

Lukashenka is honoured with a grand reception in Beijing: China's message to Moscow

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Alyaksandr Lukashenka paid an official visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC) between 28 February and 2 March. His accompanying delegation included the First Deputy Prime Minister Mikalay Snapkou and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Syarhey Aleynik. The agenda of the visit included Lukashenka's meeting with Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping and a plenary session which was attended by delegations from both countries. After the meeting, a document was signed, entitled "Joint Statement on Further Developing the All-weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Belarus in the New Era". Lukashenka supported the 12-point "China's Position Paper on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis". 27 intergovernmental agreements were also concluded to promote cooperation in various fields, including investments, agriculture, food supply, healthcare, construction, production, science and technology, sport, tourism and the mass media. Eight contracts or cooperation memoranda were also signed by companies from the industrial and agri-food sectors. According to Belarusian estimates, these business deals have a total value of approximately \$3.5 billion.

The Chinese government took care to ensure a unique setting during the visit, a privilege rarely offered to foreign dignitaries. Xi Jinping personally attended the official welcome of Lukashenka in the Great Hall of the People at Tiananmen Square. A gun salute was fired on the square. An unusually long video coverage devoted to the visit was broadcast in the first part of the prime-time news on China's national television. The government-controlled media also published a number of 'enthusiastic' materials on Sino-Belarusian relations.

Commentary

- The grand reception of Lukashenka in Beijing, after almost a four-year hiatus, can be interpreted as an attempt to show Russia that China's role is growing in the post-Soviet area. Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan in September 2022 (see '[Against the backdrop of war. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand](#)') was a clear message to Moscow from Beijing: although the Sino-Russian alliance is durable and vital for the joint effort to compete against the West, China disapproves of the revisionist voices being heard among part of the Russian establishment that could destabilise Central Asia, a region of key importance to China. As regards Belarus, Beijing has no means of offering financial or security support to the Lukashenka regime, nor does it have a direct interest in this. It is also unable to replace Moscow in this area. However, the resumption of high-level contacts with Minsk means a certain change in the policy adopted after the protests

in Belarus in 2020. Back then, Beijing clearly left it up to the Kremlin to resolve the Belarusian regime issue and significantly limited contacts with Lukashenka as an expression of propaganda support for Russia. Over the past few years, Belarus has lost its meaning as China's economic partner due to mutual disappointment with the results of cooperation (see [The non-strategic partnership. Belarus-China relations](#)) and as a consequence of Western sanctions. Support from Minsk, which is de facto a party engaged in the Ukraine war, for China's position on this issue (see '[China's diplomatic game over the 'peace plan'](#)') lends credence to Beijing's propaganda attempts to present Chinese proposals as a credible 'peace plan'.

- Lukashenka sees his visit to Beijing as an opportunity to demonstrate that he has some influence on the international arena. His press service ostentatiously highlighted all the honours shown to him during his three-day visit to Beijing. This proves that Lukashenka is in dire need of a PR success. Lukashenka is fervently supporting the Chinese 'peace plan' because he hopes that he will be able to participate in its implementation in the future, for example as the host of talks. During the visit, no information was revealed that could corroborate media speculations that talks on circumventing the sanctions imposed on Russia with Belarusian support were underway. At present, there is no indication that Beijing or Minsk would be interested in this solution. If one were to be used, China would not be able to cover up its real aid to Russia, and Belarus would face the risk of additional restrictions.
- Since Minsk is isolated by the West and dependent on Moscow's support, it is trying to develop cooperation with non-European countries, above all China. This way it is trying to keep up the appearance of political independence, to create possibilities for diversifying exports as an alternative to the Russian market (last year, sales to China doubled, and their value reached \$1.6 billion) and to acquire the technologies it needs to modernise its industry. It is worth noting that Minsk is currently unable to offer Beijing unobstructed transit routes or related logistical support as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, Belarus is extremely unattractive to investors due to sanctions. Therefore, most of the economic agreements concluded may only be declaratory in nature and are unlikely to be implemented.