

Lukashenko Plays Both Sides in Ukraine Crisis

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Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko shaking hands with Ukraine's acting President Oleksandr Turchynov.

Balancing the needs to placate the West, mollify Russia as a patron state and reassure his own citizens, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko seems to be using the Ukraine crisis in an elaborate pantomime to score points with all sides.

"I am for a single and unified Ukraine," Lukashenko said in an interview on Russia's NTV channel earlier this month, adding that he was "categorically opposed" to the federalization of Ukraine, the Kremlin's favored option for the country's political development.

While many CIS states have remained silent in the face of Russian intervention in Ukraine, others — including Belarus and Kyrgyzstan — have voiced their disapproval of Russia's role in the Ukrainian crisis, perhaps fearing that Russia could also jeopardize their territorial sovereignty.

But Belarus, Russia's staunchest ally among the post-Soviet republics, has been confusingly ambiguous in its stance on the Ukrainian crisis, and analysts are divided on what Lukashenko's endgame might be. Is he trying to court the West while avoiding angering Russia, or is he just trying to gauge which side has more to offer him?

Both Sides of the Fence

Last December, Lukashenko confirmed that Minsk was "extremely interested" in mending its relations with the European Union, and its alignment with the West on certain aspects of the crisis could be his chance to accomplish this.

In March, in a sign of his willingness to cooperate with the new Ukrainian government — which Russia considers illegitimate — Lukashenko said that he would be ready to serve as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine.

Lukashenko explained his reasoning in an interview in late March on Shuster Live, a Ukrainian political talk show, when he recalled CIS members' acceptance of the ouster of Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev following anti-government protests in 2010 as an example of regional cooperation despite political differences.

"We met with CIS members and officially stated that the Kyrgyz president had been ousted by a coup, that there had been an unconstitutional seizure of power," Lukashenko said. "We recorded and formalized this. And now we sit at the same table and make decisions with the people who seized power in Kyrgyzstan. What makes this different from Ukraine? The situation is absolutely analogous."

Lukashenko also said that Russia's annexation of Crimea created a "dangerous precedent" but conceded that the Ukrainian peninsula was now de facto Russian territory.

Yet while Lukashenko disagreed with Russia's categorical refusal to recognize the new leadership in Kiev, he agreed with Russia on the West's involvement in Ukraine, calling U.S. and EU sanctions "insanity."

Belarus is also one of the 11 countries that voted against the United Nations General Assembly resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, a sign of Lukashenko's avowed loyalty to Moscow.

"If Russia wants us to work for it in Ukraine, that is what we will do," Lukashenko told Itar-Tass earlier this month. "If Russia needs us to go to the end of the earth to do it a favor, that is what we will do."

In March, Lukashenko requested that Russia deploy 12 to 15 fighter jets in response to NATO exercises in neighboring countries.

So why has Belarus contradicted the Kremlin's narrative on Ukraine but never gone so far as to provoke Russia's wrath?

On a Tight Leash

"In practical terms, Lukashenko had no choice but to speak out against Russian actions

in Ukraine," Matthew Rojansky, director of the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center in Washington, said in a telephone interview. "For the sake of his domestic audience, he could not have accepted that another former Soviet state's sovereignty was being violated. But this does not exclude the possibility that he was saying something different to Moscow."

For Dmitry Bolkunets, a Belarus scholar at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, Lukashenko's tightrope walk on Ukraine demonstrates to Belarussians that Moscow does not control their leader's decisions, despite the country's economic and energy dependence on Russia.

"Belarus is not going anywhere," Bolkunets said. "Its circumstances and its state doctrine firmly anchor it in Russian influence, even if the country expresses views that diverge from Russia's to assert political independence from the Kremlin. At the same time, Lukashenko also understands that he has certain obligations to Russia given that Moscow provides his country with extensive support."

Belarus, a landlocked country of 9.5 million, brings little to the table in its bilateral relations with Russia, exposing itself to the Kremlin's whims.

Russia's loans and subsidies have been instrumental in keeping Belarus' stagnating economy afloat. In 2011, Belarus received more than half of a \$3 billion loan from the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Community bailout fund and a \$1 billion loan from Russia's state-owned bank Sberbank to help it out of a financial crisis. In December 2013, Russia announced it would be loaning Belarus up to \$2 billion, an amount Lukashenko said his country would not "eat away."

The Belarussian economy is also highly dependent on Russia. In 2011, more than 35 percent of Belarussian exports went to Russia, while nearly 60 percent of its imports came from the Russian market. And Belarus' membership in a Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan since 2010 draws it even closer to Moscow.

Gazprom is also the sole supplier of natural gas to Belarus and controls the pipelines on Belarussian territory. Belarus has paid preferential prices for oil and gas for nearly the entire post-Soviet period.

The Bargaining Game

While Lukashenko's anti-Russian statements about the situation in Ukraine could be considered audacious given its relationship with Russia, some analysts say Lukashenko has used ambiguity as a bargaining tool to reap benefits from both Russia and the West.

Lukashenko's flirtation with the Western position on Ukraine could lead Russia to buy back Belarus' loyalty. And it could also win him favors from the West.

Last week, Lukashenko indicated that Belarus would consider ending its feud with Russia's Uralkali, the world's largest potash producer. Uralkali ended a joint venture with Minsk in July 2013, a decision that damaged both countries' potash industries and caused potash stock prices to crash worldwide.

Lukashenko's willingness to resolve the potash war with Russia now suggests that Belarus' political pendulum is swinging toward Russia again following its anti-Russian statements on Ukraine.

"The timing of the announcement of the desire to resolve the conflict with Uralkali could certainly be linked to Lukashenko's current bargaining position," said Rojansky, of the Kennan Institute. "What we can be certain of is that Lukashenko would not be considering any deal if he could not reap maximum benefits."

This would not be the first time Belarus has used political rhetoric to obtain favors from Russia.

Stefan Meister, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Affairs, said Belarus leveraged the prospect of recognizing the independence of the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2010 to strike a deal for preferential gas tariffs.

"Lukashenko announced that he was contemplating recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which would have sided Belarus' position with Russia's," Meister said in a telephone interview. "This coincided with the return of preferential energy prices for Belarus in 2010. Although Belarus never actually recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, just pondering the notion was enough to win favors from Russia."

Belarus has also used this gambit in its dealings with the West. Lukashenko's maneuvering might also have exacerbated the current friction between Belarus and the West.

In 2008 and 2009, Belarus received more than \$3 billion from the International Monetary Fund, as well as a number of grants from the World Bank and the EU, ahead of the 2010 presidential elections. The international community anticipated its support would help liberalize the closed country's economy and political system.

But Belarus, which already had received the funds, did not live up to the West's expectations, conducting a mock election that led to the imprisonment of as many as 700 opposition activists, including presidential candidates.

Following the election, the EU and the U.S. imposed sanctions on Belarus. The country was also excluded from the EU's Eastern Partnership.

In an effort to counter-balance his relationship with Moscow and to improve his country's dire economic situation, Lukashenko tried to bargain anew. He offered to release some political prisoners in hopes the West would reward his clemency.

Lukashenko's pro-Western stance on some aspects of the crisis in Ukraine could now be an attempt at making things right with the West. Or it could just be an opportunity to curry favor.

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