

## 4<sup>th</sup> Belarus Reality Check

### Belarus from Vilnius till Riga Summits: A Nervous Winner

*Non - Paper, September 2014 – May 2015*

*The fourth Belarus Reality Check took place on September 11, 2014 in Riga, Latvia and was organised by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (Lithuania) in cooperation with the Central European Policy Institute (Slovakia) with the support of the Latvian Presidency of the EU, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany) and Pact (US). The meeting gathered top Belarusian, Russian and Western analysts, observers, and practitioners to discuss the latest political, security, and socio-economic developments in Belarus and provide evidence-based analysis and policy advice. This non paper is the result of the meeting and further research. Previous Reality Check meetings were held under the auspices of the Lithuanian Presidency of the EU. Non-papers are available at [EESC](#) and at [CEPI](#) websites.*

#### **Summary of Conclusions**

Since the EU's Eastern partnership Summit in Vilnius Belarus proved to be a master of balancing between East and West, yet it is currently between a rock and a hard place. Tactically it has utilized the opportunity the Ukraine crisis has offered and has managed to become a place where talks to regulate the crisis have taken place (Minsk agreements). It has secured yet another credit from Russia, but it also has to swallow the impact of Russia's economic downturn and serious recession of its third most important trade partner, Ukraine, all the while avoiding structural reforms in the year of presidential elections (scheduled for November 15, 2015).

Belarus' relations with Russia have not suffered much compared to the last presidential elections in 2010. There is no official campaign against President Lukashenka as there was in 2010, but Russia's "civil society" is upping the ante with a growing "we lost Belarus" sentiment and playing the nationalist card. Minsk keeps complying with its obligations (economic and security) on paper, while asserting its own interests (in reality) in its relations in every field – leading to smaller scale trade wars and occasional media shout-outs.

Since the Vilnius Summit the EU (as well as the US) is increasing its level of contact, but there is no official dialogue between the two, as the West keeps emphasizing the issue of the remaining political prisoners (its numbers dropped from 44 to the current 3). The current policy cannot and should not promise to bring about big results. Even though Lukashenka himself won't be present in Riga, the Summit may deliver a visa free agreement with Belarus; negotiations kicked off in Vilnius.

Despite mild progress on all fronts, the impact of the Ukrainian crisis and the management of the upcoming presidential elections are making Minsk nervous. Old habits die-hard: the security structures seem to be in charge, pressuring businesses to civic and opposition activists amidst shrinking resources for the state. Minsk seems to have learned a tactical lesson from the 2010 elections and subsequent crackdown, and is trying to make sure – by its old-fashioned prevention – that the state remains in charge.

#### **Policy Recommendations**

When it comes to the security relations between Belarus and Russia there are more myths than facts. Military exercises and other dimensions are often out of actual context – partly because those relations remain opaque/non-transparent. Western analysis and hitherto policy should not be driven by previous events, but instead focus on long-term trends. The Ukraine crisis, event though it is has a dramatic impact, cannot change those key long-term trends – security, economic interconnectivity, trade, and government management – overnight. The West needs to gain a much stronger foothold in the country, in order to be confident about

the impact of its policies. As the previous 20 years showed the EU cannot change Minsk’s behavior by force or pressure, as this creates resistance on the side of the government, while unconditioned solidarity (support) helped push the opposition and part of civils society out of the mainstream. The EU should accept Belarus as a partner not to give up on transition, but because that are ways to change the country.

The EU needs to realize that exclusive cooperation with the beleaguered opposition does not offer exclusive political perspective, yet human rights and democracy should remain among top priorities.

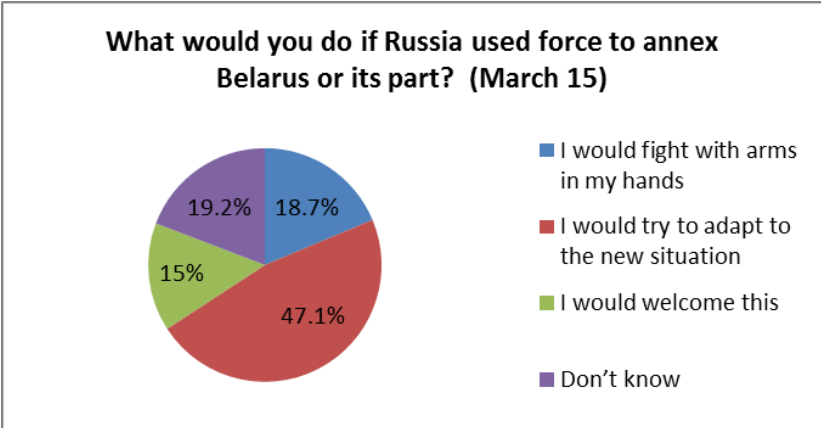
The EU’s assistance can lead to long-term results. One of the key sectors to focus on is education. The EU is attractive in this respect, even compared to Russia – there are only four thousands students from Belarus in Russia, while the numbers are larger in the West. The EU should learn from Moscow’s commonplace mistake, understanding that policy projection and implementation is not done exclusively at the highest level. Brussels should invest more in society level contacts. Thus, education should be taken as a major focus at every level and sector – including military – as the highest priority. Belarus’s current acceptance to the Bologna process is a good example: this is likely the first time the EU offers tangible benefits for the broader Belarusian society, not only for the “opposition and civil society”.

As Belarus gears up to its most important elections the West is in limbo: even though the elections process is likely to go smoothly, the real results will be unlikely announced. The EU can and should argue about increasing its presence, searching for a greater common ground with Minsk. It should call out the regime’s fraudulent electoral process unless there is a proven vote count and real results announced. At the same time, in the case of a confrontation, Minsk won’t have another choice but to join the Kremlin, with all its consequences for its statehood.

The EU should conclude the visa liberalization agreement with Minsk and also return to an idea of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (which was originally frozen in 1997) in case the elections are managed within expectations and question of political prisoners are off the table.

**Russia’s Red Lines: Security Applications to Belarus**

If Russia – hypothetically – would attack Belarus, there would be no open resistance aside from a partisan war. According to insiders, training for special operations is underway in Belarus, though Russia is not mentioned in this context. Also, under the auspices of the presidential administration, a special situation analysis task force is being established that is due to develop measures to react in cases like the Ukraine crisis.



Yet, the context is important: the geopolitical choice of Minsk back in the 1990s was not an ideological one but a pragmatic one aimed at sustaining the existing industrial potential and socio-economic system in Belarus after the collapse of the USSR. This has had popular backing from the pragmatic Belarusians. In 1996, a bilateral agreement between the two countries was signed including six items. Among them, Belarus agreed to host two military facilities (in Baranavichy and Vileika), providing infrastructure to Russia in case of a military conflict.

**Do you think it is probable that Russia may annex Belarus or a part of its territory? (March 14)**

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Answer options	%
No, it is impossible	30.0
It is possible, but the probability is small	36.4
It is quite probable	<b>26.3</b>
It is inevitable	<b>4.4</b>
Don't know/No answer	2.9

Russia pushed for the establishment of a joint air-defense system, which would be commanded centrally. Negotiations on how to move from theory to practice took ten years. Two years ago, under the increasing pressure from Moscow, a common integrated command was set up, which is currently headed by Belarusian

General Dvigalev. Though the rotation principle has yet to be implemented, quarrels continued over who will give the final command: as a result, the “two keys” principle is being used.

Under the existing integrated command of land forces, military exercise “West” takes place every two years. One of the main tasks of such exercises is to train lifting a blockade of Kaliningrad. Distance between the border of Belarus and Kaliningrad is seventy kilometers and lies over the territory of Lithuania and Poland. To de-blockade Kaliningrad in the case of a NATO invasion, Belarusian troops would have to cross the territory of Lithuania and/or Poland in order to join the Russian military units in Kaliningrad. In such an event the Baltic States would be encircled by Belarusian-Russian troops. Russia and Belarus conducted seven military exercises in 2014 alone including air defense and airborne forces. But the Belarusian military did not participate at the Russian exercise on the Ukrainian border. One of the explanations for this is that Russia did not want to share military information with Minsk, suggesting lack of trust. This joint battle group is a demonstration toward similar NATO exercises in the Baltics. The Ukraine crisis has further upset security relations between Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Moscow does not seem to trust Astana and it also suspects that the Ukraine crisis will raise the possibility of helping to improve the relationship between Belarus and the West.

Even today, Belarus has the highest number of air-defense equipment per capita: it possesses S-300PS, a missile complex with a brigade, S-300V, S-200, and others. Russia covers the costs of military exercises for Belarusian soldiers and helps to maintain all systems in a combat-ready state while Belarus covers the rest – and majority – of associated costs. After the collapse of the USSR, Belarus inherited 1800 tanks, 2000 armored vehicles, and around 10000 units of artillery. Independent estimates suggest roughly seventy percent of said military equipment can be used.

Russia will want to expand cooperation on its own grounds based on delivery of a new defense system. Belarus will provide its silent and low-level (but firm) resistance and will want to keep control of its own defense leadership.

One of the lessons learned from the Ukraine crisis: Moscow is serious about certain red lines and those applicable to Belarus as well. Moscow maintains

**What is your take on the annexation of Crimea by Russia ? (March 14)**

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Answer options	%
It is an imperialistic take-over, occupation	26.9
It is the return of Russian lands, reinstatement of historical justice	<b>62.2</b>
Don't know/No answer	10.9

that guarantees given after the fall of the USSR are in place until certain conditions from former USSR states are met (Russia's red lines). The fact that red lines are the actual level of tolerance towards Belarus could be defined as: 1) Not changing the security parameters (Belarus is Russia's military ally) and 2) Western inspired regime change (revolution) in Minsk.

When it comes to the border, Belarusians are signaling that they can introduce border checks at the Russian border, sending a message that Minsk is not satisfied with the border security on the Russian end. This has been a more important issue since the crisis in eastern Ukraine.

Belarusian expectations from Western security relations are rather mild: continuing to use the Northern Distribution Network (relations with the US), trying to institutionalize "soft" mechanisms such as education, and signing formal agreements and protocols with NATO (partnership for peace) and joint peacekeeping units. The visa liberalization agreement with the EU is likely to receive serious attention in Moscow, as the Belarusian border is a strategic and open one for Moscow.

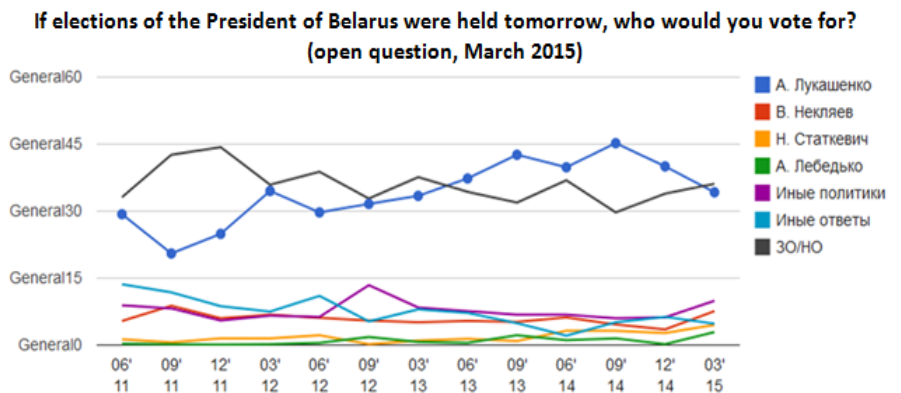
Up until the Ukraine crisis, Russia's policy to Belarus was essentially "carrot only" despite on-going disputes. Lukashenka has not been liked, but it was still cheaper and more convenient to buy his loyalty - as Belarus is touted as Russia's only loyal ally. Crimea changed that consideration though - the Belarusian statehood rather than Lukashenka is at certain risk. Attempts at regime change both in Belarus and Russia would likely project an advance of nationalist forces. Even if an actual regime change would not take place, Russian propaganda would project it anyway, paving the way for a similar conflict as Ukraine.

**Presidential Election: Managing Elections and Expectations**

The upcoming presidential elections put Belarus in a challenging situation. The challenge does not come from the country's pro-democracy opposition, but from the shifting geopolitics and the sensitivity of Russia, as well as the internal structural challenges within the Belarus government.

First, the pro-democracy opposition has been lost in its own struggle. Beyond the regime's harassments, the opposition has neglected existing opportunities to create links with citizens (micro-level), while over-emphasizing the macro level (Lukashenka, democracy).

As a result, an entire generation(s) of political and civic activists grew up "believing" that a colored revolution would somehow fix Belarus' issues and land them into positions of power. Part of this issue is the constant Western policy that is largely accepting their arguments and, at the macro-level, has elevated democracy as a major demand for change. No wonder some of the opposition leaders' (not all) main concern is any dialogue between Minsk and the West. Western policy managed to strengthen the "victimization" of the opposition by rewarding it and allowing elections cycles to emerge. That encourages the opposition both to mobilize only around elections and focus on rewards as a victim. The result is that, election after election, there are more missing links between them and the population and a missed opportunity feeling in the West. In 2015, the opposition is having a hard time to find adequate candidates to offer to the society when no side wants a Maidan to happen, including (part of) the opposition itself.



Second, the economy is in the worst shape of any elections cycle. According to the German Economic Team in Belarus, the conflict in Ukraine has significant indirect effects on the Belarusian economy. The country's exports suffer significantly from a stagnation of its most important trade partner, Russia. Western sanctions against Russia affect the financial flows and hence the financial environment in Belarus. The number of Belarusian (state) enterprises that are suffering losses have sharply increased. In January 2015, the net loss of organization amounted to 53.7 trillion rubles, which is almost 25 times more than in January 2014. In total, 2,233 companies suffered losses, which is 28.6% of all organizations, while last January it was at 19.6%. According to the IPM Research Centre, the unemployment rate in Belarus will rise to a historic high of 8-9%. A new presidential decree against "social parasites," addressing this issue particularly to Belarusian state management, via pressure, states: individuals who do not pay taxes will be forced to submit around \$240 annually into the state's coffers. In addition, tax authorities are also squeezing the private sector and tax check-ups and other form of soft pressure to fill the state coffers are as regular as ever before.

Third, managing elections is becoming a national security issue. "Siloviki" seems to be back to manage this process and while the risk factor has swung toward Russia, these structures can hardly imagine that the West dropped regime change from its tool box. Soft pressure is applied to all layers of society with the goal of preventing any serious dissent from emerging. These measures are alienating a large part of society, as the private sector has been gaining ground and has become a new hope for the country. Especially, as the social contract<sup>1</sup> between the state and citizens still holds, although "security" and "peace" has largely replaced well-being, upon the Ukraine crisis. Given this framework, and his stable electoral rating, Lukashenka may gather enough votes to declare an "elegant victory." There may be no need for falsifications. Yet, it would be hard to imagine the regime would make such a change in such sensitive circumstances.

### ***Belarus and the EU: Avoiding the Elections Trap***

Minsk continues to be a realist. It sees the US bogged down: having limited capacity towards and ambition in Eastern Europe. The EU is seen as weak: it can't give security guarantees, it still promotes trade liberalization as the panacea for economic growth, in which Minsk never believed. Yet, Minsk's priority list is US, China, and the EU, with Russia coming in last. The geographic and geopolitical reality dictates strategic relations with Moscow: praising them while trying to keep them at the bay. Belarus can't choose between East and West as any other policy would bring worsening conditions to its standing as an independent state. But the Ukraine crisis is a wake-up call for Minsk to turn to other actors.

On the contrary, the EU is an idealist: it believes in its own ideals (for the right reasons) and has the luxury to ignore the reality in which Belarus lives. Based on its own experience, the EU asserts that reform is the cornerstone of stability and security – reducing corruption and the role of state is the way to move towards a prosperous society. However, this is a contradiction of the values (strong state) most Belarusians – for historical and other reasons – believe.

The Ukraine crisis just re-confirmed the EU's previous leaning toward de-politicizing its dialogue with Belarus. The country's state capacity – vis-à-vis the collapse of central authority in Ukraine – has been put into a different context. Yet, this change puts the opposition, the traditional partner of the West, deep into its on-going existential crisis.

Since the 2008 opening of the EU Delegation in Minsk (preceded by negotiations from 2005), slowly but surely it has managed to open more channels with the society. This process also prompts it to drift away as the

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<sup>1</sup> See the original research by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies on social contract in 2009 at [http://belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/soc\\_contr\\_en.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/soc_contr_en.pdf)

protector of the opposition and positioning as “friend” of society. Most of these actions may seem marginal vis-à-vis regime change frenzy, but most of them are working in the country and bringing more EU visibility to the Belarusians. But Belarus is still low enough on the priority list. Due to this (the regime stubbornness to reform and Russia’s sensitivity), no larger scale Western policy change can be expected. Relations can move forward if the elections are managed well by all sides. What the EU is surely missing in Belarus is putting those relations into a more firm, legal framework. If the elections will be managed within normal expectations, the EU should put a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), frozen in 1997, back to the negotiation table.

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