

Wars in Syria and Ukraine Make Belarus More Important

After the Turkish downing of a Russian aircraft in Syria last month, Minsk refused to join Moscow in its accusations and recriminations against Ankara. It just lamented what happened between its “Russian ally” and “friendly Turkey.” Needless to say Minsk has also not supported any of the Russians sanctions imposed on Turkey.

Belarusian state media openly doubt Moscow's version of what is going on in Syria. That has not gone unnoticed in the Kremlin. Evgeny Satanovski, a political commentator close to the Russian government, puts Belarus alongside Qatar and Turkey as a country which opposes Russia's policies.

Why does Minsk risk challenging Moscow again? It calculates that the new international situation and, above all, the changed geopolitical significance of Belarus enables Minsk to play its own games. After all, Belarus has improved its relations with the West and after the Russo-Turkish war of words it has become the safest route for gas transit between Russia and the EU.

Pro-Western Friends of Minsk in the Middle East

Actually, Minsk has undertaken its own political line in regards the Middle East over the past decade. Since the early 2010s, it [shifted its focus](#) away from the radical regimes of Iran, Syria and Libya to conservative regimes allied with the West.

At the height of the Syrian civil war Minsk welcomed the then Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu

The Belarusian regime focused its attention on Qatar, the UAE, Oman and also Turkey. At the height of the unrest in Libya, leading to the toppling of an old Belarusian partner, Muammar Qadhafi, Lukashenka headed in summer 2011 for the country which stood behind the Libyan uprising, Qatar. At the height of the Syrian civil war [Minsk welcomed](#) in spring 2013, the nemesis of the Kremlin and Damascus, then Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and later sent high-level officials to meet Davutoglu in Ankara.

Minsk's activities in recent months are merely a less spectacular continuation of existing diplomacy. In the absence of serious contacts [with Tehran](#), or Damascus the Belarusian government preferred deals with their opponents.

On Sunday, the French web-site, Intelligence Online, reported that Moscow had to step in and halt [Minsk selling](#) the UAE some military aircraft. These would be used to train against Russian and Iranian airforces which use similar types of planes. This is illustrated by the speaker of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament, [Mikhail Myasnikovich](#), who in October described relations between Minsk and Abu Dhabi as "among all the countries of the Persian Gulf, it is the United Arab Emirates with which we have managed to establish the longest, most confidential and large-scale relations."

Also in October, Minsk welcomed a trade delegation from Iraqi Kurdistan, whose pro-American regime is clearly disliked by Moscow and its allies in the region. In September, a prominent Lebanese businessman and pro-Western politician, Adnan Kassar, visited Belarus to meet top officials, including foreign minister [Uladzimir Makei](#). Kassar has business in the country, but he most probably also facilitated contacts for Minsk in the conservative Persian Gulf regimes.

Evgeni Satanovski wrote an article accusing Minsk of secretly playing against Russian policy in Syria.

Finally last week the Kremlin reacted openly. Russian political commentator Evgeni Satanovski wrote an article accusing Minsk of secretly playing against Russian policy in Syria. He included Belarus in the "Alliance of Backstabbing Nations", together with such patented opponents of Moscow [like Qatar](#), the UAE and Turkey.

Satanovski, who has recently changed his image from an analyst of purely Middle Eastern affairs to a commentator on any political issue, acts as a mouthpiece for at least a part of the Russian regime. The high-level propaganda shows and programmes on Russian TV, especially those anchored by Vladimir Solovyev, feature him regularly speaking in a pro-Kremlin rhetoric.

Minsk Derides Moscow's Accusations against Erdogan?

The facts which Satanovski quoted are clearly not a smoking gun. He referred to the visit of Qatar's defence minister to Minsk in July, and the probable personal involvement of the ambassador of the UAE in getting an arms deal with Minsk. Minsk undoubtedly perceived the article as a stern warning, knowing the author's proximity to the Kremlin. The text itself initially appeared in a specialised periodical, *the Military Industrial Courier*, which is widely read by Russian politicians, before *Vzglyad* republished it.

Belarus Segodnya, published a brief, yet harsh, criticism of Russian accusations concerning the Turkish government

On 4 December, the web-site of the main Belarusian government media outlet, *Belarus Segodnya*, published a brief, yet harsh,

criticism of Russian accusations concerning the Turkish government's involvement in smuggling oil with Islamic State.

Formally, the article appeared as a blog entry, yet this official daily strictly controls everything that appears on its web-site, so it is not just a private opinion. Furthermore, the author, Yury Tsaryk, is closely connected to the Belarusian government and is known as a strategist and thinker of a pro-Western faction in the regime.

The New Geopolitical Situation of Belarus: Risky yet Favourable

Minsk clearly feels more confident pursuing its own policy which differs from the Russian. This is not only due to the [improvement of relations](#) between Belarus and the EU. Belarus finds itself in a new geopolitical situation and is working effectively in it.

On the one hand, Belarus managed to play some role in negotiations on Ukraine and through that the regime overcame its own international marginalisation. Now, it continues its attempts to become a recognised place for international negotiation. It follows the urgent visit of Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev, on 27-28 November which probably was about possible mediation between Russia and Turkey over their clash in Syria.

Belarus now offers the safest and arguably the best route for an additional Russian gas pipeline

Lukashenka has a chance to succeed in that endeavour. The state secretary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia and Russian General Grigory Rapota, recently discussed the

possibility of Belarus as a negotiation centre on the Middle East. By that they also arguably meant the latest conflict between Moscow and Ankara.

On the other hand, Belarus's geopolitical situation changed after the beginning of the Ukrainian war and the Kremlin's conflict with Turkey. The significance of Belarus as a route for transport of Russian oil and gas to Europe has increased. Essentially, Belarus now offers the safest and arguably the best route for an additional Russian gas pipeline.

It means Belarus becomes a more valuable [partner for Russia](#) and the EU. That means Minsk can afford more leeway in dealing both with Russia and EU and profit from this situation. Sure, the situation is not risk free. At the same time Belarus, as a transit country for gas supplies between Russia and Europe is in competition with other countries, business interests and radical groups in the region.

This risk is the price for the transformation of the country from Europe's backwater to a more active and accepted player in international politics. Not everything depends on Belarus however. The recent moves by Minsk (its position on Syria or the Russian military presence in Belarus) demonstrates, however, its aspiration to use the new geopolitical reality and build up Belarusian independence and [effective neutrality](#).

Minsk is Looking for New Friends, To Replace the Ones

It Lost

Last Friday, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Belarus. According to Belarusian officials and media the minister came just to sign visa abolition and readmission agreements. The Turkish Foreign Ministry added that ministers had, "exchanged views on regional issues mainly Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan." This addition appears to be especially intriguing since never before has such a high-level Turkish official visited independent Belarus.

Davutoğlu is seen as the architect of new Turkish foreign policy who is pursuing a neo-Ottoman style, and the man backing the Syrian rebels, flew to Belarus for something more than signing two pieces of paper. They could have been signed by a lower-level official. He came to Belarus because Minsk is rumoured to be cooperating with the Syrian authorities while Turkey supports the Syrian rebels.

The United States has even introduced sanctions against some Belarusian firms for their alleged arms deals with Bashar Assad. Davutoğlu's visit could mean that Lukashenka does after all has some weight in arena of international politics and Ankara is seeking Belarusian assistance in toppling the Syrian government.

They Deceived Lukashenka

Apparently, Minsk could benefit from more Turkish investments if it gives up Syria. Furthermore, Davutoglu has stated that Turkey, "was ready to contribute to the integration of Belarus into the international community." It means providing possible help in reviving contacts with the EU and maybe some other Western partners, like NATO and the United States. No doubt, Ankara could do that, but the question is – would it really deliver on these promises? Would Turkey help Belarus after it solves its own problems and Assad has been toppled?

The Belarusian leadership had to consider similar dilemmas a few years ago. The rich Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf did their best to convince Minsk of necessity of limiting its [friendship with Iran](#) and, in return, receive compensation for its loyalty its new Arab friends.

They succeeded for a while. Belarus dramatically reduced its contact with Tehran since 2010. Whereas in the 2000s, almost every month some Iranian delegation – frequently at the ministerial level – came to Belarus, since 2010 such visits have become rare, despite all attempts by the Iranians to continue cooperating with Minsk. As a result Iranian investment projects began to stumble and an Iranian car production project was suddenly declared senseless.

At the same time Lukashenka publicly celebrated his successes in establishing links with pro-Western conservative Arab monarchs, touting projects like “Qatar Island” in Europe – to be built in the south-western Brest province. But promises of his new friends from Qatar, UAE and Oman never materialised. Minsk felt deceived by these empty promises. Last year, it simply cancelled a huge investment deal with Oman which started at the highest level and included giving a part of the Belarusian capital to Omani developers.

Close Encounters of the Third World

The relations with developing countries has remained generally unstable for two decades. Belarusian diplomats have a difficult task in establishing relations with new countries. In some traditional directions the existing circumstances have prevented Minsk from developing closer relations. The Arab Spring and Iranian nuclear crisis in particular have contributed to the disruption of relations with North Africa, Syria and Iran.

Lukashenka recently lamented, “Of course, it is a pity that we lost Libya, we lost Syria and some other countries.”

An analysis of foreign policy in recent years demonstrates the slowdown in contacts with developing nations and even the collapse with some important players. Lukashenka recently lamented, "Of course, it is a pity that we lost Libya, we lost Syria and some other countries."

Facing these massive problems Minsk last January even held consultations on the issue with Russia. In late March, the Belarusian leader personally hastened to rescue the Foreign Ministry and [visited Indonesia, Singapore](#) and the United Arab Emirates.

The problems in relations with the Third World go beyond a political dimension. The trade with developing nations remains extremely volatile and trade volumes with some countries drop and rise every year by margins in the hundreds of percent.

Another problem is diversification. Andrey Yeliseeu of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies in an upcoming study emphasised that in 2012, among the major economic partners of Belarus in the developing world only five – China, Iran, Turkey, Venezuela and Cuba – had diversified their imports from Belarus. To the majority of other developing nations, Minsk sold one or two articles (mainly, potash and nitrogen fertilisers), although sometimes for billions of dollars. Clearly this signals that the most urgent problem surrounding its export markets remain unresolved.

The Belarusian Ruler Waiting for the Rise of China

Historically, Belarus has been a land between Russia and Europe. Each government has wanted to reduce this dependency however possible, including looking for partners outside of Europe and Russia.

The Belarusian regime's biggest hopes lie in a new global leadership lead by China. Lukashenka and his retinue have pragmatically calculated that the new readjustment of powers in the world may happen in the near future. Moreover, they see

feel their beliefs have been confirmed by recent international developments – the global economic crisis, EU internal difficulties, and the rise of BRICS countries.

The Belarusian leadership has proclaimed relations with developing nations one of its foreign policy priorities. Some in the opposition insist that since late 1990s cooperation with the Third World has been a major source of money and other benefits for the Belarusian regime. Uncorroborated [claims](#) to that effect are common place in oppositional rhetoric.

In reality though, Belarus' position in the developing world remains precarious. The share of developing nations in foreign trade is constantly hovering around 10-12% for Belarus. The lucrative arms deals were to be found back in the late 1990s – early 2000s, but have since more or less disappeared. Minsk itself now prefers to stay away from any potential hotspots or doing dealings with radical movements and regimes, yet still fails to find enough new [markets](#).

Thus, in late 2011, the US was able to block Peru's ratification of a military technical cooperation agreement with Belarus. Minsk planned to modernise the Peruvian air force and, after long negotiations, managed to conclude an agreement with Peru. However, the Peruvian liberal opposition resisted the deal with Beltekhexport. Peru21, a media outlet, accused the Peruvian government of cooperating with a Belarusian company that had been sanctioned by the EU and US and continued insinuating arms deals with "Pakistani and Syrian terrorists".

Minsk Willing to Change

Relations with developing nations have given the Belarusian leadership some leverage in balancing relations between the West and Russia. But it would be wrong to describe these relations as an adventurous rapprochement to anti-Western

regimes.

The Belarusian ruler can be accused of many things, but ideological rigidity is not one of them.

Lukashenka is going after money and is willing to reshuffle his own foreign policy if he can see an opportunity to benefit from it. He effectively renounced Qaddafi, tried to replace Iranians with Arabs, and agreed to speak with the Turkish Foreign Minister about Syria. The Belarusian ruler can be accused of many things, but ideological rigidity is not one of them.

The essentially revisionist world view of the ruling elite in post-Soviet Belarus includes some elements which can be considered anti-Western. After all, it has been shaped by the USSR's collapse and the triumph of the Western bloc. But it remains anti-Western only in so far as they can find no place for themselves in the Western bloc. That is why for the time being they prefer to cooperate with anti-Western governments.

The Belarusian regime might be well aware of problems with the West and Russia, yet it [remains hopeful](#). Lukashenka believes that changes in the landscape of global politics caused by some developing nations are imminent. He has repeatedly urged Belarusian officials and businessmen "to go to the places where nobody knows us."