

## **Belarus and Ukraine Balancing Policy between the EU and Russia**

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The issue of Belarusian and Ukrainian regional policy is studied attentively by many European and Russian think tanks. As the EU-Russia relations still can be characterized as a zero-sum game, both sides try to spread their influence on these two small states, located in the Eastern Europe, or at least to prevent such a spread of the opponent's power.

Belarus and Ukraine for a long period of time (around 20 years of their independence) have been resisting this great power's actions. What they have done is a classic balancing policy: when they see any threat to their sovereignty coming from Russia, they try to align with the European Union, and vice versa. In other words, one can find here not just balancing *smb*, but balancing *between smb & smb*. As a result, Belarus and Ukraine benefited highly from such a policy, getting advantages either simultaneously or alternatively from both sides, for example, importing energy resources from Russia at a lower price, or having a preferential access to Russian/EU internal market for Belarusian and Ukrainian goods.

However, after the 2009 one may say that the era of such a productive balancing policy is over. Among the reasons of expected changes the following can be mentioned:

- Belarus and Ukraine suffered a lot from the world financial crisis in 2008 – 2009 and need deeper economic cooperation, larger capital and investment attraction to provide their competitiveness growth. They cannot develop such cooperation simultaneously with both the EU and Russia, so they have to choose one of them as a higher priority long-term partner.

- After the «energy wars» with Russia in 2004 – 2009 Belarus and Ukraine have almost lost their transitional advantages. Russian in cooperation with some European countries has already built the North Stream gas pipeline (with Germany) and now working on the South Stream

project (with Italy, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, etc.). In oil transportation Russia strengthened its Baltic pipeline system. So, after that Russia can already minimize and in the perspective, if some new energy conflicts take place, avoid Belarusian and Ukrainian participation in its dialogue with the EU.

- Both Russia and the EU have realized that balancing policy for Belarus and Ukraine is not only a method of survival, but also the way to exact and get resources from two competitors and at the same time to save their non-aligned status for as long as possible. Consequently Russian and the European Union created less flexible frame of relations with these and some other post-soviet states: Eastern Partnership (European integration) and Custom Union (Eurasian integration). Since that Russian and the EU are ready to provide economic support only *after* certain steps made by the two small states.

Considering these circumstances, many Russian and European politicians believe that now Belarus and Ukraine have nothing to do but to align with one of the sides, at least in economic sphere. In international politics theories such an action is usually called bandwagoning (Waltz, Walt) or, as a more modern version, bandwagoning for profit (Schweller).

Indeed, after several years of balancing, one of the two small states – Belarus – started to bandwagon Russia: it entered the Custom Union and Common Economic Space, while its relations with the EU deteriorated significantly. These days Ukraine has to do the same. In contradistinction to Belarus it still has two variants to align with: either to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union and create a common “deep and comprehensive free trade area”, or to refuse that and, as Belarus already has done, enter CU, CES and to align with Russian. Nevertheless, Ukraine has to do the choice in the nearest future. Otherwise it gets no additional benefits from both Russia and the EU and no economic support, which is for Ukraine and its current authorities is of high importance.

However, does bandwagoning policy start mean that balancing policy is over? On the one hand, traditional international politics theories say it is so: if one chooses to align with the source of a threat (bandwagoning), he cannot balance it anymore. Otherwise the small country would be invaded by the source of a threat, which doesn't suit its survival imperative.

On the other hand, in current Eastern Europe there is no *real* military threat to any state. The European Union and Russia are still competitors, but they are not enemies any more. Therefore Belarus and Ukraine bandwagoning policy is primarily and predominantly about economy, and not about military security (at least for now). In this case, according to the theory, balancing and bandwagoning are not the opposite policy models.

Belarusian conflicts with Russia during last 3 years decisively prove this statement. Even being a part of the trade and economic unions with Russia and Kazakhstan, Belarus still tries to balance spread of Russian influence, looking for economic support in the Third World (Venezuela, Iran) and developing countries (China, Vietnam), attempting to normalize relations with the EU in order to delay the Eurasian integration development.

So what will be the future balancing activity of Belarus and Ukraine? According to neoclassical realism, one needs to seek the sources and factors of country's foreign policy not in the international structure only, but in domestic political situation either. In case of Belarus and Ukraine this is especially so. Both small states for more than 20 years were having and still have different relations with Russia and the EU, but the same structural *conditions*. Russian and the European Union offered Belarus and Ukraine the same models of cooperation (Association Agreement & common deep and comprehensive free trade area, Custom Union & Common Economic space), varying external policy mostly in response to certain Belarusian or Ukrainian actions. By the way, that is also the reason why Belarusian and Ukrainian balancing policy in 1991 – 2013 was so different.

As some scholars have mentioned, that in the Third World state leaders need “to balance against both internal and external threats in order to survive in power” (David). Of course, Belarus and Ukraine are much more developed economically than the majority of the Third World countries, but in domestic politics they still remain transitional countries, whose political systems come from Soviet totalitarianism, and on the whole yet cannot be called as truly democratic states.

### **Belarusian balancing**

Belarusian political regime can be called as authoritarian. Because of more than 70% of state's GDP is produced by state-owned enterprises, political authorities control both political and economic situation in the country. As a result, president Lukashenko by authoritarian means has been re-elected three times already and holds his position for almost 20 years, having now no real opponents.

Nonetheless, Belarus doesn't possess internal natural resources or a well-developed innovational production to provide a stable economic conditions and high level of life for its citizens. The state extremely needs external support, and at the same time cannot use it effectively to improve the economic situation.

That is how Belarusian balancing policy works: the state actively participates in the regional competition between Russian and the EU, choosing the side that offers larger economic support and at the same time threatens less to its political regime stability. As the European Union has a condition for economic support – democratization of Belarusian political system – Russia seems to be the preferable partner for economic cooperation.

However, at the same time Belarus as a very small country in comparison with Russia still has a wish and potential resources to balance it harder, relying on the European Union. For example, questionnaire results show that if Belarusians had to choose between the EU and any political union with Russia, only half of them would support the second variant, while the other half prefers western integration. Thus any future political democratization will provide opportunities for those who can be called as the EU-supporters, as it already happened in

Ukraine in 2004. And if the European Union will be able to promote this political power financially, it can open a new chapter in Belarusian balancing policy.

### **Ukrainian balancing**

Ukraine seems to be much more democratic country, than Belarus, despite some problems and deterioration of democracy during last three years. Moreover, Ukraine had much more resources to balance Russia and at the same time no necessity to balance the European Union.

During Yushchenko presidency Ukraine didn't seem to balance between Russia and Ukraine. In fact Ukraine balanced Russia and tried to bandwagon with the EU. However, political result of such a strategy was extremely negative for ruling power. The reason of that is the following. Like in Belarus, Ukraine lost its post-soviet economic power and needed external support. At the same time, in contradistinction to Belarus, Ukraine already had an internal clash of the EU and Russia supporters, and only a very profitable outcome of integration either with the EU or Russia could provide a re-election for ruling power. Obviously, President Yushchenko's policy wasn't such of a kind.

Current Ukrainian authorities understand that and have started the "standard" balancing policy between Russian and the EU, speculating their wish to involve Ukraine. At the same time Ukraine needs much more financial support, than Belarus does. Firstly, Ukraine is larger. Secondly, there is a high political competition in Ukraine, but the ruling power needs to be very economically successful, providing its independence from the integration center at the same time. That is why in 2011 – 2013 President Yanukovich after prisoning of his main opponent – Timoshenko – had to continue European integration of the state. And that is why he almost stopped it in November 2013, refusing to release her and starting to negotiate with Russian, having no financial guaranties from the EU politicians in case of signing the Association Agreement.

## **Conclusion**

The core features of Belarus and Ukraine balancing policy between the EU and Russia are the following:

- Belarus and Ukraine have conditions to balance between the EU and Russia because of their remaining competition in the region of Eastern Europe;
- for both small states balancing policy is not a way of providing their independence, but a strategy of their authorities to save the power by attracting external resources from the EU and Russia;
- bandwagoning with one of the sides (the EU or Russia) doesn't mean refusal to balance this side;
- Belarusian and Ukrainian bandwagoning and balancing policies are speculative and can change as a result of internal political competition.