

MINSK BAROMETER

Monitoring of
foreign policy and
regional security

Dear readers!

We proudly present a new analytical product, the Minsk Barometer, a regular review of Belarus's foreign policy developments, as well as the situation in national and regional security.

The Minsk Barometer is a response to the growing interest in Belarusian and regional issues, especially security matters, from both the international expert community and decision-makers. Our mission is to provide an all-round impartial analysis of developments in international relations and regional security involving Belarus.

The Minsk Barometer's team of authors will analyze five foreign policy dimensions (Russia, the EU, China, the U.S., and Ukraine), as well as the status of national and regional security on a bimonthly basis, and calculate values for each dimension based upon the findings of the analysis, with a view to visualizing dynamics and identifying trends for further development of the situation.

We hope the Minsk Barometer will contribute to the deeper understanding of processes in international relations and security, and consequently, better substantiated political decision-making.

We wish you interesting and helpful reading and will be pleased to have your comments, questions, and recommendations on the improvement of this review.

Best regards,

Dzianis Melyantsou,
Editor, the Minsk Barometer
Head of Foreign Policy of Belarus programme,
Minsk Dialogue expert initiative

3 Relationship with Russia

**6 Relationship with the
European Union**

9 Relationship with China

13 Relationship with U.S.

**16 Relationship with
Ukraine**

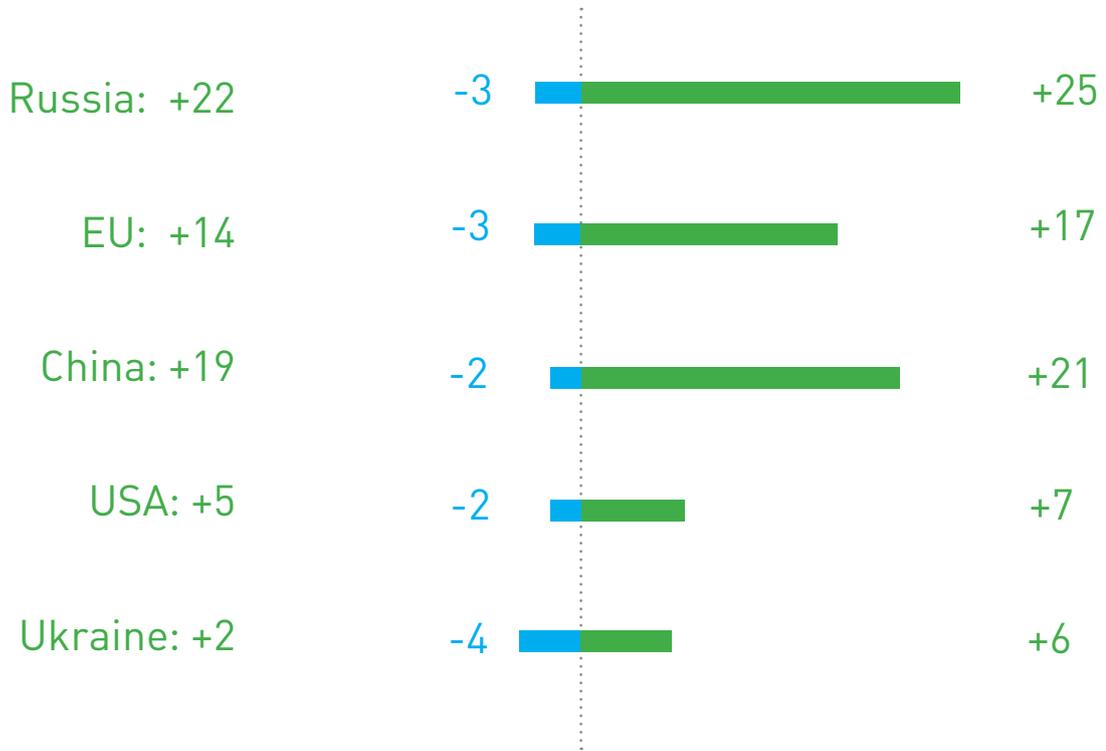
20 Security Barometer

26 Appendix 1
Catalogue of events underlying
the relations development
indices

31 Appendix 2
Catalogue of events underlying
the security indices

32 Appendix 3
Color scale of regional security
tensions

Relations development indices



Security



The green level indicates military activities, which do not pose a direct threat and will not necessarily lead to any escalation of tensions. Such a situation calls for cautious attention.

Relationship with Russia

+25



-3

Resulting index: +22

Positive points: +25

Negative points: -3

Trends

1. Integration within the framework of the EEU reached a new level: the Customs Code came into effect.
2. The entry into force of the Customs Code did not resolve the issue of mutual access of goods to the markets of Russia and Belarus.
3. Political issues in the bilateral relationship are gradually resolved.

Events and developments

Since the start of the year, the relationship with Russia has been developing towards a gradual resolution of conflict issues on the bilateral agenda, albeit with no breakthroughs. By the end of February, that progress had slowed, though, and the two countries even saw the first serious economic conflict over the previous six months.

EEU and the Customs Code

On January 1, 2018, the Customs Code of the Eurasian Economic Union came into effect. The Code provides for the transition to electronic declaration, shorter periods for the release of goods (up to 4 hours), and reduction in the number of customs control forms (from 12 to seven), preliminary customs declaration, and respite of customs payments. Representatives of the business communities of the participating countries had been involved in the development of the norms of the Code. New rules are expected to facilitate flows of goods. It is also proposed to take measures to curtail arbitrary decision-making by customs authorities with regard to importers by giving a significant portion of control to algorithmic procedures.

The Code envisions the establishment of zones with a special legal status — territorial free economic zones in addition to the existing free economic zones (FEZ). FEZ residents will enjoy certain benefits when they make customs payment.

While the Customs Code introduces certain benefits for business entities, when it comes to individuals, it gradually tightens rules for the import of goods, both personally and by postal shipment. Anyway, the EEU standards applied to individuals are markedly milder compared to those in effect in Belarus. It should be noted that Belarus's position on the application of its own norms in the near future does not contradict the requirements of the Customs Code.

As for the implementation of the Customs Code in Belarus, a draft decree has been prepared, but it looks like it will not be signed within the originally planned timeframe.

Agreement on the mutual recognition of visas and border control

In January and early February, Belarus and Russia were working on an agreement on mutual recognition of visas. The draft passed several phases of approvals. According to Uladzimir Makiej and Alexander Surikov, the agreement is planned to be signed in April or May. Meanwhile, the

State Duma and the Council of Federation ratified the protocol on the single migration card. Here the Belarusian side managed to procure more beneficial terms for foreign tourists in Belarus.

Gas and oil

The warm political climate of the bilateral relations at the beginning of the year, alongside rising oil prices and encouraging results of two-way trade, revived Minsk's hopes for discounted gas prices. The parties embarked on negotiations on the terms of gas supplies in 2019-2024. Belarus expects that in 2025, the two countries will finally have a single oil and gas market, which was the decisive reason for Belarus to hastily accede to the EEU.

The talks predictably reached a deadlock: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich said that the draft agreements submitted by Belarus for the period 2020-2024 did not suit the Russian side. He made it clear that the relations with Belarus would be built on the same principles — the difference in the prices for Belarus and Russia's regions will differ significantly — until Russia itself decides on the time for changing to free price formation for the Russian market. Moreover, the Russian side understands the issue of price convergence quite differently: the prices for Belarus and other allies will become close only once they grow in Russia to the average regional level.

The agreement on crude oil supplies causes no concerns. However, one should keep in mind that the oil lever is entirely in the hands of Russia if Minsk should exercise irrational insistence in gas supply matters. This is evidenced by the fact that in 2016-2017, Russia never hesitated to cut oil deliveries to Belarus by 6 million tons in contravention of the original agreements. In today's circumstances, the payment of duties entirely depends on the goodwill of the Russian side and the result of the consensus between Transneft and Rosneft, since the 6 million tons of oil, for which Belarus receives export duties to its budget, do not actually enter the territory of Belarus physically, but go to the Russian port of Ust-Luga for subsequent export. Moreover, considering that the protocol to the agreement on oil deliveries in 2015 was ratified by the State Duma only on January 9, 2018, it can be assumed that other Belarusian-Russian agreements on these issues have the character of political arrangements and are not legally formalized.

Union State

In an interview with Izvestia daily Foreign Minister Makiej once again spoke about the allied character of the relationship with Russia. At a news conference, Russian Ambassador to Belarus Surikov also attested to the invariably allied character of Russia's relationship with Belarus. Representatives of the two foreign ministries coincide in their assessment of the current phase of the relations: the most acute problems have been resolved, the rest are consistently on their way towards resolution.

However, with a view to stepping up cooperation, the tracks that “underperform” within the framework of the EEU are apparently going to be intensified within the framework of the Union State (i.e. on a bilateral basis). This applies to social issues (medical and pension benefits, labor movement) and mutual access to the national markets. In addition, Russia and Belarus are thinking about resuming “union programs”, i.e. industrial cooperation programs. Initiatives to combine efforts of companies with similar core activities have been discussed almost throughout the entire history of the union relations, but following the potash conflict they have been forgotten. However, judging by Surikov's words, the purchase (or exchange of assets) of the largest Belarusian factories by Russian second- or third-tier companies is being discussed. Therefore, where previously MAZ and KamAZ were supposed to cooperate, now LiAZ is looking to partner with Minsk Automobile Plant.

Dairy issue

By the end of February, the bilateral relationship had been overshadowed by another “dairy war.” At the insistence of Russian dairy industry lobbyists, the Rosselkhoznadzor watchdog imposed restrictions on supplies of Belarusian dairy products to the Russian market starting on February 26. Dairy products constitute the second most important Belarusian export, with about 90%

supplied to the Russian market. Meanwhile, Russian importers have oversupplied the Russian market with powdered milk from New Zealand and Australia and asked their government to let them sell their inventories. The position of Belarusian producers was supported by the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), which noted that the ban violated the norms of the EEU, and suggested holding hearings on the issue at the EEC without imposing a ban until the end of the negotiations. The resolution of the dispute is still pending.

Forecast

In the near future, relations with Russia will focus on the resolution of conflict issues in bilateral trade. Apparently, Russian lobbyists will be pushing the Belarusian leadership to agree to peg the main food flows to large importers close to the Kremlin and work at fixed prices. At the same time, over the past year, Belarus has made some progress in its ability to defend its interests through contacts with both its lobbyists in Russia and the EEU, so negotiations promise to be difficult.

The expected mass protests following the elections may exacerbate the Kremlin's fears of losing control, which might entail further tightening of militaristic rhetoric and quite aggressive foreign policy moves — at least on the “long arc” if not in the post-Soviet space. Ultimately, with the exception of increased propaganda hype of the Russian media and resulting growth of “alarmist” publications in the Belarusian press, this will have little effect on the bilateral Belarus-Russia relationship.

Relationship with the European Union

+17



-3

Resulting index: +14

Positive points: +17

Negative points: -3

Trends

1. The framework for the bilateral relationship is being filled with project cooperation and sectoral dialogues, which focus on specific problems and opportunities.
2. At the same time, progress is lacking in landmark areas: some important agreements (for example, on the priorities of partnership to 2020) have not been signed yet despite the high level of approvals received.
3. In early 2018, positive dynamics in two-way trade increased, with Belarusian export supplies showing the most conspicuous increase.
4. The level of official visits is gradually growing, both in Minsk's relations with Brussels and with individual European capital cities.

Events and developments

Traditionally, the start of the year was not marked by numerous visits and events. Nevertheless, the period under analysis saw a few important events that nicely reflect the general trends of the last few months in the relationship between Belarus and the EU.

On January 18, President Aliaksandr Lukashenko and Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej met to discuss the performance of Belarusian diplomacy in 2017 and plans for the year 2018. The press service of the president issued a quite remarkable message following the meeting: among other issues, it emphasizes that the head of state approved approaches to the development of relations with the European Union¹. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn Minsk's efforts to consistently improve and build up the volume of its relations with the EU will continue.

On January 18-19, Deputy Foreign Minister Alieh Kraučanka visited the Republic of Cyprus and held talks with the leadership of the Foreign Ministry, the Parliament and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. An agreement was reached that the two countries would sign a Memorandum of understanding, cooperation and bilateral political consultations between the Foreign Ministries; the concerned officials approved the text of the draft document. Cyprus is of special interest for Belarus in terms of investment cooperation. According to the Foreign Ministry, as of October 1, 2017, the country's economy received USD 2.12 billion of accumulated investments through the Cypriot jurisdiction².

On January 30, Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, paid a long-expected visit to Minsk. His visit to Belarus had been planned in the run-up to the November summit of the Eastern Partnership initiative, but had to be canceled at the last moment. The report about the cancellation of the visit caused speculation in the Belarusian media, which were looking for implications: in particular, it was suggested that the parties had failed to reach certain agreements. In fact, the visit was postponed because

1 Meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makiej - http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannyx-del-vladimirom-makeem-17878/

2 Briefing by head of the information and digital diplomacy office, spokesman for the Foreign Ministry Zmicier Mirončyk for the media on January 18, 2018 - http://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/cc4e55cafeb086d6.html

of the overlaps in Hahn's schedule due to unplanned events associated with the Brexit-related negotiations with the UK. This idea is confirmed by the fact that two months later, the visit took place without any significant breakthrough in the bilateral relationship.

The schedule of the European commissioner in Minsk turned out to be quite busy: he met with Lukashenka, Prime Minister Andrej Kabiakoŭ and Makiej. They de-facto audited the relationship at a higher level compared with the meetings of the European Union-Belarus Coordination Group (the fourth meeting of the group was held at the end of December). The results of the visit once again highlighted the main trends of the recent months: enhanced discussions and implementation of increased numbers of projects are underway; however, for a number of landmark issues, progress froze in the status of "not even kilometers, but meters are left on the distance." It was this phrase that Hahn used to characterize the status of the negotiation process on the priorities of the partnership³.

Partnership priorities are considered to be a roadmap for relations for the years 2018-2020, which should become a logical consequence of the meetings in the format of the Coordination Group. The document under discussion has four thematic clusters: effective governance; economic development and market opportunities; transport, energy, environment, and climate; and human contacts. According to Uladzimir Makiej, the talks during Hahn's visit showed that the parties have complete understanding with regards to further steps in all of the four dimensions⁴.

Therefore, both Minsk and Brussels emphasize that the signing ceremony is close at hand. This suggests that the roadmap can really be adopted in the near future, although similar forecasts were made in the second half of 2017. The document was not signed back then, though. The main reason was the position of the Lithuanian government, which sought to peg the partnership priorities to the issue of the Belarusian nuclear power plant.

At the level of project and sectoral engagement, the dynamics of the relationship between Belarus and the EU is markedly positive and intensive. For example, the progress in the customs sphere is indicative: a decision was made to send a customs attaché to the Permanent Mission of Belarus to the EU. Minsk has high expectations concerning the upcoming commencement of the financing of the first projects by the European Investment Bank in the country, as well as further expansion of the engagement with the Belarusian public sector by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (which received a respective mandate in 2016). The top priority items for project cooperation were energy efficiency, environmental protection, and the promotion of small and medium-sized businesses, Prime Minister Andrej Kabiakoŭ said. Economic cooperation is facilitated by the increase in Belarus's rank on the OECD Country Risk Classification in January 2018. This will make it easier for EU companies to obtain loans in order to implement trade and investment projects with Belarus.

During his meeting with Hahn, the Belarusian president highlighted a few political points that are crucial for the understanding of Minsk's logic in its relationship with Brussels. Firstly, he voiced the traditional desire that the Eastern Partnership be "more mundane and practice-oriented" for it to refrain from creating any new dividing lines in the region. Secondly, he said that Belarus was interested in a strong EU: "We are categorical supporters of a strong EU. We are categorically against centrifugal forces in the EU, which weaken it." The Belarusian leadership has voiced this thesis several times, but some media tried to make a sensation out of it. As if the Belarusian authorities cannot be interested in a strong EU for ideological reasons. However, both Lukashenka's words and activities of Belarusian diplomacy in recent years show that Minsk approaches its relations with the EU not ideologically, but in terms of pure realism in international relations. And from this point of view, a strong EU is really beneficial for Belarus as one of the pillars that allow expanding the room for foreign policy maneuver.

³ Meeting with Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations - <http://www.government.by/ru/content/7804>

⁴ Verbatim report of the news conference of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the republic of Belarus Uladzimir Makiej following his meeting with Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations - http://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/aec5748343953916.html

A week later — on February 7-8 — the head of the Latvian government paid his first visit to Belarus in the past nine years. He held talks with the president and the prime minister of Belarus. Māris Kučinskis's visit was organized against the backdrop of positive dynamics in two-way trade: after a decline in previous years, January-November 2017 saw an increase in trade by 27% compared to the same period in 2016, albeit in absolute terms the indicator remains modest, at USD 400 million. Therefore, both sides are interested in increasing the figure.

One of the obvious ways for this is to make the most of transit opportunities, which, as Andrey Kabiakoŭ put it, are a strategic area for cooperation between the two countries. Another relevant topic is the joint hosting of the 2021 IIHF World Championships in Minsk and Riga.

As an outcome of the visit of the Latvian delegation, a series of agreements were signed:

- Agreement between the two governments on early warning about nuclear accidents, information exchange and cooperation in the field of nuclear safety and radiation protection;
- Agreement on cooperation in the field of aviation search and rescue of civil aircraft;
- Intergovernmental memorandum of understanding on the main areas of economic cooperation for the medium term;
- Agreement on scientific and technical cooperation;
- Agreement on cooperation in the field of physical culture and sports;
- Program of cooperation between the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Latvia for 2018-2022.

On the negative side of the Belarus–EU relationship chart, January-February saw the closure of the Consulates General of Belarus in Gdansk and Milan. Those decisions were made as part of the streamlining campaign of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the system of foreign missions. Also at the end of February, the EU Council extended for another year — until February 28, 2019 — the effect of the remaining restrictive measures against Belarus. They concern arms embargoes and personal sanctions against four Belarusian citizens. At the same time, the exemptions from the arms embargo with respect to biathlon rifles and ammunition introduced in February 2017 are now expanded to all types of sporting weapons. Since Belarusian sports organizations actively supported the move, it can be considered another symbolic step of the EU towards Minsk.

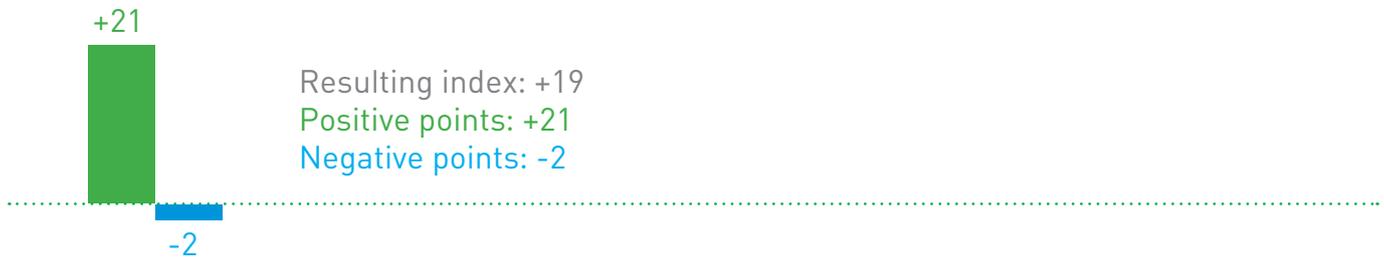
Trade turnover between Belarus and the European Union member-states in January 2018 amounted to USD 1.38 billion (an increase by 64.1% on the first month in 2017). Belarusian exports amounted to USD 953.7 million, which represents an increase by 95.8% from January 2017. Imports from the EU countries amounted to USD 426.3 million (a 20.5% increase compared with the same period last year). The surplus of trade with the EU countries for Belarus was at USD 527.4 million.

Forecast

In general, the current trends in the relationship between Belarus and the EU should remain in place. Minsk will continue its policy on systemic improvement and increase in the volume of relations with Brussels, which was again approved at the level of President Alexander Lukashenko.

In the coming months, the next, fifth, meeting of the European Union-Belarus Coordination Group is expected to take place in Minsk. Given the modestly optimistic statements by Johannes Hahn and Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej, it is possible that the partnership priorities for 2018-2020 may be signed soon after the meeting. In this case, the bilateral relationship will receive an additional impetus, which will allow shifting attention to other landmark topics: liberalization of the visa regime and prospects for negotiations on the basic agreement.

Relationship with China



Trends

1. The dynamics of the bilateral relationship has retained its momentum. Economy Minister Zinoŭski has paid an official visit to China; the first batch of Belarusian beef has arrived to China; the Belarusian president has made numerous positive statements with respect to Chinese partners.
2. For the Great Stone China–Belarus Industrial Park (CBIP), January and February were marked by an increase in the number of residents up to 28, the visit by Latvian Prime Minister, negotiations with Duisburger Hafen concerning the acquisition of a minority stake in the Industrial Park Development Company, and the adoption of a number of CBIP’s regulatory instruments.

Events and developments

In February, President Lukashenka brought up the issue of Belarusian exports to China on numerous occasions under various circumstances. Against the backdrop of the resumption of “milk wars” with the closest neighbor, the Belarusian president, when honoring the best workers of the agricultural industry, emphasized personal assistance rendered by the Chinese president in certifying Belarusian enterprises for export to the Chinese market. Alongside with that, the president pointed out the complexity of the Chinese market. In his address at a meeting with the staff of the yeast plant and the sugar refinery in Sluck, Lukashenka personally inaugurated the supplies of Belarusian sugar to China.

On 23 February, when attending a solemn meeting dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian Armed Forces, the president made a special mention of the Chinese assistance in developing new types of armaments: “When I raised the issue of equipping our army with high-precision weapons, our friends failed to help us. Luckily, our Chinese friends stepped in. Let me express, on behalf of the Belarusian people, my deepest gratitude to the president of China – my friend, and to all the military people who helped establish the production of high-precision weapons here in Belarus in as little as a year and a half.” It is not the first time the president is thankful for the involvement of the Chinese side in the development of the Polonez Multiple Launch Rocket System, but such memorable statements made on that occasion were most probably aimed at attracting the attention of more traditional military and technical collaboration partners.

Year of Tourism

The year 2018 started with the announcement of the Belarus–China Year of Tourism, opened by Deputy Sports and Tourism Minister Michail Partny at the Belarus–China tourism forum in Chongqing on 10 January. According to industry estimates, the tourist flow from China to all countries of the world has already exceeded 120 million people on an annual basis, which means that China is the largest global source of tourists. The year 2018 has also been declared the EU–China Tourism Year, with more than 12 million Chinese tourists traveling to EU annually. As for Belarus, it intends to attract a modest 10,000 Chinese visitors. In 2016, Chinese guests accounted for just about 4% of inbound tourists in Belarus, while the number of tourists traveling as part of

an organized tour reached 1,500. In his interview to RIA Novosti, Kiryl Rudy, Belarus's Ambassador to China, pointed out that the effect from attracting Chinese tourists to the country is already palpable: in 2017, their number grew by 40% year-on-year. By comparison, preliminary estimates show that more than 1 million Chinese tourists visited neighboring Russia in 2017.

The effort to make Belarus more attractive to Chinese tourists may be redoubled by the 10-day visa-free stay already announced by Anatol Kalinin and intended to be implemented in July, and likewise by harmonizing visa policies with neighboring Russia, making it possible for Belarus to become part of multi-country routes for Chinese tourists.

Economy

In 2017, two-way trade grew by almost 20% (USD 3.1 billion); however, a strong imbalance is observed in the structure of the Belarus-China trade in favor of import (88.3% of the total turnover). In contrast to imports from China, which increased by 28.8%, Belarusian exports showed a decrease of almost 15%. Following the results of the year, a deficit of trade in favor of China went up by nearly 30% year-on-year (-USD 2.381 billion).

On February 8–12, Economy Minister Zinoŭski visited China. The most significant result of that visit was probably the signing of an agreement on a CNY 1,750 million (about USD 280 million) loan by China Exim Bank for the development of Belarusian National Biotechnology Corporation. Zinoŭski met with China's Deputy Commerce Minister (in a ministerial rank) and Vice President of China Development Bank to discuss the issue of opening a CDB representative office in Belarus. He also met with top executives of MIDEA Group, Sinomach, CITIC Group, China Exim Bank, and CAMCE. The minister discussed with the representatives of CITIC Group their prospective residency in the CBIP and the implementation of a robot production project. All of the said Chinese companies are already carrying out their projects in Belarus.

On February 14, Belarus became the 14th country exporting beef to China. The first batch of Belarusian beef went through quarantine inspection at the Shanghai Airport. China is an attractive country in this respect, as its annual consumption of beef is about 8 million tons, making it the third largest beef consumer in the world. In large Chinese cities, the consumption of various meats still demonstrates robust growth.

It should be noted that the Chinese media certainly could not ignore the ban on dairy product supplies to Russia. Still, given the share of dairy exports to Russia (more than 90% of Belarus's dairy exports), it would certainly take quite a lot of time to diversify Belarusian export deliveries and make it more China-oriented. For instance, the volume of exports stipulated by a contract with the Chinese Drex Food Group Co., Ltd. is quite humble: USD 50.8 million worth of powdered dairy products, 1,000 tons of beef, and 1,000 tons of poultry. Late last year, contracts worth a little over USD 100 million were signed, while in 2017, actual Belarusian exports of agricultural products failed to exceed USD 20 million.

Great Stone

In early February, the CBIP Administration continued implementing its policy aimed at ensuring consistency and transparency of operations. More specifically, it adopted a procedure for adjustment, approval, and implementation of state expert examinations of design documentation, a procedure for the confirmation of conditions for the exemption from import customs duties and the VAT, and a procedure for the park infrastructure maintenance and repair. It also approved the restated Administration charter and the regulations governing the CBIP operation. As part of ongoing presentations of the park's investment opportunities, Latvian Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis visited the CBIP to discuss the issues of three-way cooperation in logistics.

Over the first two months of the year, the number of the CBIP residents went up by 5, totaling 28 companies. In January, registration certificates were obtained by:

- Automotive Film Coatings Technologies (Lanzhou High-Tech Company Dacheng, production of automotive lighting equipment, expected investment of about USD 12 million);
- Composite Structures Research and Production Limited Liability Company (engineering and

production of composite materials using technology developed by Dieffenbacher, EUR 220 million).

- RECIF Technologies Bel (production of high-precision parts using selective layer-by-layer laser sintering technology).

In February, two more residents joined the Park:

- Intellectual Equipment International Technology Company LLC (an R&D centre for testing self-driving alternative energy vehicles, about EUR 50 million);
- KUVVO, a Belarusian company producing glass for the transport industry.

In mid-February, Kiryl Karaciejeŭ, First Deputy General Director of the Industrial Park Development Company, gave an extensive interview to BelTA. According to him, in 2018, the CBIP will focus on further infrastructure construction and commissioning, while trying to increase the number of residents up to 40 companies. Karaciejeŭ pointed out that a number of projects in the CBIP would soon be available for operation (production of refrigerated medical and laboratory centrifuges, a plant for localizing the production of human plasma products, manufacture of solar panels and AVIC unmanned aircraft). Not only Chinese, but also the EU investors are expected here.

In the near months, the previously announced acquisition of a minority stake in the Industrial Park Development Company by Duisburger Hafen is due to take place. It is going to be the first case a shareholding is bought neither by a Chinese, nor a Belarusian company. The German investor is expected to contribute to the development of the CBIP's logistics, with the investment amount likely to exceed EUR 30 million.

Other projects

The dynamics shown by Chinese investment in 2017 was not surprising; it totaled USD 275.5 million (just a 6% increase year-on-year), including FDI of USD 113.6 million (+13%), which is hardly a gratifying result for Belarusian officials.

The involvement of Chinese companies in the privatization of Belarusian assets is an area of two-way cooperation traditionally brought forward by the Belarusian side. In late 2017, Chinese partners were presented with yet another list comprising 22 entities. However, at a press conference held on 20 February, Chairman of the State Property Committee Andrej Hajeŭ admitted there was no actual progress in this respect. The Belarusian side is ready to satisfy the interests of Chinese investors in purchasing a stake (60%) in Belgosproekt Unitary Enterprise. A respective presidential decree concerning the change in the design institute's legal status has already been drafted. In late February, Belarus's Ambassador to China Kiryl Rudy reported that certain Chinese companies came up with offers to privatize Gomselmash and Atlant, but the parties failed to reach an agreement with respect to the former.

Other joint projects are showing the following progress:

1) By the end of 2018, CJSC Belgee intends to reach a sales level of 8,000 vehicles per quarter, with the declared annual design capacity of 60,000 vehicles. On 27 February, the company announced the market launch of the Geely Atlas crossover in Russia, priced at RUB 1–1.5 million (about USD 17,700–26,600), depending on its configuration. The prices previously announced for Belarus are virtually the same. Earlier reports state that the company is going to elaborate certain sales promotion tools for Belarus.

2) In January and February, the Belarusian media repeatedly reported the complaints of Svietlahorsk residents about the newly commissioned bleached sulphate pulp plant forming part of Svietlahorsk Pulp and Paper Mill (the project's general contractor is CAMCE, a Chinese corporation). Bellesbumprom Concern representatives have stated on numerous occasions that the plant will closely cooperate with the paper-making plant based at Geroy Truda Dobruš Paper Factory, where pulp from Svietlahorsk will be processed to produce cardboard. That company is also implementing a project with the involvement of the Chinese investors, but it has not been commissioned yet. The concern aims to achieve Svietlahorsk Pulp and Board Mill's operation at the

design annual capacity of 400,000 tons of bleached sulfate pulp in 2018.

3) In February, Belarusian National Biotechnology Corporation (BNBC) succeeded in obtaining a loan for the implementation of the project entitled “Establishment of a High-Tech Agroindustrial Fully-Integrated Production for 2016–2032”. To finance the project, China Exim Bank will issue a 15-year CNY 1,750 million (about USD 280 million). Looking back, in late 2017, the range of operations planned for construction in the BNBC territory as part of the project was reduced.

4) In late January, mass production of 25-ton cranes was launched by MAZ-Zoomlion joint venture. MAZ-Weichai operation is also reported to be almost ready for production.

Forecast

Following the declaration of the certification readiness of Belarusian companies, the current year will probably see the implementation of plans to supply Belarusian groceries (beef, chicken meat, dairy products, and, possibly, sugar) to China. Apparently, a gradual ramp-up of such supplies is desirable, as Resolution No. 131 of the Belarusian Council of Ministers dated 15 February 2018 sets the target exports growth indicator for China in 2018 (except for oil products, fertilizers, etc.) at 44%.

An increase in the tourist flow from China is only possible after the 10-day visa-free stay is introduced, in which case no economic effect will be visible in the current year.

The prospect of a gain in the number of CBIP residents and closing of a deal with Duisburger Hafen AG seems quite realistic. In the course of the year, logistic cooperation with the Latvian side will likely be formalized. In 2018, the presence of CITIC, and, possibly, CAMCE in Belarus will become more prominent. In addition to the former company’s already existing operations, it will launch the construction of the BNBC project, in which CITIC acts as the general contractor. The registration of a robot production project in the CBIP is possible in the near future.

Relationship with the U.S.



Trends

1. Gradual normalization of the relations is underway, mostly centered around cooperation at the technical level.
2. The U.S.' attitude towards the issue of democracy and human rights in Belarus has not changed.

Events and developments

The relations between the United States and Belarus continue to advance slowly but steadily. The Annual Review of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017 published on 4 January states that the relations with the U.S. "are characterized by the ongoing development." According to the paper, the parties continued to cooperate in the areas of mutual interest, including trade, economy, and humanitarian affairs; combat against international organized crime; and implementation of exchange programs for professionals. Interaction between expert communities intensified. The parties successfully cooperated in combating illegal transit of nuclear and radioactive materials, as well as in preventing high technology crime. The dialogue on human rights, launched in 2015, was continued⁵.

A number of significant events resulting from continuous preparatory work took place in January and February. Starting on February 1, the U.S. Embassy in Minsk started providing full visa services to Belarusian nationals and residents for the first time in the last 10 years. Before that, Belarusians had to travel to neighboring countries to apply for a U.S. visa.

It will be recalled that this situation emerged due to a diplomatic crisis between Belarus and the U.S., which broke out in 2008 and led to the reduction of the U.S. Embassy's diplomatic staff to five, making further issue of visas impossible. It took many years for negotiations over the expansion of diplomatic staff to succeed. The current negotiation agenda still includes the issue of appointing ambassadors, as the diplomatic missions still continue to operate at the chargé d'affaires level.

Quite predictably, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry welcomed the decision of the U.S. Embassy to restore full visa services in Minsk, calling it "part of gradual rapprochement between Belarus and the U.S."

In 2017, the U.S. Embassy in Minsk issued about 8,000 visas to Belarusian nationals. Following the restoration of full consular services, the number of applications is expected to at least double. However, even this anticipated number is by far lower than the number of visas issued by the embassies of European states in Minsk.

The U.S. has also suggested negotiating the extension of visa validity periods, as currently American nationals, just like Belarusians, are only issued one-year visas.

⁵ Annual Review of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017-
<http://mfa.gov.by/publication/reports/a8a5169b6e487b3b.html>

On January 30, a delegation of the Belarusian Investigative Committee headed by its chairman Ivan Naskievič paid a working visit to the U.S. The committee's representatives visited the FBI Headquarters in Washington, where a series of meetings were held with the Bureau's officials to discuss the issues of countering organized crime, investigating violent crimes, fighting corruption and high technology offences. Apart from that, international cooperation was discussed with a representative of the Office of the General Counsel.

A separate working meeting took place between Naskievič and Paul Abbate, Executive Assistant Director for the Criminal, Cyber, Response and Services Branch responsible for investigating federal criminal and cyber offences, as well as for international operations. Following the meeting, Naskievič and Abbate signed a memorandum of understanding, in which the parties emphasized mutual interest in the signing of an agreement on legal assistance in criminal cases.

According to the Investigative Committee's official statement, "the interaction between the Belarusian Investigative Committee and the FBI is productive and mutually beneficial. The sides efficiently cooperate within the framework of international special operations to detect and prevent crimes, especially in the IT sector." The Belarusian delegation also took an opportunity to visit FBI's major training centre — the Academy in Quantico, Virginia.

The Belarus–U.S. cooperation in the area of security is not limited to liaising with the FBI. The parties continue joint effort to combat illegal transit of nuclear and radioactive materials; the Belarusian side is also interested in studying the U.S. National Guard's hands-on experience.

On January 26, in his address at the diploma award ceremony for the alumni of the two-year program "Access: opportunities for all", Chargé d'affaires Robert Riley stated that a variety of projects sponsored by the U.S. Government continue to be implemented in Belarus. According to him, these projects "are aimed at developing the Belarusian culture and the Belarusian identity, as well as at strengthening the country's independence." The U.S. Embassy operates programs in the sphere of education, self-employment, and support for SMEs and travel and tourism companies.

On January 26–29, the Belarusian travel industry made its debut at New York Times Travel Show 2018, the largest travel show in North America featuring participants from more than 100 countries of the world. At the event, the Sports and Tourism Ministry and the National Tourism Agency emphasized the five-day visa-free stay, natural and cultural heritage, as well as international sports competitions to take place in Belarus in the near future (the 2019 European Games and the 2021 IIHF World Championships).

Despite the increase in the intensity of contacts and the varied communication agenda, the general attitude of the U.S. administration to Belarus has not changed. The U.S. still expects Belarus to implement a comprehensive political reform and improve the human rights situation.

On January 30, at a press conference in Minsk, the U.S. Chargé d'affaires to Belarus Robert Riley stated that the U.S. has not arrived at the point of fully lifting the sanctions. He also pointed out that the U.S.' attitude towards the human rights and media freedom agenda in Belarus remains the same. The U.S.' sanctions against Belarus are formally in force, but are in a temporarily "frozen" state. The sanctions were imposed on certain Belarusian companies on the basis of President George Bush's order dated June 16, 2006 as a result of human rights abuse in Belarus, and have been repeatedly extended since then. The list of sanctions includes Belarusian Oil Trade House, Belneftekhim Concern, Belneftekhim USA Inc., JSC Belshina, JSC Grodno Azot, JSC Grodno Khimvolokno, JSC Lakokraska, JSC Naftan, and JSC Polotsk-Steklovokno. On October 29, 2015, the U.S. Treasury introduced a half-year sanction relief. Since then, the relief has been renewed twice a year. The issue of the Belarus sanctions will be addressed with again this April.

The U.S. was closely following the local elections in Belarus, which were held on February 18. The U.S. Embassy issued a statement with respect to this event, expressing its concern about the conduct of the elections to the local councils. According to the report, "although some slight improvements occurred in elements of the candidate registration process and the campaign period, the elections overall fell short of Belarus's international obligations and commitments to

free and fair elections”.⁶ The statement also notes the lack of meaningful changes to the electoral process as recommended by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission.

On February 13, a report on worldwide threat assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, authored by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, was issued. Belarus is also mentioned in this paper, which says that Russia views Belarus as a critical buffer between itself and NATO and will seek to spoil any potential warming between Minsk and the West. However, according to the report, Belarus’s President Aliaksandr Lukashenka will continue close security cooperation with Moscow but will continue to aim for normalized relations with the West as a check on Russia’s influence⁷.

Such an assessment of the U.S.’ intelligence attests to the realistic perception of the Belarusian foreign policy, as well as to the prevailing concept of Minsk’s “balancing” policy in contrast to the previously dominating view of Minsk as Russia’s unconditional satellite.

Earlier this year, the Belarus–U.S. two-way trade indicators for 2017 were published. Exports to the U.S. totaled USD 224.8 million, showing a 70% increase year-on year. In particular, Belarus was selling more condensed and dry milk and cream, natural honey, vodka, mineral water, and carbonated drinks, as well as woodworking products. As for imports, they fell by 26.4% year-on-year and totaled USD 379.1 million.

Forecast

As the Belarus–U.S. relationship is not a priority for either side, no dramatic change in the intensity of contacts or any significant ramping up of the joint effort in project implementation should be expected.

The forthcoming review of the U.S.’ sanctions policy with respect to Belarus, due to occur on April 30, raises certain concerns, as Washington sees no consistent steps by the Belarusian authorities to promote democratization and improve the human rights situation. A negative assessment of the local elections may also influence the U.S.’ decision concerning the sanctions. Alongside that, the U.S. is interested in Minsk’s neutral stance in the Ukraine conflict, and is not likely to strain the bilateral relations, especially in the context of growing tensions between the U.S. and Russia.

⁶ Statement on local elections in Belarus - <https://by.usembassy.gov/be/заявление-по-итогам-местных-выборов-в/>

⁷ Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community - <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/2018-ATA---Unclassified-SSCI.pdf>

Relationship with Ukraine



Resulting index: +3
Positive points: +7
Negative points: -4

Trends

1. The negative media background related to the “spies case” was mitigated by direct contacts at the presidential and Foreign Ministry level.
2. In the economic sphere, the two-way trade structure is being reformatted: against the backdrop of continued reduction of oil product sales, Belarusian companies are increasingly engaging in operations via joint ventures and subsidiaries, which enables them to get a foothold in a number of Ukraine’s strategic industries. However, losing a share in the oil product market has jeopardized the plans to increase the surplus of commodity trade with Ukraine.

Events and developments

The way political, economic, and cultural contacts between Belarus and Ukraine evolved during the first months of 2018 both revealed a number of positive trends and gave rise to the first negative indications in the areas of concern, which emerged in 2017.

In the context of the variously directed foreign policy vectors and the difference in the internal policy decision-making systems in Belarus and Ukraine, further convergence of the two countries is currently out of the question. Official Kyiv recognizes the limits of Minsk’s political maneuver, and endeavors to align its actions with that framework. In Belarus, the development of cooperation with Ukraine is viewed as an important factor for balancing Russia’s influence. Not in the least due to the “special stance” on the Ukrainian issue, the policy of normalizing the relations with the EU countries and the U.S. has become possible. Potential Belarusian participation in the peacekeeping mission in Donbas, as well as the provision of a negotiation venue may to a certain extent serve as one of security guarantees for Belarus.

Minsk is interested in extending its presence in the Ukrainian market, as this would facilitate bringing down Belarus’s dependence on the Russian market, and, eventually, provide it with more room for political maneuver.

For Kyiv, important issues include Belarus’s independent stance on the conflict in Ukraine, ensuring its own economic sustainability, and military security of the northern border.

Politics

The telephone conversation between the presidents of the two countries, in the course of which they discussed security and regional policy issues, as well as the advancement of trade and economic relations, is arguably the most significant event of the start of the year.⁸ The results of the talk included the announcement of a large-scale Belarus–Ukraine Forum of Regions.

The same topics were key to the consultations between the Belarusian and Ukrainian Foreign

⁸ Telephone conversation with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko - http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/telefonnyj-razgovor-s-prezidentom-ukrainy-petrom-poroshenko-18208/

Ministries held on February 26⁹.

The topic of war in Ukraine and Belarus's political role in the search for settlement patterns has been brought up on numerous occasions at the official level and in the media. The indications are generally positive for Minsk:

- Nursultan Nazarbayev's statement concerning the necessity to relocate the venue for the Donbas talks was followed by a sharp reaction of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry. More importantly, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin said there was no sense in taking such a step¹⁰.
- On February 18, Aliaksandr Lukashenka stated that Belarus was highly interested in a speedy settlement of the conflict in Ukraine¹¹.
- He also spoke of Minsk's readiness to send peacekeepers to Donbas to participate in the settlement. However, the statements made by the Belarusian president with respect to the subject in question are quite negatively perceived by Ukrainian politicians: Kyiv is apprehensive about Belarus's status of Russia's ally. This is why another indication — a report prepared by the former NATO chief and current advisor to President Poroshenko Anders Fogh Rasmussen — is much more meaningful and positive for Belarus. Among other things, the paper indicates the advisability of including Belarusian peacekeepers in the potential U.N. mission¹².

One of the key events, which may have a negative influence on the intensity of bilateral relations, is the closure of the Belarusian consulate in Odessa. Considering the fact that Odessa is one of the largest Black Sea ports still under Ukrainian control, such a decision of the Belarusian side is quite surprising.

The "spy scandal" has turned out to be an undoubtedly negative factor in the two-way relationship. The discussion of the topic by the media adds extra risks to the implementation of economic and political programs, as the Ukrainian authorities are extremely susceptible to the influence of the media and public sentiment. On February 27, trials of spies started simultaneously in both countries. Pavlo Sharoiko was tried in Belarus, and Jury Palityka — in Ukraine. The rhetoric of the media is also similar: the Ukrainian media speak of the "journalist's" innocence and a provocation by intelligence agencies, whereas the Belarusian media accuse the Ukrainian security chiefs of misconduct and use of pressure for coercing into confession.

Despite the presence of potentially controversial issues, contacts between the representatives of security agencies are still ongoing. The border committees of both countries have carried out preparatory work for the meeting of their deputy chiefs, and elaborated a plan of joint arrangements to enhance security on the Belarus–Ukraine border. One of such steps is the Rubezh operation.

The preparation of major political forces for parliamentary and presidential elections of 2019 will become the key trend in Ukraine for the next 12 months. This factor contributes to the already massive dependence of the Ukrainian policy on the media background.

Media

In 2017, Belarus lost the information confrontation in the Ukrainian media field. A series of fake news reports related to the Zapad-2017 military exercise, a provocation involving the kidnapping of Pavlo Grib, and other incidents revealed the inefficiency of officials' and state media algorithms

9 Ukraine and Belarus Foreign Ministries have agreed on bilateral cooperation for the nearest perspective - <http://belarus.mfa.gov.ua/ua/press-center/news/63234-mzs-ukrajini-ta-bilorusi-domovilisy-pro-dvostoronnyu-vzajemodiju-na-najblizh-chu-perspektivu>

10 There is no sense in relocating the Minsk platform to Astana, Klimkin says- <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/3930998-net-smysla-perenosyt-mynsk-v-astanu-klymkyn>

11 Belarus is highly interested in a speedy settlement of the conflict in Ukraine- <http://www.belta.by/video/getRecord/2889/>

12 Ukraine crisis needs 20,000-strong U.N. force: report - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-peacekeepers/ukraine-crisis-needs-20000-strong-u-n-force-report-idUSKBN1FW168>

of response to information attacks, as well as their inability to operate in a highly competitive foreign media space. As a result, a survey ordered by the U.S. International Republican Institute showed a negative shift in the attitude of the Ukrainians to Belarus: only 39% of the respondents assessed it as “warm” or “very warm”.¹³ In 2016, this indicator was equal to 56%.¹⁴ As a result, Belarus dropped from the 2nd to the 7th place in the attitude rating.

An apparently negative development in the media sphere was the statement by Alieh Dvihaliou, chief of Belarus’s State Military Industrial Committee, concerning the halt in the military and technical cooperation with Ukraine¹⁵, while it is known that several joint ventures manufacturing machinery for the Ukraine’s Armed Forces and the National Guard are operating in Ukraine.

At the same time, a number of events occurred in late 2017, which may influence Belarusian society: TV channel groups Star Media and 1+1 owned by the oligarchs Pinchuk and Kolomoyskyi, respectively, offered Belarus favorable terms to use their content. Despite the fact that the idea of creating a Belarus–Ukraine TV channel at the state level has not been implemented yet, the Belarusian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company has to a great extent replaced Russian shows by those Ukrainian within its broadcasting network. In early 2018, both Ukrainian media groups continued to pursue the policy of approaching the Belarusian market.

A Ukrainian singer will represent Belarus at the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest. If he is adequately presented, the show may become a driver for the Ukrainians’ positive attitude to Belarus and vice versa.

Economy

The start of 2018 was not marked by any major agreements between the states; nevertheless, several positive indications were observed.

Belorusneft, represented by its subsidiaries, is developing cooperation with PJSC UkrGasVydobuvannya: hydraulic fracturing operations are underway. In parallel, drilling operations for Rinat Akhmetov’s DTEK Oil&Gas are carried out (under a contract for four wells valid until 2019)¹⁶.

The National Bank of Ukraine did not reject the Belarusian Paritet Bank’s application for the acquisition of Sberbank of Russia’s Ukrainian subsidiary. According to Russian sources, the deal is ready for closure and awaiting NBU’s approval.¹⁷

Amid statements by top officials of Belarus’s State Military Industrial Committee concerning the halt in the military and technical cooperation with Ukraine in January 2018, the first batch of MAZ-Bogdan trucks equipped with Weichal Power engines instead of those manufactured by Russia’s YMZ was handed over to the army. Given that MAZ and the Chinese manufacturer have declared the establishment of a joint venture for the production of ICEs in Belarus, the engines are also intended for sale in the Ukrainian market, including that military. At the turn of the year, the supply of Varta armored vehicles built on the MAZ chassis to the army was announced. Actual delivery to the military units took place in early January. Judging by the posted video, the December batch of the military order comprised at least 25 armored vehicles¹⁸.

13 IRI Survey 2018 - https://www.iri.org.ua/sites/default/files/editor-files/Ukraine%202017_12%20official_UA.pdf

14 IRI Survey 2017 - http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-may-survey-of-residents-of-ukraine_en.pdf

15 Minsk and Kyiv curb military and technical cooperation- <https://sputnik.by/society/20180131/1033350260/minsk-kiiev-sokratili-voenno-tekhnicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo.html>

16 Belorusneft starts drilling a well for Rinat Akhmetov - http://ukrudprom.com/news/Belorusneft_nachala_burenie_skvagini_dlya_Rinata_Ahmetova.html

17 NBU comments on the situation over the sale of Sberbank’s Ukrainian subsidiary(<https://news.finance.ua/ru/news/-/419201/nbu-prokomentiroval-situatsiyu-s-prodazhej-ukrainskoj-dochki-sberbanka>)

18 Ukraine’s National Guard and Defense Ministry receive an early shipment of Varta armored vehicles to be sent to the area of combat operations - https://censor.net.ua/photo_news/3041926/ngu_i_minoborony_dosrochno_poluchili_ocherednyu_partiyu_bronemashin_varta_kotorye_otpravlyatsya_v_zonu

Taking into account the challenges faced by Ukraine's KRAZ, the products of Belarus-Ukraine joint ventures might potentially occupy a sizeable (more than 30%) share of the market for vehicles supplied to the army. For reference: more than 2,500 trucks and other vehicles will be required by Ukraine's Armed Forces alone (excluding the National Guard) in the next 2 years.

It is not just military machinery that is giving Belarus an opportunity to get a foothold in the Ukrainian market. According to sales statistics, amid the 84% growth of the truck market, MAZ has become the leading seller with 19.8% of all of the sold trucks. Sales of other vehicles are also on the rise. In addition to the large-scale contract for the supply of more than 100 buses to Kyiv and Zhytomyr, similar contracts may be made in 2018 with Lviv, Kharkiv, Zaporizhia, and Dnipro.

Against the backdrop of positive news concerning advancements in economic cooperation and two-way trade growth, certain negative trends are also in place:

- Verkhovna Rada has not yet examined draft laws on inland water transport, which were set to facilitate (and cheapen) the transit of Belarusian cargoes to the Black Sea ports by the Dnipro River.
- Following the failed attempts to maintain oil product prices in the fall, Belarusian Oil Company is losing its share in the Ukrainian market: both gasoline and diesel fuel supplies are showing a sharp decline. Experts of the A-95 Consulting Group believe that it would be difficult for Belarusian Oil Company to regain its former positions, because the consumption of oil products in Ukraine is falling, while its own refining has expanded; and following the disruption of supplies during the fall, some traders took their business back to Polish and Lithuanian competitors. It is a serious challenge, taking into account the fact that Ukraine is among the key markets for Belarusian oil refineries.

Forecast

In the economy, the nearest months will be marked by a change in the structure of Belarusian exports to Ukraine. Minsk will seek to reaffirm positive trends in the sales of its vehicles and machinery. Belarusian Oil Company will try to recover its previous level of income by regaining the positions in the wholesale market and developing the network of its own and affiliated gas stations under the UPG brand.

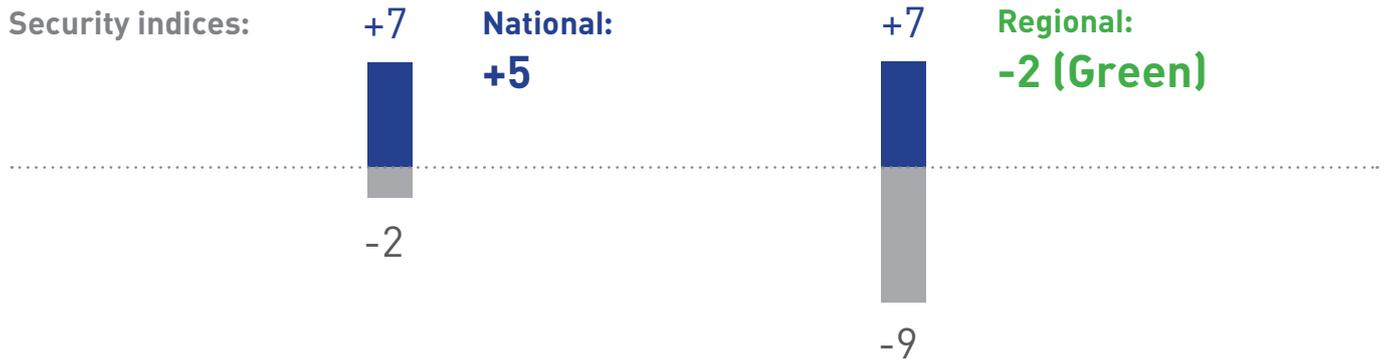
Further advances in the policy of creating joint ventures in Ukraine is no less important. JV MAZ-Bodgan made it possible to enter the military procurement market and get a foothold in the special-purpose machinery market. The Ukrainian government's plans to develop passenger traffic, railway transportation, and energy projects serve as an incentive for Belarusian companies to start operating in that country. The acquisition of the Ukrainian Sberbank might provide importers of Belarusian products (and likewise, the joint ventures) with additional financial instruments like those offered by Ukreximbank's Belarusian Import program.

The political dialogue will be aimed at mitigating negative trends observed over the last months in connection with the spy scandals and the lost media war in Ukraine. No meaningful developments exclusively at Kyiv's or Minsk's initiative are to be expected, as decisions concerning peacekeepers or the peace talks format are taken by more powerful actors. Belarus has extremely limited capacity to influence the course of events.

On the other hand, considering how significant and politically charged economic cooperation between the two states is, a meeting at the presidential level in late April or early May 2018 cannot be ruled out.



Security Barometer: status of national and regional security



Trends

1. Belarus, on the one hand, avoids being involved in the confrontation of the incumbent Russian leadership with the West and the Eastern European allies of the West. On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly disappointed with the Kremlin's growing unwillingness to strengthen its partners and allies in the military and economic areas. As a result of the increase in costs and the reduction of benefits from its alliance with Moscow, Minsk sees no other way of survival than a greater reliance on its own forces and pursuing its own security policy that would be increasingly different from that implemented by Russia.
2. Given the shortage of funds, the Belarusian leadership relied on "pinpoint" and "selective" rearmament (terms used by Defense Minister Raŭkoŭ).
3. Although the security situation in the region remains tense, this tension is a consequence of the past few years, rather than the last two months. At the same time, the countries of the region, except for Russia, are themselves faced with a deficit of financing to seriously exacerbate the security situation on their own.

1. National security

Defense self-sustainability

In February, Belarusian high-ranking officials and government agencies made a number of statements pointing to the revision of the defense policy towards greater self-sufficiency. In his speech on February 22, President Lukashenka stated: "In the event of a military threat, we must be ready to ensure the nationwide protection of Belarus. Seventy thousand military men of our army will not ensure the defense of the state ... the land should be protected by everyone. For this purpose, the system of territorial defense is being improved. In the event of a military conflict, we are capable of calling up for military service half a million people within a short period of time in order to defend the most important facilities by territorial defense forces. This is the essence of our defense doctrine." In his speech the president mentioned cooperation with Russia, but de facto he stated that any aggression should be repelled by the Belarusian forces, without

mentioning the Russian ally at all. The same position is presented in the article by Minister Raŭkoŭ in the February issue of the magazine *Bielaruskaja Dumka*.

This practical revision of the doctrine is reflected in the real defense policy. Firstly, in the focus placed on the creation of a small mobile army and the priority development of special operations forces. Secondly, in the procurement of arms. Belarus not only embarked on its own missile program in response to difficulties in obtaining short-range attack missiles from Russia, but also minimized purchases of armored vehicles from Russia. Instead of buying the BTR-82A armored personnel carrier, which had been discussed for a long time, in 2017, Minsk decided to pass into service three models of armored vehicles (the advanced BTR-70MB1, Cayman, MZKT-490100), and not only orders the upgrade of the T-72 in Russia (T-72BZ), but independently continues its own modernization of the tank (T-72BM1).

Comprehensive operability test

A regular comprehensive operability test of the Armed Forces was held from January 25 to February 2. According to official reports, “instant readiness units” were the first ones to undergo the test.

The test that is carried out every year included the performance of dynamic actions, in particular, approach to the training range and conduct of tactical exercises at a level up to the battalion. Scattered official reports about the event make it possible to draw a conclusion that in one way or another, the test applied to all units that are ready, to a greater or lesser extent, for use in combat conditions. Special operations forces, air defense, and air forces were covered almost completely, if not entirely.

Meeting on territorial defense issues

On February 28, the 230th combined arms training range hosted the meeting “Military Security and Defense of the State” with the heads of local executive and administrative bodies. It was attended by the chairmen of the regional and Minsk city executive committees and their deputies who supervise territorial defense, military commissars of the regions and the city of Minsk, Defense Minister Andrej Raŭkoŭ, and Chief of the General Staff Alieh Bielakonieŭ. They addressed the military and political situation around Belarus, the operation of the territorial defense system, and the algorithms for the operation of its management bodies.

Such meetings have been held annually since 2016, with a special topic selected for detailed review every year. Special attention during this year’s meeting was paid to “training ... of the procedure for the use of military units in the process of the preparation for and maintaining of defense of a settlement.”

At the first meeting on military security and defense of the state back in 2016, President Lukashenka stated that “as centuries-old experience shows, you can only guarantee the successful defense of the state if you make this defense a nationwide matter.” He also emphasized that the heads of regional executive committees and the chairman of the Minsk City Executive Committee were personally responsible for the organization of territorial defense in the regions.

Enhancement of border security

On January 22, the resolution for the state frontier service to protect the state border in 2018 was approved. When signing the document, Lukashenka noted the complicated situation along the entire perimeter of the country’s borders, including with Russia. According to him, the current problems are not “absolutely severe”, but they will not disappear anywhere in the near future, and therefore “it is necessary to actively continue equipping frontiers, ensure acceptable conditions for the service of border guards, build outposts, and equip the state border with state-of-the-art technical facilities.” Although the details of the resolution were not reported, according to official information, it concerns “the deployment of new units in the Ukrainian and Baltic directions.”

This resolution is in line with the tendency of the recent years towards the improvement of the technical level of the control of the Belarusian border and strengthening it. For example, the State

Border Troops Committee was ordered to strengthen the “military component” at the meeting focusing on the operation of law-enforcement agencies attended by the president on March 10, 2017.

Intelligence and counterintelligence

On February 1, KGB chief Valier Vakulčyk said that in 2017, KGB suppressed the activity of 11 agents and staff employees of foreign special services. The most notorious case was that of the citizen of Ukraine Pavel Sharoiko, who was accused of espionage under the guise of a journalist. On the other hand, last June, Ukrainians detained the Belarusian citizen Jury Palityka, also on suspicion of espionage. In general, drawing on the known facts of previous years, the special services of all of the neighboring countries are involved in active intelligence activities with respect to Belarus, and the Belarusian special services are just as active in the opposite direction.

Rearmament of the Belarusian army

Disruption of the supplies of fighters. On February 14, Defense Minister Raŭkoŭ announced at a news conference that the commencement of deliveries of the new Su-30SM fighters from Russia to the Belarusian army would be postponed until 2019. The respective contract for the supply of 12 aircraft was signed on June 20, 2017, and the first aircraft was due to arrive this year. According to Raŭkoŭ, the delay is due to the aftermath of western sanctions against Russia, which brought about the necessity to replace certain imported parts in those aircraft. There are grounds to have doubts about this substantiation, since Russia continues to manufacture such aircraft for both its own needs and for export.

Apparently, Minsk has still been unable to resolve the issue of payments for the aircraft. The Belarusian side has repeatedly pointed to the fact that it would be logical if Russia provided the maximum discount for such machines, as they would be used, among other things, to ensure the security of the most important region of Russia as part of the Unified Air Defense System. In addition, Minsk voiced its desire to pay for the supplies in kind, which is not an extraordinary payment scheme, since Russia itself has been selling the most advanced combat aircraft to Malaysia in exchange for goods, specifically for palm oil. By all appearances, in this situation, the Kremlin chooses to take a tough stance, because even back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Minsk reached an agreement with Moscow on the organization of assembly production of the previous modification of these fighters in Belarus.

Overall, the behavior of high-ranking Belarusian officials — from the president to the defense minister and the commander of the Air Force and Air Defense — serves as an indication that the issue is not settled. In recent months, their statements about the supply of new fighters no longer sound as confident and specific as they did last year, and in a number of speeches the topic was quite illustratively missing. For example, when speaking to BelTA about rearmament plans in much detail on February 23, Defense Minister Raŭkoŭ did not even mention the Su-30. The subject of Russian arms supplies was missing in Lukashenka’s speech on the same day, although he spoke about the rearmament of the army. On February 13, at a meeting of the Security Council, the president also criticized the Kremlin’s unwillingness to promote the rearmament of the armies of the CSTO member states.

It appears that this situation illustrates the drop in the level of military and technical cooperation between the two allies and attests to a number of unresolved issues that produce a profound negative effect on not only the defensive capacity of the army, but also the operation of the Belarusian military-industrial complex. For example, on January 31, Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee Alieh Dvihalioŭ said that Belarusian firms still faced “certain problems” in accessing the Russian state defense order. He also added quite meaningfully that Belarus follows Russia in terms of localizing production and maximizing the manufacture of the most important types of arms in its own territory. The problem of the Kremlin’s consistent desire to replace the Belarusian components and even ready-made samples of military equipment by Russian counterparts is well known. It is noteworthy that non-Russian entities account for 46% of the “engagement” of Belarusian companies in the field of military and technical cooperation.

Deliveries of Chinese armored vehicles.

On January 20, Belarus received from China another batch of CS / VN3 Dajiang (Dragon) light tactical armored vehicles. The exact number of machines donated by Beijing is not reported, but it is possible that the second delivery, by analogy with the first one, comprised ten vehicles. It is reported that after the trial operation of the first batch of vehicles in Belarus, the model was finalized to make adjustments to the Belarusian conditions, and the current batch consists of modified units.

2. Regional Security

Deployment of new types of weapons in the region

Russia is demonstratively building up its armaments in close proximity to Belarus. On February 23, Commander of the Russian Baltic Fleet Alexander Nosatov said that in 2018 another S-400 surface-to-air missile system, small-scale missile ships of a new design, and the upgraded Su-30SM aircraft and Ka-27M helicopters would be deployed in the Baltic Region. In fact, the Kremlin is effectively building up its military superiority, which used to be somewhat reduced by the deployment of NATO contingents in four countries of the region, and which can be further affected by the purchase by Poland of four divisions of the Patriot SAM systems (negotiations concerning the systems between Warsaw and Washington made significant progress last fall).

Furthermore, it is reported that in 2018, approximately 40 Su-34, MiG-31, Su-35 and Su-30SM combat aircraft will be added to the Air Force and Air Defense Forces of the Western Military District of Russia, along with new Mi-8 and Ka-27 helicopters. On February 5, Head of the Russian State Duma's Defense Committee Vladimir Shamanov said that the Iskander operational and tactical missile systems were deployed in the Kaliningrad Region on a permanent basis. Those developments somewhat bring down the importance of Belarus as Russia's military ally.

On February 11, Latvia purchased Israeli Spike multi-purpose missiles for a total of EUR 133 million. The weapons will be supplied in 2018-2023. By now, this system has already been purchased by Poland and Lithuania. This will significantly improve the combat capability of the Latvian army, but it should be noted that this upgrade is ensured against the background of its rather low capacity in terms of available weapons. On the regional scale, this will not lead to any perceptible changes in the balance of power.

Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

The OSCE declared an escalation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine during the period under review. According to spokespeople for the organization, the number of incidents related to ceasefire violation reached 1,000 per day. In addition, OSCE observers often encountered deliberate obstacles to their activities on the front line.

Peacemaking initiative

Former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who is currently an external adviser to the president of Ukraine, commissioned a report and presented it at the Munich meeting on 13 February. The document sets out a preliminary plan for a peacekeeping operation in Eastern Ukraine. The authors of the report suggest that Sweden lead this operation and list a number of countries that can be involved in it, from Brazil and Greece to Finland, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Austria. The inclusion of Belarus in the list is the apparent recognition of Minsk's current and future role in relation to the Donbas conflict. The Belarusian president confirmed on February 18 the previous statements by his government about the willingness to send peacekeepers to Eastern Ukraine. The very unambiguous statement by Lukashenka about the readiness to take part in the peacekeeping operation and his proposal to send 10,000 Belarusian servicemen to Ukraine testify to Minsk's aspiration to maximize its role in the upcoming operation. According to Ukrainian Foreign Minister Klimkin, it will take six to ten months to deploy this type of operation.

Confidence-building measures in the region

In February, pursuant to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), a U.S. inspection team and an inspection team from Denmark inspected one units of the Belarusian army each. It should be emphasized that Minsk continues to actively implement the CFE Treaty, while Moscow suspended the Treaty and, consequently, rejected inspections in 2007, whereas in March 2015, it completely withdrew from the agreement.

From 6 to 8 February, Riga hosted a working meeting of representatives of the Armed Forces of Belarus and Latvia, focusing on the implementation of the 2004 Agreement between Belarus and Latvia on additional measures of confidence and security. This annual meeting took place against the backdrop of 1) the deployment of the Latvian army in the Latgale region bordering on Belarus and populated partially with ethnic Belarusians, where no Latvian regular army units had been deployed; 2) attempts of the Belarusian government to promote its relationship with Latvia. According to a decision of the Latvian government, regular units, including air defense, in Daugavpils, Rēzekne, and Preiļi should be deployed by October 30 this year.

Growth of defense expenditures in the region

This year saw an unprecedented increase in defense expenditures of Belarus and all of its neighbors. Army expenditure increased in this year's budget by more than a quarter — up to USD 576 million. At the same time, Latvia's expenditures will amount to USD 685 million, Lithuania's defense expenditures will increase to approximately USD 1 billion, Poland will spend USD 11.5 billion, and Ukraine's expenditures are projected to reach USD 5.89 billion. As a proportion of GDP, Belarus allocates 1.3% of its GDP, the Baltic countries designate 2%, Russia 3.3%, and Ukraine 5%.

In addition to the increase in defense provisions, the countries of the region, in particular Lithuania, are considering getting back to universal conscription. As early as this year, Lithuania intends to call in 3,800 people liable for military service, an increase by 300 from last year. Against this backdrop, Belarus does not plan to amend its policy in this area, but it gradually continues to increase the number of contract soldiers, which currently makes up 20% of the total number of soldiers and noncommissioned personnel (as early as 2014, this figure was at 16%).

Forecast

Given the powerful momentum of political moves that originally led to the confrontation in the region in the past few years and the current increase in military spending in Belarus and other countries of the region, we should expect further build-up of military presence and the deployment of new arms in the region. However, we should not overestimate the economic, social, human and other resources of the countries of the region, that is, the militarization of the region at the expense of the region itself will be very limited. The situation can take a more serious turn only if forces outside of the region join in. In addition, the current militarization began from a very low level, and therefore its apparent scope is rather a consequence of broad media coverage, and the actual state of affairs looks a lot more modest on all sides of the current confrontation.

The gradual divergence of Belarus's and Russia's policy in the field of security will continue. On the Belarusian side, it is a pragmatic reaction to the many years of Moscow's unwillingness to give its ally the support it expects.

Minsk will do everything possible to ensure the most important component of security services, which it has guaranteed to Moscow since the moment it gained independence. This includes efforts to ensure the defense of the central Russian region by the Belarusian segment of the air defense and missile defense systems. These services are an important bargaining chip for Minsk within the framework of the bilateral relations. Therefore, air defense hardware will be one of the priorities in the procurement of arms and the promotion of the army.

For its own needs, Minsk seeks to create a more compact army with modern arms that would suit the needs of a smaller country. Therefore, it should be expected that, given the attention of the Belarusian leadership to the development of special operations forces and missile units, as well as the creation of respective arms (mobility means, armored vehicles, various missile weapons), Minsk will pay less attention to other components of the national army and even write off without replacement some of the obsolete types of heavy weapons subject to their subsequent sale via special exporters of the state military and industrial complex.

Appendix 1

Catalogue of events underlying the relations development indices

Relationship with Russia

Date	Event	Point
1 January	Customs Code of the EEU comes into effect	+4
4 January	Positive assessment of the development of the relationship with Russia in the Annual Review of Foreign Policy and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017	+2
17 January	Miasnikovič's statement about the update of the Union State Treaty	+1
2 February	Meeting of the EEU Intergovernmental Council	+2
7 February	Surikov's news conference	+1
8 February	Makiej's interview with Izvestia with the confirmation of the Union obligations	+2
9 February	State Duma ratifies the protocol to the agreement on crude oil supplies	+1
January-February	Twelve meetings between top officials of the parliament, prosecutor's office, Interior Ministry, customs service, education, communication, and industrial cooperation authorities, and heads of regions	+12
January-February	Hard negotiations on the terms of oil and gas supplies	-1
February	Difficulties with supplies of Belarusian dairy products	-1
February	Delayed supplies of the SU-30SM fighters	-1
Total		+22

Relationship with the European Union

Date	Event	Point
4 January	Positive assessment of the development of the relationship with the EU in the Annual Review of Foreign Policy and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017	+1
15 January	Kraŭčanka meets with German Ambassador Peter Dettmar	+1
18-19 January	Kraŭčanka visits the Republic of Cyprus	+1
19 January	Makiej meets with Polish Ambassador Konrad Pawlik	+1
23 January	Deputy Minister of Economy Matusievič meets with Jurgen Keinhorst, Director for Cooperation with Eastern Europe, Central Asia and South Caucasus, Middle East and North Africa at the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety, and German Ambassador to Belarus Peter Dettmar	+1
29 January	Makiej meets with Austrian Ambassador Alexander Bayerl	+1
29 January	Kraŭčanka meets with Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy Angelino Alfano and Diplomatic Adviser to the President of the Italian Republic Emanuela D'Alessandro	+1
30 January	European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn visits Belarus, meets with Lukashenka, Kabiakoŭ, and Makiej	+2
30-31 January	Kraŭčanka visits Austria, meets with Secretary General of the Federal Ministry for European Affairs, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria Michael Linhart; meeting of the Belarus – Austria Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Cooperation; Third meeting of the Belarus–Austria Business Council	+1
7-8 February	Prime Minister of Latvia Māris Kučinskis visits Belarus,, meets with Lukashenka, Kabiakoŭ, signs a series of intergovernmental agreements	+3
9 February	Consultations between the Foreign Ministries of Belarus and Latvia at the level of deputy ministers in Minsk	+1
9 February	Makiej meets with Swedish Ambassador Christina Johannesson	+1
12 February	Resolution of the Government No. 116 on the closure of the Consulate General of the Republic of Belarus in Gdansk (Poland)	-1
14 February	Joint Belarusian-Swedish workshop ‘SmartCity: Waste Management, Closed-loop Economy’ attended by Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Chudyk	+1
26 February	Resolution of the Government No. 162 on the closure of the Consulate General of the Republic of Belarus in Milan (Italy)	-1
27 February	Consultations between the Foreign Ministries of Belarus and the Czech Republic at the level of deputy ministers in Minsk	+1
27 February	EU extends sanctions against Belarus for another year. Negative response of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry	-1
Total		+14

Relationship with China

Date	Event	Point
4 January	Positive assessment of the Belarus–China relationship development in the Annual Review of Foreign Policy and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017	+1
10 January	Announcement of Belarus–China Year of Tourism in the course of the Belarus–China tourism forum in Chongqing	+1
10 January	Deputy Sport and Tourism Minister Partny visits China	+1
12 January	Foreign Minister Makiej’s interview to Xinhua News Agency	+1
30 January	An article about a Chinese investor headlined “Cannot Get Along” is published in Sovetskaya Belorussiya	-1
30 January	Articles concerning the complaints of Svietlahorsk residents, headlined “Chinese Plant Poisons Air to Svietlahorsk Residents” and “Svietlahorsk Residents Complain about the Atmosphere”, are published in Sovetskaya Belorussiya	-1
31 January	Production of 25-ton ZMC-25 cranes was launched at Belarus–China MAZ-Zoomlion joint venture	+1
1 February	Presentation of the First China International Import Expo (5–10 November 2018), attended by representatives of China’s Commerce Ministry	+1
2 February	A gala concert dedicated to the Spring Festival at the Belarusian State Philharmonic Hall, attended by Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of China to Belarus Cui Qiming and Deputy Culture Minister Aliaksandr Jacko	+1
7 February	Council of Ministers’ Resolution No. 87 dated 31 January 2018 approving the regulatory framework for the CBIP’s operation, is published	+1
8 February	Presentation of Petals of Lotus and Chrysanthemum collection of works by 100 Chinese poets of the 20th century	+1
8-11 February	Economy Minister Zinoŭski visits China. He holds a meeting with China’s Deputy Commerce Minister Fu Ziying (in a ministerial rank)	+2
9 February	In his address at the ceremony of honoring the best workers of the agricultural industry with state awards, Aliaksandr Lukashenka emphasized personal assistance rendered by the Chinese president in certifying Belarusian enterprises in the Chinese market.	+1
9 February 11 February	Signing of intergovernmental framework agreement on the issue of a preferential loan by China for the implementation of the first stage of the project for the establishment of a high-tech agroindustrial fully-integrated production (Belarusian National Biotechnology Corporation) and of a respective loan agreement with Exim Bank (about USD 280 million)	+3
13 February	First Deputy Finance Minister Jermalovič’s interview to Xinhua News Agency	+1
14 February	The agreement on 14-day visa-free stay between Belarus and Hong Kong enters into force	+1

Date	Event	Point
14 February	First supply of Belarusian beef to the Chinese market	+1
16 February	President Lukashenka extends his congratulations in connection with the traditional Spring Festival	+1
22 February	Aliaksandr Lukashenka expresses his gratitude to the Chinese side for assistance in developing new types of armaments	+1
27 February	Market launch of the Geely Atlas crossover in Russia	+1
Total		+19

Relationship with U.S.

Date	Event	Point
4 January	Positive assessment of the Belarus–U.S. relationship development in the Annual Review of Foreign Policy and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017	+1
26 January	Robert Riley’s statements concerning numerous projects in Belarus. Positive comments about the country	+1
26-29 January	Belarus is for the first time represented at New York Times Travel Show 2018	+1
30 January	A delegation of the Belarusian Investigative Committee headed by its chairman Ivan Naskievič pays a working visit to the U.S. and holds meetings at the FBI	+1
30 January	Robert Riley says the U.S. is not ready to fully lift the sanctions	-1
1 February	U.S. Embassy in Minsk starts providing full visa services to Belarusian nationals and residents	+2
15 February	President Lukashenka sends condolences to Donald Trump after Florida shootings	+1
23 February	U.S. Embassy’s negative statement concerning the results of the conduct of the local elections in Belarus	-1
Total		+5

Relationship with Ukraine

Date	Event	Point
4 January	Positive assessment of the Belarus–Ukraine relationship development in the Annual Review of Foreign Policy and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017	+1
4 January	Resolution concerning the closure of the consulate in Odessa	-1
20 January	Klimkin’s statement concerning the uselessness of relocating the Minsk negotiation venue	+1
31 January	Aliiev Dvihalioŭ’s statement concerning the halt in the military and technical cooperation with Ukraine	-1
January–February	Intense cooperation of both countries’ border committees	+1
18 February	Lukashenka’s statement concerning the settlement of the conflict in Ukraine	+1
26 February	Foreign ministry consultations, agreement on cooperation	+1
27 February	Telephone conversation at the presidential level	+1
February	Trials of the spies start	-1
February	Mutual accusations of security officials in the national mass media	-1
Total		+2

Appendix 2

Catalogue of events underlying the security indices

Date	Event	National security	Regional security
January	Unprecedented growth of defense expenditures of Belarus and all of its neighbors	+1	-6
January-February	Aggravation of the situation in Eastern Ukraine	0	-1
20 January	Belarus receives another batch of armored vehicles from China	+1	0
22 January	Resolution on the defense of the state border in 2018 is adopted, envisaging the deployment of additional units on several directions	+1	0
25 January–2 February	Comprehensive test of the combat capacity of the Armed Forces	+1	0
February	Public speeches by the president and the minister of defense of Belarus that indicate the revision of the defense policy towards increased self-reliance	+1	+1
February	Purchase and deployment of new arms in the Western Military District of Russia and Latvia	0	-2
6-8 February	Working meeting of representatives of the Armed Forces of Belarus and Latvia focusing on the implementation of the Agreement between Belarus and Latvia on additional measures of confidence and security	0	+1
13-18 February	Presentation of a peacemaking plan for Eastern Ukraine with the possible involvement of Belarus	+1	+1
14 February	Declared failure to supply new Su-30SM fighters to the Belarusian Air Force in 2018	-2	+2
February	Inspection of two units of the Belarusian Armed Forces by two inspection teams from the U.S. and Denmark	0	+2
28 February	Meeting 'Military Security and Defense of the State' involving heads of the local executive and administrative authorities	+1	0
Total		+5	-2 (green)

Appendix 3. Color scale of regional security tensions

Color value	Numerical value	Interpretation
White	more than -1	Low likelihood of escalation. Non-threatening situation
Green	from -2 to -6	Presence of military activities, which do not pose a direct threat and will not necessarily lead to the escalation of tensions. Such a situation calls for cautious attention.
Yellow	from -7 to -12	Military and other activity is observed that is capable of leading to the escalation of tensions. The situation calls for close attention.
Orange	from -13 to -17	Military preparations in the region. Growing tensions. Situation is threatening.
Red	-18 and less	Sharp escalation of tensions. The conflict is virtually unavoidable. A pre-war situation.

Information about authors

Siarhei Bohdan, political scientist, analyst at the Ostrogorski Centre. He defended his PhD at the Free University of Berlin. His sphere of professional interests includes Belarus's foreign policy and military security.

Valeria Kostiugova, political observer and consultant. Valeria is a head of the Agency of Social and Political Expertise (Vilnius, Lithuania) as well as an editor of the expert community web-site «Nashe Mnenie». Sphere of expertise: Belarus-Russia relations, political parties and political organisations.

Olga Kulai, MA in Eastern Studies (Belarusian State University), analyst at the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (Minsk, Belarus). She worked at a number of Chinese companies in Minsk and in the Republican Institute of Chinese Studies at the Belarusian State University. Sphere of expertise: Chinese foreign policy and foreign investments.

Dzianis Melyantsou, specialist in international relations, coordinator of the Belarus's Foreign Policy Programme under the Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative. Dzianis specialises in Belarus's foreign policy, as well as in national and international security.

Yauheni Preiherman, specialist in international relations, head of the Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative. Main research interests: foreign policy of small states, international relations in Eastern Europe, Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security.

Ihar Tyshkevich, expert of the program «International and Domestic Politics» at the Ukrainian Institute for the Future.