

Institute for Political Studies
"Political Sphere"

Belarus's Foreign Policy toward the "Global South" Main Trends and Challenges

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General Provisions

Against the backdrop of political developments in the world and in the post-Soviet region, and of the difficulties facing the Belarusian government after the 2020 election, Belarus's foreign policy, at least at the level of public statements, has turned toward the so-called "Global South." Unsuccessful attempts to restore dialogue with European countries and the United States require official Minsk to seek new channels of communication in both the political and economic spheres.

We collected data on the bilateral relations of the Republic of Belarus with countries in Africa and Asia in order to identify the main trends and interests of Lukashenko's political system. To this end, we examined the websites of Belarusian embassies, as well as news-agency archives, looking for data on the number and nature of reciprocal official contacts, primarily visits, from 1991 to the present. These data demonstrate the actual level of relations and interests. Based on the results, we compiled tables containing information on dates, destinations, the level of visits, and heads of delegations. In addition, separate entries recorded information on agendas and outcomes.

An outcome is understood as the achievement of concrete agreements and the signing of relevant accords, which makes it possible to assess the dynamics of relations with specific states. Time markers make it possible to determine the period in which contacts began to intensify. As

a rule, regular reciprocal visits indicate the parties' interest, as does the level of those contacts.

We were also interested in the dynamics of exports and imports with the countries of the regions under consideration. Lukashenko has established trade as a priority for the work of foreign-policy agencies.

Analysis of these data will allow us to draw certain conclusions and outline prospects for the development of Belarus's foreign-policy course.

First, a few words should be said about the effectiveness of communication channels. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs occupies the most important place among them in this respect. Most visits, as well as the preparation of agreements and the establishment of contacts, are logically carried out through diplomatic missions.

Unfortunately, there are a number of problems in this area that have only worsened over the years, especially after 2020. At present, the MFA is experiencing a serious staff shortage associated with, if not mass, then at least large-scale dismissals after the 2020 presidential election.

We do not have exact statistics on the number of diplomats who left voluntarily, for example at the end of a contract, or who were dismissed for their political position. However, based on individual reports and internal information that former employees receive from their colleagues, it can be concluded that the problem is serious enough to have a noticeable impact on the work of the foreign-policy agency.

Asian Direction

When collecting data on Asian countries, we excluded the states of the former USSR, since they form a special group in terms of integration due to membership in the CIS, EAEU, CSTO, and so on. We analyzed a sample of 35 countries (see Appendix 1), seeking to cover the entire continent.

It should be noted that the number of diplomatic missions of the Republic of Belarus is significantly smaller than the number of states in the region.

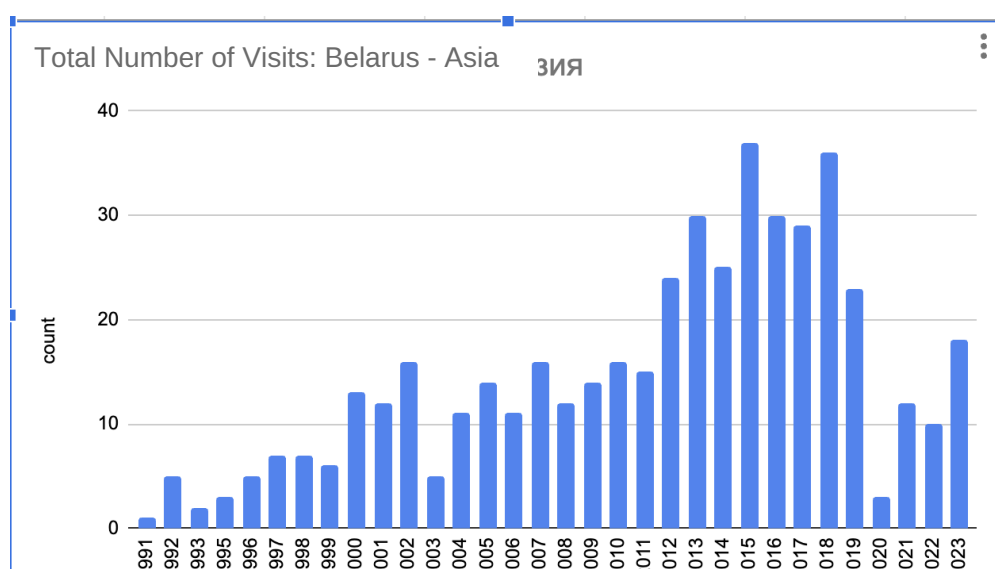
According to official data on the website of the Belarusian MFA, only 18 institutions operate in Asia (excluding the former USSR). In addition to embassies, consulates general also operate in China, Vietnam, Turkey, and India, as do

consulates general. Only 13 Asian countries have at least one Belarusian mission.

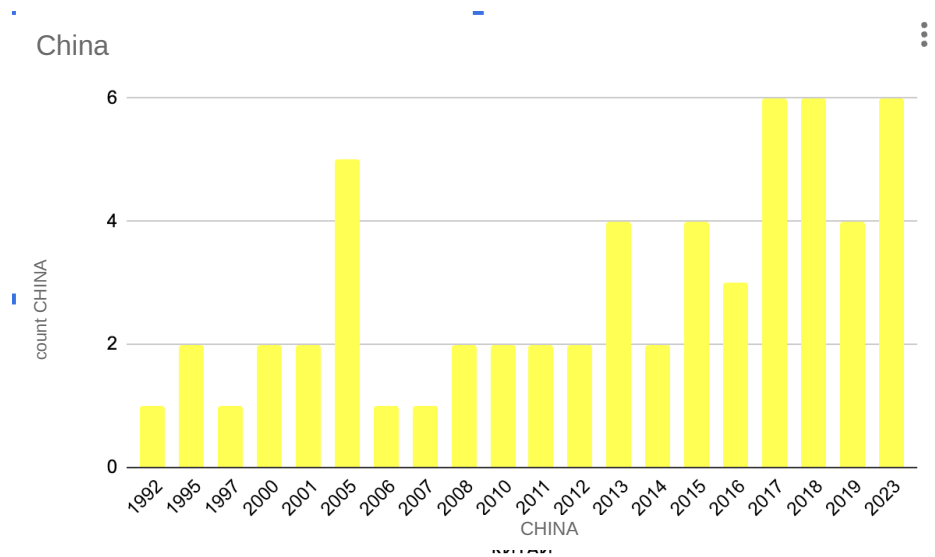
It should also be taken into account that, in most countries, the number of diplomatic staff falls far short of the level of tasks declared by the authorities.

First, it is necessary to answer the question of how realistic the Belarusian government's statements about developing relations with Asian countries are. It should be understood that the authorities in Belarus primarily mean economic relations.

The chart below shows the number of visits from the countries studied to Belarus and vice versa over the entire period. As the aggregate chart shows, the peak falls in 2012-2019. The decline observed in 2020 is most likely related not to political events but to quarantine restrictions associated with the coronavirus pandemic.



Among the countries considered, China clearly leads in the number of reciprocal visits. According to data obtained from open sources, Belarusian delegations visited the PRC 34 times between 1991 and 2023, of which 14 were at the highest level: 13 by Lukashenko and one by Kebich. This indicates a genuinely high level of interest on the part of the Belarusian government in developing relations with China.

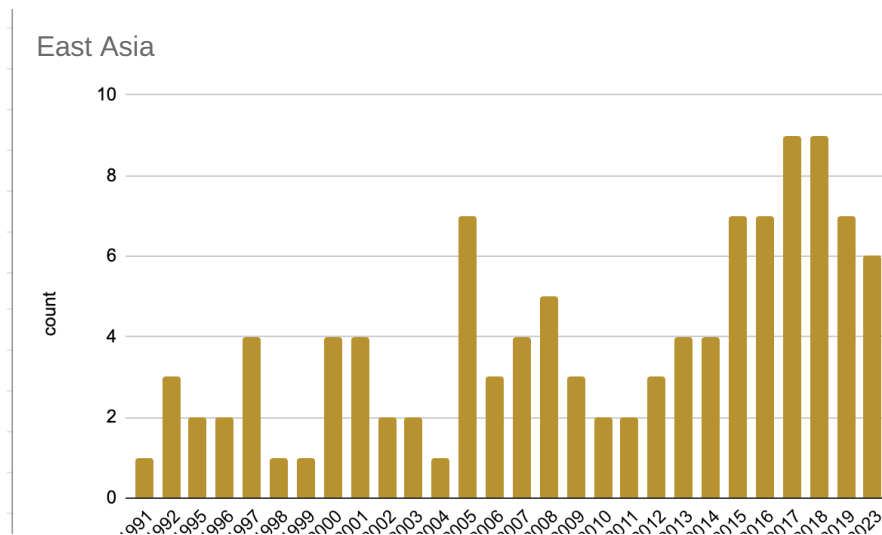


At the same time, the PRC itself appears to be seriously interested in implementing various sectoral projects. Delegations from China visited Belarus 24 times in total. Of these, two were visits at the highest level: PRC President Jiang Zemin in 2001 and PRC President Xi Jinping in 2015, significantly less often than Lukashenko. This strongly indicates an imbalance in relations between the two countries. China is much more important to Belarus than Belarus is to China.

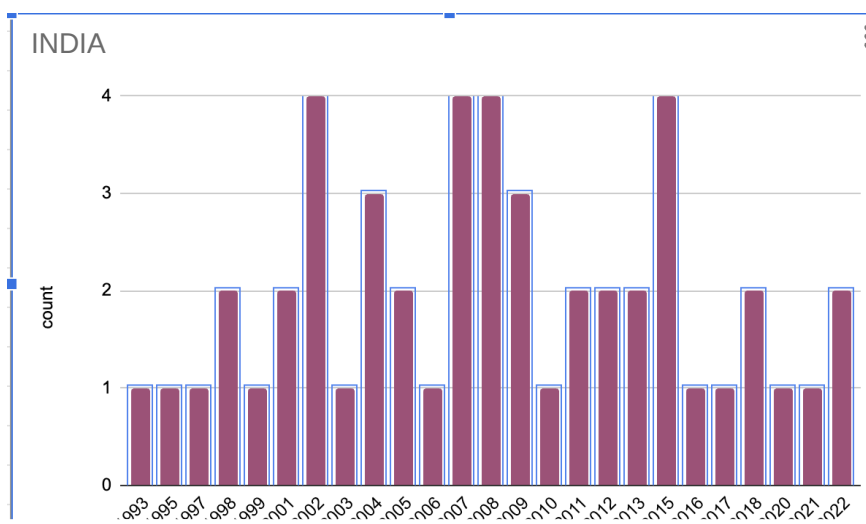
The foreign minister, defense ministers, and other officials also visited Belarus. The regularity of reciprocal visits is also apparent: the chain is not interrupted for more than a few years.

The following trend can be identified: visits are most often made by officials from the state administration and defense ministries. Many visits, especially those by Lukashenko, ended with the signing of bilateral agreements; the treaty and legal framework is fairly well developed.

Overall, over the last decade we can speak of a certain increase in the number of reciprocal visits involving East Asian countries, driven primarily by China.

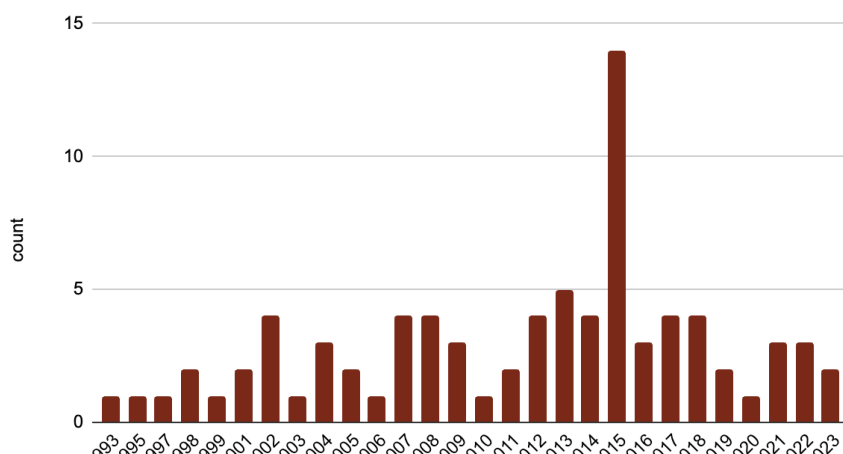


In terms of the total number of visits, India is closest to China, with 48 since diplomatic relations were established.



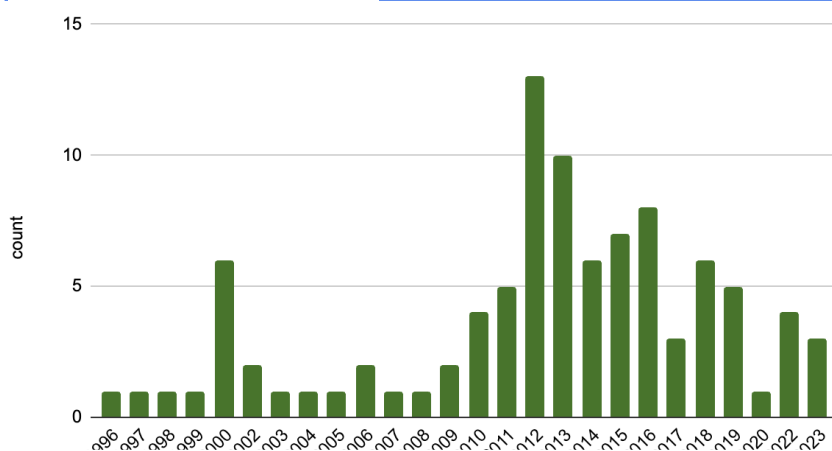
Overall, across South Asian countries, including India, there is no particular dynamic apart from the peak in 2015.

South Asia

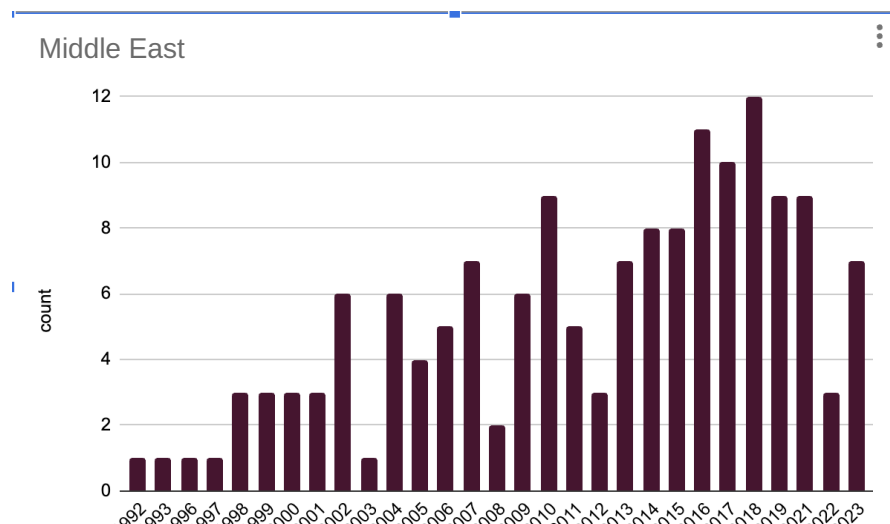


As for Southeast Asian countries, despite the large number of public statements, Belarus's relations with them have developed only to a limited extent. This is indicated by both the number and the nature of visits, among which the highest level is rare.

Southeast Asia



Analyzing the chart for Middle Eastern countries, we can conclude that the number of visits grew consistently throughout the period under review, with the peak occurring in the second half of the 2010s.



To determine the effectiveness of these contacts, we turn to the dynamics of Belarus's exports and imports with Asian countries, as well as with subregions and individual countries. As a benchmark, we use the example of relations with Russia, since it is a key partner for our country. The Belstat website provides information on exports and imports with Russia for 2001-2021. However, the same data for countries outside the CIS cover only 2011-2021. We use this period for comparison. More recent information has not yet been published.

From 2010 to 2021, the latest data available on the Belstat website, Belarusian exports to Russia rose from USD 14,508.6 million to USD 16,370.3 million, an increase of 12%. Imports, by contrast, actually fell from USD 24,930.2 million in 2011 to USD 23,659.5 million in 2021.

The same indicators for the PRC show somewhat different dynamics. Exports over the period rose from USD 636.6 million to USD 867.4 million, an increase of 36%. Import growth is even more impressive, from USD 2,193.9 million to USD 4,060.0 million, an increase of 85%. Trade turnover with China amounted to USD 4.927 billion in 2021 and had risen to USD 5.08 billion by the end of 2022.

At the same time, as of 2021, the volume of exports to Russia exceeded exports to the PRC by approximately 20 times. It should be noted that, among CIS countries, Ukraine remained the second-largest trading partner by trade volume.

Growth is also observed in trade with Turkey and Indonesia.

Thus, exports in trade between Minsk and Ankara rose from USD 129 million to USD 360 million, or by 280%, and increased slightly further in 2022. Import dynamics are also impressive: from USD 318 million to USD 722 million, or by 230%. In 2022, imports reached USD 1.13 billion.

In the case of Indonesia, the results are considerably more modest. Exports rose from USD 160 million to USD 200 million in 2021. However, already in 2022 they fell by more than half, to USD 89 million. Imports, by contrast, declined over the decade from USD 58 million to USD 32 million and amounted to less than USD 1 million in 2022.

For most other countries in the region, we observe either a plateau or a decline in both exports and imports. Lebanon is an exception: during the period under study, imports rose from USD 2 million to USD 31 million. Exports, however, declined consistently.

Belarus's trade history with the UAE deserves separate attention. Both indicators show clear movement, while the figures remain modest and do not exceed tens of millions of dollars. Exports rose from USD 17 million to USD 89 million in 2011-2020 and then fell to USD 59 million in 2021. The pattern for imports is more consistent. They rose from USD 4 million to USD 21 million, more than fivefold. Yet this impressive jump is offset by the small final figures. USD 21 million is not, in this sense, a particularly high level of trade turnover.

Excluding China, most major state visits by Lukashenko took place during the first decade of his rule, when an independent foreign-policy program was still developing. It is clear that later he regularly visited only those states in cooperation with which he was genuinely interested. Broadly speaking, talk of "entering the Global South" can be characterized as propagandistic and unsupported by real actions. Overall, the number of contacts with Asian countries increased between 1991 and 2023, as shown in the chart above. The main quantitative change, however, concerns relations with the PRC, which also accounts for the overall increase within the East Asian subregion.

In Southeast Asia, a small surge in activity in the mid-2010s was followed by a downward trend that apparently remains current. In relations with the Middle Eastern subregion, by contrast, we find a steady increase in the number of visits, peaking in the 2010s. Despite statements of interest in developing relations with the entire region, according to the statistical data we can currently speak only of the development of bilateral relations with

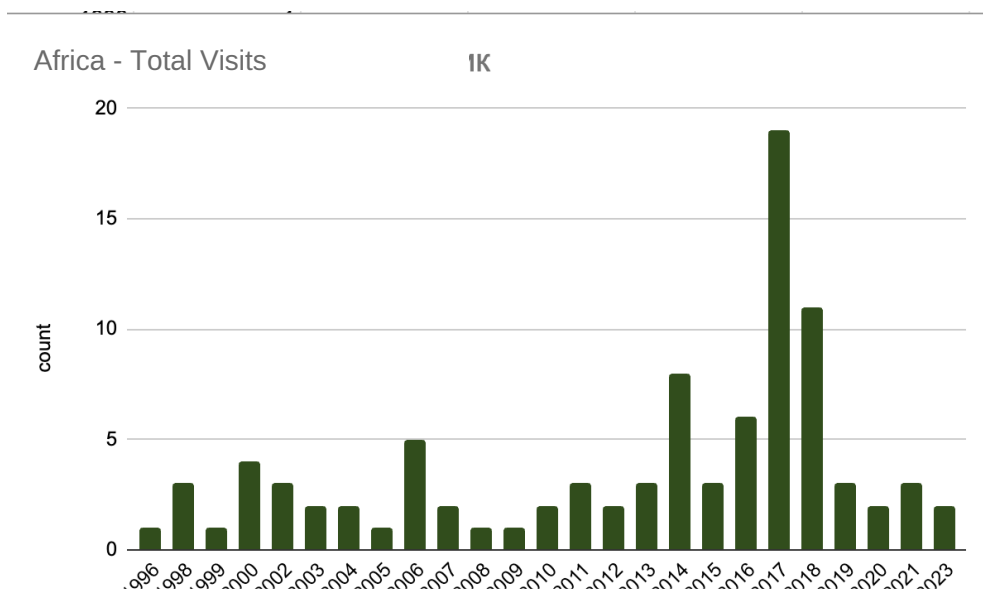
specific states such as China, Turkey, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the UAE.

Nevertheless, first, it is difficult to speak of any unified foreign-policy strategy toward the region as a whole. Second, it is difficult to identify such a strategy in interaction with the subregions. Third, as noted above, the shortage of specialists and the tendentious nature of the tasks set by the president for the MFA are problems that complicate the deepening of relations.

Relations with African Countries

Despite the large number of high-profile statements, Belarus's relations with African countries are developing rather slowly. To some extent, one can say that no real growth is visible. Only four Belarusian embassies operate on the continent - in Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa - and together they are accredited to 15 African countries.

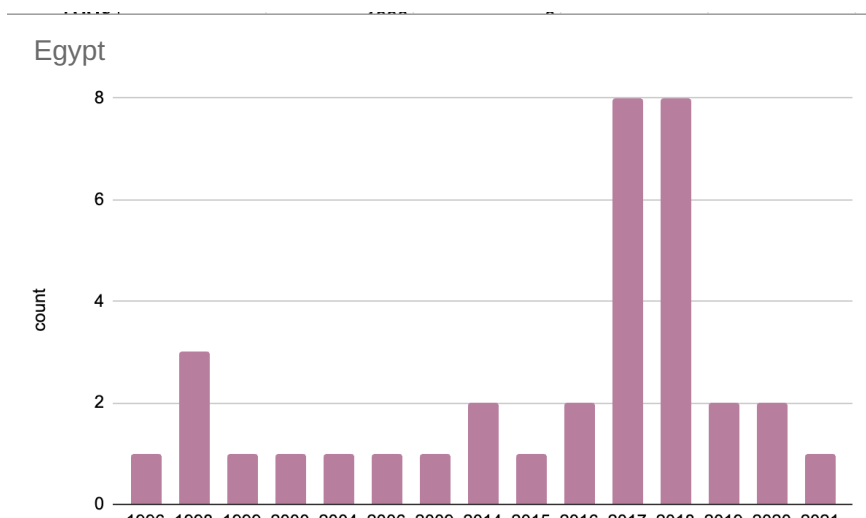
The limited depth of relations between African countries and the Republic of Belarus can be seen by analyzing the number and level of reciprocal visits. Lukashenko visited Zimbabwe, Libya, Sudan, and Egypt. The heads of Libya, Zimbabwe, Egypt, and Uganda visited Belarus.



A total of 94 visits at various levels were made between 1991 and 2023. Most of them took place in 2014-2018, reflected by the peaks in the chart.

More than one third of the contacts involve travel by officials between Egypt and Belarus - 35 visits.

Lukashenko visited the country three times. The first visit took place in 1998 and fits well into the process of shaping the foreign-policy course of independent Belarus. The next came only 19 years later, in 2017. On the Belarusian MFA website, Egypt is called the "Main Partner in the North African Region." Lukashenko's most recent visit to Egypt took place in 2020.



Contacts with Zimbabwe have been a trend of the last five years, clearly linked to local economic interests that have developed to a large extent outside the MFA and state tasks. The President of Zimbabwe visited Minsk in 2019. Lukashenko flew to Zimbabwe on a return visit in 2023.

Lukashenko's visit to Libya took place 24 years ago, in 2000, and Gaddafi's return visit was in 2008.

It should be noted that, despite a certain intensification of contacts, which is also mentioned in the article on the MFA portal under Foreign Policy, export and import indicators do not fully confirm their effectiveness. Exports between Belarus and Egypt peaked in 2014, after which, despite two visits by Lukashenko, they fell by more than threefold. The same situation is visible in imports, which fell fourfold from 2015 to 2021.

Overall, it is worth noting that most visits occurred in the second half of the 2010s, indicating at least an intention to expand the scope of cooperation. As in

the case of Asian countries, many early visits - including at the highest level - were associated with the process of shaping the foreign-policy course of the Republic of Belarus. It is also clear that, after those first trips, Africa remained outside the sphere of the Belarusian state's real interests for a long time.

Let us focus separately on reciprocal high-level visits with Libya. It can be assumed that they were connected with personal relations between Gaddafi and Lukashenko and were political in nature.

It is revealing how little the foreign-policy analysis concerning Africa and the Middle East that can be found on the Belarusian MFA website corresponds to reality. Consider two passages: "Our country has established diplomatic relations with 51 of the 54 countries of the African continent and with all states of the Middle Eastern region," and "In turn, in the Republic of Belarus, 8 states of Africa and the Middle East are represented at the embassy level and 7 countries at the level of honorary consuls. A number of ambassadors (37 heads of diplomatic missions of African and Middle Eastern states resident in Moscow, as well as in Berlin) are concurrently accredited to the Republic of Belarus."

Thus, a huge number of states in this large region are covered by only a few diplomatic missions. It is clear that under such conditions staff simply do not have the physical capacity to expand the scope of interaction effectively. At the same time, as we know from Lukashenko's own statements, diplomats are expected to focus primarily on trade. This means that other areas, political and humanitarian, remain peripheral, creating a serious imbalance in relations.

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Trade Relations with Egypt, 2011-2021

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Imports	19,0	19,4	25,6	22,4	88,3	14,5	21,3	25,2	25,9	21,0	20,9
Exports	45,2	77,7	36,3	134,0	98,0	43,5	76,2	83,0	116,5	58,6	41,8

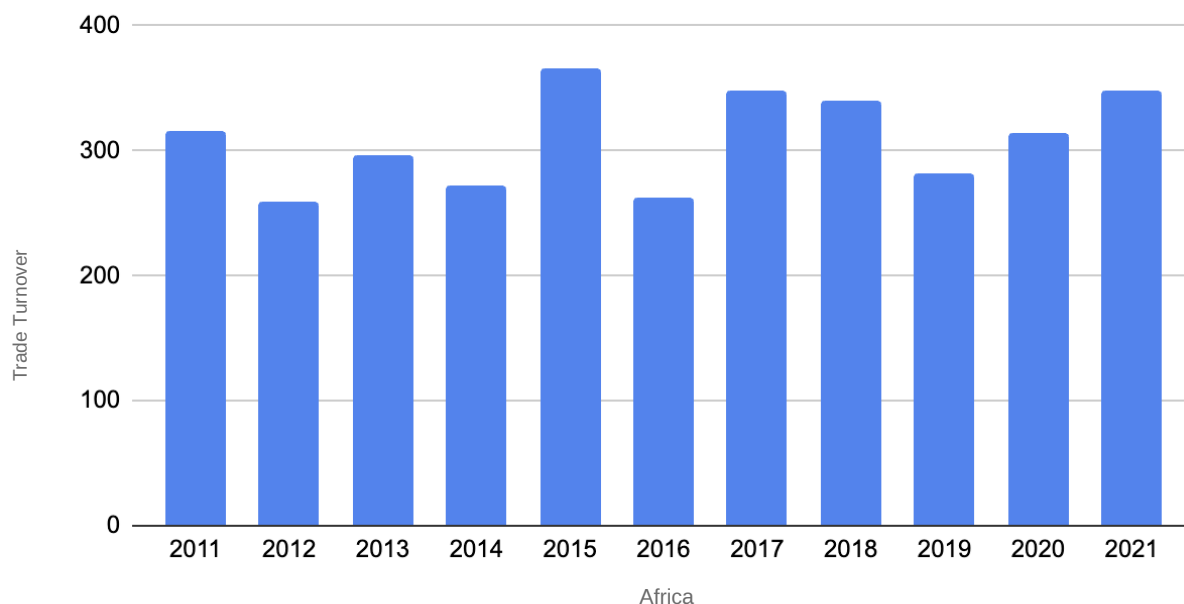
Trade turnover	64,2	97,1	61,9	156,4	186,3	58	97,5	108,2	142,4	79,6	62,7
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In trade with Zimbabwe, one can note substantial percentage growth in exports, from USD 0.1 million in 2011 to USD 16.5 million in 2021, and in imports, from USD 2.3 million in 2011 to USD 8.6 million in 2021. In absolute terms, these figures remain little more than a statistical margin. There is also a clear tilt toward exports: in the case of Zimbabwe, Belarus is evidently betting on expanding its sales market. However, despite the positive dynamics, it is impossible to conclude that the African market has been successfully developed; one country and such low figures are not evidence in favor of this.

There are no data at all on imports from Libya for the period in question. The maximum export value was USD 6 million in 2019.

From 2011 to 2021, the dynamics of trade turnover show no stable trend either upward or downward. If trade volume increased at all, it did so only slightly and in rare cases. Peak values are followed by sharp declines.

Trade Turnover, Africa



At the same time, the maximum value does not even reach USD 1 billion per year for all African countries combined.

Africa ka	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Trade turnover	315,9	258,7	296,1	272,3	366,5	262,7	348,8	340,8	281,2	314,7	347,5

As shown in the table on trade dynamics with Egypt, trade turnover with this country accounts in some years for up to half of the total volume.

Some Conclusions

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs faces significant difficulties in addressing the tasks of expanding cooperation and developing new directions. Another major constraint is the lack of a large number of specialists with narrow regional expertise. The number of diplomatic missions in the regions remains fairly low.

The Belarusian authorities have made economic cooperation a priority for the MFA. This seriously reduces the effectiveness of embassies in other, no less important areas - political, humanitarian, and so on. Foreign policy is not balanced and is developing/expanding slowly.

Against the backdrop of increased sanctions pressure on Belarus in the context of systematic post-election repression and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the government decided to develop foreign policy toward the countries of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In official statements, the so-called "Global South" is presented as a counterweight to the "Global West."

Despite this, if we assess real indicators such as trade volume or the number of official visits, no genuinely intensive development of relations can be observed. China has been and remains the main partner in Asia. To some extent, India and Pakistan can also be considered such partners, although it is difficult to expect significant growth there either. Most Southeast Asian countries are effectively outside the sphere of interest of the Belarusian state.

The same applies to African countries. By both the number of reciprocal visits and trade volume, Egypt ranks first among African countries by a very large margin. Overall, however, relations are unsystematic, while growth

of interest is observed only in individual years and, overall, only since the mid-2010s.

APPENDIX 1.

List of Countries in Asia and the Middle East

1. Republic of Korea
2. India
3. Japan
4. Afghanistan
5. Sri Lanka
6. Pakistan
7. China
8. Bangladesh
9. Cambodia
10. Vietnam
11. Taiwan
12. Indonesia
13. Singapore
14. Malaysia
15. Philippines
16. Myanmar
17. Bahrain
18. East Timor
19. Israel
20. Jordan
21. Iraq
22. Iran
23. Yemen
24. Qatar
25. Hong Kong
26. Macao
27. Kuwait
28. Lebanon
29. Mongolia
30. UAE
31. Oman
32. Saudi Arabia
33. Syria
34. Turkey

APPENDIX 2.

List of African Countries.

1. Algeria
2. Sudan
3. Kenya
4. Ethiopia
5. Tanzania
6. Uganda
7. Nigeria
8. Ghana
9. Cameroon
10. Côte d'Ivoire
11. South Africa
12. Angola
13. Zimbabwe
14. Mozambique
15. Namibia
16. Libya
17. Tunisia