

Munich or Sochi? A hard choice for the Belarusian President Lukashenka



Munich Security Conference 2019/Image: Wikipedia

On February 15-17, 2019, the [55th Munich Security Conference](#)(MSC) brought together more than 600 high-profile decision-makers from all over the world. The key theme of the forum was the future of the international order. The conference report “The Great Puzzle: Who will pick up the pieces?” highlighted concerns about the fate of democracy and rules-based order as it is being contested by authoritarian rivals such as China and Russia. The forum called to seek peaceful solutions to the problem of geopolitical tensions.

Belarusian leader Aliaksandr Lukashenka had been invited to take part in a panel discussion on security in Eastern Europe, but he opted for a visit to Sochi to meet with [Vladimir Putin](#). At the forum(Munich), **Belarus was represented by the Ambassador to Germany Denis Sidorenko and the Chairman of the State Security Committee (KGB) Valery Vakulchik.**

The debate over the importance of liberal world order and dangers of its demise is not new – the issue has been widely debated among scholars and politicians for the past years. The MSC report featured Robert Kagan, a renowned American foreign policy expert who warned that the world would become a gloomy place if China and Russia manage to establish regional spheres of influence, where human rights and the rule of law are no longer a

priority. The concerns stem from the US retreat from its global role, the EU being still hesitant about its role in global processes, and cleavages in traditional alliances. Whereas Western leaders called for trans-Atlantic unity, senior officials of China and Russia were bent on establishing a strategic partnership.

The invitation to Lukashenka to take part in the panel on Eastern Europe was expectable after the Munich Security Conference Core group had chosen Minsk for its meeting in November 2018. Belarus' attempts at positioning itself as an important peacemaker in Eastern Europe seems to be still working. Lukashenka's participation in the Munich Security Conference could be a unique opportunity to strengthen this image and communicate with a number of European politicians. The organizers provided about 100 rooms for bilateral team talks. One may wonder why Lukashenka missed this opportunity and opted for the Sochi visit, given that there were no crucial issues on the agenda of his meeting with Putin.



Belarusian President Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin/Image: RFE/RL

The Munich Security report aptly classifies Belarus along with other Eastern European countries as “in-betweeners” that are caught in the geopolitical competition between Russia

and the West: one step towards Europe triggers counteraction from the Russian side. Indeed, Belarus is located at the crossroads of the so-called “great-power rivalry”, where the rising powers such as China and Russia do not feel accommodated by the West-led liberal order and try to reshape it by virtually all the possible means.

Minsk lost the Munich Security Conference as an opportunity to strengthen its contacts with the West. The chapter on Eastern Europe of the Munich Security report gives a good insight on possible reasons behind it. In any case, **the task of strengthening the Western vector of diplomacy is still a pending issue in Belarus’ foreign policy agenda.**

This article first appeared at the [Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies website](#)

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