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HOW CAN RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS BELARUS AFFECT REGIONAL SECURITY?

Recently, the contradictions between Russia and Belarus reached their peak: there were even talks about a possible scenario for the absorption of Belarus by Russia. Clearly, Russia's aggressive policy, aimed at rapprochement with the neighboring state, threatens not only the sovereignty of Belarus, but also regional security in general and Ukraine in particular. The New Europe Center contacted well-known foreign researchers with the following question: «How can Russia's policy towards Belarus affect regional security and how Ukraine and its Western partners should respond to these changes?»



ANDREW WILSON,

Professor in Ukrainian studies at University College London,
Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations
(ECFR) :

of Dodon, who cannot ignore the reality that Moldova's main trade partner is now the EU. The disconnect between Russia's ever-tighter definition of 'loyalty' and what local leaders can actually deliver is in itself a security threat to the region.

The direct security impacts on Ukraine of greater Russian pressure on Belarus are many. But also significant is the redefining of what it means to be Russia's friend or ally. Increasingly, Russia asks too much of even its closest allies.

Countries like Belarus or Armenia were never traditional 'balancers'. Their foreign policy was not equidistant between Russia and the West. Their game of balance meant meeting enough of Russia's demands while doing enough to maintain local sovereignty and a local power base. Russia seemed to understand that local leaders could not do the former without doing the latter.

But the 'Medvedev ultimatum', demanding that Belarus introduce a single currency, customs service, court and Accounts Chamber, would take away so much of Belarus's sovereignty as to make that balancing game unstable.

Since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, Russia seems to think that every satrap becomes a local boss, a khozianin, a 'Tito' too interested in building a local power base. Russia expected too much of Yanukovich. It expected too much of Voronin. Russia will likely have unrealistic expectations of the next Ukrainian president, even though Ukraine has changed so much since 2014. Russia has unrealistic expectations



ARKADY MOSHES,

Programme director of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme,
Finnish Institute of International Affairs :

The answer to this question depends on an understanding of the goals of the Russian policy towards Belarus. From my point of view, this policy will be aimed at reducing the volume of Russian subsidies while maintaining long-term structural dependencies of Belarus on Russia in the economy and the state of society, but without territorial absorption. The policy of incorporation would be extremely expensive economically and politically; the popularity of such a step in Russia is not guaranteed, and the benefit would be minimal compared to the current situation.

It is obvious that the real ability of Minsk to pursue an independent, separate from Moscow security policy today is extremely limited, despite the normalization of political relations between Belarus and the West. Belarus actively develops military cooperation with Russia and shares Moscow's views on the NATO and the expansion of the bloc. As for the Ukrainian issue, the case of Pavel Grib and Belarus's stance at the UN characterize the real freedom of maneuver of Minsk much more clearly than the rhetoric of "friendship and fraternity" addressed towards Ukraine.

The hypothetical establishment of Russian military bases in the south of Belarus would objectively complicate the situation in Ukraine; however, a similar effect could be achieved

through strengthening the Russian military potential on the northern part of the Ukrainian-Russian border. Accordingly, the absence of bases in the west of Belarus could be easily compensated by building up military capabilities in Kaliningrad.

The West's policy towards Belarus should be aimed at promoting political liberalization and market economic reforms in the country, since only this could decrease Belarus's economic dependence on Russia, bring awareness of the value of national sovereignty and, possibly, ensure coming to power in the country in future of people mentality different from the current leadership. An unpromising option would be an attempt to interact with Minsk on its own terms, holding back the demand for reforms, hoping to "intercept" its geopolitical loyalty, as it was in 2008-10. Generally, Ukraine should be interested in developing pragmatic relations with Belarus; however, Kyiv should maintain the realistic position and not overestimate their potential.



YAUHENI PREIHERMAN,
Head, Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative :

The unfolding conflict between Belarus and Russia is not the first or the last time the two countries have disputed various aspects of their relations. Yet, this time the tensions seem more serious than usually, as they touch upon the very fundamentals of the relations, both their bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

The conflict shows two important things. Firstly, Minsk and Moscow understand their integration projects differently. Secondly, growing geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West further aggravate and complicate Belarus-Russia relations. However, neither of these factors is leading to an “imminent annexation” of Belarus by Russia, as some international media have reported recently.

In most general terms, Moscow would like to make sure that Minsk bandwagon with it on all aspects of the latter’s confrontation with the West. Yet, becoming part of this geopolitical confrontation evidently goes against Belarusian interests, as Belarus has a lot to lose economically and, in the worst-case scenario of a kinetic collision between NATO and Russian forces, it will inevitably become the battleground. Hence, the Belarusian government can be expected to do everything possible to stay away from this confrontation while trying to preserve as close relations with Russia as possible.

Such strategies have worked well for countries in similar geostrategic realities throughout the history. If Minsk also succeeds in this endeavor despite current Russian pressure, it will strengthen its status of an East European neutral ground and, thus, continue to contribute positively to regional security. If Minsk fails in this, it will find it increasingly difficult to manoeuvre in its foreign and security policy, which will have a further destabilising effect on security in the region.



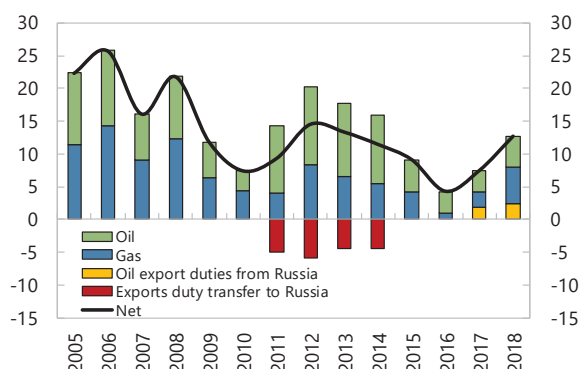
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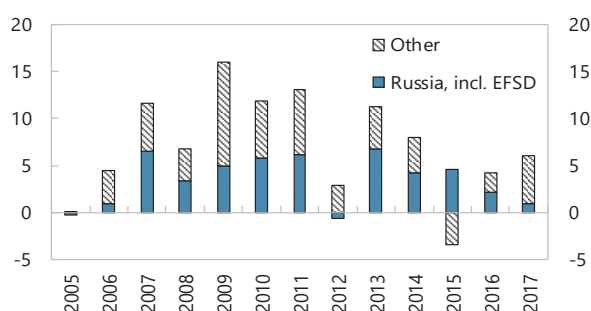
Belarus is the last country's controlling its territorial integrity among the Eastern Partnership countries, hence its relations of a difficult ally with Russia is getting into the limelight. Little wonder that since the eruption of Ukraine crisis, speculations abound about Russia's real or perceived plans to swallow or integrate Belarus. For one, Belarus developed and keeps a high-level economic dependence on its big Eastern neighbor. Minsk's strategy essentially since independence has been maintaining high level subsidies from Russia in exchange of being an ally.

The recent news about the Kremlin pressuring Minsk about integration was largely interpreted in Ukraine (conflict) context, according to which Russia must have aggressive intentions to Belarus, too. However, a closer look at the trends of Belarus-Russia relations suggest that the Kremlin's currently pressures Minsk to accept cutting its rent in time, as (economic) adjustment is the key objective in Russia. Thus, linking subsidies with further integration is a threat and the Kremlin knows Minsk will not choose this path. Keep in mind that this, i.e. reducing the rent, is what Russia has been pursuing since 2006 (see the graph on Russian subsidies and loans) with a degree of success. At the same time, Minsk managed to adjust to the decreasing level of subsidies, but also managed returning (part of) the rent, while opening up toward China and the West.

Graph 1. Russian subsidies and loans



Sources: Belarusian authorities and IMF staff calculations.



Sources: Belarusian authorities and IMF staff calculations.

Reducing subsidies is a painful blow for Minsk, what based on its redistributive policies on Russian rent. But further integration is now something Belarusians (only 19% supports integration with Russia) and especially President Lukashenko would pursue. The common value widely shared across Belarusian society is the independent state. The Ukrainian crisis changed the regional dynamics, changed Belarusians perspectives, reduced internal polarization, and help to forge a greater cohesion between the regime and part of the opposition about the importance of sovereignty. The costs of a (potential) Belarus blunder are much higher for the Kremlin than the political benefits it may gain from the integration. The West should welcome Minsk's careful balancing keeping in mind that Lukashenko's authoritarian regime will face transition sooner or later due to its leader's age.



RYHOR NIZHNIKAU,
Senior Research Fellow,
Finnish Institute of International Affairs :

We shall not expect any radical changes neither in Belarus-Russia relations nor in Belarus's role in regional security in the next few years. Belarus, Russia's main ally, will remain a security issue for its neighbours, in particular Ukraine, but it is unlikely to pose any new security risks in the region.

Moscow indeed toughened its approach towards Minsk in recent years. Since 2015-2016, it has pursued the "less for more" policy towards Belarus, which offers less economic and financial support and demands more concessions in exchange. By doing so, Russia wants to see more loyalty from Minsk as well further decrease Belarus's already limited space for manoeuvring, which is best achieved by putting pressure on the regime's main weak spot – its fragile economy – and threatening the socio-economic stability of the regime.

Overall, current discussions about Kremlin's possible plans to repeat the Crimean scenario and incorporate Belarus are not substantiated. While it is a good reminder what price Lukashenka paid over the years to satisfy his power ambitions, it is highly unlikely to happen in the near future. The Lukashenka regime irritates but satisfies Moscow as it guarantees Russia's control over the country. The Kremlin understands well that under Lukashenka there are no prospects for any political liberalization

and meaningful rapprochement with the West; the Belarusian economy will remain weak and dependent on Moscow, which altogether makes it impossible for the country to break the mould of Russia's 'friendship'.

The West should be prepared to different scenarios including a major crisis; whether and how it will be prepared is a different question.

But first, Belarus should indicate that the regime is ready to undertake comprehensive reforms. In absence of any significant policy shifts in Belarus, neither the West nor Ukraine can do much. Giving money to the regime unconditionally will not increase Belarus's resilience against Russia's pressure.

Unfortunately, taking regime's rhetorics aside, it has shown lack of willingness and intention to change so far. Belarus rejected the IMF reform plan, failed to foster new partnership with Ukraine after 2014 and continues to distrust the West.



GUSTAV GRESSEL,

Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (Berlin) :

Putin's pressure on Belarus is mounting on many fronts. Using the de-facto dormant state-union treaty of 1997 as a pretext, policymakers in Moscow seek to employ carrots and stick to pressure Minsk into quasi colonial submission. Lukashenko for the time being seeks ways to manoeuvre around, but he has much less options that Ukraine in 2013. There is little support for him waiting in the west, and he knows it. Hence Minsk tries to use all ambiguity in Soviet-style treaties to interpret them their very own way and foil Russian attempts of hostile take-over. But ultimately, if Putin decides to crush Belarus in order to absorb it, he can and will do so.

The Russian-Belarussian union state framework had been dormant since the ink dried on the treaties establishing it. Back then, both Lukashenko and Jeltsin wanted to preserve close economic ties between both countries, and hedge against possible regime-change in their own countries by using the union state as a backup. Still neither Belarus nor Russia there was any interest in negotiating their own affairs with the other. This rationale grew even more pervasive when Putin reached power and monopolised all decision-making competences in his own hand. There was no interest of Russia binding economic and financial decisions to other states – be it in the Union state or the Commonwealth of Independent States. Economic and trade policy, currency and financial affairs, and las but not

least oil and gas were used to bully Russian neighbours not to engage too deep with the West and recognise Russian pre-eminence in the Post-Soviet space – above all Georgia and Ukraine. If Belarus or any other CIS state would have had a say in that. They would have stopped it for the sake of their own interests. Hence Russian policy was bound to no other treaty format. This imperial behaviour wasn't changed for the Custom-Union – an instrument exclusively found to deny Ukraine the chance for further integration with the EU – or the subsequent Eurasian Economic Union. The latter was a prestige-project only to elevate Russia's status vis-à-vis Brussels. Once Putin found out it would not have this effect, the EEU started to slip into institutional oblivion like any other Moscow-found integration project. Meanwhile all other CIS states learnt how to survive economically without Moscow's fake integration projects. Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and sooner or later Armenia will steer towards Europe. The rest towards China. And Belarus was confident to be able to survive in the middle.

However, in recent months, Moscow keeps bombarding Minsk with proposals for re-invigorating the Union-state. In December, the Kremlin unilaterally drafted a military doctrine for the Union State. While in military terms, Russia and Belarus remain closely integrated (not only because of the CSTO, but also because of their integrated defence-industries and bilateral armed-forces cooperation), Lukashenko tried to actually decrease security dependence on Russia in recent years. They above all concern intelligence. The Russian KGB is weary of the FSB's and GRU's disregard of Belarussian sovereignty and particularly the latter's cultivation of pro-Russian nationalist youth movements in Belarus.

Russian motives to do so are plenty. None of them are entirely convincing on its own, but in

sum they well reflect the mood and worldview of the Putin-regime – i.e. the class of elderly security personnel and friends of Putin that govern the country. The revival of the Union State would give Putin a mean to solve his re-election issue. Tied by day to day politics, he could still keep control while leaving daily business to the two governments. On the other hand, Putin controls Russian public discourse to such an extent, he could even proclaim himself Tsar. Next, the Russian elite and Putin is obsessed with the idea that Russia – in order to remain a credible “pole” in international relations – needs to grow. De-facto swallowing Ukraine through the EEU was foiled. And by the time the Russian elite starts to realise that taking control of Kyiv again will need more resources and probably violence than anticipated. Hence Belarus seems the easier target. It became quite obvious over the years that Minsk can’t move West without changing its regime in substance – and that is what Lukashenko won’t do under any circumstances. Hence Belarus could be squeezed, and if that’s not enough, broken by force. Finally, one has to bare in mind the increasing militarisation not only of the Russian society through relentless propaganda, but also the regime. The extensive effort on mobilisation capabilities is an indicator that the Kremlin believes a military great-power confrontation is likely, if not inevitable. With US-Chinese tensions rising in the Pacific, the Kremlin starts to ponder whether Moscow would not be able to get revanche for 1991 once the Americans are tied down in the East and make the best out of it. Controlling Belarus, subordinating its armed forces to the Russian and freely deploy forces there would very much facilitate Russian offensive operations not only into Ukraine, but also into the Baltics and Central Europe.

For Lukashenko, this is an extremely difficult situation. Increasing Russian economic pressure decreases his ability to keep his people loyal by

the guarantee of continued prosperity. He started late creating a national narrative that separates Belarus from Russia – he actively suppressed those who spread such a narrative before 2014. But then on what basis to mobilise society if the situation gets tense? If Belarus needs to go west, everyone knows this is easier without him.

The West is equally unprepared to react to a military campaign against Belarus. Strengthening NATO deterrence and defences on the Eastern flank has been a half-hearted efforts, and many European government have not yet realised the fundamental challenge posed by Russian imperialism. The Kremlin knows, that the West would barely react to such a move. Given the very different outlook on history, some additional symbolic sanctions would be a price well worth the much improved military situation Russia then has vis-à-vis Europe.