Can Belarus Become a Success Story of European Security?

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Summary

Western observers continue to misread Belarus – and to overlook the strengthened diplomatic and security roles it could play in eastern Europe

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Recent reports of renewed tensions between Russia and Belarus have featured the alarming idea that Moscow might be gearing up to annex its neighbour in the way it did with Crimea in 2014.

The latest set of disputes between the two allies is indeed more serious than their previous conflicts. But, if anything, its media coverage demonstrates how little the West knows about Belarus, a place which has long been a black hole on the European political map. For instance, Alexander Lukashenko's remarks last week that he and Vladimir Putin "could unite tomorrow" are a case in point. His words followed a statement that Belarus's "sovereignty is sacred", yet they disorientated foreign observers. Those more familiar with this ritual know that it is just part of a usual hedging in relations with Moscow.

In the past this hedging, as with Belarus-Russia relations in general, rarely won much attention in the West. But now that European security is in its worst shape in three decades, Belarus somewhat unexpectedly "has the chance to play the key critical role in security and stability in Europe", as former commander of the United States Army Europe, General Ben Hodges, put it recently.

Belarus and Russia have been allies since the mid-1990s. In 1999, they signed the Union State treaty and agreed to stay sovereign while coordinating economic and foreign and security policies. The two countries are now members of another integration project – the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

> But Minsk and Moscow have quite different understandings about what it means to be allies.

Like other small states, Belarus joins integration blocs primarily with a view to enmeshing the larger members of the bloc into agreed legal and institutional commitments. It does this in the hope and expectation that this will make the bigger power's behaviour predictable, institutionalise the smaller state's equal say over common decisions, and ensure fair competition and access to larger markets. In this sense, Belarus considers integration with Russia a way to strengthen its sovereignty by enhancing predictability.

For its part, Russia sees integration through a purely geopolitical lens – as a tool to strengthen its position on the international stage rather than as a stable framework in which to conduct relations with allies. Moscow wants to preserve full freedom of unilateral action in both economic and international affairs and not to be restricted by intergovernmental or supranational institutions.

Lately, this contradiction has become increasingly obvious.

Current bilateral relations are dominated by the question of the so-called "oil tax manoeuvre" in Russia. Moscow is planning to gradually abolish oil export levies and replace them with a mineral extraction tax. The problem is that Russia provides budgetary support to its oil refineries to compensate for their losses from the manoeuvre. Minsk argues that the move will violate the principle of fair competition and contradict the spirit of the EAEU; but in response Russia has offered merely deeper integration within the Union State. This has caused suspicion in Belarus that Russia is trying to shape integration in its own favour and limit its ally's sovereignty.

Politically, the dispute is driven by another factor.

On Crimea and Donbas, as well as in other theatres of confrontation with the West, Russia takes unilateral action and then expects its ally to support them. However, Belarus insists that foreign policy coordination should be about the joint development of decisions, not about Minsk simply following Moscow's lead.

Today, this principle is particularly sensitive for Belarus.

> Becoming part of the Russian-Western confrontation is against the country's core interests, as, in the end, it is Belarus that will suffer the most.

In the worst-case scenario – a military conflict between NATO and Russia – Belarusian territory will inevitably become a battleground, as has happened many times in history.

Belarus has therefore taken a neutral stance in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and tries to promote de-escalation and peace talks. It has also come up with several diplomatic initiatives aimed at enhancing stability and security in Europe. Most importantly, Belarus refused to host a Russian military base in order to not further provoke the growing regional security spiral.

Many Russian officials think (and admit privately) that such behaviour goes against Russia's interests and that Belarus has to stand by Moscow as it experiences increased Western pressures. They have started using economic levers, including the tax manoeuvre issue, to 'tame' their ally.

This is a serious challenge for Minsk. It is also a potential problem for European security.

> If Belarus has no option but to bandwagon with Russia, it will hardly be able to "play the key critical role in security and stability in Europe" envisaged by General Hodges.

Instead, it will become an additional source of political and military threats, primarily to Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states.

However, there is some good news not to overlook here.

Moscow worries more about its relations with the West than it does about Minsk; at least, as long as Belarus has no NATO or European Union aspirations – which is firmly the case. So if Belarus, in contrast to Ukraine or Georgia, were to become a success story of security cooperation, not confrontation, between Russia and the West, it would interest the Kremlin as a possibility to de-escalate Russian-Western tensions and as a plausible model for future security arrangements. It would also strengthen Belarusian sovereignty and make a contribution to stability in the region.

Such an approach could include the following initial elements:

1. **Further strengthening Minsk's status as a "hub for regional diplomacy"** (as coined by secretary general of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Thomas Greminger) and a place for regional security talks that is acceptable for all relevant actors: Russia, Ukraine, the EU, the United States, and China. Topics to be discussed here are already proliferating as regional tensions multiply and because strategic stability is back on the agenda. These issues should be tackled on both official and Track-II levels.

2. **Belarus continuing its current policy of situational neutrality on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict** and on other regional manifestations of the confrontation between Russia and the West. However, given Belarus's defence alliance with Russia, this can only work if no serious build-up of military infrastructure takes place on NATO's eastern flank. Otherwise, Minsk will find it impossible to explain to Moscow why a Belarus hosting peace talks is of more benefit to Russia than a Belarus hosting Russian troops.

3. **Designing advanced cross-border confidence- and security-building measures**based on the measures Belarus has already established bilaterally with Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Such measures will minimise the possibility of military incidents and accidents getting out of control and leading to serious escalations. If successful, they will set a positive example of regional security cooperation, something which is critically needed today.

Such a mission might seem impossible right now. But Belarus is uniquely placed to play the role of a security facilitator in eastern Europe.

Disputes notwithstanding, Minsk remains Moscow's partner and retains a degree of trust with it. The Belarusian government is probably the biggest expert on Russian politics in the world, which is a remarkable asset. At the same time, Belarus has recently improved its relations with the EU and US.

> Further rapprochement requires more effort, but the Zapad 2017 exercises showed how much Belarus's transparency and cooperation is valued in the West, as EU and US officials emphasise privately.

The EU would be a major beneficiary of such a new status for Belarus, since Belarusian success would prevent further destabilisation in its eastern neighbourhood. Such an outcome would be even more valuable as arms control regimes continue to weaken and die, a situation which threatens Europe's strategic interests the most. So the EU would do well by helping Belarus become a success story of European security.

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