

Looking for 'happiness on a different part of the planet'



"[N]o one nation can meet the challenges of the 21st century on its own," acknowledged the president of the United States Barack Obama in his speech to Chinese officials today. Uncharacteristically, his Belarusian counterpart seems to agree, at least in principle.

Despite its advantageous geopolitical location between the West and Russia, Belarus resigned itself to political isolation in the late 1990s. However, the change is in the air. Hockey ace Alyaksandr Lukashenka has started aiming at a different net and hopes to join the rest of Eastern European team in cooperating with the West. The Belarusian President has even promised to restore mutual diplomatic presence with the United States, if Washington lifts economic sanctions.

The leader hurried to explain that his civilized tone with the West is not a result of some "bargaining, over-compromising or PR." Indeed, it would be hard to reach a compromise with President Lukashenka. However, Lukashenka has implemented a few liberal reforms, released most of political prisoners, and markedly loosened control of the economy. To be sure, Lukashenka clarified that Belarus "has its own way forwards" and will not develop "according to one stereotype, to somebody's dictation." In presidential lingo, this probably means that Lukashenka's authoritarian leadership style and human rights violations will continue. After all, in his view,

“Belarus doesn’t have less democracy than its neighbors.”

In return to Lukashenka’s overtures to the West, the EU lifted the travel ban on the President and his retinue last fall. This May, Belarus – along with other five former Soviet republics – was invited to participate in the Eastern Partnership, a project intended to foster closer economic and political ties with the EU. Moreover, Minsk has collected a \$1.5 billion from the International Monetary Fund and is waiting for another \$1.36 billion from the IMF and \$200 million from the World Bank.

Since Lukashenka’s gaze turned westward, the “union state” with Moscow has become “a neverending construction project.” Increasingly more “controversial matters” are emerging “in relations with brotherly Russia,” as the Belarusian President noted. On July 22, Belarus urged its citizens to obey Georgian laws when traveling to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin called Lukashenka’s move “bizarre,” his behavior is actually becoming more predictable as it now corresponds to a broader trend exhibited by leaders of most post-Soviet states, including Ukraine and Georgia. Russia’s economy is sinking, and it is smarter to sail away and look for happiness on a different part of the planet, as Lukashenka himself aptly noted in May. Had it not been for Moscow’s generous gas subsidies and the need to sell Belarusian goods on the Russian markets, the Belarusian-Russian symbiosis would have ended even sooner.

“It’s a very difficult thing to deal with, loss of empire,” US Vice President Joe Biden noted in the interview at the end of a four-day trip to Ukraine and Georgia. His ‘condolences’ have come at the right time. Russia’s influence in Near Abroad has weakened as the country struggles domestically. On the one hand, giving (subsidizing) is no longer tenable in the dire economic situation; on the other, strong-arming its neighbors

now brings too little bang for the buck. In fact, flexing its muscles in the Near Abroad has only backfired. The EU was spurred to start a new pipeline through Turkey and southern Europe to bypass mercurial Moscow. The United States neither canceled its missile defense plans in Europe nor backed down from supporting Georgia and Ukraine. Even Belarus failed to follow the suit of Nicaragua by recognizing the breakaway Georgian provinces.

Losing an empire is tough indeed. How is the empire's backyard braving such a 'loss'? Those less fortunate in the Russian orbit have to endure Moscow's tightened grip. Thousands of Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Ukraine's gas flow was shut twice in the last three years, but neither Tbilisi nor Kiev returned under the Russian wing. The grip on other former Russian satellites – especially on the few acolytes that stayed loyal after the Soviet implosion – has actually loosened. Belarus belongs to the latter.

However, President Lukashenka admitted to still feeling “a threat of graceless great power statehood” as Russia froze its \$500-million loan in May and announced construction of a new pipeline to cut off Belarus from its oil supply route to Europe in June. The rules are being redrawn, and although it is unlikely that Belarus-Russia brotherhood will end for good, the Belarusian foreign policy is clearly becoming more balanced.

Read more on the subject in Wall Street Journal, “[Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S.](#)”