

Belarus on the international stage: a Russian puppet or a skillful diplomat?

On 15 November, at the 71st session of the UN General Assembly, the Belarusian delegation voted against a draft resolution tabled by Ukraine on the human rights situation in Crimea.

This vote, along with Belarus's failed attempt to adjourn debate on all country-specific texts, was perceived as a trick to torpedo Ukraine's initiative and has angered many in Belarus and Ukraine. The move has led to the Belarusian government being labelled a traitor and Russian vassal.

So what is the rationale behind Belarus's vote at the United Nations? Do Belarusian diplomats indeed take orders from Moscow?

An unprecedented motion at the UN

On 15 November, the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly considered four draft resolutions on human rights situations in specific countries, namely North Korea, Syria, Iran, and Russia-occupied Crimea.

The [last document](#) was tabled by Ukraine along with twenty-nine other countries, including the United States, Georgia, and most EU members. The text called Russia 'an occupying power', condemned the human rights violations in Crimea by 'the Russian occupation authorities' and urged Moscow to take specific measures to remedy the situation.

Five days earlier, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko tried to talk his Belarusian counterpart [Alexander Lukashenka](#) into supporting the Ukrainian initiative at the UN. Lukashenka offered him only a vague diplomatic reply.

The Belarusian delegation in New York took many aback when Andrei Dapkiunas, the country's ambassador to the UN, [proposed to adjourn the debate](#) on all country-specific resolutions. He called them a 'depressively divisive exercise with a known outcome'.

- ✘ This unprecedented motion was defeated with 32 votes in favour, 101 against, and 37 abstentions.

The draft resolution on the human rights situation in Crimea was later [approved by a vote](#) of 73 in favour, to 23 against and 76 abstentions. Belarus was among those nations voting against, alongside Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and several [human rights pariahs](#).

Belarus's vote and its no-action motion sparked a strong negative reaction among the Ukrainian elite and democratically-minded people in Belarus and Ukraine.

Iryna Herashchenko, deputy chair of Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada, called Belarus's vote 'a stab in the back'. Volodymyr Yelchenko, the Ukrainian ambassador to the UN, labelled Belarus's position anti-Ukrainian, adding: 'We cannot accept the fact that our closest neighbour stands openly against us in the UN'.

Social networks and online forums were swarmed with Belarusians and Ukrainians who characterised the Belarusian government's actions as pro-Russian, disgraceful, and treacherous.

A convenient alibi on the Crimea issue

At the end of the day of voting, Dmitry Mironchik, the Belarusian foreign ministry's spokesman, reacted to this outpouring of criticism by saying that 'it does not reflect reality'. Mironchik stressed that 'Belarus's position on Ukraine [has] not change[d] a jot', without elaborating on the exact nature of this often ambiguous position.

The foreign ministry explained Belarus's actions at the UN by underlining Belarus's aversion towards country-specific resolutions on human rights and its 'consistent rejection of the hypocritical treatment of human rights issues'.

Indeed, over the last few years, the Belarusian delegation at UN meetings in New York and Geneva has staunchly opposed all resolutions directed against specific countries even if it meant protecting notorious human rights pariahs. This is not particularly surprising as Belarus itself remains a target of such a resolution in Geneva.

[Elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy.](#) The study identifies the main elements and manifestations of neutrality in the Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy

Belarus's decision to submit a no-action motion on the entire agenda sub-item was meant to strengthen its alibi on the Crimea issue. On the same day, Belarus also voted against all other resolutions, citing a principled rejection of this politicised tool.

In fact, this is not the first time that Belarus has explained away the fact that it's vote on a Ukraine-related issue concurred with Russia. It has used [certain extraneous](#)

[considerations](#) as an excuse before.

Interestingly, if Belarus had submitted the no-action motion on the Crimean draft alone, it would have had a much higher chance of success. However, the move against all texts 'in the package' was doomed to fail. Too many countries sought to condemn human rights violations in at least one of the countries singled out. Tellingly, Saudi Arabia – by no means a human-rights champion – vehemently opposed the Belarusian idea as it had issues with Syria and Iran.

A docile Russian acolyte? Hardly

Mironchik's arguments failed to convince most critics, who persist in labelling the Belarusian foreign ministry a Russian vassal or, at least, a loyal foreign policy ally. Belarus's foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) apparently confirmed the latter assertion on 22 November in Moscow when he reaffirmed that 'the positions of Moscow and Minsk coincide in virtually all issues on the foreign policy agenda'.



Meanwhile, the real picture remains more ambiguous. Belarus refused to follow Russia in recognising the independence of its satellites, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It insisted on maintaining diplomatic relations and a visa-free regime with [Georgia, Russia's enemy](#).

Minsk continued to [strengthen its ties with Istanbul](#) in the context of anti-Turkish hysteria in Moscow. It never sided with Russia in its rhetorical war against the West [over Syria](#).

Belarus's refusal to recognise the annexation of Crimea *de jure* and its uninterrupted political, economic, and [military cooperation with Ukraine](#) at the height of the crisis in

Donbass enraged many in Moscow.

Belarus's voting record at the UN is empirical evidence of Minsk's independent foreign policy. Out of the 75 resolutions put to a vote at the 70th session of the General Assembly, Belarus and Russia adopted different positions on 28 texts. On nine occasions, their votes were diametrically opposite.

The voting record at the UN is telling of the wide variety of issues under discussion there. At the last session, Belarus and Russia voted out of sync mostly on nuclear disarmament issues, but also on other disarmament-related matters, Palestine-related issues, and even on human rights. By voting differently from Russia on the IAEA annual report, Belarus in fact [failed to support Russia](#) in its demarche related to the status of Crimea.

Some of Minsk's initiatives at the UN have not pleased Moscow. This was the case when Belarus proposed reforming the [process of appointing new UN Secretary Generals](#).

Belarusian diplomats tried hard to find an alibi for their Crimea vote. However, the true reason for their position remains Lukashenka's unwillingness to enrage Russia, especially on the eve of his important meeting with Vladimir Putin.

Far from being Russia's obedient servant in the international arena, Belarus remains conscious of the lines it cannot afford to cross with regards to its foreign policy. This clearly includes supporting a direct international condemnation of Russia or even abstaining on the issue.

EU and Belarus: All Politics to Be Gradual

After the 2015 October presidential elections Belarus gears up for a parliamentary one on September 11 with little expectations of democratic improvement.

Albeit authoritarian, Belarus is both a functional state and society. The EU is learning to live with this reality due to tensions in its Eastern neighbourhood, the fact that it has no reliable political allies within Belarus, and Minsk's effort to reduce those geopolitical tensions and holding a more responsive dialogue with the West.

Belarus is the only remaining country of the Eastern Partnership with territorial integrity. Given the political turbulence in [Ukraine](#) and [Moldova](#), Belarus may also now be the only EaP country without political prisoners. The Ukrainian crisis and a resurgent Russia put Belarus' capable, albeit repressive, state under new light.

The notion of local stability may prove wishful thinking if geopolitics continues to heat up. Without a finessed approach in the West, Lukashenka, always a deft maneuverer, might not be able to continue to resist falling under the spell of Russia's influence. The EU's policy should not sacrifice democracy for the sake of security, but rather the former should be viewed as an endgame instead of an ultimatum defining the relationship.

Traditionalist Revolution:

Institutional Stability

Lukashenka's political longevity has stemmed from two sources: institutional stability and an a la carte friendship with Russia. Brussels has learned to despise and appreciate both.

Lukashenka lived up to his 1994 electoral pledge to [reinstall](#) a centralised system that in some policies, procedures and symbols resembles the former Soviet Union. The [liaison](#) between Soviet-era bureaucrats and power-hungry new supporters of Lukashenka led to power consolidation and a mix of centralised public institutions. They have run the country in a stable manner with a viable [social contract](#), relatively successfully as it relates to governance and the [economy](#).

Fortified by Lukashenka's personal skill in making Russia pay for Belarus' posturing as its only "genuine" ally, the seemingly impenetrable country frustrated the EU's end-of-history-style one-size-fits-all democratization effort. However, the infamous "power vertical" might now be causing Russia more annoyance than the West. This should not lull the EU into complacency.

Russia and Belarus: Mutual Vulnerability

the "Russian world" promotion do represent new risk variables for Belarus

Belarus is a country where Russia's soft power functions in most effective manner. Belarus shares with Russia common media and cultural sphere, Russian language and Orthodox church predominance and a significant presence of Russian banks. Deep connections link secret services, law enforcement, and the military of both countries. In addition, almost total energy

dependency, and open borders are not new factors for Minsk to encounter. Moscow`s feeling of existential threat, its military confidence stemming from Ukraine and Syria, its effective [media](#), and the “Russian world” promotion do represent new risk variables for Belarus.

Speculation that Russia might be losing patience can hardly be dismissed. Previously more concerned about Russia, the Baltic countries have started to worry about Belarus. Lithuania`s [latest threat assessment](#), for example, repeatedly mentions Belarus, whereas in the [2014 edition](#), it was barely mentioned at all. None of Russia`s three recently announced deployments are to be placed close to the Baltic borders. One of the divisions, however, is to be deployed at the border with Belarus.

With regard to [joint defence needs](#), including particularly [air defence](#), Belarus has routinely requested “contributions” to its defence forces. The Russian contributions of military equipment are, however, either regularly [delayed](#), or arrive in the form of [outdated](#) models. The much heralded Russian military air base in Belarus was [quietly fended](#) off.

Belarus has launched attempts at establishing “strategic” military cooperation with China - and allegedly with Ukraine

Meanwhile, Belarus has launched attempts at establishing “strategic” military cooperation with China – and allegedly with [Ukraine](#) – produced its own advanced surface-to-air missile system *Polonaise*.

In February 2016, the government updated its military doctrine dating back to 2001. Its main target is not conventional war but a hybrid one comprising terrorist and (political) extremist activities. Minsk is aware that the West no longer prefers revolutions in the neighbourhood. Yet, it cannot afford a political shift away from Russia.

Controlled Capitalism: Institutional Instability

The Belarusian economy has been struggling for years, with [inflation rising](#) and real [incomes plummeting](#). New taxes are constantly being approved, the form of which have reached absurd heights: one example being a tax on “social parasitism/unemployment”. These policies fail at generating necessary revenues, ignore the elephant (state owned enterprises) in the room, and antagonize the population.

Yet, the country`s beleaguered political opposition, with only four months remaining until the parliamentary elections, has managed to produce only several [badly coordinated](#) lists of candidates.

The economic re-shuffle prepared by a handful of reformers aims to move the country from a planned economy to a regulated one

A more potent challenge to introduce reforms is posed internally by the old government guards and the “siloviki” – the security services and law enforcement. The economic re-shuffle prepared by a [handful of reformers aims to move](#) the country from a planned economy to a regulated one. Even such gradual changes would deprive them of the veto power and target arbitrary state management, a change impossible to accept for many in Belarus` neo-Soviet power hierarchy.

A murky episode involving the recent arrest of businessman Yury Chyzh underlines the potential of internal struggle. This arrest, and the KGB involvement in it, [indicates](#) that the power mechanisms in the country might be less centrally controlled than commonly thought.

Additional speculation posits that Chyzh bankrupted a company

of which Lukashenka`s family were informal shareholders, highlighting the gradual transition between (state) power and wealth in Belarus. Regardless of the true explanation, the opaque, informal and arbitrary rules underscore the fact that reforms are not in the interest of the West but of Belarus.

Doomed to Dialogue

As there are no major carrots from the West and – following Crimea annexation – Russia carries the big stick – the EU is largely doomed to dialogue. After 20 years of opposing Belarus, the West should most of all build trust based on common interests in order to reduce resistance to reforms.

As much as the idea of a permanent NATO base might be attractive to the Baltic countries, it would likely push Russia to exert greater pressure on Belarus to accept a Russian military base on its territory. This outcome would not help to achieve deterrence but rather would increase the risk of conflict and subdue Belarus to an overpowering Russia.

the majority of the Belarusian population further show no desire to be integrated into the EU

Relations with Belarus, particularly for Poland and Lithuania, should be a higher foreign policy priority. In this regard, the [trip of Polish Foreign Minister Waszczykowski](#) in March 2016 is a step in the right direction.

Integration is not supported by either side (the EU or Minsk) and the majority of the Belarusian [population](#) further show no desire to be integrated into the EU. Nevertheless, Belarus [has been slowly turning](#) towards the West: the technology trigger for supporting necessary economic modernization is there.

The EU`s policy towards Belarus already includes increased engagement with the government. Exercised with caution, this

policy has the long-term potential to help make Belarus` notorious informal decision-making process more transparent. The EU is already strengthening its [focus on education](#). It should also emphasise the careful promotion of structural reforms, taking into consideration the principles of its social economy and the general aim to modernize local industries.

While such dialogue may ensure a relationship built on common interests, concern for democratic elections should not be neglected. The Spanish transition model might come useful here: democracy can be the end result, even if not necessarily the beginning of a successful transition process.

Russia`s perception of encroachment from the West could spiral out of control, particularly in the presence of any dramatic events, as it did with the case of Ukraine. Given the geopolitical sensitivity of Moscow towards Belarus as its last ally and a territory linking it to Kaliningrad, such an event may not need to be as significant as the Maidan was in Ukraine.

Lukashenka will play his part in keeping both sides mildly satisfied. Yet even his manoeuvring power is limited, given domestic economic challenges, resistance toward reforms, and Russia`s dominance. It is now up to the EU to demonstrate normative finesse in developing its relations with the country, both for the sake of local democracy and regional stability.

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A longer version of this article is available at cepolicy.org.

New Belarusian military doctrine responds to Putin's policies

On 22 January, President Alexander Lukashenka approved changes to Belarus' military doctrine. This document reveals fundamental changes in the mindset of the Belarusian establishment. Learning Ukrainian lessons, Minsk is putting issues of military security at the top of its priority list.

Belarusian strategists have also identified which threats are to be countered. They include violent political changes, which Minsk suspects may come from Ukraine and pro-Moscow forces' attempts to repeat in Belarus their exploits in Ukraine.

Minsk is also reevaluating its alliance with Russia. The Kremlin for years ignored Minsk's interests and is embarking on an increasingly chauvinist path. Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin criticised Soviet-era international borders as 'arbitrary', implying that they could be changed through a Crimea- or Donbas-like scenario.

Minsk identifies threats

On 22 January, Lukashenka approved changes to Belarus' military doctrine, which had remained unchanged since 2001.

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Identifying the potential military threats, the new edition of

the doctrine points to 'hybrid warfare' and 'colour revolutions', clear terms if taken in the Belarusian and regional context.

'Hybrid warfare' refers to possible Russian interventions like those that occurred in Ukraine. [Colour revolution](#) means the West, interpreted IHS Jane's Defence Weekly. But that is a moot point.

Minsk indeed harbours suspicions that somebody in the West might be working on toppling Lukashenka, but in recent years Belarusian officials have more frequently named Ukraine as a [source of destabilisation](#) in Belarus. For instance, just before the recent October 2015 presidential election a Belarusian government-affiliated TV channel reported about "200 armed Ukrainians" being detained at the border.

Although Lukashenka cites the collapse of the state in Libya, Syria and Yemen as examples of possible scenarios that he wants to prevent, Minsk reviewed its military doctrine only after the crisis and conflict in Ukraine developed. In parallel, it started – however reluctantly – to [construct a border](#) with Ukraine.

Beware of Kremlin allies

Commenting on forthcoming changes in the military doctrine, last autumn Defence Minister [Andrei Raukou](#) claimed that Belarus did not consider any foreign state an enemy and added, "But we, of course, will not concede our territory and will use any forces and means, including military, to avoid that."

☒ The official Belarusian parlance sends signals warning to extremist elements in Russia not to try in Belarus anything like they did in Ukraine.

Raukou was merely further developing earlier statements made by Lukashenka who has many times publicly rebuked the

Ukrainian government for “giving up its lands [in Crimea]” and neglecting the Ukrainian army which as a result failed to defend the country.

Belarus remains an ally of Russia but Minsk regards this status less and less only as an asset, and hence is trying to reformulate the alliance. The Belarusian leadership sees a danger of the country being enmeshed in somebody else's war as a result of confrontation between Russia and other countries.

In his earlier statements Lukashenka described the [alliance with Russia](#) as an obligation with reservations and qualifications. On 30 October, speaking before commanders of the national armed forces, he said, “Having allies is an important factor in ensuring our military security. Nonetheless, we shall build the mechanism of collective protection in accordance with our national interests.”

No arms for Belarusians

The very first reason for Minsk to review the conditions of its alliance with Russia has to do with Moscow itself. The Kremlin frequently refuses to deal with Belarus as an ally and does not hide it. To take only the most known example, Moscow concealed from Minsk the early stages of the Russian operation to annex Crimea.

Russia provides only minimal support for the Belarusian army that is sorely in need of equipment

Despite all lamentation about NATO expansion, Russia provides only minimal support for the Belarusian army that is sorely in need of equipment. This concerns even the most critical sphere for Russia – air defence. The Kremlin after many years of delays gave Belarus second-hand decommissioned S-300 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems of the oldest possible model. While Moscow is about to supply Iran with the S-300PMU, a

model from the 1990s, Minsk receives from Moscow S-300PS, a model from the early 1980s.

Likewise, while proclaiming ever closer military cooperation, Russia attempted to give Belarus only the export models of another SAM system, the Tor-M2E. That means limited – in comparison to the models supplied to Russian army – capacities. Belarus received Tors also only after Moscow forced Minsk to give in on the issue of a [Russian airbase](#).

Other cases also show a hardly ally-like attitude. Many Russian analysts acknowledge that the Belarusian army provides the bulk of force protecting Moscow from the west. Both in the air and on land, Moscow for many years has refused to give Belarusians [newer aircraft](#).



The Belarusian army has only a few old fighter jets and no bombers, and plans to decommission its remaining battlefield close-support aircraft. This has rendered the Belarusian air defence system porous and ground forces useless without air support.

Last rouble for military

The current economic situation in Belarus in comparison with 2010 has considerably worsened, with inflation reaching about 12 per cent in 2015. However, Lukashenka today insists that “if the last rouble remains in the state budget, we shall spend it on the security of our people.” To underline his point he again cited the situation in Ukraine, implying that insufficient care for security allowed that country to become a toy for more powerful forces.

The Belarusian government seems to be taking the matter seriously. Despite economic hardships, it has found resources

for projects that should result in military or dual-use products – like designing and manufacturing the multiple [rocket launch system](#) SAM and possibly other weapons with [Chinese](#) and probably Ukrainian firms. It has also invested in the overhaul of [old Belarusian fighter jets](#), putting national security interests over economic calculations.

While only a few experts have noticed these technical paraphernalia, adoption of an effectively new military doctrine has attracted much more attention. The doctrine, however, is only one small, visible example of [fundamental changes](#) triggered in Belarusian foreign and security policy by Putin's policies in the post-Soviet space. Minsk cannot cope with all the new risks without cooperating with other nations in the region and beyond. But it does what it can.

Belarus refuses to support Russia over Crimea issue at the UN

Efforts of the Belarusian diplomacy at the main part of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly at the end of 2015 brought mixed results. Alexander Lukashenka's [statements](#) during the high-level segments of the session went largely unnoticed.

Belarusian diplomats did rather well on the issues of human trafficking and international cooperation in recovery of the areas affected by Chernobyl. Anxious to maintain good working relations with the IAEA, Belarus even refused to support Russia's protest over the status of Crimea.

But Belarus' desperate fight against international human rights criticism had no immediate effect. The country's efforts to secure an observer status for the Eurasian Economic Union at the UN failed so far.

Fighting UN human rights procedures

At this session, Belarus came close to declaring an all-out war to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). It has been using all means available to force it into abandoning the practice of special procedures and country-specific resolutions.

✘ Belarus became a target of a country-specific procedure in 2012. Then, the HRC established the mandate of a special rapporteur on Belarus and appointed Miklós Haraszti to this position. Ever since, Belarusian authorities have refused to recognise this mandate and [stubbornly ignored](#) Haraszti's attempts to establish communication with the Belarusian government.

Minsk is no longer eager to cooperate with the HRC's thematic procedures. Michel Forst, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, named Belarus among the states, which failed to respond to his repeated requests for a country visit.

Belarus: a UN body is used for settling political scores

At this session, Belarus strongly defended its "fellows in misery" and voted against the UN resolutions on human rights situation in North Korea, Iran and Syria. The Belarusian delegation maintained that the country-specific mechanisms enabled the "states with the resources to do so" to legitimise their own unilateral measures.

The Belarusian delegation insisted on several occasions that the Human Rights Council was becoming a platform for “settling political scores” and the setting of standards not agreed upon internationally.

This conviction led Belarus to requesting a vote on a resolution on the report of the Human Rights Council. In its vote against the resolution, Belarus was seconded only by Israel, which disagrees with the HRC’s treatment of the issue of Palestinians' rights.

Capitalising on the fight against human trafficking

Belarus successfully introduced a resolution on improving the coordination of efforts against trafficking in persons. The resolution adopted by consensus has decided to convene a high-level meeting on this topic at the 72nd session of the General Assembly in 2017, immediately after the general debate.

Alexander Lukashenka will most likely go to New York on this occasion to score points on his diplomats’ [most successful international initiative](#).

Indeed, this Belarusian undertaking enjoys strong support even from the countries, which criticise Belarus on other issues, such as the United States. The representative of Luxembourg, who spoke on behalf of the EU, welcomed the introduction of the resolution by Belarus, as well as its readiness to take views into account during the negotiation process.

Belarus also succeeded in getting itself re-elected to the UN Commission on International Trade Law for another six-year term beginning 27 June 2016.

Rekindling the topic of Chernobyl

After the Belarusian authorities took a political decision in 2006 to [build a nuclear power plant](#) in the country, the Chernobyl disaster moved down on Belarus' foreign policy agenda.

Nevertheless, Belarus is determined to use the 30th anniversary of this [nuclear accident](#) in 2016 to secure further international assistance for the long-term recovery of the affected areas.

✘ On 7 – 10 December, deputy foreign minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) visited the UN headquarters. There he met a number of high UN officials to discuss two priority Chernobyl-related events.

On 26 April 2016, the General Assembly will held a special commemorative meeting, initiated in 2013 jointly by Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, in observance of the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe.

More importantly, in April 2016, Belarus will host a high-level international conference dedicated to the forthcoming anniversary. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other high officials may come to Minsk to attend this event.

The Belarusian authorities expect the conference to help shaping the new strategic plan on Chernobyl issues for the period after 2016, when the current policy framework will expire.

Belarus fails to support Russia in its fight on Crimea issue

Anxious to maintain good relations with the UN agency involved in the post-Chernobyl assistance, Belarus even refused to

support Russia in its demarche against the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) by the General Assembly. Russia requested a vote on the resolution, which was always adopted by consensus, because the report of the IAEA spoke of Crimea as “occupied territory”.

Russia and nine other countries abstained during the voting. However, Belarus refused to join them. A representative of Russia’s closest ally stated after the vote that his country had endorsed the resolution since it supported the IAEA’s activities and its annual report.

Seeking international recognition of the Eurasian Integration

The Belarusian diplomacy tried hard to play the card of the country’s presidency in the newly-born Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 to strengthen Belarus’ international status. The foreign ministry regarded the acquisition by the EAEU of the observer status in the UN General Assembly as a major point in this strategy. Getting the status was also one of Belarus' declared priorities for the 70th session.

This initiative, which Belarus’ delegation tabled at the UN on 19 October, [went astray from the start](#), when Georgia and Azerbaijan opposed it. The two countries used this opportunity to remind the fellow UN member states about their grievances in the bilateral relations with Russia and Armenia respectively.

EAEU's observer status falls a prey to bilateral grievances of ex-USSR countries

The consultations on the EAEU observer status, which went on

an almost daily basis, failed to forge a consensus. On 20 November, Azerbaijan reiterated its opposition to this decision noting that its objection was in regards to the presence of Armenia as member. Two countries are at odds over the status of Nagorno-Karabach.

The delegation of Turkey backed up Azerbaijan's position saying that, as the EAEU's founding document was long and had many addenda and protocols, Turkey required more time to examine it.

As the delegation of Belarus was loath to initiate a vote on the draft resolution, the Legal Committee agreed to defer a decision on the request for the observer status to the next UNGA session. Belarus thus failed to secure this status for the EAEU during its presidency in the organisation.

The 70th UNGA session clearly demonstrated that, in order to succeed in multilateral diplomacy, Belarus needs to move further away from the Russian world and embrace constructive cooperation with Western democracies.

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.

In the event of a Russian invasion of Belarus, only 18.7% of those polled would take up arms in defence of their country

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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Kremlin's Aggression in Ukraine Frightens Lukashenka – Belarus Security Digest

The Kremlin's aggressive actions in Ukraine have scared Minsk. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) dreams about its own missile defence system. However, the organisation failed to re-equip even its 20,000-strong rapid reaction force for the past five years already.

Minsk, while criticising Ukraine for having failed to mount a stand against the Russians, has to demonstrate its loyalty towards the Kremlin. New Russian aircraft has arrived in Belarus; nobody can say for how long. Belarusian defence and law-enforcement agencies lack would-be officers. This and more in this issue of Belarus Security Digest.

The Russian invasion in Ukraine clearly frightened the Belarusian authorities

It should be noted that in the last month the Belarusian authorities have built their belligerent rhetoric on the basis of negative comparisons with the Ukrainian army. The failure of the latter to offer resistance to Russian aggression in Crimea is irritating to Minsk.

To put it bluntly, the fact that Ukrainian soldiers refrained from fighting Russian soldiers outraged the Belarusian authorities. In fact, such statements confirm the thesis that:

- Minsk perceived Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a direct threat to Belarus;
- the Belarusian authorities are counting on Ukraine to become a second Poland, i.e. a country that remains hostile and a rival to Russia.

It should be noted that both the authorities and the Belarusian opposition have in fact the same negative disposition towards the annexation of Crimea. Only the latter can speak openly about it. Clearly, Russia has lost the information war not only in Ukraine and in the West but also in the eyes of the Belarusian ruling elite.

Towards a Unified Air Defence and Missile Defence System

On 5 March 2014, a meeting of the Military Committee at the Council of Ministers of Defence of the CSTO member states took place in Moscow on the basis of the Joint Staff of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Among other things, the participants discussed prospects for setting up the Joint (Unified) CSTO Air Defence and Missile Defence System.

The initiative to establish the joint CSTO air defence and missile defence system is another attempt by Moscow to place the defence potential of post-Soviet CIS countries under its full control. In return, Moscow will provide some assistance in equipping and developing the defence infrastructure of the member states.

However, Russia will invest only in those projects which it itself needs in the first place. The traditional flakiness in implementing its agreements and the habitual lack of consistency of the leadership of post-Soviet countries means that these plans will remain precisely that – just plans.

Difficulties with Re-equipping the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Force

On 13 March 2014, CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha said that the issue of discharging Russia of its obligations with regards to equipping of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) with modern weaponry and military equipment on the basis of the programme adopted in 2011 remained acute. But in general, the history of re-equipping of the Collective Force began back in 2009.

Obviously, the CSTO member states place full responsibility for re-equipment of the CRRF on Russia seeing it as the party most concerned with the alliance's existence. Currently, the Russian budget does not make provisions for extensive resources to arm its allies.

The need to incur costs can seem even more doubtful to Russia as none of its "allies" in CSTO has supported it unambiguously in the conflict with Ukraine. This is yet further proof of the thesis that alliances between post-Soviet countries are, to a greater or lesser degree, of a strictly formal nature.

Moscow's coffers are shrinking. And it is clear that this is a long-term trend. In connection with this the probability remains high that re-equipping of CSTO's rapid force units will drag on indefinitely and may become irrelevant at some point. This does not preclude Russia's continued support to CIS countries through the supply of weapons and military equipment, but it may be on a bilateral basis.

Additional Russian Aircraft Deployed in Belarus

On 12 March 2014, the Security Council of Belarus met. At the meeting, Lukashenka demanded a guarantee of the transfer of additional Russian fighters to Belarus following the build-up of NATO's military presence near Belarus' borders. Measures to strengthen air defence were announced. And the very next day, the redeployment of six fighters Su-27CM3 and three military airlift aircraft with staff to the airfield in Babrujsk took place.

On 15 March 2014, a Russian airborne early warning plane A-50 arrived at the airfield in Baranavichy. The Belarusian authorities linked further parameters of Russian air presence to NATO's actions. However, they decreased sharply the level of anti-NATO rhetoric later.

Alexander Lukashenka on Prospects of National Defence

On 23 March 2014, Alexander Lukashenka made a number of statements about the current self-defence situation.

The Belarusian leader clarified the issue of the delivery of four battalions of the S-300 air defence missile system, which Russia promised to Belarus back in April 2011. Allegedly, "...Russia said that it could not give us S-300 for next to nothing."

At the same time, Russia supplied a larger quantity of S-300s to Kazakhstan free of charge. It should be recalled that initially there were plans to transfer additional weapons to Belarus free of charge. Minsk was supposed to pay only the shipping costs, cost of repairs as well as pay the price tag for their modernisation.

The Belarusian leader also said that there was no need for a deployment of Russian aircraft to Belarus though he, Lukashenka, was personally not against it and would even be happy to have them on Belarusian soil. Translated into normal language this means that Minsk was not enthusiastic about the prospects of an increased Russian military presence, but if

Russia exerts pressure it would not be able to do anything but to depict joy.

At the same time, while Russian fighters, which are already on duty in Belarus, remain at the disposal of the Belarusian command, Minsk would like [to get its hands on aircraft without Russian pilots](#).

When answering a question about how long the Russian aircraft would remain on Belarusian soil, Alexander Lukashenka said that the duration of stay of the Russian fighters would depend on Belarus alone, i.e. on Alexander Lukashenka personally.

Alexander Lukashenka confirmed once again that the special operations forces and the air defence remained the main priority of the developing the nation's military strength. This is a long-held position. It is dictated by the inability to maintain and develop their national armed forces in a balanced manner, including a build-up of the capacity of its mechanised troops.

However, if the decline of the general-purpose forces continues, it is not totally clear who will protect the air defence forces against attacks on terrestrial enemy forces in circumstances where its own air force is degraded and its numerical strength is insufficient.

He also announced plans to modernise 10 Belarusian Su-27 and MiG-29 planes by the end of this year. According to Alexander Lukashenka, the Belarusian authority hopes to continue to exploit its Soviet aviation heritage until 2025 by maintaining the combat readiness of the equipment left over after the collapse of the USSR.

Staff Shortage in Belarusian Defence and Law-Enforcement Agencies

Belarus plans to change the procedure for admissions to institutions of higher education for its

defence and law-enforcement agencies by giving priority in enrolment to motivated applicants (graduates of military and cadet schools; military servicemen).

There appears to be only two reasons for this – the unsatisfactory "quality" of its applicants and an insufficient number of applicants who pass the exams successfully.

The students who have experience in military service or have studied in paramilitary schools adapt better to life "by the book" than civilian youth. They are also more motivated to build their career in defence and law-enforcement agencies.

Additional measures to improve the situation with staffing the higher education institutions of defence and law-enforcement agencies could include levelling down requirements for the health requirements and school grades of applicants.

Andrei Parotnikau

Andrei is the head of "Belarus Security Blog" analytical project.

**Balancing on Crimea,
Merchants' Diplomacy,
Protecting Traditional Values
– Belarus Foreign Policy**

Digest

Belarus Digest is launching Belarus Foreign Policy Digest which will overview the most important foreign policy developments related to Belarus.

Igar Gubarevich, who served as Counsellor at the Belarusian embassy in Paris in 2003 – 2006 and held several other positions of responsibility at the Belarusian Foreign Ministry will prepare the digest.□

The first issue will deal with the Belarusian authorities' attempts to walk a fine line during the Ukrainian crisis. Minsk managed to take the side of both parties without really offending or alienating either of them and endangering the country's immediate economic and political interests.

However, the regime's top priority in its foreign policy remains obtaining hard currency from its exports, by any means possible. Ambassador Latushka received a strong rebuke from President Lukashenka for casting doubt on the quality of Belarusian goods and the efficiency of the nation's existing foreign trade mechanisms.

Ukraine and Russia: Staying Friends with Both

The situation surrounding Ukraine has clearly dominated Belarusian foreign policy throughout March. The Belarusian authorities understand quite well the potential implications of any statement made on its behalf or practical step taken in the context of the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia. And they have carefully avoided making hasty comments or decisions and cautiously weighed their every word and action.

Lukashenka, usually eager to give two cents in any debate of

much lesser importance decided to wait several days before taking a public stance on the issue. His own foreign ministry, while also not rushing to clarify the country's position, even managed to preempt his announcement with one of its own.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry excels in verbal gymnastics and political manoeuvring. The MFA carefully worded its only official statement on the Ukrainian topic on 19 March, making it extremely ambiguous. Each sentence in this statement remains open to interpretation. Obviously, the Ministry had clear intentions to make it work out precisely this way. Its press service stubbornly refused to make any clarifying comment on the document after its publication.

Even when the foreign ministry had to vote against the Ukrainian resolution on the matter, they immediately downplayed their official decision. The head of the permanent mission to the UN, Andrei Dapkiunas, eloquently abstained from attending the meeting. The voting diplomat basically admitted that Belarus had acted against this resolution purely on a technicality ("Belarus supports the use of mechanisms that are less representative than those made afforded to it by the UN General Assembly").

Lukashenka, in his public appearances, and especially in his interview to Savik Shuster (a Ukrainian TV talk show host), spoke much more openly and made a number of powerful statements. However, even he remained unusually cautious in his remarks and made a visible effort to please both parties. He recognised that Crimea now belonged de facto to Russia. At the same time, his subsequent meeting with acting Ukrainian President Turchinov, to a great extent, provided a counter-balance to this unpleasant statement.

The regime has played its hand extremely well in this very delicate situation. Minsk has managed to take the side of each party without really offending or alienating either of them or endangering the country's immediate economic and

political interests. The brief recall of the Ukrainian Ambassador to Belarus from Minsk was largely a symbolic gesture.

Without a doubt both Ukraine and Russia (and especially Russia) would have preferred much stronger support from their neighbour (and ally). However, these two countries need Belarus' support quite desperately. They only take notice of statements and actions that speak in their favour and disregard (at least, publicly) those that do not suit them.

Russia was definitely pleased with the fact that Belarus recognised the de facto annexation of Crimea and voted, among a handful of other countries, against the UNGA resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. As Moscow's military ally, Minsk spoke out against the strengthening of NATO's military presence in neighbouring countries and responded positively to the increase of Russia's military presence in Belarus.

To Russia's satisfaction its Western neighbour described the regime change in Ukraine as an armed unconstitutional coup, presented the current Ukrainian authorities as weak and incompetent, and also spoke in favour of supporting language rights and other rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.

Minsk also spoke out very strongly against the federalisation of Ukraine. The de facto recognition of the country's new authorities, confirmed by Lukashenka and Turchinov's official meeting, and an agreement on the development of bilateral transit projects that bypass Russia remain the strongest gestures of support towards Ukraine among any of the CIS countries.

Belarus has clearly established a balance in its position, but even the balance that it has achieved would seem to favour Ukraine as the weaker party in the conflict. However,

the situation is developing rapidly and time will tell whether either of the two sides will manage to tip this balance in its favour.

Merchants or diplomats?

Promoting national trade and commercial interests remains among the top priorities of the diplomatic service of any nation. However, Belarusian diplomats, like few other countries, have to become deeply involved in following up on the most petty of commercial interest inquires. In carrying out their service to the state, Belarusian diplomats readily serve as substitutes for sales departments from both big and small domestic factories.

The ultimate (presidential) authority on the matter regularly greets its diplomats with strong rebukes and even the cautious attempts by professional Belarusian diplomats to rebel against such irrelevant duties have led to nothing. On 19 March, Lukashenka harshly criticised his ambassador to France, Pavel Latushka, for his remarks a few days prior on Belarusian state TV.

Latushka complained about the inferior quality of Belarusian goods and the fact that domestic manufacturers overburden foreign missions with their ill-prepared requests to push their products on foreign markets. Lukashenka, for his part, accused the former minister of culture for favouring the more bland and peaceful rhetoric of diplomacy.

Latushka has managed to remain active when it comes to promoting trade and investment. In his efforts to follow international standards, he has approached the issue at the appropriate level by making investment presentations at international business forums and speaking to trade-promotion agencies.

Latushka even plans to incorporate trade and investment presentations to the Days of Belarusian Culture even

programme. However, nobody can go unpunished for casting doubt on the efficiency of the Belarusian economic model and canonical omnipresence of the government, even in foreign trade.

Most of Latushka's colleagues perfectly understand what the government expects from them. Thus, the predominant topic of the foreign minister's news feed in March remained trade and investment at the ministerial or ambassadorial level.

The MFA's press releases covered trade-related meetings with representatives of more than two dozen countries from all over the world. The inauguration of a campaign for the launching of assembly plants for Belarusian tractors in Cambodia became the major event of Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei's visit to Southeast Asia.

Protecting traditional family: without much effect

Belarusian diplomacy is trying to capitalise on its long-standing experience in United Nations matters. Few UN bodies meet without Belarus trying to promote or defend its position of a specific issue of multilateral diplomacy. The recent 58th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women was no exception.

Not being recognised as a champion of gender equality, Belarus used this opportunity to promote traditional family values. Belarusian diplomats propagated conservative views of the country's official leader, which enjoy strong support in Belarusian society.

At this session, Belarus teamed up with the Holy See, Indonesia and Qatar, among other countries, in pushing through, what they considered, the relevant wording for the session's agreed conclusions. Contrary to the claims made by the Belarusian mission to the UN in a press release issued after the session closed, these attempts failed to bring about real change. The session's final document did not even mention

the term "traditional family".

ePramova, Mova Nanova, Local Elections Observation – Belarus Civil Society Digest

A new online platform ePramova invites Belarusians to discuss public issues with politicians and civil society activists. Its users can ask any question and watch videos of politicians answering them on the website.

How do Belarusian experts view the situation in Ukraine? International Consortium EuroBelarus and the Belarusian National Platform organised a roundtable in Minsk 'Ukraine Today: What We Can and Should Do in the Current Situation?'

A new web site Nazirannie2014.spring96.org aims to get Belarusians who are interested in election observation involved.

Campaigns and projects

[New discussion platform ePramova launched](#). The European Humanities University announces its participation in the launch of a new online platform called ePramova. ePramova is designed to encourage Belarusian citizens to become more actively involved in raising and discussing public issues that are important to them. The [ePramova platform allows users](#) to pose questions to political parties, political leaders and civic organisations that will in turn be answered. Filmed responses from respondents can be uploaded online.

[Mova Nanova goes to regions](#). On 10 March free Belarusian language courses *Mova Nanova/ Language in a New Way* were held in Gomel and attended by about 30 people. On 14 March *Mova Nanova* launched its courses in Hrodna. Earlier the civil initiative opened a branch [in Babrujsk](#). The organisers are extending the concept of non-academic study of the Belarusian language through interactive teaching methods outside of Minsk, where classes are very popular and attended by 200-300 people weekly.

[Human rights defenders launch an interactive web resource for election observers](#). Nazirannie2014.spring96.org site not only includes detailed instructions on how to become an observer and to behave properly at a polling station, but also includes unusual stories that have happened to observers during previous election observations. The new interactive platform of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" is aimed at involving Belarusians who are interested in assisting in election observations.

[Interactive platform Electby.org renewed its work](#). The platform of civic monitoring Electby.org allows anyone to document on an interactive map any violations recorded during the 2014 local election campaigns – campaign oddities, the pressure on democratic candidates and activists, manipulation of ballots, etc. One can submit evidence and add his/her "pinpoint" on the map through the web site or by e-mail, Twitter and SMS.

Seminars and discussions

[Seminar on CSOs' financial stability](#). On 29 March in Minsk, ICNL together with the Centre for Legal Transformation and the Assembly of Democratic NGOs will hold a seminar *Financial Stability of CSOs: International Experience and Perspective for Belarus*. The event seeks to present Belarusian and international legal expertise on how to ensure the financial stability of CSOs, as well as to discuss practical issues of

fundraising within the country and abroad. The seminar is open to all interested CSOs.

[Budzma's spring discussions.](#) The cultural campaign *Budzma!* invites people to a series of spring offline talk shows dedicated to the discussion of the interaction of culture and society. Every week the Minsk creative space THEKH will gather experts, researchers and celebrities to discuss the culture of 'being actual' (on 18 March), the culture of philanthropy (on 26 March), the culture of partnerships (on 1 April), etc.

[Research on visa regime intermediaries in Belarus.](#) On 13 March Minsk hosted a roundtable *Visa Mediation in Belarus: How to Reduce the Costs of Schengen Visas for Belarusians*. The BISS analyst Andriej Jelisejeu and the independent expert Julija Muryhyna presented the preliminary findings of their research *Some Aspects of Visa Regime Intermediaries in Belarus*. In their presentation the experts raised the issues on the visa mediation regulations of the EU according to its legislation and establishing the practise of mediation in Belarus.

[Social Entrepreneur course from Talaka.by.](#) Beginning 18 March, an innovative training course *Social Entrepreneur* has opened its course for registration. The course is being organised by the Talaka.by initiative and is guided at providing a comprehensive course of training for social entrepreneurs who will be able to implement social projects in the future in Belarus. Twenty of the best students will be given an opportunity to present their projects to potential investors. At the moment 190 people have already signed up to participate.

[Euromaidan from Belarusian perspective.](#) A roundtable entitled 'Ukraine Today: What We Can and Should Do in the Current Situation?' was held on 14 March in Minsk. The discussion was organised by the International Consortium EuroBelarus and

the Belarusian National Platform. The participants suggested creating a position of a special rapporteur within the National Platform to monitor the situation in Ukraine and offer a quick response, should it prove to be necessary.

[BAJ Statement on violence against journalists in Crimea](#). On 12 March the Board of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) adopted a statement which claims that a situation when journalists are prevented from performing professional duties is impermissible. BAJ calls on all people and organisations involved in the conflict to put an end to the violence and to ensure normal conditions for journalists work.

'Green' events

[Protecting nature in an urban environment](#). Is the title of a new project launched by the Brest regional branch of APB BirdLife Belarus. The project aims to preserve bio-diversity in Brest, improving residents' understanding of ecology and environmental protection, the introduction of interactive methods for Brest schools and institutions. The project is creating a unique complex interactive training program of environmental education in an urban environment.

[Online monitoring of biodiversity](#). *APB-BirdLife Belarus* NGO launched an online database for monitoring areas important to bio-diversity conservation, namely, areas important for birds. Now anyone can view the data collected and use it both for professional purposes and general guidance. Any user can contribute to the map and thus help to collect information on areas important for birds, monitor their condition, as well as join in to help solve any potential threats against them.

[School of Environmental Activism](#) announces a call for fellows for 2014. The mission of the School of Environmental Activism is to develop ecological thinking and expand the "green" movement in Belarus through a series of trainings. Organised by the Green Alliance, an annual school provides practical

skills and offers its fellows the chance to design and implement eco-projects or have internships in other Belarusian CSOs. Deadline for applications is 29 March.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Ukrainian Conflict in Belarusian State Media – Belarus State TV Digest

The Belarus state media widely covered the crisis in neighbouring Ukraine. Some of those featured by Belarusian state TV argued that external forces, including the EU and USA, provoked and financially aided the protesters to overthrow the government in Ukraine.

Others believe that the Ukrainian authorities were completely detached from the people so the Ukrainian events were not surprising.

At the same time, a visit by Uladzimir Makei to the Baltic States drew the attention of the media. Journalists pointed out that Belarus' relationship with Vilnius and Riga remain positive. The officials also discussed improving Minsk-Brussels relations.

Ukraine

Catastrophic situation in Ukraine. According to unnamed experts quoted by Belarusian television, the chances for a civilised settlement of the conflict essentially zero. The Ukrainians are clearing the shelves of products in stores because they are increasingly worried about the developing situation in the country.

Long queues to ATMs prove that they also fear losing their savings, while international banks are closing their branch headquarters in Kiev. "Nobody knows what will happen in the country tomorrow," one journalist noted. Fires, pogroms and chaos remain Ukraine's present reality. "The most horrible event is the death of dozens of people. This is already a national catastrophe," state TV journalist concluded.

The high price of the present political crisis. A state TV reporter commented on impeachment of the president Victor Yanukovich, while new elections look like they will cost Ukraine US\$2bn. However, the country can receive financial aid from abroad, an amount estimated to be around \$35bn for both this year and the year ahead, she continued.

The new Ukrainian authorities have already requested financial aid from their international partners, including Poland and the USA. "It has already been proposed that an international donors' conference should be organised with the EU countries, USA, representatives of the International Monetary Fund and other international institutions," the journalist added.

Yanukovich met with representatives of media in Rostov-on-Don. He stated that was still the official head of Ukraine. Yanukovich also apologised that he was not able to prevent bloodshed. "Experts say that Ukraine is on the brink of economic collapse," the news reports. According to the National Bank and Ministry of Finance, the treasury has been looted and is barren, she continued.

To save the economy, the new Prime Minister

Arseniy Yatseniuk does not exclude the possibility of increasing the price of gas, as well as cutting subsidies and social programmes throughout Ukraine. The reporter also noted the outbreak of protests in Crimea, with its participants do not recognise the new Ukrainian leadership. The Council of Crimea has elected a new Prime Minister for the autonomous republic, Sergei Aksyonov.

[Moscow decides to intervene with its military in Crimea.](#) The Council of the Russian Federation supported Putin's proposal for the use of the armed forces on the territory of Crimea. Earlier, the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, requested Putin to help secure peace in the region, the journalist reports.

ONT TV talk shows on Ukraine. Recently the state TV talk show [Pazicija](#) covered the conflict in Ukraine twice. The host of the show, [Vadzim Hihin](#) invited a few guest speakers, among them representatives from the minority Ukrainian and Russian communities in Belarus.

The first show was called "Ukraine: Between Peace and War" introduced the situation in Ukraine to the audience with some brief reportage done by by Tengiz Dumbadze, an ONT reporter. At the very beginning he explained that he aimed to present an objective version of events, and thus visited both Eastern and Western regions.

People in the East are less aggressive than in the West of Ukraine. Dumbadze noted that 70-80% of the protesters in Kiev came from western Ukraine. In his opinion the Donetsk region has always been the most hard-working and stable, and even today there is relative stability. In the eastern region of the country, people work hard, mine coal and earn money for the good of the country. "A fact is a fact. Here people talk less about politics, and instead just work," he commented.

The reporter presented the opinions of the students from the east who argued for a peaceful settlement of the crisis and compromise between all parties. Later on, the ONT journalist visited Lviv where he talked to some old men who criticised Yanukovich and his entourage with sharp words.

The correspondent commented that Ukraine's politicians failed to learn anything from the previous revolution and again created problems and suffering for ordinary people, and they should rather think now how to prevent any further escalation of the conflict.

The Ukrainians envy Belarusians' political leadership. The ONT correspondent talked to some random people in Eastern Ukraine and some of them praised Belarusian leader, Alexander Lukashenka. "A leader like in your country is needed here," an older man stated. According to the journalist, politicians have divided people into two camps and the nation has become the hostage of its politicians.

On another occasion, the talk show Pazicija again focused on the Ukrainian conflict. The programme was entitled, "The Ukrainian Tragedy" and was hosted Maira Mora, the Head of the EU delegation to Belarus, [Yauheni Preiherman](#) from the Liberal Club and several government-friendly analysts and activists.

Why the EU wanted to sign an association agreement with a corrupt Ukraine? One of the commentators noted that there were two nations in Ukraine with completely different mentalities. Another participant argued that the former Ukrainian authorities have parted ways with society. If everything would be going well in the country, nobody would take to the streets to protest.

The moderator asked Moira why the EU wanted to sign an association agreement with a country like Ukraine. The official replied that the EU was a tool for changes, not a goal itself. "It is a tool to obtain the know-how, and it is

readily available, free of charge," she said.

A Communist Party representative ironically commented that a ban of the Communist Party in Ukraine meant the new values have made the country truly democratic, with plenty of freedom and space for diverse opinions. He suggested that the USA and Europe inspired and financed the Ukrainian revolt. In his opinion, the Ukrainians are one with the Russian and Belarusian nations.

Participants pointed out the threat stemming from radical groups in Ukraine. Moira argued that the EU did not financially support any of these groups.

Domestic Affairs

[Positive dynamics in EU-Belarus relations.](#) Alexander Lukashenka met with Uladzimir Makei, the head of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss politics.

"There is no point in pursuing some kind of global politics. If we have a place where we have economic interests, regarding the diversification of our exports and external trade, then we have politics there," Lukashenka stated.

They also discussed the improving relations with the European Union. "No serious breakthrough has been reached. There are real obstacles in our relationship, which cannot be, unfortunately, removed in a day or a month," Makei said after the meeting.

The State TV journalist commented that Minsk is ready for dialogue both with its European partners and the USA, but "not at the cost of restricting our national interests."

[Makei visits Belarus' good neighbours: Latvia...](#) The reported goal of the official visit was strengthening bilateral relations with Latvia, but also Minsk's co-operation with

the EU. This time, more attention was paid by both sides to Belarus' ties with the EU, the journalist emphasised.

...and Lithuania. Minsk is enjoying rather fruitful co-operation with Vilnius as well. "Exemplary Belarusian-Lithuanian diplomatic relations show that stability is a wonderful foundation for mutually beneficial co-operation," the journalist concluded.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1) and ONT. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

What Should the Belarusians Expect in the Event of the Crimean War?

The Russian Parliament has approved the Russian president's request to use military forces in Ukraine. People sneer in social networks: he asked to approve the bringing of troops, which are already there.

But actually there is nothing to laugh about: while there is no gunshot, Russia tries to make itself at home in Crimea relying on force and Kyiv speaks about "direct aggression". Minsk, the Kremlin's nearest ally, still keeps silence.

Meanwhile, the high noon comes for Aliaksandr Lukashenka. One thing is abstract reasoning in the spirit of "We won't allow the Maidan". The other thing is to take a stance in the situation when Belarus' closest military and political ally and the important partner in the Collectiver Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) invades the territory of the Belarus' southern neighbour and the international community qualifies it in unison as an invasion.

This war is against the hair for Minsk

Russian and Belarusian generals have repeatedly staged mock wars with hypothetical enemies intimidating Poles and Baltics and the post-Soviet allies got everything tiptop on practice grounds. But it is quite another matter here, in the Ukrainian question.

On the one hand, the Belarusian "brothers in arms" supposedly should walk in the footsteps of Moscow especially since it depends only on the latter's mercy whether the ever less competitive economic model of Lukashenka will survive tomorrow.

On the other hand, foreign trade interests of Belarus are strongly tied with Ukraine: last year, the turnover amounted to about seven billions dollars with a large positive balance for us.

And indeed, despite all integration rhetoric of the Belarusian authorities, they must feel chills: here it is, the empire's evil grin! Whatever agreements you sign with them, tomorrow this bear can get mad and hit the sovereignty of any country, which the Kremlin sees as its zone of interests, with his paw.

And here is another zesty moment. In 1994, Russia acted as a guarantor of independence and integrity of Ukraine under the Budapest Memorandum. Moscow, alongside with Washington and London, gave exactly the same guarantees to Belarus in acknowledgement of renunciation of nuclear weapons. But if

today this agreement is violated in respect of Kyiv, then Minsk also is not immune from the same treachery of the eastern "guarantor".

The top Belarusian authorities have a motive to scratch their head strongly. So far, Belarus' Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej spoke out on this hot subject on 28 February in Riga. He spoke in a well-rounded way but clearly not in Russia's support: "The most important thing is to preserve the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine".

Lukashenka will seek to maintain neutrality to the maximum extent

In the context of the acute phase of the crisis in the relations between Russia and Ukraine "Lukashenka will seek to maintain neutrality to the maximum extent ", said Valiery Karbalievich, an expert of the Minsk analytical centre Strategy, in a commentary for Naviny.by. At the same time, he predicts that Moscow will exert pressure on Minsk, seeking support for its position on Ukraine.

Similar forecast was made by an analyst from BISS (Vilnius), Dzianis Mieljantsou, in his interview to BelaPAN: "There is a danger that Belarus will be embroiled in a military conflict and that Russia will try somehow to win over its closest military allies, including Belarus, not in the military sense but in the political and ideological one".

Will they twist Lukashenka's arms?

Here, a parallel with the events of 2008 suggests itself when the Kremlin twisted arms demanding to support the outcome of the war from Georgia and to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Lukashenka stubbornly refused and did not recognise them.

Although, he betrayed the secret later: he had a bartering with Russia's then-president, Dmitry Medvedev, about whether Moscow was willing to compensate the costs of the inevitable worsening of the relations with the West (you'd think, they were excellent without this!)

Medvedev did not promise the payment, and the case dried up. Lukashenka released a political prisoner, Aliaksandr Kazulin, and soon after he received a loan in the amount of 3.5 billion dollars from the IMF together with thawing of relations with the European Union and the United States.

But now the situation is different in many ways. Belarus' economic dependence on Moscow intensified and no quick and large-scale progress is expected by analysts in the relations with the EU and the USA even if the existing political prisoners are released (as we see, the Belarusian regime can hardly do without this standard set by its very nature).

And even if the IMF lends some money it will necessarily be tied to painful reforms, which Lukashenka does not like much generally and especially on the eve of the presidential election.

So if Russia manages to wrest Crimea, at some stage Minsk can be nailed down to the point that it would be forced to recognise grudgingly the sham independence or even annexation of this territory, said Andrej Fiodarau, a foreign policy analyst from Minsk, in a commentary to Naviny.by.

Bordiuzha spoke as a Russian general

Meanwhile, Nikolay Bordiuzha, the CSTO's Secretary General, spoke in unison with the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Parliament on 28 February: he threw a stone into the new authorities of Ukraine for having violated the settlement agreement signed with Viktor Yanukovich, and generally, "[the Western countries – translator's note] basically do not recognise legitimacy of the duly elected President of

Ukraine".

Please note that the CSTO includes, apart from Russia, five more countries, including Belarus, but it looks like no one really asks their opinion. The CSTO's Secretary General spoke as a Russian Colonel-General.

Meanwhile, Nursultan Nazarbaev, for instance, hardly approves these Putin's militaristic exercises: there are regions in Kazakhstan where the ethnic Russians dominate as they do in Ukraine. And in Belarus, not only opposition activists are set against the Russian military intervention in Crimea; the authorities also do not like this turn of events.

It seems that there is no single country in the CSTO (and in the entire CIS), which is willing to applaud Russia's activities in Crimea. Here you are with the "brotherhood in arms".

In the opinion of Valiery Karbalievich, against the backdrop of the events in Crimea "the CSTO question gets hung up altogether". Moreover, "if it comes to a war in Crimea, the agreement on creation of the Eurasian Union can get hung up as well", the analyst believes.

Belarusian sovereignty is also under attack

Politicised Belarusians, who are following the invasion of Crimea intensely, write in social networks: this is what awaits us if the country chooses the European way (which, by the way, is favoured already today by a relative majority of population).

Moscow's sinister attack against Ukraine, which got off the hook of the Eurasian integration, strengthens the democratic part of the Belarusian society in its conviction that there can be no friendship with an empire, whichever mantle the latter clothes itself into. And the idea of establishing a Russian air base in Belarus is now unlikely to be particularly

attractive even to Lukashenka's hard-core electorate.

In principle, Minsk should urgently seek a counterbalance to Moscow's imperial ambitions. Today, they should at least release the political prisoners and thus unfreeze the relations with Europe and the United States. It would somehow expand the space for geopolitical manoeuvring.

But the issue of national security and preservation of sovereignty is a comprehensive one for Belarus. The worst thing today is the hook of subsidies, incapacity of the economic model, which forces into making concessions and getting involved in Putin's integration projects.

"The Kremlin does not have to obtain something in Belarus by force. The latter gets to this trap by itself anyway", says Andrej Fiodarau. If Russia dares to seize Crimea, it will have nothing to lose in terms of image, so Belarus at some point can easily be "turned into the eighth federal district", if needed, says the analyst.

In his opinion, the obstacle to reforms and improvement of relations with the West is the fact that the objective number one for Lukashenka is to retain personal power. "[He has] no resources or political will to distance [himself] from Moscow", the source of Naviny.by sums up.

Thus, the events around Moscow sharpen again the most acute political problem of Belarus, and namely: while the undemocratic personalistic regime prevails here, which sticks as a leech to Russian resources, the country's sovereignty will remain under attack.

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