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Why Lukashenko Has Recognized Crimea as Russian Territory

Moscow will be far more willing to open its coffers for a proud bastion standing in the way of Moscow's enemies than for an ally that is constantly performing a balancing act.

By Artyom Shraibman

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Russian servicemen take part in a ship parade marking Russian Navy Day in Sevastopol, Crimea. **Alexei Pavlishak / TASS**

After seven and a half years of equivocating over the issue of whether Crimea belongs to Russia or Ukraine, Belarus's embattled leader Alexander Lukashenko finally said in an interview with Russian TV on November 30 that "Crimea is de facto Russian, and after the referendum, Crimea became de jure Russian."

Since 2014, Lukashenko's ambiguous position on the status of Crimea following its annexation by Russia had allowed Minsk not only to become a platform for negotiations on

resolving the Ukraine conflict, but also to promote its new image as a peacemaker to the West.

Now that thaw is definitively over. The political crisis that broke out following the contested presidential election of 2020, the European ban on EU aircraft flying over Belarus following the forced landing of a Ryanair plane in May, and Lukashenko's pro-Russian lurch mean Minsk is no longer an acceptable stage for negotiations.

The achievements of five years of an actively multi-vectoral foreign policy by Minsk from 2014 to 2019 have lost value. The bonuses that Belarus earned by distancing itself from Russia have vanished and will not return any time soon, given the extent of the West's dismay over human rights abuses in Belarus. And if Minsk had continued to pretend to be neutral in the current situation, it would have risked eliciting the ire of Moscow too.

Today, Lukashenko is dependent on the Kremlin's goodwill and deep pockets for two key issues: how peaceful and smooth the rest of his time in power will be, and the future power transition. Minsk's priority, therefore, is to win Moscow's benevolence while giving up as little sovereignty as possible in exchange.

Lukashenko has decided to go about this using two methods: making strong symbolic gestures on the one hand, such as recognizing Crimea as part of Russia, and dragging Russia even further into its geopolitical standoff with the West on the other. After all, Moscow will be far more willing to open its coffers for a proud bastion standing in the way of Moscow's enemies than for an ally that is constantly performing a balancing act and which simply wants to live well without bothering to reform its economy.

For Lukashenko, therefore, it's important that his own standoff with the West should be perceived in Moscow not simply as the petty squabbles of a minor Eastern European state, but as part of a major NATO crusade against Russia and its friends. This is why Lukashenko has started resorting to the verbal rattling of Russian sabers, trying to involve Moscow in his own disputes with Belarus's neighbors amid a series of belligerent, anti-Western statements, such as raising the possibility of returning Russian nuclear weapons to Belarusian territory, twenty-five years after they were removed.

There are two possible explanations as to why Lukashenko has spoken out now on Crimea and launched his latest crusade against the West. The first explanation is that negotiations are under way on a new $3 billion loan for Minsk from the Eurasian Development Bank, which is controlled by Moscow. The second is that in a recent speech to senior Foreign Ministry officials, Russian President Vladimir Putin unexpectedly said that Moscow is in favor of a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition in Belarus.

Like many analysts, the Belarusian authorities likely interpreted Putin's advice as a sign of displeasure, which could have been incurred by Minsk's attempts to turn the drawn-out process of constitutional reform promised to Moscow into a mechanism for extending Lukashenko's rule under a new title.

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In any case, it's not a good idea to upset Russia over anything right now, while loans are being

discussed and the West is introducing new sanctions against Belarus, which will require joint efforts by Minsk and Moscow to circumvent.

Belarus's neighbors — Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine — have long viewed the Belarusian authorities as a puppet regime controlled by Russia. Accordingly, the reaction to Lukashenko's comments on Crimea was fairly muted. The EU and United States paid no heed, occupied instead with passing new sanctions against Minsk for instigating the migrant crisis on Belarus's borders.

There will be consequences for the relationship between Belarus and Ukraine, of course, but a complete breaking off of relations is unlikely. Most probably, Kiev will scale down its representation in Minsk by sending home the Belarusian ambassador and recalling its own. If Lukashenko visits Crimea in violation of Ukrainian law, as he has promised to, new personal sanctions are a possibility, along with trade wars, but Kiev is not prepared to go without its main Belarusian import: petrochemicals. Belarusian refineries send about 40 percent of their petrochemicals (gasoline, diesel, and bitumen) to neighboring Ukraine, which has no potential replacement for them in the foreseeable future.

Nor is it likely that the West will impose additional sanctions specifically over Belarus's recognition of Crimea. Restrictions are imposed over threats to regional stability, such as the forced landing of the Ryanair plane or the situation with the migrants on the Belarusian-Polish border. Against this backdrop, Lukashenko's rhetoric about Russian territorial disputes with its neighbors pales in comparison.

Given that Lukashenko had nothing left to lose in relations with the West and Ukraine, his recognition of Crimea is unlikely to herald a breakthrough in relations with the Kremlin. Support for Russia's position on Crimea would have been appreciated back when it would have incurred a cost for Minsk. But a friendly gesture made out of despair, when Belarus's multi-vectoral foreign policy has stopped yielding fruit, smacks of insincerity.

In any case, the recognition of Crimea as Russian territory could easily be reversed by a future government eager to distance itself from the previous regime, whose very legitimacy is in doubt.

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For Moscow, of course, any crisis in the relationship between Minsk and Kiev is a bonus. It reduces the chance of any kind of coordinated action by these two neighbors — both transit countries for Russian gas supplies to Europe — in the future, as well as leaving Minsk with less room to maneuver and decreasing its chances of returning to any kind of multi-vectoral foreign policy.

Only time will tell whether this move by Minsk will impact on Moscow's financial generosity. The Belarusian state is due to pay off $3.4 billion in debts next year, and more than $4 billion in 2023. Taking into account the effect of Western sanctions and the state of Minsk's foreign currency reserves, new Russian loans are absolutely essential.

In September, Putin promised $630 million by the end of 2022. Clearly that won't be enough,

so Lukashenko's Crimea diplomacy and, more importantly, the Kremlin's reluctance to drive its ally to default and chaos mean Minsk can likely count on a larger sum.

The problem is that Lukashenko will have to provide Moscow with constant reminders of his loyalty, and following his recognition of Crimea, he is running out of options for further rhetorical and symbolic concessions.

Going forward, he will either have to sacrifice something sacred like state property or aspects of sovereignty, or escalate affairs with Belarus's neighbors to such an extent that the Kremlin won't be able to remain on the sidelines. For now, it looks like Lukashenko is leaning toward the second option, making that the biggest source of risk to the region today.

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