

Putin Didn't Fall for Lukashenko's Claim that Poland Intends to Annex Belarus' Grodno Region

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Lukashenko's entirely speculative claim last week about Poland's supposed intention to annex Belarus' Grodno region was nothing more than an attempt to trick Putin into "pulling a Crimea" by compelling him to comply with Russia's CSTO mutual defense obligations to its "Union State" partner in the face of this hyped-up foreign threat, which was a ruse that the Russian leader was much too wise to fall for.

If Poland Didn't Annex Lvov, Why Would It Annex Grodno?

There's a lot of talk in Central & Eastern Europe about Lukashenko's [dramatic claim](#) last week that Poland is plotting to annex Belarus' Grodno region, but this was nothing more than pure speculation that was shared for ulterior reasons. Poland, while wanting to revive its long-lost "sphere of influence" in the region through the US-backed "[Three Seas Initiative](#)" (TSI) that it leads, knows very well that any move in that direction would trigger a Russian military intervention under the CSTO's clause mandating its members to mutually defend one another. It's telling that Poland didn't attempt to annex the Lvov region of Western Ukraine in the midst of its neighbor's own turmoil over six years ago despite that area's namesake city being much more culturally and historically significant to Poles than any place in Belarus' Grodno region. The very fact that Poland would decline doing so in Lvov despite there being much less of a military deterrent to such a scenario than in Grodno casts serious doubt on Lukashenko's claim, which naturally raises the question of why he made it.

Lukashenko's Logic

The author previously argued that Russia wouldn't "[pull a Crimea](#)" in Belarus unless it was tricked into doing so by Lukashenko either provoking a border incident with NATO and/or "stepping back" to allow the domestic situation to deteriorate to such a point where Russia feels compelled to offer military assistance. With this in mind, his ridiculous Grodno claim begins to make more sense. Lukashenko wanted to trick Russia into militarily intervening in his support since he fears for his political future in the face of the [ongoing Color Revolution](#) against him, but he also doesn't want to become just another regional leader in the event that Belarus subsequently (re)unites with Russia, nor does he want to be sidelined in that scenario through the same "[phased leadership transition](#)" that he himself hinted at in mid-August. His thinking seems to be that if he can trick Russia into "pulling a Crimea", then Moscow wouldn't be able to "encourage" his exit from the political scene in any "face-saving" way, which would thus enable him to rule indefinitely under overt Russian tutelage.

Russia's "Balancing" Strategy In Practice

Russia is behaving extremely cautiously in this situation since it understands the risks inherent to both the regime change and “Crimea 2.0” scenarios, which is why Putin played it very coy during his [latest interview](#). On the one hand, he seemed to signal support for some of the legitimate protesters’ (importantly, not the rioters’!) demands and the possibility of a “phased leadership transition” by saying that “if the people take to the streets, it cannot be ignored. Everybody must listen to them and respond. By the way, the President of Belarus said that he is willing to consider conducting a constitutional reform, adopting a new Constitution, holding new parliamentary and presidential elections based on the new Constitution.”

On the other hand, however, he hinted that Russia might intervene if events quickly spiral out of control, saying that “Mr Lukashenko has asked me to create a reserve group of law enforcement personnel, and I have done this. But we have also agreed that this group would not be used unless the situation becomes uncontrollable, when extremist elements – I would like to say this once again – when the extremist elements, using political slogans as a cover, overstep the mark and start plundering the country, burning vehicles, houses, banks, trying to seize administration buildings, and so on.” Taken together, it’s clear to see that Putin is practicing a “balanced” yet flexible policy in regards to the [Belarusian Crisis](#).

Putin Didn’t Bite The Bait

Putin’s calm and rational approach should be applauded since it’s arguably the best stance that Russia can take towards this rapidly changing issue. That doesn’t seem to suit Lukashenko though, who likely fears that his counterpart is leaning closer towards the “phased leadership transition” scenario following the US Deputy Secretary of State’s visit to Moscow that the author [wrote about last week](#). After all, it’s probably not a coincidence that Lukashenko made his dramatic claims about Poland’s non-existent intentions to annex Grodno right after that visit took place, obviously wanting to remind Putin about this hyped-up threat in case the Russian leader was persuaded to cooperate with the US in advancing a pragmatic “political solution” to the crisis that would ultimately result in his “democratic” departure from office. Playing the “Polish card” was designed to manipulate Putin’s legitimate suspicions of NATO’s motives towards Russia’s traditional “sphere of influence” but failed to influence him since he wisely realized the game that Lukashenko was playing.

Concluding Thoughts

The [Hybrid War on Belarus](#) has reached a stalemate, but Lukashenko still fears for his political future since he never thought that he’d ever be in such a situation as he’s currently found himself. Russia isn’t riding to his rescue like he always took for granted would happen in this scenario since his failed “balancing” act over the past year made it seriously doubt his reliability as a partner, though its leadership’s distrust of him personally doesn’t change its geostrategic calculus towards Belarus. Russia won’t ignore credible NATO threats against its fellow “Union State” nor sit idly if EuroMaidan starts to repeat itself in Minsk, though neither has happened as of yet, and thus the trigger for military intervention under the CSTO hasn’t (yet) been pulled. Being increasingly fearful of his future and the possibility of Russia working with the US to advance a “phased leadership transition”, Lukashenko decided to pull the trigger himself by hyping up non-existent Polish threats to Grodno so that Putin rushes in and saves him, but the Russian leader knew better than to fall for this ridiculous trick.

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