

All Quiet in Russian-Belarusian Relations

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For approximately a year, from summer 2018 onwards, observers were paying close attention to tensions in relations between Russia and Belarus. A particular concern was caused by the assumption that Moscow might be planning to impose upon Minsk the reunification of two states, which could hypothetically allow President Vladimir Putin to circumvent the constitutional two-consecutive-terms limit on Russia's presidency and stay in power beyond 2024 as the leader of a new political entity. Each of many bilateral presidential and prime-ministerial meetings provoked interest, and often anxiety, as it could potentially bring news about Minsk agreeing to Belarus's absorption by Russia. However, as of today, all these have proven to be false alarms. Furthermore, in July this year, Russian and Belarusian leaders agreed to postpone the decision about the future of the two countries' integration until December 2019, when the treaty on the Russian-Belarusian Union State will mark its 20th anniversary. Quite plausibly, if the reunification scenario has ever existed, it has now been shelved or abandoned altogether.

Argued here is that while the status quo in Russian-Belarusian relations is undoubtedly being revised by Moscow, the goal may be different and not that ambitious. The Kremlin may simply aim at significantly lowering the level of Russian economic subsidies to Belarus, energy subsidies above all, while preserving a critical degree of Minsk's dependence and loyalty. In turn, the latter will try to delay the introduction of a new economic model and save as much as possible from the old times. Yet, its leverage vis-à-vis Moscow is limited and in the end Minsk will have to accept the offered compromise.

Not Exactly Business as Usual, or Is It?

Admittedly, worsening in Russian-Belarusian relations is a periodic phenomenon and for this reason singling out a period is a bit artificial. Yet, a statement made by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in June 2018 can be viewed as opening a new chapter.

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Namely, Lukashenko [said](#) that if his country were unable to “endure,” it would “have to join another state.” Whether this was just an analytical conclusion or whether he had in reality received a proposal of that kind is (and due to the lack of transparency about bilateral negotiations will remain) unclear, but it was in any case evidence of worry.

By that moment, Russian policy toward Belarus had already become less benevolent than before. Loans, once lavish, had shrunk and essentially could only be used to re-finance old debts. Russian health and veterinary authorities had started to massively restrict Belarusian food exports to Russia while customs checkpoints reappeared on the common border, although this was partly a reaction to the participation of Belarusian companies in the schemes of re-exporting sanctioned European goods to Russia. But the most painful was the approaching “tax maneuver” in the oil industry (introduced from 2019) which would make it no longer possible for Belarus to export oil products made of tax-free Russian oil. The estimated economic losses for Belarus were expected to reach \$400 million in 2019 alone and up to \$10 billion in 2019-24, and no compensation was offered.

Meanwhile, Russia tried to test and/or increase its soft power in Belarus. Russian media and social networks intensified campaigns targeting local “Russian world” sympathizers, fostering pro-Russian sentiment, and criticizing Lukashenko for his “flirtation” with the West. In October 2018, the Russian Orthodox Church, for the first time in history, held a session of its Synod in Minsk.

The link between economic subsidies and political integration was revealed in December 2018. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, visiting the Belarusian city of Brest, outlined two scenarios for the future: a “conservative” one – keeping the level of factual integration as it is – and an “advanced” one – namely the full implementation of the Union Treaty of 1999 with its provision on common currency, among other things. It became clear from the context that only the latter scenario would imply an increase in Russian economic assistance. Mikhail Babich, a former career KGB officer, who in August 2018 was appointed Russian Ambassador in Minsk and a special presidential representative on trade and economic relations with Belarus, became the central figure in public promotion of the Russian point of view in the country and, consequently, a target of Belarus’s harsh official *ad hominem* counter-criticism.

Putin, interestingly, on the contrary, chose to act as good cop. In December 2018 he agreed with Lukashenko to follow the bureaucratic path and create a working group tasked to prepare proposals on the development of bilateral relations, which lifted the pressure. In April 2019, he took a surprising step and decided to replace Babich, by that time barely tolerated in Minsk, with the much softer Dmitry Mezentsev. This was, perhaps, a turning point. Putin kept publicly reassuring the Belarusian side that Moscow had no plans of inter-state unification, which is also important, as changing this position would be an embarrassment.

Belarus Is Not Crimea

Conceivably, Moscow's goal from the very beginning was to legitimize the decrease of subsidies as well as the refusal to negotiate compensation for the tax maneuver, etc., through the lack of progress in bilateral integration rather than to actually use the economic pressure to achieve that. In other words, bringing up the issue of integration to the negotiations table was a deliberate diplomatic tactic used in expectation of Minsk's refusal; in reality, Moscow did not plan to insist.

However, if one presumes that Moscow's "plan A" was indeed seeking reunification, a quick analysis would suffice to show that the costs would be prohibitive.

First of all, even if one imagines that Lukashenko himself could be persuaded to give up the powers of a sovereign ruler, which sounds next to impossible, the consent of powerful interest groups in Belarus would be very difficult to induce. Local business circles are traditionally wary of the arrival of more powerful Russian competitors. The bureaucracy and security apparatus would not necessarily be tempted to pursue careers in an "extended Russia" and may prefer the current, better-known environment. The offer to these groupings would have to be large, but the bigger it is, the less credible it would appear.

As concerns the population, negative attitudes and even resistance would have to be expected. Although traditionally geopolitical preferences in Belarus are split and volatile (in this context, Lukashenko's [claim](#) from March 2019 that 98 percent of Belarusians would vote against entry into Russia sparks doubt), there is a constituency for which the reunification would be unacceptable. The ethnic Polish community, Belarusian Catholics, and national-minded circles would form a core of dissent, and it would resonate in larger societal strata that have no post-Soviet nostalgia whatsoever and treat national independence either as a value in itself or as an opportunity.

In turn, the absorption of Belarus would not necessarily be popular in Russia either. According to a VTsIOM poll conducted in January 2019, 48 percent of respondents [believed](#) that Russia and Belarus should not live in the same state but be good neighbors. 18 percent would support unification on equal terms, while only 17 percent favored Belarus's entry into Russia as one or several subjects of federation. In these circumstances, the hypothetical reunification would not be a safe bet in the context of the "2024 problem" as it would not provide the Russian incumbent the same strong legitimacy as the incorporation of Crimea.

Negative international implications would also follow. Russian-Western relations would further suffer not only politically—which probably could be ignored by Moscow to a certain extent, but also militarily, which could not, as Russia and NATO would receive an additional 600 km of a direct line of contact. One should also think about a reaction from

China. Beijing can hardly afford to stay indifferent toward a loss of sovereignty by its declared partner while Moscow can hardly ignore China's position in support of Belarus, whether it be conveyed openly or behind closed doors. Finally, it is needless to say that Belarus's incorporation into Russia would cause a very painful reaction among its partners in the post-Soviet space and may lead to their distancing from Russia and even balancing against it.

Taking It Easy

In view of these considerations, Moscow would appear better off resolving Putin's "2024 problem" by amending Russia's own constitution in ways that do not involve Belarus. And pursuing the cause of political integration outside of the "2024 context" makes even less sense for Russia.

In fact, Moscow may feel quite comfortable in the current situation for at least four reasons. First, the economic dependence of Belarus on Russian cheap energy and markets cannot be overcome in the foreseeable future even theoretically, which gives the Kremlin the ability to allocate and dose the assistance as it sees fit. All that Minsk and Lukashenko personally can do to resist is to blame Russia for "betraying its closest ally," which no longer has the appeal inside Russia it once had and, therefore, has little influence on the Kremlin.

Second, the results of the reset in Belarusian-Western relations that has been going on for five years already are not compelling. Despite repeated high-level encounters, the EU is implementing in Belarus only small technical assistance projects, and no major money is forthcoming either as loans or as investments. Negotiations on a fundamental framework agreement of the type that the EU has with some post-Soviet states have not even started. Even a declaratory document called "Partnership Priorities" has not been signed; it was blocked by Lithuania, which has an irreconcilable dispute with its neighbor on the issue of the Astravets nuclear power station under construction in Belarus. To signal his dissatisfaction, Lukashenko refused to participate in the jubilee summit of the EU Eastern Partnership that was held in Brussels in May 2019.

Furthermore, Moscow creatively and demonstratively reminds Minsk about its limited options from time to time. In February 2019, for example, Lukashenko had to cancel his scheduled attendance at the Munich Security Conference, where he was expected to be on a panel with several other dignitaries from Eastern Europe, because he was invited to extend his visit to Putin's Sochi residence and ski.

Third, Belarus has limited ability to balance between Russia and Ukraine because of Minsk's status as Russia's military and security ally.² The election of Volodymyr Zelenskiy

² See: Arkady Moshes and Ryhor Nizhnikau, "[A Partnership Not in the Making: Ukrainian-Belarusian Relations After the Euromaidan](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 557, December 2018.

as Ukraine's president will further complicate the process. Establishing a personal relationship between Lukashenko and Zelenskiy, similar to the one that worked well between Lukashenko and Petro Poroshenko, will take time and may turn out to be impossible, taking into account the generational difference. Unlike in 2014 in Poroshenko's case, in May 2019 Lukashenko did not attend Zelenskiy's inauguration.

Fourth, despite his recurrent outbursts of accusations, Lukashenko himself is actually a source of psychological comfort for Kremlin. His actions and reactions are predictable. He is a person who has just celebrated his 25th anniversary in power and is obviously planning to start another presidential term after the elections of 2020. He himself is a guarantor that things will stay as they are, that a like-minded regime will be preserved, and that Belarus will not follow Ukraine's path in relations with Russia. True, Lukashenko's system may need to be occasionally helped economically to avoid critical worsening of the situation. But this is far easier than dealing with a ruler who would be less ideologically and politically pre-programmed against market economy and liberal democracy.

Forecast

Most likely, in December 2019, Moscow and Minsk will declare their readiness to deepen integration, but this will not imply the creation of a common state or Belarus's entry into Russia. Belarus will still be offered a privileged economic relationship. Oil and gas prices will be higher than in Russia, but lower than they are for Russia's other clients. Yet overall level of subsidization will continue to decrease. Possibly, Moscow will more actively seek control over key Belarusian industrial assets, but this has been incorrectly expected many times before and is far from certain.

The unavoidable question is to what extent Belarus, with its very slow growth and significant debt, can cope with the further decrease of Russian subsidies. There is no definite answer, but there are reasons for cautious optimism. Today, Belarusian society-at-large [demonstrates](#) a lot more independent economic behavior, is much readier to embrace markets, and expects a lot less from the state that it is often assumed. The less Russian money there is and the less capable the Lukashenko system is to fund its neo-patrimonial social contract, the more vocal society may become in demanding and supporting change.