

## AT THE CROSSROADS OF EUROPEAN DIPLOMACY: BELARUS IS A VENUE OF DIALOGUE FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

### EN LA ENCRUCIJADA DE LA DIPLOMACIA EUROPEA: BIELORRUSIA ES UN LUGAR DE DIÁLOGO PARA LA COOPERACIÓN ENTRE EL ESTE Y EL OESTE

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#### **Abstract**

Nowadays people face a wide range of problems: conflict resolution, illegal migration, terrorism, drug trafficking, environmental protection. Today Belarus is increasingly perceived as a "pole of stability" and being the geographical center of Europe, it is the place to resolve urgent issues. Minsk, the capital of Belarus has become a recognized venue for negotiations to promote peaceful settlement in Ukraine. Besides in 2017 Belarus has hosted a number of major international forums: events organized as part of the country's presidency of the Central European Initiative; the 26th Annual Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe; the Collective Security Treaty Organization summit. It is obvious recognition of a new role of Belarus. Belarus is building bridges. Minsk has proved to be a venue of dialogue between conflict parties, between different countries, between East and West for the development of regional, subregional and global cooperation.

**Keywords:** conflict resolution, "pole of stability", venue for negotiations, peaceful settlement, international forums, development of cooperation.

#### **Resumen**

Hoy en día las personas enfrentan una amplia gama de problemas: resolución de conflictos, migración ilegal, terrorismo, tráfico de drogas, protección del medio ambiente. Hoy en día, Belarús se percibe cada vez más como un "polo de estabilidad" y, al ser el centro geográfico de Europa, es el lugar para resolver problemas urgentes. Minsk, la capital de Bielorrusia se ha convertido en un lugar reconocido para las negociaciones para promover la solución pacífica en Ucrania. Además, en 2017, Bielorrusia ha organizado una serie de importantes foros internacionales: eventos organizados como parte de la Presidencia de la Iniciativa Centroeuropea; la 26ª Sesión Anual de la Asamblea Parlamentaria de la Organización para la Seguridad y la Cooperación en Europa; la cumbre de la Organización del Tratado de Seguridad Colectiva. Es un reconocimiento obvio de un nuevo rol de Bielorrusia. Bielorrusia está construyendo puentes. Minsk ha demostrado ser un lugar de diálogo entre partes en conflicto, entre diferentes países, entre Oriente y Occidente para el desarrollo de la cooperación regional, subregional y mundial.

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**Palabras clave:** resolución de conflictos, "polo de estabilidad", sede de negociaciones, solución pacífica, foros internacionales, desarrollo de la cooperación.

### **Introduction**

The Republic of Belarus has entered a new century as a modern European country with rich historical traditions of statehood. On the territory of present Belarus in IX-XIV centuries some Principalities formed the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – one of the most powerful and highly developed states of that epoch with active international relations. The Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is an example of one of the first European constitutions.

At the moment of foundation of the UN after World War II, the Belarusian Soviet socialist Republic was among its founding states and during the whole period of its existence up to 1991 the Belarusian SSR was its active and full member.

The Declaration on state sovereignty of Belarus adopted in 1990 is obviously one of the most important and significant moments to start absolutely new stage in the development of the country, to pursue an independent foreign policy.

Despite the objective difficulties, the Republic of Belarus after the Declaration on state sovereignty managed to build relations with the outside world, without compromising its national interests. This has allowed our country to promote and defend confidently and effectively its foreign policy objectives and priorities.

### **Development**

Today Belarus is a sovereign European state which pursues independent, peaceful foreign policy, which actively develops cooperation with foreign partners in different parts of the globe, making a significant contribution to strengthening of international security and stability.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays people all over the world face a wide range of problems connected with different spheres: conflict resolution, illegal migration, terrorism, drug trafficking, environmental protection and many others. The Republic of Belarus has always been an example of peace and tolerance. Today our country is increasingly perceived as a "pole of stability" in the European region, and this factor could even increase.

Belarus, the geographical center of Europe, is the place to resolve urgent issues. Minsk has become a recognized venue for negotiations to promote peaceful settlement in Ukraine. The Minsk Agreements - an international agreement on the way to resolve the crisis in the East of Ukraine was adopted and signed in Minsk in February 2015. The 26th Annual Session of the Parliamentary Assembly reiterated support for the Package of Measures for its implementation.

“There are many people who ... think the Minsk format has become outdated and that they can do without it. But they do not offer any new initiatives to replace it. Therefore, the Minsk process should remain in place, but it should be stepped up... We fully support the work of the Trilateral contact group and Special

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OSCE monitoring mission in Ukraine. We will continue to do whatever is necessary to the state of peace,” – mentioned the President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict resolution from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine — is a key activity of the OSCE. And Minsk agreements remain the cornerstone of peaceful settlement in Ukraine that should be fully implemented by all parties. This was stated by foreign Minister of Belarus Vladimir Mackay, speaking at the 24th meeting of the Council of foreign Ministers of the OSCE in Vienna in December, 2017.

In his speech Vladimir Makei noted that the main goal of the Helsinki process was the removal of tension between East and West, as well as the creation of an atmosphere of confidence among States parties through dialogue and cooperation.

"Today the way to achieve this goal seems even longer than 40 years ago. European security continues to be in deep crisis taking into consideration the growth of polarization, the erosion of trust, multiplying the challenges," said Vladimir Makei.

The Minister also outlined the steps that need to be done to stop this trend and ensure sustainable stability. One of them is the need to send a clear political signal that the OSCE represents a unique platform for inclusive dialogue on security issues. "We should fully use the potential of the CSTO to reduce the risk of military confrontation in Europe. Belarus advocates the development of a new regime for conventional arms control, in line with current realities. We support the current structured dialogue on current and future security threats. Ready to continue to contribute to this process", — said the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Vladimir Makei. He also stressed that we used to say "East and West...", but we believe that Belarus is in Europe. Belarus is Europe geographically and politically.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the efforts to resolve the crisis in Ukraine Belarus lately has taken a number of consistent constructive steps to strengthen Minsk's position as a reliable negotiation venue: only in 2017 Belarus has hosted a number of major international forums, for instance, events organized as part of the country's presidency of the Central European Initiative, the recent Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Collective Security Treaty Organization summit.

In 2017, the Republic of Belarus took over the Presidency of the Central European Initiative. Belarus chose «Promoting connectivity in a Wider Europe» as the main theme of its' Presidency that is in line with the distinctive features of the CEI and interests of all member countries.

The Central European Initiative was established in 1989 as an organization designed to promote the development of stable relations between the States of Central, Western and Eastern Europe in the field of politics, economy and culture, as well as to prevent new dividing lines in the European region. In the late 1990-ies the main purpose of the CEI was proclaimed the promotion of European integration and rapprochement between the EU and the European States are part of it.

Today, the Organization has 18 member countries: Austria, Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Croatia, Montenegro, Czech Republic.<sup>4</sup>

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The 26th Annual Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE PA) in Minsk July 5-9, 2017 on 'Boosting Cooperation and Confidence in OSCE Region for Peace and Welfare' meant obvious recognition of the new role of Belarus. That was the first time The Republic of Belarus hosted such a large-scale international political forum.

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko made a speech during the plenary session held on 5 July to mark the formal opening of the 26th annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. "It was important that Belarus proposed the idea of starting a new Helsinki Process, a wide-ranging dialogue between East and West to overcome the existing differences in Eurasia, at this forum," the head of state noted.<sup>5</sup>

OSCE PA annual session was really important because security and economic partnership, human rights protection and building trust among the countries were actively discussed by 300 participants from Northern American, European and Asian countries. The summit was concluded by adoption of the respective resolutions and Minsk Declaration based on the resolutions adopted following the discussions and contains the recommendations to national governments, parliaments and the international community on responding to the present-day challenges and threats. The Minsk Declaration also includes several additional resolutions sponsored by individual parliamentarians on a wide range of issues: counterterrorism, migration, inadmissibility of fomenting sectarian strife, on strengthening energy security.

Belarus has become the bridge between East and West: the Silk Road Support Group was established in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk. The initiative to create the group belonged to Azerbaijan. Its founders were 17 countries (including Belarus), three more voiced their interest to join it in the future. The created group will play the role of a platform for mutually beneficial economic and trade projects. Its task is to promote the development of transport corridors, facilitate trade and transport procedures, and the free and safe movement of persons, goods, services and investments. The Silk Roads Support Group is going to coordinate its activities with China, a strategic partner country, although not involved in the work of the OSCE PA, but being the main initiator and investor of the project.

Lately Belarus has co-established the Eurasian Economic Union together with its partners within a very short time. This project is one of the largest integration associations set up recently. Belarus has been filling the Belarus-China strategic partnership with concrete content, too. Also we have made a long way towards the normalization of relations with the EU. Our cooperation with the U.S. has been gradually gaining momentum, too.

Currently it is fundamentally important for Belarus to develop cooperation with the East and the West without making a choice between them, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko said at a meeting to discuss Belarus' priorities in foreign politics at the present stage.<sup>6</sup>

2017 is a year of Belarusian presidency in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It is a regional international organization, created in 1992, the objectives of which are "strengthening peace, international and regional security and stability, protection of independence and sovereignty of member States, priority in achieving these goals for member States".<sup>7</sup> The Treaty on collective security was signed by the heads of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 1993 Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia joined the organization, but then Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan left it. Currently, the status of the members of the CSTO have 6 countries: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan,

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Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan. The collective rapid reaction forces of the CSTO are about 22 thousand soldiers, peacekeeping - about 3.5 thousand.

The Collective Security Council meeting was held on 30 November 2017 in Belarus. Not only the heads of states but the heads of Foreign Ministries, Defense Ministries and security councils were represented in Minsk.

The President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko said on November 30, opening the session of the collective security Council of CSTO that Belarus is a consistent supporter of active interaction in the framework of the collective security Treaty, the comprehensive impact of its activities and strengthening authority in the international arena.

"In general, in 2017 - the anniversary year for the organization much work has been done. I am sure that further joint actions to strengthen the CSTO will remain stable, progressive and dynamic. It is essential that this work is obvious for public both in this and foreign countries", - said the President.<sup>8</sup>

During negotiations Presidents in a constructive, frank way discussed the key trends in the development of international situation and its impact on the situation in the CSTO responsibility zone, exchanged views on the effectiveness of measures taken to ensure collective security.

At the summit Belarusian presidency in the CSTO in 2017 was summed up. Belarus has set the task to strengthen the organization's influence in the international arena, to improve the operational readiness of Collective forces, to ensure the economic security of the member states, as well as to implement additional measures to combat international terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal migration in the regions of collective security.

The President of Belarus noted with satisfaction common views of the parties regarding modern threats that face member States of the CSTO, the effectiveness of the chosen strategy to minimize them. "Our systematic work and joint efforts were aimed at increasing the international prestige of the CSTO, the expansion of the circle of its supporters, development of the most important forms of foreign policy coordination," - said Alexander Lukashenko. According to him, the format of the Organization managed to achieve a conceptual consolidation of common approaches to information security, to align with the advanced technical requirements of the basic elements of crisis response system. Specific steps have been taken towards the creation of conditions for the use of peacekeeping capacity. In addition, the basis for the regulatory registration of the partnership within the CSTO, with the international organizations and third countries was prepared.

The decision in favor of legalizing the institution of partnership as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization was made by participants of the session of the CSTO Collective Security Council in Minsk on 30 November, 2017. Belarus has worked out a package of draft legislation on legalizing the institution of partnership in the CSTO as part of the country's presidency in the organization in 2017 and in line with the agreements reached during the session of the CSTO Foreign Ministers Council on 17 July 2017. The institution of partnership is supposed to allow third countries to discuss topical matters together with the CSTO member states in addition to taking part in practical interaction in individual areas in the organization's scope. This partnership is expected to create kind of a good neighborhood belt in order to



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stop problems together with friendly nations and organizations before they reach the CSTO borders. Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei told media that the institution of partnership is supposed to increase the influence and authority of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The partnership institution will allow more active work with other countries and regional organizations. The relevant document has been drafted. “It is in the final stage of the approval process. Some CSTO member states have to complete only several domestic approval procedures. I am convinced we will finish it next year,” said the Belarusian minister of foreign affairs. The CSTO leaders also passed a statement on joint measures to bolster the defensive potential of the CSTO member states. The document reads that enhancing the defensive potential of the CSTO countries is one of the most important directions in joint work. The document also calls for improving the system of practical cooperation between the national armies for the sake of ensuring security, stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of the countries. In view of the priorities of Belarus' CSTO presidency the document also mentions intentions to increase the volume of mutual trade between national defense contractors, establish manufacturing cooperation ties, expand scientific and technical cooperation, and improve provision mechanisms for the CSTO collective forces. Belarus assumed the CSTO presidency on 14 October 2016. The priorities of Belarus' presidency include securing a quality increase in the CSTO's influence in the international scene, advancing the system for responding to crisis situations to the next level, radically improving the operational readiness of the CSTO collective forces, expanding the CSTO agenda with economic security matters, implementing a set of extra measures to counteract international terrorism and illegal drugs turnover and measures to stabilize the migration situation.<sup>9</sup> Belarusian side expects that with the transition of the presidency in the CSTO to Kazakhstan all earlier initiatives will be supplemented and will receive creative development.

By the end of the plenary session the sides have signed more than two dozen documents on the agenda of the summit. Among them, the Declaration in connection with the 25th anniversary of the collective security Treaty and the 15th anniversary of the CSTO.

An agreement on cooperation among the CSTO member states members in information security was signed at the summit in Minsk. The agreement is aimed at achieving the goals and targets set forth in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) strategy for the period up to 2025 adopted by the CSTO Collective Security Council on 14 October 2016. The purpose of the agreement is to promote the interaction between the parties in order to ensure the information security of the CSTO countries. The CSTO member states also took a decision regarding the plan of action to the CSTO collective security strategy for the period up to 2025. The document provides for a set of legal, institutional and practical arrangements on matters of foreign policy coordination, collaboration with international organizations and third countries, crisis response, arms control, peacekeeping, military, militarytechnical and militaryeconomic cooperation, training, countering modern challenges and threats to security, information security. The heads of the CSTO member states also adopted a number of decisions relating to the ongoing activities of the organization.<sup>10</sup>

In a number of final decisions the priorities of Belarusian presidency in the Organization were reflected. Among them, decisions on the legal design of the institution of partnership within the CSTO, on the improvement of measures to combat illegal migration, the statement on joint measures to strengthen the defense capabilities of the member States of the CSTO.

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A number of policy statements of the heads of States on topical issues of international security were adopted. Issues for improvement of the military component of the Organization and structure of the Secretariat and United headquarters of the CSTO, the distribution of quota positions in the joint staff, the adoption of the budget of the CSTO in 2018 and a number of other were adopted.<sup>3</sup>

The conceptual framework of the institution of partnership within the CSTO is to provide opportunities for third countries to participate jointly with the CSTO member States in the discussion of topical issues and practical cooperation in certain areas within the competence of the organization. The goal of the partnership is the creation of a sort of belt of good-neighbourliness, so that in cooperation with friendly countries and organizations to stop problems on the approaches to the borders of the member States of the CSTO.

As stated to journalists by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Vladimir Makei, the establishment of the Institute partnerships aimed at strengthening the influence and authority of the CSTO. This will allow to work more actively with other States and regional organizations. A draft document is ready. "His review is at the final stage, only requires some procedures of internal coordination in individual countries of the CSTO. I am convinced that next year we will finish it", – told the Minister.<sup>3</sup>

The leaders of the CSTO countries also adopted a Declaration on joint measures for strengthening the defense capacity of the States members of the organization. It notes that one of the major directions of joint activities is the strengthening of the defense capacity of the CSTO member States, improving the system of practical cooperation of the national armed forces to ensure security, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty of States.

The document also stated in line with the priorities of the presidency of Belarus about its intention to increase the volume of mutual trade between enterprises of the military-industrial complexes, to establish cooperative ties and expand scientific and technical cooperation and to improve the equipment of troops (Collective forces) collective security Treaty organization.

"It really was an open and principled conversation of the closest States in the world. We have no nearer and dearer except those sitting at this table, unfortunately... or, maybe, fortunately", said the Belarusian President summing up the Collective Security Council meeting.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusions**

As a result of such multi-vector policy, we have achieved a new perception of Belarus in the world. Belarus is viewed now as an independent, peaceful country, a kind of a donor of security in the region. Belarus has initiated and co-authored various initiatives in such essential international organizations as the UN, the OSCE, the CSTO and other important and reputable regional organizations.

So today Belarus is building bridges. Minsk, the capital of the Republic of Belarus has proved to be a venue of dialogue between conflict parties, between different countries, between East and West for the development of regional, subregional and global cooperation.

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