Commentary
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Belarus and Uzbekistan Proclaim a New Chapter in Relations

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Summary

The Belarusian-Uzbek bilateral dynamic reflects the geostrategic transformations ongoing in Eurasia, which, among other things, impact plans for cooperation across the post-Soviet space.

On 7–10 February, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka paid an official visit to Uzbekistan. On the eve of the visit, a series of other bilateral events—the second Inter-Regional Forum and a meeting of the Business Council—took place in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. According to the President of Uzbekistan's press service, the two countries have now launched "a new agenda for mutually beneficial cooperation". The Belarusian-Uzbek relationship seems to be experiencing a renaissance after several decades of paralysis.

Diplomatic relations between the two former Soviet republics were established on 21 January 1993. During the presidency of Islam Karimov in 1991–2016, however, few notable events happened in their bilateral interaction. Revealingly, whereas Belarus opened its embassy in Tashkent in February 1994, the Uzbek diplomatic mission appeared in Minsk only in March 2018, several years after Karimov's death. This is further reflected in bilateral trade statistics. In 2016, Belarus's commodity exports to Uzbekistan totalled only $35.9 million, while it imported $27.9 million worth of goods.

After current Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded Karimov and initiated large-scale reforms, Uzbekistan re-emerged on Minsk's foreign policy and trade radars. It seems as if a personal factor played an important role, as Mirziyoyev and Lukashenka quickly built a rapport. In 2018–2019, two mutual visits from the heads of state took place, resulting in more than 30 intergovernmental agreements in numerous fields. Trade turnover also started to grow, reflecting the expanded cooperation agenda. By 2021, this metric had grown significantly, exceeding $300 million.

> Current geostrategic transformations across Eurasia after the start of the war in Ukraine have given further impetus to the relationship between the two countries.

In 2023, according to Uzbek statistics, the volume of bilateral trade between Uzbekistan and Belarus reached $620.1 million—growing 350 percent compared to 2017 and showing a 15 percent rise year-on-year. Minsk enjoys a significant trade surplus with Tashkent, as its commodity exports amounted to $501.1 million, while its imports remained at $119 million. Belarusian investments in Uzbekistan have also grown by over 300 percent since 2020 (even though their numerical value of $18.2 million remains modest). These funds primarily go toward the production of textiles, leather, and medicine. Cooperation in the educational sphere has augmented visibly. In 2019, only 14 citizens of Uzbekistan studied in Belarus. Today, about 5,000 students are enrolled in joint educational programs.

Lukashenka's latest visit to Tashkent occurred amid an overall positive dynamic in Belarus-Uzbekistan relations, especially in the economic realm. The official status of the visit emphasized this, as well as its pompous welcome ceremony, long duration, and even several informal agenda items. This included a visit by the two presidents to an ice hockey match and a ski resort. The generally sunny relationship was also reflected by the large government delegations that participated in the talks and the long list of events that were part of the framework of the visit. Yet, besides protocol symbolism and good public relations, both sides pursued an overall review of their bilateral relationship with an eye toward building on their recent progress and adjusting to changing geostrategic realities and logistical networks in Eurasia.

In their remarks, the two presidents referred to profound ongoing transformations as both challenges and opportunities for their cooperation. These included the disruption of logistical routes and supply chains, payment systems, and commodity and energy markets. According to Lukashenka, under these conditions, Belarus is particularly interested in Uzbekistan's development and has identified it as the key partner in Central Asia.

> The Belarusian president named Mirziyoyev's "colossal connections in the world" as one of the reasons for such interest.

As a reflection of these bilateral ambitions, Minsk and Tashkent declared the immediate goal of elevating their trade volume to over $1 billion. To that end, they have agreed to establish a joint foreign trade company, introduce export-import support mechanisms,

and launch an electronic system for certifying goods. The list of priority cooperation areas includes agriculture, light industry and food manufacturing, electronics, pharmaceuticals, urban planning, and communications. Designated intergovernmental working groups will deal with each cooperation area individually. On top of that, the Trading House of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Uzbekistan will open in Minsk. It will additionally facilitate export-import operations between the countries.

To further cement its presence in the Uzbek market, Minsk intends to inaugurate integrated service centres in Tashkent, where various Belarusian mechanical devices—such as tractors and heavy vehicles—could be repaired and receive quick maintenance services. In Mirziyoyev's words, such centres will enjoy high demand since out of "ten tractors in Uzbekistan, five are made in Belarus".

Tashkent and Minsk will focus on creating favourable conditions for cargo transportation, the training of international road carriers, and the use of multimodal transport corridors together in the direction of "capacious markets in South Asia." Belarus perceives Uzbekistan as a potential gateway to the Central and South Asian regions for some of its products. In particular, the delegations discussed the possibility of joint cooperation and trade with Afghanistan. The two presidents signed a roadmap for Belarus-Uzbekistan cooperation in 2024-2025, which covers and delineates all agreed items of bilateral collaboration and suggests ideas for partnering with additional countries.

Whether these highly ambitious plans will materialize remains to be seen. Economic interest and political will to implement the agreements seem present on both sides, especially in Minsk.

> For Belarus, the expanding partnership with Tashkent is part of the overall efforts to adjust its foreign economic relations to the harsh realities of the unprecedented Western sanctions and the logistical semi-blockade along its borders with the European Union.

Overall, the Belarusian-Uzbek bilateral dynamic reflects the geostrategic transformations ongoing in Eurasia, which, among other things, impact plans for cooperation across the post-Soviet space. While some institutions and relationships that developed after the collapse of the Soviet Union are becoming irrelevant today, others are beginning to experience a renaissance. For these latter cases, as in Minsk and Tashkent, the Soviet past provides a shared background to build upon in the wake of an entirely new world.

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