

A Partnership Not in the Making

UKRAINIAN-BELARUSIAN RELATIONS AFTER THE EUROMAIDAN

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After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine and Belarus pursued competing strategies in their relations with Russia. The question was whether a drift away from Russia, as in Ukraine's case, or a close alliance with it, as in Belarus's case, would eventually provide more favorable conditions for development and state- and nation-building. In practice, the two countries often jostled with each other for Moscow's economic offerings, which prevented any concerted action toward Russian policies.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine's Donbas considerably changed the situation. In view of concerns in Belarus as to whether the country's sovereignty would be respected by Russia in the future, and a simple impossibility for Ukraine to continue dealing with Russia as before, both felt that the time to pursue a much closer relationship with each other might have come. Significant diplomatic efforts were undertaken to make this partnership happen starting from late spring 2014, in 2015, and then again in 2017. In the end, however, the commonality of interests turned out to be temporary rather than strategic, and fundamental differences in domestic and foreign policy orientations could not be concealed or reconciled, a situation that is likely to continue.

A Kyiv-Minsk Partnership: Unrealized Potential

From an analytical standpoint, if successful, a Belarus-Ukraine bilateral partnership could become a real win-win strategy. Kyiv could be less worried about the potential Russian use of Belarusian territory against Ukraine's interests and preserve access to the markets of the Eurasian Economic Union, including Russian markets. Minsk could hope to achieve normalization in its relations with the West and thus alleviate its excessive dependence on Moscow.

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Belarus did in fact make a number of reassuring statements toward Ukraine, while the latter's leadership called upon the EU not to alienate the former. With Kyiv's consent, Minsk successfully presented itself as neutral ground where a negotiated solution for the conflict in Donbas could be sought. Moreover, the two presidents, Alexander Lukashenko and Petro Poroshenko, appear to have established a working personal relationship and meet regularly. However, at a certain point, starting in 2016, bilateral momentum was lost. A relationship based on mutual trust did not emerge.

Political and Security Aspects

Not surprisingly, it is the political and security relationship where the difficulty of moving forward is most obvious. Notwithstanding Belarus's occasional, official rhetoric in support of Ukraine, however important, and its overtures to the West, it is hardly able to relinquish or even put up for question its status as Russia's closest ally. When it has to choose unequivocally, Minsk demonstrates loyalty and sides with Moscow rather than Kyiv.

The best illustration of this can be found in the results of several UN General Assembly votes on issues pertaining to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In March 2014, Belarus voted against the UN resolution in support of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, essentially casting its vote in favor of Crimea's annexation. In November 2016, it voted against the UN resolution that recognized Russia as an occupying power in Crimea and which called for a stop of repressions against Crimean Tatars and for the release of illegally imprisoned Ukrainians. A year later, Minsk was against the UN resolution condemning Russia's militarization of Crimea and which called for a stop to the established practices of discrimination against Ukrainians and Tatars. In September 2018, Belarus tried to prevent the inclusion of a debate on the situation of Ukraine's occupied territories in the General Assembly's agenda.

Any claim of "neutrality" would look even more out of place in the military sphere. The large-scale Zapad-2017 military exercise that Belarus hosted was considered in Kyiv to be a direct and immediate threat to Ukraine, which saw it as a sign of preparations for invasion and occupation. Although Russian troops did not stay in Belarus after the exercises as was feared, Kyiv's threat perception—namely, that Belarusian territory can be used to launch an attack on Ukraine—remained intact. In June 2018, an official representative of Ukraine's military intelligence [stated](#) that the "threat from the North, no doubt, exists" and that Belarus could become a Russian foothold to start an invasion.

A strong reminder in this context was a series of spy scandals that broke out in the second half of 2017. In June, Belarusian citizen Yuri Politika was arrested while leaving Ukraine on charges of gathering confidential military data. In turn, in October, Belarus's KGB arrested Ukrainian journalist Pavel Sharoyko, who was officially working in the country but later convicted, and they also expelled some Ukrainian diplomats. But the

most scandalous was the kidnapping by the Russian security services of Ukrainian Internet activist Pavel Grib that took place in Belarus in August 2017 and which exposed the Belarusian side as a Russian accomplice, or as not being in control of its own territory, or both. The after-effects of these events on diplomatic interactions are still felt today, particularly considering that Politika's and Grib's trials are still going on.

Military-technical cooperation did not develop successfully either. This sphere was viewed as promising at the initial stage of the conflict in Donbas due to Ukraine's need to acquire weapons and military equipment as well as Belarus's interest in attracting experts in the field of air defense and missile technologies. Besides Ukraine's *Bohdan* and Belarus's *MAZ* partnership in production of dual-use trucks in Cherkasy (central Ukraine), no major projects were sustained. Ambitious plans by Ukraine's *Motor Sich* and the State Military-Industrial Committee of Belarus (GVP) to make components for missiles and helicopter engines in Orsha (Belarus) did not materialize. In January 2018, the head of GVP, Oleg Dvigalev, announced that its military-industrial cooperation with Ukraine had stopped.

Even such an apparently non-problematic undertaking as the demarcation of the bilateral border stagnated. Originally, the process was agreed to be completed by 2022, but in 2015, Belarus interrupted the process. The work was resumed in 2017, but it is currently not expected to be completed before 2026. Moreover, at the same time, there is recurrent official talk in Belarus that the common border is a source of security risks (weapons smuggling, for example) and needs to be strengthened and fortified, which is certainly not a sign of a friendly and cooperative relationship.

Economics and Culture

Hypothetically, economic cooperation between the two countries could prosper even in the absence of a security partnership. For Belarus, Ukraine is the second largest export market after Russia—and Minsk could conceivably substitute Russia for Ukraine in several economic sectors. It could play a key intermediary role in Ukraine's trade with the Eurasian Economic Union. Ukraine, in turn, would be interested in increasing its energy imports from and through Belarus, and in 2015-16, Belarus became one of its key supplier of oil and chemical products. Also, ambitious plans were made public in 2015 of cooperating in developing the Baltic-Black Sea transport corridor as well as in agriculture and energy. And Minsk effectively became an air transportation hub between Russia and Ukraine when direct flights between the two became prohibited.

However, the results of these types of plans and endeavors are currently unconvincing. One reason is that Ukrainian and Belarusian companies often act as direct competitors, which has led to each imposing non-tariff trade barriers against the other. For example, in August 2015, the Belarusian government imposed mandatory sanitary and hygienic certification of Ukrainian goods. In July 2018, Ukraine launched anti-dumping

investigations against Belarusian metal and cement producers and, before, had imposed quotas on a set of Belarusian chemical products. Even when it comes to energy, where the two economies complement each other quite well, Ukrainian companies—for example, *Ukratnafta*, which is part of the powerful *Privat* group—reportedly lobbied (and continues to do so) for the introduction of quotas on Belarusian oil products. Another reason for the lack of a deeper partnership, in all likelihood, is that there exist non-transparent schemes of getting Russian energy exports into Ukraine, in competition with Belarusian ones.

In absolute terms, Ukrainian-Belarusian [trade turnover](#) lags far behind pre-Euromaidan levels. Although it has been gradually growing since 2015 when the Ukrainian economy had a dramatic contraction due to the conflict, in 2017, bilateral trade reached only \$4.5 billion as compared with \$7.5 billion in 2012 and \$5.8 billion in 2013. Furthermore, if in 2016 Belarus controlled 54 percent of Ukraine’s gasoline market, this share is expected to be 36.5 percent by the end of this year.

Agreements in the field of information and cultural exchange were not implemented in full either. During Lukashenko’s visit to Kyiv in December 2014, it was agreed that a Ukrainian TV channel could operate in Belarus. However, permission was not granted until this year even though the Belarus-24 channel has been available in Ukraine for a while. Furthermore, Minsk has not responded positively to Poroshenko’s request to create centers where Ukrainians living in Belarus could study the Ukrainian language.

Evident Explanations

There are several explanations as to why a breakthrough in bilateral relations has not been achieved. The first is the open, general mistrust in Ukraine toward Belarus caused by the latter’s close links with Moscow and vulnerability to Russian pressure. Over time, Ukraine’s official pronouncements became less and less diplomatic and they no longer hide Kyiv’s irritation with Minsk’s behavior. In February 2018, Poroshenko firmly [rejected](#) Belarus’s proposal to send peacekeepers to Donbas. In the aftermath of the Grib kidnapping, Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin [warned](#) that Ukrainians cannot feel safe in Belarus and should travel there with caution. In September 2018, Ukraine’s UN representative Vladimir Yelchenko called the Belarusian stance toward Ukraine “hostile” and [proposed](#) to move the Donbas peace negotiations out of Belarus thus depriving Minsk of its highly appreciated status in the peace process. Meanwhile, public attitudes toward Belarus in Ukraine have also worsened. International Republican Institute (IRI) [polls](#) revealed that positive attitudes toward Belarus had dropped in Ukraine from 58 percent in February 2016 to 39 percent in December 2017. In 2017, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology [found](#) no difference in the attitudes of Ukrainians to Russians and Belarusians. Most likely, these findings reflect the frustration of national-minded groups in Ukraine.

The second reason for no breakthrough is that the Belarusian leadership cannot overcome its negative attitude toward a government brought to power by a street revolution – and a free election – which symbolizes the much-feared so-called “Western-managed regime-change scenario.” In March 2017, when Belarus was facing waves of socioeconomic protests across the country, Lukashenko claimed that the militants’ purpose was to bring about regime change and that they were receiving training in Ukraine. One month later, in April, the Belarusian security services detained several Ukrainians at the border for alleged plans to undermine public order in the country. More recently, in September 2018, Lukashenko [announced](#) his decision to strengthen the Belarus-Ukraine border and close it to “bandits” and “weapon-smugglers.” Furthermore, even well-known public figures can be denied entry to Belarus, as happened to prominent Ukrainian writer Sergey Zhadan in February 2017. In another sticking point, former president Victor Yanukovich’s defense minister and ambassador to Belarus, Mikhail Yezhel, reportedly received political asylum in Belarus in 2017.

Third, Minsk failed to develop ties with Ukrainian elites, including oligarchs and their political representatives. The focus on building a relationship primarily with Poroshenko demonstrated a lack of understanding of the Ukrainian system of governance in which power is dispersed between various centers and decision-making often takes place outside formal structures. In this system, Poroshenko is only one node of influence. As a result of Belarusian ineptitude in reaching out and making deals with Ukraine’s key interest groups, a number of bilateral initiatives became derailed.

Fourth, the international context complicates, rather than facilitates, a rapprochement between Ukraine and Belarus. On the one hand, Russia preserves not only its leverage on Belarus in general, but also an ability to arrange specific provocations that put Minsk into embarrassing situations. The Grib case took place right after Lukashenko-Poroshenko summits in April and June 2017 and could have been intended to undermine further progress. In April 2016, the deputy speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) and Ukraine’s representative at the Minsk talks, Iryna Gerashchenko, was suddenly denied entry to Belarus, which had huge negative media resonance in Ukraine, simply because, on the eve of the trip, Gerashchenko had been put on a no-entry list for traveling to Russia. This circumstance also made clear that Russia and Belarus coordinate their policies on such matters.

On the other hand, the West remains understandably passive toward Belarus. The Western-Belarusian relationship has been normalized, but mutual trust is still completely absent. For as long as economic and political liberalization in Belarus does not take place, the West will see little incentive to engage with Minsk more decisively and influence Ukraine’s foreign policy accordingly. Meanwhile, Belarus is obviously aware that the status gains in the West that it received during the initial stage of the Minsk talks have been dissipating due to the stagnation of the process. For this reason, Belarusian diplomacy is investing heavily in the promotion of a new regional security

initiative, known as Helsinki-2, which is not directly linked with Ukraine and does not even require cooperation with Kyiv.

Conclusion

Despite attempts at rapprochement, Ukraine and Belarus have not been able to foster a new strategic partnership and overcome path dependencies. Belarus's freedom of maneuver vis-à-vis Russia is very limited, and for this reason bilateral relations primarily remain a problematic security issue rather than a business or political opportunity. In turn, for the leadership in Minsk, the Ukrainian political model is something to be resisted, not borrowed. In all likelihood, in the foreseeable future, the Ukrainian-Belarusian relationship will follow the current pattern of limited cooperation while each pursues fundamentally divergent policy choices at home and abroad.