Belarus Becomes Increasingly Geopolitically Minded

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Many still view Belarus's foreign and security policies through the prism of several popular but simplistic narratives. One of them classifies Belarus as Russia's geopolitical backyard and, thus, tends to interpret every international move by Minsk as dictated by the Kremlin. Within another narrative, the country's foreign policy is entirely attributed to one domestic-level factor – the nature of its political system. That is to say, the only source of Belarusian international behavior is its internal authoritarianism.

These narratives can appear to make sense when applied to individual situations, but both miss the fundamental mark. Like in the case of any other country, be it democratic or not, Belarus's foreign and security policies are primarily driven by its geopolitical situation and relative power. Most importantly, it bears noting that Belarus sits between two conflicting poles (Russia and the European Union) and has highly asymmetrical relations with them. Thus, in order to survive as a sovereign state, it needs to stay away from geopolitical tensions and maintain non-confrontational relations with both of its flanks. Two recent events have shed light on this foreign policy posture.

First, in mid-January the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, made an unexpected statement revealing his discussions with Donald Trump during his visit to the United States. According to the Kazakhstani leader, at their White House meeting, Trump suggested that the venue of the Ukraine peace talks should be moved from Minsk to Astana. Even though it is highly improbable that the US would initiate such a move under today's circumstances, the Belarusian authorities openly criticized Nazarbayev's words. Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei ridiculed the very idea by saying that "you can move the talks on Ukraine even to Antarctica if you believe they will be a success". President Alyaksandr Lukashenka also made negative references to his colleague's statement. In the end, Kazakhstan's ambassador to Belarus even appeared on TV in order to ensure that his president's words were in no way intended to hurt the interests of Minsk.

The popular interpretation of Belarus's reaction, promoted by the media, is that Lukashenka does not want to lose the laurels of a peacemaker, which have helped to improve his international image. While any world leader would undoubtedly covet such a reputational boost, this interpretation represents a huge oversimplification.

> It completely distorts the logic of Belarusian decision-makers. To understand why, one needs to analyze the meaning of the Minsk negotiation platform for Belarus's own security.

Belarus hosted both the Minsk One and Minsk Two summits and continues to host regular meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine. This fact has helped to facilitate Belarus's rapprochement with the EU and, to a lesser extent, with the US. But Belarus did not become the host by default. It happened because the country took a neutral stance on the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation in the first place. Hence, Belarusian neutrality, in turn, propelled the rapprochement with the West, which helps Minsk to diversify and balance its foreign policy.

However, Minsk would find it increasingly difficult to sustain a neutral stance amidst the Russian-Western confrontation without its current status as the ground for Ukraine talks. Losing this role would automatically deprive Belarus of the core argument for why it cannot join Russia in its anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western campaigns, especially as tensions continue to grow. In other words, without the neutral ground status and given its mutual military commitments with Russia, it would be more difficult for Minsk to say "no" if the Kremlin once again put forward the idea of a Russian airbase on Belarusian territory.

This logical circle explains why the authorities of Belarus cling to the status as a host of the Ukrainian negotiations. In today's regional geopolitics, this status is the only way for the country to stay out of the Russian-Western confrontation and, thus, improve its own security.

The second noteworthy episode happened at the end of January, when President Lukashenka held a meeting with the EU's Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn. During the meeting, Lukashenka made an emphatic statement that Minsk is a "categorical supporter of a strong EU".

The remark came as a surprise for some observers, even though this was not the first time Belarusian officials had expressed such sentiment. Some commentators argued that an authoritarian ruler cannot be interested in a strong EU, since the latter has the

reputation of a democracy promoter and presumably would threaten the former's grip on power. So, the logic continued, Lukashenka must be in dire need of financial assistance and is only trying to please European politicians to secure this influx of Western cash.

> This is another example of misunderstanding Belarus's structural realities and needs in international affairs.

As Lukashenka himself put it, the EU is a major pillar of the multipolar world, and "its [hypothetical] destruction would lead to the destruction of not only security but also economy and other spheres". As such, the statement encapsulates a classic geopolitical problem for small states like Belarus. The more strong partners it has and can rely on, the more flexibility and maneuvering space it has in foreign policy.

This simple formula works for any small state in a similar geopolitical position, its political regime notwithstanding. And Belarus has no reason to be an exception. Indeed, after the Crimea crisis, this geopolitical wisdom has evidently become even more deeply engrained in the country's political tissue.

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