

(Un)realistic neutrality Attempts to redefine Belarus' foreign policy

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The continuing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, together with the increased tension in relations between Russia and the West, have led the Belarusian authorities to attempt to redefine their country's foreign policy by stressing neutrality towards the two sides in the conflict. As a result, over the last year or so Belarus has clearly adopted a non-committal stance. Minsk is trying to play the part of a neutral mediator in the hope that this will safeguard it in the event of escalation of tensions between Russia and the West, which is seen as the greatest threat to the country's security at the present time. Thus Minsk is returning to the notion, discussed in the early 1990s, of Belarus striving for neutrality. Officially, the goal of neutrality is still stated in the Belarusian Constitution. However there are serious limitations to the effectiveness of this new strategy, due to Minsk's close military alliance with Moscow, and therefore Belarus will not be entirely credible on the international stage as a country that wishes to remain neutral.

Concepts from the 1990s not put into practice

The Belarusian people's deep-rooted recollection of experiences in World War II¹ and the terrible consequences of the Chernobyl disaster (Belarus suffered the most of all of the former USSR countries) resulted in the issue of neutrality being an important factor in the discussion about foreign policy that ensued once independence was gained. The universal awareness among the Belarusian elite that Belarus is situated between East and West, which would

have naturally defined a balanced international strategy, became a major factor reinforcing the line of non-involvement on either side. This idea was presented as being closely linked to the declaration that it was foregoing the status of a nuclear power (the nuclear warheads inherited from the Soviet Army were eventually moved out of Belarus by November 1996). At the same time, in order to underline its declaration of neutrality in a regional context, in the first half of the 1990s, Minsk tried via diplomatic channels to promote the creation of a nuclear-free zone throughout the entire CEE region. This was not received well by other countries². Regardless of the moderately sceptical response abroad, the idea of neutrality became so fundamental for the Belarusian authorities that it was mentioned in all official documents at the time

¹ According to official Belarusian estimates, during military operations and repression by the German occupier, between 2.5 and 3 million residents of today's Belarus, which was almost a third of the population of the Belarus Socialist Soviet Republic at that time, perished. Most of the industrial and municipal infrastructure was destroyed (90% was destroyed in Minsk, Gomel and Vitebsk). See *Последствия Великой Отечественной войны для Беларуси*, <https://archives.gov.by/index.php?id=697135>

² У.Е. Снапкоўскі, *Гісторыя знешняй палітыкі Беларусі*, Мінск 2004, pp. 248–9.

specifying the priorities of Belarusian foreign policy and the grounds for the country's administrative structure. Art. 18 of the current Belarusian Constitution also states that the country strives to be neutral³.

Even in the early 1990s, a tendency emerged to reconstruct a new form of close relations in an alliance with the former decision-maker in the USSR, Russia. Belarus ratified the 1992 Tashkent collective security treaty, thereby entering the military alliance being built by Moscow based on some former USSR countries, and which was subsequently transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

It is stated in art. 18 of the current Constitution that Belarus aims to be neutral.

A major factor helping to boost Russia's influence was the complete dependence of Belarus's economy on preferential conditions for supplies of Russian oil and gas, crucially important access to the sales market in Russia, and the ties of cooperation forged during the Soviet era. When Aleksandr Lukashenko came to power in 1994, this significantly sped up the expansion of Russian influence to include Belarus. The Belarusian President, appealing to Soviet nostalgia and an idea of Slavic unity popular in Belarusian society at that time, initiated and actively supported the process of Russian-Belarusian integration. This led in 1999 to the creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. Within this structure a Regional Military Group was also formed, which was responsible for organising joint military exercises, among other acts⁴.

³ W. Baluk, *Polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeństwo, in Białoruś Europa Wschodnia – dekada transformacji*. Białoruś, B.J. Albin, W. Baluk (ed.), Wrocław 2004, p. 272. See also the Belarusian Constitution, <http://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/normativnye-dokumenty/konstitutsiya-respubliki-belarus/>

⁴ Л. Спаткай, *Военное сотрудничество Беларуси с Россией*, 10 March 2015, <https://bsblog.info/voennoe-sotrudnichestvo-belarusi-s-rossiej/>

This led to significantly closer military cooperation between the two countries, which also went beyond the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Belarusian foreign policy therefore began to focus principally on a strategic partnership with Russia⁵, while the idea of striving for neutrality as written into the Constitution merely became little more than a catchy slogan in the propaganda used by the Belarusian authorities.

Shrinking room for manoeuvre between Russia and the West

Unlike his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Russian President Vladimir Putin expected Belarus to sell its strategic industrial firms and gradually give up its sovereignty in favour of integration into the Union State in exchange for its continued economic and energy privileges. In practice, this would have meant complete subjugation to Moscow⁶. Even though Lukashenko never formally withdrew from the scheme for integration with Russia, out of fear of losing sovereignty he successfully blocked the development of that process, while at the same time trying to retain the highest possible level of Russian subsidies, which were vital in order to shore up Belarus's outdated centrally controlled economy. Under these circumstances, the only way to remain autonomous was to attempt to strike a balance between pressure from Moscow and dialogue with the West, above all with the EU. The extent of Belarus's dependence on Russia is such that the Belarusian authorities have never been able to attain a perfect balance between

⁵ Vladimir Ulakhovich has pointed out the evolution of Minsk's strategy from a policy of neutrality (1991–4), a multi-vector policy (1994–7) and the strategic partnership with Russia (from 1997). See В. Улахович, *Внешняя Политика Республики Беларусь 1991–2001: опыт концептуального самоопределения*, in *Внешняя Политика Беларуси в исторической перспективе*, Мінск 2002, p. 233.

⁶ The President of Russia made his position explicitly clear in 2002 when he openly proposed that Belarus join the Russian Federation. *Путин фактически предложил Белоруссии войти в состав России*, 15 August 2002, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24190894.html>

foreign and economic policy towards Russia and the EU. Nevertheless, this strategy was an effort to exploit the advantage of being strategically placed between Russia and the West, which was linked to the concept of neutrality. Although it often led to crises with Moscow, which was irritated by the lack of progress in integration, and to the breaking off at certain intervals of talks with the EU, which was dismayed at breaches of human rights, this strategy did produce autonomy, especially with respect to the expansion-minded Russia.

Belarus' foreign policy, centred on survival, has been ill-suited to the Kremlin's aggressive strategy in the former Soviet region.

Minsk's field of manoeuvre with respect to foreign policy narrowed considerably as a result of the Russian-Ukraine conflict in 2014. The annexation of Crimea to Russia and the proclamation of the separatist republics in the Donbas caused Lukashenko great concern about the dangerous precedent of Russia's interference in the territorial integrity of a former Soviet republic in the immediate vicinity of Belarus. For this reason, Minsk did not recognise those territorial changes, and neither did it support the separatists in eastern Ukraine⁷. On the other hand, the Belarusian president tried to avoid openly criticising Russia's conduct⁸. Belarusian foreign policy diplomacy showed a keen interest in holding peace talks in Minsk in Septem-

ber 2014 and February 2015 to resolve the conflict in Donbas, to build up the country's image as a neutral mediator.

This balanced approach on the part of Minsk to the two sides of the conflict was not received well by Russia, which expected its ally to be unreservedly loyal and fully support its actions in Ukraine. This led to harsh criticism in the Russian media and from Russian experts to an extent never seen before in response to demonstrations of autonomy by the Belarusian authorities, both on the international stage and in the sphere of historical, linguistic, and cultural policy. At the same time, there was a distinct escalation in Belarus in activities by Russian or pro-Russian social and paramilitary organisations, promoting the idea of the 'Russian world'⁹. Belarus's situation was complicated further by growing tension between the EU, US, and Russia. Moscow increased the pressure on Belarus¹⁰. Minsk's foreign policy, which was centred on survival and de-escalating tensions, was not suited to the Kremlin's aggressive strategy in the former Soviet region and towards the West.

However Minsk proved unable to make full use of the potential for dialogue with the West which was resumed at the turn of 2016¹¹. On one hand, the inability of an authoritarian regime to become truly democratic was a limitation, as it had been in past years, but fear of

⁷ In 2008 Belarus was also reticent with respect to the invasion of Georgia by Russian troops, and did not recognise the Russian-supported Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

⁸ A typical example of this ambiguous position was a statement made on 23 March 2014, when Lukashenko said on one hand that "Ukraine should be an integral and indivisible country" and on the other recognised Crimea as a *de facto* part of Russia; see Лукашенко «такими» матерными словами не разговаривает, 23 March 2014, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/03/23/ic_articles_112_184995/

⁹ For more on this subject see K. Kłysiński and P. Żochowski, *The End Of The Myth of a brot herly Belarus? Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: the background and its manifestations*, OSW Studies, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2016-11-07/end-myth-a-brot-herly-belarus-russian-soft-power-belarus-after>

¹⁰ The pressure from Russia manifested itself in an attempt in autumn 2015 to force the Belarusian authorities to consent to the placement of a Russian airbase in Babruysk. Placing Russian troops in Belarus permanently would have been an unprecedented move, and would have significantly reduced Minsk's autonomy on the international stage.

¹¹ In the aftermath of the events in Ukraine, Lukashenko decided to release all Belarusian political prisoners in August 2015, opening the way for talks with the EU, which eventually lifted most of the sanctions against Belarus on 15 February 2016. The dialogue resumed at that time continues today.

the Kremlin's reaction was an equally important factor. Minsk had considerably less room for manoeuvre, and the tactic of finding a balance which it had employed up until that time ceased to be effective. This led the Belarusian authorities to return to the idea of neutrality that had been abandoned years before.

An attempt to get ahead, i.e. the Helsinki-2 concept

At the 26th annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk, Lukashenko made an official appeal to the international community to start broad peace talks based on OSCE structures. The aim of the initiative was to de-escalate tensions in Eastern Europe (and on a broader level in other parts of the world as well) followed by the drafting of new comprehensive agreements guaranteeing peaceful cooperation, above all between the main international actors, i.e. Russia, the EU, the US, and China. The format Minsk proposed for these talks was derived from the 1975 Security and Cooperation in Europe Conference held in Helsinki, and was thus given the name Helsinki-2¹². At the same time the Belarusian president, based on Belarus' experience in organising talks on Ukraine¹³, named Minsk as the best place to host the peace process. Lukashenko's declaration prompted measures aimed at arranging peace talks in the Helsinki-2 format. In January 2018 the Belarusian foreign minister Vladimir Makiey stated that the foreign minis-

try had produced detailed plans, submitted for consultation to the governments in other countries that might be interested in taking part in the talks¹⁴.

Based on experience in organising talks on the subject of Ukraine, the Belarusian President named Minsk as the venue for the peace process.

The international conference on regional security, attended by several hundred experts from Europe, Central Asia, China, the US, and Canada¹⁵ and held in Minsk in May this year, was a major event promoting Belarus as an international mediator. Lukashenko also attended the talks, and said in his speech that a new European security system was needed; he also reaffirmed Belarus' willingness to take part in the process¹⁶. The Belarusian government representatives participating in the conference avoided criticising NATO, which was probably intended to reinforce Minsk's image of neutrality. At the same time, during a visit to Belgium on 31 May, Makiey gave an assurance that Belarus was working to bring about greater stability in the region, and that therefore it was not planning to locate any military bases on its territory, but reserved the right to change its

¹² For more on this subject see А. Класковский, *Лукашенко разогревает отношения с Европой холодным летом 2017-го*, <https://naviny.by/article/20170705/1499264869-lukashenko-razogrevaet-otnosheniya-s-evropoy-holodnym-letom-2017-go>

¹³ Belarusian government representatives have consistently presented Belarus as a 'security donor' in the region at all available international forums over the last four years, based precisely on a conciliatory approach to the conflict in Ukraine. See *Беларусь убедительно обозначает себя как донора безопасности в Европе – Мясникович*, 28 November 2017, <http://www.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-ubeditelno-oboznachaet-sebja-kak-donora-bezopasnosti-v-evrope-mjansnikovich-277888-2017/>

¹⁴ The details of this concept have not been released. At the same time minister Makiey acknowledged that until now foreign partners have been 'wary' of Belarus's initiative. See *Беларусь разработала концепцию запуска «Хельсинки-2» и работает над ее реализацией – Макей*, 5 January 2018, <http://www.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-razrabotala-kontseptsiju-zapuska-helsinki-2-i-rabotaet-nad-ee-realizatsiej-makej-283334-2018/>

¹⁵ The conference Eastern Europe, seeking security for all was organised by the Belarusian Minsk Dialogue think tank, which has been active since 2015.

¹⁶ In his speech Lukashenko repeatedly stressed the right and obligation of small countries to act to bring about peace in order not to become victims of conflict between the large international players. See А. Александров, Т. Коровенкова, *Минский диалог. Лукашенко говорил о мутации вызовов и страшной болезни политиков*, <https://naviny.by/article/20180524/1527158370-minskiy-dialog-lukashenko-govoril-o-mutacii-vyzovov-i-strashnoy-bolezni>

position in the matter¹⁷ should a US base be created in Poland.

Can Belarus afford to stay neutral?

Numerous statements made by Belarusian officials indicate that the main external threat is the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. The country's strategic location between Russia and the West, initially considered an advantage, has now become a potential threat to Belarus's security, and perhaps even its independence. Russia has become aggressive and demanding of its Belarusian ally, while the West continues to be remote in terms of values and legal and administrative system standards which are ill-suited to the specific nature of an authoritarian regime. This has led the Belarusian authorities to conclude that the only effective guarantee of their survival will be measures aimed at universal recognition as a country not committed to either side in the conflict, taking

an active role as a mediator (or host of the talks, as the case may be) in peace processes.

Thus Minsk is trying to redefine its foreign policy based on the tradition, dating back to the 1990s, of striving to be neutral. Although it might possibly strengthen Belarus' international standing, there are serious limitations to the concept as thus formulated, because it is difficult to recognise as a neutral (or at least credible) mediator a country which is an active member of a military bloc (the Collective Security Treaty Organisation) led by Russia, and which above all is in a close military alliance with Moscow. Achieving Minsk's ambitions in the role of mediator will therefore depend less on the effectiveness of Belarusian diplomacy and more on the favour of the Kremlin, which expects complete loyalty and subordination from Belarus. This means that in the long run the Belarusian authorities will only be able to imitate attempts at neutrality, out of regard for Russia's interests in the region.

¹⁷ For more on this subject see *Makeй о военной базе РФ в Беларуси: «Нет ничего невозможного»*, 1 June 2018, <https://naviny.by/new/20180601/1527850414-makey-o-voennoy-baze-rf-v-belarusi-net-nichego-nevozmozhnogo>

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