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## Pariah State No More: Belarus' International Actorness against the Backdrop of the Ukraine Conflict

The Ukraine conflict has been raising fears and concerns in countries across the region, both about the possible spillover of instability and as a result of the emergence of a new revisionist Russian posture, which appears to pose an existential threat to the survival and sovereignty of states in the region. In Belarus, these concerns have evolved together with an unprecedented enhancement of the country's international and diplomatic *actorness*, which has emerged as a result of Belarus' efforts to promote and host diplomatic negotiations on Ukraine since July 2014.

By mid-2017, over 60 meetings had been held in various formats, including regular meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), comprised of senior representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and established to facilitate a diplomatic resolution of the Ukraine crisis, and occasional bilateral talks such as those held in August 2017 between the US Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations, Kurt Volker, and the Assistant to the President of Russia, Vladislav Surkov. Two of these sessions were particularly important. The first, known as Minsk I, took place in September 2014 and brought together Ukraine, Russia, and the leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (the DPR and the LPR), with the OSCE represented by Heidi Tagliavini. The second, Minsk II, took place in February 2015 in the so-called Normandy Format, consisting of representatives of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine. The Belarusian leadership also offered to provide the necessary infrastructure for further talks. In 2017, Belarus' international presence has been further strengthened by its hosting, for the first time, of the annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. At the opening meeting of the event, the Belarusian president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, presented the idea of a global security conference – the “Helsinki 2” initiative.

Each of these initiatives would have seemed highly improbable just four years ago, and it was hard to imagine that Western actors would one day be praising the Belarusian authorities for their international engagement. In the period prior to the Ukraine crisis, Belarus' relations and political contacts with the West had been limited, and sanctions were often a cornerstone of the policies of the Western actors. EU sanctions, for instance, in force since

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2004, were at some point considered “one of the most complete CFSP [the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy] sanctions regimes in force”.<sup>1</sup> The US has not had an ambassador in Minsk since 2008.<sup>2</sup>

### *Belarus’ Position on the Ukraine Conflict*

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon referred to Belarus’ position on the Ukraine conflict as a “wise policy”.<sup>3</sup> Belarus’ own interpretation of its approach was illustrated by a metaphor used by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uladzimir Makey: When two brothers fight, the third must reconcile them.<sup>4</sup> This position, as argued below, has not been easy to maintain, as it entailed striking a balance between Belarus’ alliance obligations towards Russia on the one hand and its pro-Ukraine position, which earned Belarus the appreciation of Ukraine and the West, on the other.

That Belarus’ position is informed by its close alliance with Russia was manifest in Belarus’ vote against UN General Assembly Resolution No. 68/39 condemning the annexation of Crimea on 27 March 2014. The Belarusian leadership has also backed up several key arguments within Moscow’s official narrative on Ukraine, including the claim that Russia had no option other than to support the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Crimea in the face of threats associated with the prospect of Ukraine’s joining NATO and increasing restrictions on the use of the Russian language in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the Belarusian approach diverges from Moscow on a number of points. In contrast to Russian diplomats and politicians, who stigmatize Ukraine’s leadership as a “junta” and as a group of ultranationalist radicals who, controlled by the US, lack legitimate and legal authority, Belarus has demonstrated openness towards the Ukrainian leadership from the start. The Belarusian president met Ukraine’s interim president Oleksandr Turchinov as early as March 2014 and attended the inauguration of President Petro Poroshenko in Kyiv in June 2014. Furthermore, while Moscow regarded the referenda in eastern Ukraine as legitimate expressions of popular

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1 Clara Portela, *The European Union and Belarus: Sanctions and partnership?* In: *Comparative European Politics* 4/2011, pp. 486-505, here. p. 487.

2 The US has recently increased the number of staff serving at its embassy in Minsk, including by the appointment and accreditation of Colonel Michael C. VanDeVelde as Defence Attaché.

3 BelTA (Belarusian Telegraph Agency), *UN Secretary General praises Belarus’ role in handling Ukraine conflict*, 22 September 2014, at: <http://eng.belta.by/politics/view/un-secretary-general-praises-belarus-role-in-handling-ukraine-conflict-6819-2014>.

4 Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, *Intervyu Ministra inostrannykh del Belarusi V. Makeya ispanskomu izdaniyu “El Pais” (7 iyulya 2017 g., g.Minsk)* [Interview with Minister for Foreign Affairs U. Makey in the Spanish publication “El Pais”, (7 July 2017, Minsk)], at: <http://mfa.gov.by/press/smi/afe7d554109e0bfd.html>.

5 Cf. Alena Vyotskaya Guedes Vieira, *Ukraine’s Crisis and Russia’s Closest Allies: A Reinforced Intra-Alliance Security Dilemma at Work*, in: *The International Spectator*, 4/2014, pp. 97-111.

will that justified major constitutional change, the Belarusian leadership has emphasized the importance of Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence, stressing that the option of a loose federation would be a destabilizing factor for Ukraine and the region alike. In addition, Belarus adopted a relatively cautious approach towards the separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk: While consistently condemning radicalism in Ukraine, the official Belarusian narrative has avoided mentioning the DPR and the LPR. In parallel, Belarus has opted to maintain and strengthen economic co-operation with Ukraine and co-operation on military technology. This includes continuing to export oil products to Kyiv, which is critical to Ukraine's efforts to maintain its military capabilities and a stable fuel market.

### *Belarus' Rapprochement with the West: Pariah State No More*

Belarus' efforts to de-escalate the Ukraine conflict are transforming the state's image as an international pariah and "Europe's last dictatorship". Western actors such as former US Secretary of State John Kerry have expressed their appreciation of Belarusian "leadership in supporting a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Ukraine and its commitment to good relations with all the countries".<sup>6</sup> The European Council similarly maintained that it "values Belarus' constructive role in the region".<sup>7</sup> This appreciation of Belarusian efforts has enabled a fundamental shift in Belarus' relations with the West.

In February 2016, following five years of sanctions, the EU lifted most of its restrictive measures against Belarus (they had already been suspended in October 2015), while maintaining the arms embargo and sanctions on four members of the security services suspected of being involved in political disappearances in 1999-2000. The lifted measures included visa bans and asset freezes targeting 170 individuals, including the Belarusian president. The EU's decision was facilitated by the release of political prisoners in Belarus in August 2015, including Mikalai Statkevich, a presidential candidate in 2010. In 2016, the EU increased its bilateral assistance to Belarus, with roughly half of the financing earmarked for the support of private sector development.<sup>8</sup> In 2015, the US Department of the Treasury suspended sanctions against nine Belarusian companies, including *Belnaftekhim*, the state petrochemical company and Belarus' largest oil refiner. Since then, these sanctions relief measures have been renewed every six months, with the most re-

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6 U.S. Embassy in Belarus, *Statement by Secretary Kerry on the Occasion of the National Day of the Republic of Belarus (July 3)*, at: <https://by.usembassy.gov/statement-secretary-kerry-occasion-national-day-republic-belarus-july-3>.

7 European Council/Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Belarus*, 15 February 2016, at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/15-fac-belarus-conclusions>.

8 Cf. European Commission, *New EU support to private sector development and strengthening institutions in Belarus*, Brussels, 19 September 2016, at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-16-3107\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-3107_en.htm).

cent general licence covering the period from April 2017 to the end of October 2017. Restrictive measures against members of the political and secret service elite, including the Belarusian president, have remained in place.<sup>9</sup>

When the riot police brutally dispersed peaceful protesters in Minsk in March 2017, an action that was accompanied by a wave of detentions, both the US and the EU voiced concern and condemned the crackdown. A European Parliament resolution of 6 April 2017 recalled that the EU sanctions had been lifted “as a gesture of goodwill to encourage Belarus to improve its human rights, democracy and rule of law record”, indicating that new restrictive measures would be considered if the Belarusian authorities failed to conduct an impartial investigation into possible arbitrary detentions and infringements of the protesters’ human rights.<sup>10</sup> However, no further sanctions were introduced against Belarus by either the US or the EU.

Domestically, the demonstrations have once again shown that internal dissent, this time stemming from the so-called “social parasite tax” (requiring unemployed citizens who work less than 183 days a year to pay a 230 euro tax), could be mobilized in Belarus. The authorities’ reaction was hardly surprising; the Ukraine conflict has served as a reminder of how rapidly internal destabilization can put an end to a political regime. Meanwhile, the Belarusian leadership was facing a new reality, with the dangers to its regime no longer stemming exclusively from the political liberalization promoted by the West but also from the possibility of Moscow’s rapid exploitation of unrest. This explains in part the Belarusian authorities’ relatively restrained response in March 2017, which avoided long-term detentions and even harsher measures, contrary to the habitual behaviour of the regime. Fines and short prison sentences for the detained protesters were sufficient to send a signal that Russia had no basis on which to interfere and that the Belarusian authorities had the situation under control, while avoiding the possible deterioration of its relationship with the West. Indeed, the rapprochement between Belarus and the West has continued. In July 2017 alone, the Belarusian authorities received a US Congressional delegation (led by Senator Roger Wicker) and four further delegations, including a British Parliamentary delegation, a delegation consisting of senior representatives of the French and German foreign ministries, a delegation with the Latvian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Edgars Rinkēvičs, and a delegation from the European Parliament, led by Bogdan Zdrojewski. This final visit was the result of negotiations on the participation of members of Belarus’ House of Representatives in the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, the interparliamentary forum of the EU’s Eastern Part-

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9 Cf. The White House, Letter from the President – National Emergencies Act, 13 June 2017, at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/letter-president-national-emergencies-act>.

10 European Parliament Resolution of 6 April 2017 on the situation in Belarus, Strasbourg, 6 April 2017, at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2017-0126&format=XML&language=EN>.

nership. Thus far, members of the Belarusian opposition have been considered the only legitimate representatives of the country.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, this was not the first time there had been rapprochement with the West and the lifting of sanctions. Back in 2008, for instance, Belarus' relations with the West had been warming,<sup>12</sup> at least until this thaw was interrupted by mass arrests following the December 2010 presidential elections and Western actors introduced stricter sanctions, such as those imposed by the EU in January and June 2011. The crucial difference in Belarus-Western rapprochement in the new, post-2014 context resides in the new meaning ascribed to it by Minsk, namely as a means of guaranteeing Belarusian sovereignty. In other words, the government in Minsk has started to see Belarus' independence as having been "strengthened as a result of our efforts to develop trade and humanitarian relations with the European and American partners".<sup>13</sup> This perception is shared by Western actors: US sanctions relief has been "designed to support Belarus' economic independence", to "increase Belarus' political independence, and to support its sovereignty and territorial integrity".<sup>14</sup> The ensuing pattern of interaction between Belarus and the West is thus fundamentally different from that which had prevailed previously, when Belarus used the conditions imposed by the EU and the US to extract benefits from Moscow.<sup>15</sup>

Belarus' sovereignty could no longer be taken for granted: The events in Ukraine, and especially Crimea, were completely unexpected, and the possibility that they could be repeated in Belarus could not be ignored. In 2015, Belarus undertook a mass mobilization of its reservists and amended the laws "On Defence" and "On Martial Law", while the new Military Doctrine adopted in 2016 speaks of "internal armed conflict" in reference to the possibility of a Donbas-type scenario.<sup>16</sup> The authorities are now supporting a policy of na-

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- 11 Cf. Grigory Ioffe, Belarus Gains New Friends, While Lukashenka Retains His Popularity Region-Wide, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 99/2016, at: <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-gains-new-friends-while-lukashenka-retains-his-popularity-region-wide>.
  - 12 Cf. Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, *Opening the European Commission's Delegation in Minsk: Do EU-Belarus relations need a rethink?* The Finnish Institute of International Affairs Briefing Paper 18. 7 April 2008, at: [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/55765/20080407\\_Opening\\_the\\_European\\_Commission.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/55765/20080407_Opening_the_European_Commission.pdf); Elena Kropacheva, Presidential Election in Belarus in 2010: The Winner Takes It All? In: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2011*, Baden-Baden 2012, pp. 87-105.
  - 13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, cited above (Note 4; author's translation).
  - 14 U.S. Embassy in Belarus, *Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia Bridget Brink Remarks to the Press*, 19 October 2016, at: <https://by.usembassy.gov/deputy-assistant-secretary-state-europe-eurasia-bridget-brink-remarks-press-3>.
  - 15 Cf. Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, The Many Patterns of Europeanization: European Union Relations with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, in: Teresa Cierco (ed), *The European Union Neighbourhood: Challenges and Opportunities*, Farnham 2013, pp. 57-82.
  - 16 Cf. Arseni Sivitski, Belarus's New Military Doctrine: What's the Message? *BelarusDigest*, 1 September 2016, at: <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-new-military-doctrine-whats-the-message>; Siarhei Bohdan, Is Lukashenka Preparing for a War? *Bela-*

tional revival. The idea, broached by some Russian political actors, that Belarus should be part of the “Russian World” (or even Russia itself) and that ethnic Russians living in Belarus need protection has been vigorously rejected at the highest political level.

The rapprochement between Belarus and the West raised the question of whether Western actors might de-emphasize the issue of democratic reforms, which has thus far been a cornerstone of EU, US, OSCE, and Council of Europe engagement with the Belarusian leadership. There was a growing understanding among Western actors that Belarus needed to be rewarded for its efforts to prevent the escalation of the Ukraine conflict. A shift in priorities could be confirmed to the extent that sanctions had been lifted in spite of the lack of substantial progress in undertaking reforms.

Western actors committed to supporting democratic reforms in Belarus eventually faced a new dilemma. In order to maintain consistency in their engagement with the Belarusian authorities, they had to continue to call for democratic reforms and improvements to the human rights situation. This would require them to impose strict sanctions as often as necessary. However, this brought with it the danger that the Belarusian regime would, in its isolation, become ever more dependent on Russia, as had happened before. And the possibility of growing Russian influence over Belarus (or even its absorption by Moscow) would hardly be good news for Belarus, the region, or the West.

#### *The Politics of the Russia-Belarus Alliance*

The alliance between Russia and Belarus has become the subject of some controversy in the context of the Ukraine conflict.<sup>17</sup> Differences in the allies’ interests have become more evident, and each side has developed concerns about the other’s reliability. The ensuing tension, known as the intra-alliance security dilemma, has reinforced both Russia’s “fear of abandonment” and Belarus’ “fear of entrapment”. The former refers to the fear of being deserted or losing support and is based on the perception of a risk that the partner will defect, taking into account the cost to the other ally of doing so. The fear of entrapment, in turn, refers to the possibility of being dragged, via one’s alliance commitments, into a conflict over interests held by an ally, even though one might not be a party to those interests.<sup>18</sup>

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*rusDigest*, 5 February 2017, at: <https://belarusdigest.com/story/is-lukashenka-preparing-for-a-war>.

17 The alliance between Russia and Belarus is based upon a Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation (1995) and a Defence Pact (1997). In practical terms, it consists in a joint army group and a common air defence system. See: Alena Vieira, *The Politico-Military Alliance of Russia and Belarus: Re-Examining the Role of NATO and the EU in Light of the Intra-Alliance Security Dilemma*, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 4/2014, pp. 557-577.

18 Cf. Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Ithaca, NY, 1997.

One of the issues that testify to the complexity of the bilateral relationship concerns Russian plans to establish an airbase on Belarusian territory. Belarus' traditional importance to Russia as a strategic buffer and a means of reinforcing Russia's strategic depth has increased sharply following the redeployment of NATO and US aircraft in the region and plans to strengthen their military presence in the Baltic Sea region and Poland.<sup>19</sup> Starting in 2013, Russia's fear of abandonment, reinforced by Belarus' rapprochement with the West, led the Russian leadership to push for the creation of the airbase. This included making public a draft agreement on the establishment of the base, which appeared on Russia's official government website on 8 September 2015.<sup>20</sup>

For its part, Belarus' opposition to the airbase proposal is informed by its fear of entrapment, i.e. of being drawn into a conflict between Russia and the West, which has been reinforced by concerns over Belarus' own sovereignty. The draft agreement released in Russia in September 2015 has never been signed by Belarus; the Belarusian president claimed not to know anything about it.<sup>21</sup> Belarus has since voiced its reservations, with the Belarusian minister for foreign affairs maintaining that the airbase does not make sense since "modern armaments allow Russia to react equally rapidly from its own territory", adding that Belarus "would like to avoid being a factor of tension/irritation in the region".<sup>22</sup>

Another case of contentious alliance politics concerns the joint Russia-Belarus "Zapad 2017" military exercise. Planned to be held in Belarus on 14-20 September 2017, the drills raised NATO's and Ukraine's concerns about the possibility of Russian troops' remaining on Belarusian territory following the conclusion of the exercises. The Belarusian side has been especially eager to mitigate its Western neighbours' concerns and to ensure that the drills do not become a source of tension. As well as inviting military observers from NATO and non-NATO countries, the OSCE, and the Red Cross, Minsk began to provide advance briefings on the exercise to NATO and other Western countries, paralleling the provision of similar information by Russia.<sup>23</sup> The Belarusian president has personally reassured Kyiv that Belarus will not

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19 In the case of armed conflict with NATO, Belarusian territory also becomes crucial to Russia as a means of establishing a land connection with its Kaliningrad exclave, closing the so-called Suwalki Gap, which is crucial in geostrategic terms as a means of separating the Baltic states from other NATO allies.

20 The draft did not specify the exact location of the base or the military units to be deployed. Cf. Yury Tsarik, *A Containing Ally: Belarus' Regional Role in the Context of the New Containment*, KKI Studies, T-2016/7, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Budapest, 2016, p. 12, at: [http://old.csfps.by/files/files/07\\_kki-studies\\_blr\\_tsarik\\_20160919.pdf](http://old.csfps.by/files/files/07_kki-studies_blr_tsarik_20160919.pdf).

21 Cf. BBC, *Belarus "does not need" Russia air base – Lukashenko*, 7 October 2015, at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34463901>.

22 Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, cited above (Note 4).

23 Cf. Brian Whitmore, *The Morning Vertical*, RFL/RL, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-morning-vertical-august-17-2017/28681680.html>.



become a platform for aggression against Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> The Belarusian efforts seemed to bear fruit: On 19 July, after meeting his Belarusian counterpart, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs announced that Riga no longer had any questions for Minsk concerning the forthcoming military exercise.<sup>25</sup>

The intra-alliance security dilemma between Russia and Belarus also affects domestic policy and has an economic and an energy dimension, as these are the most sensitive areas of co-operation between Belarus and Russia. Cases in point are the sanctions Russia imposed on Ukraine in 2013 and the retaliatory sanctions on imports of certain food products from the EU and other Western countries in 2014.<sup>26</sup> Belarus has joined neither of these sanctions regimes. This was based on a desire to avoid a deterioration in political relations with Ukraine and the West and to take advantage of new opportunities to trade with both Ukraine and Russia.

The Belarusian leadership has been eager to mitigate Russia's fear of abandonment by restating its commitment to the alliance, reiterating that it would continue to be honoured even if the military situation escalated.<sup>27</sup> Belarusian diplomats have also been keen to emphasize that Minsk's position on Ukraine was not aimed at undermining Russia's security and that Belarus is not pursuing the goal of improving relations with the West at Russia's expense.<sup>28</sup> These declarations could not prevent Russia from retaliating, however, and measures imposed by Moscow since 2015 in particular have led to an abrupt reduction in the volume of oil exported to Belarus (which is critical for its economy), to trade bans and restrictions, and to the re-emergence of border controls between the parties.<sup>29</sup> Russia did not hesitate to adopt these measures against its Belarusian ally even though they undermined the single economic space of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a key foreign policy priority for Moscow since 2010. The new circumstances clearly indicated the need to seek a new approach to alliance management, but a solution

24 Cf. Egor Kucher, Poroshenko: Lukashenko zaveril, chto iz Belorussii ne budet agressii [Poroshenko: Lukashenko has assured me that there will be no aggression launched from Belarusian territory], in: *Izvestiya*, 21 July 2017. at: <https://iz.ru/622403/2017-07-21/poroshenko-lukashenko-zaveril-chto-iz-belorussii-ne-budet-agressii>.

25 Cf. Belarusian Television Channel CTV, *Latvia's Foreign Ministry: We have no questions to Belarus concerning Zapad-2017 military drills*, at: <http://en.ctv.by/en/1500492784-belarus-national-bank-decreases-refinancing-rate-by-12-per-annum>.

26 Cf. Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, Eurasian integration: elite perspectives before and after the Ukraine crisis, in: *Post-Soviet Affairs* 6/2016, pp. 566-580.

27 Cf. BelTA (Belarusian Telegraph Agency), *Belarus i Rossiya adekvatno reagiruyut na usilenie NATO u granits Soyuznogo gosudarstva – Lukashenko* [Belarus and Russia Respond Adequately to NATO Build-up at the Border of the Union State – Lukashenko], 7 June 2016, at: <http://www.belta.by/president/view/belarus-i-rossija-adekvatno-reagirujut-na-usilenie-nato-u-granits-sojuznogo-gosudarstva-lukashenko-196423-2016>.

28 Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, cited above (Note 4).

29 Cf. Alena Vieira, A Tale of Two Unions: Russia-Belarus Integration Experience and its Lessons for the Eurasian Economic Union, in: *Journal of Borderland Studies* 1/2017, pp. 41-53. In February 2017, Russia designated "border control zones" in the regions of Smolensk, Pskov, and Bryansk, which border Belarus. This move followed Belarus' decision in January 2017 to abolish short-term entrance visas for visitors from some 80 countries (including all EU member states, the US, and Japan).

has not been found. The nature of the Russia-Belarus alliance has been changing, as reflected in the readjustment of Belarus' role as Russia's "hybrid"<sup>30</sup>, or even "containing"<sup>31</sup>, ally.

### *Towards a New Co-operation Space between the East and the West?*

From 5 to 9 July 2017, Belarus hosted a session of the Parliamentary Assembly (PA) of the OSCE, which was attended by 700 delegates from 57 countries.<sup>32</sup> This was the first time it had done so. As the Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka confessed, he could have hardly imagined a session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk "just three years ago".<sup>33</sup> In his opening address, the Belarusian president proffered his idea of a new Helsinki process, "Helsinki 2", a broad dialogue aimed at overcoming the existing differences in relations between the countries in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian region.<sup>34</sup> If the idea were to find support, Lukashenka suggested that the OSCE could announce, "as early as next year", "an enlarged OSCE meeting [...] and start preparations for the final summit".<sup>35</sup> Belarus could become the venue for the proposed comprehensive dialogue.

The ideas behind the Helsinki 2 initiative had previously been conveyed during the conferences and summits organized during Belarus' Chairmanship of the Central European Initiative (CEI), which Belarus also assumed for the first time in January 2017. The conferences and summits involved strengthening co-operation between individual integration initiatives and were accompanied by an appeal to the countries situated between Europe and Asia to take on more responsibility for fostering regional stability.<sup>36</sup> These proposals

30 Cf. Yevhen Magda in an interview with Vital Tsygankov: *Ukrainski palitolyag: Lukashjenka – heta hibrydny sayuznik Ukrainy* [Ukrainian political analyst: Lukashenko – a hybrid ally of Ukraine], Radio Svoboda, 17 August 2017, at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28682470.html>.

31 Cf. Tsarik, cited above (Note 20); Yevhen Magda in an interview with Vital Tsygankov, cited above (Note 30).

32 The Belarusian delegation (four out of six members) has voted in favour of the Minsk Declaration. The Declaration includes a condemnation of Russia's "hybrid aggression against Ukraine in Donbas" and urges Russia to "reverse the temporary occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol" and to "stop sponsoring terrorist activities in Ukraine through the inflow of fighters, money, and weapons". OSCE PA, Resolution on Restoration of the Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Ukraine, in: *Minsk Declaration and Resolutions Adopted by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Session, Minsk, 5 to 9 July 2017*, pp. 30-34, here: pp. 32-33, at: <https://www.oscepa.org/meetings/annual-sessions/2017-minsk-annual-session>.

33 Siarhei Bohdan, Belarus finally reaps tangible benefits from its neutrality policy, *BelarusDigest*, 25 July 2017, at: <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-finally-receives-some-results-in-its-neutrality-policies>.

34 Cf. President of the Republic of Belarus, *Address to OSCE PA plenary session in Minsk*, 5 July 2017, at: [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/address-to-osce-pa-plenary-session-in-minsk-16623](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/address-to-osce-pa-plenary-session-in-minsk-16623).

35 Ibid.

36 Cf. President of the Republic of Belarus, *Meeting with CEI ministers of foreign affairs*, 22 June 2017, at: [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/meeting-with-cei-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-16465](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/meeting-with-cei-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-16465).

in turn built upon the idea, actively promoted by the Belarusian leadership back in 2011, of the “integration of integrations”, which envisaged a specific role for Belarus in bringing the EAEU and the EU closer together.

The active role Belarus has played in these international forums attests to its aspiration to build upon its improved diplomatic standing and translate the official narrative that it is a source of stability and security in Europe into tangible policy. One issue with this, however, is the extent to which the Belarusian authorities are prepared to work towards gaining the legitimacy expected of an international norm entrepreneur. Belarus’ previous engagement with the West was largely a means for it to extract benefits from co-operation with Russia, and it was thus unnecessary for the Belarusian leadership to strive towards recognition from the West. But Belarus’ international aspirations and engagement now make Western recognition crucial. It may even become imperative for the Belarusian authorities to revise their position regarding citizens exercising their individual, civil, and political rights instead of merely restraining from persecuting the opposition or occasionally changing legislation. James Sherr has aptly summarized the paradox resulting from Belarus’ pursuit of its international ambitions in the absence of significant reform progress: “Belarus can build bridges to the West, but under its current regime it cannot go there”.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the crackdown on peaceful protesters on 25 March 2017, the anniversary of the declaration of the short-lived 1918 Belarusian People’s Republic, served as a reminder that a fundamental political transformation of the Belarusian regime was not in sight.

### *Conclusions*

Belarus’ position on the Ukraine conflict shows that the image it has had in the West as the “last dictatorship of Europe” and a “pariah state” is no longer accurate. A rapprochement has taken place between Belarus and the West as a consequence of the latter’s positive view of Belarusian diplomatic efforts on Ukraine. The Belarusian leadership has in turn started to assign a different meaning to its co-operation with the West, namely as a means of guaranteeing its own sovereignty. The dilemma arising for the Western actors in this respect has been how to reconcile their co-operation with a Belarus that is focused on guaranteeing its own sovereignty with the emphasis on human rights and political freedoms that has been a cornerstone of previous Western engagement with Belarus. Meanwhile, the Belarusian leadership has faced new dilemmas of its own. It has been more difficult for Belarus to strike a balance between its alliance obligations towards Russia and its pro-Ukraine position, as is apparent in tensions between the two allies over a number of issues, including Russia’s planned airbase in Belarus, the Zapad 2017 exer-

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37 James Sherr, *The New East-West Discord. Russian Objectives, Western Interests*, Clingendael Report. December 2015.

cise, and growing disagreements over trade and energy matters. Furthermore, the launch of new proposals on global security co-operation, such as Helsinki 2, which testified to Belarus' international ambitions, eventually raised the question of the extent to which the Belarusian leadership was prepared to change in order to act as an international norm entrepreneur. With no substantial reform progress, Belarus' diplomatic activism remains only one of many necessary steps towards its international legitimacy and acceptance.