

## Europe's last dictatorship

Will Belarus be able to shrug off its autocratic image?

The 26th summer session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, held in Minsk on 5-9 July, became one of the most strategically significant events in the history of the sovereign state of Belarus. The session took place in the context of the cyclical crisis in Belarus' relations with the European Union and the United States. But despite the traditional finger-pointing on both sides, the parties outlined the possibility of normalisation and reorientation towards a more trusting relationship.

One of the most high-profile outcomes of the session was a Belarusian initiative to organise a second Helsinki process. (The first led to the 1975 Helsinki Accords, a major diplomatic agreement aimed at reducing tension between the USSR and the West by jointly recognising post World War II borders and pledging cooperation science, economics and other areas). President Alexander Lukashenko's key message was that such a process would help the largest global powers frame a global document that would draw a line under the cold war, having excluded any possibility of its renewal and escalation into a more tragic form. In so doing, Lukashenko was seeking to depict Belarus as regional mediator and peace-maker. He is motivated by two ideas.

Firstly, the country is still viewed as Europe's "last dictatorship" by its partners on the continent. Belarus' negative image could damage its overall development and the willingness of other countries to work with it. So Lukashenko needs to win them over.

Secondly, the country's leadership is seeking to safeguard Belarus's territory. In a highly unstable region, Lukashenko keen to establish better diplomatic ties, which would bring security and act as a barrier to threats. He is ready to concede to diplomatic climbdowns in domestic and foreign policy, if that's what it takes.

It was probably the desire to move the Helsinki initiative forward and build more trusting relationships with Western countries that led Belarus to take two controversial decisions regarding Russia. Four of the six members of the delegation from Belarus supported the final declaration

of the session, including the Ukrainian resolution condemning the "aggression of Russia against Ukraine" and the "temporary occupation of Crimea and Sevastopol". How this vote will affect relations with their ally and main energy donor is as yet unknown, but even now Belarusian diplomats are playing it down. MP Valerii Voronetskii, one of the delegates that voted for the adoption of the Minsk Declaration, has argued it was a political decision over which Belarus' hands were tied.

Significantly, Belarus promised to invite international observers to "West-2017" a series of joint strategic exercises between Russian and Belarusian armed forces – something it is not obliged to do under international law. The decision is likely in response to Belarusian concerns over the possible uncontrolled deployment of Russian troops in the country

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly sessions lent Belarus a touch more legitimacy. International delegates were muted in their criticism towards the country, and struck down a scathing resolution proposed by Lithuania, which called on Belarus to rehabilitate political prisoners, introduce a moratorium on the death penalty, reform the electoral system, respect the rights of citizens to freedom of expression and assembly, and suspend construction of the BelAES (Belarusian nuclear power station).

Furthermore a previously adopted resolution on Eastern Europe, critical of Belarus, was left out of the final declaration. This had admonished Belarus for non-transparent elections, restrictions on freedom of speech, and the detention of protesters and political prisoners.

In another sign that Belarus is changing its diplomatic strategy, its highest ranking officials held several unofficial meetings with the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Belarus Miklós Haraszti, officially a persona non grata. Meetings also took place with high-level government representatives in Brussels, Geneva and Vienna.

Despite the relative success of the OSCE sessions, Belarus still suffers from critically low credibility levels within the EU and the US. For more than 20 years European leaders have criticised the country's human rights record. The developed democracies have made it clear that no real dialogue is possible without an acknowledgement of the basic values of democracy.



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