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Between Russia and the West: Belarus as a Challenge for European Stability and Security

Abstract: This paper aims to explain that the stable situation of Belarus is important for Western Europe and why any fluctuations may present a challenge for European integrity and stability. Belarus, since the beginning of its independence in 1991 seems to show a great willingness to cooperate closely with Russia, claiming Western Europe and NATO as a potential enemy. In reality, the Belarusian position is much more complicated and ambiguous. Despite its close military cooperation with Russia, different tensions between Minsk and Moscow regularly happen and Belarusian authorities are still looking for new foreign partners and new energy suppliers (what was clearly visible in the last months of 2016 and the first period of 2017). Russia, old Belarusian partner, may actually even pose a threat for Belarus, so the country's authorities have a hard challenge to maintain its stability. Western countries may be open for a new chapter of cooperation with Minsk but any rapid changes in Belarusian foreign preferences may result in unpredictable results and Moscow reaction that – in turn – would be very challenging for the whole European stability and security.

Keywords: *Belarus; NATO; Russia; security; ZAPAD-2017; Poland; Lukashenko;*

Belarus is an average size country, situated in East-Central Europe, just between Poland (a member of the European Union and NATO) and Russia (which arises, nowadays, as a source of a threat for European security), inhabited by about 9.5 million people (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2016), ruled

by an authoritarian president, having a few natural resources and heavily dependent on Russian subsidies (Nice, 2012: p. 5). Although the EU made some efforts to shape the Belarusian domestic environment, the country was sometimes marginalized by Western Europe in political contacts, in spite of the fact, that Belarusian stability in economic, military and political sectors may be essential factors in shaping cohesion and security in the region and even the entire continent. The paper will discuss these causes and explain why any (internal or external) destabilization of Belarus is risky and represents a challenge for the whole European stability and security. Initially, the situation of Belarus will be discussed from a historical point of view, in further parts of the work – the country's economic and military relations with Russia, its relations with NATO, and finally – the specification of Belarusian's geopolitical condition. The text is completed with summaries and conclusions.

Belarus – an important point in the middle of the Europe?

Why the country, which in 1991, quite unexpectedly gained independence and freed from Moscow's top-down commands and guidance (Mikołajczyk, 2014, p. 64), and which has been constantly plagued by minor and major crises, represents such an important point in terms of European security and stability? First of all, to find answers to this question, the issue of the present EU security policy should be analysed through the prism of the Belarusian.

The EU actually faces new challenges: refugee flows, terrorist attacks, tensions between certain member states, Brexit, questioning the whole Union purpose or even its existence (Mogherini, 2016, p. 3), so the current EU security policy must be focused on confidence-building and stability assurance in the region. This may be accomplished through a two-pronged strategy: caring about the economic development and prosperity of European citizens (in fact, the EU is the first foreign investor for almost every country in the world) and caring about the development of military security – and although the main route will be deepening the transatlantic bond and partnership with NATO, the EU should also seek new players and explore new formats (Mogherini, 2016, pp. 3–4).

But can Belarus, a country that has already appeared as a complicated partner for talks, be this 'new player' for the EU? Even if Belarus won't be a main partner for the European Community, it possesses some significant features that should be taken into consideration (Bondarenko, 2012, p. 18). First of all – the Belarusian location, that may be important from apolitical and economic point of view – Belarus plays a substantial transit role, not only in the context of different-types of products transported but also the transmission of energy resources: Belarus is one of the most

important, for both Russia (as an exporter) and Western Europe (as an importer), transit countries for Russian gas (20% of the entire Russian gas export outside the Baltics and the CIS is going through Belarus) (Balmaceda, 2006, p. 18).

Expect this Belarus may play an important security role, for both the European Union and NATO organizations. Even if the majority of Belarusian independent state institutions were born in pain in 1991, military transformation into the independent structures went quite smoothly. There were several reasons: the Belarusian Military District coincided geographically with the area of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Secondly, the former BSRR was lying relatively close to the then NATO countries, and for that account a large number of modern weaponry was located there, assisted with numerous military education objects and defence industry. In addition, Belarus constituted an ethnically homogeneous country (which ruled out the risk of ethnic conflicts in the army), and the local officer corps contained a large number of ethnic Belarusians (Kosior, 2015). Moreover, Belarus chose two confidence-building measures that are essential for European stability. The first important issue that may raise emotions in the international arena is the Belarusian neutrality vow, strongly connected with the denuclearization process, assured in the new-born country constitution (Głąb, 2005).

Looking at these aspects, it could be assumed that the prospect of economic and defence cooperation with Belarus may be a chance for Western Europe. However, there are factors that rather pose Belarus not so much like chance, but like a challenge for European stability.

Firstly, Belarus is an authoritarian country that does not meet the requirements of democracy, which is unacceptable for many Western countries. Secondly, despite the postulate of neutrality, Belarus joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). And although neutrality is still declared by the Belarusian authorities, its actual perception is different from the traditionally adopted one (Czachor, 2011, pp. 104–106). And most importantly – the close cooperation between Belarus and Russia, at both, economic and military level and the fact that Belarus is heavily dependent on Moscow may be the greatest dispute for European stability and security. In view of Russia's violation of international law (Crimea annexation and events in eastern Ukraine), Belarus's over-dependence on Russia may adversely affect the stability of the country. Addressing the volatile situation of Belarus and taking appropriate action is Europe's greatest challenge in the context of cooperation with Minsk.

Military Cooperation with Russia

The economic crisis, that appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union, heightened the disappointment of the Belarusian population and led, especially after assuming the position of president by Alexander Lukashenko, to an increased interest in closer cooperation with Moscow. Another factor, bringing Belarus closer to the 'Big Brother from the East' could also be the fear and distrust of NATO, which in 1999 widened with countries situated close to Belarus: Hungary, the Czech Republic and finally – Poland (Czachor, 2011, p. 99).

Reintegration of Belarus and Russia could raise concerns, especially in Poland. These concerns were confirmed by the first foreign visit of President Lukashenko, that was held in Moscow in 1994. During this visit he underlined that Belarus had a desire to continue the process of political, economic and military integration with the Russian Federation (Foligowski, 1999, p. 189). Soon, both countries signed a number of economic and military agreements - Russia received assurances for a 25 years lease of two military facilities in Belarus – in Hancevichi near Baranovichi (Ballistic Missile Early Warning System) and Vileyka (contact base with the Russian Baltic Fleet) (Mikołajczyk, 2014, p. 65). In 1995 Lukashenko suspended the reduction of the army and armaments, despite the CFE-I treaty from 1990, explaining his decision as insufficient funds. In fact, the reason for pausing disarmament was, established with Yeltsin, contraction aimed to counter NATO's enlargement by new countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Foligowski, 1999, pp. 194–196).

The process of Russian-Belarusian integration accelerated even more in 1996. Then, during the visit of Lukashenko to Moscow, strategy for the transfer of Belarusian military airfields for the disposition of Russia was worked out, moreover plans for the joint construction of a 'transit corridor' from Belarus to Kaliningrad through Polish territory appeared (Mikołajczyk, 2014, p. 66). Strategic cooperation between Belarus and Russia began to rise increasingly as opposition to NATO's politics and actions. Both countries not only signed in 2000 a treaty to create a Belarus-Russia Union (Mironowicz, 1999: 278), but also established common, and cyclically repeated, large-scale military manoeuvres, called ZAPAD. These manoeuvres were propaganda-oriented, that was especially visible in 2009 when, during exercises in Belarus, offensive 'nuclear attack on Poland' and 'suppression of the Polish minority revolt' were practiced (TVN24, 2009). Also, the scenario of exercises Zapad-2013 indicated NATO as a potential enemy. Moreover, at that time, Russia clearly pushed for increasing its military presence on Belarusian territory. As it should be noticed, it happened in the period prefixing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Kosior, 2015).

What kind of benefits do the Belarusian's get from the presence of Russian troops on its territory? Primarily, the Belarusian state gains the attendance of new military equipment. As far as ownership of the Belarusian army presents itself quite impressively in numbers, in reality only part of that equipment is efficient and suitable for use. Belarus does not have enough funds to provide new armature, therefore, it relies on Russian resources. On the other hand, Russia will prefer to send Russian soldiers and equipment, than to help Belarus in self-reinforcement. The presence of Russian forces in Belarus has for the Russian authorities strategic importance for many reasons, and one of them is the possibility to locate their units about 600 kilometres further to the west, closer to NATO countries (all military bases in Belarus are located in the western regions, close to the Polish border) (Kosior, 2015).

Cooperation with Russia is important for Belarus not only in the military area (still, of all the soldiers are subjected to the orders of the Belarusian commanders), but also in the context of energetic security. Anyway, it is difficult to compare the effectiveness of cooperation in this sector to the success of the military co-action. After taking power in Russia by Vladimir Putin, the Russian-Belarusian relations experienced a series of tensions and thaws, also a few 'energy wars' took place between the allies, and Belarus is constantly looking for opportunities to diversify supply sources (Mikołajczyk, 2014, pp. 67–69).

Relations between Belarus and the NATO

Despite intensive military cooperation with Russia and the open instructional manoeuvres, training military reaction in case of an attack from the West, Belarus does not lead an unambiguous military policy. Since 1995, Belarus also cooperates with the NATO, and even if relationships stabilize at the different levels, these contacts are visible (Ciężczyk, 2010). Cooperation takes place within the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). Since 1998, there is a Belarusian diplomatic post next to the NATO, that gives large opportunities for bilateral collaboration. Within the Partnership for Peace plan, a special Individual Partnership Programme was evaluated for Belarus. Among actions being a part of it, Belarus can participate in many courses provided by the NATO, such as civil planning, crisis management, arms control, air defence, information processing and language training. Areas of most intensive cooperation between Belarus and the NATO is demilitarization (in 2007, a destruction program of 700,000 antipersonnel mines in Belarus was completed), as well as, sectors related to science (including scholarships for Belarusian scientists) and public information (supporting the development of civil society in Belarus) (Ciężczyk, 2010).

The NATO is not uncritical to the controversial and authoritarian policy of the Belarusian president, however, the Alliance still expresses readiness to support the democratization processes and is always open for partnership and cooperation (Ciężczyk, 2010).

The Influence of Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

The annexation of the Crimea and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that occurred in the aftermath of Euromaidan, put Belarus in a difficult situation. Belarusian authorities carried out every possible effort to maintain neutrality and, at the same time, appropriate relations with both neighbours. However, Lukashenko openly denounced the Crimea annexation (Anishchanka, 2015).

Observing the situation in Ukraine, Lukashenko must realize that he had a reason to be afraid - and that fear has its source in the possibility of harming the stability of Belarus or even - annexation of part (or even the entire country). Russia still remains a strategic partner for Belarus, however, Belarusian authorities take visible efforts to work out a specific balance in international relations and present an assertive judgment about some actions taken by the Russian authorities.

Moreover, President Lukashenko changed, the previously used, internal politics: a peculiar political thaw is possible to be observed, as well as the wakening of, earlier wiped out, Belarusians sense of national identity or even promotion of Belarusian symbolism (shirts with a Belarusian embroidered ornament, white-red-white flag, the *Pahonia* emblem) and the Belarusian language (Borovoy, 2015).

Between the West and the East

But is the cooperation of Russia and Belarus still fully progressing? In the last weeks of 2016 controversy aroused around the news about planned manoeuvres Zapad 2017, for which Russia had decided to organize the transfer of troops to Belarus on an unprecedented scale: whereas in 2015 rail transportation from Russia to Belarus counted 125 wagons, in 2016—50 wagons, in 2017 4126 wagons are predicted. The Russian Minister of Defence Activities, Sergei Shoigu, openly confirmed that this huge transportation is related to the planned Zapad 2017 exercises (Sabak, 2016).

Some of the Belarusian commentators claim that the purpose of the displacement of such large military units is to locate them permanently in Russian facilities located in Belarus, others believe that we can observe only demonstrational manoeuvres, showed in response to the appearance in Poland, within the NATO cooperation, the American mechanized brigade (Sabak, 2016).

While, the permission for Russia to transport on the territory of Belarus such giant military units could indicate that deep cooperation and trust, tensions between the two countries in other areas may be thought-provoking. At the turn of January and February 2017, Russia began to construct the infrastructure on the border with Belarus, which is a specific precedent and, sometimes described as a violation of the agreement from 2000, that guarantee the open character of the Russian-Belarusian border. It is suspected that this movement is Moscow's response to the Belarusian cooperation with the West and opening visa-free travel for the citizens of 80 countries, arriving in Belarus via Minsk airport (Szoszyn, 2017). However, the official arguments of the Russian authorities concern the need to increase border protection in the face of the terrorism threat, but simultaneously, the freedom travelling for Belarusians and Russians will not be limited (Górecki, 2017).

Russian border construction coincided with a firm declaration of the Belarusian president, who presented a huge willingness to reach energy independence from Russia. "We can do without Russian oil. It is going to be difficult. But freedom and independence are not measured by Independence [...] integrity, our historical past are worth much more than oil, Unfortunately, Russia does not understand it, they are thinking that we will hold their hand. We will not" – said Alexander Lukashenko in early February during a press conference (Belta, 2017). It can be widely discussed if actions and declarations, fulfilled by clearly negative connotations, are typical behaviour for close military allies. The situation may be witnessed by further tensions on the Minsk-Moscow line, or perhaps, they are only part of the propaganda aimed at showing Belarusian-Russian relations as unstable to arouse anxiety among Western countries.

On the other hand, some months ago as Belarus turned towards Western countries was particularly noticeable, especially in the warming of relations with Poland and vivid contacts of Belarusian and Polish high-level authorities, accompanied by a series of political and economic plans, followed also by Polish declarations to become a mediator in talks for further integration between Belarus and NATO. Slight confirmation of Belarus's willingness to cooperate can be noticed in the assurances of the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uladzimir Makey, who said that while the deployment of NATO troops in Poland would not have Belarusian approbation, is still entirely understandable for Belarusian authorities and would not be read as a threat (Belsat, 2016).

In addition, Belarusian willingness and efforts to establish new relations with the United States (Belsat, 2016), Turkey, Ukraine, Slovakia and Austria were noticed. Moreover, Belarus had already started new cooperation in the energy sector with Azerbaijan, buying 84,7 thousand tonnes of oil (Gubarevich, 2016).

Conclusions

Belarus finds itself in a difficult period that requires thoughtful and cautious movements to secure military, political and energetic safety. The situation in Belarus can be described as complicated – any attack from NATO countries does not seem to be possible at the moment. Thus, Belarus may not fear aggression from a side that was earlier treated with suspicion and anxiety by Belarusian authorities. In contrast, a threat to Belarus and its territorial integrity can arrive from the east - from Russia, that for many years has remained the biggest military and economic partner of Belarus. And although it is doubtful that Russia would annex Belarus, Russian authorities would want to exert influence on their ally. At this moment, Belarusian authorities have a difficult task to limit the Russian impact, and maintaining proper relations with Moscow at the same time. Moreover, one of the main goals of Belarus will be to gain greater energy independence – it is difficult to find new suppliers in the European Union. Hence the Belarusian searches for other partners – such as Venezuela or Azerbaijan.

Certainly, it can be questioned whether a rapid return to the West and a break from cooperation with Russia would be beneficial for Belarus. Despite the ups and downs, Russia remains a major partner for Belarus and this cooperation brings profits for Minsk. Exposing the anger of a more powerful ally (expressed even in potential economic consequences), may lead to another point, which Alexander Lukashenka might prefer to avoid - social unrest and mass protests.

Also, despite the Polish declarations, it can be questioned whether the NATO could have a real interest in stronger deepening cooperation with Belarus or even accepting Belarus as a member. For geopolitical reasons both, the Atlantic alliance and the Russian Federation, would gain quite a lot on military cooperation with Belarus. For Russia, it is a shift for its units 600 km in an eastern direction, opportunity to place troops right next to the border of European Union countries (Poland, Lithuanian, Latvia), closer to the Ukrainian border and closer to the 'orphaned' Kaliningrad. Russia has a great interest in remaining military facilities on Belarusian territory, because it gives more possibilities for manoeuvre in the event of armed conflict or simply a greater opportunity to exert pressure on the international arena in order to support Russian interests.

For the NATO, gaining Belarus, another country of the former Soviet Union, as an ally, would be important, not only for symbolic reasons, but for real security strategy, especially for Central and Eastern Europe. In the case of military cooperation with Belarus, the NATO forces would move several hundred kilometres to the east, touching the direct border with Russia, the Atlantic alliance main opponent. In

addition, the NATO forces would gain more control over the land of Poland, Baltic countries, as well as the Ukraine.

However, such a sharp turn in the geopolitical European system may bring the Alliance more problems than profits. As was already mentioned, such 'treason' of Belarus would surely meet with Russia's response, which would be difficult to predict. The new situation would require a prompt and appropriate response from the Western states and focus more attention on Central and Eastern Europe. At a moment, when Europe is struggling with other serious problems (a growing terrorist threat), such a situation would be a problematic burden.

Belarus, having Russia as its main ally, but also slightly cooperating with the West (as it was until now) has a chance to become quite stable. This may be the purpose of Belarusian authorities, but also Europe, instead of the 'Europeanized' Belarus, needs now a stable Belarus and (as far as possible) predictable. Changing the balance of power or even a violent change of government and regime in Belarus could bring the hard-to-foresee political and economic consequences that Europe, struggling with the migration issue, the conflict in Ukraine, and the crisis in the European Union do not really need. Also Belarus joining the NATO would require a completely new strategy of action and probably huge intensification of activities. And rather it would increase the tension in the region instead of improving security.

It is clearly visible that in the future, Belarus can play a significant role in the context of security in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, and the distribution of power across the entire continent. Although, not only the actions of the Russian Federation, the European Union and the NATO will be essential, but also the independent decisions taken by the Belarusian authorities. For president Lukashenko the unquestionable priority will be to provide stability for his country, both political and energetic. The only question is, which partner - the Eastern or the Western one - will be considered as a better guarantor of beneficial cooperation?

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