WILL BELARUS CHOOSE THE WEST?

Prospects for Democracy in Minsk

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The Issue

The democratic world just celebrated the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. How far east was it considered a historic victory and how much longer will it take for its shadow to disappear in Belarus? Opening doors to token opposition representation in parliament, more frequent overtures to the West, and the promotion of national symbols may seem like the early spring of Belarusian rebirth after more than 25 years of Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s dictatorship. But are these signs of a thaw and a repetition of the events of 1989?
INTRODUCTION

Russia and its close ally Belarus plan to form an economic union by 2022, according to an undisclosed plan initialed by the Russian and Belarusian prime ministers on September 6, 2019 and published by the Russian magazine Kommersant 10 days later.¹ The document provides for the consolidation of the two countries’ tax, customs, and civil code by spring 2021. Single regulation of the electricity, gas, and oil market, as well as harmonization of industrial policy, would be the next step. The document reportedly does not mention the introduction of a single currency or a common budget. However, it calls for an eventual agreement on common banking supervision, a single payment system, foreign exchange control, and so-called joint counter-sanctions against other countries. “The economy of Belarus is 29 times smaller than that of Russia, so we’re talking about the actual economic takeover of our country,” analyst Vitaut Siuchyk stated on Belsat.eu.² Military and security coordination are not explicitly mentioned, at least in public. Some experts and politicians claim that there are secret protocols to the framework that would establish Russian military bases in Belarus and integrate the two countries’ security cooperation.

This message of convergence between Belarus and Russia clashed with news on September 17 that the United States and Belarus announced plans to exchange ambassadors 11 years after Minsk recalled its envoy to Washington to protest U.S sanctions on the Belarus regime for human rights violations. The apparent thaw, moreover, came after months of signaling by the Lukashenka government that it intended to improve relations with the West and pursue a foreign policy more independent of Moscow.

What is behind Belarus’ apparently contradictory behavior?

“Minsk, Belarus” by Andrey Filippov under CC BY 2.0.
WHAT DOES LUKASHENKA WANT?

Often described as “Europe’s Last Dictator,” President Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s primary goal is to stay in power. His authoritarian rule is based on four key pillars, each underwritten by Kremlin support and without which his political prospects would be uncertain.

Ruthless Suppression of the Political Opposition. There is little chance that a Maidan-style revolution from below of the sort that happened in Ukraine in 2014 could topple Lukashenka. The regime has banned human rights groups and political opposition movements. No new political party has been able to register since 2000. Belarus remains the only European country to use the death penalty, with several high-profile opponents of Lukashenka having vanished over the years: former Interior Minister Yury Zakharanka disappeared on May 7, 1999; opposition politician Viktar Hanchar and his associate Anatol Krasouski vanished in Minsk on September 16, 1999; Russian television journalist Dmitry Zavadsky went missing on July 7, 2000. These men are presumed dead, but their fates remain unknown. Independent journalists, bloggers, and political activists are fined or imprisoned. Belarusian authorities put pressure on independent media resources to conform to the government line. The government sponsors sham elections, the next scheduled for November 17, 2019 for a new parliament, to legitimate Lukashenka’s rule and signal to the West that his grip on power is loosening (two members of the opposition were allowed into the parliament in 2016, the first oppositionists in 20 years). But the body is a rubber stamp.

Military and Security Integration with Russia. There are no Russian military bases in Belarus, but armed forces from the two countries regularly conduct massive military exercises near the borders of Poland and Lithuania. On September 16, 2019, 12,000 military men—4,000 of whom were Belarusian—participated in operational exercise “Union Shield” in Russian Federation territory. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) agreement, signed in 1992 between Russia, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan provides that in the event of conflict with the West, the Belarusian army would be
deployed as part of the Russian armed forces to defend Russia’s western boundaries.\(^5\)
Russia’s military and naval communications center, covering the North Atlantic and Europe, and its early warning radar are located on Belarusian soil. Russia and Belarus also have joint regional air defense systems.

**Moscow’s Economic Support.** Russia is Belarus’ main trade partner. In 2017, 51 percent of its foreign trade in goods was with Russia, including 44 percent of exports and 57 percent of imports. In return, Belarus exports fuels and lubricants (around 33 percent of all exports).\(^6\) Belarus’ preferential trade relationship with Russia, provided by the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2014, guarantees it access to oil at a discount price and concessions in Russian market access for Belarusian producers. This makes the country’s main export products competitive but very much dependent on Russia’s attitude toward the Lukashenka regime.

Russia is the largest investor in Belarus, accounting for 38 percent of all foreign direct investment in 2017. Belarus’ economy depends on Russian energy subsidies worth several billion dollars per year. Between 2001-2010, a so-called integration grant from Russia accounted for up to 15 percent of Belarusian GDP, or USD $10 billion annually. One of the largest investments in recent years was Moscow-controlled Gazprom’s acquisition of 50 percent of Beltransgaz shares in 2011 worth around $3 billion, which promises a comprehensive program for modernizing Belarusian gas infrastructure. Additionally, Russia has provided a $10 billion loan for the construction of the nuclear power plant in

"Zapad-2017 joint Russian-Belarusian strategic military exercises." by kremlin.ru under CC BY 4.0.
Astravets, a facility being built and equipped by Russian companies and which does not follow international security standards.\textsuperscript{7}

Russia’s shipment in 2019 of heavily contaminated oil through its Druzhba pipeline to Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic illustrated Belarus’ vulnerability. According to Gomeltransneft, Belarus’ state pipeline company, the losses to the country from contaminated oil were estimated to $100 million.\textsuperscript{8} Since one of Minsk’s biggest headaches is its increasing debt (29.6 percent of GDP in 2018), almost half of which is made by state-owned enterprises, the damages to its economy were enormous.\textsuperscript{9,10} (Earlier in 2019, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev revealed at a meeting with the Belarusian Prime Minister that Belarus owed Russia $6.2 billion.) Belarus also is losing billions of dollars in budget revenue as a result of Russia’s new energy tax system, which shifts the tax burden on oil products from their export to extraction. Minsk, which previously bought duty-free crude oil from Russia under their customs union and then reexported it at a profit, claims that the new system violates the terms of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.

**Russification of the Population.** More than 70 percent of Belarusians speak Russian at home and 87 percent of pupils are taught in Russian at school, an increase from 81 percent in 2010. The number of students taught in Belarusian dropped by 103 times between 1990 and 2018. The number of Belarusians who named Belarusian as their native language, moreover, also dropped drastically from 85.6 to 60.8 percent during the same period. Today only a few hundred university students study in the Belarusian language.\textsuperscript{11} The book publishing industry is being transformed by the same “de-Belarusization” trends. Russian influence is also spread by the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is Belarus’ most trusted public institution.

In the broader society, Russian-language outlets occupy two-thirds of the Belarusian media space, which enables the Kremlin to saturate the country with pro-Kremlin narratives. The regime gives financial support to pro-Moscow websites. Internet traffic from Russia has increased enormously in recent years, especially from the Sputnik news service. In recent months Russia has dramatically expanded its use of social media to target young people and promote the idea that Belarusians are not a separate people but part of the Russian nation and therefore the two countries must unite.\textsuperscript{12} Russian influence is also strengthened by more than 140 civic organizations, think-tanks, and at least five

“There is little chance that a Maidan-style revolution from below of the sort that happened in Ukraine in 2014 could topple Lukashenka.”
At the same time, Lukashenka is careful to toe the Kremlin’s red lines: he must not lose his grip on the country; and he must make sure Belarus is firmly anchored in Russian security structures.

In foreign policy, Lukashenka recently has been working hard and with some success to establish Belarus as a balancer among Russia, Europe, and the West by portraying it as a neutral site for helping to solve international problems and as a suitable location for multinational institutions such as the OSCE. At the Minsk Forum on September 8, 2019, for example, Lukashenka described the war in Donbas as being between Ukraine and Russia, not Kiev and so-called “separatists,” a comment that the Kremlin immediately rejected. He added that U.S. leadership is essential in resolving the conflict. Lukashenka’s government also has worked toward a liberalized visa regime with the EU.

Although he is dependent on the Kremlin to remain in power, Lukashenka has used his country’s strategic location to leverage his bargaining position with Moscow. Whenever Lukashenka believes the Kremlin is pushing too hard to limit his tactical freedom of maneuver, he responds by flirting with the West. At the end of 2018, for example, Belarus announced it was seeking to resume talks with the International Monetary Fund about a new loan in 2020 and expressed interest in buying U.S. oil for its refineries to diversify its supply.
Lukashenka also has put an especially high priority in recent months on improving ties with China. In an attempt to lure more Chinese technology companies to invest in Belarus, in January 2019 it was announced that the China–Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park will be designated as the first of Belarus' special economic zones for the Moscow-backed Eurasian Economic Union. The zone is intended to form a "bridge" between the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), giving Chinese companies tax-free entry to markets in Russia and Central Asia. As Lukashenka said, "We will strengthen relations in the eastern direction: both with Russia and with the PRC" as "these relations are the strongest support and an asset." For Lukashenka, Chinese investment is not only a counterweight to balance Russia, but Belarus' geographic location also makes it a key link between Asia and Europe for the BRI. Belarus also forms a valuable economic and political stepping stone for China into the larger and profitable Russian and Central Asian markets.

Minsk is also seeking to scale up defense cooperation with Beijing. China provides military-technical assistance to Belarus, and Beijing has supplied the Belarusian Armed Forces with equipment in recent years. Both countries have said that they are exploring boosting wider cooperation. When Stanislav Zas, the State Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council, met with China's public security minister Guo Shengkun in April 2017, the sides said that they would explore boosting cooperation on issues such as transnational crime, terrorism, and cybercrime.

Despite the thorough russification of society, Lukashenka has also recently cultivated Belarusians’ relatively weak sense of nationhood to strengthen his political base against Russian pressure. On Belarus’ Independence Day on May 11, 2019, Lukashenka stressed the importance of the country’s symbols: "...These are the symbols of the country’s sovereignty which embody the national idea, reflect the country’s glorious history and centuries-old traditions, emphasize our identity and independence in choosing the path of development."

In his current presidential campaign—elections are scheduled for August 2020—Lukashenka has focused on maintaining Belarus’ independence, warned of the threat of a Russian invasion, and stressed the economic benefits of cooperating with the European Union. In a further effort to symbolically distance his country from Russia, Lukashenka recently moved the location of commercial plane arrivals originating in Russia from the domestic to the foreign terminals at Minsk Airport. The Kremlin, according diplomatic sources, is not amused.

In any case, these gestures are largely cosmetic and rhetorical, and should not be seen as a indicating a shift in Minsk’s geopolitical orientation. In October 2019, Lukashenka instructed his military to devise an adequate response to the deployment of U.S. troops in Lithuania. This is not the reaction of a leader who says he wants closer ties with the West.

**KREMLIN CALCULUS**

The Kremlin views Belarus as a hybrid space: not a fully independent country, but also not wholly a part of the Russian Federation. As such, it is the kind of weak but authoritarian state that Moscow wishes to see along its periphery, serves as a bulwark against further NATO expansion, and as a barrier against the spread of any pro-democracy movements.
inside Russia itself. Through its penetration of the Belarusian military and security structures, Moscow closely monitors what goes on in the country and can remove Lukashenka, either through coup d’état or military intervention, whenever it wishes. For now, however, the Kremlin prefers to avoid the international backlash and drain on resources it would face from an outright military invasion. A Russia-backed military crackdown also might spur Belarus, Mikhail Babich, and replaced him with Dmitry Mezentsev, a former regional governor. Babich played a much more obtrusive role in Belarusian politics than his predecessor, and his actions ruffled feathers in Lukashenko’s administration. This was in part because Babich was given additional diplomatic powers as Russia’s representative for trade and economic ties with Belarus. This imbued him with greater authority to negotiate on the Moscow’s behalf and facilitate high-level meetings between Belarusian and Russian officials. However, he often went beyond his official role as an ambassador, sometimes criticizing Lukashenko in the media, framing Belarus as a mere district of Russia, and reminding Belarus of Russia’s economic strength.

The September 2019 plan for closer integration suggests that the Kremlin is drawing Belarus closer even as it stops short of outright annexation. As experts in one recent report concluded, Belarus’ path ahead “is no longer characterized by a stark binary choice between the regime and the pro-democracy opposition. Now, Russia—with its ample resources—is emerging as a visible political player...”21 According to one scenario, moreover, the closer economic relationship, as well as the possibility of broader security cooperation, could be a prelude to a political union which would give Vladimir Putin the constitutional fig leaf to remain in power after 2024 as the head of a unified Belarus-Russian state. (This is not a new idea. The two sides approved a series of documents providing for closer political, economic, and social integration in the late 1990s.22) However, the latest proposal for creating a union state has so far remained on paper. At the moment the Kremlin’s option of creating such a union state is only one of several Putin succession plans under consideration.

Belarus’ tightening ties with Russia mean that the West should not be naïve about the prospects for development of liberal democracy in the country.

Sometimes the Kremlin overplays its hand. On April 30, 2019 Russia recalled its ambassador to...
Belarus’ tightening ties with Russia demonstrate that the West should not be naïve about the prospects for development of liberal democracy in the country—which are very slim—as are the prospects for Belarus becoming a genuine buffer state between East and West. Regarding its potential for a democratic transformation and integration into the West, Belarus is not in the same situation as were the other post-Soviet states of Eastern and Central Europe in 1989. Lukashenka’s authoritarian rule and thirty additional years of Moscow’s heavy hand have taken its toll.

Lukashenka’s flirtation with the West should thus be considered carefully, since there is considerable danger that the West could overplay its hand and provoke a harsh reaction from Moscow. Nevertheless, the results of judiciously-tailored Western engagement, such as cultural exchanges and increased dialogue—undertaken with realistic expectations—can be positive over the long term. With a new U.S. Ambassador in place, it will be easier to understand what is going on and better communicate with the opposition. Such small steps send a message of hope to Belarusian civil society and could complicate Moscow’s plans for the country, even if their impact is small at first. Meanwhile, developing investment opportunities for Western companies and helping Belarus to diversify its economy would reduce its energy dependence on Russia and help the West compete with China in the region, even as we await the uncertain prospect of changing political winds from Moscow.
Endnotes


