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The Belarusian Vision of Central Europe: a buffer zone or the territory of cooperation and security between West and East?

1. Presently, the region of Central and Eastern Europe is one of the theatres for the clash of civilizations where the interests of the U.S., the EU, Russia and China conflict each other. However, many experts consider this region an artificial conglomerate as it is not united culturally, ideologically, politically, or economically.
2. The greatest pressure comes to the post-Soviet states, which emerged at the place of the ex-USSR republics. No power questioned their independence and sovereignty now of their emergence. But today, each of them tends to demand something and impose their own development model. So, even the nations which have made their 'sovereign choice of their future' (well, nearly sovereign) are becoming hostages of the geopolitical game.
3. These young independent countries are now offered either to keep the partnership with Russia as the membership in the CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union, or to sign association agreements with the EU which entail integration into Brussels' economic area and political subordination and accountability to the EU, however without the right to membership. Lately, these states also face the pressure from the U.S., which demands to curtail or minimize joint projects with the participation of the Chinese business.
4. It is noticeable that various integration offers are made strictly in the 'either – or' style when partnership with one centre of power turns into degradation of the relations or an open conflict with the other.
5. A classic and most tragic example is Ukraine where ex-President Yanukovich, facing the Russian pressure, refused to sign the Agreement of Association with the EU, thus initiating the 'color revolution' mechanism which was possible due to well-calculated and lasted impact on the society by the 'soft power' of the Western civilization.
6. As a result of street riots, and afraid of a slaughter, President Yanukovich had to flee from his country. Mostly ethnic Russian population of Crimea and Donbass made the same decision.
7. Unfortunately, the flow of 'revolutionary' violence provoked by the Maidan events was not stopped but followed by perishing of hundreds of people in Odessa and the South-East of Ukraine.
8. According to the UN Observation Mission, by the early 2019 after 5 years of war between the official Ukrainian authorities and the rebels, the number of victims had arisen to about 43,000 people, of which 13,000 had been killed and nearly 30,000 wounded. Out of those killed, about 3,300 had been

civilians, nearly 4,000 Ukrainian Army soldiers and officers, and over 5,000 paramilitaries of the Donetsk and Lugansk unrecognized republics.

9. It is worth admitting that after the Minsk agreements were signed, the intensiveness of the combat has decreased but at the present moment people are being killed in the conflict zone. Actually, the local conflict in Donbass has not finished, lasting longer than the Great Patriotic War.

10. Besides the catastrophic outcome for Ukraine, this conflict has also contributed into the escalation in the international situation and the dramatic decline in mutual trust between the NATO and Russia down to critical line. The region has been showing new demarcation lines more and more evidently.

11. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, after 2014 the world in general and Europe in particular have seen a sustainable trend of the increase in military expenses.

12. Militarization of Central and Eastern region is aggravating. Every year, the number of military exercises is increasing, as well as 'rotational' and 'infrastructural' presence of the NATO. Military budgets of the Baltic states and Poland are rocketing, with the growth in defense expenses of 78% in 2010 – 2016, namely in Latvia 44%, Lithuania 35%, and Poland 28%. The reason, according to politicians, is 'the threat of Russian aggression'.

13. At the same time, it seems that the manipulations around the possibility of Russia's attack against the states protected by the NATO are not really grounded. Cultivating the image of an enemy from outside, 'folding' fears and phobias of potential voters into a brilliant paper might be explained by the desire of politicians to make publicity and invite political and military investments into their countries. However, it is evident that they contribute into the division of the region but in distant perspective, such a strategy is going to fail.

14. It is remarkable that Washington traditionally demands from its NATO allies to increase their military expenses up to 2% of their GDP, which will enable them to spend significant sums on army modernization and purchasing mostly American weapons.

15. Since 2014, the profit for the U.S. corporations from selling weapons abroad has been rising permanently, and in 2018 this figure showed 13% growth, up to \$192.3 billion. The 3rd place among the interstate deals goes to the contract on the Patriot anti-missile systems delivery to Poland, for \$4.6 billion.

16. Accordingly, this antagonism and aggressive foreign policy brings direct profit to the U.S. military industry as incomes from weapons export and inner defense contracts, for the U.S. share of global defense expenses is about 40%.

17. This is also related to the decision of Washington to quit the Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in Europe, which enables American military corporations to get funding from the U.S. budget for designing and deploying such missiles.

18. It is easy to understand the interest of certain U.S. political circles in transforming Central Europe into an armed buffer zone between East and West, but what is the interest of the Central European nations in it?

19. It is obvious that in response to the strengthening of the NATO eastern flank, Russia will answer with militarization of its North-West and Kaliningrad oblast, as well as negotiations about increasing its military presence in Belarus.

20. It is necessary to underline that in 2015 Belarus rejected a Russian military base in its territory, and it happened not because Belarus is restraining from the military union with Russia but because Minsk realizes the risk of getting into a trap of militarization and antagonism. That is why Belarus signalizes with its example to its neighbors that they should reject the buffer role and instead bear the role of the territory of cooperation and security.

21. Deployment of additional armaments, especially offensive, is not a guarantee of security but rather a voluntary transformation of a country into a target for a potential assault. In its turn, only a sovereign refusal to armament proliferation can be a real guarantee of security.

22. Meanwhile, it is evident that with all the difficulties in building the union with Russia and the desire to have a mutually respectful dialogue with the EU and U. S., Belarusians are guided by their long experience and wisdom, it is much more visionary than a number New Europe's politicians who light-mindedly play with military stakes.

23. The core Belarusian vision of the demilitarization of the region is restoring the dialogue on security and cooperation in Europe similar to the Helsinki negotiation process between the West and the USSR in the 1970-es. Smaller states of the region should be together and define their future together – to become a bridge, a link between various geopolitical centres.

24. This approach to international relations means that small and medium-size countries should not be pawns and hostages in the policy of great powers when it comes to security issues. In connection with the termination of the INF Treaty, the MFA of Belarus has already proposed the idea to sign the Declaration of Concerned Nations on Non-Deployment of the Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Nuclear Missiles in Europe.

25. By now, Belarus has managed to obtain the support from the OSCE and a number of neutral or non-aligned states, such as Austria, Switzerland, Moldova, Serbia etc. Furthermore, certain optimism about the good will for

de-escalation is generated by the Russia- U.S. dialogue on peacekeeping in Syria, as well as the recent exchange of detained persons between Moscow and Kiev and the mutual efforts to withdraw troops from the frontline in Donbass.

27. However, if politicians often feel it difficult to find mutual understanding in security issues, it has always been an opportunity to support the movement for peace within the civil society. Because it is peaceful development that definitely meets the interests of the Central European nations, which once suffered horrors of the World War II and later the reality of the Iron Curtain in the 2nd half of the 20th century.

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