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# BELARUS' RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE AND LITHUANIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2006 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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## *Abstract*

This article contains an analysis of the changes in the Belarus' foreign policy towards its immediate neighbours, Lithuania and Ukraine. Special attention is given to the analysis of reasons and conditions for such considerable changes in the Belarusian authorities' policies, and the comparison of policies before and after the "reversal" that took place in 2005–2006. The "reversal" was caused by a number of factors, some of which are dependant on the peculiarities of the political development of Belarus such as the political isolation on the part of the West, the aggravation of relations with Russia, the presidential elections of 2006, and the strengthening of the authoritarian regime. Other factors were of external and regional nature such as the coming into power of new political leaders in the Ukraine in 2004, and the growing acuteness of the energy security problem. For better or worse, the events of 2005–2006 have significantly altered the foreign policy orientation of Belarus, which promises both new challenges and new opportunities.

## 1. Belarus-Lithuania relations

Until recently, Belarus-Lithuania relations remained in the shadow of the official relations between Minsk and Moscow, and only after the presidential elections in 2006 and the changes in the international context did relations between the two neighbouring countries become more dynamic and gain more importance for Belarus. This evolution of bilateral relations can firstly be explained by the deterioration of Russia-Belarus relations, and the actual winding

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up of the process of creation of the union state of Russia and Belarus after a series of energy conflicts that took place in 2004, and 2006–2007.

In the framework of increasing the “pragmatism” of its foreign policy, the Kremlin refused to indirectly subsidise the Belarusian economy by supplying cheap energy resources, which led to a pained reaction from the Belarusian authorities. In this situation, Minsk was forced to urgently start looking for new opportunities for diversification of its hydrocarbon supply, and form new foreign policy vectors that could enable balancing the previous foreign policy inclination towards Russia. The review of priorities of Belarusian foreign policy, among other things, led to an increased interest in the development of relations in the framework of Baltic and Black Sea regions on a qualitative new level.

Regardless of the undoubted significance of the transformation of orientation of foreign policy in the Republic of Belarus after 2006, Belarusian analysts have not demonstrated any due interest in the study of the new stage of Belarus-Lithuania relations. The most recent studies of Lithuania-Belarus relations come from 2003<sup>1</sup>. The study of bilateral relations after the Belarusian presidential elections in 2006 has not been initiated whatsoever.

This situation can be partially explained by the fact that after accession of the Republic of Lithuania to NATO and the European Union it began to be viewed by Belarusian analysts and diplomats as part of a more extensive political formation — the European Union, thus Belarus-Lithuania relations began to be viewed in the context of relations with the EU. This explanation is evidenced by the inclusion by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry of Belarus-Lithuania relations in the category of “relations with European countries,” in which only EU member states are listed<sup>2</sup>.

In the meantime, Belarus-Lithuania relations may not in any case be limited to EU-Belarus relations, because the policy of Belarus towards Lithuania differs considerably from its policy towards the EU, and the policy of Lithu-

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<sup>1</sup> Халиманович Н. Белорусско-балтийские отношения в региональном контексте // Белорусский журнал международного права и международных отношений. - Минск, 2003, № 3. - С. 56-59 (Khalimanovich N. *Belarus-Baltic Relations in the Regional Context*. // Belarusian Journal of International Law and International Affairs, Minsk, 2003, No. 3, pp. 56-59).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, <<http://www.mfa.gov.by/rus/index.php?d=policy/bicooop&id=106>>, 22.09.2007.

ania towards Belarus is somewhat different from the attitude of the entire EU towards Minsk. In this case, we may talk about fully-fledged bilateral relations of two independent states.

### **1.1. Belarus' policies towards Lithuania in 2002-2006**

The period between 2002 and 2006 is characterised by rather lukewarm, and sometimes tense, relations between Lithuania and Belarus. The year 2002 is taken as the bottom limit for this period because it was then, at the NATO Prague Summit (to which, it should be mentioned, Alexander Lukashenko was not admitted), that Lithuania's accession to the Alliance in 2004 was officially announced. This circumstance was not least of all to have an impact on the policies of Minsk towards Lithuania. At the beginning of the period in question, Belarusian authorities had a very negative attitude towards NATO expansion to the east, associating itself with Russia on this issue. Accordingly, the Republic of Lithuania — which was preparing to become an equal member of the North Atlantic Alliance — was viewed as an instrument of influence of the “aggressive military block” in Eastern Europe.

An analysis of speeches given by the Belarusian leader and articles published by *Belarus Segodnya-Sovetskaya Byelorussia (Belarus Today-Soviet Belarus)*, the newspaper of the Presidential Administration, gives us some understanding of the general nature of presentation of the Republic of Lithuania in the Belarusian media.

In the statements given by Lukashenko, Lithuania was represented as a base of the West, by means of which the West intends to exert influence or implement military invasion of the Belarusian territory. Lithuania and other neighbouring countries (Poland, Ukraine) were more than once reproached for providing help to the Belarusian opposition and for preparation of militants for the overthrow of the existing political regime.

“Today, there are support bases that were created in order to exert influence on Belarus: these include the media, control measures, and spying on the part of Lithuania and Poland. They are also attempting to involve Ukraine”<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> A discussion on the issues of internal and foreign policies, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press12395.html#doc>>, 25.09.2007.

“Russian citizens must be able to freely move from one part of the Russian territory to another; but today, when Lithuania or any other state starts restoration of a nuclear state and exerts pressure on Russian citizens, including Belarusians, this is impermissible”<sup>4</sup>.

Belarusian state propaganda represented Lithuania as one of the pro-American Eastern European nations obediently fulfilling the will of the US Government. This was especially emphasised after the official decision of the Alliance was taken to accept Lithuania among its members<sup>5</sup>. The dependency of Lithuania’s foreign and internal policies was also linked to the process of accession of Lithuania to the European Union.

“What are the United States doing in Lithuania prior to the elections, together with the Lithuanian troops; incidentally, how many of those are remaining — five or six thousand? They are concentrating armed forces at our borders — just think, they want to hold some training exercises there”<sup>6</sup>. “Consider the Kaliningrad issue. (...) Well, that’s not even a problem. This problem should not have been posed at all. Nevertheless, no concessions are being made. Yes, they are doing this through Lithuania. They say it’s Lithuania that doesn’t agree; but if the European Union gives a signal tomorrow, Lithuania will be bound to react and solve all the issues”<sup>7</sup>.

Prior to accession to the European Union, considerable attention in the representation of Lithuania was given to the themes of poverty and social injustice. From the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an increasing number of Belarusians started visiting Lithuania, which naturally led to growing awareness among Be-

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<sup>4</sup> Interview of the Belarusian President A.G. Lukashenko to representatives of the media on the relevant issues of foreign policy, 12.11.2002, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press13364.html#doc>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. see Градов Е. Балтийский бальзам. // Советская Белоруссия №154 (21529), June 12, 2002 (Gradov E. The Baltic Balsam. // Sovetskaya Belorussia No. 154 (21529), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=17712>>, 25.09.2007; Астахов И. Фарс мажорные обстоятельства. // Советская Белоруссия №66 (22223), April 9, 2005 (Astakhov I. Force Majeure Circumstances. Sovetskaya Belorussia No. 66 (22223), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=42884>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>6</sup> Лекция “Исторический выбор Республики Беларусь” в БГУ (Lecture The Historical Choice of the Republic of Belarus held at the Belarusian State University), 14.03.2003, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press29279.html#doc>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>7</sup> Press conference of the Republic of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko held for the Russian regional media, 2003 08 01., <<http://www.president.gov.by/press29326.html#doc>>, 25.09.2007.

larusians of the higher standard of living in the neighbouring country. In his speech given on March 14, 2003 to students of the Belarusian State University, the Belarusian President aimed at dispelling these “myths”:

*“An apartment [in Belarus] costs almost nothing, whereas in the Baltic States, in Lithuania, it costs 120 USD for a two-room apartment. Is there anything you'd like to say about salaries? Well, I want to ask you then, who is it that earns that kind of salary in Lithuania? They say, this is the average Russian salary, whereas this is the average Lithuanian salary. So, I mentioned one person whose income equals 16 billion, but there are those who have absolutely nothing, and they account for ninety percent of the population. That's how the average is calculated. The average temperature of the patients at the hospital is good, as the saying goes.”<sup>8</sup>*

In his interview with Russian media journalists the Belarusian President came back to this topic once again:

*“So they say that in Lithuania the average salary is 280-300 dollars, whereas in Belarus it is 150-200 dollars. So I am asking you, do 100 percent of Lithuanian residents pay for the public utility services? They pay 100, and in Belarus we pay 47. Up to 47. (...) Then, do they have any free kindergartens and schools? No. They pay 100 percent of the fees for the kindergarten. Everything is private.”<sup>9</sup>*

Revelatory articles were also published by *Sovetskaya Byelorussia*, which compared the income of the “ordinary” Lithuanian and “ordinary” Belarusian, and concluded that the latter was much better-off, while at the same time they accused the Belarusian opposition of manipulation of information and fraud.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Лекция “Исторический выбор Республики Беларусь” в БГУ (Lecture The Historical Choice of the Republic of Belarus held at the Belarusian State University), 14.03.2003, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press29279.html#doc>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>9</sup> Press conference of the Republic of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko held for the Russian regional media, 2003 08 01. 3, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press29326.html#doc>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>10</sup> See Курчатова С. Так ли хорошо там, где нас нет? // Советская Белоруссия №242 (21239), 24 августа 2001 (Kurchatov S. Is the Grass Always Greener on the Other Side? // *Sovetskaya*

Belarusian television regularly broadcasted reports negatively portraying the economic and social situation in Lithuania.

As regards the internal political processes in Lithuania, the period in question was represented by the official media as a period of chaos and anarchy. First to be mentioned was the impeachment of President Paksas, which was represented as a political lynching of the nationally elected head of state.<sup>11</sup>

A certain weakening of anti-Lithuanian statements in the Belarusian media is also linked to the very fact of Lithuania's accession to the EU and NATO. Prior to accession, Lithuania was viewed by Belarusian authorities as a traitor and defector, which together with Belarus was once part of the Soviet Union, but later joined the enemy, and as a result is now cherishing the values and implementing the policies of that enemy. After Lithuania joined the EU and NATO, it was no longer perceived as a separate independent state (regardless of its links to the "enemy") and was started to be seen as part of the "West," which turned it from the "defector" to "the fully-fledged OTHER." Belarus had to accept the new status of its neighbour.

In addition, many of the non-amicable actions of Lithuania in relation to Minsk now meet a considerably more moderate reaction from the Belarusian Foreign Ministry compared to the reactions prior to 2004, because foreign policies of Lithuania are now viewed by Minsk as a constituent part of Brussels' policies, of which Vilnius cannot be accused. For instance, the acceptance by Lithuania of the EU restrictions regarding issuance of visas to Belarusian officials has not led to a sharp reaction from Minsk, which could have been expected had such a decision been taken a few years earlier.

Together with the media representation of Lithuania as described above, the foreign policies of Belarusian authorities in the period from 2002 to 2006 do not allow mention of any good level of political relations between Lithuania and Belarus.

The year 2005 and a considerable part of 2006 in Belarus-Lithuania relations were darkened by the scandal in connection with Lithuania's plans to

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Byelorussia No. 242 (21239), August 24, 2001), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=8267>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>11</sup> Мацукевич П. Импи́чмент или расправа? // Советская Белоруссия №64 (21974), 7 апреля 2004 (Matsukevich P. Impeachment or Lynching? // Sovetskaya Byelorussia No. 64 (21974), April 7, 2004), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=35593>>, 25.09.2007.

build a depository of spent materials from the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant next to the Belarusian border.

The Belarusian media started a real anti-Lithuanian campaign. As a response to the “environmental war” declared by Lithuania,<sup>12</sup> Belarusian officials announced their plans to build two giant pig breeding facilities in the immediate vicinity of the territory of Lithuania. The Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas condemned this decision saying that “building of pig breeding facilities in the basin of the River Neman would equal barbarity.”<sup>13</sup> The western media called this incident “a strange diplomatic scandal.” The conflict was only settled in September of 2006 when the Lithuanian party announced that the depository would be constructed in the vicinity of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant rather than next to the Belarusian border. The Belarusian media presented this news as an achievement of Belarusian diplomacy.

In advance of the presidential election campaign in September-October of 2005, large-scale command and staff training of the North-West operational command forces was held by Belarus next to the Latvian and Lithuanian borders, the objective of which was the refining of actions aimed at fighting against illegal armed formations and parachute-equipped diversion groups. The location selected for the training was not accidental: Belarus has willingly demonstrated its increased military activity at the borders of the Baltic States. Speaking to the Grodno military garrison officers, the Belarusian Defence Minister Leonid Maltsev stated that “an information war is being waged against Belarus”; therefore, Belarus and Russia, with the help of their combat capacities, must be able to meet the potential threats posed by NATO.<sup>14</sup>

As regards official visits, no meetings of Lithuanian and Belarusian Presidents have taken place since November of 1998. Since 2003, annual political consultations between the Lithuanian and Belarusian Foreign Ministries have

<sup>12</sup> Дорошенко Е. Недобрый сосед атом. // Советская Белоруссия №155 (22312), 13 августа 2005 (Doroshenko E. Atom, the Unfriendly Neighbour. // Sovetskaya Byelorussia No. 155 (22312), August 13, 2005), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=46011>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>13</sup> Партифф, Том. Ссора из-за ядерных отходов оборачивается зловонием в Литве (Partiff, Tom. The Dispute Concerning Nuclear Waste is Turning into a Malodour in Lithuania), <<http://www.inopressa.ru/guardian/2005/08/25/12:58:21/aroma>>, 25.09.2007.

<sup>14</sup> Викторovich Ю. Белоруссия нашла террористов у границ Прибалтики. // Коммерсантъ. - № 181(3265) от 27.09.2005 (Viktorovich Yu. Belarus Found Terrorists at the Baltic States' Borders. // Kommersant), <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=612388>>, 10.10.2007.

been held. The Belarusian Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky has visited Lithuania several times.

Unlike political relations in 2002–2006, the development of economic co-operation between the two countries was fairly rapid. From 2002 to 2006, trade between Lithuania and Belarus grew 1.6 times. In 2006, the volume of transportation of Belarusian cargo through the territory of Lithuania totalled 4,515 million tons, an increase of 29.1 percent compared to the data for 2005.<sup>15</sup> Due to the increasing volumes of Belarusian cargo shipped through the port of Klaipėda, Alexander Lukashenko emphasised the importance of Belarus for Lithuania.

*“Lithuania’s dependence on us is considerable. 30 percent of Lithuania’s national budget<sup>16</sup> is formed thanks to shipment of our goods and cargos at their ports. Through them, we ship approximately five million tons of potassium fertilisers alone. Lithuania earns a lot of money from this. Lithuania must respect and appreciate both ourselves and the Russian Federation for this,”* stated the President at the press conference.<sup>17</sup>

In 2004, the Lithuania-Belarus Entrepreneurial Association was established in Lithuania, and in May of 2005 the Lithuania-Belarus industrial forum was organised in Klaipėda by the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists.

Furthermore, since July 1, 2005, Belarus and Lithuania have considerably reduced the price of entry visas for citizens, which has had a positive impact on business contacts between the two countries.

Belarus-Lithuania relations in the period from 2002 to 2006 can be characterised in the following manner:

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<sup>15</sup> Транзит белорусских внешнеторговых грузов через Клайпедский порт постоянно растет – С.Сидорский, (The transit of Belarusian foreign trade cargos through the port of Klaipėda is constantly growing. S. Sidorsky) <[http://www.government.by/ru/rus\\_news03102007.html#n5](http://www.government.by/ru/rus_news03102007.html#n5)>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>16</sup> According to approximate estimates, the profit earned by the Republic of Lithuania on the transit of Belarusian cargos does not exceed 0.5 percent of the budget revenue.

<sup>17</sup> Press conference of the Republic of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko held for the Russian regional media, 01.08.2003, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press29326.html#doc>>, 10.10.2007.

- In the economic sphere, relations were built on the basis of pragmatic cooperation strengthened by mutual interest in the transit of Belarusian goods through the territory of Lithuania, and the increasing intensity of business contacts;
- The level of political contacts of the neighbouring countries remained fairly poor, which can be explained both by Lithuania's need to coordinate its foreign policy activities with the remaining NATO and EU member states, and by Belarus' internal policy trends directed towards self-isolation of the state from Euro-Atlantic structures.

### **1.2. Presidential elections in 2006 and the new reality**

Presidential elections in Belarus in 2006 can be viewed as the beginning of better Belarus-Lithuania relations for several reasons. Firstly, it was only after these elections that the Russian authorities saw that Lukashenko did not intend to settle accounts for the Russian financial and political support for his campaign, and that he did not intend to let the Russian capital take part in the privatisation of the most important Belarusian companies. What followed then was the raising of gas prices by Gazprom and the actual winding-down of the Belarus-Russia integration project with Belarus trying to improve its relations with the West. Secondly, the election of Alexander Lukashenko as President of Belarus for the third term of office has demonstrated to the European Union and the US the inefficiency of their strategy towards Belarus and forced them (at least the EU) to make attempts to review the strategy. The steps taken in this direction, which coincided with the "oil and gas war" between Russia and Belarus, led to attempts on the part of the EU to improve relations with the Belarusian regime with a hope to force it from the influence of Moscow and, finally, to encourage democratisation of the regime. In this latter process the EU assigned a major role to Lithuania as Belarus' closest neighbour.

Gazprom's decision to raise the gas price payable by Belarus up to 200 USD and Putin's statement on the discontinuation of support for the Belarusian economy have put Lukashenko in a difficult situation. Therefore, since summer of 2006, Belarusian authorities have been feverishly looking for an alternative

foreign policy support in order to reduce the importance of the Russian vector on Belarusian foreign policy. This search resulted in the forced formation of the so called “distant link” of Belarusian foreign policy, which includes China, Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba. At the same time, Belarus’ activity in the Non-Aligned Movement has increased. These steps enabled Belarus to win support on the international arena.

The next step was the search for alternative sources of energy resources with a view to reducing the level of energy dependence on Russia. By the end of 2006, two possibilities emerged: extraction of oil in Venezuela and Iran, whose governments concluded the relevant agreements with Belarus. However, the above-mentioned alternatives, considering their fantastic nature, had to be accompanied by specific projects of transportation of oil to Belarus, which were impossible to implement without improving relations with their immediate neighbours, i.e. Lithuania and Ukraine.

The fact that during the course of 2006 some signs of improvement in relations between Belarus and Lithuania appeared can be proved by changes in several parameters of cooperation.

### **1.3. Changes in the official rhetoric**

Compared to the prior period, the rhetoric of Belarusian officials in relation to the Republic of Lithuania has changed considerably. There are no negative statements about Lithuania in the speeches of the head of the Belarusian state anymore, and official newspapers and television channels have begun to “discover” Lithuania for Belarusians once again, emphasising cooperation and good neighbours’ relations.

Whereas before articles about Lithuania published in the official media were dominated by the theme of comparison of the standard of living, now particular attention is given to the issues of mutual trade, transit, and culture<sup>18</sup>;

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<sup>18</sup>See Дуда плюс сакс. // Советская Белоруссия №35 (22690), 21 февраля 2007 (Sovetskaya Byelorussia No. 35 (22690), February 21, 2007), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=56969>>, 10.10.2007; Мальдис А. Корень и крона истории. // Советская Белоруссия №180 (22835), 25 сентября 2007 (Maldis A. The Root and Head of History. // Sovetskaya Byelorussia No. 180 (22835), September 25, 2007), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=61020>>, 10.10.2007; Селицкая Л. Вдоль по Вили. // Советская Белоруссия №76 (22731), 25 апреля 2007 (Selitskaya L. Along the Vilia. // Sovetskaya Byelorussia No. 76 (22731), April 25, 2007), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=58075>>, 10.10.2007.

more attention is paid to interviews with officials working at the Lithuanian Embassy.<sup>19</sup>

Belarusian authorities have positively evaluated the fact that Lithuania voted against expulsion of Belarus from the EU's Generalised System of Preferences, in relation to which President Lukashenko stated the following:

“We enjoy very good relations with our neighbours. No matter what they say, we cooperate with the European Union in the economic area. Yes, they did try to adopt some declaration regarding our expulsion from the regime of preferences, but nobody voted for it. The Baltic States voted against it. (...) How can Lithuania vote against Belarus in economic issues, if today we form 30 percent of the budget of Lithuania thanks to shipment of our cargos?”<sup>20</sup>

During his conversation with the new Lithuanian Ambassador Edminas Bagdonas, at the ceremony of presentation of letters of credence Alexander Lukashenko emphasised that “today we are ready to build very warm and good relations with Lithuania in all spheres of life,”<sup>21</sup> and even permitted Mr Bagdonas to call him any time.<sup>22</sup>

2006 also saw changes in Belarus' attitude towards the problem of building a nuclear waste depository by Lithuania. While previously such plans were viewed as a “declaration of environmental war” and chairman of the Council of the Republic commission on international affairs and national security, Nikolay Cherginets, threatened to take “a decisive stance in Belarus-Lithuania relations,” in December of 2006 Cherginets himself supported discouraging Lithuania by applying methods of persuasion.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Романова Н. Минск и Вильнюс — это рядом! // Советская Белоруссия №15 (22670), 24 января 2007 (Romanova N. Minsk and Vilnius are Near! // Sovetskaya Byelorussia No. 15 (22670), January 24, 2007), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=56385>>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>20</sup> Verbatim account on the press conference for representatives of the Russian regional media, 29.09.2006, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press31105.html#doc>>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>21</sup> «Александр Лукашенко подтвердил готовность Беларуси к взаимовыгодному сотрудничеству с Европой» (Alexander Lukashenko confirmed readiness of Belarus for a mutually beneficial cooperation with Europe), 13.02.2007, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press39493.print.html>>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>22</sup> Edminas Bagdonas: “One of the most important demands is the release of all political prisoners in Belarus,” <<http://www.charter97.org/bel/news/2007/03/12/bagdonas>>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>23</sup> Cherginets: “We must take advantage of all opportunities in order to persuade Lithuania not to construct the depository.” // Белорусские новости (Belarusian News), <[http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2006/12/19/ic\\_news\\_116\\_264116/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2006/12/19/ic_news_116_264116/)>, 10.10.2007.

#### 1.4. Geopolitical projects

The need to diversify the supply of hydrocarbon resources to Belarus determines the interest of Minsk in the implementation of joint transit projects with Lithuania and Ukraine. In this respect, the statement of the Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus concerning the possibility of involving the port of Klaipėda in the pumping of Venezuelan oil is of advantage to Belarus, and was favourably accepted by the Belarusian side.

On the day following Adamkus' statement (February 14, 2007), Mikhail Osipenko, Deputy Head of the concern Belneftekhim, said that Belarus was ready to consider Lithuania's proposal. "The project of delivery of oil to Belarus by sea from Klaipėda, unloading through the Klaipėda oil terminal and subsequent delivery by rail is absolutely realistic," he said, emphasising that Minsk has all the technical means necessary for implementation of the project.<sup>24</sup> The reaction of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry to Adamkus' statement was also positive. Spokesman for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry Andrey Popov said the following at the press conference:

*"I believe that diversification of the sources of supply of energy resources is a natural and normal objective for any country. Belarus is no exception. We are now actively dealing with the issue, and will continue to deal with it in the future."*<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of the fact that independent experts assess the above-mentioned project rather sceptically, it should be acknowledged that "Western" support for Belarus on the part of Adamkus has had a considerable impact on the decisions taken by Lukashenko, including his decisions in the framework of Belarus-Russia relations.

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<sup>24</sup> Мухина В. Три нефтяных мушкетера. // Новости Украины (Mukhina V. *The Three Oil Musketeers*. // Ukrainian News), <<http://www.from-ua.com/eco/5de72dd3a1f30.html>>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>25</sup> МИД: Беларусь продолжит диверсифицировать свои источники энергии. // Белорусские новости (Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Belarus will continue diversification of its energy supply sources. // Belarusian News), <[http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2007/02/15/ic\\_news\\_113\\_266910/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2007/02/15/ic_news_113_266910/)>, 10.10.2007.

Furthermore, statements of the Belarusian President evidence the viability of the idea of a Baltic and Black Sea transit union, which was put forward in the early 1990s by the leaders of the Belarusian People's Front (BPF). In the context of deteriorating relations with Russia, this project received new impetus and is probably under discussion in the Administration of the President. In his interview with the German newspaper *Die Welt*, answering the question about the possibility of a transit union, Alexander Lukashenko stated that Belarus is:

*“ready to cooperate with everyone in order to ensure our national security. (...) Ukraine and Belarus are the most important transit states. I am quite sure that we will be able to reach an agreement. And others (Poland, the Baltic States) will follow us. It's been some time now since we've been offered the idea of consolidation of transit states, and we'll defend our interests together.”*<sup>26</sup>

An important signal that made Belarusian authorities change their policies towards Lithuania was the statement made by the Lithuanian Ambassador Edminas Bagdonas regarding his country's intention to become an advocate of Belarus in the European Union.<sup>27</sup> Facing the need to normalise their relations with the EU, Minsk officials take advantage of all opportunities to improve official and private contacts with Brussels, including help provided by their neighbours, Lithuania and Ukraine.

At the same time, Belarus is seeking to keep the Belarus-Europe dialogue in the framework of discussions of economic projects, and not allow it to focus on discussions on the protection of human rights and democratisation of the country's political system. Therefore, some misbalance between the intensity of economic and political relations between Lithuania and Belarus is seen, which will probably continue to exist in the future as well.

However, the degree of reorientation of the direction of Belarusian foreign policies must not be overestimated. Belarus remains highly dependent on Russia in the areas of supply of energy resources and sale of its products. This depend-

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<sup>26</sup> Interview of the Republic of Belarus President to the largest German newspaper *Die Welt*, 30.01.2007, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press38517.html#doc>>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>27</sup> Lithuania has promised to become the “advocate” of Belarus in the EU, <<http://worldnews.org.ua/news34392.html>>, 10.10.2007.

ency will not be eliminated in the short term. Therefore, Belarusian authorities will need to balance between the interests of the EU and those of Russia, without giving preference of foreign policy to either of these two actors.

### 1.5. Moving closer together

The gradual normalisation of Belarus-Lithuania relations is also evidenced by the goodwill gestures on the part of Minsk officials, which would have been barely possible or absolutely impossible prior to that.

As an example, we may cite the incident of the Kaunas air club plane, which on June 6, 2006 illegally crossed Belarusian airspace and was forced to land at Lida military airfield. After an investigation, on the decision of Oshmyany District court the airplane was confiscated in favour of the state and in October of the same year was to be sold at auction. However, these plans were not implemented, because on receipt of the Lithuanian party's request to Belarusian authorities, the President ordered that the airplane be returned to its previous owners.<sup>28</sup> According to the Lithuanian Seimas (Parliament) Member Vaclovas Stankevičius, this gesture did not pass unnoticed in Lithuania.<sup>29</sup>

Another example is the accelerated completion of demarcation of the Belarus-Lithuania border and the signing of all related documents. This is the first eastern border of the EU, on which the works of demarcation have been completed. On February 2, 2007 (prior to the beginning of the term of office of the new Lithuanian Ambassador), the final documents concerning demarcation of the Lithuania-Belarus state border were signed.

According to the Lithuanian Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas, the Belarusian side has also provided all possible help in the investigation of the tragic death in Brest of the Lithuanian diplomat Vytautas Pociūnas.<sup>30</sup> The parties

<sup>28</sup> Конфискованный у литовцев самолет-нарушитель вернули на родину. // Белорусские новости (*The confiscated Lithuanian airplane that had violated the state border was returned to its previous owners.* // Byelorussian News), <[http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2006/10/27/ic\\_news\\_116\\_261201/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2006/10/27/ic_news_116_261201/)>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>29</sup> Мартинович В. Всё-таки имел место несчастный случай. // Белгазета, 30 октября 2006 г. (Martinovich V. *The incident did take place.* // Belgazeta, October 30, 2006), <<http://www.belgazeta.by/20061030.43/020080141/>>, 10.10.2007.

<sup>30</sup> Lithuanian Prime Minister: "I hope that the truth regarding the incident in Belarus will be established." <<http://www.charter97.org/bel/news/2006/08/24/pm>>, 10.10.2007.

managed to avoid politicisation of this theme: official Belarusian media has expressed a fairly calm reaction to the version expressed by Vytautas Landsbergis of the possible “political assassination” of the diplomat.

These seemingly minor gestures have had a great significance for the practice of international relations, and in the long run led to an increase in mutual trust between the two countries. This process allows hope for a gradual intensification of political relations between Lithuania and Belarus, especially taking into consideration the interest of both parties in the closer cooperation and joint implementation of regional projects.

### **1.6. Strengthening of economic cooperation**

The expansion of economic cooperation was both the result and the driving force of the overall improvement of Belarus-Lithuania relations. After all, it was economic motives that encouraged Lukashenko to review his relations with the European Union and neighbouring states. It was the issues of transit and diversification of energy resource supply that became the cornerstone of the Belarusian foreign policy after presidential elections in 2006.

The 2006–2007 period in Lithuania-Belarus economic relations is characterised by the overall growth of trade volumes, an increase in the transit of Belarusian goods through the territory of Lithuania, and intensification of business contacts. For instance, in 2006, the volume of trade between Belarus and Lithuania totalled 603 million USD, an increase of 24 percent compared to 2005. In January–July 2007, the volume of trade totalled 461.94 million USD, an increase of 37.8 percent compared to the same period in the previous year. Exports grew by 51.8 percent and totalled 352.84 million USD. According to the Belarusian Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky, by the end of this year the two countries can reach trade volumes of one billion USD.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Belarus acknowledges the importance of cooperation with Lithuania (S. Sidorsky), <[http://www.government.by/ru/rus\\_news03102007.html#n5](http://www.government.by/ru/rus_news03102007.html#n5)>, 10.10.2007.

Table 1. Trade between Belarus and Lithuania (million USD)

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Trade</b>	383.2	366.1	419.2	460.4	486.4	603.0
<b>Exports</b>	275.8	256.7	265.0	284.8	351.8	432.7
<b>Imports</b>	107.4	109.4	154.2	175.6	134.6	170.3
<b>Balance</b>	168.4	147.4	110.8	109.3	217.2	262.4

Source: Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

(<http://www.mfa.gov.by/rus/index.php?d=policy/bicoop/europe&id=6>)

The volumes of Belarusian cargos shipped through the port of Klaipėda have increased in the period in question as well. In 2006, the port of Klaipėda shipped a record amount of cargos throughout the entire history of its existence, i.e. 23.6 million tons, 19.1 percent of which (4 million 517.2 thousand tons) accounted for the Belarusian foreign trade cargos. This is an increase of 1 million 20 thousand tons compared to 2005. Belarus is “the most important foreign partner of the Lithuanian port, whose cargos receive preferential treatment from the Lithuanian port workers, and the best shipment and storage conditions.”<sup>32</sup>

During the meeting of the Belarusian Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky and the Lithuanian Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas on October 3, 2007, agreements were concluded under which Lithuania will invest about one billion USD in the Belarusian economy. Somewhat earlier, consultations regarding possibilities of cooperation in construction of a nuclear power plant in Lithuania and Belarus were started.

<sup>32</sup> Клайпедский порт планирует увеличить грузооборот за счет белорусских грузов. // Белорусские новости (The port of Klaipėda is planning to increase its cargo turnover thanks to Belarusian cargos. // Belarusian News), <[http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2007/02/14/ic\\_news\\_113\\_266853/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2007/02/14/ic_news_113_266853/)>, 14.10.2007.

## **2. Belarus-Ukraine relations: changes in the configuration in 2005–2007**

### **2.1. Introduction and background**

If we compare relations between Belarus and Ukraine, with Belarus' relations with other neighbouring countries, they can be classed as the most politically neutral and free from any particular ideology.<sup>33</sup> While Belarus' relations with Lithuania, Poland and Russia have undergone periods of crises (which sometimes were extremely serious), its relations with Ukraine from the very moment of declaration of independence represent a perfect example of tranquillity and smoothness, despite the fact that the economic aspect of these relations wasn't always successful. The traditional problems of bilateral relations arising from the mid-1990s, i.e. ratification of agreements regarding state borders and payment of debts, have never acquired the features of a poignant conflict. The political challenges related to the victory by the oppositional political forces in the Ukrainian presidential elections in 2004 have transformed the situation but have not resulted in the deterioration of bilateral relations between the two countries. Rather, the opposite has happened: under the influence of the external political and economic environment, the interest in cooperation has increased considerably.

Although official Belarusian media have created several negative information waves on the Orange Revolution, no forcing of the situation has taken place. The image of Ukraine portrayed in the Belarusian media is fairly neutral, even though Belarusian authorities like emphasising the “poverty” and political chaos in Ukraine. This is especially contrasting with the portrayal of Poland and Russia, the images of which are often emotionally charged. Until recently, in speeches and official statements Ukraine was usually mentioned in various contexts along with other countries. Despite the contradictions present in bilateral relations, such contradictions have never acquired the political acuteness and ideological charge characterising relations with the other neighbours (Russia, Poland, and Lithuania).

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<sup>33</sup> Diplomatic relations between Belarus and Ukraine were established on December 27, 1991. The Republic of Belarus Embassy in Ukraine started its work in October of 1993.

It would be fairly difficult to find any clearly political crises in relations between the two countries. The vigilance in relations in late 2004 – early 2005 can only nominally be called a crisis. At the same time, we would struggle to find any periods of euphoria. Here we should mention Lukashenko's statements made in 1995 regarding the idea of a trilateral union between Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, and some populist steps taken in that direction, which have not led to any practical results.

In addition to the overall description of relations between Belarus and Ukraine, we should mention the presence of close links other than those on the state level. For instance, since the 1980s close links have existed between Belarusian opposition and the right spectre of the Ukrainian political order, which actually came to power in 2004. At the same time, links between the Ukrainian elite and Belarusian counter-elite have a fairly constant nature. There are a number of organisations working in Ukraine in connection with programs aimed at the promotion of democracy in Belarus, yet Minsk has not used this fact in its propaganda. The degree of civil cooperation is hard to evaluate; however, the very existence of this phenomenon enables the creation of a more comprehensive picture of the context and logic of relations between the two states. A certain impact can be seen on the intellectual sphere as well, whereby Ukraine is viewed as a cultural alternative to the Russian influence, considering that a considerable demand for intellectual and academic (first of all history related) products is seen in Belarus.

If we consider the drawn-up projects of Belarus-Ukraine relations after restoration of independence, then the first one in terms of chronological order was the idea of the Baltic and Black Sea Union, which was supported in Belarus by the nationalist democratic opposition. The essence of the project was to create a regional bloc of the European countries of the former USSR in order to counterbalance Russia. However, this project has not become a political reality.

The next project was related to the attempts of integration of Ukraine and Belarus based on the "Slavic" and Soviet rhetoric of the mid-1990s. In 1994, presidential elections were held in Ukraine and Belarus, in which Alexander Lukashenko and Leonid Kuchma won respectively. Both politicians were viewed as pro-Russian candidates and used the integration related, somewhat "all-Slavic," rhetoric in their election campaign. The year 1995 saw activation of Belarus-

Ukraine contacts. In March of 1995, Belarusian President Lukashenko visited Ukraine, and in July of 1995, Ukrainian President Kuchma visited Belarus. In the spring of 1995, Lukashenko officially announced the beginning of the “pan-Russian” project of the internal and foreign policies of Belarus, actually passing to the position of Russian nationalism and restoration of the “common state” and integration with Russia.

In this situation Belarusian authorities have made attempts to develop Belarus-Ukraine relations in the framework of the “Slavic unity” paradigm. In May of 2005, Lukashenko suggested creation of a political union of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. This idea was actively promoted on the Russian political scene as well. Similar statements were made by various representatives of Belarusian authorities in the course of 1995. The idea was undoubtedly supported by the pro-Russian political forces in the Ukraine, but was not popular with the Ukrainian elite. After the coming into power of Leonid Kuchma, the Ukrainian authorities quickly switched to the position of limited cooperation with the CIS States and non-involvement in the political integration processes. Thus the activation of integration attempts, which was mainly dependent on Belarusian authorities, has diminished. The failure of integration initiatives led to an ideologically neutral and pragmatic period of Belarus-Ukraine relations, whereby relations of the two countries were limited to economic contacts. At the same time, in the CIS zone, Ukraine and Belarus occupied opposite political positions. Ukraine announced its appeal for European and Atlantic integration, and became an active participant of the GUAM, an organisation of the CIS States opposing Russia. Belarus announced its clear orientation towards Russia and its appeal to create a “union state” with the latter.

## **2.2. A new stage in relations in 2005–2007**

The new stage of Belarus' policies towards Ukraine should be linked to the year 2005, which is often considered the turning point of bilateral relations of the two countries, rather than the 2006 presidential election in Belarus. There were many reasons for changes in the format and activation of cooperation, and various factors often overlapped. After a serious crisis in relations with Russia, Belarusian authorities needed to reformat their own foreign policies in order to find new political and economic alternatives. Some changes had to be introduced in Ukraine as well, after new political forces came into power in 2004. Furthermore, energy security problems became more pressing in Ukraine. As a result, a fairly specific model of relations was created over 2005–2007, which can be described as a certain configuration of “rapprochement” despite the political polarity of the two regimes.

It should be noted that Belarus-Ukraine relations in 2005–2007 were somewhat asymmetrical. Belarus had been implementing policies which resulted from its reaction to the external conditions; the country was oriented towards economic relations and, whenever possible, tried to push any political problems to the periphery. It is in this framework that relations between the two countries and the possibilities of regional coordination were discussed. In addition to its pragmatic interests, Ukraine has been seeking to implement more active and diverse policies towards Belarus, including policies concerning the issues of democratisation. These policies have targeted state institutions, political parties, the media, and civil institutes.

Thus the main objectives of Belarus included the need to break the political isolation, the search for new markets to sell its products, and the search for new suppliers of resources. In this situation, Ukraine became a very useful partner. The main objectives of Ukraine included activation of bilateral relations, the posing of the issue of democratisation, and the issue of protection of human rights in Belarus. Ukrainian authorities have officially condemned Belarusian authorities for their actions towards the opposition (in particular after the elections in 2006) and suppression of democratic freedoms, while at the same time expressing their readiness to cooperate along the entire economic and political spectre.

At present, the chronological order of the contacts at the highest level looks as follows: in autumn of 2005, negotiations were held in Kiev between the Foreign Minister and Belarusian Security Council Secretary. On October 18, the Ukrainian Prime Minister Yury Ekhanurov was on an official visit to Minsk. On November 28, 2006, the new Prime Minister of Ukraine Victor Yanukovich was on a working visit to Belarus. At the end of 2006, Victor Baloga, the Head of Secretariat of the Ukrainian President, visited Belarus.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, in the period of 2005–2007, Presidents of Belarus and Ukraine have met at least four times at various forums and summits of the CIS States, and at other large-scale events. Preparations for an official meeting of Alexander Lukashenko and Victor Yushenko are underway, yet the meeting itself has been postponed several times (according to the official explanation, due to unpreparedness of the parties to sign the necessary agreements concerning state borders and acknowledgment of Ukraine's debt to Belarus).<sup>35</sup>

### **2.3. Main problems of Ukraine-Belarus relations**

The main problem of bilateral relations since the mid-1990s remains the problem of Ukraine's debt, and the issue of demarcation and delimitation of the Belarus-Ukraine border. As far back as May of 1997, during the official visit of the Belarusian President to Kiev, the parties signed a Treaty on the State Border. The said Treaty was ratified by the Ukrainian Supreme Rada three months later, whereas the Belarusian parliament so far has not done this.

The basis for disagreement was not the issue of the border itself, but the position of the Belarusian side, which insists on a “package-type” solution to this issue. That is, ratification of the Treaty must take place together with the acknowledgement and reimbursement of the debt by Ukraine, whereas Ukrainian authorities do not acknowledge the state related nature of the debt. The issue

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<sup>34</sup> On cooperation of the Republic of Belarus with Ukraine // Website of the Republic of Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <<http://www.mfa.gov.by/rus/index.php?d=policy/bicoop&id=16>>, 14.10.2007.

<sup>35</sup> Press conference of the Ukrainian Ambassador to the Republic of Belarus Igor Likhovoy. Data on the press conference *Belarusians and the Market*. Ежедневная аналитическая газета. №32(767), 27 августа – 3 сентября 2007 (*Ezhenedelnaya Analyticheskaya Gazeta*, August 27 – September 3, 2007), <<http://www.br.minsk.by/index.php?article=30882>>, 14.10.2007.

is related to the debt to Belarusian companies, which formed after withdrawal of Ukraine from the Soviet ruble zone in 1992.<sup>36</sup> The Ukrainian side expressed its readiness to reimburse national debts where they exist, yet they insist on the view that the debts to Belarusian companies formed in the early 1990s constitute debts of economic agents rather than the debt of the Ukrainian state whose institutes in the period in question were only in the process of formation. Taking into consideration the complex nature of the process of separation of national and corporate debts, Ukraine views the demand for a “package-type” resolution of the issue of the state border as ungrounded.

“Ukraine will never agree that this debt be documented as its foreign debt. We believe, and this is proved by all documents, that it is a corporate debt from 1992, and we are looking for mechanisms to solve this issue.” (A. Kinakh, October of 2005).<sup>37</sup>

Among other important issues of bilateral relations, the mutual trade problems — more precisely, the conducting of anti-dumping investigations and imposition of restrictive levies on the import of various goods — should be mentioned. Such investigations are initiated on a regular basis by both parties, and they limit bilateral cooperation. In this relation authorities of both states initiated the process of preparation of an inter-governmental memorandum on the issue of application of anti-dumping measures.

#### **2.4. The issues of democracy and human rights: “the middle way policy”**

The issue of democratisation, which became part of Ukraine’s foreign policy towards Belarus, has several dimensions. On the one hand, actualisation of this issue might lead to a deterioration of relations with Ukraine’s northern neighbour. On the other hand, it gives Ukraine an opportunity to take the role of

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<sup>36</sup> For more details, see Володимир Кравченко. Україна — Білорусь: договір в обмін на гроші. // Дзеркало тижня № 42 (467), 1 — 7 листопада 2003, <<http://www.dt.ua/1000/1600/43478/>>, 14.10.2007.

<sup>37</sup> Anatoly Kinakh, Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security Council. The statement was made prior to the visit to Belarus of the Ukrainian Prime Minister Yury Ekhanurov. Cited from: Ольга Мазаева. Україна буде демократизувати Білорусь в економічному і людському вимірах (Olga Mazaeva. *Ukraine will democratise Belarus in the economic and human dimensions.*), <<http://news.tut.by/59153.html>>, 14.10.2007.

mediator in the process of democratisation, which can lead to a more important political role for Ukraine in the region. Here, the basis for the legitimacy of the leading role was the idea of democratic and European values whose victory and success were demonstrated by the new Ukrainian authorities. One way or another, Ukrainian authorities have chosen a “middle way” strategy by gradually changing the nature of their foreign policies. As mentioned before, Ukrainian democratic forces have close links with the Belarusian opposition, and Belarusian oppositional politicians took an active part in the events of the Orange Revolution.

*“Ukraine has consistently supported democratic forces in Belarus. I am delighted that many Belarusian colleagues were present in the Maidan. From the point of view of the authorities, my aim was to give the signals which could provide new opportunities. My official contacts serve for that purpose.”*

*(Yushenko, October of 2005)<sup>38</sup>*

At the beginning of his term of office as Ukrainian President, Yushenko took some practical steps which provoked concern among Belarusian authorities. For instance, he invited representatives of the Belarusian opposition to the ceremony of his inauguration. After the presidential elections of 2006, his position became even clearer, as Ukraine officially supported the EU's opinion on the non-democratic nature of the election process in Belarus.

“Our attitude to the events [presidential elections in 2006] in Belarus is clear. We view them the same way as Brussels. No additional comments are needed here. We — just as Belarus now — have seen long years when the authorities ignored the opposition, at a time when we were looking for possibilities to hold round tables for the Ukrainian dialogue in Warsaw. We found possibilities there, and that's very good. However, we have concluded that a much better way to resolve the political crisis would have been holding a round table in Kiev.”

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<sup>38</sup> Victor Yushenko: Orange Revolution is an example for others. Interview given to BBC, October 17, 2005. // The official website of the Ukrainian President, <[http://www.prezident.gov.ua/ru/news/data/17\\_3531.html](http://www.prezident.gov.ua/ru/news/data/17_3531.html)>, 14.10.2007.

“I regret that not everyone has come to certain conclusions from the events that took place in Ukraine. Belarusian authorities have to talk to the opposition. Ukraine can become a mediator in this dialogue.” (Yushenko, May of 2006)<sup>39</sup>

Thus the practical aspect of support for democratic values was expressed as well. Ukraine expressed its readiness to become a legitimate mediator between Belarusian authorities and the opposition, which could lead to the increasing political influence of Ukraine on its northern neighbour. It goes without saying that for the time being such negotiations remain only a hypothetical possibility. Yet, taking into consideration the degree of cooperation between various political forces in Belarus, Ukraine indeed could become a mediator. Furthermore, Ukraine is the only state that has the necessary political reserves, as Moscow, Vilnius and Warsaw seem to have insufficient trust on the part of the parties to the possible negotiations.

In the new political situation Ukraine, just as Lithuania, can hope for one more mediation related position: between Belarus and the West. This has been proposed by Ukrainian authorities more than once since 2005 — for instance, during the crisis provoked by the pressure exerted by Belarusian authorities on the Union of Belarusian Poles (summer of 2005). The attitude of Belarusian authorities to the idea was fairly negative. Nevertheless, it was in Kiev that the meeting of the heads of national security councils of Ukraine, Poland and Belarus was held, which meant the renewal of dialogue with Warsaw. Thus Ukraine has fulfilled the functions of a mediator between the two parties and has preserved the overall potential for this type of cooperation.

If we consider the position of Belarus, its attitude towards mediation related initiatives is fairly negative. Defining itself as a sovereign state and an independent subject of international relations, Belarus declares its capacity to independently conduct all required negotiations. Therefore, invitation of mediators is possible only as a compulsory measure, whereas the international position of Belarus now is fairly unstable and it is ready to apply this procedure in order to deal with some pressing issues. In this process, Ukraine can be a valuable partner not least because of its moderate position towards Belarus. It is interesting

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<sup>39</sup> Victor Yushenko: *Let's Meet Each Other* (Подадим друг другу руки). An interview with Victor Yushenko. // The official website of the Ukrainian President, <<http://www.president.gov.ua/ru/news/data/print/8228.html>>, 14.10.2007.

to note in this respect the campaign by Belarusian authorities to change the wording and replace “mediation” with “neighbourly support” in the process of improvement of relations with the European institutions.

“Rather than being a mediator, Ukraine is ready to provide neighbourly support in the process of improvement of our relations with the West and other partners.”<sup>40</sup>

The main advantage offered to Belarus by Ukraine as a mediator in relations with Europe is regular contacts between the Belarusian state head and Ukrainian officials. As is well known, such fully-fledged contacts are not possible with EU States. Furthermore, Ukraine is not bound by any restrictions imposed on Poland and Lithuania by the European common policies regarding Belarus. It is these intentions, together with the campaign to support and develop the pragmatic aspects thereof, that constitute the essence of the “middle way” position of Ukraine towards Belarus.

“Contacts and dialogue must be maintained, and round tables must be held. Let’s start at least with a pragmatic dialogue: how can we conclude the discussions on delimitation and demarcation of borders; how can we create the free zone, and free border communication regime; how can we create a transport corridor in the direction of the Baltics, and include Belarus? All of the above-mentioned must go in addition to the political aspects: my country supports all decisions regarding Belarus in the framework of the EU and the OSCE. Although these are our neighbours, we should act in a delicate manner, without crossing this border.”<sup>41</sup>

The above-cited statement provides a fairly accurate reflection of the “middle way” position aimed not only at accentuating, but also expanding economic and political relations, while at the same time maintaining a critical attitude towards

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<sup>40</sup> These statements were made by the Head of Belarusian Presidential Administration Gennady Nevyglas published in the central official publication *Belarus Segodnya (Sovetskaya Byelorussia)*. The journalist then commented on Nevyglas’ statement as follows: “It is an important aspect: mediation between Europe (the European Union) and Europe (Belarus) looks somewhat strange, whereas neighbourly interest is a different matter.” По-соседски! (*Like Good Neighbours!*) // Советская Белоруссия. 17 февраля 2007 года (Sovetskaya Byelorussia, February 17, 2007), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=56898>>, 14.10.2007.

<sup>41</sup> Interview of Victor Yushenko with BBC prior to the visit in Minsk of the Ukrainian Prime Minister Ekhanurov. Беларусь — Украина: лучше не бывает? (*Belarus and Ukraine: It Can't Be Any Better?*) // Belarusian portal Svich.Com <<http://svich.com/articles.php?articleId=297>>, 28.10.2007.

the regime. It should be noted that in this case Ukraine holds a unique position among all other states surrounding Belarus. Among other things, Ukraine has not imposed any restrictions on the entry to the country of Belarusian officials (as was expected at the beginning of 2005 and after presidential elections in 2006). Furthermore, Ukraine stated that it is against such policies, and that it has its own stance on the issue of international isolation and imposition of additional sanctions in relation to Belarus.<sup>42</sup>

“As regards our present-day relations in the economic sphere — we could not hope for anything better... As regards our political relations, I am satisfied with the current trends. The dynamic is good, and the results are good as well.” (Lukashenko, October of 2005)<sup>43</sup> These words of Alexander Lukashenko said during the visit to Minsk of Yury Ekhanurov (November of 2005) express the overall “positive” evaluation of Ukraine’s “middle way” position, which Belarusian authorities will seek to use in order to pursue their interests.

2005 saw the first fairly positive assessment by the Belarusian President of the personality of Victor Yushenko. For instance, Alexander Lukashenko compared Yushenko to himself at the beginning of his own political carrier:

*“The events taking place in Ukraine [resignation of Yulia Timoshenko] seem familiar to me and remind me of the mid-1990s when I became President. At that time, my team was joined by several recruits, whereas afterwards not all of them could assume a position or manage to agree on something, so they had to leave. ... My reaction was calm, and I appointed new recruits.”*

*(Lukashenko, September of 2005)<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>42</sup> This, among other things, was stated by the Ukrainian Ambassador to the Republic of Belarus Igor Likhovy on August 22 at the press conference dedicated to the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence in Ukraine. *Belarusians and the Market* press conference materials. Еженедельная аналитическая газета. № 32(767) 27 августа - 3 сентября 2007 (*Weekly Analytical Newspaper* No. 32 (767), August 27 – September 3, 2007) // <<http://www.br.minsk.by/index.php?article=30882>>, 14.10.2007.

<sup>43</sup> Said during the visit to Belarus of the Ukrainian Prime Minister Yury Ekhanurov. Александр Лукашенко встретился с Юрием Ехануровым (*Alexander Lukashenko met with Yury Ekhanurov*). // The official website of the Republic of Belarus President, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press11932.html#doc>>, 14.10.2007.

<sup>44</sup> From the answers given by the Republic of Belarus President to questions of Belarusian and Russian journalists. Cited from: the official website of President of the Republic of Belarus, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press16252.html>>, 14.10.2007.

## 2.5. Economic cooperation: the boom of 2005–2007

The configuration of Ukraine-Belarus political relations described above was formed in the context of considerable success in the sphere of economic cooperation, and with the energy security problem acquiring a more pressing nature. These factors had a direct impact on the readiness of both sides to cooperate, regardless of the clear political antagonism (at least in the initial stage).

According to the data of the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis of the Republic of Belarus, the dynamic of trade between Belarus and Ukraine looks as follows (see Table 2):

Table 2. Trade between Belarus and Ukraine in 1999–2006 (USD million)<sup>45</sup>

Period	Trade	Export	Import	Balance
1999	696.3	280.6	415.7	- 135.1
2000	900.3	559.7	340.6	219.1
2001	699.2	421.8	277.4	144.4
2002	562.3	271.6	290.7	-19.1
2003	705.6	343.5	362.1	-18.6
2004	1,084.7	539.8	544.9	-5.1
2005	1,801.7	907.8	893.9	13.9
2006	2,458.7	1,234.0	1,224.7	9.3

Statistical data show that the volume of trade between the two countries decreased considerably in 2002–2003, which also led to a negative trade balance for Belarus. Since 2003, the volume of trade has been growing. In 2005–2006, the growth acquired the nature of a boom: 53.7 percent and 66.1 percent respectively. The year 2007 is demonstrating the trend of further growth (in

<sup>45</sup> Статистический ежегодник Республики Беларусь. Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Belarus. Минск, 2007.

January—June, growth equalled 25.4 percent). In 2005–2006, Belarus' trade balance was positive, while in 2007, the numbers for imports are considerably higher than those for exports. The significance of economic cooperation with Ukraine has changed as well (see Table 3).

Table 3. Share of trade with Ukraine in the Republic of Belarus' total foreign trade in goods (%)

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
5.6	4.4	3.3	3.3	3.6	5.5	5.8

Thus the process of development of relations between the two countries acquired a stable economic basis, although the large portion of raw materials in mutual trade makes the growth of economic cooperation less stable.

If we consider the structure of Belarusian imports, major volumes account for raw materials and agricultural products. Belarus imports iron and unalloyed steel products, grain and foodstuffs, chemical products and machinery, and some other goods. Among strategic items energy supply should be mentioned. Belarus exports mineral fertilisers, machinery and equipment, oil products, chemical and light industry products, and ferrous metals. That is, the nature of exports is more technological, although the portion of raw materials is considerable as well. It should also be noted that the main consumers of Belarusian products are the city of Kiev, and Dnepropetrovsk and Donetsk Oblasts, which in their turn supply products to be imported to Belarus. In January—June 2007, the portion of trade with Kiev (and Kiev Oblast), Dnepropetrovsk and Donetsk Oblasts accounted for 51.8 percent of total trade,<sup>46</sup> i.e. the major economic links are concentrated in Ukraine's capital city and in the industrial regions in the east of the country.

Usually, among the factors of growth of the volumes of trade, the favourable pricing regime for Belarusian products on the Ukrainian market (specifically,

<sup>46</sup>Data on the volumes of trade of the Republic of Belarus with various regions of Ukraine. Ministry of Statistics and Analysis of the Republic of Belarus, 2007.

oil products), and the passing of Russia and Belarus to the procedure of payment of VAT in the country of destination of the goods from 2005, are mentioned. The changes introduced in the principles of taxation led to the increase in prices of some goods, which forced Belarusian manufacturers to purchase such goods in other countries. For instance, the volume of supply of metal products to Belarus from Ukraine in the first half of 2005 increased 1.5 times, whereas the volume of imports of the said products from Russia decreased by the same number. Furthermore, another important factor was the desire to ensure energy security by means of diversification of energy supply sources, and to reduce the degree of dependency on Russia. Among the promising economic projects we should mention Ukraine's interest in the transit of energy through Belarus to the Baltic States.

## **2.6. Geopolitical configuration, and fuel and energy security**

The passing by Russia to a new type of relations in the energy sector led to considerable changes in regional policies, which might have some long-term geopolitical consequences. Discussions on fuel and energy security of the region and all of Europe resulted in the revival of plans and strategies popular in the early 1990s (the Baltic and Black Sea Union), and to a certain reconfiguration of the orientation of foreign policies of the states in question. In this case, we are talking about the projects of coordination and about a closer economic, and perhaps political, cooperation between the transit states lying in the territories from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

Such ideas and possible implementation plans have been voiced many times throughout 2005–2007 both by Belarusian authorities, and by officials from Lithuania, Ukraine, and other countries.

*“As soon as Belarus and Ukraine reach an agreement, the configuration in this segment of economic and political relations will change dramatically.”*

*(Lukashenko, November of 2006)<sup>47</sup>.*

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<sup>47</sup> Press conference of the Republic of Belarus President to representatives of Ukrainian media. // The official website of the Republic of Belarus President, <<http://www.president.gov.by/press33657.html#doc>>, 14.10.2007.

*“The time has come to fill Belarus-Ukraine relations with new content. By doing this, we will considerably contribute to the assurance of the sovereign status of our states, and we will raise the geopolitical significance of the Eastern European region.”*

*(Lukashenko, April of 2007)<sup>48</sup>*

Here, the position of Belarus is two-fold. On the one hand, assurance of close cooperation of the states in the region objectively weakens the influence of Russia and in its most radical version may mean the creation of a sanitary cordon separating Russia from Europe. In some cases, Belarusian authorities have demonstrated their disposition for exploitation of this kind of threat in order to obtain a more preferential treatment on the part of Russia. On the other hand, certain coordination is required in order to ensure energy security and avoid economic dependency on a single state. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned factors and the peculiarities of the process of decision-making in the authoritarian Belarus (any decision and agreement can be annulled without adhering to any bureaucratic procedures); Belarus cannot be viewed as a reliable partner in the possible cooperation. Participation in such a bloc is viewed by Belarusian authorities as a forced measure rather than a strategic choice, at least at this stage. However, the very fact of participation, and investments in joint projects might lead to reorientation of the Belarusian elite.

At present, all regional cooperation projects are of a preliminary nature. They are mainly related to discussions on the directions of transit of energy, gas and oil (including routes bypassing Russia), which, according to Lithuanian President Adamkus, call for coordination of steps taken by Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus. This idea received full support from Ukraine and some support from Belarus (for instance, information on this was published in the *Sovetskaya Byelorussia* newspaper).<sup>49</sup> Some of the major projects in this area include the extension of the Odessa-Brody oil pipeline and the creation of the Eurasian oil

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<sup>48</sup> Annual message of the Republic of Belarus President to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus: «Независимая Беларусь — наш достойный и надежный дом» 24 апреля 2007 г. (*Independent Belarus is our great and reliable home*, April 24, 2007) // The official website of the Republic of Belarus President, <[www.president.gov.by/data/press43753.doc](http://www.president.gov.by/data/press43753.doc)>, 14.10.2007.

<sup>49</sup> По-соседски! (*Like Good Neighbours!*). // Советская Белоруссия.. 17 февраля 2007 года (*Sovetskaya Byelorussia*, February 17, 2007), <<http://www.sb.by/article.php?articleID=56898>>, 14.10.2007.

transportation corridor. The Odessa-Brody oil pipeline was constructed in 2001 with a view to transporting Caspian oil to Central European countries bypassing Russia.<sup>50</sup> At present, preparations are made for extending the oil pipeline until Plotsk (Poland) to reach the port of Gdansk. Belarusian authorities have already expressed their interest in the supply of Caspian oil for their own needs. Furthermore, Belarusian authorities have expressed their desire to diversify the supply of oil and gas thanks to more active cooperation with Iran, Venezuela, and Azerbaijan.

## **Conclusions**

The above-described circumstances of development of Belarus-Lithuania relations after presidential elections in Belarus in 2006, and of Belarus-Ukraine relations after the year 2005 enable us to reach the following conclusions regarding reasons for, and consequences of, transformation of the direction of Belarus' foreign policies:

- The visible normalisation of Belarus-Lithuania relations in 2006–2007 and intensification of contacts with Ukraine are the result of changes in Belarus' foreign policy context and, among other things, the result of partial suspension of subsidies to the Belarusian economy on the part of Russia, due to which Minsk is bound to look for new reference points on the international arena and diversify the sources of energy supply. Furthermore, activation of economic cooperation with Ukraine is related to the search for new markets for Belarusian products and for new raw material sources after the deterioration of the economic situation for Belarusian companies on the Russian market.
- Improvement of Belarus-Lithuania relations constitutes part of a larger-scale process of rapprochement of Belarus with the European Union and the search for a dialogue between Minsk and Brussels, in which Lithuania received the role of mediator. The same applies to Belarus' relation with Ukraine, which is also viewed as a mediator (helper) in Belarus' contacts with the West.

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<sup>50</sup> At present, the oil pipeline does not carry out any of its direct functions but carries out reverse transportation of Russian oil.

- Consequently, the state of Lithuania-Belarus relations and, to a lesser degree, of Ukraine-Belarus relations is directly dependent on the current Russia-Belarus and Belarus-Europe relations, which makes the former somewhat unstable and highly dependent on contextual changes.
- Belarus is seeking to intensify its relations with the EU, Lithuania and Ukraine in the economic sphere, and at the same time slow down political contacts on the highest level (in the case of Ukraine, Belarus is seeking to push the political issues to the periphery), because the latter demand from Belarus implementation of political reforms, which is unacceptable to Belarusian authorities.
- Belarusian authorities are interested in the creation of the Baltic and Black Sea Transit Union of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine in order to ensure independence in the energy sector and strengthen their geopolitical position in the region. However, being under considerable political influence from Russia, in their steps related to foreign policy Minsk officials will have to consider the Russian factor, and will most likely attempt to use the EU and Russia's disagreements to their own advantage.
- Considerable restrictions on Belarus-Lithuania political relations are imposed by Minsk's perception of Lithuania as a foreign policy actor highly dependent on Brussels and Washington, and therefore unable to form the balance of power in the region the way such balance is projected by Belarusian authorities.