

A courtesy visit with no substance. Lukashenka visits Beijing

Michał Bogusz, Kamil Kłysiński

From 2–4 June, Alyaksandr Lukashenka paid his fifteenth visit to the People's Republic of China, the first since March 2023. Simultaneously, a Belarusian delegation travelled to Beijing for a meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors from the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). On 4 June, Lukashenka was received by Chairman of PRC Xi Jinping. According to a Chinese communiqué, following their meeting both sides announced 'coordination of actions and cooperation within multilateral structures such as the UN and the SCO'. They also declared joint opposition to 'hegemony', which Lukashenka defined as 'pressure from the West'. The Chinese leader reportedly assured him that 'China firmly supports multilateralism and opposes sanctions and pressure' on sovereign states. The Belarusian guest expressed gratitude to China for its readiness to cooperate and for its investment in his country.

Lukashenka travelled to Beijing to intensify bilateral economic relations and seek political support following Belarus's unrecognised presidential election in January, which the West has not acknowledged. China's interest in economic cooperation with Belarus has significantly declined since the country became politically isolated and subject to EU sanctions. At the same time, Beijing is keen to see the current leader remain in power, as he can always be relied upon to support China's international initiatives. However, China views Belarus as part of Russia's sphere of influence and therefore considers the stabilisation of the Minsk regime to be Moscow's responsibility.

Commentary

- **Lukashenka's visit to China was another attempt to raise his international profile and compensate for Western isolation.** Contrary to Minsk's enthusiastic narrative, the relationship with Beijing remains stagnant in most areas, and the visit itself lacked significant substantive content. While Belarusian state media outlets heavily emphasised the PR importance of the meeting with Xi Jinping and gave it extensive coverage, the Chinese side kept a low profile. News of the visit appeared in Chinese media only on 4 June, after the leaders had met. Lukashenka's trip had not been announced in advance and was described as a working visit. The lack of official Chinese statements about any other activities during his stay suggests that the hosts may have had little to offer economically. The Belarusian side merely reported that the autocrat held 'meetings with business circles'.
- **Minsk has long been seeking assistance from Beijing for technological transformation and industrial modernisation, hoping to trigger a new development impetus for the**

country. The Belarusian side emphasised the investment and technology sectors, possibly also aiming to persuade China to increase imports from Belarus to help to balance trade. In 2024 alone, China's trade surplus with Belarus rose by 47.6% year-on-year, reaching \$4.77 billion, despite an increase in purchases of Belarusian goods, including potash fertilisers. However, as China is affected by overcapacity in its own manufacturing sector, it is not interested in investing in Belarusian industry. In Beijing's strategic planning, Belarus has primarily played the role of a transit country or a location for Chinese assembly operations targeting the EU and Eurasian Economic Union markets. Belarus's role has diminished further due to factors such as Russian protectionism, EU economic sanctions imposed after the suppression of protests in 2020, a decline in the volume of rail transit from China to the EU (including due to Russia's war against Ukraine), and general disappointment with the outcome of bilateral cooperation (see *'The non-strategic partnership. Belarus–China relations'*).

- **For China, Belarus's enthusiastic participation in all of its international initiatives holds some value in bilateral relations.** However, for Beijing, this value is almost entirely symbolic as Belarus is portrayed in the Chinese narrative as a representative of Europe in its global initiatives. In bilateral relations, Minsk's role, which is noticeable to Chinese leaders but limited, is primarily linked to cooperation in military education. China has also used Belarus to lend credibility – primarily for propaganda purposes – to its so-called 'peace plan' for the war in Ukraine (see *'China's diplomatic game over the 'peace plan''*).
- **Beijing also uses its relations with Minsk to signal its intentions to Moscow regarding the post-Soviet space.** This was the case in 2023, when the authorities in Beijing received Lukashenka on an official state visit after years of maintaining a distance from the Belarusian regime (see *'Lukashenka is honoured with a grand reception in Beijing: China's message to Moscow'*). At that time, there was concern that Russia might destabilise the Central Asian region, which is crucial for China. Therefore, although China lacks both the means and the direct interest to provide material or security-related support to Lukashenka's regime, it uses its relationship with Belarus to assert its position in the post-Soviet space.