

Poroshenko and Lukashenka: Will the Ukrainian President Defend Belarus in the West?

On 26 May the future President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko stated that Belarus and his country can cooperate to help Lukashenka take steps towards establishing a democracy. Poroshenko also said that Lukashenka could consider him a friend, and their countries share common interests.

The president-elect of Ukraine knows Belarus better than any other ruler in Europe except, of course, Putin. Poroshenko was one of the main advocates of improving relations between Belarus and the West during the reign of Orange Revolution president Viktor Yushchenko. He also solved several economic issues between the two countries during his time in office on Yanukovich's team as the Minister of Economy and previously had business interests in Belarus.

The election of a new president in Ukraine gives both sides hope for the restoration of trade relations between the two countries to previous levels. However, it remains unlikely that Ukraine will become an example for democratic transition for Belarusians. Ukraine brings up feelings of fear, not admiration, among many Belarusians.

Deepening cooperation between the countries may worsen the relations between Minsk and Moscow, but improve the image of Lukashenka's regime ties with the West. Still, it seems highly unlikely that Poroshenko will once more champion Belarus' case with the West.

Old friends?

On 25 May Petro Poroshenko stated that he has maintained

friendly relations with [Alexander Lukashenka](#). From his years of service in the government, Poroshenko has gotten to know the Belarusian political class quite well. Moreover, their cooperation has brought about many benefits for both countries both economically and politically.

Poroshenko visited Minsk in 2009 as Ukraine's foreign minister, when the Ukrainian authorities were advocating for a dialogue between the European Union and Lukashenka's regime. Lukashenka's visit to Kyiv, the only one during the reign of Yushchenko, was the apparent result of these negotiations. At that time the Belarusian authorities considered their improved relations with Ukraine as part and parcel of normalising relations with the West.

Poroshenko has also worked with Belarusian Prime Minister [Mikhail Myasnikovich](#) and his deputy [Uladzimir Semashka](#). As a result of the negotiations between the parties, both countries removed restrictions on the import of meat, dairy products and beer.

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Moreover, the president-elect of Ukraine often visited Belarus promoting the interests of his machine construction and confectionery companies. Poroshenko's Roshen holds a commanding position on the Belarusian chocolate market.

Poroshenko worked on both Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's teams, so he has seen Belarus from different perspectives. Most Ukrainians, and Poroshenko as well, feel grateful for [Lukashenka's support](#) and opposition to the country's federalisation, the most important demand of Kremlin's policy towards Kyiv since the interim government took over. Thus, the Belarusian-Ukrainian relations have plenty of room for

improvement.

How the Ukrainian Elections Can Affect Belarus

Ukraine's pro-European choice remains unlikely to become an example of change for Belarusian society. Economically and socially Ukraine [remains behind](#) Belarus and the war in the east of the country will destabilise it for a long time. According to the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political studies April study, 70% of Belarusians do not want such a transition to occur in Belarus.

If Poroshenko's team stabilises the country and improves the welfare of Ukraine, Belarusians may begin to view these changes more favourably. Ukraine has already shown its willingness to change for better. For example, the levels of transparency and voter engagement during the Ukrainian elections were themselves something that Belarusians would find enviable.

Belarusians perceive the world through the lens of Russian TV

However, even with the possible success of Ukraine, Belarusians perceive the world through the lens of Russia. A restricted-access sociological study to which the author has access to shows that programme 'News of the Week with Dmitry Kisilev' remains the most popular informational television programme of its kind in Belarus.

This Russian television program has become one of the main mouthpieces of the Russian information war against Ukraine. At the same time, the authorities cut Ukrainian TV from cable packages in some Belarusian cities. In May Brest was hit, a city in the west of Belarus that has a large Ukrainian minority.

While these elections hardly affect Belarusian society, the Belarusian authorities expect improvements in the realm of

economic cooperation. Indeed, it is the main reason why they want to see the situation in Ukraine stabilise as soon as possible. On 26 May even the Belarusian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on twitter about the Ukrainian elections under the hashtag #UnitedforUkraine (a hashtag created by the U.S. State Department).

The crisis in Ukraine has already [affected](#) the Belarusian economy. Ukraine remains the second largest trading partner of Belarus. However, for the first quarter of 2014, when compared with the first quarter of 2013, Belarusian exports to Ukraine declined by more than 5%, while imports from Ukraine dropped by 30%. Shares of US-Belarusian IT corporation EPAM Systems fell by a third due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Will Poroshenko Become Belarus' Advocate in the EU?

Belarusian-Ukrainian cooperation can greatly influence Belarus-Russia and Belarus-EU relations.

While the Kremlin remains reluctant to state as much, but it seems worried that Lukashenka supports the new Ukrainian authorities and opposes the decentralisation of its southern neighbour. If the Kremlin chooses to take a rough approach in its relations with Ukraine, a strengthening of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations could become a big irritant for Moscow.

Lukashenka-Poroshenko relations can soften the image of the Belarusian authorities in the West

Simultaneously, Lukashenka-Poroshenko relations can soften the image of the Belarusian authorities in the West. Already many European politicians have stated their appreciation of Belarus' policy towards Ukraine. The head of the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry Lynas Linkyavichus said that the "statements of the Belarusian leadership are very independent".

On 26 May, the future president of Ukraine declared the necessity of reviving the Eastern Partnership, which "can be a major motivation behind the development of democracy in Belarus." Poroshenko also hopes "to cooperate with Belarus for democratic change".

These statements should not be exaggerated. The Belarusian authorities thoroughly know that to normalise relations with the EU they have to release all political prisoners. Naturally, this does not require any participation of the Ukrainian authorities.

Ukraine also has too many problems of its own at the moment, so it remains unlikely that they will have the time to promote the interests of Belarus in the West. But at least the Belarusian authorities have found an ally, one which the West is listening carefully to.

The article has been written in the framework of the project ["Election observation: theory and practice"](#) upon the results of the Belarusian observation mission in Ukraine. The material is a part of the analytical document about the election in Ukraine which will be published soon.

Ukraine and Belarus: Friends Against Russia?

This month the EU External Action faced a stubborn unwillingness by two post-Soviet countries to listen to its advice on political reforms. As the [diplomatic scandal](#) unfolded in Minsk, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry protested against the behaviour of the EU Ambassador to Ukraine. At the same time, both countries are under increasing pressure from

Moscow to participate in its new integration initiatives.

These developments should motivate Belarus and Ukraine to actively cooperate on the basis of common interests. But instead the two countries often clash with each other. For example, in March Ukraine prohibited imports of Belarusian meat and dairy products. It raises the question of whether Victor Yanukovich and Alexander Lukashenka have enough political will to improve their relations and strengthen sovereignty of their countries.

Belarus-Ukraine Trade War

Earlier this month the Ukrainian sanitary inspection suspected that Belarusian meat products might be infected by the African cattle-plague and that its dairy products might contain other harmful components. The authorities refused to implement a reciprocal ban and entered into a dialogue with Ukraine. Observers think that Ukraine did this in order to compensate losses for its dairy producers estimated at \$270m annually. Earlier Russia banned exports of seven Ukrainian producers because of a high concentration of palm oil in their products.

Nevertheless, Belarusian-Ukrainian goods turnover grew by 40 per cent in 2011, with the Belarusian trade surplus reaching more than \$2.1bn. Thus, Ukraine remains the third most important trade partner of Belarus after Russia and the EU.

20 Years of Friendship Despite Difficulties

Since their independence, Belarus and Ukraine have maintained good relations despite difficulties. The lowest point was right after the Ukrainian "orange revolution" in 2004. The Belarusian authorities feared the spread of revolutionary activities to Minsk and broadcasted anti-Ukrainian propaganda on state television. For several years Ukraine became the main base for offices of American and European funds that supported the Belarusian opposition and NGOs. Unlike Lithuania and

Poland, Belarusians need no visas to go to Ukraine and Russian is widely spoken there.

Bilateral relations [gained new impetus](#) after the 2008 parliamentary election in Belarus when the EU started an engagement policy with Belarus. Ukraine took the role of [mediator in Belarus-EU relations](#) and became the locomotive of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) activities. Kiev supported the Belarusian authorities in a conflict over their representation in the EaP Parliamentary Assembly EuroNest. Then Ukraine-Belarus relations reached their highest point.

However, when Victor Yanukovich, an [ethnic Belarusian](#) himself, assumed power as a new president, several Lukashenka-Yushchenko agreements reached a deadlock. Last year Yanukovich did not invite the Belarusian to an international conference at the [Chernobyl nuclear disaster](#) in Kiev. This provoked a nervous reaction from President Lukashenka, and he even verbally assaulted Yanukovich. That made relations worse and impeded the resolution of the long-lasting border demarcation dispute.

No Border – No NATO Membership

Belarus has not ratified the State Border Treaty because of a long-standing debt to Belarus owed by the Ukrainian government. In 1992, several Belarusian enterprises transferred money to Ukrainian enterprises, but did not receive expected goods in exchange. The Belarusian authorities consider it as a part of Ukrainian public debt to Belarus estimated at \$134m. For a long period of time, Ukraine denied such claims, taking the view that this was a debt of private companies that do not exist anymore.

When Ukraine declared its NATO aspirations, Kiev was interested in resolving the dispute with Belarus as soon as

possible. All NATO countries should have stable and clearly defined borders and no territorial disputes with their neighbours. At a 2009 meetings in Chernihiv, Yushchenko and Lukashenka finally found a solution. Ukraine agreed to acknowledge its debt and committed to providing Belarus with discounted Ukrainian energy supplies as a way to repay it.

Then Belarus ratified the Border Treaty, but both sides have not yet exchanged the ratification protocols. Yanukovich planned to visit Minsk last year, but [the diplomatic scandal](#) which followed the Chernobyl conference mentioned above spoiled bilateral relations. Foreign ministries had to postpone the visit.

Future of Belarus-Ukraine Relations

Yushchenko's political demise cut short the anti-Russian trend in Belarus-Ukraine relations, but it does not impede Ukrainian and Belarusian authorities from continuing the diversification of oil supplies. The latest Ukrainian plans include supplies of Azerbaijani oil to Poland through Belarusian territory. Previously, Ukraine allowed Belarus to use its Odessa-Brody pipeline in order to pump Venezuelan oil to the Belarusian refinery in Mazyr. However, Belarus became less interested in the transit role of Ukraine after it secured extremely beneficial [oil and gas agreements with Moscow](#).

After Yulia Timoshenko's imprisonment, Ukraine is no longer a great friend of the European Union; it helps Belarus look less unpleasant to European politicians. Belarus is no longer the only place in Central Europe with clear authoritarian tendencies. Today the whole project of the Eastern Partnership is under threat. Ukraine considers the option of joining the Single Economic Space of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, but Russia does not agree with the "3+1" scheme that Ukraine offers. And Ukraine is not ready to go further than 10-15 agreements within the Single Economic Space because the country is primarily interested in European integration.

The Belarusian authorities now prefer to focus on economic cooperation with prominent Ukrainian businessmen. In November Belarusian Prime Minister Mikhail Miasnikovich promised a Ukrainian tycoon Piotr Poroshenko favourable conditions for Ukrainian investments in food and engineering industries. This fosters the formation of a pro-Belarusian lobby in the Ukrainian business and political elite. But no lobby can be effective without the political will of two presidents to improve relations.

Nobody knows when exactly the long delayed meeting between Yanukovich and Lukashenko will take place. It is high time for Belarusian and Ukrainian decision-makers to realise that the strategic potential of bilateral relations is of much greater importance than temporary disagreements. And if both countries want to stay independent, they should unite their efforts to avoid isolation from the European Union and to balance pressure from Moscow.

Ukraine Becomes More Important as a Factor in Belarusian-Russian Relations

In the last months Ukraine has significantly increased its importance in the European part of the CIS. The new president Viktor Yanukovich enjoys a honeymoon with Russia: Ukrainian-Russian cooperation has started booming after previous president Viktor Yushchenko had left office. Ukraine and Russia have agreed on lower gas prices for Ukraine*, on the Russian Black Sea Fleet staying based in Ukraine till 2042.

Vladimir Putin has even made a sensation by speaking of a

possible merger of Russia's Gazprom and Ukraine's Naftogaz. Added to this, there come smaller initiatives to establish cooperation (or to sell relevant Ukrainian assets to Russians) in nuclear power, shipbuilding, aviation construction, power generation and supply.

At the same time, since the times of president Yushchenko Ukraine is an important partner for the largely isolated Belarus. Ukraine remains one of the very few European countries having official political contacts with the authoritarian Belarusian government and the contacts have only [intensified](#) with Yanukovich becoming president. Ukraine has recently become the transit country for the important Venezuelan oil supplies to Belarus. In April the Belarusian parliament has finally ratified the border treaty with Ukraine, which has been the key issue of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations since the collapse of the USSR.

Relations between Belarus and Russia are currently in a crisis [since Russia has imposed duties on oil supplied to Belarus](#). This came despite establishing a customs union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan at the very same time. The disappointment with absence of progress in the Russian-Belarusian integration have led to Russia [unilaterally transforming](#) the relations with Belarus into a more pragmatic and market-based form. Ukraine could threat Belarus as a new strategic ally for Russia in Europe, for it would be psychologically easier for Russia to impose a hard line on Belarus when it isn't the only faithful satellite on the European continent. On the other hand, Ukraine could potentially act as intermediary between the two. In any case, Ukraine seems to become a more important actor not only in [Belarus' relations with the EU](#), but also in Belarusian-Russian relations.

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