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## Belarus in an Uneasy Neighborhood

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On 1 March 2012, **Natallia Pinchuk**, PhD candidate at the Graduate School in Social, Economic and Political Sciences, University of Milan, delivered an open lecture at the Faculty of Political Science "Roberto Ruffilli" in Forlì. The lecture was held in the framework of the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe (MIREES).

During her lecture the speaker analyzed Belarus' foreign policy in the context of international relations theories. In her analysis of state behaviour in the context of international conditions, the guest argued that a small state depends on bigger and stronger neighbours which condition its capacity to act in the international arena. Natallia Pinchuk discussed how the international environment has influenced the country's democratization, claiming that the policy tools the EU has developed for other countries have not worked with Belarus. The speaker analyzed the most recent developments of **Belarusian foreign policy**. These include the Belarus-Russia-Kazakhstan customs union formed in July 2010; the creation of a common economic space by Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia on 18 November 2011; the similarities of the Eurasian Economic Union to the European integration model; the creation of a common defence space and plans to introduce a single currency. Regarding Belarus' dependence on Russian oil and gas supplies, the speaker analyzed the benefits of the union for Russia's security. Kazakhstan is a key country for Russia's protection from China, and leverage over Belarus and the strengthening of the two countries' economic and political ties demonstrate the gradual restoration of links between the post-Soviet states. The union's benefits for Belarus can be seen in the increase of the last year of bilateral trade between Russia and Belarus, whereas Russia's promises for low oil and gas prices for Belarus have yet to be fulfilled. The guest then reviewed **economic problems** faced by Belarus: a large trade deficit, problems with currency and devaluation of the Belarusian ruble; the Soviet-style economy which remains unreformed and not ready for competition; threats for Belarus's macroeconomic situation; and the economy's need for modernization and reform.



Referring to the union of **Russia and Belarus**, the speaker stated that this has been enormously successful in military terms. Since April 1997, the integration of the two countries' social, legal, military and economic structures revealed a huge disparity between their capabilities: according to Pinchuk, Belarus appeared too small to promise economic benefits to Russia. Still, the two countries found their common interest in merging their military forces, establishing a joint defence system aimed at preventing the enlargement of NATO eastwards.

The guest then proceeded to analyze **foreign policy strategies** pursued by various states vis-à-vis Belarus. Situated between the EU and the Eurasian economic union, Belarus interests Western countries as a country which borders the EU and is one of the NATO flanks. The old EU member-states (Germany and France) tend to support a triangular model of Russian, Belarusian and EU relations, aimed at the Europeanization of the whole post-Soviet space. In turn, Poland and the Baltic states see NATO and Russia not as friends but as

partners with rather different interests. These countries traditionally aspire to reduce Russia's influence in the region. Likewise, the US refuses to accept any privileged interest of Russia on the territory of Belarus.

In her analysis of the **EU's bureaucratic approach** toward Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia, the speaker claimed that the EU's modernization strategy aimed at reducing structural gaps between the EU and its periphery has proved to be unworkable, as the triangular model of the EU-Belarus-Russia relations was characterized by asymmetry. According to Pinchuk, on the one hand the continuing international isolation of Belarus has reinforced the country's alliance with Russia. On the other hand, Pinchuk argued that the combination of sanctions imposed on Belarus, the EU's refusal to maintain trade affairs with arms-producing countries and diplomatic tensions accompanied by the withdrawal of EU diplomats from Belarus, all lead to the further isolation of Belarus from Europe.

The lecture was followed by a **lively discussion**, with the audience showing a great interest in Belarus, its culture, history, economics and contemporary life.

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