



PERSPECTIVES

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Belarus Could Be Russia's Next Big Geopolitical Target

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russia's geopolitical projection has shifted over the past two decades. The country has tried to reverse its losses in Ukraine and the South Caucasus, but it is in Belarus that Moscow will most likely try to further extend its leverage to keep the EU and NATO at bay.

Russia has extended its geopolitical influence across three major vectors over the centuries: the western front (Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic States); the South Caucasus; and the Central Asian region.

In the South Caucasus the Russians appear to have reached the limit of their influence. There is little more they can do to further increase their already extensive influence over Armenia's and Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region (so-called South Ossetia). Azerbaijan will likely manage to continue on its more or less independent foreign policy path.

In Central Asia, Russian moves are easier to anticipate, but it is not a primary theater for Moscow's foreign policy.

Russia's western front – its border with Europe – is a theater in which Moscow hopes to reverse its as yet unsuccessful foreign policy and gain geopolitical leverage over the EU and NATO. Moscow's influence in Eastern Europe over the past 18 or so years has diminished substantially. Ukraine is largely lost, and though it is fashionable to talk about how Russia has re-emerged as a major power in the region, as proven by the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (Eastern Ukraine), the reality is that Russia has added yet another antagonistic country to its border.

There is little chance that Russia will be able to enhance its position in Ukraine without resorting to military force. Even then, from a long-term perspective, it would be tough for Russia to confront Ukrainian military power on a western front reinvigorated through economic sanctions and diplomatic moves.

In the Baltic States, the Russians can hope for very little to increase their influence in the region. The NATO/EU umbrella is powerful enough to stop them. In addition, there is a historical animosity of the local populations towards the Russian state, which hampers Moscow's projection of power.

This leaves only one country – Belarus – that could be susceptible to Russian geopolitical influence in the coming years. Economically and militarily, the country relies on Russia. This lack of diversification is the source of both stability and instability for Minsk – but crucially, in Belarus there is room for Russia to increase its influence. Moscow could, for example, ask Minsk to station Russian military personnel on its soil. There will be a good excuse for this in the coming months, as the US is likely to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). The US will probably float the possibility of stationing its high-tech missiles on the European continent, which would make it urgent for Russia to use Belarus and the exclave land of Kaliningrad as a forward-defense ground.

Wider geopolitical considerations

From Russia's perspective, Belarus's geographical position makes it a valuable territory from which to project economic and political power. Through the centuries, its location on the North European plain has made it an avenue for foreign invasions of the Russian mainland. Charles XII of Sweden, Napoleon, and Hitler all directed their Russian campaigns through Belarus. Now that the EU and NATO have made considerable headway into the former Soviet space by signing EU association agreements and holding military exercises with Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, Russia perceives them as no less a danger than the above-mentioned historical figures.

Moreover, Belarus not only borders on the core Russian territories – the Russian mainland – but also industrially and economically important regions such as Pskov, Bryansk, Smolensk, and others. More importantly, Belarus is geographically very close to major Russian population centers, most notably Moscow.

Keeping Belarus in its sphere of influence also gives Russia the chance to project its power far beyond its current borders and deep into Central Europe and the Baltic states. Belarus borders on Poland and Lithuania, both members of NATO and unequivocally anti-Russian in their foreign policy stance. Moreover, as

Russia grapples with the ongoing Ukraine crisis, Belarus's position has become doubly important as it borders on North Ukraine and is very close to Kiev.

As in Ukraine, alongside a pure geopolitical calculus there is also a cultural aspect to the significance Belarus bears for Russia. Belarusians are the Russians' Slavic brethren and the country, like Ukraine, represents an integral part of Russian history. For the steadily decreasing Russian population, the retention of the asset of almost 10 million Slavic Belarusians is very important.

Moreover, constant diplomatic spats between the Russian ambassador to Belarus and the latter's Ministry of Foreign Affairs add to the geopolitical tensions between the states.

Thus it is quite possible that the next flash point between the west and Russia will be Belarus. A confrontation might not necessarily take place in the immediate future, but there is unquestionably a buildup in Moscow's rhetoric and general geopolitical posture regarding Belarus.

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