

Lukashenka meets Americans, Belarusians give up on state benefits – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Belarus's geopolitical importance grows amid the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Alexander Lukashenka meets American analysts in Minsk.

Eurasian Development Bank warns Belarus of risks. Belarusians no longer expect free benefits from the government. Belarus climbs up to the 37th position in Doing Business.

PACE calls on Belarus not to issue Astravets NPP license. The number of women involved in the Belarusian IT sphere has increased by 2.5 times. Belarus ranked 38th in World Ranking of English Proficiency.

This and more in the new digest of Belarusian analytics.

Politics

[The autocephaly of Ukrainian Orthodox Church Spotlights Belarus's Growing Geopolitical Importance](#) – Grigory Ioffe notes that the latest Belarusian-Russian summit in Mahileu and the issue of Orthodox disunion together ended up spotlighting the further growth of Belarus's geopolitical significance. The crisis and war in Ukraine had started that trend as early as 2014, leading to the promotion of Minsk as a venue for truce talks.

[Partnership priorities between Belarus and EU may be signed before the yearend](#). This became known after the meeting of EaP foreign ministers and the EU in Luxembourg, on October 15.

Belarusian MFA Head Vladimir Makei notes, “unfortunately, our partners have recently added a number of additional provisions we have to study. I think we will elaborate a position on it very soon.”

[Lukashenka Meets American Analysts](#) – Grigory Ioffe analyses the media reaction on November visit to Minsk of a group of US foreign policy analysts. But still, despite the noticeable improvement in relations with the West, Lukashenka decided against travelling to Paris to attend the celebration of the end of WW I. The analyst explains this referring to journalist Alexander Klaskouski: ‘Lukashenka prefers to enter Europe on a white horse, not to get lost in the crowd’.

Economics

[Reforms needed: Eurasian Development Bank warns Belarus of risks](#). The unbalanced growth of salaries and the instability of its payment balance are major threats to Belarus’ economy. The EDB expert group [visited](#) Minsk on October 2-5 with a monitoring mission on amending the government’s reform program, necessary to be fulfilled for the final, seventh EFSD tranche of the credit.

[Belarusians No Longer Expect Free Benefits From Government](#) – Alexander Chubrik, IPM Research Center, talks about the results of a recent [study](#) on the values of the Belarusian society. In particular, Belarusians believe that the main task of the state is ‘to give an opportunity to earn money’. Ten years ago, such a request came only from the business. Now this answer overtakes even the provision of quality medical care, pensions, and protection against crime.



KEF 2018 Conference in Minsk. Source: tut.by

[Belarus climbs up to the 37th position in Doing Business](#), according to the World Bank 2019 [report](#). Compared to last year, Belarus has risen one place to rank 37th out of 190 economies. The country summary contains a brief description of reform: Belarus made starting a business easier by abolishing the requirement to register the book of Registry of Inspections and made dealing with construction permits easier.

[KEF Results: Less Desire to Talk about Reform](#) – In November, the 6th Kastryčnicki Economic Forum ([KEF](#)) *Belarus in a Brave New World* was held in Minsk. This event traditionally gathers the most influential officials, businessmen, experts, and journalists. Economist Sergei Chaly sums up the KEF-2018 results and explains why there is less and less need and desire to talk about reforms.

Security

[PACE calls on Belarus not to issue Ostrovets NPP license](#). The parliamentarians urged the authorities of Belarus not to issue an operating license for the Ostrovets nuclear power plant until it meets certain international safety standards. PACE voted for the resolution in Strasbourg, on October 11.

[The Munich Security Conference](#) (MSC) hosted its 2018 Core Group Meeting in Minsk, on October 31 and November 1. The event brought together senior government officials and representatives from international organisations, including Belarus' president, OSCE Secretary General, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and more.

[Monitoring of the Situation in the Field of Economic Security of Belarus. October 2018](#) – Belarus Security Blog's monthly monitoring indicates that the deterioration in the currency and deposit markets, caused by the September devaluation of the ruble and faster growth of population incomes, may force

the authorities to adopt a policy of tightening monetary policy. This can create problems to achieve the planned GDP growth in 2019.

[Belarusian army among 25 most powerful in Europe](#), according to the Business Insider's latest [ranking](#). Russia has the most powerful army in Europe, followed by France, Britain, and Turkey. Belarus was ranked 17th: the total number of active-duty and reserve military personnel in Belarus exceeds 400,000.

Information Technology

[Belarus, Ukraine And Russia: Time To Revisit Their Tech?](#) – Ilya Abugov, Crypto Briefing, notes that the Eastern European region has its share of unique problems, but even so, the blockchain scene in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia has been significantly overlooked. At this point, it is not about finding a diamond in the rough, but rather finding the entrance to the mine.

[Belarusian IT: More females employed](#). New tendencies have appeared in the Belarusian IT sphere over the last 10 years, according to the annual [research](#) of the portal Dev.by. The number of women involved in the IT sphere has increased by 2.5 times. Females make up 1/5 of all IT specialists in the country.



Belarusian IT specialists attending the first Women IT Week. Source: <https://bel.biz/heroes/witw/>

[Belarus industrial park can help boost GDP](#), EBRD-supported reports find. The analytical work has helped the Bank open up more policy dialogue with the Belarusian authorities on their

plans for the development of a market-oriented economy in general and the Great Stone Industrial Park in particular.

Other

[Best In Travel 2019: Belarus in Top 10 countries](#). Lonely Planet team [announced](#) its picks for the hottest travel destinations for 2019. Belarus is tipped to be big next year. The Best in Travel 2019 book credits the country for being open to new travellers on the back of relaxed visa requirements.

[Belarus ranked 38th in World Ranking of English Proficiency](#). This is the first time Belarus appeared on the annual EF English Proficiency Index ([EPI](#)) published for the eighth consecutive year. The 2018 survey took into account 1.3 million non-native English speakers, across 88 countries. Belarusians speak better English than their neighbours in the East and South: Russia occupies the 42nd place and Ukraine – 43rd.

[KEF poll: 85.6% of Belarusians ready to fight for their country in time of war](#). This is data of the survey about the values of the Belarusians conducted within the framework of [KEF](#) in May-June 2018. Thus, 86.1% of respondents call the Belarusian language ‘an important part of the culture, and it should be preserved’; 85.8% say that they are proud of Belarus.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Getting Rid of the Pariah Status, Complaining about Russia, Protecting Conservative Values – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

The days when Belarus was a pariah at most European diplomatic gatherings appears to be a thing of the past.

During his recent trips to Vienna and Basel, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei met with a dozen of his counterparts from European countries. However, Belarus would benefit even more if Makei manages to curb the anti-Western rhetoric all too [common in his public statements](#).

In an unusual development, Minsk publicly brought up its disagreements and quarrels with Moscow in its dialogue with Europe.

Minsk has been much less successful in promoting its latest multilateral initiative – protecting the rights of traditional families. A UN meeting held in New York on 3 December showed little enthusiasm from the international community towards Belarus' conservative views.

Makei Meets Europe in Vienna...

During recent weeks, Belarus' Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) made two official trips to Europe. In addition to multilateral events, the top Belarusian diplomat also managed to squeeze in many bilateral meetings. Later, Makei held several important

meetings with European diplomats in Minsk.

On 23 – 24 November, Vladimir Makei went to Vienna to represent Belarus at a meeting of prime ministers of the Central European Initiative's participating countries. This regional club remains one of Belarus' preferred sites for dialogue with its Central European partners. Many of these countries (i.e., Hungary, Italy, Austria, Serbia etc.) have so far demonstrated more tolerance towards the Belarusian regime than most Western and Nordic EU member states.

Austria is now one of Belarus' most important business partners

The bilateral dimension of the trip was equally important. Vladimir Makei met with his Austrian counterpart, Sebastian Kurz, and Christoph Leitl, the president of the influential Austrian Federal Economic Chamber.

Austria is now one of Belarus' most important business partners. The trade turnover between the two countries has reached \$500m a year. Austria is also the fifth largest investor in Belarus (\$400 m in January – September 2014).

... in Basel...

On 4 and 5 December, the foreign minister visited Basel in Switzerland to attend the 21th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council.

At the meeting, Makei spoke about the "unprecedented, for the past few decades in Europe, increase of tension" and "new dividing lines in the region". Predictably, he failed to name the country, which the international community almost unanimously sees as being primarily responsible for provoking and sustaining the "bloody armed conflict" in Ukraine.

Instead, the Belarusian diplomat preferred to put all blame on some – still unnamed – countries, which "push forward their

priorities to the detriment of other states" and "use "double standards", political and economic sanctions".

This poorly disguised verbal attack against Western nations did not prevent Vladimir Makei from holding bilateral meetings in Basel with his counterparts from Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Sweden, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Turkey. The talks focused on different aspects of bilateral relations, outstanding issues of the dialogue between Belarus and Europe and cooperation in the framework of international organisations.

... and in Minsk

On 10 December, the foreign minister and, separately, his deputy [Elena Kupchyna](#), received in Minsk a delegation of senior diplomats from the Visegrad Group countries. The political directors of the foreign ministers of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic visited Belarus for the first time in this format.

The Visegrad Four remains an important and efficient channel of dialogue between Belarus and the rest of Europe. One of the topics discussed in Minsk was Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership.

The next day, the EU ambassadors in Minsk were invited to the foreign ministry for an urgent meeting. In the meantime, Vladimir Makei made phone calls to a number of his European counterparts. Belarus needed these extensive contacts with the EU to discuss "problematic issues in the relations between Belarus and Russia as well as the development of the Eurasian integration processes".

Belarus has managed to normalise its dialogue with Europe on the working level

It is very unusual for Minsk to bring up its disagreements and

quarrels with Moscow in its dialogue with Europe and more so, to make the fact of such discussion public. Belarus feels confident again about blackmailing Russia with its prospects for improving its ties with Europe.

Makei's recent contacts with his European colleagues have confirmed that Belarus has managed to normalise its dialogue with Europe on the working level. However, the possibility of the resumption of the highest-level contacts and the further easing or even completely lifting sanctions against it are based on the release of all political prisoners.

Building Ties with Vietnam

On 26 – 28 November, Nguyễn Phú Trọng, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam visited Belarus after his official visit to Russia. In Minsk, he met with President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) and Prime Minister [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#).

In today's Vietnam, the position of the Communist Party's boss is no longer synonymous with leader of Vietnam. Actually, Nguyễn Phú Trọng is ranked only eighth in the party's official hierarchy.

The talks focused on trade, investment and military cooperation. Belarus wants to sell various industrial goods to Vietnam. In return, it is ready to open its market for Vietnamese farm produce, coffee, seafood, garments and woodwork. Lukashenka promised his guest help in accelerating the negotiations on a free trade agreement between Vietnam and the Customs Union.

Belarus pledged to continue provide training for Vietnamese military officers and expand military training programmes in Vietnam. The Asian nation has also taken a lot of interest in getting access to Belarusian technologies, both military and civilian.

Two weeks later, a large Belarusian delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) visited Ho Chi Minh City to attend a regular meeting of the intergovernmental trade and scientific cooperation committee. By some estimates, in 10 years Vietnam will become the fastest growing economy in the world. Belarus seeks to use this opportunity to capitalise on the Soviet heritage of special relations with Vietnam and secure a strong footing in this country.

Fighting for Traditional Family

Belarus continues to act as the most determined and outspoken [proponent of the traditional family](#).

On 3 December, Andrei Dapkiunas, Belarus' Permanent Representative to the United Nations [spoke](#) at a meeting of the UN General Assembly dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family.

The ambassador vehemently opposed attempts to “blur the moral points of reference” that the family traditionally provided. “Significant strides in the past decades in human liberation apparently have tempted some governments to test the limits of the possible on the family”, he said. Andrei Dapkiunas refused to see “the foundations of the family destroyed and the traditional family values sacrificed in the name of artificial social constructs”.

Some other delegates, i.e. from Russia, Hungary and Egypt, shared Belarus' concerns at the meeting, albeit much less emphatically. However, several other speakers expressed strongly opposed views.

It is hardly surprising that delegations from liberal western democracies supported “diversity in the concept of families, including an acknowledgement of parents of the same gender” (Norway). One of the more dramatic elements of the meeting was that Belarus failed to generate the proper level of support from the developing world. Most third world countries avoided

the issue altogether. Moreover, delegates from predominately Catholic countries, Columbia and Brazil, overtly supported the same-sex couple and "open-minded perspective" with regards to the "family unit".

In the UN and elsewhere, Belarusian diplomats have defended the concept of a traditional family shared not only by the country's leaders but also by most Belarusians. However, unlike with its [proposal on human trafficking](#), Belarus has little chance of capitalising on this new flagship initiative.

Ice Hockey Diplomacy in The Desert, Sanctions and Human Rights Criticism – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Alexander Lukashenka spent five days in Abu Dhabi meeting with local officials at various levels, managing to get in a game or two of hockey and some sightseeing as well.

A UN report presented on 28 October harshly criticised the human rights situation in Belarus. Two days later, the EU extended its restrictive measures against many Belarusian officials and businesses.

However, these events failed to dissuade the Belarusian authorities from seeking further rapprochement with the West through a series of working meetings with European officials.

Breakthrough Visit or Working Holiday?

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka paid a working visit to the United Arab Emirates during the last week of October. However, the trip looked more like a little sunbathing holiday than a work trip, though he managed to squeeze in some officials meetings to justify the travel.

The trip conveniently coincided with the autumn vacation of Lukashenka's youngest son Mikalai, who accompanied his father during the trip. Father and son played a couple of hockey games with a team of local veterans – both sporting the number 1 on their jerseys – and visited the Emirates' largest mosque.

On 21 – 22 October, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) preceded his boss in the UAE with a large official and business delegation. It looks like Lukashenka's trip was more improvisational than appearances might suggest, or it was only agreed upon during Makei's visit.

Alexander Lukashenka spent five days in the Emirates, from 25 to 29 October. However, his first and most important meeting took place only on his third day in the country. The Belarusian leader met with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces. The sheikh is *de facto* running the country as his brother Sheikh Khalifa, the UAE President, is still recovering from a stroke.

The state-run news agency BelTA called the visit a 'breakthrough' and claimed that "the entire country, and beyond, [was] closely following the events of President Lukashenka's working visit to the UAE".

In fact, there is nothing that would appear to suggest that Minsk and Abu Dhabi are on the verge of a major upgrade in their ties. Arab leaders love to please their guests and make abundant promises. However, [these pledges rarely live beyond the day they were made.](#)

In fact, the UAE is clearly oriented towards western goods and technology. The country is willing to pay premium prices for top-notch products and services and never compromises when it comes to quality. This leaves a majority of any Belarusian products that Belarus would like to sell to the wealthy nation out of the running.

There are certainly a few exceptions. Recently, the Abu Dhabi police placed an order for full body x-ray scanners manufactured by [ADANI](#), a private R&D company based in Minsk. This decision was based on the product's reputation and its assessed quality rather than politics. Indeed, no top-level political exchanges could influence the UAE to make such a purchase.

Sanctions Extended but Contacts Developed

On 30 October, the European Union [extended](#) for another year a package of sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes against individuals and companies linked to the Belarusian government. At the same time, the EU removed 24 individuals and seven companies from its black list. It has been the largest reduction seen since the sanctions were introduced following the violent crackdown on opposition in December 2010.

Despite regular signals of a thaw emerging in Belarus' relations with Europe, the EU insists on the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners and significant improvements with human rights and rule of law as a precondition for a complete revocation of the restrictive measures currently in place.

The Belarusian foreign ministry reacted rather calmly to the EU's decision to extend the sanctions. While expressing their ritual 'regret' about the 'inertia of the past' in the EU's policy towards Belarus, the MFA called the abridgement of the sanctions list "a step in the right direction, albeit an

insufficient one".

Meanwhile, Belarus continues to engage European countries in extensive consultations on a bilateral level. In the second half of October, Foreign Minister Makei and his deputies [Alena Kupchyna](#) and [Alexander Hurjanau](#) met with senior diplomats and government officials from France, Poland, Slovenia, Latvia and Switzerland. During these meetings, Belarusian diplomats emphasised Belarus' advantages as a gateway to the much larger and more lucrative Russian market.

France even chose Minsk as a venue for a regional meeting of its envoys to post-Soviet countries. Uladzimir Makei met with the ambassadors and Eric Fournier, the French MFA's Director for Continental Europe, on 31 October to brief them on Belarus' policy towards the EU, CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union.

On 20 – 23 October, a team of EU officials visited Minsk in the framework of putting together a cooperation programme for 2015. The delegation focused on environmental issues.

At the same time, there is a certain level of stagnation surrounding visa regime liberalisation negotiations between Belarus and the EU. Belarus agreed to hold these talks back in November 2013 and the first round took place in June 2014.

In her recent interview with state-run Belarusian TV channel *Belarus-1*, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna expressed her disappointment with the fact that the EU had thus far failed to react to Minsk's proposals that were made back in June. The Belarusian authorities are looking to establish travel rights with the EU that are analogous to many of their CIS neighbours.

Human Rights Pariah Still

Belarus continues to get its regular share of criticism from international bodies concerning the human rights situation in

the country.

On 28 October, Miklós Haraszti, Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus, introduced his [report on Belarus](#) at a meeting of the UNGA Third Committee in New York.

The Hungarian human rights advocate has found in Belarus "systemic violations of human rights, committed with the help of a governmental mechanism of laws and practices, purposefully constructed over the last two decades".

The report describes a highly dissuasive regime that practically prohibited the exercise of all public freedoms, which are essential in any democratic society.

A Belarusian representative, speaking at that meeting, reminded the assembly that the government of Belarus rejected both the Special Rapporteur's mandate and his report, describing them as politically motivated. Miklós Haraszti has long been a persona non grata in Belarus.

Another tactic of Belarusian diplomats is to downplay civil and political rights by trying to shift the emphasis to economic and social rights. Iryna Vialichka, a Belarusian delegate in the Third Committee, even suggested on 22 October that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights should redirect the available funds "to fight hunger, poverty and disease, thus contributing to the real advancement of human rights".

Belarus is the only European country under the Special Rapporteur regime while [many CIS countries have similar or worse human rights situation](#). Simply put, this indicates a failure of the country's leader and his diplomatic service to get rid of its pariah status by finding a mutually acceptable arrangement with the democratic forces of the world.

Belarus At The United Nations: Resentment, Bragging And Anti-Western Rhetoric

Three weeks ago Belarus Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) presented the country's multilateral initiatives in the general debate of the 69th session of the UN General Assembly. The United Nations remains Belarus' preferred tool for promoting its foreign policy initiatives and a source of development assistance.

Makei chose to please mainly Minsk's allies among third-world countries. He made no attempt to capitalise on recent timid advances in relations between Belarus and the West. Instead, resentment, anti-Western rhetoric and unjustified bragging filled his rather bleak statement from the UN rostrum.

UN's Special Place in Belarusian Diplomacy

Belarus, together with Ukraine, became a [founding member](#) of the United Nations in 1945 in recognition of these nations' role in defeating Nazism. The Soviet Union thus got three votes in the Organisation.

The permanent mission of Belarus to the UN opened in New York only in 1958. The mission even lacked nominal independence in its diplomatic activities. It was often staffed with diplomats sent from Moscow and all decision-making was made there.

Nevertheless, the mission became a great school of practical diplomacy for many Belarusian civil servants. They formed the core of the foreign ministry's staff when Belarus obtained

independence in 1991.

Belarus' Priorities at the 69th Session

Traditionally, Belarus invests a significant amount of human and financial resources into its participation in the annual UN General Assembly sessions. Also, the government used to formally approve the country's priorities at each session drafted by the foreign ministry.

This practise seems to have been abandoned. The [priorities for the 69th session](#) are only available as a non-paper at the web site of Belarus' permanent mission to the UN.

The 16-point document pays special attention to the post-2015 United Nations development agenda. Belarus also intends to further prioritise its two key initiatives, the fight against human trafficking and the protection of traditional families. In the field of security, the priority issue is the prohibition of the development and manufacturing of new types of weapons of mass destruction.

Some priorities have been rather oddly formulated and sound more like political statements, i.e. about "international human rights law, which some countries have repeatedly violated through their unilateral activities".

Belarus sees the country-specific resolutions on human rights only as a "tool invoked by some countries to advance their own political and economic interests". As a target of one of such resolutions, Belarus intends to "strongly oppose" them.

Anti-Western Crusade

Belarus' Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei made his [statement in the general debate](#) of the 69th UNGA session on 30 September. He spoke in Russian, hastily and unemphatically, before the half-empty UNGA meeting hall.

Makei's statement contained few positive statements or

overtures. He preferred to develop the anti-Western rhetoric of a besieged state.

Uladzimir Makei started with a historical reference to the WWI, which he used as an introduction to his condemnation of those "revising the outcome of WWII... or defiling the memory of the fallen heroes".

The minister failed to name such offenders. He also preferred to disregard the fact that Belarus' closest ally, Russia, routinely befriends far-right political forces in Western and Central Europe, whose leaders often honour Nazi collaborators and deny Holocaust.

Faithful to the country's declared UNGA priorities, Makei aligned with those who believe that human rights rhetoric serves only to punish those nations, which rebel against subordinating themselves to the greedy transnational capitalism.

Uladzimir Makei intentionally reminded the General Assembly who the main allies of Belarus were: "Countries like Belarus, Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela surely feel such pressure much more than others". The minister has clearly taken pride in being in this company of outcasts.

Autocratic Stability and Ukraine

From the UN rostrum, Makei promoted [Alexander Lukashenka's](#) vision of a "powerful", strong state meant to protect its citizens from "chaos, lawlessness and impunity". Many UN members will certainly disagree with this vision arguing that the state's strength and power derive from democratic institutions and not a one-man autocratic rule.

The minister asserted that Belarus had been chosen as a "site for addressing acute international crises" namely because the international community considered it to be a "stable and

internally coherent state".

Not many experts would agree with this assertion. The international community has certainly appreciated the balanced position of the Belarusian government in the Ukrainian crisis. Belarus indeed has some geographical and logistic advantages, which warranted the choice of Minsk as a [venue of the talks on Ukraine](#). However, it is doubtful that the negotiating parties ever considered Belarus' internal autocratic 'stability' as an advantage when making this choice.

The above passage was the only reference to the conflict around Ukraine in the minister's speech. Makei refrained from assessing the new challenges to the regional and international security even within the constraints of [Belarus' position of neutrality](#) in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

Development Priority and Traditional Family

The foreign minister called the international community to use thematic global partnerships as a tool to implement the [post-2015 United Nations development agenda](#): "Only effective partnerships among states, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector can deliver success in addressing any global problem". Ironically, the Belarusian authorities are reluctant to engage civil society and private sector as equal partners when discussing domestic affairs.

Uladzimir Makei also resented the alleged attempts to force Belarus "to renounce the values of a [traditional family](#), and recognise instead the diversity of this institution's forms". Again, he sees the liberal policies on family issues only as another capitalist plot: "This may be just another way to subdue the resisters to the capital by turning them into soulless slaves".

The strengthening of traditional family has become Belarus' top priority initiative within the UN. Regrettably, the Belarusian authorities have failed to provide more clues about

their understanding of this term. It is not clear whether it goes beyond the rejection of the same-sex marriages and adoption of children by homosexual families.

In 2013, Belarus ranked No. 2 in the world in terms of the divorce rate. BelTA once quoted Professor Katsiaryna Antsipava saying that this divorce rate "signalled the ill-being of the family institution in the country". So much for Makei's offer to share Belarus' advances in this sphere with others.

Belarus' Prospects in the UN

Belarus has probably begun losing momentum in its UN-centered multilateral efforts. It becomes difficult to continue to capitalise on the successful initiative on combatting the human trafficking as it is becoming another institutionalised UN issue.

The initiative on traditional family has failed to gather proper international support. It is vague and non-priority for most countries if not directly unacceptable. Also, it seems unwise for the Belarusian authorities to emphasise their pariah status just to show off before the third-world allies.

**Belarus OKs European
Integration of Moldova,
Offers to Promote China in
Europe – Belarus Foreign**

Policy Digest

Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#), unlike his Russian counterpart, sees no immediate problems for Belarus in Moldova's association with Europe. However, he is dissatisfied with the existing level of trade and investments in Belarus' relations with most CIS countries.

Belarus succeeded in obtaining a \$24m grant from China. In exchange, the Chinese delegation got a promise of Minsk's help in increasing China's influence in Europe.

Lukashenka Talks to CIS Leaders

On 24 and 25 September, the Belarusian leader paid an official visit to Moldova. Lukashenka and his counterpart Nicolae Timofti focused on trade and economic relations. Belarus is already implementing or developing several knockdown assembly projects for agricultural machinery and public transport vehicles in Moldova.

Lukashenka reassured the Moldovan public that the signing and ratification of the association agreement between the EU and Moldova would not affect the latter's relations with Belarus: "Don't dramatise ... We need to create new forms and look for new ways of cooperation".

On 6 October, Lukashenka received Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov. This move meant to emphasise the importance Belarus attaches to its relations with this fast-developing partner.

The Belarusian leader expressed his dissatisfaction with the current volume of bilateral trade: "For us to have the turnover of \$300m or even \$500m – it is embarrassing even to talk about it". Again, Lukashenka has demonstrated his eagerness to set up a knockdown assembly in Azerbaijan

counting on local financing of such projects.

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov visited Minsk on 8 October. Two international outcasts seem to go alone rather well. They signed 14 cooperation agreements in different areas.

Turkmenistan has taken serious interest in development of cooperation in academic research and education. The leading project in the economic area is the construction by Belarusian companies of the potash mining and processing facility in Garlyk.

Finally, Lukashenka met with Uzbekistani President Islam Karimov on the sidelines of the CIS summit in Minsk. The official communiqué on the meeting's results is much less enthusiastic than the reports on similar Lukashenka's encounters with his CIS counterparts.

Islam Karimov even mentioned "many instances of interpretations and speculations in mass media" about alleged contradictions in relations between two countries. This comment served more to confirm these speculations rather than to refute them.

Eurasian Integration Meetings in Minsk

On 10 October, Belarus hosted the summits of three post-Soviet integration structures – the CIS, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Eurasian Economic Community.

The only CIS head of state missing from this gathering was Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. The Ukrainian authorities have yet to finalise their position on the country's membership in the CIS. Besides, Ukraine cannot simply ignore the unwillingness of most CIS 'brothers' to help it in stopping Russia's encroachment on Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Alexander Lukashenka indirectly acknowledged this situation: "It is probably unacceptable that the burning issues that relate to Ukraine are being dealt with somewhere far away, in Berlin or Milan". He spoke in favour of paying more attention to security in the framework of the CIS.

The CIS summit proved to be another routine event. It ended with adoption of 15 documents dealing with humanitarian, law enforcement and other issues. The members of the EAEU also signed an agreement on Armenia's accession to this Union.

Expanding Ties with Latin America

The Belarusian foreign ministry actively seeks to secure a good footing in Latin America. [In June, Vladimir Makei](#) visited Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua. In September, he met with his counterparts from the last two countries in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA.

Meanwhile, one of his deputies, [Alexander Guryanov](#), made a working tour of Latin America on 24 September – 1 October. In Argentina, Uruguay, Chili and Peru, he met with his counterparts in the foreign ministries as well as with local business leaders and regional governors. The trade and economic cooperation was a dominant topic of most meetings. Alexander Guryanov promoted Belarusian agricultural machinery and heavy duty lorries.

Belarus is actively using Venezuela as a showroom of successful cooperation. In September, Ecuadorian Minister of Industry Richard Espinosa Guzmán visited Belarusian-built plants in Venezuela. He also met there with Belarusian Deputy Minister of Industry [Hienadz Svidzierski](#). The officials discussed prospects for implementing similar projects in Ecuador.

In the same context, Belarus and Columbia held consultations in Minsk on 29 September.

The Belarusian diplomats are doing their best to follow direct instructions of their president. Mr Lukashenka sees great potential in the region's markets, especially after the success in Venezuela.

Maintaining Momentum with Europe

On 29 September – 1 October, Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) visited Brussels for the third round of consultations on modernisation. The parties focused on the issues of transports, energy and environment. Kupchyna seized this opportunity to discuss pressing issues of political relations between Belarus and the EU with some top EU officials.

On 8 October, Belarus and Hungary hold the fifth meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation and a business forum in Minsk. László Szabó, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, led the Hungarian delegation there.

While the Commission discussed many trade and economic issues, they made an emphasis on development of cooperation in the banking sector. Two major Belarusian banks, Belarusbank and Belagroprombank, signed cooperation agreements with the Hungarian [Eximbank](#).

Belarus and Hungary enjoy strong working relations over several recent years. Hungary's conservative government sympathises with strongmen like Putin and Lukashenka.

Aliaksandr Khainouski, Belarusian ambassador to Hungary, maintains active dialogue with the country's central and local authorities on a wide range of issues. It also helps a lot that Alena Kupchyna, the current Deputy Foreign Minister in charge of relations with Europe, was Khainouski's immediate predecessor in Budapest.

During recent weeks, Belarus also held consular consultations with Croatia and foreign policy consultations with Romania.

China Gives Impetus to the Industrial Park

On 26 September, a Chinese delegation led by Zhang Gaoli, China's Vice Prime Minister, visited Minsk and met with Alexander Lukashenka.

The top-ranking Chinese official came to Minsk to give an impetus to the project of the [China – Belarus Industrial Park](#). The Park is the most ambitious venture in Sino – Belarusian relations and the largest joint project for Belarus.

The visit's immediate result has been a grant of RMB 150m (\$24m) for electrification of the Park. China will issue this non-repayable aid under an intergovernmental agreement signed in Minsk.

During the meeting, Alexander Lukashenka was very enthusiastic about the relations with China. He described Mr Zhang's visit as a "very opportune" one and invited China to invest more in Belarus.

In exchange, Alexander Lukashenka promised to "help to increase China's influence in Europe". It is doubtful that China makes much use of Belarus' services for this matter.

**Securing Borders,
Rediscovering Africa,
Restoring Ties With The West
– Belarus Foreign Policy**

Digest

On 21 September the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the important and constructive role played by Minsk in diplomatic efforts to resolve the Ukrainian crisis at his meeting in New York with Belarusian Prime Minister [Mikhail Myasnikovich](#). Ban Ki-moon also thanked the PM for Belarus' hospitality to refugees from Ukraine.

Shaken up by the Ukrainian crisis, the Belarusian authorities are taking measures to build up the country's capacity to withstand foreign pressure. They are securing the country's borders and have turned down offers to have a unified visa regime with Russia.

Belarus also seeks to reinforce the economic basis of its independence. Foreign Minister Makei's visits to Nigeria and South Africa and numerous contacts with European countries were a move in this direction. The authorities also try to counterbalance their relations with Russia by attempting to improve ties with the US and Europe.

Borders Guarded Tighter

The Belarusian authorities have obviously learned a number of lessons from Russia's aggression against Ukraine. One of them is the need for clearly demarcated and well-secured borders.

Recently, Belarus brought up this issue in one form or another in its relations with all of its neighbours. Belarusian diplomats have discussed border issues at the ministerial or ambassadorial level with their colleagues from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. On 3 September, the border commissioners from Belarus and Latvia met at the border checkpoint Paternieki to discuss joint actions to counter illegal migration and other measures of cooperation.

On 1 September, President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) signed a decree, which greatly facilitates and speeds up the demarcation of the Belarusian – Ukrainian border. He thus responded to a similar intention expressed by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko during the latter's visit to Minsk.

Four years ago, former State Border Committee Chairman [Ihar Rachkouski](#) said that the demarcation would take 10 years and cost over \$17m. Lukashenka clearly wants to put to bed this long-standing issue much quicker and by spending less money.

Another of Lukashenka's recent decision – to establish border control points in the administrative units directly adjacent to Russia – was the most unexpected step. The Belarusian authorities are trying to downplay the importance of this decision by stressing its technical nature. However, the very fact of such a move and its timing permit for it to be seen as an important part of a plan to [strengthen the Belarusian borders in all directions](#).

Unified Visa with Russia?

Grigory Rapota, State Secretary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, said on 10 September that Minsk and Moscow are discussing possibility to introduce a unified (Schengen-like) visa regime for two countries.

The next day, Dzmitry Mironchyk, spokesperson for the Belarusian foreign ministry, refuted this claim politely but firmly by stating: "As for any new Belarusian – Russian agreement on this issue, no such talks are currently under way".

Russia's foreign ministry issued its comments on 22 September saying that "this issue is indeed under discussion but negotiations on a specific draft have not started yet".

While Belarus and Russia have no control over their joint border, they have coordinated yet separate visa policies. This

certainly creates some difficulties for tourists and business travellers. One of them is the impossibility of visa-free transit through the international airports in each of the two countries.

Regardless, the Belarusian authorities are refraining from trading in their independence with issuing visas for the advantages of a unified visa policy. Another important consideration may be the unwillingness to see revenue from visa fees reduced as many visitors may use the substantially more developed network of Russian visa offices.

Rediscovering Africa

Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) paid his first visit to Africa. On 8 – 12 September, he visited two of the continent's biggest economies, Nigeria and South Africa.

In an interview with the South African daily Business Day, Belarus' top diplomat had to admit: "Previously, we have not paid significant attention to Africa... When the Soviet Union collapsed, our ties with African states collapsed as well".

Now, Minsk is trying to catch up. Belarus recently opened embassies in Nigeria and Ethiopia and currently has diplomatic missions in five African countries (also in South Africa, Libya and Egypt).

While the parties discussed relations in nearly every major arena, trade, investment and military cooperation were a clear priority. Among the immediate results of the visits is an agreement on setting up a knockdown assembly plant for Belarusian tractors in Nigeria. The Belarusian delegation also heavily promoted a similar arrangement for Belarusian lorries in South Africa.

Belarus and Nigeria also agreed to speed up the conclusion of several intergovernmental trade and investment agreements. Belarus and South Africa will hold their next round of

political consultations and a meeting of the Committee for Trade and Economic Cooperation in 2015.

Restoring Relations with the US

An interagency US delegation visited Minsk on 8 – 10 September. The visiting team included senior officials from the State Department, the Agency for International Development and the Department of Defence.

The delegation had meetings at the ministries of foreign affairs, defence, economy and education. Belarus and the US reviewed possibilities for broadening cooperation on areas of mutual concern. The visitors also spoke with members of civil society, leaders of the political opposition, and relatives of political prisoners.

Thomas Melia, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, described the visit as a "restoration of bilateral relations". However, as he pointed out, "relations between the United States and Belarus have not changed as a result of this visit. Specific decisions have not been taken".

The US delegation confirmed that the existence of political prisoners in Belarus continued to be "an obstacle to deepening and expanding cooperation between the two countries". No major breakthrough can be expected until this problem is solved.

Building Relations with Europe

Belarus uses every opportunity it has to build and strengthen its network of bilateral and multilateral relationships with Europe. Just during the first half of September, Belarusian diplomats held meetings at different levels with officials from a dozen of European countries.

The political consultations between the foreign ministries of Belarus and Austria held in Minsk on 15 September was one such important event. The parties discussed the entire spectrum of

bilateral relations and a range of issues related to Minsk's relationship with the EU including within the Eastern Partnership.

Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) represented Belarus at an informal meeting of foreign ministers of the Eastern Partnership countries in Baku, Azerbaijan, on 9 September. Kupchyna insisted on the need to [reformat the group](#) by taking into account the latest developments in the region. She also promoted the idea of 'the integration of integrations' backed by Belarus and Russia over the past several years.

This month, this idea received unexpected support from EU Commissioner Štefan Füle. On 16 September, at a European Parliament meeting in Strasbourg, he spoke about possibility of a "European economic free zone from Lisbon to Vladivostok". In Füle's opinion, while some call the Eurasian Economic Union a project of Putin, "this union is a matter of reality. It is not only about Russia, it is also about Belarus, Kazakhstan and very soon also about Armenia".

Time will tell whether it has been a personal opinion of an outgoing commissioner or an EU foreign policy novelty.

Talks with Neighbours and the EU, Ties with Iraq – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

The gathering on the Ukrainian crisis mediated by Belarus and held on 26 August in Minsk became one of the most important recent global events.

The Belarusian government tried to make maximum use of this opportunity to promote its own national interests in its relations with the EU and its other neighbours.

Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#)'s recent visit to Warsaw focused primarily on regional security and trade relations. Belarus also managed to substantially improve its ties with Iraq.

Lukashenka Talks with Neighbours, EU Officials

The key foreign policy event for Belarus in August was the Minsk meeting of the Eurasian "troika", the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and three top EU commissioners. Belarus Digest covered the background and political ramifications of this meeting for Belarus in [a separate story](#).

It is telling that although [Alexander Lukashenka](#) and Vladimir Putin held no bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Minsk summit, the Belarusian president held bilateral meetings with all other parties in attendance.

His meeting with Catherine Ashton was more an issue of protocol than anything else, without any joint statement or even a mention of the bilateral discussion. Still, any dialogue at such a high level seemed impossible only a few weeks ago.

Time will tell whether this meeting helped the parties to start building the trust they need to design and implement a package of reciprocal steps to normalise their relations. However, Lukashenka's appreciation of the EU's role in the peace process in Ukraine, expressed during a phone call with his Serbian counterpart on 1 September and made public by his press service, looks like a positive sign.

Lukashenka and Poroshenko discussed several bilateral issues besides the Ukrainian crisis, including strengthening of

mutual trade and economic relations, especially in the energy arena, and the official demarcation of Belarus-Ukraine border. However, Lukashenka's press service chose to keep quiet about these bilateral discussions. They focused solely on the crisis in Ukraine and potential implications of the country's association agreement with the EU for its neighbours.

Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev chose to stay in Minsk overnight after the Minsk meeting to continue his discussions with Alexander Lukashenka. The two leaders may have found common ground with regard to their status in the Eurasian Union. However, unlike Nazarbayev, Lukashenka now prefers to refrain from any public statements criticising the EaEU.

Warsaw and Minsk Discuss Ukraine

Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei paid a working visit to Poland on 28-29 August. In Warsaw, he met with his Polish counterpart Radosław Sikorski and Janusz Piechociński, Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy.

The talks focused on the situation in and around Ukraine. Vladimir Makei shared his assessment of the Minsk meeting. Radosław Sikorski said that the fact that Russia and Ukraine were Belarus and Poland's immediate neighbours was "the cause of their great concern about what was happening between these two countries."

Poland certainly values Belarus as an important source of insider information about Russia's intentions towards Ukraine. The Polish government also appreciates the measured position the Belarusian authorities have taken in the Ukraine crisis from its very inception.

Polish PM Donald [Tusk already called Lukashenka](#) in April to discuss this issue. This move surprised many of those who are aware of Lukashenka's pariah status in the West. National security considerations seem to have outweighed the

reluctance of dealing with Lukashenka's regime. Sikorski's invitation to Makei to visit Warsaw is a continuation of this policy line.

No Breakthrough in Polish-Belarusian Relations – Yet

The foreign ministers also discussed bilateral relations. Radosław Sikorski expressed Poland's satisfaction with the progress achieved during the bilateral talks. Indeed, the two countries have recently established [contacts](#) on the level of deputy ministers on a monthly basis. The dialogue has focused predominately on trade, visa issues, trans-border and cultural cooperation.

At the press briefing after their meeting on 28 August, Sikorski mentioned some conversations on consular matters, the forthcoming signing of an agreement in the field of education as well as increased historical dialogue among positive examples of cooperation. The Polish minister spoke in favour of upgrading the existing legal framework of bilateral relations as "some agreements dated back to Soviet times". He also rejoiced in Makei's meeting with the minister of economy, seeing it as another positive step forward.

Vladimir Makei refrained from highlighting any specific areas of bilateral cooperation during his press briefing. He announced that the parties had agreed on "holding a separate meeting on bilateral relations in the future". However, according to Makei, "this meeting requires thorough preparations".

Translated from diplomatic language, this means that such a meeting is unlikely to happen any time soon. Any breakthrough in bilateral relations will come only after Belarus takes serious steps to calm the West's concerns about political freedoms and the human rights situation in the country.

Belarus Successfully Restores Its Relationship with Iraq

Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei made an official visit to Iraq on 23 and 24 August. This was the highest-level Belarusian delegation to visit this country in the post-Saddam era.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime by the US and allied military forces in 2003 dealt a crushing blow to relations between Belarus and Iraq. Lukashenka's regime was then one of the staunchest supporters of Hussein in the world. It used this status mostly to promote its economic interests. Some allegations were also made about [military cooperation](#) between the two regimes.

The new Iraqi authorities had little appreciation for this old friendship and relations between the two nations practically froze. Belarus closed down its diplomatic mission in Baghdad, and Iraq reopened its embassy in Minsk only three years ago.

However, this difficult period seems to be over. Vladimir Makei met with several of the most important top-ranking Iraqi officials during his trip to Baghdad. This list of officials included the president, the current and future prime ministers, parliament's speaker, and foreign and oil ministers. Iraq's President Muhammad Fuad Masum interpreted Makei's visit as a sign of support to the Iraqi authorities in their ongoing fight against extremism.

During its visit, Belarus' top diplomat predictably emphasised its trade and investment interests. Belarus seeks to enter Iraq's lucrative oil market with its equipment. Two countries signed an agreement on mutual protection for investments. They also confirmed plans to organise another meeting of the bilateral commission on trade and economic cooperation and a visit of Iraqi businessmen to Belarus.

Minsk now seems to be ready to stage a comeback in Iraq. Yet much depends on whether Belarusian business will be able to deal with Iraq's omnipresent corruption.

Belarus Seeks to Host Ukraine Talks, Liberalise Visa Regimes, Reform EaP – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) instructed his ambassadors to prepare to withstand and counter soft-power pressure from global players, a category that implicitly includes Russia.

Meanwhile, Minsk is getting ready to host talks between the parties in conflict in the Ukrainian crisis.

At a meeting in Brussels, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) proposed to include Russia in the Eastern Partnership's (EaP) events and activities so that Moscow had a say in European integration matters. Belarus also sought to make foreign travel easier for its own citizens.

Minsk to Host Talks on Ukraine

On 29 July, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko asked his Belarusian counterpart to host talks between a tripartite contact group on Ukraine. Lukashenka did not hesitate to agree.

Ukraine wants its former president Leonid Kuchma, Russia's ambassador to Kyiv Mikhail Zurabov and a representative from the OSCE to discuss the release of hostages and secure access for international investigators to the MH17 crash site.

Several reports suggested that pro-Russian separatists may participate in the meeting in Minsk. Lukashenka's office said

in its initial communiqué that 'all parties concerned' would be involved in talks.

Belarus' special relationship with both the Russian and Ukrainian authorities makes Minsk a perfect venue for such talks. However, at this stage Belarus' role will be limited to a strictly technical one.

Lukashenka refrains from posing as an [unsolicited intermediary](#) in the negotiations, which have only the faintest chances of producing a major breakthrough.

Senior Diplomats Getting Trained

Belarusian ambassadors and senior consular officers from around the world gathered in Minsk on 10 – 18 July for their regular mid-summer meeting. This training event takes place annually after Belarus' ambassadors host Nation Day receptions in their respective countries of accreditation.

Opening the event, Vladimir Makei stressed that while its programme covered the widest possible range of topics, including politics, history, culture, sports and the media, “the main emphasis was placed on economic issues”.

Indeed, the Belarusian ambassadors at this point remain little more than [sales reps with diplomatic passports](#). The lectures and practical events focused almost exclusively on how to promote Belarusian exports and attract foreign investment to the country.

The diplomats mostly met with people from government agencies in charge of the real economy, but also representatives from major export-oriented companies.

Ambassadors were also brought together to discuss trade and investment issues at a meeting with First Deputy Prime Minister [Uladzimir Siamashka](#) held on 14 July.

Lukashenka Concerned about New Threats

The training event culminated into an unexpected meeting with Alexander Lukashenka on 17 July. The last time the president received the ambassadors was five years ago. The latest international developments, unfolding right in the neighbouring Ukraine, naturally warranted calling such a high level meeting.

Lukashenka refrained from designating the West as the only threat to Belarusian sovereignty

Unlike most of his statements from years' past, Lukashenka refrained from designating the West as the only threat to Belarusian sovereignty. He claimed that “so-called 'soft power' would be used to furthest extent possible all around the perimeter of our borders”, unambiguously establishing Russia as one of the 'global players' Belarus has to deal with.

The president seemed to hear [his envoys' complaints](#) about the inefficiency of export-promoting efforts taken by domestic manufacturers. As a result, he ordered a thorough overhaul of Belarusian exporters' trading and dealer networks. Lukashenka also called for highly qualified professionals who speak foreign languages fluently to head the sales departments of major exporters.

Despite these proposals and a slight shift in his rhetoric, Lukashenka still holds the ambassadors personally responsible for achieving the targeted figures in foreign trade and investment in the countries where they serve.

Europe Remains in Focus

Belarus wants to grow its cooperation with Europe in a large number of potential domains, with a particular emphasis on trade, investment and technology transfers, but with no real changes in its domestic policies.

The need for closer relations has gained substantial importance as of late in view of the geopolitical revolution in the region provoked by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, the Belarusian authorities are well aware of Europe's reciprocal interest in having Belarus be an independent player.

As Lukashenka stressed during his meeting with Vladimir Makei on 28 July, "the European Union, as well as the US, has begun talking to Belarus – albeit through clenched teeth".

Earlier in July, Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) went to Brussels to attend a second round of consultations on modernisation. This dialogue is primarily aimed at mapping out the best form of future cooperation between Belarus and the EU.

However, despite the visible intensification of the working-level dialogue, the regime is not yet ready to take major steps that would lead to full normalisation of relations.

Seeking to Reformat the Eastern Partnership

Belarus recently began to show more interest in developing cooperation with Europe within the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

This initiative is bound to undergo serious changes after three out of six partner countries – Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – signed association agreements with the EU.

Even Edgars Rinkēvičs, the Foreign Minister of Latvia, who will host the EaP summit next year, stressed the need for a more individualised approach towards EaP partners during his recent visit to Kyiv.

The Belarusian diplomats began actively promoting the 'reformatting' of the EaP during an [informal meeting of the Visegrád Group and EaP countries in Budapest](#) in April 2014.

Belarus hopes to transform the EaP into an initiative which would help it to achieve development goals without making many concessions in democratisation or human rights issues.

Makei also spoke in favour of engaging Russia in the EaP's activities in order to avoid creating new dividing lines in the region

Vladimir Makei had these very interests in mind when he attended the EaP foreign ministers' meeting on 22 July in Brussels. The foreign minister stressed the need for greater differentiation in the relations between the EU and its partner countries, ones that would take into account their specific needs, interests and integration aspirations.

Makei also spoke in favour of engaging Russia in the EaP's activities in order to avoid creating new dividing lines in the region. This may well be Belarus' own idea, meant to appease eventual Russian fears over Belarus' rapprochement with Europe.

It could also be an initiative promoted at Russia's instigation. In any case, this proposition has slim chances to materialise into something substantial in the current context.

Talking to Its EU Neighbours

Vladimir Makei discussed his position on the reformation of the EaP with Lithuania's Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius during the latter's working visit to Minsk on 24 and 25 July. Despite EU sanctions, Lithuania finds it appropriate to maintain regular dialogue with its southern neighbour on the ministerial level.

Linkevičius met with Prime Minister [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#) and held extensive negotiations with Makei. The two countries focused on trade, investments, transport and transit, as well as border infrastructure and visa issues. They also discussed regional security matters in view of the situation around

Ukraine.

Belarus also held a series of working-level bilateral consultations with Poland on political, trade, consular and trans-border cooperation issues in July.

Progress Made with Visa Issues

☒ Lately, the Belarusian foreign ministry has been hard at work on bringing about the liberalisation or abolition of visa regimes with several foreign countries.

In his interview with the Belarusian TV channel STV, Foreign Minister Makei said that such negotiations were under way with about fifteen countries.

Over the past months, Belarusian citizens have gained the right to travel without visas to Turkey, Mongolia and Ecuador.

In July, Belarus and the US agreed to mutually lower their visa fees to \$160. Talks on visa abolition with Israel are progressing well and could result in an agreement in the near future.

At the same time, Belarusian diplomats are much less optimistic about prospects with regards to visa regime liberalisation with the Schengen countries. The negotiations have so far failed to progress beyond an exchange of views on the two parties' respective initial offers.

Currently, Belarusians can travel without visas only to 22 countries. Ten of them are post-Soviet states.

Belarus Opens New Embassies, Struggles to Remain Neutral on Ukraine – Foreign Policy Digest

Despite the need to please Russia during the talks on the Eurasian Union, Belarus managed to avoid criticising the Ukrainian authorities. Minsk remains a strong supporter of Ukraine's unity and stability.

Belarus pursued its policy of gradual engagement with the EU through its Central European members. Meanwhile, the country is actively looking for new export markets, mostly in Asia and Latin America. Two new embassies, in Mongolia and Ecuador, will open soon.

Struggling to Maintain Neutrality on Ukraine

Belarus has stood by its policy of neutrality in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. However, during the last two weeks it has largely avoided any overt expression of sympathy and solidarity with the Ukrainian government.

Minsk has been sure to carefully word all of its official statements.

The Foreign Ministry expressed its "deep concern and anxiety" over the developments in Ukraine. It appealed to all political forces "to immediately stop the bloodshed and to take real steps towards building national dialogue". The ministry also urged Belarusian citizens to avoid visiting Ukraine and getting involved in political events there.

On several occasions, Alexander Lukashenka criticised the West's conduct in the Ukrainian crisis. He expressed his

displeasure with the "absolutely inadequate response by our so-called Western partners" to the tragedy in Odessa.

The Belarusian president also accused them of escalating tension by imposing economic sanctions on Russia. Lukashenka capitalised on this situation by trying to sway Russia to buy more from Belarus.

There is one explanation for this certain tilt in balance towards Russia. Belarus could not afford alienating Russia in the midst of decisive talks on the Eurasian Union integration project. However, Minsk has remained faithful to its public position on the legitimacy of the Ukrainian authorities and the inadmissibility of the federalisation of Ukraine.

Eastern Partnership through Central Europe

Belarus skipped the Eastern Partnership summit held on 24 and 25 April in Prague. Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makej](#) touched on this topic briefly in his interview to the Czech daily Lidové Noviny. According to him, the Czech government failed to "invite those people who formulate and make policy decisions". For his part, Commissioner Štefan Füle stressed at the summit that the EU remained committed to its stated position on Belarus.

However, only a few days later Belarus attended an informal meeting of the Visegrád Group and Eastern Partnership countries in Budapest. Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) stressed there the need to "rethink and streamline the initiative ... in view of new challenges and development of the situation in the region".

Kupchyna claimed that Belarus' western partners and other EaP members supported this approach. It remains to be seen what practical steps will be taken to implement this rather general intention.

Alena Kupchyna's visit to Budapest followed up on a series of steps to [warm relations between Belarus and Central European countries](#). Belarus may find it easier to develop dialogue with the Visegrád Four than with Old Europe. This informal gathering was also a perfect opportunity for Kupchyna to talk to Štefan Füle and her Hungarian counterparts.

As for the Eastern Partnership *per se*, Belarus' ambitions remain quite modest. Most EaP members have embarked upon the integration path with the EU. Belarus and Azerbaijan have mostly focused on [visa issues](#).

Ambassadors as Potential Idlers

The president of Belarus appointed three new ambassadors. They are all career diplomats. Two of them, Stanislau Chepurnoj and Ihar Palujan, will open new Belarusian embassies in two countries, Mongolia and Ecuador. Mikalaj Barysievich, who once served as Lukashenka's spokesman, will head the Belarusian mission in the Netherlands.

At the last moment, Lukashenka appeared to be seized with doubts about the need for opening new missions abroad: "We'd better not be hasty and appoint ambassadors to where they will have nothing to do". He stressed the absolute priority of trade promotion in their ambassadorial work. On this point, Mongolia and Ecuador might have not looked like serious partners to him.



Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei had to defend his choice for the new diplomatic outposts. However, he admitted that his ministry "did not always take into consideration all possible options when appointing some heads of missions".

Today, Belarus has a diplomatic presence in over 50 countries. The lion's share of its diplomatic missions are in

post-Soviet states and former Eastern bloc countries. Georgia is here the most notable exception.

The priority now is to expand Belarus' presence in Asia and Latin America. However, the latter, together with Africa, remains largely neglected by Belarus

Belarus is surprisingly absent from such economic strongholds and regional powers as Spain, Norway, Mexico, Chile, Saudi Arabia, Angola, Singapore and Malaysia. However, a Belarusian mission will appear this year in Australia, one of the world's wealthiest and largest countries.

High-level Visitors in Minsk

Minsk received several high-level guests in late April and early May. Besides the leaders of Russia and Kazakhstan who came to work on their joint integration project, the list of visitors included prime minister of Cambodia, speaker of the parliament of Laos and the foreign ministers of Armenia, Mozambique and Venezuela.

Development of trade and economic relations remained the main topic of all discussions. Cooperation with Southeast Asia deserves a special mention. The high-level visitors from this region came to Minsk only a few weeks after Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei visited Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Belarus is eager to expand trade relations with these fast-growing economies, which have rather poor human rights records.

Expanding Presence in UN Bodies

Belarus was elected by consensus to several subsidiary bodies of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The list includes the Commission on Population and Development, the UNICEF's Executive Board, the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Governing Council of UN-Habitat, and the UNHCR's Executive Committee.

The Belarusian mission to the UN managed to negotiate a trade-off list of candidacies with other members of the Eastern European Group and avoid a competitive election. This unofficial voting bloc at the UN consists of 23 post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The fact that Belarus currently holds one of the Group's six seats in ECOSOC also helps in the election matters.

Countries often exchange voting support and offer political or economic favours to get their candidature to the most important UN bodies supported by other countries. Then, human rights or political concerns often fall by the wayside. The visit of Jim Bolder, former prime minister of New Zealand, to Belarus can provide a good illustration here. Mr Bolder came as a special envoy to lobby his country's candidature to the UN Security Council.