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Security in Eastern Europe in 2021: Balkanization of the region

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Summary

The countries of the region have already gone quite far in breaking up Eastern Europe geopolitically, narrowing the foundation for peaceful cooperation and even coexistence, dragging external players into regional disputes, while citing some noble goals. At the same time, the societies and the establishment of the countries in the region are almost universally disinclined to explore the dangers of the unfolding situation and seem to neglect these trends. Drawing an analogy with the situation in the Balkans in the early 20th century would seem increasingly relevant in this context.

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The end of Belarus's "situational neutrality"

The political crisis in the wake of the Belarusian presidential election of 2020 set in motion a slew of well expected processes that lead to the destabilization of the Eastern European region. These importantly include the destruction of the components of Belarus's neutral status. Though limited, this status had been consolidating over the previous few years and had been inconvenient – for opposite reasons – both for Russia and many regional players from the opposing camp. In the region where bloc logic, militarization and confrontation were on the rise, Belarus had refused to follow those trends until the very last moment, and this fact alone challenged the idea that such a policy was inevitable and rational.

The political crisis and waves of sanctions pressure compelled Minsk to get back into the track of the general regional trend for the sake of mere self-preservation, turning into another *frontline state*. However, the de facto blockade of Belarus by the West in a number of dimensions and Minsk's growing dependence on the Kremlin are only formally associated with the forced landing of the *Ryanair* flight in May or the appearance of refugees on Belarus's western border. The country's strategic repositioning had been imminent even without those developments: it stemmed primarily from the logic of political processes in the region, which had emerged a lot earlier.

General security situation

The all-round pressure, which objectively caused Belarus to abandon its neutrality, contributed to the fusion and mutual reinforcement of the centres of regional tension, as the Donbass, Crimea, and Belarus crises started to merge.

The way the ongoing crisis evolves is not reduced to purely strategic and military aspects, but those are very often unreasonably ignored and replaced by discussions of certain humanitarian issues. The region has in fact been short of rhetoric about the need for peace as a basic value. The dismantling of the institutional framework for communication between major world actors continued. Against the backdrop of the withdrawal of both the U.S. and Russia from the Open Skies Treaty (OST) in 2020 and 2021, the level of the relationship between Moscow and NATO went further down a notch.

In this context, the "unfreezing" of the conflict in the east of Ukraine was only logical, albeit without any significant changes in its course and balance of power. When it comes to ceasefire, the situation with maintaining it began to deteriorate in late January. Under the circumstances, Russia deployed additional troops on Ukraine's borders, which were withdrawn only in the summer. In the second half of the year, comprehensive ceasefire in the east of Ukraine was not fully restored; the lower intensity conflict simmered and periodically resulted in human casualties. On 1 October, OSCE observers stopped their operations on the Russia–Ukraine border, and on 17 October, the OSCE suspended its entire special monitoring mission in the east of Ukraine.

Securitization and militarization

The crisis on Belarus's border with Poland and Lithuania became a dramatic example of the securitization of the challenges faced by the region. Lithuania introduced emergency measures on 2 July due to additional inflows of migrants. On 7 July, Lithuanian Prime

Minister Ingrida Šimonytė referred to the situation as "*hybrid aggression directed not even against Lithuania, but against the EU*" and announced the decision to send troops to the Lithuania–Belarus border to build barriers. Later on, other European politicians picked up the "hybrid warfare" rhetoric.

On 18 August, the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior claimed that Belarusian border guards had crossed the state border of Lithuania illegally as they were pushing a group of illegal migrants into its territory. In this regard, the Lithuanian side made up its mind to further reinforce border protection.

It was after the serious crisis unfolded on the border with Lithuania that the situation on the Polish border began to escalate. In mid-August, the Polish army began to increase its presence on the border. On 2 September, the Polish government introduced a state of emergency in the border area. Among other things, the move made it impossible for journalists and public organizations to work in the frontier zone.

On 8 October, the Polish side accused Belarusian border guards of firing blanks at Polish military and border guards. The Belarusian side denied all accusations. On 25 October, Minister of National Defence Mariusz Błaszczak said that a total of 10,000 soldiers would be sent to guard the border with Belarus due to refugees' attempts to cross the border by force.

Against the backdrop of border reinforcements by the EU countries, Belarus was putting in place similar arrangements on its border with Ukraine. On 27 September, Lukashenka said that the situation in the neighbouring states was "unfavourable" and their leadership had opted for confrontation with Belarus. He called for paying heed to general defence issues and deployment of foreign troops along the borders of the country, without limiting the scope of activities to the issue of migrants. The head of state focused on Ukraine, which, according to him, is used to "open a new front" targeting Belarus, and must therefore be given close attention. At the same time, Chairman of the State Border Committee Anatol Lappo said that through Belarus's own efforts and a joint programme with Russia to build up the border with Ukraine (in effect since 2016), "*in some of its areas the Ukrainian border has been reinforced even stronger than the Polish border.*"

In March–June 2021, following a number of new resolutions and legal acts, the Security Council of Belarus was expanded. The body was granted additional authority, all the way up to the transfer of presidential powers to the Council in case of incapacity of the

head of state. Securitization of domestic politics continued to be enshrined in the law through the adoption of a few legal acts authorizing the involvement of the army and other security agencies in the resolution of domestic political challenges.

Build-up of forces

Poland became the country to voice the most radical plans to increase its military capabilities. On 28 October, Jarosław Kaczyński, the deputy prime minister responsible for security and defence, submitted a new bill, which envisages doubling of the Polish army from 120,000 to 250,000 personnel. The proposed hikes are attributed to the Russian threat.

Nearly all countries in the region continued to seriously increase their military spending. In early October, it was reported that the Lithuanian government was expecting its defence expenditure to increase by EUR 128 million to 2.05% of the country's GDP in 2022 (up from 2.03% in 2021). This is in line with the agreement between Lithuanian political parties on enhanced military spending, which is projected to reach 2.5% of GDP by 2030. In 2021, the original military budget stood at EUR 1.028 billion, but was eventually increased by EUR 20.7 million.

Much of the deployment effort is focused on Belarus, which is thus made equivalent to Russia in terms of threat. On 11 March 2021, commander of the new 18th Mechanized Division of the Polish Army Jarosław Gromadziński announced a new phase of the deployment of that new unit of the Polish Armed Forces: the 18th Air Defence Regiment, the 18th Artillery Regiment and the 18th Reconnaissance Battalion would be deployed along the eastern border of Poland. On 18 June, President Andrzej Duda endorsed the decision to redeploy the Polish army to the east and said he was satisfied with the establishment of the new 18th Mechanized Division on the Belarusian border.

In the middle of October, it was reported that the Lithuanian command was planning to build a new training centre in Rūdninkai, in the vicinity of the border with Belarus, by 2024. Given the unfailing involvement of foreign military in almost every relatively big project of the Lithuanian army, they will probably be deployed at the new border facility as well. Finally, on 28 June, the multinational headquarters of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) task force deployed in Latvia was officially opened in Riga. The new HQ became the largest project of the Canadian Army abroad over the past few decades (EUR 12.2 million).

At the end of October, Russia declared its plans to increase its military expenditure by 2024. In 2022, it is expected to reach EUR 42.4 billion (14.8% of the budget), in 2023 – EUR 42.96 billion (14.5%), and in 2024 – EUR 46.04 billion (15.2%). In 2021, defence spending is planned to account for 14.4% of the budget.

Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that about 20 new military units would be formed in the Western Military District of Russia by the end of the year. In June, some facts were reported testifying to the expansion of Russian troops in the country's western regions. In early September, many regions of Russia, including those western, unexpectedly started campaigning and recruiting to the Combat Army Reserve of the Country (BARS), which implies regular voluntary service. The first BARS units were assembled as early as in September.

In October, the Ukrainian government adopted the state budget for the year 2022, which provides for record-high security and defence expenditure – 5.95% of GDP (up from 5.92% in 2021 and 5.45% in 2020). In addition to budget spending on defence, Kyiv hopes to benefit from aid from France, the UK and the U.S. In July, Ukraine passed the law "On the strength of the Armed Forces", which authorized an increase in the maximum size of the army by 11,000 servicemen (to 261,000). In early October, Commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine for Territorial Defence Anatoliy Barhylevych announced that 25 territorial defence brigades had been created. Kyiv's growing reliance on military relations with Washington and Brussels is especially notable.

Minsk's strategic repositioning

Amid growing confrontation with the West, the Belarusian leadership has seriously modified its political platform on security issues. On 11 February 2021, Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei told the All-Belarusian People's Assembly that "*Belarus's commitment to neutrality enshrined in the Constitution does not correspond to the current situation.*" Head of the Main Operative Department of the Armed Forces of Belarus Pavel Muraveika made a similar comment: "*Increased military activities near our borders, double standards, unprecedented pressure and sanctions objectively put obstacles to our ambition for neutrality... As of today, there is still no framework to ensure the neutral status of our country. Until such a framework has been ensured, the choice of collective defence as a strategic guideline is indispensable and needs to be enshrined in the Constitution.*"

This would de facto formalize the rapid convergence of Belarus and Russia in the military sector, which is already a reality. Over a period of less than 12 months after the presidential election of 2020 the geopolitical revolution brought about unprecedented

integration of the Belarusian army into Russia's security architecture. Arms procurement throughout 2020–2021, improved access of the Russian army and security agencies to the territory of Belarus, as well as the likely plans to deploy troops on the border with Ukraine are just a few examples to illustrate the shift.

According to plans for the academic year 2021, the number of joint activities with the Russian military has increased to 160 from 120 in 2020. The Defence Ministries of Belarus and Russia signed an unparalleled five-year strategic partnership program. In March 2021, three new joint training centres were added to the agenda: an air force and air defence centre in the Hrodna region (it turned out later that two centres were supposed to be established); a training and combat centre for land forces in Nizhny Novgorod of Russia, and a Baltic Fleet centre in the Kaliningrad region of Russia to train Belarusian units at the base of the Russian Marines. In September, aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces arrived in Belarus to become part of the air force and air defence training centre. They immediately went on joint combat alert patrols. At the same time, Russian anti-aircraft gunners started a joint combat alert mission with their Belarusian counterparts in the vicinity of Hrodna.

Exercises

A series of large-scale military exercises were held across the region in response to each other. The West-2021 joint strategic exercise organized on 10-15 September became the highlight of this period. The strategic drills were hosted at 14 training ranges simultaneously in Belarus and Russia. A total of about 200,000 personnel, over 80 airplanes and helicopters, up to 760 pieces of military equipment (including tanks, MLRS and mortars) and up to 15 ships were involved in the exercise, mostly in Russia. Despite the participation of military contingents from Armenia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia, the drills were not perceived as an international exercise. According to the Russian command, the exercise featured the first ever practice of joint operations of a mobile strike echelon with armoured groups of airborne assault and tank battalions. Another notable component of the exercise was the simultaneous practice of airborne insert at night in different areas.

Simultaneously with the onset of West-2021, Poland embarked on the Lynx 21 exercise, involving more than 4,000 soldiers transferred for this purpose to the east of the country. Polish Defence Minister made no secret that the exercise was associated with the Belarusian–Russian manoeuvres. Two thousand soldiers had already been deployed in the area to deal with the inflow of refugees. Also in mid-September, Latvia held the

Namejs 2021 exercise, whereas Lithuania completed the two-week Iron Wolf - 2021 II exercise on the border with Belarus, with the participation of 3,000 soldiers and 1,000 units of equipment from Lithuania, NATO countries and Ukraine.

Immediately after the conclusion of West-2021, Rapid Trident 21, a Ukrainian-led, U.S. Army Europe and Africa assisted annual exercise kicked off (involving 6,000 personnel from 15 countries, who practiced, among others, offensive operations, as well as landing and assault crossing). On 22-30 September, the Combined Efforts–2021 exercise involving representatives of 15 countries was held at the major military training grounds of Ukraine, and also in the water areas of the Black and Azov Seas. Some 12,500 soldiers and more than 600 units of armaments were engaged. The cycle was completed with the exercise of the Black Sea Fleet of Russia on 20 September, involving 20 ships and naval aviation.

Whereas neighbouring NATO countries have long conducted most of their exercises above the battalion level jointly with foreign military, the Belarusian army used to carry out its manoeuvres mostly independently. In the summer and fall of 2021, amid the aggravation of the situation around Belarus, almost every second relatively large exercise of the Belarusian Armed Forces was conducted in cooperation with Russian troops, which became an anomaly.

Bottom line: a few steps away from war?

In 2021, on the back of militarization and the collapse of military transparency arrangements, confrontation in the Eastern European region continued to escalate. This trend is corroborated by the indicators available in the Minsk Barometer regular regional security monitoring (see Diagram 1).The findings of the monitoring prove that the pace of military preparations in the region is increasing and is close to dangerous levels.

> ***Diagram 1.*** *Level of regional tensions according to the Minsk Barometer regional security report. The index reflects the level and quality of military activity along the perimeter of the Belarusian borders. A modified Torino scale is used for the final score.*

Belarus, which had sought for quite a long time to stay beyond these trends, was forced to progressively yield its strategic autonomy to Moscow in 2021. As a consequence, the Belarusian crisis has functionally brought together several pockets of confrontation between Russia and NATO countries.

Drawing an analogy with the situation in the Balkans in the early 20th century would seem increasingly relevant in this context.

The countries of the region have already gone quite far in breaking up Eastern Europe geopolitically, narrowing the foundation for peaceful cooperation and even coexistence, dragging external players into regional disputes, while citing some noble goals. At the same time, the societies and the establishment of the countries in the region are almost universally disinclined to explore the dangers of the unfolding situation and seem to neglect these trends.

Moreover, the logic of “frontline states” is built on exaggerating the significance of threats and securitizing issues that in normal conditions have no connection whatsoever to international security. This is the way for them to obtain the support of influential allies beyond the region, who, however, may not necessarily be interested in the widening of this conflict spiral.

The shifts in the political economy of international relations within Eastern Europe present a particular long-term threat in the context of the above regional security trends. The name of the game is the redirection of transit and other transport and logistics flows that involve the pipeline and seaport infrastructure. All of the region’s countries without exception have been affected. However, in the case of Belarus, the country’s survival as a sovereign state is at stake.

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