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The Rise and Fall of Belarus' Geopolitical Strategy

By deploying a combination of foreign policy analysis tools at the system, state and, to a certain extent, individual level this article is undertaking to trace the trajectory and some critical junctions of Belarus' foreign policy strategy in the 21st century. Special focus is given to the implications of president Alexander Lukashenko's recent crackdown on domestic opposition for the mechanism of geopolitical balancing between Russia and the West that has been in place for more than a decade.

The world financial and economic crisis has sharpened contradictions between Belarus and Russia and forced Minsk to seek ways for cooperation with Western partners. After the beginning of the normalization of relations with the European Union the Belarusian authorities have intensified its policy of balancing between the East and the West. For Minsk the EU's role in this arrangement has grown beyond its previous rhetorical importance. Belarus has actively tried to equalize its Eastern and Western policy poles and also to complement them with a new "Southern arc" by boosting relationships with Asian, Latin American, and the Arab states.

Under the conditions of globalization Minsk started to use networking geopolitical technologies to promote cooperation with China, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, Libya, Syria and other states, which are geographically distant, but whose political and economic interests are in various degrees compatible with those of Belarus. In this way Minsk has attempted to become a political and economic player outside its traditional geopolitical zone and to compensate for the costs of problematic dealings with its neighbors Russia and the EU.

Meanwhile, because of a reluctant and forced adaptation to the external environment Belarus' foreign policy remains extremely contradictory and despite some correctives it retains many inadequate tenets.

A brutal dispersal by the Belarusian authorities of a peaceful action of pro-democratic forces on the day of presidential elections (December 19, 2010) and the following massive political repressions became a watershed that marked the failure of the regime's preceding domestic and foreign policies, exposed its obsession with power and destroyed the balancing mechanism for its geopolitical 'avatars' designed individually for the East, West and 'South'.

Introduction

An ample observation has been made to the effect that "a strange mixture of social rhetoric ("we must keep the best from the Soviet era"), advocacy of a union state, of confrontation with the West, and elements of ethnic myths (inclu-

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ding the Battle of Grunwald, in which forces from the territory of modern-day Belarus helped defeat the Teutonic Knights)" took root in Belarus¹ and created an identity that does not appear stable and has many "faces" or "avatars".

Almost twenty years of Belarus' independent foreign policy allows the identification of some of its basic characteristics. It has several constants and a peculiar conceptual continuity dating back to the first years of independence. These constants embrace a number of aspirations, principles and priorities: "search for a neutral status", non-nuclear and multidirectional ("plurivectoral") policy and the priority of good-neighborliness (since 1999 the formulation has been a "belt of good-neighborliness"). Still, so far only the non-nuclear principle has been achieved, understood as a status of a non-nuclear weapon state as a result of a voluntary renunciation of nuclear weapons that remained in the territory of Belarus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The "constants" include also serious problems bedeviling Minsk's relations with the United States and the European Union. A decade and a half-long conflict between Belarus' authorities and the West featured the confrontation of democratic and authoritarian values, application of sanctions, pressure, but also various incentives addressed at the Belarusian regime so as to make it stop repressions against the opposition, civil society and the independent media and to encourage democratic reforms in the country. So far this protracted conflict has repeatedly lapsed into Minsk's aggressive self-isolation and yet another impasse, rather than lead to a constructive resolution of the Belarusian dilemma.

Belarus' foreign policy is extremely contradictory, which is largely explained by the fact that it has to adapt itself to the international environment that does not correspond to the ideas of the ruling elite about the normative world order. This may produce reactions stimulated predominantly by self-reflection on the "objective reality," but not by the reality itself.

The implementation of Belarus' foreign policy has been inconsistent throughout its whole history and at times moved in a zigzag course. While the non-nuclear status has been achieved (albeit with regular regrets voiced by the Belarusian president), "aspirations for neutrality" already with Alexander Lukashenko's first term in office² have been replaced with the creation of a military alliance with Russia and Belarus' membership in the Collective Security Treaty and later in the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Similarly, instead of developing "plurivectoral" East-West relations Minsk has opted for asymmetric, impulsive and erratic integration with Russia that culminated in the signing of the bilateral treaty on the formation of a Union State (1999) endangering Belarus' independence.

¹ Lukyanov, Fyodor. "Lukashenko set for reelection, not surprisingly". December 9, 2010, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Lukashenko-set-for-re-election-not-surprisingly-15049>

² Alexander Lukashenko was elected to his first term as president on July 10, 1994. The presidential post was introduced by the Constitution adopted on March 15, 1994. Prior to that Belarus was a parliamentary republic.

This integration drive, however, started to wane soon after the treaty had entered into force in 2000, and eventually the provisions of the agreement remained unfulfilled. Instead, a new accent has been put on the real “plurivectoral moment”, in contrast to the hitherto declared one.

Belarus’ relations with Russia have noticeably deteriorated since 2007 with recurrent bilateral annual crises due to the growing prices of Russian gas and oil and various “trade wars” that reflected tensions on quite a few political issues, from Minsk’s non-recognition of the independent status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to its reluctance to join the Customs Union along with Russia and Kazakhstan without being promised clear economic advantages.

One more unfulfilled foreign policy priority has been the efficient use of the country’s “advantageous geopolitical position” for international transit (or a ‘bridge between the East and the West’ in the wording of the 1990’s).

Despite the ritual official statements to the effect that the state’s priority in ensuring regional security is the formation of a “belt of good-neighborliness” with the countries, which have a common border with Belarus³, a conspicuous long-time foreign policy failure has been Minsk’s far from friendly relations with the EU and NATO and the unsettled border issue with Ukraine.⁴

The few accomplishments to be mentioned in this regard are bilateral agreements on additional confidence and security-building measures in the military-political sphere concluded by Minsk with Ukraine and Lithuania (2001), and with Latvia and Poland (2004). The world financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009 has sharpened contradictions between Belarus and Russia and along with the realization of the futility of self-isolation it compelled Minsk to seek ways for mending relations and cooperating with Western partners.

Meanwhile, because of a reluctant and forced adaptation to the external environment Belarus’ foreign policy has remained extremely contradictory and despite some correctives it has retained many old tenets. The supreme goal for Lukashenko has been that of regime security with other objectives subordinated as instrumental ones.

The nature of the authoritarian regime has once again “triumphed” over rationality during the December 2010 presidential elections in Belarus and dramatically set back both the uncertain signs of domestic change for the better and the prelude to a full-fledged normalization of relations between Minsk and Western capitals.

By deploying a combination of foreign policy analysis tools at the system, state and, to a certain extent, individual level this article is undertaking to trace the trajectory and some critical junctions of Belarus’ foreign policy strategy in the 21st century.

³ Interview by Viktor Shikh, Director of the Department of Europe of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus to the newspaper “Respublika”. April 16, 2002, http://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/f5e09d6a0afb6412.html

⁴ The bilateral treaty on the common border was signed and ratified by the two countries, but it has not entered into force because the Belarusian side is procrastinating with the completion of the necessary diplomatic procedures.

Special focus is given to examining the mechanism of geopolitical balancing between Russia and the West that has been in place for more than a decade and evaluating the impact inflicted on it by Lukashenko's recent crackdown on domestic opposition.

1. Geopolitical Power Wire

1.1. Four Level Geopolitical Game

Over the period of its existence the Lukashenko regime has been able to gradually build up a four-level system of geopolitical balancing. Although unstable and situational, it often yielded for Minsk important political and especially economic advantages.

In his address to the Belarusian Parliament and people delivered on April 21, 2011 Lukashenko reiterated that Belarus has a particular place in Europe that necessitates a "balanced interaction between the two poles of power". The latter is achieved by means of the "strategy of an equal proximity to the East and West" that allows it to benefit from the geographical position and the transit and industrial potential of the country.⁵

This geopolitical system includes:

1. With regard to the Russia – balancing between independence and integration.
2. With regard to the European Union – balancing between political self-isolation and normalization with prospects for economic cooperation.
3. Simultaneously with Russia and the European Union – balancing between:
 - "safeguarding Belarus' independence from Russia" – for the EUand
 - "safeguarding common values and interests from the West" – for Russia.⁶

⁵ Президент Республики Беларусь, "Послание белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию", 21.04.2011, <http://www.president.gov.by/press116504.html#doc>

⁶ According to Lukashenko Belarus is the 'last rampart' preventing NATO tanks from lining up at the Russian border near Smolensk. Also, it has allegedly become a 'ground zero' of US global politics aimed at subordinating Russia and Western Europe and today Belarus is the only 'corridor' that connects Russia with the EU and stays beyond US control. - See, for example: "[President Lukashenko's] Meeting on Home and Foreign Policy Issues." July 26, 2005, <http://www.president.gov.by/en/press16355.html#doc>

4. Together with other members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and countries of the “Southern arc of cooperation” (SAC)⁷

- balancing between the North and the South and attempts to use the political representation by the NAM and SAC states in international organizations so as to neutralize criticism of the Belarusian authoritarianism by democratic states (in fact, the latter dichotomy has been reinterpreted as safeguarding the sovereign right of states for their own specific ways of development⁸)

and

- using NAM and SAC states’ financial, trade economic and energy potential as a safety or compensatory mechanism to prop up Minsk’s positions in difficult times, especially during crises periods in its relations with Russia and/or the West (in other words, throwing the weight of some of their resources on the scales to equalize the emerging troublesome disequilibria).

This seemingly impressive construction can nevertheless turn out to be mere wishful thinking when empirically tested. The factual economic, political and military/security dependence of Belarus on Russia prevails over its formally possessed independent status. This can be easily proved by the counterfactual scenario of Moscow’s non-recognition of the December 2010 presidential elections in Belarus as legitimate (in addition to the real fact that both the EU and the US have questioned their legitimacy and Lukashenko is being treated as only a “*de-facto*” state leader). In this case the regime would have encountered first the international and domestic legitimacy crisis to be followed by destructive political, economic and social strains, especially if Russia would not agree to rescue its ally by financial, trade and economic means but would have treated it as an opportunistic client state to teach a lesson to.

Indeed, in its dealings with Russia Belarus has traded its geopolitical and military-political loyalty for economic preferences. Minsk has been in a state of permanent bargaining and giving promises (often only partially or completely unfulfilled, or with dramatically delayed implementation) about such sensitive issues for Russia as the Constitutional Act of the Union State, the introduction of a single currency, the diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,

⁷ A propagandist of the official line and head of the department of foreign policy at the President’s Academy of Management holds that now that Minsk is dealing not only with its two traditional poles but also with partners in other continents it is conducting already not a “plurivectoral foreign policy” but already a “real and powerful global geopolitics.” driven by its own calculations. See Tzarik, Yuri. “Geopolitika Belarusi: pozitsija v mire, liderstvo v regione.” December 7, 2010, http://www.bgr.by/project/geopolitika_belarusi_pozitsiya_v_mire_liderstvo_v_regione

⁸ <http://www.president.gov.by/press46194.html>

the selling of Belarusian property, joining the Customs Union and the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force, the creation of the Single Air Defense System, etc.

The “balancing mechanism” has recurrently failed and in recent years has been losing its efficiency because Lukashenko’s opportunistic line has caused growing discontent in the Kremlin.

In the following sections international system and state level analysis will be complementary. In searching for the causal explanations of the demise of Belarus’ geopolitical balancing mechanism (GBM) the author will draw on James Rosenau’s concept of a penetrated political system as “one in which nonmembers of a national society participate directly and authoritatively, through actions taken jointly with the society’s members, in either the allocations of its values or the mobilization of support on behalf of its goals.”⁹

1.2. Belarus’ Network Geopolitics: Balancing Disequilibrium

Under the conditions of globalization Minsk started to use network geopolitical technologies to promote cooperation with non-European states, which are geographically distant, but whose political and economic interests are in various degrees or situationally compatible with those of Belarus. In this way Minsk has attempted to become a political and economic player outside its traditional geopolitical zone and to compensate for the costs of problematic dealings with its neighbors Russia and the European Union and also the United States. This refers in particular to diversifying trade markets and supplies of energy resources and attracting investments.

The Belarusian network geopolitical concepts of the “pillar states”¹⁰ look like an adapted version of the erstwhile US theory of “pivotal states,”¹¹ which proceeded from the premise that in every geopolitical region there is a key state, on which regional relations and stability are predicated.

These concepts are of significant practical value for the Belarusian authorities. Some of the countries that have been enlisted as ‘pillar states’ for Belarus’ interests in distant geopolitical regions are Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia and Cuba in Latin America; China, Iran, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand in Asia; South African Republic, Nigeria and Ethiopia in Africa and

⁹ Rosenau, James. “Pre-theories and theories of Foreign Policy” in Farrell, R. Barry, ed., *Approaches to Comparative and International Politics*, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966, p. 147-148.

¹⁰ See Interview with Sergei Martynov, Belarus’ Minister of Foreign Affairs in *Belarus: Sustainable Economic Growth*. Official Report published by FIRST to mark the Belarusian Investment Forum and the visit of HE Sergei Sidorsky, Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus”. London: FIRST, 2008, p. 14.

¹¹ See Chase, Robert S., Hill, Emily B. and Paul Kennedy, “Pivotal States and US Strategy”, *Foreign Affairs*. 75(1), 1996, p. 33-51.

also the Persian Gulf states.¹² They constitute a “wider arc” of Belarus’ foreign policy in the Southern hemisphere.¹³

Belarusian network geopolitics may have various and sometimes quixotic forms or ‘avatars’. Minsk itself has repeatedly claimed to play the role of a ‘pillar state’ in Europe on behalf of the Non-aligned movement as the only European member-state in this organization.



Figure 1. Belarus’ geopolitical ‘pillar states’ and ‘arc of cooperation’

Within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Minsk proposed the creation of an “institute of partnerships” with a view to expanding the organization’s “sphere of influence” and international role and expressed confidence that not only the neighboring states would be interested but also states in other continents.¹⁴

After the beginning of the normalization of relations with the European Union in 2008 the Belarusian authorities have intensified its policy of balancing between the East and the West. For Minsk the EU’s role in this arrangement has grown beyond its previous rhetorical importance because the latter’s new “Eastern Partnership” program promised many real benefits.

After its previous unsuccessful attempts to democratize Minsk the Euro-

¹² “Belarus is looking for new footholds in Asia, Latin America and Africa.” June 28, 2010, http://news.date.bs/economics_178323.html

¹³ Interview with Sergei Martynov (note 10).

¹⁴ The treaty on the free trade zone in the CIS will be ready before year end. December 10,2010, http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/president/Dogovor-o-zone-svobodnoj-torgovli-v-SNG-budet-podgotovlen-dokontsa-goda_i_535216.html

pean Union, for its part, joined Belarus' geopolitical game of balancing by trying to apply what was sometimes referred to as the strategy of engagement.

The new equilibrium became qualitatively different from what it used to be since 1997, when as a result of Minsk's authoritarian policies its relations with the EU and the US were frozen and entered a long period of a "cold war".

Previously Lukashenko utilized primarily the "bugaboos" of the aggressive West, anti-NATO phobias and pan-Slavic myths so as to bargain the indispensable role of Belarus for the military defense of Russia for its huge economic preferences. Then Minsk's behavior ideally fitted the pattern of a client-state. This time it was looking for additional means of ensuring economic and energy security from Russia.

At the same time, having started to create at the turn of the century its "Southern arc" a decade later Minsk found that the new geopolitical construct failed to serve as a substitute for a regular full-fledged relationship with its natural European partners, or as a quick fix for its problems with Russia.

2. Balancing Mechanism Undermined

2.1. Energy Challenges and Responses with Uncertain Outcomes

For more than a decade the Belarus-Russia energy policy model "fitted the immediate political and economic interests of the ruling elites on both sides."¹⁵ In one opinion, energy it is not so much about balancing foreign policy between Russia and the EU as on "using any improvement in relations with one of the two to extract concessions from the other."¹⁶ However the wider context of this article shows that energy issues are indeed part of the balancing foreign policy equation.

Belarus depends on imported energy sources by about 85 percent and has for years enjoyed considerably reduced prices on their supplies from Russia. After a serious conflict with Russia over its energy supplies during the winter of 2006-2007 Minsk undertook vigorous efforts to mitigate its energy dependency¹⁷. Russia embarked on a pragmatic style of relations with the post-Soviet states and declared transition to world market-based prices on gas and oil.¹⁸ For Minsk there were no ready and affordable solutions to these issues that had been supported by any economic and political requisites. As Lukashenko publicly admitted, Belarus had no available energy resources that might serve

¹⁵ Balmaceda, Margarita. "At a crossroads: the Belarusian-Russian energy-political model in crisis" in Fischer, S., ed., *Back from the Cold: The EU and Belarus in 2009*. Chaillot paper No.119, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brussels, November 2009, p. 79.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Earlier bilateral rows over energy supplies happened in 1997 and 2004.

¹⁸ In 2007 Minsk managed to agree with Moscow on a gradual transition to world prices on energy resources, but ever since disputed the terms, pace and time frame for price increases.

as an alternative to the Russian ones, and “even if there are, we have not fully elaborated upon them.”¹⁹

A long and difficult process has been started to establish a productive dialog with potential new energy partners. A series of conceptual documents and programs to enhance the state’s energy security have been developed in 2007-2010. Special attention was paid to launching the project of the Belarusian nuclear power plant, although its future role in reducing energy dependence is highly dubious because it will be credited and constructed by Russia again.

In August of 2010 the Council of Ministers of Belarus adopted the Strategy for the Development of the State Energy Potential. It defined as alternative prospective energy suppliers the Caspian, Central Asian, South American regions and the Persian Gulf states. According to the document diversification of gas supplies will be provided for through the participation of Belarusian organizations in its exploration and production abroad and also as a result of the realization of projects on the construction of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) terminals in Lithuania, Poland and its deliveries from these and other countries, including routes via Ukraine. It is hoped that these measures will considerably reduce dependence from Russia.²⁰

The Energy Strategy envisages oil supplies from Azerbaijan, Venezuela, and the Gulf states via sea ports in the Baltic and Black Seas and states that oil discharge from sea vessels will be economically expedient at the ports of Odessa and Yuzhny (Ukraine), Ventspils (Latvia), Klaipeda (Lithuania), and Tallinn (Estonia).²¹

The Belarusian government’s Action Plan for 2011-2015 envisages a diversification of supplies of oil, natural gas, electricity and coal, and the reduction of the share of the dominant energy supplier, i.e. Russia in the country’s gross energy consumption to 70-71% by 2015. This will be supplemented with the optimization of logistics, the construction of gas and oil terminals and pipelines in adjacent countries, and an increase in the production of oil in Venezuela and Iran,²² where joint projects are already underway.

In 2010 Minsk and Caracas concluded several oil agreements which provide for annual deliveries to Belarus of up to 10 million tons of oil in 2011-2012. To save on considerable transportation expenditures swap contracts have been concluded allowing to replace part of the Venezuelan oil with Azerbaijan shipments to the port of Odessa.

In July 2010 an intergovernmental cooperation agreement on oil deliveries was signed in Kyiv by Belarusian and Ukrainian officials. The Ukrainian

¹⁹ *Belorusskii Rynok*. No. 4(739), 29 January - 5 February 2007, <http://www.br.minsk.by/index.php?article=29447&year=2007>

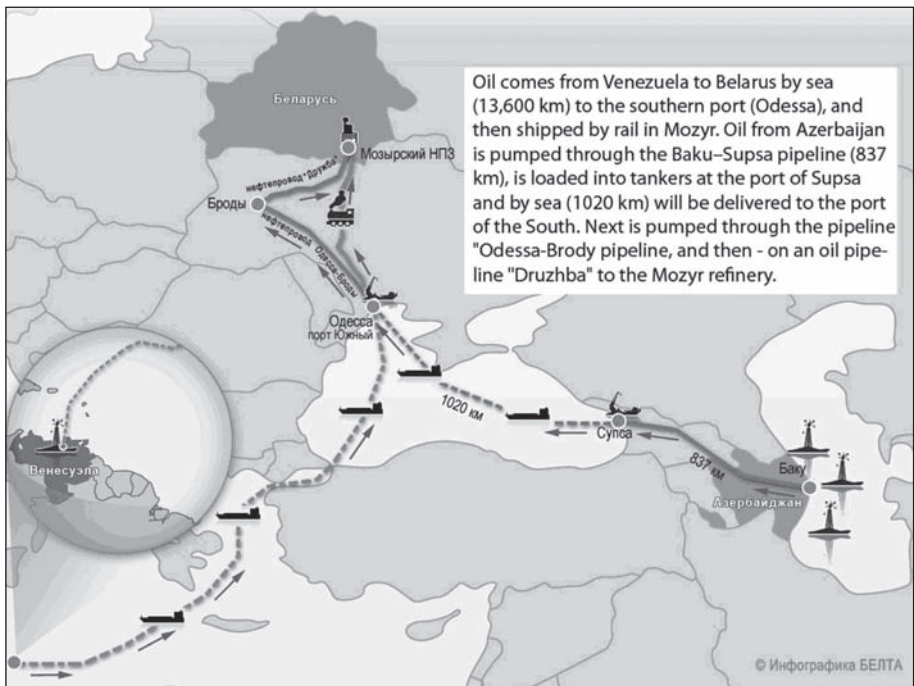
²⁰ Strategy for the Development of the State Energy Potential of Belarus. Adopted by Resolution of the Council of Ministers of Belarus No. 1180 on August 9, 2010, <http://pravo.by/webnpa/text.asp?RN=C21001180>

²¹ Strategy for the Development of the State Energy Potential of Belarus.

²² Belarus to reduce share of dominant energy supplier to 70% in 2015. February 28, 2011, <http://news.belta.by/en/news/econom?id=614924>

side is committed to provide facilities (seaports, railways, and pipelines) for the transshipment and transportation of oil to Belarus. The volume of deliveries was set at about 4 million tons a year from May 2010 through April 2011 to be subsequently increased to 10 million tons a year.²³ In February 2011 Ukraine started shipping Azerbaijani crude oil to Belarus via the Odessa-Brody oil pipeline.²⁴

Other possible routes for Belarus to import Venezuelan oil include the ports of Klaipeda in Lithuania, Ventspils in Latvia and Muuga in Estonia. Technically, it is possible to use spurs of the Druzhba pipeline for transporting oil from Klaipeda and Ventspils to the Navapolatsk refinery in Belarus. However this opportunity has been blocked in recent months by LatRosTrans, a company that operates the pipeline spur on Latvian territory and which is controlled by the Russian capital²⁵.



Source: http://www.belta.by/newinimages/0000000642_872551.jpg

Figure 2. New oil delivery routes to Belarus

²³ Belarus plans to ratify oil transportation agreement with Ukraine. March 02, 2011, http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/economics/Beloruskie-deputaty-planirujut-ratifikatsirovat-soglasenie-s-Ukrainoj-o-sotrudnichestve-v-transportirovke-nefti_i_544610.html

²⁴ "Ukraine begins Azeri oil shipments to Belarus via Odessa-Brody." Kiev (Platts). February 15, 2011, <http://www.platts.com/RSSFeedDetailedNews/RSSFeed/Shipping/8544516>

²⁵ See: Socor, Vladimir., "Russia Uses Denial-of-Access Tactics Against Belarus Oil Supply Diversification." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. Vol. 7. Issue 226. December 20, 2010.

Another important change undermining the previously profitable (for Belarus) oil supply and processing mechanism is the drastically reduced revenues from exports of oil products, which used to provide the country with the lion's share of currency before 2010.²⁶ In addition to a combination of global negative trade and economic factors the most prominent one has been tougher Moscow energy policy. On one hand, Belarus cannot do without Russian oil by severely reducing or replacing its imports, on the other, the currently operating agreement signed in 2011 obliges it to purchase the stipulated volume, again, on less-than-before (but still advantageous) terms. The less the amount purchased, the higher the price.

In 2007 natural gas comprised 62.7 percent and oil 30 percent of the country's Total Primary Energy Supply (TPES).²⁷ On gas there is a "structural over-dependence" on the availability of low-cost gas (*de facto* Russian).²⁸ Natural gas is the basis for the generation of 87 percent of heat and of 97 percent of electricity. Over the past five years Russia more than tripled prices of natural gas for Belarus, though they are still lower than those at the European market²⁹.

Belarus' dependence on gas has remained basically unchanged. Although within the Unified Economic Space (UES)³⁰ that is being created there is a formal opportunity to diversify gas supplies and reduce the reliance on 'Gasprom', in reality this is problematic because gas produced by Kazakhstan has already been accounted for in contracts with Russia. Other potential gas suppliers from Central Asia also lack immediate spare export gas capacities. This necessitates looking for suppliers in the Gulf and other regions.

Meanwhile, the construction of terminals for receiving and the regasification of liquefied gas in the neighboring countries will take time and money. The same is applicable to all measures designed to diversify Belarus' energy supplies.

2.2. The Dual Use of Balancing and its 'Boomerang Effects'

The balancing mechanism was "reformatted" by Moscow when it took control of it so as to reengage and "tame" its restive ally who seemed to be drawn into Western projects and exposed to the risk of being lost as an important element of the Russian political, economic and military strategy.

²⁶ According to the National Statistical Committee of Belarus its "energy commodities" made up 40 percent of the net exports value. In 2004 exports of oil products reached two thirds of their total output. – See: World Bank, *Belarus: Window of Opportunity to Enhance Competitiveness and Sustain Economic Growth*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2005.

²⁷ Belarus Country Profile. <http://www.ebrd.com/downloads/legal/irc/countries/belarus.pdf>

²⁸ See: Balmaceda M. (note 15), p. 90.

²⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *Investment Policy Review of the Republic of Belarus*. New York and Geneva: United Nations, 2009, http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/diaepcb200910_en.pdf

³⁰ The UES is the next stage of the development of the Customs Union comprised of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. It is planned to become functional on January 1, 2012.

Despite tense interstate and spoilt personal relations between the countries' leaders (suffice it to recall Medvedev's comments on his video blog at the beginning of October in 2010³¹) the Kremlin decided that its long-term geopolitical interests have priority over changing a problematic head of the allied state. An outcome of such a change (with no prepared or ready replacement at hand) would have brought uncertainty and risks of Belarus' drift to the West, which, in turn, would imply one more failure of Russia's foreign policy and a blow against its plans in the post-Soviet space, as well as weakening of the domestic political positions of the "duumvirate" of Medvedev and Putin.

Although the detailed contents of the commitments agreed upon during the meeting of the two presidents in Moscow on December 9, 2010 were not made public,³² it goes without saying that their key elements were continued subsidies for the Belarusian economy which exceeded 52 billion USD over Lukashenko's 15-year term in office.³³

Under the agreement on the creation of the unified economic space starting from 2011 Belarus is receiving all Russian oil duty-free. At the same time, Minsk agreed to pay duties to Moscow on exports of oil products from the processed Russian crude. As a result, according to preliminary estimates, in 2011 alone Minsk will gain about 3,9 billion USD, while Russia will lose about 5,3 billion USD.³⁴

Lukashenko admitted that even if he would have been forced to "surrender, as they say, for four billion a year," he was ready for that, because "what matters is that we have obtained as much oil as we need..."³⁵

Minsk's energy concerns encompassed the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant (BNPP) and its financial backing. These issues had been discussed by the two sides since 2008 with no final solutions found. The December meeting of the Belarusian and Russian presidents in Moscow opened the way to the final phase of negotiations. In March 2011 it was reported in the mass media that draft agreements on the parallel operation of the two countries' power systems and on the construction of the BNPP had been finalized and talks were underway on the terms of issuing a Russian credit for the construction work.

³¹ See Dmitry Medvedev on relations between Russia and Belarus: "The senseless period of tension in relations with Belarus is certain to come to an end." October 3, 2010, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/1052>

³² On December 9, 2010 presidents Medvedev and Lukashenko had a separate one-on-one meeting before the summit of the Customs Union member-states. It took place in the run up to the presidential elections in Belarus and against the backdrop of tense relations between the two presidents, who had not met for several months but exchanged personal insults through the mass media. After the meeting Lukashenko said that the quarrel was settled. "Lukashenko 'poteshilsya' s Medvedevym." December 10, 2010, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/2010/12/10/799420.html>

³³ Suzdaltsev A. "Pravda o Belorussii. Part 3." August 30, 2010, <http://www.politoboz.com/media/andrei-suzdaltsev-pravda-o-belorussii-chast-tretya>

³⁴ "Rossijskije neftjaniki prekratili postavki v Belorussiju." January 13, 2011, <http://www.rb.ru/topstory/business/2011/01/12/122505.html>

³⁵ "Bat'ka gotov sdat'sja za chetyre milliarda." December 12, 2010, <http://www.utro.ru/articles/2010/12/17/944734.shtml>

Additionally, Minsk received the cheaper arms and military equipment it needs for the modernization of the army and also for the materialization of its rationale of strengthening state security in the face of mounting international challenges.

A role in the unexpected settlement of the interstate discord was also played by a Wikileaks publication at the beginning of December 2010 of materials on the plan for the defense of Poland and the Baltic states against the Russian aggression that was allegedly adopted by the NATO Lisbon Summit two weeks earlier.³⁶ This gave another start to Moscow's suspicions about the Alliance and raised salience of Belarus as a military outpost for Russian political and military elite.³⁷

On December 27, 2010 Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the federal law on the ratification of the Russian-Belarusian agreement on the advancement of military technical cooperation that was signed a year before (adopted by the Duma on December 8 and by the Council of the Federation on December 15).³⁸ On February 9, 2011 Medvedev signed the federal law on ratification of the inter-governmental agreement "On the Mutual Supplies of Military, Dual-Purpose and Civil Goods during Periods of Heightened Aggression and in Wartime" (signed in Moscow on December 10, 2009) and on the same day he submitted to the Duma for ratification the bilateral agreement "On Creating a Unified Communications System for the Regional Group of Troops (Forces) of Belarus and Russia."³⁹

In exchange for such benefits Lukashenko promised to ratify before the new 2011 year the package of documents on the creation of the Unified Economic Space among Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which he managed to complete by December 30.

In addition, at the Moscow meeting of the CSTO Collective Security Council on December 10, 2010 Lukashenko assumed chairmanship of this structure, which he had evaded since June 2009. Thus, the bargain succeeded.⁴⁰

Moscow's promise of massive economic support relieved Minsk of the need to look for other urgent means of rescuing itself from the inevitable crisis.

³⁶ See: Alesin A. «Wikileaks was right on time». *Belorusy i rynek*. December 20, 2010.

³⁷ An eloquent exposition of this point of view was made in Yuri Godin's article "The Union State Must Start Working". *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. December 27, 2010, http://www.ng.ru/courier/2010-12-27/11_soyuz.html

³⁸ The treaty determines the order of supplies for the national Armed Forces, law enforcement agencies and special services.

³⁹ It sets a regulatory framework for coordinated management of the regional group of troops of the two states and outlines a unified system of views and approaches to coordinate their communication planning.

⁴⁰ Belarus was supposed to take up chairmanship in the CSTO at its Moscow summit on June 14, 2009, however Lukashenko refused to take part in it because of the "milk war" with Russia. ("Sekretariat ODKB: Belarus ne hochet predsdatelstvovat." January 11, 2010, <http://www.belaruspartisan.org/bp-forfe/?page=102&news=54942>). Other conflicts between the two allies followed. Apparently so as to add up one more bargaining instrument in its disputes with Moscow Minsk did not assume chairmanship in the CSTO for about a year and a half and Russia had to perform a "temporary technical chairmanship" of the organization.

Having obtained external political and economic guarantees of its survival the regime did not hesitate to use force on December 19 against its most active and therefore dangerous domestic opposition. By doing this it foiled the scenario of normalizing relations with the EU and the US that had been relatively steadily unfolding in the preceding months and dealt its own blow (following the one from the Kremlin) on the “balancing mechanism,” destroying its second competing pole to the satisfaction of the remaining Eastern gravity center. In the end, Belarus avoided morphing into “another Yugoslavia”, and Lukashenko avoided becoming “another Marshal Tito”.

Minsk ‘subcontracted’ to get actively engaged in Russia’s geopolitical and geo-economic planning of the post-Soviet space including the Customs Union, the UES, the Eurasian Economic Union, the expansion of the CSTO functional capabilities into peacekeeping and crisis management, etc. Lukashenko opted in favor of the more convenient and acceptable of Moscow’s post-imperial projects and rejected the course of approximation with the European Union that was associated with dangers of democratization for the authoritarian power and its subsequent collapse. In fact, this was a choice for the sake of staying in power and for the geopolitical designs most conducive to that.

Eastern partnership initiated by the European Union and the UES, promoted by Russia as a stage along the way to the Eurasian Union, are two competing geopolitical projects. The Belarusian leadership chose the UES, deemed in the given circumstances as a more advantageous option⁴¹ that promised future economic benefits not tied up to political conditions such as regime democratization. Therefore the EU lost in the “contest.”⁴²

However, it may also be true that the events of December 19 and their follow-up have been associated with no real or immediate achievements for the players involved. Not only the West but Russia as well gained nothing but problems, although of a different kind. Due to this zero gain for the two key external players the paradigm of Minsk’s traditional in-between maneuvering has collapsed.⁴³ Still, “leaders evaluate gains and losses in political terms – domestic politics is ‘the essence of decision.’”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Deputy Minister of Economy of Belarus Andrei Tur believes that the Customs Union offers great opportunities for promoting commodities abroad because it opens up a vast market of three states with the population of almost 180 million people where Belarusian enterprises and entrepreneurs can come with their products without customs payments.

Particularly promising in his opinion are logistics and transit spheres. - See “Tamozhennyi sojuz predostavljaet Belarusi bol’shije vozmozhnosti dlja prodvizhenija tovarov za rubezh.” February 14, 2011, http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/economics/Tamozhennyi-sojuz-predostavljaet-Belarusi-bolshie-vozmozhnosti-dlja-prodvizhenija-tovarov-za-rubezh---Tur_i_542542.html

⁴² See TV program “Kartina mira” of February 13, 2011 on the channel “RTR Belarus”, <http://www.ctv.by/km/~news=50226>

⁴³ See: Koktysh K. “Final beloruskogo limitrofa.” February 10, 2011, <http://nmbnby.eu/news/express/3038.html>

⁴⁴ Mintz, Alex. “Applied Decision Analysis: Utilizing Poliheuristic Theory to Explain and Predict Foreign Policy and National Security Decisions”, *International Studies Perspectives*, Volume 6, Number 1, February 2005, p. 95.

3. The Belarusian Regime after 12/19: a Strategic Defeat?

Belarus' strategic position in 2011 may be described as a major strategic defeat of its authorities, both domestic and external. This has several main reasons.

On the face of it lies the disproportionate resort to force against the peaceful rally of democratic forces on the evening of the day of presidential elections in Minsk and the continuing repression against not only the participants in the rally, but against all democratic activists, civil rights defenders, opposition political parties, youth and civil society organizations siding with the opposition.

The final report by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) published in February of 2011 concluded that Belarus had a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections. The document stated that the December 19 presidential election in Belarus was marked by numerous and serious violations at key stages of the electoral process. Most presidential candidates and hundreds of citizens were detained on election night, among them journalists, human rights activists and other civil society representatives.⁴⁵

Many independent estimates of the election results questioned the official ones by stating that ballots cast for Lukashenko were not sufficient for his victory in the first round and anyway were much lower than officially reported. It contributed to the nervous reaction of the authorities and the brutal suppression of protest moods on election day and after.

Currently there is no political consensus in Belarusian society. The gap has widened between the democratic forces opposed to Lukashenko's rule and outraged at the continued suppression of their rights and liberties on the one hand and regime supporters on the other.

The numbers of dissenters have become so substantial⁴⁶ that the Belarusian president had to appeal to them in his New Year address to the nation and pledged to reckon with alternative opinions:

I am addressing my [New Year] greetings also to our minority. You should know that you are being treated as an inalienable part of our society, with its own goals, views and aspirations. You have your position, a special conception of the world order and our country's development. This is

⁴⁵ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. "Republic of Belarus: Presidential Election 19 December 2010". OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. Warsaw, 22 February 2011, <http://www.osce.org/odihhr/75713>

⁴⁶ According to sociologists the so called "unorganized" political opposition in Belarus numbers about 2,3 million out of 7 million people 18 years of age and older. – See: Nikoluk S. "Aleksandr Lukashenko I dva milliona storonnikov oppozitsii." *Novaja Europa*. October 5, 2010. The survey conducted in Belarus at the end of October of 2010 by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies showed that 33,7% of those polled defined their attitude to Lukashenko as "rather or very negative." *BelaPAN*, November 23, 2010,

http://www.n-europe.eu/article/2010/10/05/aleksandr_lukashenko_i_dva_milliona_storonnikov_oppozitsii

*your right that no one can take away from you. But you should know that that your opinion is not indifferent to us. And along with the overwhelming majority of our people we will struggle for you and your views. We will look for ways to your minds and hearts because otherwise it is impossible to unite the society, preserve the country and accomplish the tasks that we are facing.*⁴⁷

The EU and US responded with strong statements and sanctions to press Lukashenko to stop the repressions and free the new political prisoners.

Many analysts were skeptical about the “rapprochement” between Belarus and the EU in 2008-2010 and even analyzing the standoff between Minsk and Moscow a month before the 2010 presidential elections some of them concluded (though mistakenly) that it was a calculated imitation⁴⁸ in the actual game aimed at harvesting in the end the legitimation, credits and other benefits from both Brussels and Moscow.⁴⁹

As the Belarusian president met with top executives of several Russian mass media on March 18, 2011, he stated that a dialogue with the West was impossible, because “they are indecent people: they say some things but think different things” and blamed Western states for working to subvert the regime while trying to lull its vigilance prior to the presidential elections.⁵⁰ Later in an interview to the *Washington Post* on March 28, 2011 Lukashenko admitted that he was not planning to get engaged with the Americans or the Europeans in any more political games. “We did a number of steps closer to your direction. You cheated us, and we don’t believe you,” he said.⁵¹

The official Minsk response was a *per saltum* U-turn from at least a declaratory route toward “liberalization” that marked the 2010 presidential election campaign. Thus, the base conditions for the continuation of a constructive dialogue between Minsk and the West were violated. At the same time, the resort to force annihilated the minimal prerequisites for civilized domestic political communication among the authorities, the opposition and pro-democratic forces aimed at finding ways of cooperation between the state and the civil society.

⁴⁷ President Lukashenko’s New Year Address to the People of Belarus on December 31, 2010. January 1, 2011, http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/president/Novogodnee-obraschenie-Prezidenta-Belarusi-k-beloruskomu-narodu_i_537996.html

⁴⁸ See: ‘The Mystery of Russia – Belarus Conflict: What is Game and What is Real?’ November 10, 2010. <http://profi-forex.org/news/entry1008057994.html> and also: “Experts’ Opinion Confirmed: The West was Bluffed into Believing the Game Played Jointly by Moscow and Minsk.” – November 12, 2010. <http://profi-forex.org/news/entry1008058154.html>

⁴⁹ That was, of course, a reluctant and inconsistent simulation, more symbolic and superficial than substantive. It could not even last long enough to yield any tangible results. But hardly there was something like the above-mentioned double-pronged strategic design. Should there be one it would not be viable. The conflict between Minsk and Moscow was a real one. If the situation evolved further down the road on both the “Eastern and Western fronts” Lukashenko could lose power within the next several months. He tried to prevent at least this accelerated scenario from being implemented.

⁵⁰ “Lukashenko: West is impossible to talk to.” March 18, 2011, <http://news.belta.by/en/news/president/?id=618788>

⁵¹ “Lally Weymouth interviews Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko.” March 4, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lally-weymouth-interviews-belarus-president-alexander-lukashenko/2011/03/03/AB9iCoN_story.html

Conclusion

The dismantling of the previously existing geopolitical balancing mechanism from which Minsk has benefitted for more than a decade came at a time when its “clockwork” was almost at the apex of its capability. In 2010 all of its key elements (players) were at work: the EU and, to some extent, the U.S.; Russia; the “Southern arc” states and Belarus itself.

The EU and the US have been augmenting their real substantive roles and provided the trajectory of normalizing relations with Belarus developed in an unhampered way these roles could acquire a new positive quality.

Conversely, the role of Russia was negative in the sense that it was serving as a “trouble maker” for Belarus’ economy and energy sector, and like a critic or almost a political opponent of president Lukashenko.

The “Southern arc” states were gaining their importance as potential alternatives (although partial) to Russian energy and financial resources and trade markets.

The first principal move to dismantle the GBM was initiated by the Kremlin, which could not accept the risk of Minsk drifting further to the West with its competing project of the Eastern partnership and ruining Russia’ geopolitical plans in Eurasia – the creation of the Customs Union, the UES and the Eurasian Union in the future. The move was timed for the final stage of the presidential election campaign in Belarus.

Minsk was extremely concerned with the unsettled prices on Russian energy supplies in 2011 and generally on Moscow’s political and economic course after gas and trade wars and bitter exchanges in the mass media that marred their relations throughout 2010. In fact, had Moscow refrained from providing support to Lukashenko on December 9, ten days before the election day (December 19), that would have certainly reduced his rating and could imply that the Kremlin was planning to apply economic sanctions and even go as far as not to recognize the elections as legitimate.

By pledging formidable economic and political support at the decisive period of time in the run up to the presidential elections in Belarus, Moscow has once again “penetrated” the Belarusian political system. It simultaneously and decisively influenced the Belarusian regime’s domestic and foreign policy decision-making options. In short, it was a move intended to “keep Russia in, Belarus down and the West out.”

The fact that Belarus’ political system has been vulnerable to external penetration is nothing new. One of the illustrative examples was Moscow’s ‘mediation’ in its domestic political crisis in 2006, when it saved Lukashenko from impeachment and reassured the Belarusian authoritarianism of its future sustainability. The president himself stressed on many occasions that “Russia does not detach itself from the development of the domestic political situation in Belarus.”⁵²

⁵² See, for example: “[President Lukashenko’s] Meeting on Home and Foreign Policy Issues.” July 26, 2005. <http://www.president.gov.by/en/press16355.html#doc>

At this time this was a multiple penetration by Russia of Belarus' political system intended to influence and change the country's leader's preferences and the eventual political outcomes at the individual, state and the system level (GBM).

The second and third moves destroying the GBM came from within the political system of Belarus. The theory holds that "instead of selecting among alternative foreign policy actions that serve the national interests, decision makers select among foreign policy actions that serve their own domestic political needs, or that help them survive."⁵³ This applies to the spectrum of foreign policy deals, which the Belarusian president reached in Moscow on December 9 – 10, 2010.

The third move was a brutal dispersal by the Belarusian authorities of a peaceful action of pro-democratic forces on the day of presidential elections and the following massive political repressions. It swung Belarus' official relations with the West back into the cold.

These generalized three moves made by Moscow and Minsk marked the failure and change of the preceding foreign policies of Belarus' regime and destroyed the external balancing mechanism for its geopolitical 'avatars'.

April 2011

⁵³ Neack, Laura. *The New Foreign Policy: Power Seeking in a Globalized Era*. 2nd ed. Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, p. 44.