

The Unanticipated Consequences of Policy Blindness: Why Even Belarus Matters

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A dangerous blind spot in the incoming administration's view of Russian affairs is its inadequate understanding of the significance of the newly independent states (NIS). The unanticipated consequences of such policy blindness are exemplified by developments in the 1990s in Belarus, formerly called Byelorussia—a country sandwiched between Russia and Poland—sharing a border with Ukraine to the south and with Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest.

Immediately following independence, Belarus sought to establish a foreign policy in the European tradition of the neutrality of small states. It had already adopted the principle of neutrality in its 1990 declaration of sovereignty. Like the Baltic states, Belarus hoped to follow a foreign policy oriented on multilateral bases, as a guarantee of independence. Such a policy, given Belarus's cultural history, would have been equally Eurocentric and Russocentric.



Then headed by the young, intelligent, and reform-minded President Stanislau Shushkevich, Belarus was home to some Soviet nuclear missiles. The West's only interest in Belarus was in getting the country to adhere to the START I treaty, because that was a precondition for the entry-into-force of START II. In February 1993 Belarus ratified the START I treaty, then the Lisbon Protocol to it and the Non-Proliferation Treaty as well. By then, Belarus had already transferred the strategic offensive nuclear weapons on its territory to Russian jurisdiction. For all of this, Belarus was entitled to expect some consideration from the West, and the United States in particular. Instead, it fell off the proverbial radar screen.

The Belarusian parliament remained for a long time a holdover from the previous Soviet era. It promoted neither economic nor political reforms. In the absence of Western incentives and attention, it was only a matter of time before Belarus adhered to a Russian sphere of influence. The turning point in this respect can be identified as the order to President Shushkevich in May 1993, by the Belarus Supreme Soviet and National Security Council, that he sign the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Treaty on Collective Security.

In the Baltics, the West made every effort to support the government of Lithuania in its negotiation of the departure of former Soviet troops and in its integration with northern European economic structures, infrastructures, and superstructures. But the West's failure to pay attention to Belarus facilitated Russia's consolidation of a sphere of influence in the mid-1990s. The effects of this development can still be seen.

If Belarus had not fallen into a Russian sphere of influence, all the pretensions in Moscow throughout the 1990s concerning the foundation of a "Slavic Union," supposedly also to include Ukraine, would have had no basis at all. Without Belarus in its sphere, Russia would not have been able to establish (with Kazakhstan) the "Group of Four" inside the CIS (Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan). The Group of Four served as the multilateral basis for the re-invigoration, at the end of the 1990s, of a limited-membership CIS Customs Union and the recent foundation of a Eurasian Economic Community still within the new, leaner CIS framework.

The West's crucial error was to let Belarus slip between its concern with guaranteeing Baltic independence and its concern with promoting stability and progress in Russia. A further blind spot was the West's underestimation of the significance of domestic public opinion in the country. That is why Alyaksandr Lukashenka's election as president in the mid-1990s came as a surprise to the West, although it should not have been one.

Domestic opinion is also important today for Belarus's future. Although the older generations in Belarus remain nostalgic for Soviet values, the younger generation is quite critical of the present situation. Over two-thirds of the young people favor market reforms, and less than one-third favor

the Lukashenka regime. They see the world as market-oriented, and many young people want to start their own companies or work in private firms. However, they lack both capital and the know-how for new start-ups.

If the West continues to ignore Belarus, then the younger generations will emigrate. That emigration would diminish domestic support for reforms and would lead to the country's continued development essentially as a part of Russia, even though it is by now clear even in Moscow that the last thing Lukashenka really wants is to trade in his dictatorial powers in Minsk to become just another regional prefect under Moscow's supervision.

There will be new elections for president of Belarus in 2001. The opposition to Lukashenka has already united with the intention of putting forward a single candidate. Even though Putin has declared that a victory by the opposition in 2001 would mean Russia's loss of Belarus to the West, Moscow is divided over Luakshenka's fate. Recent leaks about the misdeeds of the Belarusian KGB come from the Belarusian KGB itself, which is known to be faithful first of all to Russia.

Western inattention to Belarus in the early 1990s led to the division of the "new" Eastern Europe, exacerbating mutual distrust between the West and Russia. A policy of "Baltic exceptionalism," combined with a failure to be

alert to the significance of Belarus, led the West to miss the chance to shape the future of the new Eastern Europe. Of course, the West could not have done this all by itself. But its lack of attention meant a blindness to possibilities, and small amounts of neglect can have consequences out of proportion to the original issue.

The moral of this story is that it is as easy to misunderstand what "realpolitik" means today, as it was to misunderstand what "detente" meant in the 1970s. Both of these words are non-English and are generally unfamiliar. They can therefore easily be construed to mean almost anything that the person using them wishes to convey.

However, it is fundamental to understand that realpolitik does not mean—and has never been meant to serve as an excuse for—neglecting details. For, as any diplomatic historian will tell you, it was that master of realpolitik, Talleyrand, who said, "the devil is in the details." Belarus is such a "detail," and it is the small things that come back to haunt you. In the case of Belarus, the West—ironically, thanks to Lukashenka—still has a chance.

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