

# By Winning Crimea, Russia Can Lose Belarus

On 7 March, Ukrainian [espresso.tv](#) reported that Belarus refused to send observers to the Crimean referendum. This is not the first time that the Belarusian authorities have disobeyed Russia, because the interests of Minsk and Moscow are in opposition to one another on several key issues.

Lukashenka will not support the precedent set by the Kremlin's invasion of other countries in the name of protecting the interests of its Russian-speaking people. The Belarusian authorities seem reluctant to lose credibility in the eyes of its Baltic neighbours, their main advocates in the West.

Moreover, Russia will lose tremendous sums of money as a result of the Crimea invasion. At some point there may not be enough money for Belarus, Abkhazia, Transnistria and other regimes it supports. This scenario becomes even more likely if oil prices will fall, particularly if Western powers will facilitate it.

## Et tu, Brute?

On 5 March, [Lukashenka](#) and Nazarbayev [refused to support](#) the actions of Vladimir Putin in Crimea. This once again testified to the fact that the presidents of Belarus and Kazakhstan do not see themselves as vassals of the Kremlin. Lukashenka's stance shows that Belarus' foreign policy remains guided by its own interests, not Russian ones. And at the moment, it is in Belarus' interest to support Ukraine, not Russia.

By refusing to send its own observers to Crimea proves that even for Putin's closest allies, his actions look like overkill. Belarus and Kazakhstan became seriously concerned that the Kremlin may one day want to "protect the Russian-

speaking populations" of their respective countries. By refusing to support Putin in Crimea, Lukashenka is protecting his own interests and borders.

Belarusian authorities also intensified their efforts to rebuild relations with the West. On 1 March, Uladzimir Makej successfully completed his official visit to Lithuania. If Lukashenka's regime supports Putin, it will lose credibility in the eyes of Lithuania and Latvia, countries that are closely watching the developments in Ukraine. If Lukashenka supports Russia in Ukraine, what would prevent him from supporting the same actions, if they take place in the Baltic nations in the future?

This is not the first time Aliaksandr Lukashenka has challenged Putin on the international arena. The non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has become one of the most famous examples. Lukashenka repeatedly promised Putin to recognise independence of these territories, but he was always able to find a new way to hold out, as he was never truly contemplating recognising them.

The Belarusian authorities have managed to preserve their geopolitical flexibility and even earn money from it. Belarus has become a mediator in economic and transport relations between Russia and Georgia. Belarusian Airlines flights between Minsk and Tbilisi are always full of Georgians going to and from Russia, particularly when there were no direct flights between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Lukashenka's regime also continues to try to find new partners to balance the influence of Russia on Belarus. Belarusian authorities have persistently maintained their relationship with [China](#). On 4 March, Uladzimir Makej and Chen Guoping, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, met in Minsk.

Military relations, production of automobiles, and [Chinese](#)

[energy projects](#) irritate the Kremlin, but give Belarus a cushion, if only superficially, in case of a serious conflict arising with Russia. Likewise, Belarus has pursued its own interests developing relations with Venezuela, with [oil imports](#) from Latin America becoming the biggest challenge to the region's energy dependence on Russia.

### **Common Interests**

However, Belarus still firmly remains in Russia's camp. Russia and Belarus often vote the same way in international organisations such as the United Nations or the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. However, this not just the result of Minsk's economic dependence on Moscow, but also because of their perceived shared interests.

Both countries despise democracy and human rights and would like to see the world with more than one centre of decision-making. Today these countries continue to support Bashar al-Assad, as both have had good economic relations with Syria in the past.

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and Russia often hold consultations with one another, with the most recent discussions between the parties took place on 6 March. Although Minsk, because of the asymmetric nature of their relations, can hardly affect Moscow's position on specific issues. Also, the ministries have signed several treaties which demonstrate their closeness. For example, citizens of Belarus, in the absence of its own embassy in a foreign country can always contact the Embassy of Russia.

### **Diplomatic Elite**

Belarusian diplomats seem to be the least bound to Russia. The heads of other ministries almost never meet with their counterparts from the West and communicate only with their Russian colleagues. While many top officials from the security forces have studied in Russia, only one person among the

senior staff of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry was educated in Russia.

Moreover, [Uladzimir Makiej](#) graduated from the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria and Minsk State Linguistic University. [Valiancin Rybakoŭ](#), MFA Deputy Minister, completed a training course at the Foreign Service Institute of the US State Department, a rare case for the Belarusian elite. Unlike most of their colleagues from other ministries, Belarusian diplomats are able to speak the Belarusian language fluently.

### **Small Window of Opportunity**

Although the Belarusian authorities have preserved the possibility of an independent foreign policy, Russian pressure is sure to increase in the coming days. Its [economic](#) and [energy](#) dependence, as well as the various [integration processes](#) already in the works, make Belarus less flexible. Although today Lukashenka does not look like a Russian puppet, his position in relations with the Kremlin can only become but weaker given the current dynamics at play.

Russia is gradually increasing its leverage over Belarus, including demanding the sale of its state enterprises. This will also affect Belarusian foreign policy. Although Lukashenka conducts an independent policy in its relations with [Ukraine](#), China or Azerbaijan, these relations do not guarantee the healthy functioning of the Belarusian economy. Russia does.

Balancing between the West and Russia in the shadow of what many dubbed as new Cold War becomes an increasingly difficult task for Belarus. The Belarusian authorities will pay for not supporting Russia on the Crimea issue, as the Kremlin will hardly forget this diplomatic slight. For as long as Russia has resources, it will invest them in speeding up Eurasian integration until Belarus loses its sovereignty altogether.

The Eurasian integration promoted by Russia is no longer a voluntary process. Russia will have to stop bullying its neighbours and supporting undemocratic regimes if following the occupation of Crimea the health of its economy weakens and assertiveness of the rest of the world strengthens.