Will the Belarusian Authorities Learn from the Ukrainian Crisis?

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has brought some benefits to the Belarusian authorities. Due to the instability outside Belarus, Lukashenka's position in his dealings with the West has been strengthened. His recent phone conversation with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk proves this point. Belarus plans to capitalise on its role as an intermediary in certain sectors of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Meanwhile Lukashenka's approval rating has hit 39.8%, the highest it has been in some time.

However, long-term losses exceed the potential benefits. Lukashenka can no longer predict the actions of Putin, who despite expecting further sanctions presses on, a point that Belarus has yet to concede. The long-term slowdown of the Russian and Ukrainian economies will greatly damage Belarus.

If the conflict deepens, Belarus will lose even more. Therefore, Lukashenka's regime must reform the country and begin to gradually increase cooperation with the West. The European Union must recognise the limits of cooperation with the Belarusian authorities, but also be ready to consider a bailout for Belarus.

Short-Term Benefits

According to the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, Lukashenka's approval rating over the last three months has increased by 5% and his trust rating exceeded his distrust rating.

On the background of the events in Ukraine, the Belarusian
state leader appears to be a stable and effective leader, while relatively portraying Belarus' slowing economy as not particularly threatening to the nation. Moreover, Lukashenka’s popularity extends not only to Belarus. During an interview on Ukrainian TV, 100% of the audience voted in agreement with the Belarusian head of state on some of the statements he made.

The West is also beginning to look at the Lukashenka's regime differently. In April, the first time after the 2010 elections, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk talked with the Belarusian ruler for a few hours. Over the last month, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna held consultations in Slovakia and Germany. On 28-29 April, she also participated in the meeting of foreign ministers of the Visegrád Group and of the Eastern Partnership, where Kupchyna had a bilateral meeting with Štefan Füle.

At the moment Lukashenka looks better than the weak Ukrainian authorities or imperialist Putin. At least insofar as the Belarusian authorities are causing fewer problems for the rest of the world.

If the conflict between Ukraine and Russia deepens, Belarus can lay claim to being an intermediary in the economic relations of the countries. Belarus played this role for Russia and Georgia for a while, but on a small scale. Belarusian Airlines flights between Minsk and Tbilisi are always full of Georgians going to and from Russia, particularly when there were no direct flights between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Belarus has already declared its readiness to develop military-industrial cooperation with both countries to find contacts (and contracts) from both sides. It seems that
Russia and Ukraine will continue to sell weapons to each other, but through an intermediary Belarus.

**Long-Term Losses**

Although Lukashenka’s regime has already won something from the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the future costs for Belarus may be substantial.

First of all, the Belarusian authorities have lost confidence. For many years, Minsk looked at Moscow as a cash cow – a sometimes tough partner, but not an aggressive one. Now Lukashenka does not know what to expect from Putin.

The Kremlin’s possible military intervention in Belarus has become one of the scenarios that the authorities and the opposition are becoming increasingly aware of. On 22 April, Lukashenka **even demanded** that law-enforcement agencies “immediately eradicate any speculation about the violations of Russians’ rights in Belarus”.

Any growth in Russian imperialist fervour will only further subordinate Belarus to their eastern neighbour. Many hoped that Putin would abolish duties on Belarusian oil to maintain the loyalty of Minsk. However, it seems that the Kremlin has chosen the path of sanctioning Lukashenka’s regime rather than make concessions to him.

On 22 April, Alexander Lukashenka said he would not sign a landmark agreement on the Eurasian Economic Union if Russia leaves keeps its restrictions on the oil and gas market. However, only a week later, Lukashenka, Putin and Nazarbayev agreed to sign the treaty, although Russia will liberalise these markets only in 2025.

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of the conflict. The **International environment** was unfavourable for Belarus even before the conflict. Now the deteriorating economies of its largest trading partners will push Belarus into a recession. Foreign exchange reserves decrease monthly, and the authorities need to take steps such as privatisation or devaluation to simply stay afloat.

**Where is Belarus’ Place in the New Cold War?**

The Belarusian authorities, although they garnered some benefits from the conflict, crave the stabilisation of Ukraine. Moreover, they have become very weary of a new Cold War. If a new Cold War is launched, Lukashenka's regime will no longer be able to continue his long observed balancing act policy between the East and the West. Putin's refusal to abolish duties on key goods that boast the Belarusian economy shows that the Kremlin's strategy towards Belarus may yet become even more severe.

Russia in such circumstances seems like a natural choice, as Belarus **militarily**, **energetically**, **economically** and **even culturally** deeply dependent on it. If Belarus chooses the West, Russia may send more troops into Belarus.

Therefore Lukashenka’s regime should take real action, release political prisoners and start economic reforms. On 22 April, Lukashenka said that Belarusian nation should stay united and said that if "we lose our language, we will disappear".

This was quite a step for a pro-Soviet ruler who claimed in 1994 that the "Belarusian language is an impoverished one". National identity remains one of the most important elements of the nation's overall system of self-defence. It alone can act against the massive currents of Russian propaganda to which Belarusians are exposed to through popular Russian TV channels daily. It is precisely for this reason that Lukashenka should implement his words into practise.

Belarus' relations with the European Union must be based on
mutual trust between both parties, not just a goal of irritating Russia. Modernisation projects can be a good start. The West must be aware of the limitations of Belarus, but also be prepared to confront Russia in case of regime change or increased pressure.

Unfortunately, independent and democratic Belarusian government as a result of a regime change hardly looks realistic after what Russian is doing in Ukraine. The European Union and the United States should strengthen their positions inside Belarus and help stabilise the Belarusian economy in case of a severe crisis.

However, the Ukrainian crisis should serve as a wake up call for everyone in Belarus. Belarus as a country has a difficult task ahead of it in trying to learn some lessons from Ukraine and react to growing threats to its future.