

Can Belarus Stick to Neutrality Despite Russian Pressure?

Last week, pro-government Russian experts and media launched a new series of attacks on the Belarusian government. Minsk, they insisted, is going the way of Yanukovich's Ukraine.

Russian commentators agree on that regardless of their ideological colours. Be it the liberal *Kommersant* daily, government-affiliated think tanks or the radical right-wing *Zavtra* daily. They warn Lukashenka of Yanukovich's fate.

The attacks have been triggered by Lukashenka's statement that the issue of the Russian airbase is [far from settled](#). Minsk already irritated Moscow by its cautious building up neutrality since the late 2000s.

Moreover, while earlier Minsk could collude in Russia's politics with influential right- and left-wing elements who dreamt of restoring a multinational empire, it now has to deal with new powerful forces which hate compromise with allies like Lukashenka. Exclusive Russian nationalism is ever more influencing Moscow's policy.

Rampant Russian Nationalism

At the beginning of October the Belarusian Embassy in Moscow held an expert video conference between Moscow and Minsk on the *"Prospects of Belarus-Russian Relations in the Context of Presidential Election in Belarus."* From both the Belarusian and the Russian sides, only well-known experts close to the respective governments participated. For Belarus, there were [Vadzim Hihin](#), Yury Shautsou, [Siarhei Kizima](#) and Alyaksandr

Shpakouski.

Commenting on the video conference, the Leading Research Fellow of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) Oleg Nemenskii lashed out at the Belarusian participants. According to him, "the main thing which united the Belarusian experts was their hate towards the Russian World." Moreover, "Minsk has been so frightened by the changes that occurred in Russia in spring 2014 that it does not even try to find a *modus vivendi* [with Russia](#)."

Bolsheviks split Western regions from Great Russia in order to implement "the un-Russian national projects of Ukraine and Belarus"

This prominent expert of a think-tank affiliated with the Russian government openly expresses radical Russian nationalist views. Earlier, he accused, in an article, the Bolsheviks of splitting Western regions from Great Russia in order to implement "the un-Russian national projects of Ukraine and Belarus." He urged that the Soviet heritage be overcome and that a "Russian national state" be formed from a "large part of the Russian Federation, Belarus, most a bigger part of Ukraine, Transnistria and a large part of Kazakhstan."

Russian nationalist experts seemingly believe this rhetoric. They argue that Lukashenka with his doubtful loyalty to Putin's policies does not represent the Belarusian people. They refer to presumably neutral surveys of public opinion in Belarus which show high support for Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Just a decade ago, Russian nationalists (to be differentiated from imperialist groups which reject its more ethnically-based ideas) existed as a marginal group without serious political clout. Now, they grow ever stronger in Putin's state as another recent political show has demonstrated, too.

On 25-26 September, the conference “*Russophobia and Information War Against Russia*” in Moscow for the first time featured a series of presentations on problem of Russophobia in Belarus. It also alleged that Russophobia was committed by the [Belarusian state](#). The presenters included prominent Russian nationalists from Belarus who had challenged the Belarusian government, like Andrei Herashchanka sacked from Belarusian public service for Russian chauvinism.

The event served as a stern warning to Lukashenka because the conference was not a shabby meeting of right-wing radicals. Two organisations close to the Kremlin and a group of deputies of the Russian Duma had organised the event and Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin spoke at it.

No Friends in Moscow?

The lack of acceptance for more neutral Belarusian positions seems to be [universal in Moscow](#). Last Thursday, Maxim Yusin wrote in the liberal Kommersant daily that Lukashenka in his negotiations with Moscow was feeling surer than never before. Minsk pursues a multidirectional foreign policy, and foreign powers strive for influence over Belarus. According to Yusin, this policy of balancing between Russia and the West is similar to that of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich before his toppling in 2014. The same fate can befall the Belarusian leader, he implies.

In the Zavtra daily on 12 October, an influential Russian nationalist politician Konstantin Zatulin commented in the same vein,

Lukashenka and the West are coming closer to one another. He, in fact, has occupied the niche which earlier was occupied by Ukraine in the former Soviet Union. That is the niche of a mediator between the East and West. Russia does not need such a mediator. But it is ideal to which at this stage aspires

the Belarusian leader.

Remarkably, it was the newspaper which for many years fiercely supported Lukashenka that has printed Zatulin's words. Minsk used to be able to reach parts of Russian establishment through Zavtra and its authors.

Minsk Heading for Neutrality?

The Belarusian authorities felt the Russian establishment's tilt towards a more [aggressive nationalistic policy](#) and have responded accordingly. Although the Belarusian Constitution declares the neutrality of Belarus, for many years it has remained a dead letter. That changed in 2006 as [divergences with Russian foreign policy](#) emerged.

Minsk continued to go out of its way to preserve friendly relations with Moscow, yet established good relations with Ukrainian president Yushchenko and [Georgian president Saakashvili](#), and refused to recognise Russian-supported independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Minsk also refused to [extradite Bakiev](#) to the new pro-Russian government of Kyrgystan. Belarus's refusal to accept Russia's annexation of Crimea and ambivalent stance on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine are just some of the latest illustrations.

In the eyes of pro-Putin Russian politicians Belarus can either be with Moscow on all and every issue or against it

Belarus effectively started to implement the neutrality clause of the Constitution. That does not mean automatic acceptance of this neutrality by others. In the eyes of pro-Putin Russian politicians Belarus can either be with Moscow on all and every issue or against it. It cannot simply be an ally with its own position on some issues, even if this is a neutral position which does not oppose Russia.

Unfortunately, Minsk [finds it difficult](#) to persuade Western countries about its possibilities to act independently of Moscow, too. After his recent visit to Berlin, the chief of the Belarusian *Nasha Niva* daily Andrei Dynko wrote that German politicians do not trust Lukashenka and believe that the Kremlin can enforce any of its decisions on Belarus, including the plans for an airbase.

Indeed, Belarusian neutrality is very limited and the Kremlin maintains significant influence in the country. Yet Finland after WWII succeeded in building neutrality in not identical yet comparable conditions of tight Soviet control. Helsinki merely avoided confrontation with Moscow, accepted legitimate Soviet interests while building its own country and gradually developing more independent and neutral policy. Belarus could do the same. Maybe, its the only way to survive as an independent nation.

Belarusian Combatants in Ukraine: Heroes or Criminals?

On 29 August, Ales Charkashyn, a member of tactical volunteer group Belarus Fighting in Donbas, died from combat wounds. This is the first known death of a Belarusian citizen fighting on the Ukrainian side.

No Ukrainian diplomats attended Charkashyn's funeral in Brest yesterday. Kyiv has been reluctant to acknowledge the devotion of Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine by awarding them Ukrainian citizenship and see them as an obstacle in relations with Minsk.

The Belarusian side, on the other hand, continues to say that

it will persecute Belarusians who join the fight in Ukraine, on either the Ukrainian or the Russian side.

Belarusian Volunteers in Ukraine

The true scale of [Belarusian involvement](#) in the Ukrainian conflict remains unknown. Most Belarusians conceal their participation in order to avoid persecution at home. Estimates in the media, such as those given by Belsat TV, range from a few dozen to several hundred volunteers.

Several political activists and individuals formerly recognised as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International have joined the fight in Ukraine. Vasily Parfiankou, who served a prison sentence for participating in protests after the rigged 2010 presidential election, has been serving in Ukraine since last winter.

On 25 July, co-chair of the Young Front Eduard Lobau published a video announcement stating that he had arrived in Ukraine "to fight the common enemy". Arrested for organising protests following the 2010 election, Lobau left Belarusian prison just six months prior to the announcement.

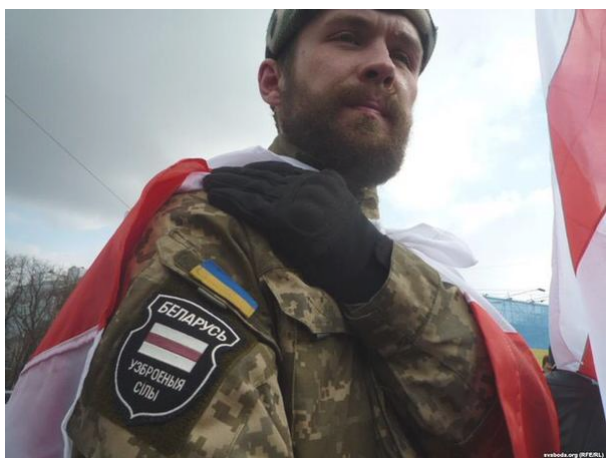
The involvement of well-known Belarusian political activists in the Ukrainian conflict who do not conceal their identities draws media attention. Yet according to an anonymous volunteer interviewed by the European Radio for Belarus, the majority of Belarusians fighting for Ukraine have no political background and speak Russian. Many of them have joined the tactical Belarus group, which belongs to Ukrainian militant group Right Sector (Pravy Sektor).

Belarusians Die for Ukraine

On the night of 10 August, the Belarus group came under fire. The Ukrainian coordinator of Belarusian volunteers, Vitaly

Tsilizhenko, died right away. Charkashyn, 33, was sent to intensive care with shards in his head, chest and kidney. Ukrainian doctors fought to save his life for two weeks, but he died on 29 August.

Since the early 1990s Charkashyn has belonged to the democratic movement in Belarus. He studied at the Tavriyskiy Christian Institute in Ukraine and previously served as the leader of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party in Brest, a city of 310,000.



At the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict, Charkashyn assisted with humanitarian aid delivery. Eventually he became a soldier. Charkashyn seemed like a quiet and religious man when the author met him several years ago.

Charkashyn is the first Belarusian known to have died fighting on the Ukrainian side; several other Belarusian volunteers died fighting for the separatist cause. Some 150 people attended Charkashyn's funeral on 3 September. The crowd chanted "Heroes don't die" as his coffin was carried through the streets of Brest.

Several leaders of the Belarusian opposition attended, including Pavel Seviarynets of the Belarusian Christian Democratic party and former political prisoners Zmicier and Nasta Dashkevich of the officially banned Young Front. No Ukrainian diplomats appeared.

Are Belarusian Fighters for Ukraine Criminals?

The majority of Belarusian volunteers fight in combat groups such as the Right Sector, a Ukrainian far-right organisation frowned upon by the Ukrainian authorities and the international community. A possible reason for this is that only Ukrainian citizens can join the official Ukrainian army. Right Sector, the only pro-Ukraine combat group unaffiliated with the Ukrainian government, may be the only choice for foreigners seeking to support the Ukrainian cause.

According to one volunteer, even though all Belarusians who return home from the Ukrainian front are convicted as mercenaries, they do not qualify for refugee status in Ukraine. Were the Ukrainian government to enforce its laws, it could start deporting the volunteers, most of whom stay in Ukraine longer than the laws allow.

Even though Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and Minister of the Interior Arsen Avakov once promised to award citizenship to Belarusian fighters, most volunteers still have no Ukrainian citizenship. Two Ukrainian parliamentary deputies close to the volunteer corps, Igor Guz and Dmitry Timchuk, proposed a law that would permit granting Ukrainian citizenship to foreign volunteers fighting on the Ukrainian side.

[The only Belarusian fighter](#) who has received citizenship to date, Sergei Korotkich, has a dubious past. Korotkich had led a neo-fascist organisation in Russia and participated in a crackdown on Belarusian pro-democracy activists in the 1990s.

Belarusian volunteers who spoke with Belarus Digest named two reasons for the reluctance of the Ukrainian authorities to grant citizenship to Belarusian volunteers. One reason is the current dysfunctionality of the Ukrainian state. A no less

important reason is Ukrainian concern about the ongoing negotiations between Minsk and Kyiv.

The Belarusian government threatens to criminally prosecute Belarusian volunteers as mercenaries

According to volunteer Andrej Strizhak who spoke to Belarus Digest, Ukrainian MPs drafted a law awarding a Hero's Medal to Belarusian Mikhail Zhiznieuski, [shot dead](#) at the Euromaidan protests, but the draft was never voted on in parliament, "perhaps due to a political agreement between Belarus and Ukraine". Instead of the Hero's Medal, Poroshenko presented the Order of the Heavenly Hundred Heroes, a lesser award, to Zhiznieuski's parents.

The Belarusian government threatens to criminally prosecute Belarusian volunteers as mercenaries. The KGB reportedly summons relatives of volunteers fighting for Ukraine for questioning.

"Do you understand that people go there to kill and then return and live among us?", Chairman of the Belarusian KGB [Valiery Vakulchyk](#) told the media in June 2015. He said that these people should face the consequences of their actions, sooner or later. At the same time, no criminal cases have been initiated to date, possibly because all the volunteers have remained in Ukraine.

Just a year ago, the Ukrainian authorities welcomed foreigners willing to fight for Ukraine. Today, they view Belarusian volunteers as a liability rather than an asset. The volunteers deserve more respect than the Ukrainian authorities give them.

Belarus and the Ukraine Conflict: More Losses Than Gains?

Although the Belarusian authorities have managed to promote their country in a favourable light by hosting the high-level talks on Ukraine, they seriously worry about the direct spillover of the Ukrainian conflict.□

Belarus has already suffered economic losses from the Donbass war as its trade with Ukraine has fallen by more than 40% in 2015. In addition, it has hosted more than [100,000 refugees](#) and had to resist significant Kremlin's pressure.

Seeking to prevent the pressure, Minsk decided to avoid siding with anybody and developing relations with all involved parties. Maintaining friendly relations with Moscow and Kyiv, it rekindled its relationship with Europe. Now, Minsk sent another message as President Lukashenka urged Americans to participate more actively in the Ukrainian peace process.

Economy Decides

Minsk's trade links explain much in its behaviour regarding Ukrainian crisis. Having a fragile national economy, the Belarusian government cares about Ukraine as a partner. While bilateral trade in goods in 2012 made up almost \$8bn, last year it fell to just \$5bn. It was 7.5% of the whole Belarusian foreign trade. That is significantly less than with Russia (48.7%) yet still a lot.

Even more important is the considerable positive trade balance that Belarus constantly had in trade with Ukraine, because Minsk for years has been struggling with a large negative trade balance in Belarus' foreign trade.

Minsk opted for its current neutral position taking into account not only Russia's and Ukraine's significance for the national economy but also the EU's. After all, more than 30% of Belarusian exports in 2014 went to the EU, and about 20% of imports came from there.

To revive trade with Ukraine, Minsk agreed last month to wider use of Ukrainian hryvna in bilateral trade despite obvious risks and losses related to such a decision. The significance of the links with Ukraine for Minsk were emphasised by Minsk daring to supply Kyiv with [military equipment](#).

Through Ukraine to Europe?

So far, Belarus has managed to minimise its losses related to the Ukrainian crisis. Further Minsk even succeeded in using the Ukrainian crisis to rekindle its relations with European nations. The OSCE Chairman Ivica Dačić during his visit to Belarus on 21 July announced, "Minsk has become a synonym of peaceful regulation in Ukraine."

Belarus could host a secretariat for the talks on Ukraine

The exact role of the Belarusian government in Ukraine's armistice talks remains a moot point, although it clearly plays some part and wishes to play an even bigger one. On 9 July, Belarusian Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) said that the Belarus could host a secretariat for the talks on Ukraine. The Belarusian web-portal Tut.by commented: "That will to the maximal extent possible bring Belarus closer to the role of mediator in the peace process."

Unlike relations with Europe, Minsk's [relations with US](#) remain essentially in the same troubled state. Washington recently extended sanctions, and put Belarus into the group of the worst violators of human trade, worse even than Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Hence the new moves by Minsk. Last week, Lukashenka met with US Republican congressmen Dana Rohrabacher, Gregory Meeks and Stephen Cohen. On Tuesday, in the presence of a journalist of US-run Radio of Liberty he emphasised the necessity of bigger US engagement in solving the Ukrainian crisis.

Minsk's Fears: Real and Imaginary

Nevertheless, the uneasiness that Minsk feels about the conflict to the south of the Belarusian border find its expression in many occasions. For example, usually Belarusian Special Operation Forces celebrate Paratroopers Day at their military bases. This year, however, the Belarusian army made a point of staging military shows of special forces in the centres of Brest and Vitsebsk where the most renowned special forces units are stationed.

Celebrations included demonstrations of combat skills and eloquent gestures. Thus, in Brest, [on the Ukrainian border](#), the show featured Belarus' deputy defence minister, commander of Belarus' special operations forces and deputy commander of Russia's paratroop forces. The demonstration of force became even more pronounced as one of the speakers announced: “We are not the Health Ministry, we will not warn [before acting].”

Belarusian officials warned Belarusians who participate in hostilities in Ukraine about criminal persecution for mercenary activities

Top Belarusian officials openly discuss what they consider a threat. On 4 August, Lukashenka told journalists, “there is a lot of violations on the [Belarus-Ukrainian] border... Violations ranging from smuggling to – what worries me the most – infiltration of persons with weapons.” Two days earlier, acting Secretary of the Security Council Stanislau Zas' also assured a Belarusian TV channel that the government was taking measures to prevent weapons from Ukraine entering

Belarus.

On 11 June, the chairman of the Belarusian State Security Committee [Valery Vakulchyk](#) said that Belarusians who participate in hostilities in Ukraine will face criminal persecution for mercenary activities. "Men killing men... How can we accept it? And then they will come here with the experience of killing people." So far, Belarusian state bodies, however, have not launched criminal investigations against any of these combatants fighting on either side.

That Minsk avoids unnecessarily antagonising Kyiv is clear from this stance even as it is widely publicised of cases of participants in Donbass war. For instance, on 27 July, a co-chairman of the oppositional organisation "Young Front" Eduard Lobau announced that he had gone to Ukraine to "aid brotherly people in its struggle against the common enemy [Russia]."

He is not the first opposition activist to do so, and earlier former political prisoner Vasil' Parfiankou also joined the battalion of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists. These are not individual cases. On Friday, Nasha Niva announced that all Belarusian nationalists fighting in Ukraine would be assembled into one military unit.

Some public statements of Belarusian officials may follow not only from their concerns about the destabilisation in Ukraine but also from the domestic political context. A case in point is the statement by Zas' who on 2 July said,

We are carefully watching the situation in Ukraine. It is necessary to fortify the borders, to maintain public order. And the most important point is that our people, our countrymen shall understand the value of peace and serenity, realise that they are fragile and defend them.

Before the October presidential election in Belarus, these words sound as a warning about danger of [massive protest](#)

[actions.](#)

Belarus faces ever more risks related to the conflict in Ukraine. These risks can ruin the country and its independence, if destabilisation and foreign intervention occurs. Yet these risks can also help Minsk to move on the way to changes and building a viable independent statehood. Both scenarios are probable, and much depends not on Belarus.