

International support grows for Belarusian peacekeepers in Ukraine

At a press conference on 17 November 2017 in Minsk, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel described his meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, in which they “talked a lot about Ukraine,” in positive terms.

The upbeat summary is a remarkable surprise. On 15 November, Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey announced his country’s willingness to dispatch peacekeeping forces to Eastern Ukraine. In addition, for the first time, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov voiced Russia’s support for the deployment of Belarusian peacekeepers, which Minsk has repeatedly proposed since 2014.

Thus, Belarus appears to be on its way to secure the support of key international players for an active role in defusing the Ukrainian crisis. The deployment of peacekeepers in Eastern Ukraine offers Belarus a chance to raise its international status.

Minsk finally accepted as a peacekeeper?

Minsk has sought to play a peacemaking role in the Ukraine crisis for years now. A new window of opportunity emerged on 5 September when Russian President Vladimir Putin called for the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in Eastern Ukraine. On 9 November, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the US government—it did not specify what part—suggested the deployment of 20,000 peacekeepers in Eastern Ukraine because it believed Putin might be interested in ending the conflict.

The [Belarusian government](#) is undoubtedly involved in horse trading over the Donbass region, home to Ukraine's two separatist "republics." On 17 October, President Lukashenka met with the director of Russia's Foreign intelligence service (SVR), Sergei Naryshkin. Without any direct mention of Ukraine, official sources say their meeting dealt with the "coordination of activities and adjustment of directions of joint work aimed at protecting national interests." These are serious grounds to assume that Lukashenka and Naryshkin discussed Ukraine.

Indeed, as early as in October 2014, at the very beginning of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Lukashenka offered to send Belarusian peacekeepers to the Donbass region. Belarusian officials have continued to cautiously articulate the idea to no avail. As recently as October, the Kremlin still did not support the deployment of Belarusian peacekeepers to Ukraine.

Ukrainian reaction



Фота: Sputnik Беларусь.

Certainly, the position of the most important party to the conflict—Ukraine itself—is unclear. First, *Kommersant*, a Russian daily newspaper, on 15 November quoted a source within the Ukrainian administration saying Kyiv would prefer Polish and Lithuanian peacekeepers. The same source continued to say that Russia would hardly welcome such an option. As a compromise, Kyiv might instead agree to Belarusian and Kazakh

peacekeepers.

Second, relations between Minsk and Kyiv are improving but not ideal. On 15 November, Ukrainian Parliament First Deputy Chairwoman Iryna Herashchenko accused Belarus of “stabbing Ukraine in the back for the second time” after it had voted in the UN General Assembly against a Ukrainian-sponsored resolution on human rights violations in Crimea. The first time was exactly a year earlier in 2016 when Belarusian representatives voted against a UN resolution on investigating human rights abuses in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol. “Voting by the Belarusian delegation contradicts loud statements about its neutrality,” Herashchenko said. Minsk, however, insists that it always votes in the UN against “country resolutions.”

Ukrainian radical politicians have attacked the idea of Belarusians helping to restore peace in Eastern Ukraine. On 16 November, a prominent member of the Ukrainian parliament, Ihor Mosiychuk, said that Belarusian peacekeepers could become a “Trojan horse.” It would be Russian occupation forces disguised as Belarusians entering the Donbass region. Mosiychuk, who represents a major right-wing radical party, said, “Belarus has behaved not as a neutral state, but as a satellite of the aggressor country, the Russian Federation.” For proof, he cited recent Belarusian voting at the UN, the joint [“West” 2017 military exercises with Russia](#), and [“the kidnapping by the \[Russian\] FSB of a Ukrainian political prisoner](#), Igor Grib, from Belarusian territory.”

Another well-known representative of another Ukrainian right-wing party, Ihor Miroshnychenko, on 16 November said Belarus was an [“enemy territory](#),” which has “common [military interests](#)” with Russia.



Чальцы беларускага атрада, што ваюць у складзе ўзброеных сіл Украіны на Данбасе. Фота: YouTube

He also urged Ukrainian diplomats to do everything to remove Belarus from the sphere of Russian influence.

“Diplomats [will work to distance Belarus from Russian influence] at their level using various methods. However, we should clearly realise—and I am talking now sincerely and seriously—that we cannot achieve this without forming serious subversion and intelligence groups, and carrying out subversive acts on the territory of Belarus and Russia, including within cyber space.”

It would be somewhat self-defeating if Ukraine did, indeed, pursue such a disruptive policy. Belarus already persecutes citizens who support separatists in Eastern Ukraine. As recently as 16 November, a court in the southern Belarusian city of Rechytsa sentenced another Belarusian, Vitali Mitrafanau, on grounds of fighting for the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic in Eastern Ukraine. He had been detained by police in July. In September, a Vitebsk court in the north of Belarus convicted a Belarusian for the very same reason. The former was sentenced to two years of hard labour, the latter for two years of restricted freedoms.

Many Ukrainian politicians speculate on Belarus’s role in the conflict. However, they often ignore the special circumstances that limit Belarus from taking a definite position. All the

same, the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko so far have demonstrated a willingness [to accept Minsk as a partner](#).

However, powerful forces in and outside Ukraine work to sabotage Belarusian participation in the peace process. In addition to the calls of radical parliamentarians quoted above, other odd incidents occur regularly, which threaten to derail bilateral relations. On 25 October, for example, Minsk detained a Ukrainian citizen, Pavel Sharoiko, for espionage. Sharoiko is officially a journalist. However, until 2009 he [openly served with Ukrainian military intelligence](#). Belarusian authorities have tried to downplay the incident, keeping quiet on the issue until Ukrainian activists on 17 November revealed the story, which is now generating tensions between Minsk and Kyiv.

Minsk has Ukraine's best interests in mind

Despite Russia's hesitancy and Ukraine's concerns, Minsk has shown its primary interest to bring it to an end the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Indeed, Minsk has ignored other opportunities for joint military operations with the Kremlin. For instance, in recent years, international media have speculated on Belarus's participation, together with other member states of Russia-dominated [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO), in ensuring peace in Syria. However, that scenario has never materialised. On 27 October, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry announced there are no plans to discuss the sending of CSTO member state troops on a peacekeeping mission to Syria.



Belarusian airborne troops.

Image: Vayar news agency.

In the 1990s, Russia also tried to convince Minsk to send Belarusian airborne troops as peacekeepers to Transnistria. Belarus did no such thing. Its participation in peacekeeping operations has so far been limited to deploying a symbolic number of [Belarusian military personnel](#) as part of UN operations, in particular in Lebanon. Indeed, this is in stark contrast to many of Belarus's neighbours, all of whom have participated in one international operation abroad or another.

Since 2014, the Belarusian government's offer of peacekeeping services to Ukraine has to do with the transformation of Belarus and its neighbourhood. Minsk wishes to find a new, international niche for itself through engaging in conflict resolutions. A central goal is to break out from the tired "last European dictatorship" epithet. At the same time, the volatility of the region has pushed Belarus along this course of action. Russian support is uncertain and increasingly limited. Thus, the Belarusian government has tried both to defuse at least some tensions around Ukraine and to gain more international respect.

Until now, Minsk's efforts to become [more neutral](#) have appeared problematic. Moscow, in general, has never appreciated these attempts. The [West has been unsure](#) of Belarusian claims of neutrality. However, if Belarus does deploy peacekeepers, then arguably Russia, the West and other neighbouring states would, in effect, be validating Belarus's

right not to choose sides.

What Dangers Do The Clashes In Nagorno-Karabakh Bring For Belarus?

Saturday 2 April witnessed intensive clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijan forces in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The same day Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka ordered the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Relations to start consultations with their Armenian and Azerbaijan colleagues.

Moreover, the Belarusian leader held telephone conversations with Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev and Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan. In spite of Belarus' membership of the OSCE Minsk group, which has been the only more or less active platform for negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since 1992, this reaction of the Belarusian authorities demonstrates their deeper interests and concerns about the situation.

Lukashenka's interests in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Some experts consider Belarusian activities in the current conflict as a continuation of Lukashenka's policy to transform Belarus into a kind of regional Switzerland that provides a reliable platform for solving regional and even global issues.

However, the Ukrainian case remains the only example of relative active Belarusian participation in the process of conflict resolution. Other recent initiatives, including statements to promote Minsk as a place to resolve the Middle Eastern conflict, look extremely odd and ambitious for a country such as Belarus.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka's interest to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is much older than the Ukrainian war. In November 2009 the Belarusian president rather unexpectedly made several statements on this issue, emphasising Belarusian interests in engaging to resolve other conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

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There are permanent rumours within the Belarusian establishment that the main reason for Lukashenka's peace initiatives was the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to US president Barack Obama in October 2009. Lukashenka is rumoured to have given orders to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to "win" the Nobel Peace Prize for him.

However, the apparent lack of Belarusian capacity to influence the process, deteriorating relations with the West after the presidential elections in December 2010, the economic crisis of 2011 and Lukashenka's receipt of the parody Ig Nobel Prize in 2013 definitely cooled the president's ambitions.

One might claim that Belarus' more or less successful experience in conflict resolution in the case of Ukraine and recent improvements in relations between Belarus and the West give Lukashenka a new chance to pursue his "peacekeeper" position in the region, regardless of the Nobel Peace Prize. However, the year 2016 differs from the year 2009.

Belarus' interests in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

In January 2015 Armenia officially joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) free trade bloc. The absence of a common border between Armenia and the other EEU member states seems non-conducive for economic integration and has caused numerous concerns in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev has expressed these concerns clearly, pointing out the unclear status of Nagorno-Karabakh in the EEU. Belarus refrained from making direct statements on this issue, but the Belarusian authorities have joined their colleagues from Kazakhstan in discussing this issue at a number of working meetings.

The governments of Belarus and Kazakhstan believe that Armenia will play the role of 100% Russian ally in the EEU management and policy-making, and will promote the idea of transforming the EEU from an economic union into a politically and militarily integrated entity.

Armenia considers Nagorno-Karabakh a key issue for its own national survival. No Armenian politician admits even the theoretical possibility of returning Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Armenian officials, as well as society in general, completely understand the growing gap between the military capacities of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia's economic vulnerability compared to Azerbaijan, its full dependence on arms supplies from Russia and Russia's key influence on the dynamics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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According to some estimates, the military budget of Azerbaijan

exceeds Armenia's military budget eight to nine times. Russia has supplied weapons to Azerbaijan worth a total of about \$5bn, while to Armenia supplies totaled only about \$400m (however, such a comparison should take into consideration lower prices for Armenia).

In this context, official Yerevan is seeking ways to secure sustainable and incontrovertible Russia's support for the Armenian position in the conflict. Russia's intentions to promote deeper integration, including furthering political and military rapprochement, match Armenia's goals. Since Armenia joined the EEU, Russia has strengthened its forces at the Erebuni military airbase and has intensified the integration of the Armenian air defence forces into the Russian air defense system.

Unfortunately, these intentions contradict the interests of Belarus and Kazakhstan, who would like to preserve the purely economic character of the EEU. Both governments understand that Russia and Armenia could use the current clashes as a precedent to strengthen the role of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and / or further deeper integration within the framework of the EEU.

The current Nagorno-Karabakh clashes in the context of Belarusian foreign policy

Belarus' positions on the current clashes appears to be one of the most critical towards Armenia. While Kazakhstan has called for an immediate ceasefire and a solely peaceful solution of the conflict, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has called for strengthening the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

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This fact demonstrates Belarus' deep concerns about the "politisation" of the current clashes. The issue of the Russian airbase in Belarus, which has still not been officially removed from agenda, sparks these concerns. Even Kazakhstan, which has directly supported the position of Azerbaijan in recent years, has not risked mentioning the principle of territorial integrity.

Until April 2016, Belarus maintained close political and economic cooperation with both main parties of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as a balance between respecting the positions of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Baku's financial support for Belarus during the gas conflict with Russia in 2010, as well as close personal relations between Lukashenka and Aliyev, are no secret.

Despite Azerbaijan's more significant economic importance for Belarus (both in terms of goods turnover and trade balance), the Belarusian authorities have managed to maintain close relations with a part of the Armenian political and economic elite, in particular with businessman and politician Gagik Tsarukyan.

Armenia is deeply bewildered because of Belarus' position

The Armenian authorities reacted immediately. The country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded on 3 April explanations from the Belarus Ambassador to Armenia, emphasising its deep bewilderment because of Belarus' position.

Whether Armenia will forget Belarus' calls for "territorial integrity" and be satisfied with the Belarusian ambassador's explanations remain under question.

Risking relations with Armenia

Neither party in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict expected Belarus' support in the current clashes, nor do they need it. However, Belarus understands that these clashes have a far less local character than they would have several years ago.

Belarus' direct engagement in deeper military and political integration with Russia has become increasingly unavoidable, while it completely contradicts the authorities' intentions. Only an immediate ceasefire and return of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into a "frozen" one can prevent Belarus from a clear withdrawal from further Russian initiatives such as the long-planned airbase in Belarus.

It seems that Belarus is more ready to risk its relations with Armenia than to support de-facto strengthening of Russia's role in the region.

Aliaksandr Filipau

PhD in Political Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Extended Education at the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts; Expert of NGO "Liberal Club"

Concerns about Belarusians Fighting in Ukraine,

Cooperation with Poland, Budget Cuts – Belarus Security Digest

The Belarusian authorities are concerned about Belarusians fighting in Ukraine. Belarus and Poland have been expanding cooperation of rescue departments. Belarusian peacekeepers are ready to participate in UN missions. Belarus's territorial defence has not been definitely shelved yet.

Export of extremism concerns the Belarusian authorities. Money for Belarusian law-enforcement bodies in 2015 will be scarce.

Belarusian Fighters in Ukraine

The Belarusian authorities are concerned about Belarusians' joining the fighting in Ukraine. The authorities take very seriously information about participation of Belarusian citizens (especially from among former military personnel) in the [fighting in the territory of Ukraine](#). Currently, they focus mainly on preventing the departure of Belarusian citizens to the hostilities and monitoring those who could participate in the war.

Minsk strives to remain equidistant between both sides in the war, and therefore participation of its citizens in the conflict may result in undesirable claims of political or ideological nature from Kyiv or Moscow. Second, there are fears that combatants with combat experience and serious ideological motivation may participate in activities aimed at destabilising the domestic political situation.

The Belarusian authorities obviously see the threat of an externally provoked destabilisation as real. They get ready to

respond harshly to any attempts of active protest. At the same time, they categorically deny the fact that they have been creating the ground for shocks through their own policy miscalculations.

Territorial Defence Drills

The training of the territorial defence resumed after a one year hiatus. Information appeared in early March about a two-day staff training of the territorial defence, which took place in late February in the military commissariat of the Hrodna region.

The participants practised interaction between territorial defence troops and units of the Interior Ministry, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the State Security Committee, the Investigative Committee, and the State Border Committee in maintaining order. They focused on protecting sites, mitigating the aftermath of terrorist attacks, accidents, self-inflicted and natural disasters, etc. Local officials and military commissioners of the region's towns and districts participated in the event.

On 5 March, the training involved staffers of the command structures of the territorial defence and law-enforcement bodies of the Vitsiebsk region. They drilled interagency interaction and training of territorial defence troops. On 23-27 March, a planned joint staff exercise of the unified command of the regional grouping of Belarus and Russia took place. The staff headquarters of the territorial defence zones (i.e., the regions and Minsk) and agencies of the Belarusian state administration participated in the event among other units. The exercise was carried out at the stationary command posts.

The territorial defence training resumed almost immediately after Alexander Lukashenka's statement before the military command on 19 February. The Belarusian leader stressed the

importance of creating an efficient system for the territorial defence of Belarus. The Ministry of Defence is playing the leading role in this sphere. This is despite the fact that recently the Belarusian military authorities wanted to shift this responsibility mainly to the local authorities.

Budget Revenues Have Been Falling

Despite the significant operating surplus (4.9% of GDP), there is a tense situation with the execution of the state budget. Because of falling crude oil prices, the budget will lose about \$1 bln in oil duties alone. Already the Ministry of Finance announces adjustments to the budget in the first half of the year by reducing its expenditure. It is obvious that the curtailment will affect primarily expenses, which are not related to the social sphere.

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Given the lack of resources, the interagency competition to get them becomes more intense. Some *siloviki* follow tried-and-tested practises: on the eve of the presidential election, some law-enforcement agencies take advantage of the fear factor concerning possible political unrest modelled after the one that took place in Ukraine.

As the opposition's weakness is obvious, the authorities have been actively promoting [football fans to the role of the regime's new enemies](#), while the fan movement is essentially a subculture, which is very fragmented and without a clear political platform. A possibility remains that due to diversification of information sources, the highest political leadership will not drift into a costly and absolutely senseless struggle with windmills.

Police Focuses on Banks and Taxes to Raise Money

Problems with replenishment of the state budget compelled the authorities to revise law-enforcement priorities in the sphere of prevention and suppression of economic crimes. Earlier, the Interior Ministry paid special attention to government procurement, modernisation of state-owned companies and use of public funds.

This year, they have new priorities: the return of foreign exchange earnings to the country and the control over the currency exchange market and financial sector (especially banks). This is due to falling exports and the inflow of foreign exchange earnings into the country against the backdrop of massive foreign debt payments. The second task is to ensure the revenue side of the state budget. In this connection, the struggle against tax evasion is getting tougher.

No Visas for Polish Rescuers

Minsk and Warsaw plan to abolish visas. So far, for rescuers only. The Belarusian-Polish sub-committee on cross-border cooperation met on 13 April. The parties reached agreement that the emergency services of both countries would be able to cross the border without visas in future emergencies. Belarus and Poland are drafting an agreement on cooperation in the prevention of accidents, natural disasters and other emergencies as well as mitigation of their consequences, which will include this provision.

Belarus in Peacekeeping Missions

Belarus plans to take a more active part in UN peacekeeping missions. On 26-28 March, a delegation of Belarus headed by

Deputy State Secretary of the Security Council Stanislau Zas attended a conference of defence ministers dedicated to the issues of UN peacekeeping missions. On 26 March, during his meeting with Atul Khare, Under-Secretary-General for Field Support, expressed Belarus' interest in expanding its participation in UN peacekeeping missions.

During his meetings with the chiefs of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Spain and Serbia, Stanislau Zas discussed the prospects for expanding Belarus' participation in the UN military mission in Lebanon.

On 28 March, Stanislau Zas met with Hervé Ladsous, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, and Lt. General Maqsood Ahmed, Military Adviser for Peacekeeping Operations, also to discuss the expansion of Belarus' participation in the UN peacekeeping activities.

Today, Belarus can provide a peacekeeping company of 240 servicemen, a military transport aircraft Il-76MD with two flight crews and two teams of ground service personnel, officers to serve in multinational staff headquarters (up to 15 people), a team of medical specialists (up to 7 people) and a mobile hospital.

Andrei Parotnikau

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