

Belarus and Ukraine: inevitable love

Despite the obvious differences between political systems, the common interest in economic, political and security spheres forces our countries to close cooperation.

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On October 25-26, 2018 Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Petro Poroshenko met at the Forum of Regions of Belarus and Ukraine in Homel. In addition to general talks about cooperation opportunities in different spheres – from metallurgical complex to Hi-tech park - \$101.5 million contracts were signed. Also, each of them gave attention to the civic dimension: Petro Poroshenko met with Ukrainian diaspora representatives, and Aliaksandr Lukashenka emphasized that as many as 150,000 Ukrainian citizens has moved to Belarus since 2014. Belarusian president once again offered to send Belarusian peacekeepers to the Donbass and 5 days later developed the idea at the official opening of Munich Security Conference Core Group Meeting in Minsk.

Commentary

- ◆ It was no coincidence that the Forum of Regions of Belarus and Ukraine was on the heels of a similar event of Belarus and Russia, which took place on October 10-12 in another border area centre – Mahilou. Parallelism sometimes was literal: whereas, for Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Mahilou and Vitsebsk were “the cities that do not differ from Russian cities at all”, Homel “does not differ from wonderful Ukrainian cities.” The bigger scale and earlier timing of the event in Mahilou are in line with the declared priorities of Belarusian integration, but creation of such a conspicuous Belarus-Ukraine counterbalance demonstrates the priority of foreign policy diversification in both economic and political dimensions.
- ◆ Ukraine is Belarus' second-largest trading partner after Russia, and Belarus is Ukraine's fifth-largest partner following Russia, China, Germany and Poland. Trade between the two countries in the first half of 2018 amounted to \$2.4 billion (+15.9% in comparison with the same period in 2017), the trade balance being positive for Belarus: Ukraine exports goods and services to the value of \$0.7 billion and imports to that of \$1.7 billion. The import includes fuel and MAZ equipment, which is used, among others, for military purposes in the Donbass (the issue that Russian media sometimes speculate on). Meanwhile, on the Ukrainian market Belarusian fuel competes namely with the Russian one and lost the market share this year. According to Consulting Group A-95 data, in the first nine months

of 2018, the share of diesel fuel from Belarusian companies in the Ukrainian market decreased from 45% to 35% as compared with 2017, while the Russian market share grew from 28% to 37%. Nevertheless, fuel supplies from Belarus are still significant and they are not subject to political risks as in the Russian case. Equally with well-established logistics, it has become one of the reasons why petrochemical industry contracts account for around 70% of all the contracts signed during the Forum (that is almost \$70 million).

- ◆ It is interesting how consistently Aliaksandr Lukashenka brings up the topic of Belarusian military peacekeeping involvement in the Donbass. For the first time the Belarusian president voiced the idea exactly four years ago in an interview to the Euronews channel. Since then he has been repeatedly speaking of the offer, expanding the format all the time: from the Belarusian soldiers' presence on the demarcation line, through the help in controlling the Russia-Ukraine border, to assistance in ensuring safety during the Donbass elections. The offer is made despite that the Belarusians generally perceive it in a “mostly negative” way. After the crackdown on the IISEPS there are no up-to-date sociological surveys on such sensitive questions, but in March 2015, in a public opinion poll by the IISEPS, to the question “How do you assess the variant that Belarusian peacekeeping forces go to the Donbass under the United Nations flag to ensure the ceasefire?” 44.8% of Belarusian citizens replied negatively, 26.8% were indifferent and only 18.2% had a positive attitude to such an idea (still 10.3% undecided).
- ◆ This is not a matter of Lukashenka's belligerence, nor is it a matter of a wish to go against the public opinion. What matters here is that it is because of its impartiality in the Ukrainian conflict that Belarus succeeded in unfreezing the western vector in foreign policy, which has become the biggest diplomatic achievement at least in the last eight years. However historically important they can be, the Minsk Agreements have been recently perceived less and less optimistically. Thus, Belarus is bent on looking for a new role in this story – be it a participation in the peacekeeping mission or hosting some “Helsinki-2” in Minsk. As the Minsk Agreements have shown, the failure in the implementation of some initiatives does not prevent Belarus from reaping diplomatic benefits.
- ◆ One more four-years-old idea is broadcasting of a Ukrainian television channel in Belarus. Lukashenka and Poroshenko agreed on it informally in December 2014, but the issue has been stalled since then. The new statement of Ukrainian president on the launch of the broadcast in “the nearest future” does not make the issue more specific. Judging by the information from the meeting of Lukashenka and Poroshenko in Kiev in the summer of 2017, even in a private format the two presidents seem to be genuinely set up to start the broadcast. But the availability of a new foreign TV channel in a general access package is not a common phenomenon in Belarus and it is technical and administrative details that slow down the process rather than the lack of political will. If after all the Ukrainian television channel is launched in Belarus (and without global censorship), this will seriously

change not only the national media space but also the degree of the Belarusians' awareness of the region.

Thus, despite the obvious differences between Belarusian and Ukrainian political systems, the common interest in economic, political and security spheres forces our countries to a close cooperation. One can reasonably expect a follow-up Forum of Regions, this time on the territory of Ukraine, which will also mean the appearance of new bilateral formats.