

BELARUS: AN UNLIKELY BENEFICIARY OF CRISIS IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. The author considers the crisis in Ukraine from geopolitical angle while concentrating on the role of Belarus in it. He comes to conclusion that Belarus's ability to benefit from the crisis nearby while simultaneously working to bring this crisis to an end deserves greater scrutiny and international recognition.

Keywords: Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka, crisis in Ukraine, geopolitics.

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БЕЛАРУСЬ КАК «ТРЕТИЙ РАДУЮЩИЙСЯ» В ХОДЕ КРИЗИСА В УКРАИНЕ

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается кризис в Украине в контексте его геополитической перспективы, при этом особое внимание уделяется роли Беларуси. Автор приходит к выводу о том, что способность Беларуси получать определенные выгоды от кризиса в соседнем государстве и одновременно способствовать его урегулированию заслуживает более пристального внимания, а также международного признания.

Ключевые слова: Беларусь, А. Г. Лукашенко, кризис в Украине, геополитика.

The crisis in Ukraine has elicited many emotions, while also revealing a lack of strategic thinking on both sides of the growing divide. There are at least four angles from which to examine the conflict. The first such angle is international law, and from this perspective Russia has clearly violated its basic norms. The second angle is nation-building. Two out of three East Slavic communities, Ukraine and Belarus, betray a lack of a

unified identity and/or a lack of national consolidation. Significant segments of both populations are closely connected to Russians. Consequently, almost any attempt to create a cohesive and inclusive national home in Ukraine and Belarus requires distancing from Russia, which may assume ugly forms, as exemplified by the tragic events in Odessa on May 2, 2014. A third perspective is to think of the conflict as a side effect of the lingering breakup of the Soviet Union, something that was deceptively sold to the general public as a one-act drama played out in December 1991, but which is actually a lengthy and painful process.

The fourth angle or perspective is geopolitical. It has become habitual to hear criticism of Russia for its unjustifiable attachment to an archaic nineteenth-century concept of spheres of influence, whereas in today's world, a knowledge-based economy, not control over additional space, is what is really important. Barack Obama spelled this out while delivering his criticism of Vladimir Putin. As a PR gesture, this criticism is perfectly acceptable, and Russian liberals routinely embrace this sort of thinking. At the same time, the survival of NATO despite the end of the Cold War, and its steady eastward expansion thereafter, reflect an attachment to the very same concept of spheres of influence of which Russia unilaterally stands accused. By that logic, Russia may be criticized for biting off more than it can chew by entering a confrontation it can ill-afford, but not for embracing anachronistic ideas of which its geopolitical rival has long disposed. Moreover, since the early 1990s, American policy on Ukraine has been more visibly impacted by Zbigniew Brzezinski's famous dictum that without Ukraine, Russia is no longer an empire, than by anything else. Geopolitics under the guise of democracy promotion does not stop being geopolitics.¹

Situated in the same geopolitical niche between Russia and the West-European alliances, the Republic of Belarus has been persistently targeted in the same manner as Ukraine, but it proved less susceptible to the American policy of the Western world's expansion at the expense of what is now being called as the "Russian world" for three major reasons. First, its cultural divide, while showing some marks of existence, is much less vivid and pronounced than in Ukraine. Second, it developed a consolidated political elite. Third, it nipped oligarchic capitalism in the bud, in part because Belarus is resource-poor and in part because of an unusually strong grassroots attachment to equality, historically upheld by a redistributive peasant commune. In that sense, Belarus is more culturally Russian than Russia itself, definitely more so than today's oligarchic Russia. Without oligarchs, Belarus is not prone to develop multiple centers of power.

Having successfully resisted the geopolitical advances of the Western world, Belarus was labeled a pariah state and Europe's last dictatorship.

¹ I expressed this idea in my 2013 article "Geostrategic Interest and Democracy Promotion", and three years earlier in my presentation at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington (<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/staff/grigory-ioffe>).

However, because Belarus emerged unscathed from the same advances that may have led to the tragic conflict in Ukraine, it was also able to extract benefits from that conflict. First, it performed a balancing act on Ukraine, retaining close ties with Russia while backing Ukraine's territorial integrity. This made it possible for Minsk to offer the venue for crucial peace talks, raising Belarus's heretofore meager international profile. Initially Baroness Ashton, the former chief of EU diplomacy who imposed travel sanctions on Alexander Lukashenka, paid a visit to the Belarusian president and praised him for his efforts at brokering peace. Then the leaders of Germany and France traveled to Minsk for truce negotiations and honored Lukashenka with small talk. Few people realize the piquancy of the event. Previously, the top officials of each of these countries had stopped in Belarus just once. On August 3, 1941, Adolf Hitler visited the town of Borisov, the headquarters of the army group Zentrum, which was taking part in the massive German invasion of the Soviet Union. On January 11, 1973, French President Georges Pompidou arrived in Minsk for talks with Leonid Brezhnev. Incidentally, testifying to the woefully low level of Belarus's name recognition in the West, a photograph of the Franco-Soviet meeting, found in the online archive of the reputable Corbis Images collection, bears the caption: "Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev shakes hands with French President Georges Pompidou at Minsk airport in Ukraine on his arrival."²

Second, the crisis in Ukraine converted the notion of Belarus's stability from a propaganda cliché used by official Minsk into a palpable reality. The respective change in perception is all the more acute as Ukraine is a culturally close neighboring country situated in the same geopolitical space (between Russia and the West) as Belarus, and yet Ukraine's economic system and quality of its leaders pale beside those of Belarus in the eyes of most Belarusians. Lukashenka's pacifying mission and his balancing act are to the liking of most Belarusians, as polling firms funded by the West have discovered. They have also found that at least half of Belarusians trust their leader and at least 40 percent of them would be willing to vote for him as president should elections be conducted today. To be sure, there are many who argue that in a dictatorship, public opinion polls should be treated with caution, a statement that cannot be dismissed out of hand. However, even Lukashenka's harshest critics, such as Valer Karbalevich, the author of a disparaging biography, affirm that his popular support is not entirely fictitious. Moreover, whereas previously the president's popularity closely tracked with Belarusians' personal incomes, a correlation repeatedly uncovered by earlier research, now incomes are falling and Lukashenka's rating is, at a minimum, not following suit.

² Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and French President Georges Pompidou in Ukraine. Photographer Henri Bureau. Accessed March 15, 2015. <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/42-17090300/soviet-leader-leonid-brezhnev-and-french-president>.

Third, concerned about the potential loss of Belarusian statehood, Western governments have put their universalizing human rights concerns, which Stephen White of the University of Glasgow has labeled “values imperialism,” on the back burner and intensified contacts with Minsk (White, Fekliunina 2014). Beginning in fall 2014, numerous high-level European bureaucrats paid a visit to Minsk. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, the country chairing the Council of the European Union until June 2015 and the country that will host the European Union’s Eastern Partnership summit in Riga next month, made it to Minsk. It is likely, though not certain, that Lukashenka himself will chair the Belarus delegation at that summit. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican’s Secretary of State, also visited Belarus during this period. Further, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Eric Rubin paid a visit. Although Rubin is not a high-level official, Lukashenka received him. In its legislative efforts through the Belarus Democracy Acts, the United States had attempted a diplomatic isolation of Belarus, but this effort is now being reversed.

Fourth, Belarusians have begun to place greater value in their statehood and national identity. In December 2014, only 24 percent of Belarusians polled by a Western firm stated they would vote for unification with Russia if a respective referendum were conducted at that moment, whereas 58 percent would vote against. Several years prior, more people had opted for unification than for independence. Look at December 2007. A growing consensus about the value of independence has consolidated Belarusian society. Describing her impressions about Lukashenka’s January 15 press conference, an opposition-minded journalist had this to say: “We are different, very much so. We have different opinions and views on how Belarus should develop. But we live in this country. This is what unites us. And we have to keep that in mind, especially today. We should stay together despite differences. This feeling was in the air, I did not notice anything like this before” (Zolotova 2015). Such deeply felt words reflect a willingness for national consolidation, something that Belarus has been lacking previously.

Fifth, Belarus is now able to boost its already sizeable (close to \$3 billion) agricultural exports to Russia thanks to a retaliatory embargo on foods from several Western countries by Russia. This is despite a recent, acrimonious trade war with Russia that banned imports from twenty-three Belarusian meat processing plants and accused Belarus of reexporting Western foods. These allegations have since been resolved. Likewise, Belarus is going to make up, in part, for the now lost Ukrainian collaborators of Russia’s military industrial complex.

Sixth, Belarus was able to overcome the obstacles to ratification of the Eurasian Union (with Russia and Kazakhstan) in exchange for benefits. Specifically, Russia agreed to annul the transfers of export duties for refined oil products sold by Belarus to the West back to Russia’s budget, a \$3.5 billion saving for Belarus. This is because the conflict in Ukraine

made Russia's concessions to Belarus more necessary, as the value of each remaining integration partner has grown in the absence of Ukraine. Russia even halted its pressure on Belarus to agree to major joint venture schemes that would effectively transfer some major Belarusian industrial plants into Russian oligarchs' hands. Belarus has been doggedly opposed to these schemes despite its financial dependency on Russia because of cheap oil and shrinking demand for Belarusian industrial products. Western donors may decide to resume their credit lines to Belarus. A recent IMF mission to Minsk and a visit by the director of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have been positive, if belated signs that Western funding may be resumed in the near future.

In addition, Belarus made a serious effort to curb further decline in its trade exchange with Ukraine. Thus, in January 2015, the two countries agreed that Ukraine would now pay for Belarusian non-petroleum exports in hryvnas. This was a risky decision on Minsk's part given the instability of the hryvna. However, in so doing, Belarus was able to retain much of the market share for its products in Ukraine, Belarus's second-largest trading partner, with which it enjoys a trade surplus. Until recently, Ukraine had sold electricity to Belarus, but their roles have reversed, with Ukraine set to purchase electricity from its northern neighbor. Moreover, as some Ukrainian thermal stations switch from coal to fuel oil, the latter will be imported from Belarus. Due to deficiencies in Ukraine's oil refining capacity, part of the oil extracted in Ukraine may soon be processed at the Mozyr refinery in Belarus. Should the Ukrainian initiative of inviting international peacekeeping detachments find international support, the Belarusian military may become a key part of those peacekeeping units. Despite close ties with Russia, Belarus is still committed to the territorial integrity of Ukraine. This, among other things, have given some analysts reason to claim that by being an ally of Moscow, Minsk is more independent from Russia than the Baltic and Balkan members of the European Union are from Brussels (for more details see Ioffe 2015).

Could it then be that that Alexander Lukashenka, labelled the last dictator of Europe, has been doing something right?³ It is indeed likely that this national leader is routinely underrated. "Disturbing though it may sound," one democracy promoter quipped back in 2009, "Lukashenka has proved to have greater national responsibility and integrity than the entire Orange elite in Ukraine" (Jarábik 2009). The five-word qualifier that begins this statement of praise only makes the statement more compelling. While not a Western-style democrat by any means, nor claiming to be or to ever become one, Lukashenka is at a minimum more astute than the public and scholarly dialogue about him have suggested. Likewise, the world itself is more nuanced and multifaceted than the "end of history" argument

³ My view on this subject has been reinforced not only by my area studies work, but also by my several interviews with the Belarusian leader. I have published my conclusions in my relatively recent book, "Reassessing Lukashenka: Belarus in cultural and geopolitical context" (Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

implies. An unexpected purveyor of stability in Europe, the Republic of Belarus is a seemingly successful case of defying popular stereotypes. Its ability to benefit from the crisis nearby while simultaneously working to bring this crisis to an end deserves greater scrutiny and international recognition.

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