Commentary
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Belarus Muddling through Geopolitical Uncertainties

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

In two recent years leading Western media and think tanks have written about Belarus, perhaps, more than they did in the previous two decades. Most reports focus on Russian policies towards neighbours, and Belarus in particular (or what journalists and analysts presume those policies are), and Minsk's actions in that context. Thus, in a way, the media continue to write about Russia and the coverage of Belarus has an obvious Russian angle to it.

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Yet, even this is significant progress compared to what was the case before. For a long time, Belarus, despite its essential position on the geopolitical map of Eurasia, remained a 'black spot'in Western information space. On those rare occasions when it appeared in headlines, the story would have revolved around the 'last dictatorship of Europe'nickname that Condoleezza Rice once gave to it. Few analysts would have gone beyond that in order to understand the nuances of Belarusian domestic and foreign policies.

Since 2014, when the Crimean and Donbas crises broke out, international attention towards Belarus has been (very slowly) growing. Firstly, Minsk took a constructive neutral stance on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and became the venue for peace talks. Secondly, it intensified its own attempts to normalise relations with the West, which had been almost frozen before. Finally, observers started to notice that Belarusian foreign policy is not as primitive as many had thought.

Belarus's Geopolitical Realities

> From a geopolitical point of view, Belarus sits in a highly controversial area.

Eastern Europe has long been the territory where the West meets the East and where their respective interests and competing rationalities encounter physically. On the one hand, this creates multiple cooperation opportunities, which east European nations tend to explore for the sake of their own interest and regional stability (which is also their core interest). On the other hand, once geopolitical tensions are on the rise, it is this area that becomes the first victim.

The tragedy in Ukraine and its current implications have proved this yet again and have had a serious effect on Belarus. It would, perhaps, be wrong to say that the crises in Crimea and Donbas marked a completely new chapter in Belarusian foreign and security policies. However, they do represent a watershed moment after which Belarus found itself in a much more complicated reality. This has naturally impacted its two main foreign policy dimensions – that is, relations with Russia and the EU.

Belarus-Russia relations: old regularities and new trends

Belarus and Russia have been formally allied since the mid-1990s. In those early days of Belarusian independence, they signed five documents which gave shape to what is known today as the Union State of Belarus and Russia:

- Treaty on the Formation of the Community of Russia and Belarus (concluded on April 2, 1996);
- Treaty on the Union of Belarus and Russia (April 2, 1997);
- Charter of the Union of Belarus and Russia (May 23, 1997);
- Declaration on the Further Unification of Russia and Belarus (December 25, 1998).
- Finally, the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia was signed on December 8, 1999, whichmarked the highest point of the bilateral integration.

The Union State treaty did foresee a gradual process of integration by introducing a single economic space, unifying certain sectoral policies and even creating a single currency and a Union State parliament in the future. Ultimately, a referendum was supposed to take place in both countries that would either adopt or decline a constitutional act of the Union State.

Today some commentators refer to the 1999 Union State treaty as if it were a document cementing a future loss of Belarusian sovereignty. In reality, the central principle enshrined in the treaty is that of parity. In other words, all integration plans notwithstanding, the two countries were still supposed to remain independent and preserve sovereignty over key governance areas. Institutionally, the treaty included decision-making mechanisms that ensured that no decision would pass against Belarus's will. And one can argue that, at least partially, that explains why many far-reaching goals declared in the 1999 Union State treaty never materialized during the following two decades. Moscow would not agree to parity-based decision-making in key economic areas, whereas Minsk would not go for anything else.

Moreover, Belarus and Russia later joined other post-Soviet integration arrangements, e.g. the Eurasian Economic Community, Customs Union, Single Economic Space, and now the Eurasian Economic Union. The latter, with its ambitious agenda and broader membership, in some respect took integration steam out of the Union State. At some point it even seemed that the bilateral project would slowly die as irrelevant under new international circumstances.

Yet, in December 2018 the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev stated that Moscow wanted to get back to the 1999 treaty, revise it and start taking practical steps towards its full implementation. That statement came as a reaction to recurrent Belarusian demands that Russia should deliver on its obligation under the Treaty of the Eurasian Economic Union to do away with numerous barriers, exemptions and limitations from the free economic space regime, which distort economic competition in the EAEU to Russia's favour. In response, Moscow stated that if Belarus wanted a proper economic union, the two sides needed to return to the idea of enhanced bilateral integration or otherwise things would stay where they were or even get worse for Belarus.

These developments caused serious concern both inside Belarus and in the West that Moscow might be up to launching a campaign to incorporate Belarus. One speculation gained particular popularity – that Vladimir Putin wants to resolve his 2024 problem through the Union State: by 2024 he will have served another two presidential terms and the Russian Constitution forbids him to run again. Hence, the speculation goes, he intends to become the president of the Union State and continue to rule not only Russia but also Belarus.

According to several people close to the Kremlin [1], this option for staying beyond 2024 was indeed suggested to Putin by one group in his surrounding and has been on the table along with at least three other options. But the fact that this particular one has attracted so much media attention does not mean that it is the preferred one. Rather, it

reflects the overall international atmosphere and Russian completely destroyed image after what it did to Crimea. As a result, observers and politicians in the West and even in the post-Soviet space tend to presuppose the most wicked intentions on Moscow's side in relation to each and every international issue.

But even some basic analysis of the situation would pose a serious question as to the probability of an 'Anschluss scenario.' Even if Putin really considered the Union State option as a way to prolong his stay in power or insisted on political integration with Belarus out of any other consideration, it is not too difficult to predict what Minsk would respond. The answer would be a definite *No!*

The Belarusian president and other high-level government officials keep emphasizing over and over again that sovereignty is the utmost value and that there can be no discussion about it. According to Alexander Lukashenko, 98% of the Belarusians will never support the idea of merging the two states politically. Hence, what Minsk is willing to talk about is an economic union only. It is worth reminding that this position is fully shared by Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan within the Eurasian Economic Union, where even the Russian idea to create a Eurasian parliament was declined immediately by all other member states.

Hypothetically, what would Moscow do about all this if it really intended to enforce a political union on Belarus? Will it use military force, as some people might presume? It would certainly consider such an option were Belarus to declare that it would leave integration blocks with Russia altogether and seek enhanced military cooperation with NATO. The tragic events in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2014 can serve as a reminder of how Moscow tends to react to what it sees as threats to its fundamental security interests.

Yet, resorting to military power in reaction to Belarus's refusal to deepen integration would be sheer madness for Moscow, as it would involve too many risks and even guaranteed losses (as Minsk has ways of striking back) while providing too few obvious gains. The Kremlin is certainly ready to use economic pressure to achieve its goals in relations with Belarus. Moscow did it many times before and not only to Minsk, and it is clearly applying it right now. But then the question about what Russian goals really are is not as simple as numerous commentators seem to assume.

Moscow has found itself in a situation of huge challenges and extreme uncertainty. Ongoing structural changes in the system of international relations combined with Western sanctions and the poor state of the Russian economy and demographics impose serious dilemmas on the Kremlin. On the one hand, it tends naturally to follow its great

power instincts, which dictate that it should coerce Belarus and other former Soviet republics into 'geopolitical obedience.' On the other hand, however, relations with European capitals are becoming increasingly important to Moscow, as Russia and the EU are themselves getting stuck in-between US-Chinese strategic competition. Under these circumstances, creating a serious problem with Belarus would amount to shooting in the foot while the other one is already injured because of Ukraine. Moreover, at a later stage, and provided some positive developments, Belarus might turn out to be a crucial link between Russia and the EU.

> This is not to say that current issues on Belarusian-Russian agenda are going to simply dissolve. If anything, Russian great power instincts are too strong, and its decision-making is too reactive.

So we are in any way set for difficult times between Moscow and Minsk.

Belarus – EU limited rapprochement

Old and new difficulties in relations with Russia naturally incentivize Minsk to diversify its foreign policy and economic cooperation. The EU is a natural go-to partner in that regard. And indeed, a few years ago the Belarusian authorities declared a so-called '30-30-30' formula of sovereignty, which implies that the country's economy and security will only become sustainable if a third of its exports goes to Russia, another third to the EU and yet another – to the rest of the world. In other words, if Belarus's dependence on Russian markets is lowered, and the EU is crucial for that.

At the end of 2012 – beginning of 2013, Minsk started making visible steps aimed at normalising relations with the EU after they had frozen in the aftermath of the crackdown on demonstrators in December 2010. Given the background, it took the sides long time to even get used to talking to each other. No doubt, the tragic events in Ukraine and the stabilising role Belarus played in that context helped the process, as many in the EU realised the importance of relations with Minsk.

Following that, contacts, including on top-level, have steadily been on the rise. The EU has earmarked more funds for cooperation projects with Belarus and, most importantly, the EBRD and EIB have become significantly more active in the country. Minsk and Brussels launched new dialogue formats, including on human rights, sectoral cooperation and trade, as well as the Coordination Group mechanism, which addresses the whole spectrum of relations. It is telling that relations with the EU started to get

highly positive coverage in Belarusian media and, according to a recent survey, only about 10% of the Belarusians hold a negative attitude towards the EU (which is lower than in other Eastern Partnership countries).

> However, quantity has not yet transformed into quality in Belarus-EU relations.

Belarus remains the EU's only neighbour without a framework agreement. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed back in 1995, but it never made it through the ratification procedure by EU member states. Minsk keeps calling on Brussels to open negotiations on either another PCA or an agreement of a new generation (like, for example, the one between the EU and Armenia). At the moment, Brussels seems reluctant to give this topic any serious consideration.

Moreover, Belarus and the EU have got stuck in talks on other, arguably less complicated, documents. Namely, the partnership priorities agreement (which is supposed to give bilateral cooperation a better structure and pave the way for a future framework agreement) and the visa facilitation agreement (which comes in package with the readmission agreement). Whereas, after some bumpy and long negotiations, the sides are ready to sign the latter document, the former looks more problematic. Lithuania has blocked it unilaterally due to its critical stance on the Belarusian nuclear power plant under construction. Ostensibly, Vilnius wants Belarus to comply with a number of extra requirements to ensure the NPP's security. But, in fact, the already former Lithuanian President Dalya Gribauskaite recently went on record as saying that her government would accept nothing less than the full closure of the NPP project. Needless to say, that no sensible negotiations are possible while the Lithuanian approach remains unchanged. Statements by the new Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda give hope that under his leadership a more constructive dialogue might be possible between the neighbours.

The situation when one member state simply blocks further progress in Belarus-EU relations causes frustration in Minsk and empowers those who argue against rapprochement with the EU and the West in general. Combined with little palpable advances in the economic cooperation, it stresses the fundamental problem between Minsk and Brussels – lack of mutual trust, which is a natural repercussion of the almost two decades of conflictual relations. Because of it, Minsk refrains from taking some obvious steps that Brussels and other EU capitals insist on. For example, it hesitates to

introduce a moratorium on death penalty, assuming that once the moratorium is there, the EU will necessarily put out some other demand without offering anything valuable to Minsk.

What are Belarus's realistic options?

Realistically, all that Belarus can do to survive as a sovereign actor in times of heightened international tensions and multiple issues with all its partners is to continue muddling through. What does it mean in more conceptual terms?

Belarus's international environment is not shaped by two or more regional powers with fixed preferences, which Minsk could use as a stable coordinate system for manouevring. Rather, it is shaped by overwhelming uncertainties and risks, which manifest themselves almost everywhere: in Belarus's bilateral relations with each regional power, in relations between the regional powers themselves and, ultimately, in the currently tumultuous transformation of the international order. Hence, in the first place Minsk has to tackle those risks and uncertainties so that to stay afloat under any hypothetical development. And that is what hedging is about.

> Hedging is a complex and nonorthodox set of foreign policy behaviour aimed at reducing and spreading risk, as well as maximizing possible benefits in relations with all external actors.

Diversification is an important element of hedging – therefore, Minsk will continue making efforts to engage the EU, as well as the USA and China. But only to an extent that diversification does not create new risks.

Neutralism is another part of the hedging portfolio, which helps to keep various options available. For Belarus, this is also a potential way of minimizing regional tensions (which Belarus's own security is so vulnerable to), as it has already demonstrated by applying situational neutrality to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Had it not been for Belarusian situational neutrality, the 'security spiral' in Eastern Europe would have already reached far more dangerous levels.

Yet, such neutralism-leaning actions can quickly get in conflict with Belarus's commitment within the defence alliance with Russia. So Minsk has to look for non-linear ways of performing a neutral function where and when it can contribute to regional stability, while simultaneously delivering on its alliance commitments with Russia. This is, obviously, an extremely unconventional model, but so is the overall situation in Eastern Europe and in European security at large.

Importantly, such a non-linear model can work only if all regional actors have something to gain from it. In other words, if the model turns Belarus into a success story of East European security (in contrast to what has been the case with Georgia and Ukraine). And this is exactly what Minsk is looking for.

[1] Author's interviews in Moscow, conducted in January, April and May 2019.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations