

Lukashenko's "Drift To The West"

WHY MOSCOW SHOULD NOT BE WORRIED

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In February 2016, the Council of the European Union lifted sanctions on Belarus. It had imposed them in 2010 in response to the regime's brutal oppression of the opposition after that year's presidential election. Since very little domestic political liberalization has occurred in Belarus since then, the decision must have been driven by geopolitical motivations. Most likely, the EU sought to reward Minsk for its reluctance to bandwagon fully with Moscow in the Ukraine conflict and, more generally, saw an opportunity to weaken Belarus' alliance with Russia.

The lifting of sanctions is both a result and symbol of ongoing attempts to normalize EU-Belarus relations.² In what seemed like some progress, a new format for structured bilateral dialogue was launched in April, the so-called Belarus-EU Coordination Group. Minsk also officially expressed interest in concluding a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which the EU usually grants only to priority partners. In May, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, until recently banned from traveling to the EU, paid an official visit to Italy. In the bi-monthly Belarusian Foreign Policy Index compiled by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, the EU now consistently outscores Russia in terms of general favorability: the EU received a rating of +31 versus Russia's +24 in January-February, +28 versus +26 in March-April, and +34 versus +21 in May-June (a very significant lead).

All of this has produced some anxiety among certain segments of Russia's analytical community and media. For example, Russia's Regnum information agency ran a series of highly critical publications on Belarus' current policy. Other sources have expressed suspicion and discontent in regard to "Lukashenko's drift to the West."

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² Washington did not follow suit and lift sanctions, but this could still happen after Belarus' recent parliamentary elections. (See Arkady Moshes, "[Parliamentary Elections in Belarus: A Couple Holes Patched, but Bucket Still Leaking](#)," PONARS Eurasia Commentary, September 12, 2016).

A closer look at developments, however, offers little reason to believe that Belarus is undergoing a major geopolitical reorientation. True, Minsk's positions on issues of European security, the Ukraine conflict, and Crimea's incorporation into Russia are not identical to that of the Kremlin. Yet Russia and Belarus remain much closer to each other than they ever could to the West. The regimes are united by a rejection of liberal democracy and fear of internal destabilization and color revolution. Both are deeply connected in their security and defense arrangements. All of this at least balances, if not outweighs, Minsk's concerns in regard to Moscow's potential assertiveness. At the same time, Minsk is clearly frustrated by its failure to receive tangible economic benefits from its normalization with the West. In his April 2016 address to the nation and parliament, Lukashenko described Belarus' current stage of relations with the West as *govorilnya* – “talking shop.”

In reality, Belarus' traditional structural dependence on Russia is increasing, and Minsk's freedom of maneuver continues to shrink. In the post-Crimea context, Belarus' formal sovereignty and territorial integrity can no longer be considered untouchable, nor can the longevity of Lukashenko's personalist regime be guaranteed. Flirting with the West (as Minsk is prone to do periodically) only erodes trust and confidence in Belarus-Russia relations and leads the Kremlin to exert new forms of pressure, all while failing to establish a true balancing act.

The Belarus-Russia Defense Alliance – A “Single Whole”

The most convincing argument in the debate on whether or not Belarus' military-political distancing from Russia is bearing fruit—or is possible at all—can be found in professional analyses of the security situation on NATO's eastern flank.

A report co-authored by former NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Wesley Clark [concluded](#), “in the event of conflict, Russia's land forces operating from the Kaliningrad exclave and Belarus could attempt to close the so-called ‘Suwalki Gap’” (a 65-km-long land corridor between Lithuania and Poland). Without the perception of Russia's guaranteed access to Belarusian territory and air space, drawing such a conclusion would not be possible. Furthermore, during the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016, Lithuania's Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius [confirmed](#) that due to tight integration between Belarusian and Russian military forces, NATO views the two countries as a “single whole.”

A new Belarusian Military Doctrine, which entered into force in July 2016, provides further evidence of this dependence. Article 20.1 of the document lists among the priorities of the “coalition military policy” the strengthening of relations with Russia on matters of maintaining the necessary defense potential, joint measures on preventing military threats to the bilateral Union State (a unique format of Russian-Belarusian

integration), repelling of aggression against their joint defense space, and maintaining a regional group of forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation.

The two countries have a shared threat perception. Although Minsk repeatedly states that it does not view NATO's decision to deploy new contingents in Poland and the Baltic States as an immediate threat, it does not welcome them and perceives them as a challenge in the military sphere. The same military doctrine (article 11.3) refers to "enlargement (creation) in the European region of military-political alliances of which Belarus is not a member, or an assumption by them of global functions" as a source of military risks and dangers, which is quite close to analogous Russian formulations.

Practical cooperation between Russia and Belarus develops and intensifies accordingly. In addition to regular large-scale bilateral maneuvers, such as "Union Shield" and the CSTO multilateral exercises "Unbreakable Brotherhood," in 2016, 38 joint exercises and trainings are being held by Russian airborne units and Belarusian special operations forces (as compared with 26 in 2015). The Russian Air Force regularly uses Belarusian airfields when practicing. Belarusian Defense Minister Andrei Ravkov said last June that his country was considering multiple new arms purchases in Russia, including a battery of Tor-M2 air defense missiles.

The only noticeable security controversy between the two allies arose on the issue of the deployment of a new Russian Air Force base in Belarus. In September 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly tasked the government to negotiate an agreement. However, the proposal was rejected by Lukashenko, and Minsk has stayed firm ever since. Politically, this must be embarrassing for Moscow, but from the military point of view the gains may simply not be worth bargaining for. Military experts have reached a consensus that the formal absence of the base does not prevent a quick redeployment of Russian planes to Belarus when necessary. At the same time, it is often hinted that a deployment in Belarus of Russian Iskander missiles is possible.

At the same time, regardless of the state of affairs in relations between the two allies, Russia's general reinforcement of its military potential along its western borders lessens its dependence on Belarus. Lukashenko's earlier argument that "in the West Russia has nothing but the Belarusian army" no longer holds. Furthermore, certain developments, such as the redeployment of the 28th Motor Rifle brigade from the Urals to Russia's Bryansk region in May 2016, may be viewed as affecting the security situation of not only Ukraine but Belarus as well, and serve as potential leverage against the latter.

Growing Economic Dependence

Neither the EU nor Western financial institutions show any appetite for rendering Belarus massive economic assistance. On missions in November 2015 and June 2016, International Monetary Fund representatives could not reach agreement with the

government, evidently due to the latter's reluctance to support needed market reforms. In the absence of a deal with the IMF, other sources of Western funding are bound to stay limited.

This makes securing Russian financial subsidies a necessity for Minsk. In 2015, [according](#) to the calculations of Belarusian expert Irina Krylovich, Belarus borrowed \$1.6 billion from the Russian state and banks. In March 2016, the Eurasian Development Bank, an institution of the Moscow-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), agreed to grant Belarus a loan of \$2 billion for 2016-18 (\$500 million arrived in March and another \$300 million in July). Given Belarus' worsening macroeconomic situation, however, this money may not suffice even to refinance earlier debts, whereas the payment of the entire sum is not even guaranteed as Moscow may wish to attach strings to future installments.

Cheap energy has been another component of the Belarusian "economic miracle." Yet, at this time of low global energy prices, extracting energy rents has become more complicated. In spring 2016, Belarus sparked a gas controversy with Russia. It refused to pay the price of \$132 per thousand cubic meters in accordance with a 2011 intergovernmental agreement. Instead, Belarus began paying only \$73 per thousand cubic meters. By July, Belarusian debt reached \$270 million, and negotiations brought no results. Russia went a step further and cut oil deliveries to Belarus by 37 percent. Since refined oil products are among Belarus' main export commodities, this move was expected to be quite painful, depriving Belarus of \$200 million per quarter. As of early September 2016, the controversy is not settled, although experts predict a deal involving payment of the debt in exchange for future price discounts.

Meanwhile, Russia continues to protect itself from illegal imports of food products, which it believes go through Belarus. In June 2016, Moscow banned food imports from several African countries, claiming that Belarusian certificates of origin may be false. Protectionism, as it relates to Belarus' own exports to Russia, also continues. In July, Russia deemed dry milk from 15 Belarusian producers "dangerous," thus opening a new "milk war." Through these types of economic issues, the mechanisms of the EEU, as well as those of the bilateral Union State, do little to address the problem of Russian protectionism.

In general, Belarus' well-known structural weaknesses in its economic relations with Russia are growing. Full cessation of direct and indirect subsidies is, of course, not to be expected, but maintaining the previous level of subsidization is hardly affordable for Russia either, taking into account its own crisis situation. In these circumstances, a new struggle for control of Belarusian state-owned enterprises in the petrochemical industry, machine building, and the banking sector is probable. Russia may try this in exchange for loans or other assistance to Belarus. However, Moscow may also be supportive of a Belarusian deal with the IMF, not only because this would free Russia from the

immediate need to finance Minsk but also because an overall economic liberalization in Belarus could be beneficial for Russian economic actors.

Asymmetry in Soft Power

A noticeable change took place recently in Minsk's PR vis-à-vis Moscow. Earlier, Lukashenko did not hesitate to accuse Moscow of "unfriendly" behavior during bilateral quarrels, and he often benefitted from such rhetoric.³ However, during the aforementioned gas conflict, Lukashenko stayed unusually quiet. Officials in Minsk limited themselves to expressing traditional, yet mild, criticism of the EEU and the Union State. An [explanation](#) for this by Belarusian analyst Yuri Drakokhrust is that in the post-Crimea situation, with Putin's skyrocketing domestic ratings and Russian society's turn away from post-Soviet nostalgia, Lukashenko cannot easily gain the sympathy of Russian public opinion the way he used to.

Belarus remains under the heavy information influence of Russia. Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration of Belarus Igor Buzovskiy has said that up to 65 percent of the content in Belarusian media comes from Russia and that from the point of view of national culture and information security this should be a matter of concern. In May, a gathering of a Parliamentary Assembly of Belarus and Russia adopted a plan to create a single information space for the Union State, which, if implemented, would further strengthen Russian information dominance.

Information cohesion builds upon the natural proximity and mutually-friendly attitudes between Russians and Belarusians. It affects the geopolitical preferences of Belarusians, even though those remain volatile. According to June 2016 data by the Vilnius-based Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies, in case of a hypothetical choice whether to join Russia or the EU, 42 percent of Belarusians would choose Russia and 34, the EU; in March, the ratio was 48 to 31 percent. As of June 2016, in case of a military conflict between Russia and the West, 34 percent of Belarusians would support Russia and only 13 the West (although 44 percent, remarkably, would support neither side).

Conclusion

Lukashenko's "drift to the West," whether limited to bureaucratic diplomacy or intended to go further, appears to have its limits. On the one hand, the boundaries of what is possible in Russia's neighborhood have been redrawn by the Ukraine conflict; everyone now has to keep in mind the potential appearance of "polite green men." On the other hand, the EU has dramatically lowered the level of its regional ambitions for a

³ See Arkady Moshes, "[Russian-Belarusian Relations after Vilnius: Old Wine in New Bottles?](#)" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 304, December 2013.

number of reasons. Taking into account Belarus' integration into Russia-led structures, its economic dependence on Russia, and their shared rejection of the liberal political model, rapprochement between Belarus and the EU can have only marginal effects. Whether this is worth the rejection of a values-based approach to Belarus by the EU is a question that at some point Brussels will have to answer.

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