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LUKASHENKO AND POROSHENKO: FRIENDS OF CONVENIENCE?

Since the beginning of the Maidan revolution and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Minsk has been sending ambiguous messages. On the one hand, Lukashenko expressed his disapproval to such ‘anarchistic’ disorder in a neighbouring country. Yet on the other hand, he made it clear that he supports established international rules such as territorial integrity and non-intervention in the matters of sovereign countries, rules that were cynically violated by Kremlin.

This position of Belarusian president, however, is nothing new. With the upcoming presidential elections in 2015, Lukashenko perceives new Ukrainian government to serve as a window for rapprochement with the West. At the same time, Minsk is sending a signal to Moscow that it will not probable. Thus, good ties with Kyiv are the most pragmatic move in the current situation. Given the ongoing undeclared war in Eastern Ukraine, good ties with Minsk are highly beneficial for Kyiv as well.

Thus, in this issue of the “Bell” two articles are trying to answer, where relations between Belarus and Ukraine could lead. In the first article, Yauhen Krasulin argues that while many found developing relations between Lukashenko and Maidan-promoted leadership unexpected, these highly pragmatic relations are more than logical. He then explains how these relations might once again bring Belarus closer to the West.

In the second article, Aliaksandr Aleshka reviews the key interest of both Belarus and Ukraine in the strategic cooperation between the countries. He states that trade, military cooperation and cooperation in energy sector could of further interest for Minsk and Kyiv in deepening their relations. Both authors conclude that Belarus and Ukraine have a common interest in containing Moscow’s influence - another driving force for working together.

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

UKRAINE-BELARUS COOPERATION AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Yauhen Krasulin

Many have found developing relations between Aleksander Lukashenko and new Maidan-promoted leadership of Ukraine unexpected. Lukashenko was not the only one who could associate Maidan with Belarusian Plošča Square, a tool seen by many in the Belarusian opposition and the public who hope to overthrow the regime.

Belarusians in favor of change saw Maidan as an example to follow and a symbol of change for Belarus. This is why it was even more surprising to see concrete steps by the new Ukrainian government towards Mr. Lukashenko after the collapse of Yanukovich’s regime. Oleksandr Turchynov, the Chairman of the Supreme Rada and the then acting President of Ukraine, met Lukashenko. Later, Petro Poroshenko, the Ukrai-

nian president elect, invited Lukashenko to his inauguration. These facts provoked reflection on the reasons behind this friendly treatment of the ‘last European dictator’ by the Ukrainian leadership. In an attempt to explain it, some in Belarus voiced a possible Western strategy to use Ukraine as an intermediary for new relations with Belarus, or perhaps a move towards reviving the Baltic-Black Sea Belt.

However, such assumptions imply a certain strategic plan on the side of the new Ukrainian leadership. Given the situation in Ukraine, which brought new people to the government, it seems unlikely that they have a clear mid-term strategy, let alone a long-term one. These people had very obvious and urgent problems to deal with to preserve the country’s existence.

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Some in Belarus voiced a possible Western strategy to use Ukraine as an intermediary for new relations with Belarus, or a move towards reviving the Baltic-Black Sea Belt idea.

Moscow has clearly shown its readiness to break the sovereignty of a neighboring nation, while a threat of "Maidan import" stays a mere theory.

Russia's annexation of Crimea appears to be just the beginning. Politicians and experts have repeatedly predicted a full-fledged invasion, something that no longer seems to be a vain fantasy. At the beginning of the World War II, Nazi Germany invaded Belgium to circumvent fortified barriers and occupy France in the so-called Operation Fall Gelb. In the present day, Russia could consider this model and use the Belarusian territory to cross the northern border of Ukraine.

Belarus in 2014 fits the model even better than Belgium in 1940. Though formally neutral, Belarus willingly provides Russia with a platform for military training. Attacks against Chernihiv and Kiev, Rivne or other strategic locations in Ukraine from the Belarusian territory seem likely.

This can explain why the new Ukrainian leadership has been so eager to get support from Lukashenko rather than from loyal supporters of Maidan and Ukraine against Russia. Ukrainians needed someone in Belarus who was in control and could have at least some impact on Ukraine's vulnerable northern border. To put it bluntly, Turchynov needed someone to prevent Russian tanks invading Ukraine from Belarus, and Poroshenko's interest is obviously the same.

Yet these were not the only interests of both parties. Now, in a period of a certain stability for the Ukrainian leadership, they could begin to think strategically, too. Perhaps they have remembered Sun Tzu's idea of undermining the enemy's alliance – in the context of Ukraine, by cutting Belarus off from Russia (or at the very least by weakening their ties). Ukraine is capable of offering Lukashenko an alternative to a pro-Russian orientation by becoming an intermediary in relations with the West. If Poroshenko wants to feel secure in the North, he might approach the leadership in Minsk with such an offer. It could be attractive for Lukashenko, who typically tries to be good for the West in run-up to presidential campaigns. Indeed, it is likely that he will continue his flirt with the newly elected Ukrainian leader.

While Poroshenko's goal is probably to weaken Russian pressure by cooperation with Belarus, Lukashenko's goal has stayed the same for over 20 years: to preserve his own personal power. As Russia becomes a bigger threat, interaction with Ukraine looks like a reasonable way to achieve this goal. Moscow has clearly shown its readiness to violate the sovereignty of a neighboring nation, while a threat of "Maidan import" remains a mere theory. This can explain both Lukashenko's visit to Poroshenko's inauguration and his bold statements in Kiev on situation in Ukraine's East. An unexpected release of the human rights defender Ales Bialiatski can also indicate an at-

tempt by Lukashenko to opt for a relative diversification of power resources.

The interests of Poroshenko and Lukashenko affect interests of Russia, or at least that's how the Russian leadership sees it. Many want Russia to behave appropriately in the international arena, but it is obviously unready to respect international standards in relations with its neighbors, especially when a neighbor defies the Russian understanding of the world. The Russian mentality allows almost no possibility for independent choices of former Soviet republics.

In this regard, Putin's policy is a consequence rather than a cause of popular moods in Russia. What the current Russian leadership finds natural is the doctrine of 'limited sovereignty', popular in Brezhnev's USSR; countries of the 'socialist camp' have their statehood, but no sovereignty regarding their path of development. This is why independent choices of post-Soviet countries, unless they favor Russia, provoke a negative response. This is even more evident for countries that are particularly important for Russian, like Ukraine or Belarus.

Russia might see closer links between Ukraine and Belarus as a step towards the Baltic-Black Sea Belt organization. This is a long-standing idea brought back to memory again after the change of authority in Kiev. If implemented, it would result in a considerable counterbalance to Russia in Eastern Europe. This is why any allusions to cooperation between post-Soviet countries, beyond Russian-established and approved institutions, is immensely irritating for Russia. A prime example of this is how negatively Russia reacted to the Eastern Partnership. The Kremlin might tolerate Lukashenko's boldest statements, but it will force him to act according to Russia's interests.

Belarusian sovereignty is hardly under threat from such conditions. So far, Russia's political and financial elites benefit from Belarus' status as a legally independent actor; just like in times of the 'socialist camp', a controlled ally means an extra vote in international organizations, the ability to maneuver against sanctions, and 'underground schemes' for profits and money-laundering. Only a force majeure can force Russia to consider the Anschluss of Belarus, such as a need to justify some big domestic fail.

Lukashenko's attempt in improving relations with Kiev can hardly mean any significant shift in his policies, for he would certainly love better relations with the West. However, his real and perceived dependence on Russia coupled with Moscow's mission of preventing CIS countries from developing independent policies enables me to say that Lukashenko has limits of expression set out by Russia.

The only chance for Belarus under the current leadership to break the vicious circle and to get rid of Russia's grip is a crisis in Russia itself.

As a result, many in Belarus have already noticed that Lukashenko's statements and actions are increasingly conflicting. On one hand, he chose the Belarusian language for his Independence Day statement, a rather unexpected move for the current Belarusian leader. On the other hand, he delivered the statement wearing a tie in colors of the "St. George Band", a symbol of the Victory against Nazis and, more importantly, the current imperialist aspirations of Moscow to recollect former provinces, including Belarus.

Russia also can make tough statements about Lukashenko - during the presidential campaign of 2010 in Belarus, the pro-Kremlin NTV broadcasted "Godfather", a sarcastic anti-Lukashenko documentary. Many perceived it as a radical change in how Moscow's leadership treats Lukashenko and his U-turn towards the West. However, subsequent developments proved that these were mere smart manipulations, while the relations had never changed in fact.

The upcoming electoral campaign can become a precise repetition of the same scenario. Moscow's TVs might launch another smear campaign against the Belarusian "candidate number one", while Lukashenko might use it to persuade the West, perhaps via the Ukrainian leadership. Nevertheless, the result will stay the same as four years ago.

Heavily dependent on Russia, Belarusian leadership might try to serve as the substitute of Ukraine in economic ties with Moscow. Following the announcement by Poroshenko of a ban on military cooperation with Russia, Belarus might offer Moscow the production it has lost. This could be an explanation for the Belarusian Prime Minister Miasnikovich's statements on July 9th regarding prospects for coopera-

tion between Belarusian and Russian military industries. While such a cooperation could be very promising for Belarus, given potential gains from trade of weapons, Western sanctions could break these hopes. Sanctions can take contemporary technologies away from Belarus and Russia, undermining competitiveness of their goods. This makes pro-Russian orientation less attractive in this regard.

The only chance for Belarus (under current leadership) to break the vicious circle and to be free of Russia's grip is a crisis in Russia itself. In such a case, Lukashenko could turn to the West for resources. However, Lukashenko is not able to adjust to democracy due to his aforementioned supreme goal and because of his anti-Western mentality, and so the union with Russia remains completely natural for him. If he went Westward, the role of West's "Our Son of a Bitch" would be the only one acceptable for him.

Power seems to be the only thing Russia respects, but it does not have to be a physical or a military power. Firm political will and the nation's willingness to defend its interests can appear sufficient to preserve sovereignty. Even if the enemy is stronger in military terms, if it finds financial, human and reputational costs too high, it may very well refrain from aggression. This is what Ukraine now is doing.

Overall, one must weary of the notion that Belarus would win from a weakened Ukraine. Some in Belarus have recently said that if Ukraine split, post-Lukashenko Belarus would find it easier to deal with several countries in replacing the now biggest European state. Such opinions only indicate the weakness of Belarusian politicians. Strong and consolidated Ukraine is much better for Belarus, especially if it aspires to be independent in its choices one day.

RELATIONS BETWEEN BELARUS AND UKRAINE AFTER THE RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION: PERSPECTIVE TO ESTABLISH THE LONG-TERM INFORMAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Aliaksandr Aleshka

The recent Russian aggression on Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea has seriously shaken all the ruling elites of the post-Soviet region. The Russian authorities have proven to all of its neighbors that they are able to start a large-scale military intervention to any of the states in the region despite the risk of international sanction. It seems that the Russian attack on Ukraine has terrified the leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan, Russia's closest allies. These two countries are

practically unprotected from a direct Russian military aggression. Additionally, the Western reaction to such a potential aggression may be much lower than in case of Ukraine. In this situation, the Belarusian leadership established the advanced relations with the new authorities of Ukraine from the very beginning of the conflict.

During the last decade, the political elites of Belarus and Ukraine have perfectly understood

During the last decade, the political elites of Belarus and Ukraine have perfectly understood their common interest in the further limitation of the Russian influence in their countries.

their common interest in further limiting the Russian influence in their countries. Despite its high political, economic and military capacities, the Russian Federation is not capable to carry out an aggressive policy towards both Belarus and Ukraine at the same time, for it still seriously depends on the transit routes of these countries. That is why the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine perceive the advanced cooperation between their countries as the most effective tool, which strengthens their capacity of self-protection against Russia.

In the present situation of Russian military aggression against Ukraine, the political elites of Belarus and Ukraine have started to advance their political and economic cooperation. In the near future, this cooperation may take the form of a long-term informal strategic partnership – the fundamental goal of this partnership is the mutual assistance in their self-protection from further growth of the Russian influence in the region. In the case of Ukraine, advanced cooperation with Belarus helps the country guarantee the security of the Northern border of the country, ensure a supply of oil products from the Belarusian refineries to Ukraine, and find additional international support for its position among the post-Soviet countries. In the case of Belarus, the advanced relations with Ukraine help create a serious counterbalance against further growth of the Russian influence in the country, increase the volume of its exports to Ukraine, and uses Ukraine as its lobbyist in the European Union. It seems that Belarusian leadership is gradually adding a new element to its traditional geopolitical balancing between the Russian Federation and the EU – in the near future, Ukraine may become a real strategic partner for the Republic of Belarus.

Part I. Key interests of the Republic of Belarus in its strategic cooperation with Ukraine

1. Setting up a common counterbalance to Russian influence on the post-Soviet area

After the Russian annexation of Crimea and inspiration of the separatist movement in the Donbas region, the political elites of the entire post-Soviet region have become extremely worried about the security of their countries. It seems that in the near future, Ukraine and Belarus will increase their cooperation in order to set up an informal counterbalance aimed further limiting Russian influence in the region (to a certain extent).

Belarus and Ukraine can coordinate their position in the following strategic areas:

a). Transit of Russian natural gas and crude oil to the EU – Belarus and Ukraine are still play the

largest role in transiting Russian energy resources to Europe. The Russian authorities perfectly understand their dependence on the transit territories of Belarus and Ukraine, which is why they have been trying to accelerate the construction of bypassing pipelines (Nord and South Stream). Additionally, the Russian Federation has never initiated an energy conflict with both of these countries at the same time – consistent coordination of the position of the leadership of Belarus and Ukraine may be a very efficient tool of self-protection from the Russian energy blackmail.

b). Coordination of the international position of Belarus and Ukraine – in frames of the CIS and other post-Soviet regional organizations, the leadership of Belarus and Ukraine (together with other countries in the region) may coordinate their position in order to limit to the political pressure of Russian authorities on its neighboring countries.

c). Military cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine – in the near future, the Belarusian authorities may start to adapt their military and internal security troops to the new challenges of the Hybrid War. Military cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine may help both of these countries modernize their military forces and adjust them to the current military challenges of the region. These two countries may see common projects in the modernization of helicopters, development of modern optics, light arms, armored troop carriers, and in some other spheres.

d). Alternative routes of energy supplies to Belarus and Ukraine – it seems that the Ukrainian authorities will accelerate their work on establishment of alternative routes of supply of natural gas and crude oil (reverse supply of gas from the EU, construction of additional gas storages, and increase of transfer of the crude oil from Azerbaijan). Achievement of complete energy independence of Ukraine from Russia is strategically important for Belarus – in the future, it may use the Ukrainian system of alternative energy supply to reduce its own dependence on Russia.

2. Further economic cooperation with Ukraine
Ukraine is Belarus' second largest trading partner – in 2013, the trade turnover made up about 6,2 billion USD (4,2 billion USD – Belarusian export, 2 billion USD – Belarusian import)¹. With a current positive trade balance (2 billion

¹ “ИТОГИ ВНЕШНЕЙ ТОРГОВЛИ РЕСПУБЛИКИ БЕЛАРУСЬ ЗА ЯНВАРЬ-ДЕКАБРЬ 2013 ГОДА”, http://gtk.gov.by/ru/stats/itogi_vnesh_torgovli2013/dekabr2013_itogi.

Belarus and Ukraine may seriously increase their self-protection by advancement of cooperation in establishment of alternative routes of energy supply, joint development of military equipment and coordination of their international position on the most critical current challenges of these countries

USD), Ukraine has been one of the most advantageous trading partners of Belarus. Despite the recent political and economic crisis in Ukraine, the volume of Belarusian exports has not seriously reduced, for Ukraine continues to be one of the largest receivers of Belarusian production.

In the near future, the Belarusian authorities will try to increase the volume of exports to Ukraine. There are two key tendencies which may allow Belarus to increase its profits from the Ukrainian market:

a). *Growth in export of refined products* - about 70% of Belarusian exports to Ukraine are composed of refined products. The large-scale export of oil products to Ukraine is the major reason for the large volume of trade between the two countries and for the significant positive trade balance for Belarus. The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine may result in a serious growth of demand for Belarusian refined products in the Ukrainian market (due to possible limitations of delivery of crude oil from Russia, problems with the Lisichansk refinery in the Donbas region, disputes over the ownership of the Odessa refinery, etc.). Statistics for the first half of 2014 shows that Belarus has not limited its export of refined products to Ukraine and further increases of exports may be possible.

b). *The possibility to take up a significant part of certain categories of Russian exports to Ukraine.*

At the present moment, Russian exports to Ukraine are continuing to decline as a direct consequence of the Russian military aggression. In the near future, the progressing trade war between the two countries may result in an introduction of formal or informal limitations for the Russian exports to Ukraine. Freed by the withdrawal of Russian exporters, the Belarusian exporters may have a chance to take up significant part of certain categories of the Ukrainian market.

3. Possibility to improve relations with the EU by Ukrainian lobbying for Belarus

At the present moment, the Ukrainian leadership has very advanced political relations with EU authorities and its key member-states. It may soon be possible that Ukraine starts to lobby for certain interests of Belarus in Europe, which may positively influence the character of future relations between the EU and the Republic of Belarus. Ukraine may back up such a lobbying of Belarus in the EU with the pro-Ukrainian position of the current Belarusian leadership – this position may result in a very negative reaction from Russia, but Belarus continues its strategic support of Ukraine.

Part II. Key interests of Ukraine in the strategic cooperation with Belarus

1. Guarantees of protection of the Northern border of Ukraine

In the present conditions of the open Russian military aggression against Ukraine, the Ukrainian leadership is vitally interested in the guaranteeing the security of its Northern border with the help of Belarusian authorities. Without this security, Ukraine will have to spread its military forces along the border with Belarus, which would prove to be extremely challenging for the Ukrainian military. With a secure Northern border, however, the Ukrainian leadership can concentrate the largest part of its forces in the Donbas region, neutralizing the activities of the separatist armed groups.

2. Continuation of the large-scale import of refined products from Belarus

Ukraine seriously depends on the supply of refined products from Belarus, especially considering the current circumstances. In 2013, Belarusian refined products composed over 30% of total Ukrainian consumption (0,9 million tons of petrol and over 2 million tons of diesel fuel)². One of Ukraine's key interests in this sphere is the full supply of the Ukrainian army with fuel, which is partially achieved with the help of Belarus.

In practice, Belarus could easily replace the Ukrainian market for refined products and sell all of its oil products to the EU countries, as the refined products are demanded all over Europe. Yet Belarus continues to supply Ukraine with an adequate volume of oil products, despite the dissatisfaction of the Russian leadership.

3. Cooperation with Belarus on further limiting Russian influence on the region

In the near future, Ukraine will be interested in a strategic cooperation with Belarus in further limiting Russian influence in Eastern Europe. These two countries may protect themselves by advancing cooperation in the establishment of alternative routes of energy supply, joint development of military equipment, and coordination of their international position on the most critical current challenges to these countries. In this category, the goals of the leadership of Ukraine and Belarus completely match.

² Андрей КОЖЕМЯКИ, Беларусь захватывает украинский рынок нефтепродуктов?, 201204-03, http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2012/04/03/ic_articles_113_177395/.

Part III. Potential problems and challenges in bilateral relations

So far, there have not been any serious visible problems between the current leadership of Ukraine and the Belarusian authorities. The potential sources of problems may come from the two following sources:

a). Question of regular disagreements on mutual limitations and barriers in trade

During the last two decades, both Belarus and Ukraine have been imposing regular formal and informal barriers for the import of certain categories of production. The majority of these disagreements are solved during negotiations – both of these countries seriously depend on each other in terms of international trade and they have to keep their trade rather open. There have been recent contradictions on the limitations of imports of the Ukrainian beer and confectionary to Belarus and attempts to impose limitations for imports of the Belarusian dairy products to Ukraine – all of these disagreements are not

critical for the further development of political and economic relations between Belarus and Ukraine.

b). Strong political pressure by the Russian authorities on the Belarusian leadership to limit its cooperation with Ukraine

The Russian authorities perceive further economic and political cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine very negatively. It seems that in the near future, the Russian Federation will continue its economic and political pressure on Ukraine, perhaps resulting in a growing number of anti-Ukrainian trade measures adopted by the Customs Union. In that way, the Russian authorities may force Belarus to limit its economic coordination with Ukraine. In addition, the implementation of potential strategic Belarusian-Ukrainian projects as alternative energy supply or joint production of certain military equipment may cause extremely strong Russian political pressure on Belarusian authorities. Such pressure may seriously limit the potential for future cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine.

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