

## **Belarus Crisis May Signal Shift for Ukraine**

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Lukashenko has friends in Kyiv – but now faces increased pressure from Russia.

It took over a month for the Ukrainian parliament to adopt a resolution on the growing wave of anti-regime protests in neighbouring Belarus. The bland statement they eventually produced on September 15, although it harshly condemned the detainment and treatment of protesters, stopped short of directly criticising President Alexander Lukashenko.

Even so, it was only adopted by a tiny margin of two votes, with two-thirds of the ruling Servant of the People party declining to support it.

The vote perfectly illustrates the ambiguous relationship between Ukraine and its northern neighbour.

Although Ukraine's 2014 revolution threw Lukashenko's anti-democratic and authoritarian politics - as well as his distrust of Western values and dependence on Russia - into sharp focus, relations between the two countries remained warm.

Most significantly, Lukashenko never took sides in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In particular, he did not recognize annexed Crimea as a part of Russia and did not block fuel supplies to the Ukrainian army, even during fighting in Donbas.

He also did not allow Belarus to become a springboard for Russian troops against Ukraine, which prevented even strictly pro-European politicians from criticizing Lukashenko.

However, the situation has now changed. Minsk's pro-Moscow orientation makes it more likely that Russian troops will appear in Belarus, especially if Lukashenko retains power.

Currently, Ukraine only has an eastern front with Russia. If relations with Belarus worsened and Russia was allowed to launch military operations from there, that would open up another north/north eastern front as well.

Alexander Zavitnevich, head of the Ukrainian parliament's national security committee, told RBC-Ukraine that although the chances of a Russian military invasion from the territory of Belarus were "fewer than from the territory of Donbass, they still exist and cannot be neglected".

According to Hanna Shelest, editor-in-chief of Ukraine Analytica, Russia could also revive attempts it made some five years ago to convince Belarus to let them position a military base on its territory. After much back-and-forth, Minsk refused; it will be much harder for them to resist now.

Shelest said, however, that in line with Russian policy it would be much more likely that this prospective base would be intended as a deterrent to NATO forces in Poland, rather than Ukraine.

"For Ukraine, this may become a chance to strengthen its cooperation with NATO, including in terms of exchanging intelligence information and modeling joint activities in case of a Russian assault from the territory of Belarus," Shelest said.

Developments in Belarus may also affect its trade relations with Ukraine. If the crisis deepens, Ukraine will have to join ongoing efforts by the EU to impose sanctions on Belarusian officials.

In 2019, Ukrainian exports to Belarus amounted to a substantial but not critical volume of 1.55 billion US dollars. This meant that Belarus was not even in the top ten key sales markets for Ukrainian goods. Imports from Belarus are seen as more crucial for Ukraine.

"As of now, we see no threats to our trade cooperation," said Taras Kachka, an official Ukrainian trade representative. "Moreover... the government of Belarus is trying to prove that it remains a reliable supplier, in spite of the current crisis."

According to him, the government was working to assess the possible damage if bilateral trade was disrupted.

"As our calculations show, we do not have a critical dependence on Belarusian imports, except for petroleum products. But even here, even in case of rupture, we might have up to one or two-week disruptions. During this time, we will be able to diversify the supply of these goods as well," Kachka said.

Polling shows that Lukashenko has many supporters in Ukraine. One 2016 survey conducted by the

Rating sociological group showed that 63 percent of Ukrainians had a positive attitude towards Lukashenko, giving him the highest approval of all foreign leaders.

In a survey last year by GfK Ukraine and commissioned by the New Europe Center, more than 13 per cent of Ukrainians said that their own president of Ukraine should follow Lukashenko's example as a powerful, independent leader who prioritised his own country and its economic success.

Lukashenko's popularity is not limited to supporters of integration with the Russian Federation either. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, for example, remained silent when Polish and Lithuanian counterparts asked him to join their statement in support of Belarusian civil society.

Some analysts suggest that this approach was due to local elections in Ukraine scheduled for October 25, with political forces trying to target pro-Russian voters avoiding sharp criticism of Lukashenko.

"If we look at the time before the protests started in Belarus, Lukashenko was popular in the whole country, including among those with pro-European attitudes, participants of the Maidan protests and the war in Donbass," said Lyubomyr Mysiv, deputy head of the Rating group. "He personified the image of a powerful leader, who managed to sustain economic growth and social orientation, and remained independent from oligarchs. In light of the post-totalitarian experience, such leaders stay popular for a very long time.

Nonetheless, he said that the brutality of the current Belarusian crisis had already affected Lukashenko's status in Ukraine.

"The popularity of Lukashenko among Ukrainians has definitely decreased over the past month and-a-half," Mysiv continued. "Most likely, he will remain popular only among supporters of integration with the [Moscow-led] Eurasian Economic Union while pro-Western Ukrainians will be disappointed in him."

**Location:** Belarus  
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