

In the Middle of a Clash Zone: Role of Belarus in the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

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Although during the Russian war in Ukraine, Belarus may be qualified as a Russian proxy, paradoxically, it can be as well perceived as a country struggling to save the rest of its independence from Moscow.

Being located exactly on the principal geopolitical axis of Eastern Europe, between Russia and the Collective West (EU plus NATO), Belarus is put before a strategic choice between the two with the space of neutrality dramatically shrinking. Although culturally and historically European, it is a country with post-Soviet political system which makes it incompatible with Western integrational projects. At the same time, neither the society nor the authoritarian president manifest any willingness to renounce sovereignty and become a part of the neo-imperial "Russian World".

Belarus's position in the Russia-Ukraine war is a function of Minsk's relations with Moscow. The weaker Belarus is internally, the more it has to comply with Kremlin's demands for cooperation. The war turns out to play a role of a principal marker of its sovereignty: as long as Lukashenka is able to oppose Putin's demand to take active part in Russian attack, the decision-making autonomy and thus the rest of independence remains and Belarus may be treated as partially-sovereign. Strategically sovereign, yet not economically that forms an interesting case from the point of view of political theory: usually satellites are less independent politically than economically and here, between Russian metropolis and Belorussian colony, the situation is reversed.

Lukashenka stays reluctant to openly support Russia because taking an active part in the war would constitute a critical risk for the stability of the regime both externally (being exposed to a an obvious Ukrainian response) and internally (it is not certain if the army and law-enforcement forces would stay loyal to the president or rather chose for a regime change).

Belarus has absolutely no reason for any kind of conflict with Ukraine and thus, both the elite around Lukashenko, the president himself and the society see no reason for an engagement. For Belarus, there is nothing to win and a lot to potentially lose from a direct conflict with Kiev.

The only reason and incentive to let Russia operate from Belorussian territory is Moscow's coercion resulting from economic dependence that regulates the social situation inside Belarus: if Minsk doesn't agree for this or that Russian demand, Moscow will simply rise the price of oil and gas or close its market for Belorussian exportations, automatically rising tension inside the republic whose economy forms a kind of living museum of Soviet-style etatism (inefficient and having no sense from the point of view of contemporary market-oriented economy).

As a result, the state of Belorussian economy makes it very difficult, not to say impossible to diversify country's foreign policy: Belarus has nothing to offer to Europe, China or any other partner and thus remains dependent on Kremlin that is the only one ready to pay economic price for political benefits offered by Minsk). Russian influence inside Belarus is the price paid for Russia's support of Lukashenka's regime and this price went higher after the 2020 elections that showed the ultimate collapse of his legitimacy everywhere beyond the army, police and bureaucracy – the only remaining factor of its stability is Moscow's support, both financial (to finance the illusion of Belorussian economic miracle) and political (the constant danger of Russia's direct intervention à la Czechoslovakia in 1968).

This last factor (of possible Russian invasion leading to complete suppression of Minsk's decision-making autonomy if not to a formal Anschluss to Russian Federation) is fundamental for Belorussian calculation of its strategy towards external partners: paradoxically enough, it narrows its negotiating position towards Russia, but widens it towards the West: as long as the Russian threat (the possibility that Moscow liquidates Belarus as a formally independent state) stays actual, the West (and especially the immediate and thus potentially the most endangered neighbors: Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) will never put values (democracy and human rights) above their strategic interests (of keeping Belarus in one piece and at least formally independent from Russia), From their point of view, the difference between having Russian tanks in Smolensk or in Brest is strategically fundamental for national security.

For this reason, it is important to notice that although the Russian war in Ukraine confronts Lukashenka with several risks (of which no one is actually of an existential character), it also puts him in a situation favorable for the timely indefinite prolongation of his rule (that would most probably end in the form of internal collapse or the Russian intervention if the war did not begin). That's why, Belarussian regime tries (until now with full and brilliant success) to use

the situation created by the war to strengthen its position simultaneously towards Russia (who fears to lose the last ally) and the West (who fears to lose Belarus as an independent element of international system). All that, at the expense of economic, social and cultural development of the country in the long term, but this is a “question of taste”, an argument of a moral, not strategic nature which hardly applies to Minsk’s calculations.