Commentary
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# Belarus Demands a Seat at Russia-Ukraine Negotiation Table

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**Summary**

Minsk is determined to secure a place at any future negotiation for peace in Ukraine. Belarus sees a seat at the Russia-Ukraine negotiation table as crucial for ensuring its own security and affirming the country's sovereignty.

On 31 October and 1 November, Belarus hosted the Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security. It was the second edition of the massive event that Belarusian leadership aspires to turn into an annual alternative to the Munich Security Conference. In his speech at the gathering, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka made several important and, at times, unexpected statements that shed additional light on Minsk's thinking about the continuing war in Ukraine and its future scenarios. He also stressed the specifically Belarusian core interest in securing a separate seat at the table where a peace agreement will be negotiated. Belarus's geographic and geopolitical position in relation to the war in Ukraine ensures that Minsk will be significantly impacted regardless of the conflict's outcome. Belarus's involvement in this outcome will shape the future of the country's autonomy and its role in European affairs.

Lukashenka stated that the war between Russia and Ukraine is approaching an inflection point. On the one hand, he envisages a potential opening for reaching a diplomatic solution to end the hostilities. On the other hand, he thinks the probability of a significant escalation of the fighting is particularly high. Therefore, he called for intensified efforts to prevent escalation scenarios by starting negotiations. According to him, the number of peace initiatives that various actors have put forward, including non-public ones, is growing by the day. They remain fragmented, however, as "different countries objectively tend to be closer to regional centres of power," which "complicates the search for mutually acceptable compromises." The Belarusian president suggested that various efforts be unified within a single framework to accelerate the process.

> Lukashenka emphasized that if serious diplomatic talks start now, there is still a chance to end the conflict “in a draw.”

This phrase is noteworthy, as it sounds strikingly different from Moscow and Kyiv’s official positions, which both stress the narratives of their own victory and the enemy’s defeat. He also noted that the situation on the battlefield is changing as Russia continues to gain more ground, which automatically results in the hardening of its stance towards hypothetical negotiations.

Separately, Lukashenka underlined that Belarus is interested in getting a seat at the negotiation table once peace talks begin. In his words, this will be a way to guarantee the country’s security. He and other Belarusian officials made this point multiple times, including in the initial weeks of the war. For example, in April 2022, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Makei, stated that Belarus should be present at the concluding round of talks between Russia and Ukraine. Similarly, in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2022, Makei stressed that Belarus, as Ukraine’s neighbour and an affected country, must be an inseparable part of the negotiation process and final security guarantees.

> Thus, Minsk wants not simply to have a chair at a negotiation table but to be included in international commitments and guarantees that the post-war security order in Europe will rely on.

The logic behind these aspirations appears relatively straightforward. If Minsk participates in the talks on post-war arrangements between Russia and Ukraine and in a broader regional context, it will ensure that mightier actors do not ignore its security interests as a sovereign state. Several past experiences have taught the Belarusian leadership that hinging on others, including allies, to advance their own interests during international negotiations often ends badly. A relatively recent example is the grain deal that Ukraine and Russia reached with the help of Türkiye and the United Nations in July 2022. Minsk hoped that Moscow would insist on suspending sanctions against Belarusian potash producers as it negotiated the unimpeded export of Russian fertilizer materials as part of the deal’s package, but in the end, not a word was mentioned about Belarusian companies.

Thus, when stakes are high, each state must do everything possible to take responsibility for its interests in its own hands. Here, the stakes cannot be higher. Given that a hypothetical agreement on ending the war between Moscow and Kyiv will not terminate overall military and political tensions in Eastern Europe, risks are significant

that new crises might break out in the region before too long. Due to Belarus's geographic location and geopolitical significance, it is not hard to imagine scenarios whereby its territory becomes part of such a crisis.

The Belarusian leadership is correct to consider such contingencies. They can only ensure that the country's core national interests are respected if Belarusian officials sit at the negotiation table, where they will emphasize the need to extend security guarantees to Minsk, as well as to Kyiv. For precisely the same reason, other Eastern and Central European states will likely start making a similar case regarding their security interests as the prospects for peace talks grow and post-war arrangements come into focus. Revealingly, Polish President Andrzej Duda is already advancing a somewhat similar argument.

> Additionally, for Minsk, this issue appears to have a dimension of sovereignty.

In recent years, and especially since February 2022, when Russian troops entered Ukraine from the Belarusian territory, Western decision-makers have increasingly perceived Belarus as a country with limited sovereignty, at least in foreign and security affairs. While such perceptions appear to distort the empirical reality, they constitute a sizable problem for Minsk, because Western states have been implementing their Belarus policies accordingly. For instance, the numerous rounds of Western sanctions against Belarus were applied without any concern that they destroy the political economic foundations of the country's sovereignty and push it even further into Russia's firm embrace.

If Minsk's separate voice is not heard during future peace talks, it will have a further detrimental effect on the prospects of Belarusian sovereignty, both in terms of how other actors see Belarus and how much actual room for manoeuvre it enjoys in regional affairs. In this respect, the West should arguably also be interested in having Minsk at the table. Even under the present geopolitical circumstances in Europe, a sovereign Belarus with at least some space for diplomatic activity can positively contribute to European security.

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