

# Belarus Refuses To Support Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

At a meeting of presidents of the Customs Union on 5 March, Putin desperately tried to gain support on for Russia's invasion of Ukraine from his closest allies, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

All his efforts, it would seem, appear to be in vain, as neither Lukashenka nor Nazarbaev publicly voiced support for Russia's aggression in Crimea. For both individuals, it became a dangerous precedent which showed the true nature of Russian politics in the post-Soviet space.

Now, the Belarusian authorities are attempting to re-launch their cooperation with the EU and preparing to host the Ice Hockey World Championship, they know full well that any involvement in the crisis in Ukraine could destroy their painfully reconstructed relations with the West.□

## **Lukashenka's Thoughts on the Crisis in Ukraine**

Aliaksandar Lukashenka first mentioned the Euromaidan protests on 21 January at a meeting with Belarusian media. "It is a nightmare, a catastrophe. As soon as the president's children engage in business and his mistresses start to wear crowns – expect trouble," he said, describing the corruption in Ukraine prior to the revolution.

A month later, Lukashenka spoke about Ukraine during an address to the security forces on Belarus' Armed Forces Day, 23 February. Here, he explained Belarus' position on the future of Ukrainian lands. "They have their own problems. Maidan is not new to us. This is not the first time it happened and you know, I still have good relationship with the original leaders of Maidan, Yushchenko and others...We have a singular view of Ukraine. It should be integral, nobody should

divide this great country.”

Lukashenka also compared the Ukrainian Maidan with the [19 December 2010 protests](#) in Minsk and assured Belarusians that Maidan was impossible here. “We did not steal anything, nor have we acquired any luxuries at the expense of others. In Ukraine, they drove people to a terrible state, and people decided: it could not get any worse than this anyways.” He stressed that in Belarus, the very capable armed forces and police will ensure order is upheld and prevent anarchy and a crisis like in Ukraine.

In a telephone conversation on 4 March Lukashenka assured Ukrainian ex-President Leonid Kuchma of his support of Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

### **Foreign Minister Makej Tours the EU**

Belarusian Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makej](#) became the other official who made public comments on the situation in Ukraine. At the end of February he visited Latvia and Lithuania, preparing for a new rapprochement with the EU and began discussing the prospects for renewed cooperation.

At the meeting with Latvian Foreign Minister in Riga on 27 February, Makej said that Belarus had already formulated several issues for the agenda of Riga Summit of Eastern Partnership in 2015.

Speaking about Ukraine, Makej mentioned the close economic and cultural ties Belarus had with Ukraine, called the events a tragedy and stated that Belarus supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

On 1 March, Makej gave an interview to the Baltic News Service, where he again explained Belarus' official stance. According to him, the victory of Euromaidan is not the end of the struggle, and Belarus will keep on observing how things develop. And despite the mess, Belarus will remain in

contact with the new Ukrainian government.

### **Ukraine on Belarusian TV**

Despite the very reserved and even pro-Ukrainian comments made by Belarusian senior officials about the crisis, some of Belarusian TV channels featured Russia-style propaganda tales.

ONT channel focused on the economic crisis in Kiev, where people are snatching up all the products in stores and huge queues are appearing near cash machines, as everyone frantically lines up in an attempt to withdraw their money. It also criticised an attempt to reduce the status of Russian language.

The channel STV showed the events in Eastern Ukraine in a style typical of Russian propaganda. It accused Maidan radicals of violating the rights of Russophones and threatening their security. It also repeated information on the alleged 700,000 refugees from Ukraine that had left the country in the previous months.

Meanwhile, Belarus 1 channel simply mentioned that the events did indeed occur in Ukraine, though did not bother to provide any detailed coverage. This, in effect, means that no order was given to support or ignore Russian intervention. What Belarusian TV did have to make clear in their broadcasts was that anti-government protests lead to anarchy, regardless of the country, and they always have and always will.

### **Customs Union Discusses Ukraine**

On 5 March, the three presidents of Customs Union attended the meeting of the High Eurasian Economic Council. Vladimir Putin put the economic issues of Ukraine crisis on the agenda, saying Customs Union needs to protect its economy from Ukrainian unrest and develop new approaches to cooperation with Ukraine.

However, Lukashenka appeared more concerned with remaining duty exemptions, which impede the building of a real economic union. For Lukashenka, the issue of equal prices for hydrocarbons remains essential in the union, and that is what Russia does not want to concede.

Nazarbaev in his speech focused on technical issues of the union building and did not publicly express any political concerns. So, neither Lukashenka nor Nazarbaev voiced support of Putin's invasion. And it is quite clear why.

### **Abandoned Putin**

Russia's invasion of Crimea concerns Kazakhstan, which also has regions with large ethnic Russian populations. Therefore the reaction of Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan was neutral and urged all parties to maintain a balanced, objective and responsible approach towards the situation.

For Belarus, situation seems even more complicated. Russia, as Belarus' main political and military ally as well as its main financial supporter, considers Belarus within its sphere of interest, perhaps even more so than it does with Ukraine. And deployment of Russian troops in case Mr. Putin does not like Lukashenka's behaviour indeed frightens Belarusian leader.

At the same time, the current foreign policy priorities make any anti-western moves highly undesirable for Belarus. As the country recently started a new period of rapprochement with the West, any support of Russian aggression can destroy any potential for a relaunch of a constructive Belarusian-Western dialogue.

Another threat for the regime, coming from support of Russian intervention, is the fate of [Ice Hockey World Championship](#) that will take place this May in Belarus. A pro-Russian position from Belarus in the current conflict could lead to a boycott of the championship games, which Belarusian authorities consider as a major international

breakthrough in recent years.□

At the moment, Lukashenka looks quite a brave politician. Despite pressure from Russia, for years he has been stubbornly refusing to recognise independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – two breakaway Georgian provinces. These days he again shows that Belarus has its own voice in international affairs.

In such a situation, Vladimir Putin looks indeed isolated. Even his closest allies cannot stand such an open and groundless aggression.