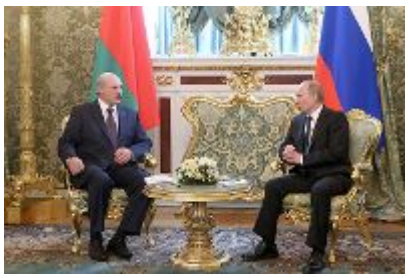
Belarusian foreign policy: Balancing act in face of new challenges

Description

The latest developments in post-Soviet politics –the intensification of the Eurasian integration and Russia's annexation of Crimea– pose serious challenges to Belarus' traditional strategy of foreign policy balancing. However, if Minsk manages to cope with them Belarus will continue to enjoy the benefits of its "sandwiched" position.



Belarus is a landlocked country that is squeezed between Russia and the European Union (EU). Several terms are widely used in literature to conceptualize Belarus' foreign policy. They vary from a balancing act to manoeuvring to a multi-vector policy to even more creative ones, like, for example, "clumsy geopolitical shopping"[1]. These terms imply the logic of an actor in international relations that finds itself "sandwiched" between other more powerful and competing actors.

Foreign Policy Balancing as a Survival Mode

Balancing is, therefore, a natural survival strategy for such an actor and a way to maximize benefits that it can extract from its in-between geopolitical position. Belarus' geostrategic position and the already rooted public sentiments about the sovereign state require from the authorities in Minsk to constantly play the surrounding powers against each other. Here Belarus mainly exploits two weaknesses of its big neighbours.

On the one hand, it plays with deeply entrenched Russian imperialistic nostalgia (about the lost empire and the might and historic role of the so-called "Russian world") and strong geopolitical phobias in the Kremlin (for example, NATO enlargement). On the other hand, it makes use of the fact that the West and the EU in particular have a problem coordinating a single consistent policy towards Belarus and even more so towards Russia[2].

This combination of weaknesses, given they are skilfully exploited, creates good opportunities for the Belarusian government. The experience of the previous two decades shows that this is a smart way to extract material benefits from the geopolitical status. According to various estimates[3], the annual "geopolitical gain" for Belarus has ranged from 10 up to 15-16 per cent of the GDP. It mainly comes in the form of energy subsidies –discounted Russian gas and oil imports. Other benefits include preferential access for Belarusian goods to the Russian market, availability of credits on more favourable terms than on international financial markets, and an opportunity to earn foreign currency by using all sorts of legal and "hidden" trading schemes between Russia and European countries. A recent example of such a "hidden" scheme includes the so-called solvents scheme: for years Belarus sold to the EU oil products it made from Russian crude oil disguised as solvents in order to avoid returning customs duties into Russia's budget.

Would all these benefits not be possible without a foreign policy balancing act? If there were no geopolitical counterbalance, Minsk would be directly and permanently exposed to the Kremlin's post-imperialist syndrome, which would hugely threaten its sovereignty. Moreover, the foreign policy balancing act logically stems from the political system in Belarus –a personalistic authoritarian regime. It reflects the characteristics of the system and helps to sustain it and consolidate the incumbent's power.

Tilted Balancing Act

Belarusian foreign policy is not, however, a classic example of equally remote balancing between the neighbouring geopolitical powers. Due to historical, cultural and economic reasons Belarus has strong ties with one pole, Russia, and incomparably weaker ties with the other. In the words of Samuel Huntington[4], Belarus is in the inner circle of the

civilization that has its core in Russia. The civilization approach is not always helpful in interpreting day-to-day politics but it provides a useful framework to look at the bigger picture of the geopolitical environment.

Since Belarus gained independence in 1991 it has been an active part of multiple Russia-sponsored integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space: the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the Eurasian Economic Community and the Customs Union, etc. It is a member of the military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and maintains deep bilateral defence cooperation with Russia. Effectively, this makes void the neutrality principle proclaimed in the Constitution[5].

At the same time, the institutional arrangements that Belarus has with the West are unequally poorer. Even 23 years after the disintegration of the USSR there is no bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU and, as a result, Belarus enjoys only limited participation in the Eastern Partnership.

Thus, it is justified to argue that the country's balancing act is generally tilted towards Russia. According to many analysts, the Western axis of Belarus' foreign policy is the function of its Russian dimension[6]. In other words, the state of Belarus-Russia relations is the central variable in determining the scope and intensity of foreign policy manoeuvring by Minsk. To a certain extent, it explains the phenomenon of protracted diplomatic conflicts that the Belarusian authorities have with the West. Such conflicts would be unthinkable in a situation of classic foreign policy balancing but are recurring in the Belarusian case.

The logic of Belarus's tilted balancing act, where the West is an auxiliary pillar and a geopolitical hedge against various risks coming from Russia, manifests itself with certain regularity. The Belarusian authorities generally start to actively seek rapprochement with the West in, at least, two typical situations.

Firstly, when relations with Russia see worrying developments, e.g. the Kremlin's pressure to privatize lucrative state assets in Russia's favour or take damaging foreign policy decisions, like recognizing the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Secondly, when the country gets closer to another presidential election, which is always a serious stress test for Aliaksandr Lukashenka's rule. This is actually the only period when the personalistic authoritarian system allows visible political activity in the country. The government, therefore, tries to minimize all extra risks during this period, tense relations with the West being one of them.

Eurasian Integration and Instabilities in the post-Soviet space

Political processes in the post-Soviet space perfectly illustrate Belarus' balancing act and simultaneously pose the biggest challenge to it. Belarus has been an active participant of almost all of Russia's integration initiatives. It has often taken the role of a driver of such initiatives and promoted a discourse close to Vladimir Putin's notorious statement that *"the break-up of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century"*. President Lukashenka's public speeches are normally abundant with words of Slavic fraternity and eternal friendship against the conspiracies of the wicked West.

At the same time, the Belarusian regime has proved to be Moscow's "awkward ally"[7]. In spite of the high rhetoric and far-reaching promises, Minsk refuses to deliver on integration commitments that would limit its sovereign powers. The last two decades have seen numerous instances of this. The story of the Russian rouble as the single currency of the Union state of Belarus and Russia can serve as a vivid example. The plan was never realized no matter how many deadlines the states set over the past 15 years.

The current process of Eurasian integration, from the perspective of official Minsk, is not too different. However, its overall integration framework looks more comprehensive than the previous attempts, which poses a more serious threat to Belarusian independence. Should the integration progresses in the direction of establishing functional supranational institutions Belarus's manoeuvring potential will shrink.

But the Belarusian authorities are not interested in such progress. They would rather see the Eurasian integration have virtual accomplishments that provide the sustainable flow of "geopolitical gain" and do not tread on their prerogatives.

In more plain words, Minsk would like the Eurasian integration to remain a cynical platform for exchanging resources where Russia exchanges its natural and monetary resources for the geopolitical support of the former Soviet republics. Any sizeable integration spill-over effects are hardly possible under such circumstances.

Mounting Russian assertiveness in the region can, however, break this logic. Instabilities –like the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 and the ongoing Ukraine crisis– present extraordinary challenges to Belarus' balancing act as they limit manoeuvring possibilities and force Minsk to take sides in face of the Kremlin's resolved actions.

So far, the Belarusian government has been able to navigate the uncharted waters of instabilities in the post-Soviet space and preserve its balancing potential. In spite of the risks that stem from the Ukraine crisis, it has even secured additional financial support from Moscow in exchange for agreeing to sign the founding treaty of the Eurasian Economic Union at the end of May 2014. Whether the Belarusian authorities will implement the treaty, that can noticeably narrow the country's sovereignty, remains doubtful.

References :

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[3] Matthew Frear "Belarus: Player and Pawn in the Integration Game", *in* R. Dragneva and K. Wolczuk (eds.) *Eurasian Economic Integration. Law, Policy and Politics*, Edward Elgar, 2013.
[4] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Touchstone Books, 1998 (first published in 1991).
[5] There is no direct statement of the neutral status Belarus in the 1994 Constitution, however, Article 18 says that Belarus "*pledges itself to make its territory a neutral, nuclear-free state*".
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Legend : Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin meeting in Moscow on 8 May 2014, official web-site of the President of Belarus (www.president.gov.by).

Translation in French

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