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Belarussian President Lukashenko: An Unlikely Peacenik

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Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin walk upstairs during peace talks in Minsk, Feb. 11.

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko has developed a reputation over the years as "Europe's last dictator," but a flurry of recent diplomatic activity seems to indicate a desire to rebrand, embracing the image of high-profile peacenik.

As world leaders convened in Minsk on Wednesday evening for key talks on the ongoing Ukraine conflict, Lukashenko was a jubilant host, greeting Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko with a warm hug, offering flowers and braided bread to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande, and giving a masculine handshake to President Vladimir Putin.

The Belarussian leader, widely chastised by advocacy groups for his country's dismal rights record, hosted peace talks at his opulent presidential palace for the second time since

the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, a move that could earn him coveted allies in the West, according to political analysts.

Lukashenko prided himself on his hosting skills during the 16-hour talks, telling reporters on Thursday that he had personally served his guests omelets and coffee, and that he had denied himself the luxury of getting any shut-eye.

"How could I sleep? How can you go to war without ammunition [food and drinks]?" the Belarussian News Agency quoted Lukashenko as saying Thursday. "My task was to bring the ammunition [food and drinks] on time. ... You see, everything is in its places in Minsk, everyone does his job."

Yet Lukashenko's display of hospitality may not be as selfless as it first appears. Luring European power players Merkel and Hollande onto his turf, and bringing Putin and Poroshenko together as Moscow-Kiev relations scrape historic lows may be part of a broader scheme to score points with the West, Belarus scholar Dmitry Bolkunets told The Moscow Times.

"Lukashenko has been trying to normalize Belarus' relations with the West for many years now," said Bolkunets, a scholar at Moscow's Higher School of Economics. "He has been isolated. And now the crisis in Ukraine has lead him to believe that Russia could represent a direct or indirect threat to his country. This is especially true given Russia's current economic circumstances, which put Belarus at risk. He is on the lookout for other allies."

In December, Lukashenko announced that the country would strive to reduce its economic dependence on Russia. Russia is Belarus' biggest trade partner, accounting for more than half of the country's imports and receiving some 40 percent of all of Belarus' exports, according to the Belarussian Foreign Ministry.

The presence of Western leaders in the Belarussian capital is a rarity. According to Bolkunets, the last official visit of a Western leader prior to the recent Minsk talks dates back to then-U.S. President Bill Clinton's 1994 visit with Lukashenko, after the latter was first elected.

Lukashenko, it seems, is trying to put Minsk on the map at a crossroads between Russia and the West, a move Alexander Gronsky of the Minsk-based Center of Eurasian Studies described as a tactic aimed more at pleasing the West than Russia.

Lukashenko employed this tactic earlier in the Ukrainian crisis, expressing his willingness last March to serve as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine.

"What's important to Lukashenko is to receive high-level recognition in general, no matter what his relations with Russia are like," said Matthew Rojansky, director of the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center in Washington, in a telephone interview. "He was opposed to the heads of state meeting in Astana [in January], which was eventually cancelled, but he readily agreed to have the Normandy talks format come to Minsk. He has signaled that being a peace broker is a priority for him and that he does not support what has happened in Ukraine."

Lukashenko's willingness to host a diverse array of foreign officials could also be viewed as

an attempt to regain the credibility he lost during the 2010 presidential elections, which are broadly believed to have been rigged, according to Bolkunets.

In 2008 and 2009, the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the World Bank poured generous grants into Belarus ahead of its 2010 presidential elections. Hoping the aid would liberalize the Belarussian political system, the West was bitterly disappointed when the country conducted what appeared to have been a mock election that led to the imprisonment of presidential candidates and hundreds of opposition activists.

Belarus was promptly excluded from the EU's Eastern Partnership and targeted by Western sanctions.

Lukashenko will be vying for the presidency when his co-citizens go to the polls in November. Although he is unlikely to face any significant challengers, the Belarussian leader will apparently try to stay in the West's good graces.

"When Lukashenko is re-elected, few countries will congratulate him aside from Russia and China," Bolkunets said. "Lukashenko wants to be recognized by a broader range of countries, including in the West."

Lukashenko's role in helping to bring about a resolution to the Ukraine crisis seems to have begun to reap benefits. In December, the World Bank approved a $250 million loan to Belarus to improve the country's transportation system.

Lukashenko appears to have sensed the opportunity to rebrand himself at the very start of the Ukraine crisis, an opportunity he has embraced with a sense of humor. In an interview on Ukrainian television last March, shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea, he joked that might no longer be Europe's last dictator after all.

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