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## EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL POLICIES OF BELARUS AFTER CRIMEA ANNEXATION

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### Abstract

Within the last few years, significant changes have taken place in the geopolitical and economic spheres of Europe: Euromaidan, annexation of the Crimea in the East, and problems inside the European Union (issue of migrants, Brexit) in the West. These changes had their impact on Belarus, a country situated between Russia and the EU. Conflict between Ukraine and Russia shook the Belarusian economy. Belarusian authorities were afraid about unexpected Russian steps towards Minsk and about social unrest against their own authoritarian president. All of this forced Alexander Lukashenko to search for new solutions in his policies. During recent months, it was possible to observe the change of a political discourse with Poland, attempts of a cautious cooperation with Russia (which is still Belarus' main ally), and a search for new sources of finances and energy suppliers. The present situation is a new challenge for Belarusian authorities and even for foreign observers. For inhabitants of the country, the situation is not comfortable.

This article aims to present, based on selected sources, the synthesis of actions that were taken in the external and internal politics by the Belarusian authorities after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

**Keywords:** Belarus, Russia, European Union, Poland, Lukashenko, euromaidan, Ukraine

## Introduction

The geopolitical situation of Belarus has never been easy. It is a country situated at the crossroads of „west” and „east”, the western border of the former Soviet empire. Moreover, within its borders contains areas having the clear influence of the western European culture. During the time of the Soviet Union, Belarus was considered as one of the most developed republics. But after collapse of Soviet Union, Belarus found itself in a new, difficult situation. Early on as a newly independent nation, Belarus tried to keep its traditional communist control and practice in the economy, although after 1993 this policy became insufficient. It was strongly connected with Russia's decision to adjust energy prices and terminate the flow of so-called technical credits from central bank. Additionally, the collapse of the Belarusian idea of a monetary union with Russia and its first presidential election campaign sustained existing inflationary pressure on its economy. Before 1994, Belarus, balancing on the verge of hyperinflation, had significant political problems with the insertion of a coherent package of reforms (Dąbrowski & Antczak, 1995: 4).

Belarusian politics was not far better than economy. Since 1994, the country has been ruled by President Alexander Lukashenko, and the political system can be considered a presidential republic with the characteristics of an authoritarian state. The president himself has repeatedly been accused of human rights violations and other controversies (what sometimes resulted in sanctions imposed on Belarus) (OSW, 2011).

At the beginning of Lukashenko era, Belarusian political sympathies automatically turned toward the big brother from the east – Russia. However, after 2000 (when Vladimir Putin became Russian president), more and more conflicts began to appear between both countries. Most of the tensions had a background of economic causes and of the supply of Russian raw materials (Czachor, 2011: 172–190). Belarus, more or less successfully, coped with its stronger neighbor, trying to gain as much as possible, but appearances of economic and political stability were misleading.

Relations with Poland also were not exemplary, and despite some economic cooperation, significant tensions were appearing frequently. Some efforts were undertaken by Poland to initiate the process of repairing good relations – and, inter alia, one of the most important acts was the Eastern Partnership program. Despite the hope of good developments (several Polish Parliament members visited Belarus, also a representative of Alexander Lukashenko was present at the inauguration of the partnership summit in 2009) (Zięba, 2010: 241), another setback happened and relations again become cold.

## 2014 and violent geopolitical changes

In the end of November 2013, the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius took place, but the most important Belarusian authorities were absent. Belarus was subjected to EU sanctions for human rights violations and Alexander Lukashenko (*because of a visa ban*) was persona non grata in Vilnius. Initially, no one expected that the summit in general would bring any breakthrough. Agreements were signed with Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan, but signing an association agreement with Ukraine, the most expected result, did not come to fruition (Dudek, 2013). A signing of an association agreement was expected not only by representatives of the EU but the Ukrainians themselves. Resignation from the association agreement led to a wave of protests against Viktor Yanukovich, first in Kiev, then in the whole country. The opposition demanded the removal of the president from his post, and by the time protests underwent radicalization and had soon developed into a national revolution, called Euromaidan (Woźniczka, 2013). The apogee of the protests took place in February 2014 when bloody clashes between protesters and Ukrainian special services happened (TVN, 2014). President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Russia (BBC, 2014), and the Ukrainian government was overthrown. Ukrainians hoped for a good development of events, however, the endeavors to the transformation of power and action of „decommunization” was interrupted by Russia, which decided to seize the moment of weakness and confusion in Ukraine. At the end of April 2014, the annexation of the Crimea took place [Federal Law, 2014]. In Lugansk and Donetsk separatist movement also announced their desire to join the Russian Federation. This started a war in the region (Gazeta, 2014).

Up against the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Belarus found itself in a sticky situation. Lukashenko made every effort to remain relatively neutral, as long as it only possible, and to keep a good relationship with both countries, though he had officially condemned the

annexation of Crimea, saying: „it is unacceptable that one country took part of the territory of another country, violated its territorial integrity” (MG, 2014). Lukashenko also tried to play the role of peacemaker by suggesting Minsk as a place of peace negotiations regarding the conflict in Donbas. However, Lukashenko did not take part in them, and the same talks held between the national authorities, first in 2014 when representatives of Ukraine, Russia and Lugansk People’s Republic (what finished with signing of Minsk Protocol in September 2014, that finally collapsed) (OSCE, 2014) and for the second time negotiations were held by representatives of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France. Despite hopes, again it did not bring a ceasefire and a solution to the situation (Kadraś & Konończuk, 2015).

From the very beginning, the events in Ukraine seemed to be unfavorable for Lukashenko. Initially, it was thought that his main anxiety was mainly caused by Euromaidan. The autocratic president could fear that the fierce attitude of the Ukrainians may encourage Belarusians to fight for their rights. Minsk recently experienced mass protests in 2006 and in 2010, after the presidential elections. However, „the Belarusian maidan” was not entirely a realistic perspective. Belarusians and Ukrainians are mentally different and, as Belarusian public mood showed, they primarily appreciate stability and peace. Belarusians, while watching the events in Ukraine – with protests, their bloody suppression, annexation of the Crimea and the war in Donbas – started even to feel happy with their government, which, after all, guarantees peace and stability (Smok, 2014).

There are two things that could frighten Lukashenko more. First, Russia could have applied on Belarus the same procedure it had applied on Crimea by annexing parts of the country for the „protection of Russian-speaking citizens.” A majority of the population in Belarus speaks Russian. Besides, Lukashenko may have been terrified by his own work. For many years, he provided a policy of denationalization of Belarusians, squashing their sense of national identity, language and symbols, and this may now effectively turn against him. For many Belarusians, incorporation into the Russian Federation would not make a more existential difference. Many Belarusians still long for the Soviet Union, and Moscow is the city which is associated with the former Soviet empire. Moreover, the situation in Ukraine could encourage the pro-Russian forces in Belarus, that favor deeper integration with the Russian Federation (Wyrzykowska, 2014).

### **New political discourse of Alexander Lukashenko**

The negative effects of the Crimea annexation for Belarus were assessed by the independent Belarusian political scientist Valery Karbalevich (Wyrzykowska, 2014). Thus far, Belarus strode by on an independent track, and Lukashenko built an economic system on different principles than the Russian way. Russian capital was allowed into the country in a controlled manner. Moreover, Russia was not allowed to interfere in Belarusian internal affairs. However, nowadays, the situation changed. Moscow expressed its willingness to put Russian military planes in Belarus. If this would happen, in light of the situation with the Crimea, additional concerns may have risen and the Belarusian political situation may be changed. Lukashenko aimed to preserve neutrality, if only it was possible, in relation to the conflict between two neighbors. „The official ideological construction” had been destroyed, but Minsk still wanted to maintain independence and protect the coun-

try from the Russian influence and to also keep, beneficial trade relations with Ukraine (Wyrzykowska, 2014).

A major problem for the Belarusian authorities was how to present the situation in the national media. The target of the state media was not to provide objective information to customers, but to translate content into its own political context. It was decided to transform the conflict between Ukraine and Russia into a conflict between Russia and Western Europe. Additionally, state media emphasized and exaggerated the chaos that resulted from Euromaidan, spreading fear in Belarusian citizens. This resulted in social and political profit for President Lukashenko (Wyrzykowska, 2014).

However, it is crucial to note that in the present geopolitical situation, strong and stable authorities are needed (or even indispensable) in Belarus. And even if it sounds surprising, this type of power can actually be guaranteed only by an autocratic president (who is indispensable). Belarus does not have well-developed political elite. Also, the opposition is quite weak and divided. If there was a change of power, protests, political turmoil and fighting for position, the stability of the country – similarly as in Ukraine – would be disrupted. This situation could be taken advantaged by Russia (Kuleszewicz, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is possible to observe a change in the policy of the Belarusian president. During a speech in 2014, even if he was cautious enough to note that there was space for development of the Russian language in Belarus without any obstacles, he also stressed (what was kind of a novelty) separateness of Belarusians and Russians („Belarusians are not Russians”). He also referred to the Belarusian language: „If we stop to speak Russian, we will lose reason, but if we unlearn to speak Belarusian, we would cease to be a nation” (Polskie Radio, 2014). Moreover, Lukashenko, using usually the Russian language, shocked public opinion by delivering part of his speech in Belarusian during the celebration of Independence Day in 2014 (Dynko, 2014). Despite the sudden tendency to emphasize (still rather subtly) Belarusian-ness, Lukashenko constantly underlined that Russia „has always been and remains a strategic ally of Belarus, being associated with brotherly ties” (Polskie Radio, 2014). He also referred to Western European countries and to the European Union, expressing hope that, in spite of a negative opinion, which has Belarus among them, western partners „despite negative opinions from Western partners „ (Polskie Radio, 2014).

Moreover, it recently became clear that Belarusian authorities changed their attitude to Belarusian national symbols, no longer treating them as a threat. It is also a new quality in Alexander Lukashenko’s policy. In the past, he himself initiated a referendum on amending the Belarusian national symbols on the modified Soviet Belarus symbols in 1995, and later effectively cut off public demonstrations of the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia emblem (Antonowicz, 2016). Belarusian authorities, in order to consolidate the Belarusian nation and strengthen the sense of national identity among its countrymen, decided to use Belarusian national symbols. The first visible change The first visible change able to be observed after the outbreak of the war in Donbas was when the representatives of Belarusian authorities began to openly wear clothes with elements of „needlework” – traditional Belarusian embroidery, previously used exclusively by the opposition. Moreover, earlier celebrated only by the opposition, „Day of needlework” was observed for the first time by official authorities and public organizations. According to Vilnius-based political scientist Mariusz Antonowicz, Belarusian opposition was deprived of the monopoly on the „needlework”, and the theme of the Belarusian folk ornament had been successfully promoted and distributed by the ruling government. Until recently, shirts with „needlework” could

be purchased only in a few specialty stores aimed at „opposition customers”. Now, these kind of items were available widely throughout the whole country (Antonowicz, 2016).

Belarusian national symbolism penetrated also sphere of sport, which – as it is well known – is a factor strongly consolidating the nation. Before starting qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup 2018, the Belarusian Football Federation unveiled a new design for their national representation outfit. Instead of, as used in previous years, the colors red and green, the new uniform was designed in the colors of white and red with an ornament of „needlework”. Moreover, during the first match of the Belarusian national team, fans were allowed to bring white-red-white flags with the „Pahonia” emblem and other elements evocative of traditional Belarusian national symbols to the stadium. Earlier, this type of behavior was constituted as a crime and carried the risk of punishment [Antonowicz, 2016].

Lukashenko found also a new way of referring to national minorities living in Belarus – including the Poles, taking a first, small step to innovation in the Polish-Belarusian relations generally perceived as weak. Lukashenko claimed that he „does not intend to bug” people with Polish nationality in Belarus, because if he would, Belarus could share the Ukrainian fate. He also said that „everyone should remember that Polish people in Grodno are our Polish people, and it’s their land. They will never be ‘farmhands’, even in a place where their compatriots live. They will be landlords, but here, on this land” (Kuleszewicz, 2014). It seemed that the Belarusian president recognized that the Polish minority in Belarus was not only important, but also represented an integral part of society. So far, there were only words with no significant change in the real situation of Polish minorities in Belarus. The declaration itself was a new quality in political discourse of Alexander Lukashenko.

The Belarusian president also realized that not only a stronger sense of belonging to the state, national identity and good neighborly relations are a guarantee of stability in the country. It is also economics. Speaking to residents of the Hrodna region in 2014, he claimed „if our economy will work as it should, then we have nothing to fear, neither color revolutions, nor shallow investment. Nothing to fear! However, if we will fall down, we will submerge ourselves in corruption, irresponsibility, undiligent actions – we will prepare a breeding ground for these color revolutions (...) So it was in Ukraine (...) The economy is a main issue. Everything else we already have” (Kuleszewicz, 2014). Lukashenko also raised the issue of foreign investors: „Each year you are organizing an investment forum, you are making a lot of noise in the press. That’s fine, but where is the result? You should have direct Polish and Lithuanian investments, not scampering and illegally earning traders” (Kuleszewicz, 2014).

The search for new investors and business partners was also an important matter in current time for President Lukashenko. The economic situation in his country forced him to seek new solutions without looking at the old sympathies and political legacy. Since 2014, Belarus unsuccessfully fought with a growing economic crisis and inflation, caused by an inefficient paternalistic economy based on the Soviet economic model. As a result, the state is not able to provide well-being for its citizens, and their incomes were steadily declining (Antonowicz, 2016). The economic situation in Belarus was not optimistic. In 2015, for the first time in the last 20 years, there had been a decline in GDP. It was caused, mainly, by the large decrease in the level of production and export, thus foreign exchange reserves were depleted and the value of the Belarusian ruble plummeted. In addition to



the inefficiency of the Belarusian economy, the causes of crisis may be traced in the strong economic relations with Russia, which was also in the economic recession. And even if the only salvation for Belarus would be a complete remodel of the economic system, nothing indicates that President *Lukašenka* will decide to take such a step (Kłysiński, 2016).

The strategy adopted by Belarusian authorities was nothing else than an old tactic – authorities intend to get a huge, low-interest stabilization loans, probably from the International Monetary Fund and the Eurasian Development and Stabilization Fund, coordinated by Russia. By reviving relations with Western countries, rebuilding alliance with the European Union and the United States, Belarus may increase its chances for these loans. However, according to experts, this action would only postpone the inevitable need to carry out fundamental reforms of the Belarusian economy (Kłysiński, 2016).

Inflation, lasting for many years in Belarus, finally forced Belarusian authorities to accomplish the denomination of the Belarusian ruble in July 2016. This procedure could only solve the practical problems of Belarusian citizens occurring during the use of money. The key should, however, strive to eliminate the cause of the bad monetary situation, rather than alleviating the ailments (Krivibok, 2016).

The situation in Belarus will not be improved by the events in Western Europe, and a major blow to the Belarusian economy and politics may be from Brexit, the migration crisis and the euro zone crisis. According to Andrei Dyńko, the editor of the weekly magazine „Nasha Niva”, Western countries will be busy with their internal affairs and cooperation with Belarus can become secondary. On the other hand, Brexit and changes in Western Europe may increase the role of Russia, which is not exactly beneficial for Belarus. As he pointed out: „The weaker European Union is, the weaker Belarus is. But as stronger as the Union is, such stronger will be the economy and independence of Belarus. This relationship will be visible in the next few years” (Pac, 2016).

Belarus is trying to make use of every possible situation to have a chance to improve its economic and exports indicators. In a sense, such a possibility happened in 2014, when Russia imposed an embargo on products from EU countries, Australia, Norway and Canada. The embargo gave a new opportunity to strengthen cooperation with Poland, this time in the economic field. Belarus turned out to help Polish producers who, because of the embargo, were unable to send their products to Russia. Polish products were sent to processing plants in Belarus, and there the label „Made in Belarus” was to be added, giving the possibility to export them further to Russia. The second way was to increase the export of Belarusian products to Russia, and replace them with Polish products in Belarusian stores. In 2016, for the first time in two years, Polish exports to Belarus increased by 12.3%. However, as experts point out, this was also the result of the intensification of contacts at the political level (Forsal, 2016).

Nevertheless, Belarus still treats and wants to treat Russia as a main partner. Both countries not only still remain a Belarus-Russia Union (Mironowicz, 1999: 278), but cooperate on different levels, including the military sphere. Russia has facilities on Belarusian territory (Ballistic Missile Early Warning System in Hancevichi near Baranovichi and a Contact Base with the Russian Baltic Fleet Vileyka) (Mikołajczyk, 2014: 65). Also, Minsk and Moscow established a common, and cyclically repeated, large-scale military tactic actions known as the ZAPAD maneuvers (Szaszdi, 2008: 250).

## **A new chapter in Polish-Belarusian relations**

The year 2016 was a year of recovery in the Polish-Belarusian relations. Both the geopolitical situation, which forced Belarus to new behaviors, as well as the change of government in Poland had its effect on this. Polish authorities decided to slightly change course and become even more open to talks with Belarus. The watershed event in mutual relations was the visit of Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski in Belarus. The head of Polish diplomacy not only met with Poles living in Belarus and visited a memory space (Kurapaty) important for both Poles and Belarusians, but he also met with high representatives of the Belarusian authorities – President Alexander Lukashenko and his Belarusian counterpart Uladzimir Makey. (Polskie Radio, 2016). At the beginning of his visit, Witold Waszczykowski pointed out that the situation when close neighbors do not talk to each other is abnormal: „Therefore we have decided, without any preconditions, to start talks to regulate all neighborhood affairs”, he added. Alexander Lukashenko expressed the full willingness to work closely with Poland, referring to the community of the Polish and Belarusian history. He pointed out that „Together we can significantly speed up many processes that take place here. In the interests of both countries and in any case not to the detriment of our neighbors” (Polskie Radio, 2016). Another important event for the new development of mutual relations was the visit of Polish Deputy Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki in Minsk. Also, there was the meeting with President Lukashenko. The talks focused on strengthening economic and trade cooperation, and Poland proposed an offer to participate in the privatization process in Belarus (Polskie Radio, 2016).

Morawiecki underlined that the interest in the development of Polish-Belarusian economic cooperation is not only the domain of the state authorities, but above all entrepreneurs themselves. The visit of the Polish deputy prime minister coincided with the inauguration of the twentieth Polish-Belarusian Economic Forum „Neighborliness 2016”. Both the Polish deputy prime minister and deputy prime minister of Belarus unanimously agreed that the potential of cooperation is located in both countries geographical position, which may have a strategic importance for the transport and transit of goods. It was noted that Poland can help Belarus to enter the markets of the European Union and Belarus has the ability to support the development of Polish trade within the former Soviet Union. As Deputy Prime Minister Morawiecki emphasized, a broad spectrum of 15 blocks of cooperation (among the major listed areas were industry, construction, oil processing, machine building, and construction) were discussed and a way of quickly resolving disputes and doubts was worked out. There was also a declaration to maintain the growth rate of trade between Poland and Belarus (Prus, 2016).

During the visit of Deputy Prime Minister Morawiecki in Minsk, another important question was the possibility of energetic cooperation. Belarus could offer the sale of energy from its nuclear power plant in Astraviec. Poland could therefore buy energy for its own needs or sell it further to Western countries (Prus, 2016). That would be an important step towards the diversification of energy sources in Poland and important chance for Belarus to boost the economy. It was clearly noticeable that the development of trade and economic cooperation would be beneficial for both Poland and Belarus and it is possible to suppose that economic interest may become a factor significantly influencing the political relations.

Even if economic and trade questions were widely discussed between Poland and Belarusian authorities, the area of education also became a platform to develop further cooperation between both countries. Talks on the subject were held at the beginning of December 2016 during the visit of the Polish Senate Marshal Stanisław Karczewski in Minsk (W Polityce, 2016).

Karczewski spoke with President Lukashenko about improving the situation of Polish minorities in Belarus and an important cultural agreement was worked out to allow reception of two Polish television stations, TVP Polonia and TVP Kultura, in Belarus. However, some contentious matters between Polish and Belarusian governments are still present until this day. There is no positive answer from President Lukashenko to Polish questions about the exhumations of the victims of the Stalinist regime, the construction of official state memorial at the place of execution in Kuropaty or the transfer of the so-called „Belarusian Katyn list.” Lukashenko remains consistent and determined about the Kuropaty issue. However, according to Marshal Karczewski, hope is still not lost and the Polish government should continue talking with Belarusian authorities (Bielecki & Szożyn, 2016).

Current development of mutual relations between the Polish and Belarus gives hope for multidimensional cooperation, where both countries can benefit significantly. For Belarus, trade and economic cooperation seems to be particularly important, while increasing exports to Poland and attracting new investors from the European Union may be necessary to save the country's economy. However, Alexander Lukashenko is forced to lead a cautious, equivalent policy to maintain good relations with other post-Soviet countries and, in particular, with Russia, that still remains the main partner for Belarus.

## Conclusions

Recent years of rapid development and changes in Europe, both Eastern and Western, placed Belarus in difficult geopolitical situation. Euromaidan experiences, Crimea Annexation and a raising fear about Russian aggressive action forced autocratic Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko to provide a very cautious and balanced external policy and to change his approach to internal affairs (Belarusian president started to rebuild a sense of national identity in Belarusians, what seems to be entirely new phenomenon). Belarusian authorities tried every effort to remain neutral in conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and to preserve proper relations with both neighbors.

Belarus has a problem not only with political concerns, but its economy has also been through tough times. Belarusian authorities stand before the uneasy challenge of bringing the country out of a crisis. To reach this purpose and to remain with political security and stability, Belarus is looking for ways to become independent from Russia as much as possible by finding new partners. This is clearly visible in latest of warm contacts with Polish authorities which resulted in some plans and promises. Even if the latest Belarusian-Polish contact gives a significant chance to repair bilateral relations and construct a strong cooperation system, there is still a little fear if actual improvement of relations will last.

After all, Russia still remains the main partner of Belarus. And even if certain tensions on the Moscow-Minsk line have happened recently (Lukashenko's "strong" statements against Russia, Russia's plans to introduce a large number of troops into Belarus as part of the ZAPAD-2017 maneuvers and the reintroduction of control on the Belarusian-Russian



border) it is possible to consider their emphasis as a part of a common propaganda strategy (Sabak, 2016).

Nevertheless, Belarus, in connection with its economic situation, is looking for new business partners, as can be observed in the case of the latest relations with Poland. It should be emphasized, however, that Belarus is led by a desire to improve its economic situation, rather than the desire for a sudden return to the West and turning away from Russia. Yes, Belarus will want to gain bigger energy independence of Russia, but this aim cannot be provided by Poland or any other European Union country. Minsk is looking for new energy suppliers in Azerbaijan and Venezuela. In addition, Minsk is seeking to expand its business contacts with Ukraine (president.gov.ua, 2017) and Turkey (Gubarevich, 2016).

The change in the situation in Europe, the annexation of the Crimea, the military conflict in eastern Ukraine, the crises and unrest in the European Union, and the internal poor economic situation have forced Belarus to pursue a new, careful policy (both internal and external). Belarus primarily needs stabilization – politically and economically – which is sought by neutrality towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and a subtle opening to new directions of cooperation (within and outside the European Union) while simultaneously preserving Russia as a main ally.

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