaijan were worth \$318m and its imports from Azerbaijan a mere \$8.7m.

Belarus is looking to further increase its exports and to [attract Azerbaijani investments](#). Azerbaijan may be more interested in military-industrial and scientific cooperation and technology transfers. Both countries support each other in the international arena.

Vietnam: reinforcing an outpost in South-East Asia

[Lukashenka](#) made his first foreign trip following his re-election to Vietnam on 9 December. This was not an intentional tribute to the two countries' strategic partnership.

During his one day visit to Hanoi, Lukashenka met all the  top leaders of the country. Belarus and Vietnam agreed to foster their bilateral ties in a wide range of areas, going well beyond the prioritised trade relationship.

Vietnam has been [seeking technology transfers and industrial cooperation](#) with Belarus, particularly in the petrochemical industry, engineering, and automobile assembly. Reportedly, the Belarusian businessmen who accompanied Lukashenka on this trip signed contracts with their Vietnamese colleagues worth \$350m.

This is a huge amount taking into account the existing trade turnover (only \$169.3m in 2014). Routinely, Belarus and Vietnam agreed to aim at a \$500m turnover in the near future.

The Belarusian president postponed his visit to Moscow, which was originally scheduled for 25 – 26 November. Belarus and Russia explained the postponement as a result of the extreme workload of both Lukashenka and Putin. However, a more plausible explanation is Belarus' unwillingness to jeopardise its relations with Turkey by having to comment in Moscow on the warplane shoot-down incident. Another reason might be a lack of an agreement on the issue of a Russian air base in Belarus.

Turkmenistan: supporting falling trade and playing peacemaker

On his way back to Minsk, Alexander Lukashenka made a stopover in Ashgabat on 10 – 12 December for an official visit and a celebration of the 20th anniversary of Turkmenistan's neutrality.

Bilateral turnover has been falling dramatically since 2013. It amounted to \$67.7m in January- September 2015. As with Azerbaijan, it remains a one-way street with Belarusian exports largely dominating.

✘ The 'flagship project' of the two countries' economic relations remains the Garlyk mining and processing complex for potash fertilisers in Turkmenistan, which is being built by a Belarusian company. Turkmenistan is also one of the largest buyers of Belarusian MAZ trucks.

Furthermore, Belarus has become a preferred destination for [Turkmen students](#). Over 9,000 Turkmens have been studying in Belarusian universities.

On his third day in Ashgabat, Lukashenka used a statement at

an international conference dedicated to Turkmenistan's neutrality to call for dialogue between Russia and Turkey. 'It is essential to find a solution, to make a concession. At least, a way to take a half-step towards each other should be found to de-escalate the tension', Lukashenka said.

It is highly probable that Lukashenka met Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the sidelines of the summit in Ashgabat. However, publicising such a meeting, if it indeed took place, would not be in Lukashenka's best interests. Russian public would be unlikely to respond positively to its ally's contacts with Russia's sworn enemy. It is already unhappy with Belarus' neutrality in this conflict.

Lukashenka has been trying to capitalise on his good personal contacts with a number of foreign leaders, seeking investments and exports revenues for his currency-stripped county. It appears that he is not willing to engage in political liberalisation to gain access to the West's much larger financial assistance and further decrease his dependence on Russia.

Belarus Engages Europe, Maneuvering on Ukraine, Standstill with the US – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Alexander Lukashenka's policy on Ukraine has won him many sympathisers both in Belarus and Ukraine. In his interview with Serbian media, he has also claimed a certain level of improvement in relations between Belarus and the European

Union.

Belarus continues to reap the rewards of its policy of non-recognising breakaway territories, and as of late in its ties with Serbia. However, its relations with the United States have failed to normalise despite periodic diplomatic contact.

Reaffirming Support to Ukraine

The president of Belarus attended the inauguration of the new Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko. With the sole exception of his Moldovan counterpart, Alexander Lukashenka was the only head of a CIS country to visit Kyiv on this occasion.

By accepting an invitation from the Ukrainian authorities, Lukashenka explicitly showed his willingness to strengthen ties with the new authorities. Belarus sees no inconvenience in the fact that its closest ally, Russia, is waging a *de facto* war against Ukraine.

Lukashenka has yet to develop a close personal relationship with Poroshenko. The two presidents did not meet officially on inauguration day. In fact, the Belarusian president may regret reducing Speaker and ex-president Turchinov's role in the government. Their meeting in Kyiv has clearly demonstrated that the two men have been getting along rather well.

[Lukashenka's line of conduct in the Ukrainian crisis](#) has won him many new and often unexpected supporters among the Ukrainian elite and common Ukrainians. These developments have positively affected Ukrainians' attitude towards Belarus in general.

Strengthening Cooperation with EU Members and Institutions

The Belarusian foreign ministry has been tireless in its efforts to develop relations with the European Union in the existing framework of sanctions and restrictions. This month, Belarus' contact with the EU went well beyond the typical

Central European circle.

Central European countries are still maintaining [their prominent place in all of Belarus' interactions with the EU](#). Minsk held high-level consultations with Poland, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia on a wide range of issues. Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) also attended a meeting of the Central European Initiative's foreign ministers in Vienna.

Belarus still has a long way to go to normalise its relations with the EU backbone countries (Germany, France, Italy and the UK). However, its foreign ministry has managed to engage some 'Old Europe' countries in the dialogue. Alena Kupchyna met top foreign policy officials in Vienna and Helsinki. Economy Minister [Mikalaj Snapkou](#) met with Spanish Foreign Minister José García-Margallo.

Belarus talked extensively to the EU as an institution. Several high-level EU officials, led by Gunnar Wiegand, the European Commission's Director for Eastern Europe, visited Minsk to carry out consultations on modernisation. The goal of this dialogue was to determine the best form of future cooperation between Belarus and the European Union.

A Belarusian delegation also visited Brussels to attend the meetings of several functions related to the Eastern Partnership. There are strong indications that Belarus is seeking to go to the Riga summit at a much higher level of engagement with the activities of this initiative.

Belarus and the European Commission have engaged in expert consultations on the draft agreement liberalising the visa regime between Belarus and the EU. Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) admitted in his recent interview to BelaPAN news agency that the parties may even sign it at the Riga summit in autumn 2015.

Consolidating Friendship with Serbia

Alexander Lukashenka made an official visit to Serbia on 11-12 June. It was one of the rare visits of the Belarusian leader to a European nation associated with the EU.

Technically, Serbia has undertaken an obligation to align itself with all EU foreign policy decisions, including the visa and economic sanctions against Belarus. However, according to Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic, he agreed on Lukashenka's visit with Brussels and even postponed it once to accommodate Catherine Ashton's request.

Serbia has appreciated Belarus's refusal to recognise the unilateral independence of Kosovo. Belarus remains interested in Serbia as a stronghold in the Balkans. The Serbian presidency in the OSCE in 2015 may also be used by Belarus to strengthen its position in the organisation.

The two presidents issued a joint statement summarising the results of their talks. Together, along with many standard formulaic comments on the intention to develop cooperation in all possible fields, it includes a passage praising the advantages of Belarus' membership in the Customs Union and the newly created Eurasian Economic Union.

Despite some growth in their bilateral trade turnover, the two countries are still quite far from reaching their target figure of \$500m, which they agreed on in Minsk last year.

Meeting the US Envoy

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Eric Rubin visited Minsk on 2 – 4 June. He met with a number of officials, including Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei, as well as representatives of civil society.

The diplomats discussed issues related to bilateral cooperation. In the press release issued after the visit, the US embassy emphasised the "long-standing US concerns on the need for enhanced respect for human rights and

democratisation". The Belarusian foreign ministry, in its turn, highlighted the "need to lift sanctions, which hinder the development of normal relations between Belarus and the United States".

A week later, President Obama extended the sanctions against Belarus for another year. It is a technical decision, which confirms the lack of any major positive shifts in bilateral relations. The two countries are nowhere near the resumption of reestablishing the full-scale work of their embassies or the appointment of ambassadors.

However, the discussion of bilateral issues may have not been the sole reason for Mr Rubin's visit. Usually US officials of his rank come to Minsk in winter or early spring as a part of their regional tour. This visit seems to be an unscheduled one. The top US diplomat may have wanted to hear first-hand about Belarus' position on Ukraine.

Promoting Traditional Family Values

The promotion of traditional family values has indeed become another key multilateral initiative of Belarus. However, unlike combating the trafficking of people, this idea is [failing to garner universal support](#).

In June, Belarusian diplomats brought up this subject during a UNICEF session and the UNGA high-level event on human rights and the rule of law. However, the idea has yet to find its way into the agreed documents of universal organisations.

Deputy Foreign Minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) had more success at the 17th Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Algeria. He managed to push the language about a traditional family in the final document of the meeting.

The Movement is composed of developing countries with mostly conservative social views. Belarus remains its only European member.

Construction Boom in Minsk: Happy Businessmen and Unhappy Public

On 13 March, Belarus hosted a high level guest – Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić. Nikolić and Serbian businessman Dragomir Karić symbolically launched a new construction project near national library. Today Serbian company Astra Investment is one of the largest investors in Belarus development sector.

Development remains one of the few industries foreigners eagerly invest in Belarus because of high and quick profit. Meanwhile, Belarus authorities struggle with other problems of urban development. They fail to properly regenerate the Old Town of Minsk and their policy of compaction of districts in already densely populated city causes protests of locals.

Thriving Capital

Although Belarus experiences economic stagnation and resists market reforms, the intensity of development and construction makes an impression of a thriving area. Indeed, development presents one of the few sectors that foreign companies readily invest in Belarus.

In this most cases foreign does not mean western, as investors come from Arab countries, Russia, Iran, Turkey and China. Serbian Astra Investment serves perhaps the biggest investor at the moment. Its projects, Majak Minska (Lighthouse of Minsk) includes a shopping and entertainment complex and several housing projects.

Construction especially flourished after 2009, when the International Ice Hockey Federation chose Minsk the venue for the 2014 championship. The event seems especially important for regime's image and international legitimation, therefore authorities do their best to prepare the capital for the upcoming championship. The amount of work is substantial – Minsk definitely lacks tourist infrastructure.

However, as it usually happens in Belarus, people do not know how the deals are made. This behind-the-scene politics causes discontent of the public. This discontent is fairly justified – very often good pieces of Belarusian land go to president's friends without asking people's opinion.

For example, in 2012 an official document with a mark "confidential" appeared in Belarusian Internet. According to it, Aliaksandr Lukashenka ordered to grant Qatar state (in fact its ruling family), lands near Minsk for building residence and open-air hunting cages. Expensive lands near the capital should be granted for free for 99 years. Such generous presents of course are a part of bigger deals that the authoritarian leader makes with his Arab counterparts.

The Tragedy of Minsk Old Town



Regeneration of old building remains a disaster in Belarus. Denationalised Belarusian bureaucracy does not realise the value of architectural heritage and do not want to stick to legislation on urban development during the restoration of old buildings.

Most famous cases from recent decade include reconstruction of Old Town in Hrodna, a town with old European architecture in Western Belarus.

Authorities conducted reconstruction with numerous violations. They did not conduct archaeological excavations and damaged a

layer of remnants of the mediaeval city; changed traditional planning of Old Town; destroyed some buildings and built them from modern materials instead of restoration. As a result, the biggest Old Town in Belarus turned into typical town of Lukashenka period.

Minsk is in a similar situation now. Poor reconstruction of Old Town of Minsk started in USSR already. Today, in independent Belarus the authorities continue to destroy the historical face of the city for reasons of quickness and minimization of cost. The 2014 ice hockey world championship makes the authorities hurry in their preparations.

Among the biggest problem of renovation experts name the destruction of former planning of the streets and buildings. While a single wrongly erected building can be destroyed and restored, the rebuilding of the whole planning seems hardly possible and will be extremely costly in future. Another task during regeneration is to preserve the past cultural landscape, but Belarusian authorities prefer to turn Minsk Old Town into a business-centre.

According to historian Zachar Šybeka, one of the best experts on Minsk history, normally the Old Town becomes conservation zone, where new construction is prohibited. In Belarus, he says, such norms do not exist in law. As a result, modern buildings appear in the centre. They overshadow the historical architecture and make the whole view ridiculous.

Sadly, authorities even abuse religious monuments like church complexes. Instead of giving them back to church, officials use buildings for state purposes. In one case, they even presented a plan to turn a former monastery building into hotel with casinos.

Compaction of Housing



Rapid growth of construction results in the lack of free space in the city. Notably, Lukashenka prohibited the spread of the city and building on agricultural lands. Authorities offered an alternative solution – to boost “satellite towns” that lay near Minsk. Citizens that need housing can build it in those towns now.

However, new elite housing and business and shopping centres mushroom in the city, and somehow authorities manage to find land for them. Clearly, those projects are highly profitable and Minsk authorities do not miss a chance to earn some more cash and report to the top about their success.

The government promotes policy of compaction of some communities to create new places for profitable projects. This policy sparked social tension and protests of city dwellers. Politically indifferent Belarusian may become very active and aggressive when the deal concerns their property. Take for example the case of Uručča conflict.

In spring 2012 dwellers of Uručča district protested against building of several houses, some of them were assigned for riot police families. This fact stirred up the discontent with authorities because Belarusians perceive police as a part of the regime. Still, dwellers had no chance to win in this case.

Similarly, owners of the housing in the central district resist the plans of authorities to evict them or rebuild the part of houses and implement other projects. Such sporadic protests appear here and there and authorities have to compromise. They organise civil discussions, where experts, architects, officials and citizens discuss the construction plans.

So far, the discussions appeared not quite fruitful, as sides do not want to listen to each other and retain their positions. Nevertheless, authorities accept that such protests

indeed prevented some projects or changed them. "Prevention of social tension", the term that authorities use, shows that even in today's Belarus people can effectively defend their interests if they organise.