

THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA BILATERAL RELATIONS

UKRAYNA KRİZİ'NİN BELARUS-RUSYA İKİLİ İLİŞKİLERİNE ETKİLERİNİN İNCELENMESİ

Veranika Taustykh¹

Assist. Prof. Gökhan Duman²

Abstract

This article analyzes the effects of Ukrainian Crises on Belarus-Russia bilateral relations with the help of historical facts and recent event. Russia's position and power give her a chance to dominate the region in which ex-Soviet Union territories currently exist as independent states. The dependence to Russia on economy does not allow countries like Belarus to ignore rising situation. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia forced Belarus to adopt new policy and approaches not only its relation with Ukraine but also with Russia. The article argues that because of historical roots and economic dependence Ukrainian Crises' effects are greater and anticipated.

Keywords: Ukraine, Belarus, Crimea, Russia

Özet

Bu makale, Ukrayna Krizi'nin Belarus-Rusya ikili ilişkileri üzerindeki etkilerini tarihsel olgularla ve son olaylarla birlikte incelemektedir. Rusya'nın konumu ve gücü, şuanda Sovyetler Birliği'nin eski topraklarında bağımsız devletlerin bulunduğu bölgeye hâkim olma şansını veriyor. Rusya'ya olan ekonomik bağımlılık Belarus gibi ülkelerin bölgedeki artan tansiyonu görmezden gelmelerine izin vermiyor. Ukrayna ile Rusya arasındaki ihtilaf, Belarus'u sadece Ukrayna ile ilişkilerinde değil, Rusya ile olan ilişkilerinde de yeni politikalar geliştirmeye zorlamıştır. Makale, tarihsel bağlar ve ekonomik bağımlılık nedeniyle Ukrayna Krizi'nin etkilerinin öngörüldüğünden daha büyük olduğunu savunuyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ukrayna, Belarus, Kırım, Rusya

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the confrontation between Ukraine and Russia creates an axis of rivalry not only for these two countries but also the neighborhood countries in the region. After the independence from Soviet Russia, Ukraine began to create its own statehood on a rigid

¹İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Yüksek Lisans Programı Mezunlu, veronika.tolstykh@gmail.com.

²İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü, gokhan.duman@idu.edu.tr.

***THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA
BILATERAL RELATIONS***

nationalistic basis. The anti-Russian topic immediately became one of the key ones in the press, on television, even in school textbooks. As Leonid Kravchuk, the first president of Ukraine stated in an interview: "Ukraine can be proud of what it is and was, and in 1991 it became a country that destroyed the Soviet Union - the last empire, the most terrible" (Kravchuk, 2013). All Ukrainian leaders of the post-Soviet period, from Leonid Kravchuk to Viktor Yanukovich tried to balance Russia with their intention to join the Euro-Atlantic structures. However, Ukraine pursued a policy of rapprochement with Russia, in order, firstly, to be able to receive Russian energy resources at relatively low prices and secondly, using the fears of Western leaders about Ukraine's potential rapprochement with Russia, to seek to soften them. In 2014 relations between Russia and Ukraine became strained again. This was reflected in the fact that relations between Kiev, Moscow and Minsk became significantly more complicated. The first problematic factor affecting the diplomatic climate between countries was the adoption of the resolution of the UN General Assembly "Situation with human rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (Ukraine)", in which Russia is directly called the occupying state. Belarus at a meeting of the General Assembly voted against this document. The internal and external policy of Belarus changed a lot and put attention to its nationalization development. After occupation of Crimea started in 2014, policy of Belarus took attention adjust its position in international politics. In the speech of Russian President before the State Duma and the Federation Council he told that Belarus, Ukraine and Russia are close neighbors and historically are the same people. The Ancient Russia that was called 'Rus' was common motherland. In 2015 president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko mentioned 'the Russian world' mainly expressing a negative relation towards this geopolitical perception, which states consolidation of Russia with its neighbors. The idea of 'the Russian world' with Russian culture as the main culture gave the green light for aggression against Ukraine. According to Putin, passing Crimea to Russia is like uniting of Russian lands. According to Marlene Laruelle, the usage of the political, historical and cultural ideas, common Russian lands to legalize the annexation of Crimea places real situation into hard power (Laruelle, 2015, p. 9). The negative relation of Alexander Lukashenko can be understood: when speaking about 'the Russian world' he talks mainly about respect of sovereignty and independence of Belarus. He started 'soft Belarusization' after occupation of Crimea and put some critical observations towards Russia's policy of making prices on energy resources.

THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA BILATERAL RELATIONS

The importance of the article is based on analysis of events that has started recently and still ongoing. The changes caused by the conflict are deeper than just foreign policy and touching interests of not only Belarus but also all neighboring countries. The article will contribute to understanding of conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the effects on Belarus-Russian bilateral relations, and also how is foreign, domestic policy and identity of Belarusians are influenced by this conflict.

2. BELARUSIAN IDENTITY THROUGHOUT HISTORY WITH RUSSIA

There is a view that specifies several important dimensions for determination of national identity: historical background, cultural background, language of the specified country, territory and inhabitants who show social and psychological manners. The historical heritage and experience of each nation have an influence in the decision-making process in foreign policy. Reasons of appearance and development of Belarusian identity is important because Belarus remains a subject of interest for different neighbor countries. Only in 1991 Republic of Belarus gained independence, however its history dates back around 1000 years. With gaining independence with other former Soviet States, the possibility of conducting objective studies of historical sources for Belarus has recently increased. The collapse of the Soviet Union caused significant changes in history of all the countries of the ex-Soviet territories. During the Soviet period, the history of each people was written from the Russian point of view. Belarusian history and identity is rich but since 17th century it became a part of Russian Empire and then Soviet Union and only after 1991 year started to become and independent country with its own national peculiarities. Historical memory of past in the specific territory forms part of its identity. Origins of Belarusian people go to Eastern Slav tribes, Western Slavs and ethnic groups of Balts (Vorobyeva, 2016, p. 69). The time of first mentioning of Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians starts from 6th to 9th centuries when the modern territories of these countries were annexed with Eastern Slavs and local ethnic groups. Belarusian modern historiography tells that Belarusians are descendants of ancient Krivichs, Dregovichs, Yotvingians and Radimichs, the ancient tribes that lived in the territory of Europe (Taras, 2014).

Starting from 1991 historians noted that one of the oldest state formations on the territory of Belarus was the Principality of Polotsk. It occupied a huge part of modern Belarus (Vorobyeva, 2016, p. 71). The Principality of Polotsk later became independent from Kievskaya Rus. Principality having all important and basic elements of the state: sovereign power of the ruler King, administration, capital, army and so on. The Principality of Polotsk was large state

***THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA
BILATERAL RELATIONS***

situated in Western Europe. It was populated with Slav people and old Belarusian language was a state language of the Principality. There is an opinion that Principality of Polotsk and common historical facts in general unites Belarusian and Lithuanian people. In 1569 and during 1795 The Grand Principality of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland formed Union of Lublin (Taras, 2014), and then became a part of *RechPospolitaya* federation. In 18th century after 3 divisions of Poland all modern Belarusian lands became part of Russian Empire. Belarusian national movement started to develop since 19th century when Belarus was part of Russian Empire. At that time firstly was mentioned the word `belarusians`, throughout it was used more often. In the middle of 19th century national publications started to appear in Belarusian language and this influenced national self-confidence as well. Until beginning of the 20th century, a lot of works in Belarusian language about history, culture, language peculiarities were written. All these made a big contribution to national and self-awareness of Belarusian people. This led to formation of Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) in 1918. Belarusian schools and publishing agencies appeared at this time, Belarusian language applied there as the main language. However, BPR period of existence was not long because occupying German army did not let to form own armed forces, police, financial system and local authorities (Podlesny, 2016, p. 37). Among other reasons of failure were weak support of population (Tyutyushev, 2015). In 1919 the Belarusian SSR with the capital in Minsk was proclaimed. Belarusian language was declared the official national language. Russia was leading and most powerful country in Soviet Union. The Soviet were thinking about Belarusian history was similar the Russian Empire concept (Taras, 2014). As national movement was destroyed in 1928, Belarusian national history disappeared for a long time (Nosevich, 2008, p. 41). Trinitarian Russian people concept appeared in the 16th century and according to it Russian nation was a united community of Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Belarusians. Later Russian Empire took this concept to ideological level. In 1930s the USSR returned this concept back. According to this idea, Russian people were considered as ancestors from Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians (Yankoyt, 2017, p. 7). In the late 1980s Soviet Union had to accept ideological pluralism. In 1989 the national Belarusian Popular Front was established. Belarusian SSR proclaimed its independence a bit later in 1989. Historians were freed from severe ideological restrictions and it meant liberalization of social life in Belarus (Yankoyt, 2017, p. 61). In 1991, BSSR was renamed into Republic of Belarus. Sociologists shared the idea that during that time Belarus received its territorial identity. Speaking about national identity some historians say that it began to form only after collapse of Soviet Russia (Daneyko, 2017). With the onset of the

***THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA
BILATERAL RELATIONS***

Belarusian national independence, there was a change in the approach to the national interpretation. Ideas of nation and nationalism became popular. Since 1991, Belarus has been searching for its own national historical identity. At this point, it is possible to argue that throughout the time, Belarusian identity had struggled within individuation and depersonalization dichotomy between its own and Russian identities. The dichotomy, that was argued by John G. Turner et.al in *Rediscovering the Social Group – A Self Categorization Theory* and cited by Unur and Doganyilmaz Duman (2016, p.40), is an indicator of how an individual possesses its own individuality while there is a group that provides another dimension of belonging. Belarusian identity, as an individual one, has been under effects of Russian identity as a group one, and against the threat of depersonalization, which means that groups' characteristics getting more invoked, Belarusian identity managed to individuate itself. Starting from 1991 there was a wide Belarusization policy (Volkov, 2017). Belarusization was a policy of protection and advancement of the Belarusian language and promotion of ethnic Belarusians. In 1994 Alexander Lukashenko won presidential elections. He was against elimination of the Soviet Union. (Volkov, 2017) In 1995, government held referendum according to which Russian language was proclaimed national language together with the Belarusian language. Because of the Soviet position of bilingualism shifted the emphasis towards the Russian language (Shraibman, 2016).

After events in Ukraine authorities in Belarus started to consider a fact that incomplete national identity is a weak point of national Belarusians. Some influence and respect was left to the time factor due to the fact that the State of Belarus existed for more than 20 years. Belarusian society is gradually realizing the importance of the Belarusian language for the awareness of independence and a deep understanding of freedom. Later Alexander Lukashenko, took the way to an increasing in Belarusian language lessons in schools and universities. In 2017, governmental authorities gave a task to show the formation and development of Belarus' state in textbooks. These steps towards strengthening Belarusian language, identity, culture and history had been criticized by Russian authorities. Especially after the Ukrainian crises, in general any step that is taken in former Soviet republic to strengthen and to develop its national identity is considered as anti-Russian activity by Russia. Consequently, this directly effects the bilateral relations between Belarus and Russia. There are two historical ways that continue to be existent in Belarus. From one way, there is an increasing consciousness and realization that Belarus have a different opinion on some historical facts than Russia has, and regarding international policy has its own path for development. From the other side, there is Russian

world with common history, culture and identity and it affects society's perception about the most desirable foreign policy direction towards Russia. (Baranchik, 2015, p.5)

3. EFFECTS OF CRIMEA'S ANNEXATION

Starting from 2014, foreign policy diplomats and experts put attention to events in Ukraine. Protests that against the decision by Victor Yanukovich (former president of Ukraine) who rejected to sign the agreement with the EU later turned to nationwide unrest. Russia took advantage of this crisis and occupied and annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and later in the end of 2014 started a military operation in the Eastern border regions of Ukraine in Donbass region. According to the Russian experts, periodically recurring trade conflicts dominate the list of problems in the relations between Russia and Belarus. Belarusian experts, foremost, refer to the problems associated with Russia's desire for Belarus to fully follow Moscow's foreign policy. The political background of Minsk's relations with Moscow is increasingly being set by the context of the confrontation between Russia and the West. At the official level, the Russian side has never stated a problem that most of the Belarusian experts call paramount. With economic dependence on Moscow, which, after the annexation of the Crimea, if not, it is insignificant, Minsk continues to withstand the line of neutrality: Belarus did not support the Russian Federation in its conflict with Ukraine and the West. Such a position, is a twine situation. At the center of this conflict, according to the expert, the issue of Moscow's confidence in Minsk, it is shrinking, and this affects various areas, poisoning Russian-Belarusian relations, including the relations of the leaders of the two countries. Expert Karbalevich does not see the ways of the peaceful solution of this problem: "Of course, Russia can try to force Belarus to greater obedience, but this will inevitably lead to conflict" (Karbalevich, 2016, p. 5). However, according to the expert, Russia is unlikely to take any active steps: the conflict will remain "under the carpet" at least until Belarus is behind the "red lines" set by Russia, which are the participation of Minsk in all integration associations created on the initiative of Russia. In addition, Minsk takes decisions against the backdrop of a lack of confidence that it will not happen with Belarus what happened to the Crimea and Ukraine, believes political analyst Andrei Fedorov. In his opinion, Moscow had and still has a lot of leverage to pinch its fingers to Minsk if necessary.

After the events in Ukraine, Belarus took a contradictory position in relations with Kiev. In March 2014, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, President Alexander Lukashenko said that "Ukraine must be holistic" and expressed its readiness to cooperate with the new authorities in Kiev. Belarus did not support the anti-Ukrainian sanctions of Moscow and provided a

***THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA
BILATERAL RELATIONS***

platform for negotiations on the settlement of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities did not support any international document condemning the actions of the Russian Federation in this context.

In March 2014 voted against the United Nations General Assembly's resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. In November 2014 Minsk voted against the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution on human rights violations in Crimea, in May 2015 refused to sign the communique of the Riga Eastern Partnership summit on the annexation of the Crimea, and experts believe that at the expense of its current position, Minsk is taking immediate economic benefits without worrying about a long-term strategy. In their opinion, Ukraine understands that Belarus is forced to show political loyalty to its main ally of Russia, therefore the Belarusian-Ukrainian cooperation in the economy will continue. "While playing the role of peacekeeper against the backdrop of the development of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Minsk received a lot of dividends from the EU and Ukraine, although Belarus is in Moscow's wake, and in matters important for Russia it operates in sync with its interests," the scientific director of Kyiv Institute of Euro-Atlantic Cooperation Alexander Sushko said regarding Belarus-Russian bilateral relations (Friedman, 2014). Sushko explains the behavior of Minsk by the fact that Russia's influence on Belarus remains very strong. Director of the Minsk Center for European Integration (CET) Andrei Yegorov agrees that "Minsk is playing a cunning political combination of neutrality." The leadership of Belarus, in his words, quickly realized how, without changing its policy, to earn points in the eyes of Kiev and the Western community. At the same time, Yegorov points out that it is necessary to distinguish the game of Minsk on the political field from actions in the sphere of economy. He is sure that, despite Moscow's loyalty, the Belarusian authorities will cooperate with Kiev: "The satellite is not a vassal, and Belarus can play on its own where it benefits, there is no harm to any Kremlin" (Yegorov, 2016, p. 11). In spite of everything, Minsk means a line of good-neighbor relations with Kiev. In his turn, Alexander Sushko noted that "no one in Ukraine expected specifically that Lukashenko would be in solidarity with Ukraine on issues that will become the subject of his conflict with Russia." Andrei Yegorov predicts that in the future the contradictory position of Belarus in relations with Kiev on the economic cooperation of neighboring countries will not affect it in any way. "All resentments will be forgotten for the sake of a pragmatic side of cooperation, beneficial to both Minsk and Kiev" (Yegorov, 2016).

4. CONCLUSION

The political background of Minsk's relations with Moscow is increasingly being set by the context of the confrontation between Russia and the West. After 2014 the Ukrainian crises was added to the context of Belarus-Russian bilateral relations. At the same time, Belarus' expectations of cooperation with Russia remain overstated and unrealizable. With economic dependence on Moscow, which, after the annexation of the Crimea, if not, it is insignificant, Minsk has occupied and continues to withstand the line of neutrality: Belarus did not support the Russian Federation in its conflict with Ukraine and the West. At the heart of this conflict is the issue of Moscow's confidence in Minsk, it is shrinking, and this affects various areas, poisoning Russian-Belarusian relations, including the relations between the leaders of the two countries.

In times of globalization, countries cannot develop autonomously. For equal development and adaptation to changing events regional integration is mandatory. In the modern world, countries develop in different ways. One of the ways based on the principles of the free market, communications with the outside world and, in the creation of alliances with states close to the principles of development, in order to resist the authority of the countries forming political and economic currents. Another way of development is adaptation to the politics and economy of an influential country, benefiting from it in the form of achieving cheaper resources and support in the policy of lobbying their interests. Belarus is moving along the second path, it has its own priorities but in major foreign policy issues it conducts consultations with an influential neighbor – Russia but some decisions in the state are taken independently. Russia has an impact on foreign policy of neighboring countries. However, not all countries are equally dependent on this influence. Baltic States have been following relatively independent policy since 1991, although they experience some pressure from Russia via media through the introduction of propaganda and disinformation. The policy of Alexander Lukashenko has a tendency to Russification and predominance of the Russian language on the territory of Belarus. The "annexation of the Crimea" troubled Minsk and, as a result, made it to develop its own position that does not copy Russia's policy.

When there is an economic confrontation on various issues of the delivery of goods, including sanctions issue, Belarus takes a rather tough position. As a result of negotiations, a compromise is reached on many issues but the note of tension in relations has increased markedly. Although the media and the leaders of the countries constantly talk about the unity and brotherhood of

THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA BILATERAL RELATIONS

countries, in fact it is obvious that they are pursuing their own interests. Belarus introduced a visa-free regime for short-term visits (30 days staying) for citizens of 80 countries. In response, Russia announced the creation of a security zone on the border between countries. Russian traditions of pressure exertion hamper the creation of a real union state between Russia and Belarus. In spite of many pitfalls, the countries have powerful integration on economic and military-defense issues. For loyalty, Belarus gets support in many issues, and is a bridge in relations between Russia and the West. NATO having its troops in the Baltic countries and Poland exerts considerable pressure on Belarus. As a result, it becomes a problem for Russia. While the annexation of the Crimea created complexity for Belarus-Russian relations, it also opened for Europe a principled and independent opinion of Belarus in such a global political moment. Peacekeeping functions were highly appreciated by the West. The European Union began reviewing its previous positions and adjusting its relations with Belarus as a political player. While there is no possibility to conclude relations with Minsk within the framework of the Eastern Partnership of the European Union, it is already obvious a new attitude and increasing interest in Belarus and its foreign policy is in place as a result of the effect of Ukrainian crises over Belarus-Russian relations.

5. REFERENCES

- Baranchik, Y. (2015). *How belarusization movement is going in Belarus*, RN.
- Daneyko, (2017), *Peculiarities of Belarusian national identity*. Online <http://www.dw.com/ru/особенности-белорусской-национальной-идентичности/a-37674267>
- Friedman, U. (2014). A Ukraine Peace Plan That Excludes Ukrainians Is Unacceptable, *the Atlantic*. Online <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/response-boisto-peace-plan-ukraine-russia-us/379428/>
- Karbalevich, V. (2016). *The prospect of Slavic unity. Belarus' relations with Russia and Ukraine: a Belarusian view, Present and Future relations between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, Stockholm, Swedish National Defence College.
- Kravchuk, L. (2013), *Interview with Former Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk*, Radio Svoboda. Online <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29779412.html>.
- Laruelle, M. (2015), *The 'Russian World', Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination*, Washington DC, Center For Global Interest.

***THE ANALYSIS OF UKRAINIAN CRISES' EFFECTS ON BELARUS-RUSSIA
BILATERAL RELATIONS***

Nosevich, V. (2008). Problems of Grand Lithuanian Duchy: view of Belarusian history, *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, (22), 39-57.

Podlesny, E. (2016). *Belarusian National Republic: triumph and tragedy*, 142(1).

Shraibman, A. (2016). The Lukashenko Formula: Belarus's Crimea Flip-Flops", *Carnegie Moscow Center*. Online <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=63698>.

Vorobyeva, (2016). Strengthening of government, *Bankauski vesnik*, 12(1), 68-71.

Taras, A. (2014). *Short overview of Belarusian history*. Online <http://coollib.com/b/277966>.

Tyutyushev, M. (2015). *Belarusian National Republic: appearance and history*. Online <http://fb.ru/article/186510/beloruskaya-narodnaya-respublikaprovozglashenie-i-istoriya>.

Unur, E. and D. Doganyilmaz Duman. (2016). Sosyal Kimlik Olarak İslam'ın Sosyal Medyaya Yansıması: #Gerçekİslam. *Din Bilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi*, 16 (3), 37-61.

Volkov, (2017). *Lukashenko and Belarusian nationalism*. Online <http://naspravdi.info/byvshiy-sssr/lukashenko-i-beloruskiy-nacionalizm>.

Yankoyt, V. (2017). *How Russian world study Belarusian nationalism*.

Yegorov, A. (2016). Digest of Belarusian Analytics, *Belarus Digest*. Online <https://belarusdigest.com/story/civil-society-in-focus-belarusian-opposition-internet-users-digest-of-belarusian-analytics/>.