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Background

Belarus's Rapprochement with the West: What does it indicate?

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S*ummary*

It would be inaccurate to place Belarus either on the side of Russia or the West. Rather, it is a country that supports the easing of hostility between Russia and the West. Belarus has always abided by good neighbourliness and practised a multi-vector foreign policy based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, partnership, and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Despite its limited resources and influence in international politics, Belarus continues to play a prominent role in the international arena to strengthen peace and promote stability in the region.

Despite having close defence and political cooperation with Russia and Russian-led regional organisations, Belarus has opened the door for negotiations with all major players in Europe, including NATO. President Alexander Lukashenko has reassured Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for European Neighbourhoods Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, that Belarus would remain committed to the Eastern Partnership, an initiative aimed at consolidating the EU's relations with six post-Soviet republics - Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. He explained: "We strictly adhere to the Eastern Partnership agreements. We offer specific regional economic projects which benefit both the European Union, Belarus and eastern neighbours, ours and yours."¹ At the same time, during a session devoted to discussing integration projects and cooperation with European organizations on March 5, 2019, Lukashenko expressed disappointment with the lack of progress in the Eurasian integration process. He noted that "unfortunately, Eurasian integration is turning or has already turned back."² In the same session, with regards to the appointment of the Secretary General of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), he also opined that "now the organization is caught in some unhealthy situation." Further, Belarus has also pronounced that it would pursue a policy of non-involvement in the conflict between Russia and the West. According to Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei: "We are not going to choose any side. I do not like the fact that Belarus should be a bridge between the East and the West. We, proceeding from our national interests, are trying to suggest ideas that could help build a constructive dialogue between different opponents."³

This attitude of Belarus has surprised many in Russia and in the West. The Russian media has interpreted this shift as a consequence of growing tensions between Russia and Belarus. The differences between Belarus and Russia include an argument over Russian energy subsidies to Belarus and a Belarusian request for easing the terms of payment for the construction of a nuclear power plant. With respect to the latter, the interest rate on Russia's loan to build the nuclear power plant stood at 4.8 per cent, whereas it stood at less than three per cent in the cases of Vietnam and Armenia.⁴ The West has also offered its own interpretation for the perceived shift in the foreign policy of Belarus. US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, A Wess Mitchell, equated it to those undertaken by

¹ Meeting with European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, 21 June 2018, at http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/meeting-with-european-commissioner-for-european-neighborhood-policy-and-enlargement-negotiations-johannes-18976/

² Alexander Lukashenko (2019), "Session to discuss integration projects and cooperation with European organizations", March 5, 2019, at http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/session-to-discuss-integration-projects-and-cooperation-with-european-organizations-20648/

³ Vladimir Makei (2017), The East-West dialogue is in Belarus' interests, June 6, 2017, <https://eng.belta.by/opinions/view/the-east-west-dialogue-is-in-belarus-interests-5601/>

⁴ Lukashenko: Belarus has not lived off Russia and never will, March 1, 2019, at <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-has-never-lived-off-russia-and-never-will-119142-2019/>

Georgia and Ukraine earlier. In his view, “frontier states like Ukraine, Georgia, and even Belarus ... offer the surest bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism.”⁵

Until recently, both the Western media and policy makers portrayed Belarus as a “Junior Partner of Russia”⁶ or “the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe.”⁷ This was never correct. There have been several instances of Belarus radically differing and disagreeing with Russia and Russian actions in the international sphere. For instance, Belarus declined to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. From the very onset of the Ukraine crisis, Belarus has expressed displeasure over the Russian approach towards Crimea. Belarus did not recognise or back the integration of Crimea into Russia. Responding to media questions on this matter on March 23, 2014, President Lukashenko stated: “As for Crimea, I do not like it when the integrity and independence of a country are broken. Ukraine is a brotherly country for me and for you. It is a part of our Slavonic community. Therefore, the things that are going on there are rather painful to me.”⁸ This stance on the conflict in Ukraine has not changed thereafter. Belarus is the only neighbouring country that maintains friendly relations with both Russia and Ukraine. Such a neutral stance has enabled Minsk to become a major venue of negotiations for the Ukraine crisis and emerge as a mediator between rival parties.

According to the *Annual Review of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus of 2018*, “Minsk agreements remain one of the key mechanisms for the settlement of the situation in the east of Ukraine. In 2018 Belarus hosted more than 20 meetings in the framework of the Trilateral Contact Group.”⁹ Recently, on March 1, 2019 President Lukashenko cautioned the Russian leadership and opined that Belarus is

⁵ A Wess Mitchell (2018), “Winning the Competition for Influence in Central and Eastern Europe”, October 18, 2018, Keynote Speech of The Hon. A Wess Mitchell, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at Atlantic Council, at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/winning-the-competition-for-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe-us-assistant-secretary-of-state-a-wess-mitchell>

⁶ Oleksandr Khara (2018), "Will Russia Be Able To Swallow Belarus", December 28, 2018, at <https://www.unian.info/world/10393815-will-russia-be-able-to-swallow-belarus.html>

⁷ “Rice: Russia's future linked to democracy”, April 20, 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke with CNN Moscow Bureau Chief Jill Dougherty , at

<http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/04/20/rice.dougherty/index.html>

⁸ President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko answers questions of mass media representatives on March 23, 2014, at http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/president-of-the-republic-of-belarus-alexander-lukashenko-answers-questions-of-mass-media-representatives-on-8348/

⁹ Annual Review of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018, at <http://mfa.gov.by/en/publications/reports/c6a9b8e77e5bf177.html>

the best suitable place to resolve the Ukraine conflict. According to him, "We need to resolve this problem. I tell every Russian leader: don't flatter yourself that you are big and will win. If Americans deploy intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles in Ukraine, you will be in trouble. This is why this problem has to be resolved."¹⁰

Belarus not only shares borders with Russia and Ukraine but also with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland which are all NATO members. Belarusian administrations had earlier expressed serious concerns about NATO's eastward expansion and deployment of troops near its borders. Addressing the international forum on "Eastern Europe: In Search of Security for All" on May 24, 2018, President Lukashenko had blamed NATO for the ongoing confrontation in Europe. He claimed that "Many of the problems we have faced today were caused by the NATO expansion to the east. I have the right to say this, because it all happened in front of my eyes, the first President of Belarus."¹¹ Similarly, with reference to the deployment of additional NATO troops in neighbouring countries, Minister of Foreign Affairs Makei noted that "As for the prospects of deployment of a new contingent of NATO troops in the Baltic states and Poland, we certainly do not welcome the deployment of additional troops in the territory of our neighbouring countries."¹² However, in the last few months, it appears that Belarus has adopted a more flexible approach towards NATO.

As reported in the state-owned national news agency, Belarusian Telegraph Agency (or BelTA), on February 21, 2019, Major-General Oleg Voinov, Chief of the International Military Cooperation Department, Ministry of Defence, held a briefing with military attaches of 28 countries. During the meeting, it was revealed that Belarus has adjusted the concept of international military cooperation for the period 201 to 2023. In line with the new concept, it would gradually improve relations with members of NATO and the European Union, as well as with nations that respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Belarusian state and advance a trustful and equal dialogue.¹³ Consequently, President Lukashenko, while addressing the students and academic staff of the Military Academy on February 22, 2019 stated that "As a sovereign state, Belarus is ready for a constructive dialogue, including with the North Atlantic bloc on the principles of equality and transparency. We do

¹⁰ Belarus described as good place to resolve conflict in Ukraine, March 1, 2019, at <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/belarus-described-as-good-place-to-resolve-conflict-in-ukraine-119179-2019/>

¹¹ President Alexander Lukashenko speech at the international forum "Eastern Europe: In Search of Security for All" on May 24, 2018, at http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/international-forum-eastern-europe-in-search-of-security-for-all-18776/

¹² Vladimir Makei (2017), "Deployment of NATO forces in neighbouring countries poses no direct threat to Belarus", July 7, 2016, at <https://eng.belta.by/opinions/view/deployment-of-nato-forces-in-neighboring-countries-poses-no-direct-threat-to-belarus-5434/>

¹³ "Belarus to stay partners with Russia, improve relations with NATO", February 21, 2019, at: <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-to-stay-partners-with-russia-improve-relations-with-nato-118901-2019/>

not fence ourselves from anyone. We are ready for this dialogue."¹⁴ Moreover, Belarus has consistently encouraged negotiations as the only way to resolving all contentious issues including Ukraine conflicts. Foreign Minister Makei proposed "We should now establish, as fast as possible, a direct and honest dialogue between all the stakeholders: between NATO and Russia, NATO and Belarus, separate NATO member states and Russia, and also individual NATO member states and Belarus."¹⁵

Belarus has been pursuing an independent foreign policy since declaring its state sovereignty on August 25, 1991. During an interview to BelTA, Minister of Foreign Affairs Makei stated that "Our country's foreign policy and foreign trade policy, like any other, is based on national interests. Its main principles and priorities were defined by the country's president. These include a multi-vector policy, good neighbourliness, peacefulness. From this perspective, we build up relations with foreign states expanding the circle of our partners and allies."¹⁶ President Lukashenko has always prioritized independence and sovereignty and constrained all sort of foreign interventions in the country. Unlike in Moldova and Ukraine, the ruling elite of Belarus is not divided into pro-Russian and pro-EU camps. As a result, Belarus has managed to diversify its international engagements and balanced its ties with both Russia and the West. Articulating his view on the confrontation between the West and Russia, President Lukashenko said at a meeting on July 11, 2017 that "We do not need to confront anyone. We need to make friends with everyone. It is fundamentally important to develop cooperation with the East and the West without making a choice between them. We need to find new contacts everywhere to be known, understood, and recognized in the end. This is when we will be able to establish mutually beneficial relations."¹⁷ In this context, President Lukashenko articulated the idea of "Big Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific" and opined that the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union should establish closer ties. Earlier, addressing the National Assembly on April 29, 2015, he had noted that "We will eventually succeed in bridging the gap between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union and in establishing Big Europe

¹⁴ "Lukashenko: Belarus ready for dialogue with NATO based on equality, transparency", February 22, 2019, at <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-ready-for-dialogue-with-nato-based-on-equality-transparency-118940-2019/>

¹⁵ Vladimir Makei (2017), "Deployment of NATO forces in neighbouring countries poses no direct threat to Belarus", July 7, 2016, at <https://eng.belta.by/opinions/view/deployment-of-nato-forces-in-neighboring-countries-poses-no-direct-threat-to-belarus-5434/>

¹⁶ Vladimir Makei (2019), "Belarus' sovereignty is common achievement and greatest value", January 18, 2019, (in the run-up to the 100th anniversary of the diplomatic service, Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei gave an interview to BelTA), at <https://eng.belta.by/opinions/view/belarus-sovereignty-is-common-achievement-and-greatest-value-5868/>

¹⁷ Alexander Lukashenko (2017), "Meeting to discuss Belarus' priorities in foreign politics at the present stage", July 11, 2017, at http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/meeting-to-discuss-belarus-priorities-in-foreign-politics-at-the-present-stage-16658/

from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. Belarus' presidency in the EEU will contribute to the materialization of this idea.”¹⁸ These words on the promotion of connectivity in Greater Europe and initiatives on the partnership between various integration associations are indicative of Belarus' balanced foreign policy.

However, unlike Georgia and Ukraine, Belarus has never shown any willingness to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Nor has it ever threatened to leave the Russian-led political and security organisations. Instead, the country's leaders have repeatedly emphasised their continued commitment to strengthening ties with Russia. In line with the new adjusted concept of international military cooperation for 2019-2023, Belarus stated that it would continue to pursue its strategic partnership with Russia as well as maintain a high level of relations with the Collective Security Treaty Organization member states, China, and CIS member states.¹⁹

Given all this, it would be inaccurate to place Belarus either on the side of Russia or the West. Rather, it is a country that supports the easing of hostility between Russia and the West. Belarus has always abided by good neighbourliness and practised a multi-vector foreign policy based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, partnership, and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. In spite of its limited resources and influence in international politics, Belarus continues to play a prominent role in the international arena to strengthen peace and promote stability in the region.

¹⁸ Alexander Lukashenko (2015), “Address of the President to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly”, April 29, 2015, at http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/belarus-president-to-address-nation-parliament-on-29-april-11303/

¹⁹ “Belarus to stay partners with Russia, improve relations with NATO”, February 21, 2019, at: <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-to-stay-partners-with-russia-improve-relations-with-nato-118901-2019/>

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