

The Game with Risen Stakes: Official Minsk's Quest for Legitimization in the Context of the Geopolitical Mess in the Region

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In the span of just four days, from 16th to 19th August 2008, former presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin and two participants of the entrepreneurs' protests in January, Andei Kim and Siarhej Parsiukievich, were released from jail. This formally brought the number of remaining political prisoners in Belarus to zero. The fulfillment of the foremost demand of the European Union and the United States opened a rare opportunity for normalization of Belarus' relations with the West. However, as freeing came upon the background of the intensification of the Kremlin's pressure on Belarus, it can also be a repeat of the blackmailing pattern, when the Belarusian authorities nudge Russia towards a more lenient deals on energy price issues by threatening with 'normalization' of relations with the West. Even so, Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy following the conflict in Georgia may create a deeper set of incentives for the official Minsk to move closer to the West than the mere petty blackmail of Kremlin. In this situation, effective and clearly defined conditionality formulated by both the European Union and the United States may be a key factor promoting positive changes in the country in the near future.

Kazulin's Release: Perfect Timing?

Alongside with a conduct of the parliamentary elections in a free and transparent manner, Kazulin's release was set as a pre-condition for the beginning of the process of normalizing relations between both the EU and US and Belarus. The possibility of Kazulin's release from jail first emerged in February-March this year, and the decision on his fate was then a test on the credibility of the 'liberalizing' intentions of the Belarusian authorities. These intentions, however, seemed to have all but vanished later in the year after the confrontation with the United States over the sanctions on Belnaftakhim concern was followed by the near-closure of the US embassy in Minsk, violent suppression of the March 25 demonstration, the attack on journalists of the electronic media broadcasting from abroad (and effective criminalization of their work without registration afterwards), and harsh prison sentences to Kim and Parsiukevich given in April. Apart from dispelling the myth about liberalizing intentions of the authorities, the refusal to release Kazulin (and 'restocking' of political prisoners' in April) was considered by us as a move towards raising the stakes in the possible bargaining with the EU once the official Minsk would find necessary to reenter the dialogue.

The release of Kazulin, Kim, and Parsiukievich, was not a measure of good will. It was authorized exactly at the moment that benefits associated with the improvement of the international image far exceeded the political cost of having Kazulin at large. First, some of the regime protagonists have already hinted that the government considers the fulfillment of one of twelve demands of the EU a maximum it can be asked for, and that continuing the pressure would lead to the break-up of the relations. Second, the release of Kazulin might have been authorized with the aim to provoke intensification of leadership battle in the opposition, which would further disorganize it on the eve of parliamentary elections.

Third, it appeared that the release of Kazulin was an attempt to compensate the failure to honor another demand by the EU and the United States – to carry the parliamentary elections in a free and transparent measure. The inclusion of 32 representatives of the opposition into constituency-level election commissions seemed to be a promising step towards liberalization of the election practices. Nevertheless, already at the moment of registration of the initiative groups there were signs that the format of elections would not be changed dramatically compared with previous election of 2004. Thus, at least three opposition members who tried to get registered had been fired from state jobs after they declared their intentions, whereas many others faced problems while collecting signatures. The result of formation of the precinct-level election commissions (i.e. those that would actually count the vote) was most discouraging. As the independent Belarusian press agency Belapan reported on Friday, August 15th only 40 of the 810 candidates nominated by the opposition coalition United Democratic Forces were admitted into the local election commissions. Altogether 69,845 members were nominated in 6,485 district election commissions, though only 161 of them should represent the political parties. Even more disappointing was the result of the candidate registration process, when about 20 out of 91 UDF candidates were denied registration. True, there is still a chance to ensure a fair vote by granting appeals to the rejected candidates and admitting election observers to effectively monitor the vote count. Yet, the trends lead towards a conclusion that a promise of 'conducting the election to the highest possible standard' had not been fulfilled.

External Push for Normalization: Enter the West

Over the last several months one could observe the growing interest in normalization of relations with Belarus. The reasons for this interest go far beyond the image improvement exercises of the official Minsk, for which it had recently hired a British spin doctor Lord Timothy Bell. A remarkable development is the continuous, throughout the year, involvement of the German embassy behind the scenes negotiations with Lukashenka, the first round of which took place in the winter of 2008. In the second round, which unleashed in August, presumably after the Moscow's harsh reaction to Lukashenka's neutrality over the Georgian war, the issue of Kazulin's release may have been solved. Remarkably, the same was promised by Lord Bell himself just days before the release took place, but this assertion might have been little more than Bell's own PR strategy of self-promotion.

The interest in normalization was also manifested in the debates in the British Parliament that took place on July 16, 2008 and led by the opposition MP Mark Pritchard, who visited Belarus in May with a mission that somehow eschewed media attention. Pritchard's statements, that business interests in the City of London are willing to invest in Belarus and that the country need to improve its record on human rights in a manner that goes beyond the cosmetic image

changes, was nominally a poke in Bell's side but generally followed the same strategy: offering a roadmap for official Minsk for ending the most uncomfortable aspects of political isolation by fulfilling minimum political conditions, such as release of political prisoners and conduct of parliamentary elections in a fair manner, even if it will not return a sizeable opposition representation in the House of Representatives. Given the fact that 'a City of London' may well be represented by the Russian capital that found its home on the banks of Thames, such drive towards normalization may well be led by the same allies of the official Minsk it counts on so heavily for investment. Some of these business interests may well see Belarus as a certain safe heaven for their operations, possibly a springboard for the return to Russia. This may well necessitate improvement of the international reputation of Belarus.

Friendship Enforcement: Enter Russia

The Belarus-Russia relations continue to be the defining factor in the internal political dynamics in Belarus as well as in the relations between Belarus and the West. As we affirmed in our previous analyses, the Minsk's dealings with the EU and the United States had been a function of Belarus-Russia relation. To some extent, this pattern repeats once again: in fact, the warming up between Minsk and Brussels happens when Russia turns more assertive and aggressive with regards to Belarus.

Yet, there are important modifications to the customary model. Before the new round of gas price negotiations with Russia, Kremlin (and particularly Moscow's White House) made it clear that Moscow was committed to continue cutting down energy subsidies and pressing forward privatization of critical Belarusian infrastructure by the Russian capital. In a broader sense, Moscow had become increasingly assertive in enhancing its economic role in the near abroad (as can be testified by the president Medvedev's initiative of making Russian ruble a regional reserve currency). In Belarus, this assertion was converted in numerous declarations by both prime minister Putin and Russian Ambassador to Belarus Alexei Surikov, both making it clear and loud that privatization of critical infrastructure and forging closer political ties to Moscow was the only way for Minsk to avoid drastic gas price hikes in the future. Meanwhile, due to the rapid growth of energy prices, the raise of gas prices from the current 128 US dollars per 1000 cubic meters to about 200 US dollars in 2009 seems to be inevitable under any circumstances.

Belarus' Rapprochement with the West: A Casualty of Georgian War?

Lukashenka's ability to minimize Russian pressure by making ceremonial gestures to the West is nowadays undermined by Kremlin's commitment to play hard ball. The aftermath of the Georgia-Russia war that unleashed in August 2008 may have serious consequences for Belarus as well. The war and may have radically changed the balance of power and the rules of the geopolitical game in the former Soviet Union. The logic of Kremlin's confrontation with the West would push it towards asserting control over what Moscow considers its 'sphere of influence', which may mean destabilizing Ukraine to prevent its entry into NATO; and tightening its grip over Belarus to ensure that the country's foreign policy orientation would not change. The official Minsk was, in the midst of the conflict, in the position to play the role of 'Moscow's last friend' something it did so successfully in the 1990s. However, the Belarusian side kept silence over the conflict and was not in rush to endorse Kremlin's actions. It appeared that the official Minsk wanted to put the price tag on its loyalty and allegiance once again. Instead, Surikov's outrage over Lukashenka's failure to immediately

endorse Russia's aggression in Georgia was a sign of Kremlin's unwillingness to overpay this time.

The Kremlin's pressure over Georgia put before Lukashenka a greater dilemma than it might have been predicted. One has to remember that the official Minsk refrained from harsh statement against Tbilisi over the past years, and the relations recently took a drastic turn towards normalization. Some of the Belarusian companies, such as Belavia that greatly increased the flights to Tbilisi, simply extract profits on Russia-Georgia confrontation (and Georgian wine is freely on sale in Belarus too). And it should not be forgotten that if Belarus leadership still considers the idea of diversification of energy supplies, it has a vital interest in having Georgia stay around.

As for Moscow, it grasped the momentum and then explored the shock of the first post-war days, when all leaders of the former Soviet states still reflected on the return of tanks and fighter jets as tools of Russian foreign policy, to force Lukashenka not only to vocally support Russia in its war with Georgia (although Lukashenka did it in a manner that sounded conspicuously absurd and might have betrayed his reluctance) but also forced him to honor promises of political and economic integration it did before. In particular, Russia is becoming increasingly assertive in two areas: creation of the missile defense system of the 'Union State' and privatization of key companies (such as MAZ and Polimir) by the Russian capital. The list of future demands may include new privatization deal, formation of the currency union, and possibly a closer form of political and military integration. The official Minsk is to a very large extent cornered in this standoff: not only there is a clear difference in 'weight categories' between Belarus and Russia, Lukashenka can simply not count on international sympathy and support once Moscow applies pressure due to the dubious international reputation enjoyed by the political regime in Minsk. Furthermore, Russia's position is strengthened by the fact that it applies pressure on the Belarusian authorities on the issues in which integration was promised by the official Minsk itself – suffice it to say that the joint air defense system was discussed by Lukashenka himself in December last year when he was busy securing a lucrative stabilization loan from Russia. Any engagement with the West can hardly substitute the benefits offered by Kremlin: lucrative stabilization loans, discounts on energy, and preferential access to the Russian market. In fact, Russia may not be pressing harsher to keep Belarus firmly in its orbit, it may use its leverage and incentives to ensure the lack of political and economic changes in Belarus through creation of negative incentives to the official Minsk in order to maintain its geopolitical loyalty and economic dependence.

As Kremlin not only forces Belarus to take its side in the conflict in Georgia but also tries to assure its unwavering loyalty in the emerging geopolitical confrontation with the West, it may push Minsk towards moves that would make improvement of ties with Europe and the US implausible. This could include, beside placement of the elements of Russia's missile defense system in Belarus, such steps as recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and adoption of these puppet states into the 'Union of Belarus and Russia', another self-styled formation that lacks international recognition.

However, there is a reason to believe that Minsk would resist pressure to fully succumb to the Russia's line in the Georgian conflict. In fact, by doing so, Lukashenka would not only lose much his credibility in the West (first and foremost the trust that he is indeed an independent player who is worth talking to and not a puppet president of a rogue state on the same level with Kremlin's clients Sergei Bagapsh and Eduard Kokoity), but will also be defenseless in the occasion if Russia's political and economic pressure intensifies and begins to threaten his power. Hence, apart from short-term considerations that defined

Lukashenka's sways between Russia and the West on the previous occasions, Lukashenka's interest in engagement with the West may turn increasingly stable and long-term. Ironically, the power instincts of Lukashenka may be the key factor in creating the window for engagement between Belarus and the West in the near future. If played wisely, the process of engagement can be conducive in promoting political liberalization in the country as well.

Conclusions

The two-way geopolitical 'massaging' raises the stakes for the official Minsk in its simultaneous game with Russia and the West. Such a game, given Russia's new sense of confidence and its readiness to bypass the niceties of the international law, may threaten the very existence of Belarus as a sovereign state. However, **when the West comes up with clear and concrete agenda and a road map for normalization of relations, the unexpected consequence of this game may be a real political progress.**

The West can and should open before the official Minsk a prospect for a real normalization, including the breakthrough from political isolation and the access to real benefits of cooperation with Europe and the United States, which would help withstand the Russia's efforts at expanding its economic presence in Belarus to the maximum possible extent. This won't require 'reinventing of the wheel' and drafting new policies and strategies: instead, old ones need to be done more specific and coherent. For example, even though the US sanctions against Belnaftakhim were declared by many analysts (including us) ineffective and even counterproductive in the short run, they may prove to be important factor in the new situation when the Belarusian authorities may care not only about material gains and losses but also image and prestige matters. The US policy was consistent and flexible at the same time, as Washington was first to adequately react to the first concrete signs of political liberalization in Belarus by sending its envoy to talks and offering a clear perspective of the policy change, such as removal of sanctions and visa bans – contingent on concrete and measurable progress. If the EU wants to lead the Western policy towards Belarus, it has to work out a consistent and measurable set of benchmarks regulating the process of normalization in the long term – even though it may sound impossible given the coordination costs of decision making among 27 sovereign states. The starting moment may be redefinition of the 12 demands and working out the clear policy of conditionality.

The main elements of such road maps can be laid out as following. The release of political prisoners and fair conduct of parliamentary elections help to measure the progress and provide a clear road map for the official Minsk towards elimination of the most obvious instruments of political isolations: economic sanctions and travel bans. Contingent upon the election conduct, the contacts between official Minsk and the EU may be immediately extended to the ministerial levels. The European Union and the United States may encourage the further progress by drawing a realistic, well-defined, and concrete conditionality approach by agenda by defining and clearly explaining what next moves they expect from the official Minsk in the near future and what benefits of cooperation that would offer to Belarus in return. As the removal of visa and travel bans are contingent upon the conduct of the parliamentary elections, the EU may explain right away what it expects from Belarus (such as end of restrictions on activities independent press trade unions and NGOs) to unfreeze the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and to achieve the full-fledged participation in the European Neighborhood Policy. Furthermore, if the progress continues (fair conduct of 2011 presidential elections) – further carrots may be visa facilitation agreement and support for Belarus membership in WTO.