

Failure of Minsk-2 and the Belarusian Presidential Election

Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka's role as a mediator in the conflict in Ukraine has received high praise from European officials and partially ended the isolation of the republic. Recently the government has taken part in several high-level events, most notably the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga on 21-22 May.

But the potential impact of the collapse of the Minsk-2 agreement on Lukashenka's popularity three months before the presidential election in October has received little attention. A related question is: where do residents of Belarus stand on various issues of the conflict, which has effectively severed relations between its two neighbours?

Minsk-2 on Shaky Ground

Minsk-2 (February 2015) featured a consolidation of terms reached at the earlier Minsk-1 (the Minsk Protocol) agreement in September 2014, which in turn derived from a 15-point peace plan drafted by Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko. It required a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front, preparation for local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk, and monitoring by the OSCE.

In addition to Lukashenka, the presidents of France and Germany initiated Minsk-2, and thus it took on the appearance of a common European effort to stop the war. In Minsk, Lukashenka acted as mediator. After the signing, but before its measures took effect, the separatists mounted a sustained and successful campaign to capture the town of Debaltseve,

following their takeover of the remains on Donetsk airport.

The past four months have seen both sporadic and heavy conflict, which approaches once again a full-scale war. Ukraine argues that Russia has committed up to 12,000 troops on the scene, some from the Caucasus and Central Asia. After Ukraine retook the occupied territories, it has seized advanced weaponry produced in Russia, including tanks and artillery. Ukraine in turn has continued to shell the city of Donetsk. The OSCE has neither the numbers nor the authority to monitor the zone, and deception of the monitors is common. Minsk-2 is on the brink of failure.

Outlook of Belarusians in Summer 2015

Currently, despite a struggling economy, Lukashenka should win the election, though his popularity has taken a dip because of concerns over rising prices and unemployment. The recent June poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI) indicates that 37.4% of those polled would vote for the incumbent president if he runs, as expected, for a fifth time, and 20.6% for a candidate from the democratic opposition. But individually no member of that opposition is polling more than 5%. The highest is Mikalai Statkevich, who is currently in prison.

The same poll, however, contains interesting insights into popular views on international affairs. A majority of respondents would not want to join either the European Union or a merged state with Russia. On the other hand, appraising the actions of state leaders, the highest levels of approval went to Vladimir Putin (60%), Nursultan Nazarbayev (43.7%), Xi Jinping of China (35.4%), and Angela Merkel (34.6%). Least favoured were President Barack Obama of the United States ((13.5%) and Petro Poroshenko (10.1%). The inescapable conclusion is that Belarusians prefer authoritarian leaders to

democrats.

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Regarding attitudes to Russia, some 39% supported the concept of the “Russian world,” 62.3% considered the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 as the rightful return of Russian lands, and almost half thought that the people of “Novorossiia” have the right to self-government. In the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, Belarusian sentiment is overwhelmingly on the Russian side. In the event of a Russian invasion of Belarus, only 18.7% of those polled would take up arms in defence of their country, and 52.9% would adjust to the new situation. Still, currently over 60% consider Lukashenka’s policy toward the conflict as the right one, reflecting, as the poll demonstrates, the pervasive power of Russian Television.

Lukashenka: Hobson’s Choice?

NISEPI polls have consistently been quite accurate. Thus if one takes these results at face value, respondents would prefer to remain out of the conflict, but nonetheless sympathise with Russia. If hostilities escalate, the options for the president may be limited. Moreover, the failure of Minsk-2 would undermine his image of a “peacemaker,” and perhaps drag Belarus into the conflict as a base for Russian weapons and servicemen. In this respect, Lukashenka, limited by his own past ardently pro-Russian policies and commitments, might feel compelled to join forces with Putin in order to retain the support of the electorate.

The poll’s dismissive attitude toward Poroshenko merits comment. His popularity is falling in Ukraine too but remains respectable, in contrast to that of his Prime Minister Arsenii Yatseniuk. Yet Poroshenko has elevated as governor of Odesa

region (and according to some reports potentially the next Prime Minister) the flamboyant former president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, not only an implacable opponent of Putin, but also perhaps the closest friend of Lukashenka in Europe. Lukashenka's past neutrality on the conflict reflects his dilemmas: to betray friends like Saakashvili or antagonise Putin?

Lukashenka likely hopes some semblance of Minsk-2 remains in place until October. But if, as seems probable, it collapses before then—the separatists usually favour summer campaigns—he will need to reevaluate the situation promptly and with intricate care. Neutrality may no longer be an option, and the Russian president applies pressure for deeper commitment to a common struggle with the West and “neo-Nazi” Ukraine. But that choice (for Russia) would negate newly built ties with Europe as well as potential reductions of sanctions by the EU and United States. A Catch-22 situation prevails.

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