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# Foreign Policy Insight

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# UKRAINE AND BELARUS:

attempts to elaborate common positions against a backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict



Russian aggression against Ukraine has made a number of countries in the region, mostly former Soviet republics, think about how well they are protected against possible violations of their territorial integrity and sovereignty, and whether Moscow would seek reenacting the ‘Georgian’ or ‘Ukrainian’ scenarios within their territories. Under such conditions Ukraine should make use of its traditional ties and of constructive position of the neighboring countries that stand for peaceful resolution of the conflict, including Belarus despite its being one of Russia’s loyal allies. Today there is a chance to use Minsk not only as a platform for peace talks in the ‘Normandy format’, but also to combine efforts of the former Soviet republics as regards their resistance to Russian dominance. Such opportunities lie within military, political, economic and other spheres of bilateral relations between Ukraine and Belarus.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the restoration of statehood of both Ukraine and Belarus, there were ups and downs in relations between the two countries. However, never before have good neighborly and partnership relationships between Ukraine and Belarus been put to such test as in the aftermath of the victory of the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv, Russian occupation of the Crimea and the outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine’s east.

Being under strong pressure from Moscow, the Belarusian government is now seeking to keep a balance between Ukraine and Russia as conflicting parties. On the one hand, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko admitted that after March 2014, Crimea de facto belonged to Russia. Belarus was among just a few countries that voted against the UN General Assembly Resolution which con-

demned the events in Crimea. In January 2015, Belarus alongside Russia and Kazakhstan became a co-founder of the Eurasian Economic Union. The Belarusian gas transportation system, important infrastructure objects and many large enterprises are owned by the Russians, which only increases Belarus' dependence on its northern neighbor both in economic and political terms.

On the other hand, Minsk authorities offered the Belarusian capital as a platform for talks between the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany to achieve a peaceful solution for the conflict over Ukraine. The Belarusian government supports Ukrainian territorial integrity and development of friendly bilateral relations between Minsk and Kyiv. Over the last year, a number of meetings between Ukrainian and Belarusian presidents have taken place, including an official visit of Alexander Lukashenko to Kyiv in March 2014 and a meeting with the then acting president Oleksandr Turchynov, participation in several events on the occasion of the inauguration of Petro Poroshenko as Ukrainian President in June, negotiations between Lukashenko and Poroshenko in August, September and December 2014 and February 2015 including meetings within the framework of peace talks on Donbas.

Despite different approaches to a variety of problems, Ukraine and Belarus may find many common threats facing them as well as areas for mutual cooperation. Therefore, there are points where the positions are close, and opportunities exist for Ukraine and Belarus to elaborate mutually beneficial approaches and take security measures.

Recently, Belarus has received an "admonition bell" when a provocative material was published on a Russian nationalistic website, according to which Belarusian cities Vitebsk, Mogilev and Homel, which in the 1920s belonged to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, had been transferred to the soviet Belarus "just like a sack of potatoes". This is not the first attempt of Russian strategists to cast doubt on Belarusian statehood and territorial integrity and voice a need to «unite a single people into a single state»; apparently, nor it is the last one of the kind. While for historians such imperial threats are not new, the Belarusian populace, and especially the country's leadership, should get worried by such statements of Russian propagandists. One year ago Belarus was thought to be secure against any exter-

nal threats; now it may become a platform for Russian military invasion into Ukraine. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that Belarus itself will not fall victim to Russian imperial ambitions.

The last year's events showed that neutrality (as in the case of Ukraine) or even the membership of a collective defense organization (for Belarus it is the membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization) does not provide any security guarantees if aggression comes from the "security guarantor", namely Russia. In the near future we are likely to witness further escalation by Russia of the military and political situation not only in Ukraine but also in the rest of Europe. The first possible victims are believed to be Baltic states and Poland (which was recently confirmed by American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski in an interview for a Polish newspaper "Gazeta prawna": he reminded that when the anniversary of the "reunification" of the Crimea with Russia was celebrated in Moscow with V.Putin attending the celebration, the voices in the crowd were heard shouting "Finland is next, and Poland will follow!"). However, while this prospect now looks distant, Belarus is in real danger of losing its sovereignty and independence. This is precisely why it is in Kyiv's and Minsk's interests to step up the exchange of reconnaissance and other military information in order to take and coordinate necessary measures.

The rethinking of possible threats in light of Russian aggression against Ukraine galvanized the Belarusian leadership into action and made them take steps to enhance the national security. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Lukashenko paid visits to several Belarusian security structures: on February 19, he visited the Defense Ministry; on March 5, the Ministry of Internal Affairs departments. Amendments to the martial law legislation were also actively pushed through the parliament. For Lukashenko, this year will offer a chance to be reelected as Belarusian President for the fifth time, if he positions himself as an efficient security guarantor. Scheduled for the summer 2015, the presidential elections are likely to finish with Lukashenko's victory. However, unlike the previous elections when the opposition was actually subdued, now Lukashenko will have to take into account instability in the region triggered by Russian aggression against Ukraine as well as a difficult economic situation in Belarus.

Finally, the situation around Ukraine provides Lukashenko with an opportunity to take steps aimed at strengthening his country's independence. It is in this context that his recent statements that "there will be no "Russian world" in Belarus" and there is a fight between Russia and Europe to have possession of Belarus, with "colonization being on their mind one way or another", should be considered. However, under current conditions enhancing its independence means for the Belarus leadership enhancing repressive regime within the country. Over past twenty years the governments, those of neighboring countries in the first place, have learned about Belarusian president's peculiar features – namely, occasionally stressing his independent course of actions, he usually tries to get concessions from partners.

The best chance, however, the current crisis has provided to the Belarusian leader for positioning himself as a neutral and honest intermediary between Russia and the West, as well as between Kyiv and terrorist groupings of DNR and LNR. During one of recent press conferences, while stressing the "sacred nature" of ties with Russia, Lukashenko also stated that he did not intend to go to war with the West "to oblige someone". The announcement of his future visit to Tbilisi was yet another poke to Moscow.

Awakening to the common threat for national security of our two countries provides for establishing possible common points, and in some cases, even unity of positions of Ukraine and Belarus regarding the current conflict: the first country has already fallen victim to the attack while the latter might become both an object of territorial claims and the bridgehead from which a new phase of Russian aggression might begin (just as was the case in 2008 when Russian Black Sea Fleet vessels departed from the Ukrainian Crimea to participate in the hostilities in Georgia). Moreover, while Ukraine, after the Russian attack, could count on economic and military assistance (though it was not quick to come as well), in case of the Russian occupation threat or attempts to destabilize the situation Belarus might be left out in the cold to deal with the aggressor all by itself. One should not forget that great majority of Belarusians would be unprepared for Russian invasion even mentally, as in their vision their eastern neighbor is a friendly state (the similar way of

thinking was observed in many Ukrainians residing in eastern parts of the country). Under these circumstances Ukraine which strictly abides by the principles of international law might come along as a reliable ally for Belarus in struggling for its sovereignty and territorial integrity. This should be consistently brought home to Belarusian partners.

The deplorable experience of actually having no state border between Ukraine and Russia (which allows the aggressor's troops and "humanitarian convoys" to break it practically in an unhampered way) makes the issue of demarcation of Ukrainian-Belarusian state border even a more burning one. The first meeting of the bilateral demarcation commission took place as long ago as 2013, but the process is not over yet.

In addition to national security considerations, the lack of progress in settling border-related issues prevents from solving some other issues having to do with cross-border cooperation. In this connection it is worth to mention the conflict that started back in 2008 around construction of Khostislav chalk quarry in Belarus near unique Shatsk Lakes on the Ukrainian territory. Because of intensive extraction of chalk by Belarusians there has emerged a potential threat to ecosystem of the Svytyaz Lake which is a natural landmark of national significance. As a way out of the situation which would allow stopping the chalk extraction and preserving a unique piece of nature, the Ukrainian side could offer Belarusian specialists to look into exploiting a similar mine in Ukraine.

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia also poses an economic threat for Belarus as it depends heavily on Eastern European markets – first of all, on big markets of its closest neighbors as well as that of Poland. Obviously, Russia will continue its pressure on the Belarusian leader, including the use of economic leverage, forcing him to take a much stricter stance towards Ukraine. At the same time, Lukashenko has aptly used the imposition of Western economic sanctions on Russia and has started re-exporting European goods there under Belarusian trademarks. This was the method he had used in the past to circumvent Russian embargo on trade with Georgia and Moldova due to their rapprochement with Brussels. As a pragmatic person, he criticized Russia for these sanctions and at the same time increased trade flows with them.

Similarly, under these circumstances Ukraine must strive to keep its presence on the Belarusian market, especially due to heavy losses on the Russian market (according to recent data, in January 2015 Ukrainian exports to Russia fell by 60 per cent compared to January last year). In 2014 the overall trade turnover between Ukraine and Belarus amounted to USD5.868 billion having increased by 1 per cent compared to the year before, with Ukrainian exports having fallen by 18.5 per cent and imports from Belarus having grown. The fall in hryvnia exchange rate should stimulate Ukrainian exporters to enhance their deliveries to Belarus, especially in those sectors where Russia has closed its market for us.

Belarusian attempts to revive cooperation with Western countries have lately become rather noticeable, and here Ukraine has a role to play. The mere fact that for the second time in a row Minsk has become a venue for “Normandy Four” meetings for settling the Russian-Ukrainian conflict testifies to Lukashenko’s attempts to gradually get out of international isolation. Western envoys have now been visiting the Belarusian capital more frequently to seek ways out of the situation in Ukraine. In addition, Lukashenko has lately made some concessions in terms of improving human rights and political prisoners’ situation; in response a dialog has started on easing visa regime with the European Union. Pope Francis has recently offered his good offices to improve relations between Belarus and the EU. Lukashenko has been active on the economic side as

well: thus, this week a Belarusian-Spanish business forum took place in Minsk, with similar events involving European businessmen having taken place before. This does not mean, however, that “Europe’s last dictator” has been forgiven: on October 30, 2014 the EU sanctions against the country’s leaders were extended for another year.

On its part, Ukraine could provide informational and technical support to the Belarusian side, should the latter show its interest, in terms of building ties with European entities as an alternative (for the future) once the current period of the country’s being in the shadow of its eastern neighbor is over.

As history has shown many times before, a crisis opens new opportunities. These are now opening for the enhanced Ukrainian-Belarusian cooperation in many areas, and both sides must make use of them to the extent possible. Belarus-related issues, including possible scenarios of its democratization and assistance in “getting back to Europe” in the future, have to remain on the agendas of bilateral and multilateral talks of Ukrainian representatives with diplomats and leaders of the European states and the USA. The long-discussed idea of creating a Baltic-Black Sea Union (integration of countries located between Baltic, Black and Caspian Seas) could be jazzed up as an alternative to Eurasian expansion, especially developing ties within the Ukraine-Belarus-Lithuania-Poland quadrangle. However distant these alternatives might seem as of today, with war dramatically amending countries’ current plans, one must be prepared for future challenges.

The aim of the publication is to provide analysis of Ukraine's foreign policy in the context of global processes in the region and the world, as well as an overview of major world events that may have an impact on the further development of Ukraine and the region. Special attention is paid to the European integration of Ukraine, in particular implementation of Ukraine–EU Association Agreement.

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