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Consequences for Belarus of Russian Policy towards Ukraine

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The consequences of the Ukrainian revolution and the Russian intervention in Crimea will be important for Belarus in the economic, military, and domestic and foreign policy dimensions. Problems in the Ukrainian and Russian markets arising from the political situation will reflect negatively on the condition of the Belarusian economy, for which both countries are important trading partners. There is also a growing awareness among Belarusian political elites that their own army would not be able to resist Russia. Because of the desire to leave the door open to relations with the European Union, Belarusian support for the Russian military operation in Ukraine should not be expected, and Belarus may decide to release political prisoners.

Ukrainian Lessons for the Belarusian Regime. The Maidan protests in Kyiv were followed closely in Belarus. Although the official media carried almost no coverage of events in the Ukrainian capital, they had a strong influence on the decisions of the Belarusian authorities. The most important was the acceleration of the changes in the regulations on the introduction of martial law in cases of, amongst other things, mass social protests inspired from outside Belarus. This had been due to be dealt with not in the spring, but during the autumn session of parliament.

Major changes involve the elimination of liability for members of the security forces who use a weapon in "justified cases," such as obeying orders or when under threat. Officers will also receive wider power of attorney to, for example, use wiretaps, examine correspondence, and search people, vehicles and property, without a warrant from the prosecutor. These changes broaden the scope of competence of the security officers, including the KGB, internal forces, and special militia (OMON), which are estimated to number 90,000 (in comparison, the Belarusian army has about 40,000 troops).

The proposed changes will also concern the functioning of the media and NGOs. Under martial law, the media would be banned, except for the titles on a list approved by the Ministry of Information, and NGO activity would be limited. During martial law, the right of Belarusian citizens to enter and leave the country may also be restricted.

In this way the Belarusian regime is trying to protect itself against an explosion of social protest, although the probability of such an event is low. The main reason is the atomisation of Belarusian society and its meagre involvement in the affairs of state. Another factor limiting the potential for change is the weakness of the opposition, which is not only divided, but, in contrast to its Ukrainian counterpart, has for a long time been outside the structures of power and partly in exile.

Economic Consequences. The Ukrainian political crisis and Russian intervention in Crimea had an unfavourable impact not only on the economies of these countries, but also on countries in the region, including Belarus, which has strong economic ties with both neighbours. In 2013, trade between Belarus and Ukraine amounted to $6.25 billion ($4.2 billion of which was accounted for by Belarusian exports), and among the 180 countries that trade with Belarus, Ukraine took second place. The structure of trade is dominated by oil products, fertilisers and tractors, for which the Ukrainian customers pay primarily in American dollars. This may mean that the devaluation of the hryvnia will significantly limit the ability to purchase these products, which will hit the most profitable branches of Belarusian industry.

The consequence of the devaluation of both the Ukrainian hryvnia and the Russian ruble (in part due directly to the conflict), will also be a reduction in demand for Belarusian goods in these countries, because the products will become expensive and uncompetitive. To improve the situation of its own exporters, Minsk should devalue the Belarusian ruble. However, President Alexander Lukashenka decided against such a step, due to the negative consequences it would have for ordinary Belarusians.

In the long term perspective, the deepening economic crisis in Russia and Ukraine will also cause a decline in demand in the markets of these countries, which will further reduce Belarusian exporters' options for trade. Thus, it will deepen the existing problems of Belarus connected to selling goods and falling industrial production.

The unstable situation in the region will also cause a decline in foreign investment interest (including Russian) in Belarus, which will also have a negative effect on the situation. Moreover, the Belarusian government will, in the coming year, need about $4–4.5 billion of foreign investment, among other sources of income, in order to maintain the level of foreign exchange reserves. In the last nine months they decreased by almost $2 billion to $6.146 billion, which was caused by the negative trade balance, lack of foreign investment, and the need to repay debts (including an IMF loan).

Military Engagement. Events in Ukraine, and especially the threat of Russian intervention, also has significance for the Belarusian army. According to Belarusian law, it is not possible to use Belarusian soldiers in any Russian military operation on the territory of Ukraine (neither can Russia expect such support on the basis of agreements concluded within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation). However, Russia's actions aimed at protecting its interests in neighbouring countries may also pose a risk for Belarus. Russia has two military bases there, at Hancevichi (near Baranovichi), where there is a radar station that monitors ballistic missile launches from the west and is part of the Russian early warning system, and at Vileyka (Minsk province), where there is a centre to communicate with strategic nuclear weapon-capable submarines. What is more, a base for Russian fighters is to be built in Lida in the coming months.

Belarus also has much stronger military ties with Russia than does Ukraine. The framework for the two countries' alliance is regulated by an agreement from 1997, along with the Security Concept of the Union State of Belarus and Russia of 1999, and an agreement in 2012 on a common air defence system (based on which, Russian Su-27P fighters, relocated to Baranovichi, have been performing combat duty in Belarusian airspace since autumn 2013). Both countries are also members of the CSTO, and conduct joint military exercises regularly. This dependence could mean that the Belarusian authorities will not be able to refuse the deployment of additional Russian troops to protect the border with NATO countries and Ukraine.

Thus, the Belarusian army would not be able to oppose Russian intervention in any way. There are also concerns about the loyalty of the higher officer corps educated in Russia. Moreover, according to the Belarusian defence doctrine, any attack will only come from a western direction, which means that the main military installations are located in the western part of the country. A lack of military equipment, and total dependence on Russia for supplies and service, also mean that the Belarusian army would not be able to defend the nation against without support.

Conclusions. The situation in Ukraine has created a very difficult dilemma for the Belarusian authorities. On the one hand, because of political, economic and military dependence they should be loyal towards Russia. On the other hand, however, Ukraine is an important economic partner, and support for Russia's actions will also have a negative effect on any Belarusian attempt to engage with the European Union.

This is all the more important because Belarus, due to the deteriorating economic situation and the desire to avoid total dependence on Russia, may, in the coming weeks try to return to dialogue with the EU. It is possible, therefore, that the Belarusian authorities will decide to release political prisoners, which is the main condition for the resumption of talks from the EU side. This decision may be quite easy, because the majority of those held have served more than half of their sentences, and none of the previously released politicians (for example Nyaklyayew, Sannikau) returned to active political activities in Belarus. At the same time, however, it is clear that the regime, partly through changes in the law, is preparing for radical action in the case of a situation similar to that in Ukraine.

Immediate recognition by the Belarusian authorities of Crimea's independence (and well as its right to join the Russian Federation) should not be expected. As was the case with Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which Belarus still does not consider independent), the government in Minsk will recognise Crimean independence only under strong pressure from Russia.

The behaviour of the EU, the United States and Canada will also be an important indication for Belarusian society and local independent communities. Any aid given to the new Ukrainian authorities will be perceived as willingness of these countries to continue to support democratic changes in the region. At the same time, however, Kyiv's Maidan may, for Lukashenka be another lesson of distrust towards the European Union. Lack of guarantees of security for Viktor Yanukovych, who signed an agreement with representatives of the EU, may in fact mean that the Belarusian president will never believe any assurances about peaceful change of power that EU politicians may give.