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To West via East: Belarus's Policy on the Middle East

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On the final day of October, Belarus's Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej arrived in Istanbul. That mission did not stand out of the series of official visits and statements and was virtually disregarded by analysts and journalists. Nevertheless, it was another landmark event illustrating sweeping changes in Minsk's policy on the Middle East. It is no secret anymore that Belarus's best friends in that region are the closest allies of the West. When meeting with Ahmet Davutoğlu, Makiej was not just speaking to yet another minister of foreign affairs of yet another country, but to one of the masterminds behind the developments in Syria who has the best approaches to the political and economic elites of the Western countries. Moreover, he himself belongs to the Western establishment, despite the ideological peculiarities of the current Islamic-oriented Turkish government. Anyway, Ankara remains the United States' most important NATO partner; it is the only country of the region that made up its mind to de facto wage a war on the Syrian government.

The Middle Eastern Exchange

Some Turkish media called Makiej's recent visit to Ankara a "surprise" and pointed out that the Belarusian minister held a closed-door meeting with Recep Erdoğan. The official reason for the meeting was negotiations over the agreement on visa-free travel.

The same visa issue became the alleged reason for Davutoğlu's visit to Minsk this spring. The Belarusian official media announced that the objective of the visit was to discuss the bilateral relationship. A more ludicrous explanation would hardly have been possible to account for why the virtual coordinator of the Syrian civil war left the heat of action on a mission of little to no importance to an Eastern European country, which up until then had welcomed, at best, only second-tier Turkish ministers. The Turkish media covered Davutoğlu's visit to Minsk this spring in a totally different way: they admitted that Belarus and Turkey were discussing the situation in the region, specifically the Syrian issue. The move by the Turkish government was quite logical: since the start of the civil war in Syria, Belarus had been accused of collaborating with the Syrian government, which had been permanently at feud with Turkey at the very least since the late 1950s. Moreover, there were suspicions that it was via Belarus that the Syrian government received some of the vital military equipment. Therefore, by persuading Minsk to cease its cooperation with Damascus, Ankara thought it would expedite the total defeat of its old enemy.

What could Minsk be offered in return? Davutoğlu spoke not only about Turkish investments and promotion of trade relations, but also made it quite obvious that he would help Minsk find new ways to approach the West, something that Lukashenka desperately needs now that both Saakashvili and Yushchenko — his former friends who served as

mediators between the Belarusian leader and the West — are gone. There are no doubts that the Turkish administration can deliver on its promise. But what price tag does its service have? There are hardly any doubts that Davutoğlu's offer to substitute the Syrian friends for those Turkish and in the longer run (and for an extra charge) — for those Western — was not the first one that Belarus received. Indeed, Minsk pulled away from Damascus almost as soon as the Syrian civil war broke out and adopted a fence-sitting attitude. The only clear political statement that official Minsk made in September concerning the chemical disarmament of Syria should be treated in the framework of the Belarus-Russia relationship. Lukashenka specifically noted in his interview with a Kazakhstan television channel that as far as Syria is concerned, Belarus's foreign policy actions followed in Russia's footsteps.

Nothing Personal, No Ideology

What was the reason behind this self-restraint of official Minsk, known for its once overwhelming support for Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in his confrontation with the United States? The thing is that since then the Belarusian administration has almost entirely changed its modus operandi in the Middle East.

Up until the late 2000s, Minsk had been friends with mostly nationalist regimes (albeit sometimes bearing Islamic slogans) in the Middle East — Iraq, Syria, Libya and Iran. All of them were opponents of the West, or at least the United States, either open or latent. The Belarusian opposition experts attributed those ties to ideological issues: Lukashenka, a Soviet man, is looking for soulmates. Others were saying that Minsk was the only friendship option for those who have no one else to befriend. The media spoon-fed the public these explanations for as long as 15 years.

The range of Belarusian contacts in the region saw its first modifications in around 2008, when Minsk started establishing increasingly close connections with a totally opposite group of countries — the conservative fundamentalist Arab monarchies (Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). All of them have always been and still are the friends of the West, and enjoying unrestricted access to the wealth of the Western world, there was no point for them to hunt after Belarus's riches. Declarations and promises of generous projects showered on the country, but the reason why the Arab monarchies were so interested in Belarus remained vague.

The situation became clear when WikiLeaks started publishing secret cables on the diplomacy of the Arab monarchies. It appeared that they were working very closely with the Americans and Israelis with a view to stopping Russia from cooperating with Iran. It was the Iranian nuclear power plant, as well as Teheran's growing military power that worried the well-off sovereigns of the Persian Gulf; the more so because Iran obviously has plans to democratize those monarchies and has repeatedly welcomed Arab renegades.

Iran's ties with Russia were one of the sources of its growing military power; therefore the Arab monarchies, Americans and Israelis offered the Russian government an alternative in order to get it to cancel the transfer of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles (that are not banned by UN sanctions) to Iran. Then president Medvedev yielded to persuasion and suspended the contract at the very last moment.

Belarus is not mentioned in the diplomatic cables that describe these stratagems; however, further developments suggest that the Arab monarchies in association with Israel had also been working with the Belarusian administration to convince it that its circle of partners in the Middle East should be revised. It was at that time, in 2010, that Minsk's contacts with Teheran collapsed. Prior to that, throughout almost the entire decade of the 2000s, Belarus received more or less substantial Iranian delegations on a monthly basis. Since 2010, though, high-level visits have become rare, although the Iranian side continued seeking closer contacts. The highest-profile joint projects — Belarus's oil-producing initiative in Iran and Iran's automobile production in Belarus — were shut down in no time at all.

Meanwhile, Minsk started keeping distance from its allies in Syria and Libya. Hardly had the Libyan rebels taken care of Gaddafi, when Lukashenka went on a visit to the Emir of Qatar. When showing his regret over the death of his friend, the Belarusian leader must have been playing on the anti-Western feelings in the former Soviet Union. The Belarusian administration proved to be even less eloquent when it came to the Syrian crisis: the Foreign Ministry only issued a series of warnings about the possible threat to Belarusian citizens staying in Syria.

Which factor contributed the most to the reversal towards the pro-Western sovereign regimes — the “Qatari island in Europe” project in the vicinity of Brest, pressure from the United States or admonitions of Israeli MPs who visited Minsk — is quite hard to identify. They might have been complementary, though, as the Arab Sunni monarchies easily coordinate their plans to counteract the Shia axis (Iran – Syria – Lebanon) with the United States and Israel. The Belarusian administration was made an offer that it could not refuse. On the one hand, the Arab monarchies were offering bright, albeit hardly realistic projects worth loads of money; on the other, the United States displayed its willingness to shut down legal international business schemes for Belarus. Furthermore, Israel was drawing a crisp picture of what would happen to Lukashenka once the West started treating him as a threat to international security.

However, it was probably the inability and reluctance of Minsk's closest ally — Russia — to cover Belarus in its political endeavor in the developing world that became the decisive factor. Moscow was only ready to help Minsk resist the democratization efforts of the West, which was interpreted as a threat to Russia's sphere of influence, which incorporates Belarus. What Moscow did not want then and does not want now is to see the allied brotherly Belarus grow strong. This applies to strengthening through contacts with developing nations, including in the Middle East (one example is Russia's harsh reaction and even opposition to Minsk's efforts to seek additional oil sources in Venezuela).

Nevertheless, Minsk must have been aware that Syria and Iran should be kept as its best bargaining chips to the bitter end, especially given the “flamboyance” of Arab diplomacy and the fact that the well-off Arab nations have never been short of partners and allies and, therefore, have no strong motives to befriend Belarus. This is when Turkey steps into the framework of Belarus's foreign policy and Davutoğlu all of a sudden takes a keen interest in his Belarusian counterpart.

Defying the Laws of Political Physics

On the one hand, the transformation of Belarus's foreign policy paradigm in the Middle East suggests that Minsk has yielded to pressure and cannot have things all its own way anymore. Proponents of political neorealism insist that a country's foreign policy is defined primarily by the structure of international politics (a single, two or many centers of power and the balance of forces). Is it true that this universal logic applies even to the countries that have made it their goal to disregard it? Or are these attempts much like efforts to defy Newton's laws in our everyday life — it seems it is not impossible, but they will work anyway. Indeed, the de facto establishment of the unipolar world has brought marked changes to the framework of international politics. Back in the 1990s, the Europeans were ostentatiously bypassing the United States' unilateral sanctions against the radical regimes. In the 2000s, they could only adopt impotent resolutions against the U.S. military operation in Iraq, and in the early 2010s, Europe finally joined the United States even in its unilateral initiatives, so no one is there to challenge the lawfulness of the American campaign against Iran.

Russia continued growing weaker in the 2000s. Back in the 1990s, it signed multi-billion (adjust this for inflation!) military contracts with Iran, and Russian volunteers fought in Yugoslavia; whereas in the 2000s, Russia shut its military bases abroad and ceded its territories to China, while yielding to the West even in its close circle. Whereas Yeltsin was tackling the issue of NATO's enlargement in Central Europe, it was up to Putin to cede Ukraine and Georgia (and, in the long view, some other post Soviet states) to the

West. Incidentally, Moscow has never changed its attitude to the former USSR republics. It still treats them as vassals, rather than allies (some examples include the price policy on hydrocarbons, Moscow's restraints on cooperation in the military and industrial sector even with Belarus, etc.).

A Defeat or Victory?

Under the circumstances, Minsk had to either look for new approaches or come to terms with the degradation of its foreign policy, which would inevitably have brought about degradation inside the country. This is why the very fact that the government was able to shift its focus to connections with other countries of the Middle Eastern region and stepped up its relationships with other regions (specifically, Southeast Asia) once the previous strategy became inoperative, was already a major achievement. However, official Minsk has had to resist other consequences of changes in the structure of the international system of politics for many years now. On the one hand, Belarus as part of the Eastern European region has already lost a fair share of its geopolitical importance after the "Cold War" ended. Eastern and Central Europe played a crucial role in the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Once the opposition was over, the region remained a socially and politically problematic area; its strategic significance was reduced to the transit of Russian oil and natural gas. Anyway, Moscow could have made transit agreements with the Europeans (essentially with the Germans) directly. On the other hand, since Russia is no longer a serious military threat to the West, the neighboring countries, including Belarus, have seen the room for bargaining using Russia's military threat considerably narrow. Nevertheless, even Minsk drew benefits from the fears caused by the Kremlin's plans following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008.

In this context, Belarus found itself on the way from the EU to the geopolitical "Nowhere". When it comes to Ukraine, the Western world should have some concerns because of its sheer size, whereas Belarus became a blank space on the map, incomprehensible and unwanted by the Western elites. They used to write about such blanks in the Middle Ages: "Hic sunt leones" ("There are lions here"), meaning there is something vague and troublesome in this area, definitely not worth the effort.

Surprisingly, it was the Middle Eastern policy of the Belarusian government that resulted in a situation when Belarus has become interesting to the key players of global politics. The Belarusian administration has not met with the French or German leaders (so far), but has spoken to the Arab politicians, who play an important role in contemporary world. Makiej has not been invited to meet with John Kerry yet, but Makiej is already going to Davutoğlu. Belarus's policy in the Middle East has all of a sudden provided the country with new opportunities, both in the bilateral engagement with Turkey and in its search for common ground with the West.

