

Will Belarus Last for Long?

The Crimean crisis stirred up a number of comments on the probability of Russian annexation of Belarus.

The topic is not completely new. Since the 1990s, fears of Russia taking over Belarus – under pretext of integration process – were one of main issues for national politics.

Later, the public's mood calmed down a bit as Lukashenka made clear that he did not intend to give away anything despite the authorities' integration declarations.

The survival of the Belarusian state today does not seem to be any more endangered than any other moment over the past two decades. Independent Belarus always suffered from a bad reputation and was expected to disappear from the face of the earth for years.

Virtual Russian Annexation

Belarus appeared to be a complete unknown, and an exotic place, for many outsiders to believe in its permanence. The director of *Nasha Niva* weekly Andrei Dynko likes to recall how historian Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, now secretary of the Académie Française, proposed in early 1990s to remove the then newly independent Belarus from the political world map – simply because such a state made no sense to her. The Academy itself discussed which gender to designate to Belarus in French.

Belarusian analysts also doubted the future of their country. Well-known political scientist Vyachaslau Paznyak in his 1998 article *Belarus: In Search of a Secure Identity* pronounced:

More than any other of the former Soviet republics, Belarus was unprepared for the dissolution of the Soviet Union and remains uncertain about its status as an independent country

and about its national identity.

Belarus did not count on Western policies toward post-Soviet nations in early 1990s. The only major Western leader who ever visited the country was Bill Clinton, who came to Minsk for seven hours in 1994 – as a reward for Minsk's agreement not to maintain any claims on its Soviet nuclear arsenal.

Meanwhile, the president and executive director of Freedom House Adrian Karatnycky in his 1994 article "Another Chance for NATO" in the National Review argued that "Russia has virtually annexed Belarus by integrating the republic's economy and military into its own."

After the newly elected president Lukashenka launched a series of integration initiatives with Russia, it led to a new bout of negative perceptions of Belarus. Alexander Vondra, then deputy foreign minister, and later foreign minister and defence minister of the Czech Republic, argued in 1995 that, "Already Belarus has not succeeded as an independent state. ... Belarus is a model of reintegration and of an increase in Russian influence in the Western direction at the smallest cost."

Brzezinski's Wisdom

As Edward Lucas of The Economist commented later on,

The idea that Belarusian statehood might be a temporary phenomenon gained ground. [...] it seemed inevitable to many that Mr. Lukashenko's strongly pro-Russian, pan-Slavic approach would end with the country becoming part of a new Kremlin-led confederation that in the future might include other pro-Russian anomalies such as Transdnistria [...] or the two separatist, Russian-backed enclaves in Georgia.

Lucas included these ideas into his list of what the West got wrong about Belarus.

Dissenting opinions about Belarus as a political reality that would stick around remained almost unheard of until 2002-2003. Nevertheless, Zbigniew Brzezinski in his 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard* insisted that,

Although Moscow managed to retain a politically dominant position in the formally newly independent but highly Russified Belarus, it was far from certain that the nationalist contagion would not eventually also gain the upper hand there as well.

The experienced scholar and politician knew that the nationalism in Belarus might be simply misunderstood and it already emerged as being entrenched in some kind of specific state-focused form, unlike the nationalist movements in neighbouring countries with their focus on ethnicity and language.

Meanwhile, even a nationalistic Russian politician such as Alexei Pushkov at the end of 1998 warned in a publication of the Russian foreign ministry that:

As far as Belarus is concerned, we shall develop the foundations of the existing union. It does not matter whether it is declaratory, still it is better than nothing. To unite? The Belarusian elite doesn't want to unite. Why would it be willing to lose the authority that it possesses? It will be drowned out in the Russian elite, it will be like a kind of Russian province – something like the Maritime Province. The elite will not give away their power. [...] Nobody ever gives away their power.

Belarus as Cambodia under Pol Pot

By the early 2000s the Belarusian regime became integrated into the global narrative of 'rogue' nations. First, Michael Kozak, the US ambassador to Belarus, described Belarus in an

opposition newspaper in 2001 as 'the Cuba of Europe.' More odd speculations were yet to come.

In November 2002, the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank linked to the Bush administration, hosted a conference entitled, "Axis of Evil: Belarus-The Missing Link". Radek Sikorski insisted at the event that, "the message from this conference with Lukashenka is: 'President Lukashenka, be careful, because if your buddy in Baghdad gets thrown out, we will find the evidence of what you've been up to with him.'" Nothing substantial, however, has yet to be found.

Meanwhile, US senator John McCain has proclaimed, that "Thanks to Lukashenka's leadership, Belarus now joins a group of nations, including Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, that are both isolated in the modern community of nations and face a newfound American commitment to change the way they do business or go out of business."

To put Belarus alongside, say, Iraq became a handful of issues that are considered completely ordinary even in scholarly quarters, seems a bit extreme. Robert Rotberg did precisely this in his 2003 *Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators*. "There is a special category of weak state: the seemingly strong one, always an autocracy, which rigidly controls dissent and is secure but at the same time provides very few political goods." Among them he specifically named North Korea, "Cambodia under Pol Pot," Belarus, Iraq, and – with some doubts – Libya.

Doomsday Scenarios Replace Sound Debate

Sound analysis of the situation surrounding Belarus remains a rare commodity in western and western-addressed discourse on Belarus and its regime. All respectable western monographs on Belarusian politics can be easily placed on one bookshelf. Gloomy forecasts, comparisons blown out of proportion and colourful rhetoric prevail. Discussions over Belarus' fate

after the developments in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine exhibit much of the same pattern.

Ukrainian analogies dominate today's discussions and usually are followed by some grim predictions about an approaching doomsday for Belarus. The lending of Ukrainian concepts does not, in fact, make much sense because of the diametrically different political, economic and cultural developments that have occurred in Ukraine since 1991. Many analysts miss the completely incomparable strategic calculations involved in Belarus-Russian and Ukraine-Russian relations.

Belarusian statehood is stable despite the creeping degradation of some state and social institutions. Broad consensus supports the value of Belarusian state. The nation displays no geographical cleavages comparable to those found in Ukraine, and there are far fewer ethnic Russians – only 8.26% (according to a 2009 census, a number which is decreasing) – living dispersed amongst Belarusians and feeling rather secure as a result of the absence of any hostility towards them.

The state apparatus in recent years has been informally reshuffled to ensure its loyalty to Belarusian statehood. Although the government articulates Russian-friendly rhetoric, everyone who goes too far with it gets punished.

Economically, the current modus vivendi with Russia, despite its regular trade wars, enables Minsk to monetise its friendship with Moscow and compensate for economic failures elsewhere. Russia, on the other hand, is aware that undermining Belarusian statehood comes with serious risks and does not offer any particularly grand prizes.

The Kremlin is striving to acquire profitable Belarusian factories through having them privatised by Russian oligarchs. Yet they do not seem to be interested in annexing thousands of square kilometres – land which is, in any event, already ruled

by the government friendly to Russia.