

Belarus' Renewed Subordination to Russia UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER OR HARD BARGAIN?

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July 20 was the twentieth anniversary of Alexander Lukashenko's inauguration as president of Belarus. Over these two decades, his country has performed a unique balancing act.

On the one hand, Belarus has declared itself Russia's most loyal ally and asserted its readiness to join any reintegration initiative Moscow proposes, including the ostensibly bilateral "Union State" that was created in 1999. In return, Belarus has obtained colossal economic benefits that have kept its unreformed economy afloat.

On the other hand, Lukashenko emphasizes the primacy of his country's national sovereignty. He has flirted with European neighbours, and Belarus has even joined the European Union's Eastern Partnership program. Russian expectations that Minsk's political advances toward Moscow would be followed by economic openings for Russian business have largely remained unmet. At times, "Russia's best ally" has even resorted to harsh undiplomatic rhetoric and deliberately provoked conflicts in order to wrest concessions from Moscow in exchange for a return to "normal" relations.¹

Events in the first half of 2014 have significantly altered this balance. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March demonstrated that Moscow is prepared to use hard power over economic incentives and sees enforced partnership as a more effective instrument of policy than buying loyalty. The May 2014 signing of the agreement forming the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) demonstrated that Lukashenko cannot escape the deepening of Belarus' institutional integration with Russia, regardless of how he may feel about any given institutional arrangement. Arguably, events in Ukraine and the creation of the EEU have qualitatively limited Minsk's freedom of maneuver and, for the foreseeable future, changed Belarus' foreign policy paradigm. Bargaining and retaining economic

¹ See, for example, Arkady Moshes, "[Russian-Belarusian Relations after Vilnius: Old Wine in New Bottles?](#)" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 304, December 2013

privileges are still possible, but a complete rejection of what Vladimir Putin sees as critically important is not.

The Case of Ukraine

The line taken by Minsk toward the crisis in Ukraine is highly revealing in this regard. There is no doubt that Belarus would like to appear as an independent actor. Lukashenko has personally done a lot to emphasize the distance between the Belarusian and Russian approaches to Ukraine. Even though Lukashenko did not show any sympathy for the Euromaidan movement and called the change of power in Kyiv an “unconstitutional coup,” he immediately recognized the legitimacy of Ukraine’s new authorities and met with acting president Olexander Turchinov. After the May 25 election, Lukashenko congratulated newly elected president Petro Poroshenko on his victory and even attended his inauguration. Lukashenko recognized Crimea’s entry into Russia de facto but not de jure, and he publicly supported Ukraine’s territorial integrity and the maintenance of a unitary state. Consequently, Belarus refused to recognize the results of the independence referenda held in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. On the eve of Ukraine’s signing of the economic part of its bilateral Association Agreement with the EU in June, Belarus (supported by Kazakhstan) blocked the introduction of new import duties by the Eurasian Economic Union on Ukrainian exports, leaving Russia to act unilaterally.

Analysts were not surprised by these actions, which in fact seemed to be a continuation of Minsk’s established policy tradition. Ukraine is Belarus’ close cultural neighbor. More importantly, it is its second largest trade partner after Russia, which makes bandwagoning onto the latter neither an easy nor natural choice. Differences from Russia also typically attract positive attention from the West. Poroshenko’s inauguration, for instance, provided Lukashenko the rare opportunity to be featured in a group of international leaders. Also recall that Belarus never recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; on the contrary, Minsk maintained stable and even warm relations with Tbilisi under its former president Mikheil Saakashvili.

Nonetheless, despite all its rhetoric in support of Ukraine’s unity, Belarus joined Russia in voting against Ukraine’s territorial integrity in the UN General Assembly in March. The only other post-Soviet state to fall in line was Armenia, which has its own reasons to prioritize self-determination over territorial integrity. Russia’s other closest partner, Kazakhstan, abstained from the vote, but Belarus was apparently not provided this liberty. Presumably, Lukashenko concluded that the absence of full and meaningful solidarity with Moscow on this issue would have consequences that Belarus could not afford to bear. This is a critical distinction from previous experience.

Russian-Belarusian “Reunification”: Still Hypothetical but No Longer Unthinkable

The key to understanding why Minsk decided not to test Russia’s patience may lie with its concern that Belarusian sovereignty and territorial integrity are less secure today than before. While Lukashenko is unlikely to feel impending doom, his government now has to treat the *Anschluss* of Belarus as at least a possible scenario.

First, rhetoric of the “Russian world” and the “gathering of Russian lands” has gained prominence in both official and unofficial circles in Russia. It is impossible to determine whether the expectations this kind of talk engenders will increase to a point requiring appropriate action. But compared to Ukraine, Belarus is a relatively easy target: it is traditionally friendly to Russia, predominantly Russian-speaking, and fairly small. Back in 2002, Putin suggested that if Belarus were to fully unite with Russia, it should do so as just “six regions.” His off-the-cuff comment prompted an emotional reaction from Lukashenko, who has hardly forgotten this slight. At the same time, Russia’s ability to plan and carry out such a conquest has been convincingly demonstrated. Without pushing the comparison too far, we can acknowledge certain similarities between Belarus and Crimea:

- Traditional sympathies for Russia, propelled among other things by a higher standard of living.
- Exposure to Russian broadcast media.
- The presence of Russian military personnel, which is expected to increase in Belarus in the coming years.
- Close integration between the Russian and Belarusian military and security services, which raises the question of the latter’s loyalty.

Second, it has become evident that the West is not in a position to protect its partners. This may not have been a big surprise for Minsk, which is well-versed in the Russian discourse on the “decline of the West” and has learned from its own experience that the EU is reluctant to go beyond mere declarations in its sanctions policy. In addition, from now on several new factors have to be taken into consideration, namely:

- The West’s apparent acquiescence to Crimea’s annexation, recalling that actions taken or discussed were predominantly aimed at preventing escalation of the conflict beyond Crimea.
- A clear line publicly drawn between membership in and partnership with Western organizations, something that is legally and technically correct but in real life leaves partners to their fate.
- Serious concerns among Belarus’ immediate western neighbours as to whether or not NATO would be willing and capable to defend them.

All this prompts the following conclusion: engagement with the West is not a guarantee of security, while simulation of engagement just provokes Russian retaliation. In the end, if the West failed to ensure Ukraine's territorial integrity, it is highly unlikely it will do anything for Belarus, which has long been seen as part of Russia's sphere of "privileged interests."

Finally, there has been a change in Belarusian public opinion. Regardless of whether or not Belarusian citizens think the two countries should form one state, they are now compelled to contemplate a possible reunification by force. In a June 2014 poll by the Vilnius-based Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), 26 percent of respondents believed that the "annexation by Russia of the whole of Belarus or part of its territory" is "highly probable" and another 4 percent found it "unavoidable."² Thirty percent considered the annexation improbable, while 36 percent thought it possible but with low probability. Worryingly for the authorities, only 14 percent of people said they would be ready to take part in an armed resistance, while 48 percent would try to adapt to the new situation and 17 percent would welcome it. Grigory Ioffe, a specialist on Belarus, has rightly noticed the difference between popular opinion and "what Minsk considers to be Belarus' national interest."

How Does the Eurasian Economic Union Factor In?

The story of Belarus and the EEU mirrors Belarusian-Russian bilateral relations. Lukashenko criticizes Eurasian integration for its failure to create a "full-fledged" economic union without exemptions and non-tariff barriers. He has also threatened to withdraw from the organization if certain demands, first and foremost Belarus' right to retain export duties on the oil products it refines domestically, are not met. Nonetheless, Lukashenko duly agreed to form the EEU in May 2014.

Belarus did obtain some concessions from Russia through a series of bilateral negotiations earlier that month. The parties agreed that in 2015 Belarus would keep \$1.5 billion of its export oil duties, approximately half the expected amount. Russia also agreed to supply Belarusian refineries with the amount of crude oil necessary to guarantee their operation at full capacity; previously, Minsk needed to confirm this quantity every three to six months, which was a lever Russia could use in case of disagreements. And even though Russian state loans did not arrive as expected, the state-owned Russian bank VTB provided Belarus with a so-called "bridge credit" of \$2 billion.

Moscow thus seems to recognize the need to compromise with Belarus on the economic—but not political—front. Undoubtedly, a deep economic crisis in Belarus would be a much bigger challenge for Russia and the emerging Eurasian Union than the relatively minor financial losses it incurs through concessions, while Lukashenko's

² <http://www.iiseps.org/news/49>

frustration with Moscow could obstruct the development of further integration. Moreover, if the EEU lives up to Moscow's expectations, in the long run the benefits the Russian economy will receive thanks to Belarusian accession could very well compensate for the assistance package it has provided. If the process stagnates, on the other hand, the cash paid for Lukashenko's signature will remain just another loss-making subsidy.

Conclusion

Due to the Ukraine crisis and the creation of the EEU, Minsk has largely lost its freedom of maneuver in relations with Moscow. Belarus' longtime economic dependence on Russia has now been paired with concerns that Lukashenko's hold on power, and conceivably even Belarusian statehood, can be lost.

Under these circumstances, rapprochement with the EU makes little sense. The choice that was present back in 2010—to engage in internal liberalization in exchange for Western financial assistance and political legitimacy—has ceased to exist. Today the West could not offer any package to compete with Russian economic incentives or protect Belarus from a conflict with Russia, even if it were inclined to do so. For the foreseeable future, interaction between the EU and Belarus will be ad hoc and technocratic, not strategic. This is an outcome Moscow can tolerate.

Meanwhile, Moscow will continue to provide Minsk with economic benefits. To retain Belarus under Russian control, a more dependent Lukashenko is the least costly scenario compared to other hypothetical options, such as “reunification” or the replacement of Lukashenko.

All this creates a very comfortable situation for Lukashenko as he approaches the 2015 presidential election. Without the ability to provide either positive or negative incentives, the EU will likely play no role in the election at all, while Russia can be expected to again offer support to Lukashenko's regime. Taking into account the weakness of his opposition and relatively high approval ratings, Lukashenko can be expected to face the least challenging presidential election in his entire political career.