Commentary
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Belarus Aims to Become a BRICS Member

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

Belarus seeks closer ties with BRICS and aims to become a full member, seeing the organization as a means to support a multipolar world and reduce its mono-dependencies. Minsk's efforts to join BRICS contrast with Kazakhstan's recent decision to delay its application, which sheds light on what drives the foreign policy strategies of many states across Eurasia today.

Belarus continues to seek opportunities to join international organizations that have not closed their doors to Minsk. On 23 and 24 October, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka attended the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, where he confirmed Minsk's strong interest in becoming a full-fledged member of the organization. Notably, just a few days prior to the Kazan summit, another post-Soviet state that usually aspires to be active in all possible integration groupings—Kazakhstan—stated that it would not apply to join BRICS in the foreseeable future, even though Astana had considered the move before. Comparing Belarus's and Kazakhstan's latest attitudes toward BRICS can shed important analytical light on what drives the foreign policy strategies of many states across Eurasia today.

> Minsk has long signalled an interest in close partnership with BRICS.

Speaking at its summit in 2015, Lukashenka called Belarus a member of the "BRICS friends club" and expressed willingness to "contribute actively as a friendly country to various cooperation avenues". Yet, at that time, he did not voice ambitions to seek formal membership in the bloc. Instead, Belarusian officials stated that Minsk intended to advance bilateral ties with the grouping's member states. Additionally, Lukashenka emphasized that he saw BRICS as the "integration of integrations" and aimed at "building mutually beneficial and equal relations between the West and East, North and South, without any dividing lines".

Nearly a decade later, Minsk's tone and intentions vis-à-vis BRICS sound somewhat different. In Kazan, the Belarusian president made a political case in support of BRICS's more active role in global affairs. According to him, the grouping is seen increasingly as a driver of a "fairer world order," which will "recognize each state's right to independently define its development ideology and implement an independent foreign policy." Lukashenka thinks that BRICS has the potential to "bring the end of the domination of the collective West closer, as the latter has proved unable to bear the responsibility for a civilized development of international relations."

Minsk also confirms its determination to cooperate more with BRICS by applying for full-fledged membership. They officially declared this goal in July 2023 and notified the existing member states accordingly. The BRICS summit in South Africa in August 2023, however, did not register any progress in Minsk's application procedure. Yet, after the summit, the then-Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Aleinik, stated that the current member states would prioritize Minsk's application.

At the recent Kazan summit, the member states abstained from expanding the grouping's membership. Its final declaration endorsed the introduction of a new category: BRICS Partner Country. Officially, no further details were provided regarding which countries are likely to join the ranks of the partner countries. In a series of media interviews, however, Lukashenka said that Belarus will be among the 12 or 13 countries acquiring this newly created status. He added that becoming a partner country is now a necessary intermediary stage before applying for full-fledged membership.

Simultaneously, the Belarusian president expressed dissatisfaction with the modest number of the new partner countries—as about three dozen more states articulated interest in acceding to BRICS—and with the organization's overall unwillingness to expand further at this point. In particular, he argued that it would be beneficial for BRICS if Türkiye could join now, but the existing members came up with "this dressing room in the form of a partner country." Minsk would be happy to bypass the intermediary stage and speed up its accession, which Lukashenka made clear in his address at the BRICS Outreach/Plus summit.

Minsk's persistent desire to join BRICS contrasts with Kazakhstan's seeming U-turn regarding the group. About a year ago, in June 2023, Astana officially declared its ambition to become a full-fledged member. Only a week prior to the Kazan summit, however, the press secretary of the Kazakh president stated publicly that "currently and, most likely, in the foreseeable future, Kazakhstan will abstain from applying for BRICS membership". He explained the decision by noting the complex multi-stage accession

process and “other reasons related to the prospects for the grouping’s development.” Also, he added that President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev prefers to focus the country’s attention on the United Nations as “a universal organization that has no alternatives.”

It seems plausible to assume that, at least partially, Astana’s change of mind can be explained by its unwillingness to create additional points of pressure with its Western partners. This includes the United States, which clearly does not look upon BRICS with any enthusiasm. Given the latest additional complications that the existing BRICS members have created for prospective ones, it is likely that Astana simply concluded that the game is not worth the candle for now.

> Unlike Minsk, Astana enjoys a much wider room for geopolitical manoeuvre due to the overall positive policies that the United States and other Western actors have toward it.

Thanks to this, Kazakhstan can avail itself of many more diplomatic options and engagement alternatives, which form the basis for a more diversified foreign policy strategy. Minsk, on its part, which conducted a similar hedging policy until only a few years ago, is deprived of a geopolitical margin for manoeuvre due to harsh Western sanctions and, essentially, a logistical semi-blockade on its borders with the European Union. Unsurprisingly, therefore, through the Belarusian lens today, even BRICS looks like a way of diversifying its economic and geopolitical mono-dependence on Moscow.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations