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Belarusian foreign policy: a time of crisis or rebirth?

Belarus's president, Alexander Lukashenko, [claimed](#) that “a certain moment of truth has arrived” ahead of talks with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in Sochi on 7 February 2020. The ensuing talks yielded little favorable to Minsk and point towards the emergence of a new basis for bilateral relations. It is important to understand the context in which the new regime for those relations is forming and the implications for Belarus's broader foreign policy.

Does the new regime imperil Belarus's traditional maneuvering strategy in international relations? Russian political analyst Fyodor Lukyanov has [long predicted the end](#) of so-called “multi-vector” strategies in post-Soviet Eurasia. In fact, there are reasons to think the opposite may be the case: the current complex geopolitical environment could well foster the birth of more sophisticated and responsive foreign policies among post-Soviet states such as Belarus.

Winter games in Sochi

In Sochi the two presidents agreed to keep last year's gas supply price for 2020 (\$127/thousand cubic meters), although the Belarusian negotiators had earnestly sought a reduced price. More significantly, the Russian side has removed a “linked” compensatory mechanism in place in 2017–2019 through which Belarus received the export tariffs on re-exported oil. In this way, Russia has worsened conditions for Belarus by uncoupling oil and gas negotiations. Moreover, while the oil price for Belarus remains at 83% of the world price, Belarus will still have to pay an extra premium to Russian oil companies. Meanwhile, Belarus's claims for compensation for Russia's “tax maneuver”, as well as for contaminated oil shipments to Belarus in the spring of 2019, [remain unresolved](#).

Russia adopted a harsher policy towards Belarus from 2018. It [dispatched a hands-on ambassador](#) in the form of Mikhail Babich (later replaced) and Russia's prime minister at the time, Dmitry Medvedev, injected impetus into the realization of the Union State in December of that year. The Union State, created by a 1999 Treaty between the two countries, had remained [little more than a piece of paper](#) for twenty years. Following Medvedev's statement, Russia tied continued subsidies for hydrocarbons to deeper and wider economic integration. The limited public information on the 31 "roadmaps" that were being discussed by bureaucrats of both countries throughout 2019 hints at political integration as well, while the media went into something of a frenzy on the issue.

Russian pressure on Belarus mounted throughout 2019. Then everything changed quickly. Having failed to make headway with Belarus on the roadmaps for integration, Russia changed tack. First, it announced in January 2020 a constitutional reform within Russia and, initially, it appeared to put the Union State on ice. That was not the case, however. At the meeting in Sochi, Russia reaffirmed its hard line on Belarus through the revised oil and gas pricing – and, worryingly for Belarus, Russia's ambassador in Minsk [publicly stated](#) that Moscow will continue to pursue closer integration.

The necessary conditions for Belarus's maneuvering

Belarus's foreign policy has often been cast as a case of playing external actors against each other. In government and policy circles a "multi-vector" foreign policy – proclaimed by many countries in post-soviet Eurasia – has been defined as "cooperation and co-habitation with all regional powers,"¹ although in so far as that would seem to be a *sine qua non* of foreign policy, we would hold that "multi-vector" actually describes the consistent maneuvering between such influential players. The context for Belarus's maneuvering between Russia and the West has certainly changed after 2014, but how has this affected the necessary conditions for such a foreign policy?

Perhaps the most obvious condition for a successful multi-vector foreign policy is the continued and divergent interests of the influential players in the region. Ongoing tense relations between the West (mainly the EU

¹ Elena Gnedina, 2015, '«Multi-Vector» Foreign Policies in Europe: Balancing, Bandwagoning or Bargaining?' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67:7, p.1008.

and the US) and Russia were brought into the open by different ambitions for eastern Europe, highlighted by events in Ukraine. The tensions, marked by the introduction of reciprocal economic sanctions, have seen neither side back down from their claims. Russia claims extensive interests and expects to retain a preponderant influence over states such as Belarus. Western actors persist in repeating liberal claims about smaller states' sovereign rights and the right to choose their relationships. Accordingly, there has been no significant change in this condition. On the contrary, it has become more pronounced.

Related to this is a second condition. These external players' interests must be salient enough that they commit time and resources to the region. The actions of both Russia and Western states have demonstrated such a commitment. The interest of the EU towards Belarus was confirmed by the removal of all but a few sanctions on the country in early 2016 (following their suspension in October 2015). Russia's efforts to deepen integration in the framework of the Union State are far more ambitious and can be interpreted as a demand for choosing allegiance. Yauheni Preiherman has rightly [pointed out](#) that Lukyanov affirms the end of multi-vector foreign policies by using different arguments in 2014 and 2019. While in the later interview, he [underlines the diminishing interest](#) of Russia and the EU in having a monopoly in the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia, his [earlier argument](#) that the tensions are, on the contrary, exacerbating corresponds better to the recent situation in Russian – Belarus relations: the more determined Russia has been, the keener the EU and US response.

The reintroduction of harsh political and economic sanctions by the EU and US would be disabling for official Minsk. In the period from late 2010–2014, bookended by a violent dispersal of protests in the evening of the December 2010 presidential election and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities found themselves isolated by the West and pushed into Russia's embrace. In the context of commercial conflicts with Russia, Belarus struggled to find leverage. From 2014 onwards, both the EU and US have [adapted](#) their foreign policies towards Belarus so as to be less centered on human rights and more focused on common security and economic interests.

An additional external condition is Russia's ability to support Belarus's outdated economic model. Economic crisis is [forcing Russia](#) to reduce subsidies to allies such as Belarus. The relative importance of this condition depends on the Belarusian authorities' willingness to adapt; the more flexible Belarus becomes, the less significant will be the condition. Still, the indications are that Russia remains capable and willing to subsidize the Belarusian economy for the foreseeable future.

A final, necessary condition is internal to Belarus: its continued economic autonomy. Without this, Belarusian sovereignty would be massively undermined. Belarus already yields some of its economic sovereignty through participating in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. However, if the authorities sign the 31 roadmaps for the realization of the Treaty of the Creation of the Union State, this would mean the definite loss of economic autonomy. Criticizing Russia's integration plans, Lukashenko [recently said](#): "This is not integration! It is incorporation! I will never go there." So long as Lukashenko keeps his word, Belarus's foreign policy will be forced to find new avenues and new directions will most likely open up.

Since 2014 these background conditions have reconfigured themselves. Political ties between Belarus and the West have become friendlier, while Russian pressures on Belarus have increased. In some regards, the situation is the inverse of relations in the period 2011–2014.

Unintended consequences for Russia

The more Russia squeezes Belarus, the more innovative Belarus is becoming in its foreign policy. Prior to 2014, many politicians in Western Europe could be forgiven for largely ignoring Belarus. Since then Belarus has taken its seat at foreign affairs tables. This can be explained, *inter alia*, by renewed trade opportunities after the lifting of Western sanctions, steps towards eased visa requirements between Belarus and the EU, and Minsk's active efforts to make its position known on the Ukraine conflict.

In part these innovations reflect the growing opportunities for the Belarusian authorities. Over the past two decades, Lukashenko has paid "lip service" to the Union State. The domestic popularity in Belarus of "brotherly" relations with Russia meant that he would not want to be seen to damage those relations for the sake of a revised foreign policy. Public opinion in Belarus is presently shifting in a direction unfavorable to Russia. Polling data from the Belarusian Analytical Workroom [reveals that support](#) among Belarusians for integration with Russia fell from 60% to 40% across 2019, and support for closer ties with the EU rose from 20% to 32%.

This does not mean that a reorientation of Belarus's foreign policy away from Russia is in sight – nor that it should be expected in the foreseeable future. The difficulties in the bilateral relationship should not be overstated: Russia has not completely abolished subsidies and Lukashenko was still offered a preferential tariff for gas.

Other economic benefits such as the preferential access to the Russian market are not under threat all the while Belarus remains in the Eurasian Economic Union.

Moreover, there is no prospect of Belarus acceding to the EU and the deepening of relations with Brussels will continue to be based on democratic conditionality. Besides, following the signing of a visa facilitation agreement in January 2020 (ending negotiations that were first proposed by the EU a decade ago) it's not immediately clear what the next step is for EU-Belarus relations. The EU's foreign policy is currently marked by a "wait and see" attitude towards Belarus in the context of the uncertainty surrounding the Belarus–Russia integration process, and with an eye on the government's conduct during the forthcoming presidential election. US foreign policy towards Belarus is [in a more proactive mode](#) and more pragmatic than that of the EU. The recent visit by US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, part of his wider tour of post-Soviet countries, [saw declarations](#) supportive of Belarus's independence from Russia. The prospects for cooperation with the US are unclear and could shift depending who wins the US presidential election in November.

And, too often, the Belarusian authorities do not help themselves. The reluctance to reform the economy for the sake of preserving the authoritarian political regime limits the prospects for economic diversification and growth. Belarus's only option is to obtain funds from foreign partners by maneuvering between the influential players in the region. With a presidential election due in August this year, there are already signs that shoring up the regime will trump gestures to Western partners. Kirill Rudy, the darling of the liberals a few years ago before he was sent to serve as Belarus's ambassador to China, no longer has a job as of last month.

If we adopt Elena Gnedina's description of "multi-vector foreign policies" as a negotiation strategy that involves maneuvering, we cannot see any imminent end of such behavior in the case of Belarus. There has been no drastic change in the conditions needed to maneuver. *A contrario*, we can observe that Ukraine's foreign policy - despite concerted efforts to shift its political allegiance since the Euromaidan protests of 2013–14 - still oscillates between Russia and the West, considering its geographic position and the economic situation in the country. As Gnedina argues, "even after the 2014–2015 tensions between Ukraine and Russia, Ukraine continued to look for ways to minimize the disruption of its relations with Russia along multiple dimensions such as trade, travel arrangements and energy links." Perhaps the more relevant point is that Ukraine was not tempted into a *volte face* on its ties with the EU in the face of Russia's pressure.

The rebirth of Belarusian foreign policy?

In so far as Belarus has begun to seriously develop its foreign policy, this can hardly have been an outcome Russia wanted. We already see a growing pursuit of nation-building activities by Minsk. The goal of these policies is to underscore Belarus's autonomy from Russia.

Lukashenko, *bat'ka*, recognizes the opportunity to create a legacy as father of the nation. This can be seen in the politics of historical memory: the presentation of the country's past in school textbooks has changed over recent years and given greater emphasis to periods outside of Russian rule.² It can further be seen in the weakening of repressions against private initiatives supporting the Belarusian language, and in the [changing of state symbols](#) that emphasizes the separateness from Russia. The state crest, introduced early in Lukashenko's rule and based on the equivalent emblem from the Soviet era, currently displays a globe centered on the former USSR. Belarus could have rotated the globe at any time in the past two-and-a-half decades to center on Belarus and, while ever so subtle, the timing of the intended change has understandably caught political observers' attention.

Indeed, Belarus's changes are incremental and discreet enough to be missed by Western partners, but necessarily such so as not to compromise the existing benefits of – and continued reliance on – cooperation with Russia. And yet the presidential discourse will still affirm the brotherly ties (at least when Lukashenko is talking to Russians!). With no economic reforms in sight that would compromise the political model, the authorities will most likely continue their efforts to recover low prices for hydrocarbons and, while that might seem a foolhardy policy, opportunities will present themselves. As Putin attempts to codify the “Soviet victory” in the Second World War in Russia's new constitution, he will keenly watch Belarusian rhetoric as they approach the forthcoming celebration of the common victory. At the same time, with a new European Commission and Parliament as of 2019, both seeking to make their mark in EU foreign policy, Belarus will have opportunities for further innovations in its relations with the EU.

² See the [article of Aliaksei Lastouski](#) on the edition of new history textbooks in 2017–2018.