

Forever Together? Relations Between Moscow and Minsk After the Belarusian Revolution of 2020

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The Belarusian Revolution was a stress test for Belarus-Russia relations. The domestic political crisis that followed the rigged presidential elections of 2020 weakened the Minsk regime and put Moscow in a highly advantageous position. It was [expected](#) that the Kremlin would [grab](#) the opportunity to [increase](#) Belarus's subordination to Russia – and perhaps [engage](#) in territorial incorporation and the replacement of President Aleksandr Lukashenko. However, nothing of the kind happened. Bilateral relations have continued as “business as usual,” with Moscow acting carefully and showing no formal signs of seeking the political reintegration of the two countries.

Russia's status-quo-oriented policy is a rational choice. On the one hand, the existing model satisfies Moscow as it allows Russia's structural influence in Belarus to continue rising. The Kremlin is also certain that the Belarusian leadership knows where their red lines are. All the while, the West has no appetite to engage in a geopolitical contestation with Russia over Belarus. On the other hand, it is also apparent that should Russia try to radically change its game, not only may the costs outweigh the gains both in the bilateral and the international context, but it may lead to unexpected effects that could undermine Russia's dominance in the country altogether. This situation can be preserved so long as the current political leadership remains in power in Moscow and Minsk or until the circumstances in Belarus change to such an extent that maintaining the status quo would be beyond Russia's capacity.

A Drama that Was Not

On the eve of revolutionary events in the summer of 2020, Belarus and Russia were in the middle of a quarrel over Russian subsidies and stalled interstate integration. Then, the arrest of 33 Russian citizens from a private military company in Belarus at the end of July

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triggered an unprecedented crisis. On August 4, in his presidential address to the parliament and people, Lukashenko directly [accused](#) Russia of planning to “organize a massacre in the center of Minsk” and to “test color revolution technologies.”

But the threat to Lukashenko’s survival put all grievances aside. Since August 2020, Russia has been consistently providing political, media, and economic assistance needed to stabilize Lukashenko’s grip on power. The Kremlin’s public posture prevented the split of the Belarusian power and administrative elites during the peak of the mass protests. Russian top security officials helped to coordinate the regime’s responses, while police reinforcement was pledged if required. Russian professionals boosted the regime’s propaganda machine. In the international arena, Moscow’s diplomatic endorsement helped Minsk avoid full-scale delegitimization.

If any concessions were expected in return, they did not come about. Belarus has not shown any readiness to advance inter-state political or economic integration. Although after the elections, Lukashenko paid six visits to Russia, no major new agreements were reached. Minsk has not even made symbolic gestures. It neither de jure recognized Russia’s annexation of Crimea nor established direct transport connections with the peninsula. Even if, conceivably, the issue is no longer a priority for Moscow, this continuity indicates that the Belarusian regime does not find its position vis-à-vis Moscow hopeless. True, Lukashenko may not have felt fully comfortable demonstrating servility during photo sessions, skiing in Sochi, swimming in the cold Black Sea waters, or [echoing](#) President Vladimir Putin’s ideas on Ukraine, but in return, he would always obtain demonstrative respect for Belarusian sovereignty and assurances that the Russia-Belarus Union State is primarily an economic project.

Critically importantly, Russia restrained from interfering in Belarus’s domestic political process, which predetermined the preservation of Lukashenko’s monopoly on decision-making in the country. Russia’s original insistence on constitutional changes was gradually abandoned. The constitutional process is opaque and is under Lukashenko’s single-handed control. Despite initial speculation, no pro-Russian party has been allowed registration in Belarus. Viktor Babariko, a former chairman of Belgazprombank widely believed to be a Moscow-backed presidential candidate, was sentenced to a long prison term in July 2021. Furthermore, Russia’s Gazprom eventually accepted the raiding of Belgazprombank, which it had fiercely opposed at the start. It opened a new credit line for the bank and, in January 2021, appointed Nadezhda Ermakova, Lukashenko’s nominee, as its chairman. The Russian Orthodox Church approved the purges of opposition-minded figures in the leadership of the Belarusian Orthodox Church.

There has been no breakthrough in economic integration, even if the countries’ two prime ministers have also worked in close contact. The intergovernmental agreement on exporting Belarusian oil products via Russian Baltic Sea ports remains the only tangible shift, but, arguably, this is rather a result of the deterioration in EU-Belarus relations.

Integration negotiations procrastinate. The “new” Union programs are, in fact, the same but renamed integration roadmaps introduced in 2019. They inherited all previous problems. In June 2021, Lukashenko proposed to begin work on an integration program until 2030, which sounded like trolling. Old disagreements on fiscal issues as well as oil and gas pricing remain unresolved. Rosselhoznadzor, Russia’s food and veterinary watchdog, continues to struggle with Belarus’s violations of the Russian counter-sanctions regime.

Meanwhile, Moscow apparently decided not to use subsidies as leverage. In 2015-2020, Russia’s then-new policy of “less for more” increased the conditionality of assistance and gradually lowered the [economic support](#) provided to Minsk. After the Revolution, Russia has continued to offer Minsk enough—or, rather, just enough—to maintain the regime but did not go any further. In December 2020 and June 2021, Russia disbursed two \$500 million tranches of its intergovernmental loan. In July 2021, another loan was agreed to compensate for Russia’s tax maneuver in the oil industry. Gas and oil prices, which had been annually raised in 2015-2020, were frozen for 2021 and 2022. At the same time, reportedly, Russian intermediaries are helping their Belarusian counterparts bypass EU economic sanctions. Russia also pledged to provide support to the Belarusian banking sector and increase imports of Belarusian agricultural products.

Neither has Russia used the Minsk regime’s weakness to take over its neighbor’s key economic assets. In 2011-2013, during the previous crisis in Belarus-EU relations after the also rigged presidential elections of December 2010, Russia attempted to take over Belarusian strategic enterprises, even if with little result. In 2021, Russian business shows a lot less appetite to acquire control over state-owned enterprises in the petrochemical industry, machine-building, or the banking sector. That said, Moscow seems to be interested in the incremental increase of its engagement in the Belarusian economy through joint enterprises and enhanced cooperation, loans, and other assistance, which could eventually lead to a growing demand for privatization. Control over Belaruskaliy, a major producer of potassium fertilizers, is potentially on the agenda if Western sanctions pressure continues to rise.

Meanwhile, security and defense cooperation intensified but did not reach a qualitatively new level. Minsk hosts regular visits of key Russian security officials. The security and intelligence agencies increased the exchange of information and coordination of their activities. Joint special operations were executed, which inter alia resulted in an arrest of Belarusian opposition activists in Moscow in April 2021. A new [agreement](#) between the Belarusian Ministry of Interior and Rosgvardia now allows the parties to carry out a wide range of law-enforcement operations on each other’s territory.

Also, Russia assists in the technical modernization of the Belarusian armed forces, in particular its air defense. In October 2020, an [agreement](#) was signed on joint air defense of the borders of the Union State. The lease of two Russian military facilities in Belarus

was extended. Belarus also stepped up its [contribution](#) to the regional group of forces. The West-2021 (Zapad-2021) military exercise will be held in a new format and include the Belarusian territorial defense units. At the same time, defense cooperation remains within an already existing framework. Belarus and Russia reached a high degree of strategic, operational, and tactical compatibility of their defense forces well before 2020. There are no plans to set up new military bases, increase Russian military presence, or actively involve Belarusian forces in Russia's operations abroad.

“One Team”

There are several reasons why Russia once again decided to sustain and strengthen the weakened Lukashenko regime. First, the current modus operandi fully satisfies Moscow. Lukashenko has proven to be the best available promoter of Russian interests in the country. He continues to tie Belarus economically, politically, and ideologically to Russia, and this structural dependence will continue to grow if he stays at the helm. A cleansing of the state bureaucracy from national-oriented actors along with waves of domestic repressions, which target civil society and media, not only limits the Western presence and clears space for Russian media and NGOs but also consolidates Russia's linkages with the Belarusian elite and certain quarters of the population.

Similarly, Lukashenko's stay in power is the best guarantee that Belarus will not turn to the West. His mistrust of the West and its core values – democracy and market economy – has long ago ruled out a possibility of a meaningful change in the country's foreign policy course. His post-electoral delegitimization in the West deepens both Minsk's geopolitical loyalty to Moscow and the securitization of Belarusian foreign policy. Western economic sanctions would continue to increase the regime's dependence on Moscow. Also, they may eventually help to minimize the smuggling of sanctioned Western products into Russia.

Second, the Belarusian crisis remains instrumental for the Kremlin. Internally, Lukashenko's narrative of Western-driven regime change and its war against Minsk and Moscow fits well the propaganda discourse inside Russia. It also demonstrates to Russian society the frightening consequences of popular uprisings against the regime. Externally, the West's inability to influence the behavior of the Lukashenko regime works for the Kremlin's international status as this helps both to claim an implicit Western recognition of Moscow's sphere of influence and to emphasize Russia's resolve and commitment to its allies. The latter is particularly important at a time when other pro-Moscow actors are experiencing difficulties across the former Soviet Union. Finally, Minsk's actions, such as [trafficking](#) migrants into the EU, is an element of pressure on the West, Europe in particular, and a drain on its resources, which does not cost Moscow anything but may be pushing the West toward a “deal” with Russia over Belarus.

At the same time, another explanation shall be sought in Russia's limited capacity. Russia's plate as concerns the post-Soviet space, in particular, is already full. The costs of its conflicts with the West and Ukraine are significant. Pro-Russian forces have difficulties recovering from continuous electoral defeats in Ukraine and Moldova. The Caucasus and Central Asia are increasingly turning into zones of instability. The U.S. withdrawal from and the expansion of the Taliban's control in Afghanistan threaten the stability of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while the domestic situation in Kyrgyzstan is troubling. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is de-frozen and requires permanent involvement. In this situation, the Kremlin must tread carefully when considering whether to open yet another "front" in Belarus. Moscow should realize that any miscalculated move can stir a new crisis in the neighboring country with unpredictable consequences. Sticking to the status quo in such circumstances appears to be a much more rational strategy.

It is not surprising that in view of all this, Lukashenko has regained confidence. As he [noted](#) in January 2021, "we [Lukashenko and Putin] are tightly stuck into one team." This, however, does not mean that the Lukashenko regime has unlimited freedom of action. Moscow understands the extent of the regime's dependence and clearly delineates the boundaries of acceptable. Obviously, for example, cutting off the transit flows between Russia and Europe, as Lukashenko threatened, will not be allowed. A hypothetical question is what Moscow would do if Lukashenko abruptly decided to once again seek normalization in relations with the West, but apparently, now this is not a probable scenario and is not Russia's immediate concern.

Looking Ahead

The Belarusian Revolution has not shaken Belarus-Russia relations. Rather, it has consolidated the old model, which predominantly rests on the proximity of the two regimes and the belief systems of Putin and Lukashenko personally. This means that as long as both regimes survive, the status quo in Belarus-Russia relations will remain intact. In this regard, Western policymakers should remain sober and avoid oscillation between ungrounded enthusiasm and alarmism. Both the hope that Lukashenko would change his behavior (as in 2008 and 2015) and fears of the possible incorporation of Belarus by Russia would only hinder decision-making. This analysis implies that the West will not employ a wait-and-see approach. Instead, it should conduct a proactive policy that would promote change in the internal and external situation of Belarus along the lines of the Belarusian people's aspirations.

There are, however, three scenarios that would put this model in jeopardy in the medium run. First, any change of leadership would naturally trigger a substantial revision of Belarus-Russia relations. In Russia, various elite groups are, for different reasons, dissatisfied with the existing situation and, therefore, a post-Putin re-configuration of power is likely to modify the policy. Second, more importantly, the Belarusian Revolution

is not over. The longer Lukashenko stays in power with Russian support, the higher the chances are that the next revolutionary tide will be geopolitical and result in popular demands for distancing from Russia, whether or not Lukashenko leaves office before that. Admittedly, the end of the monopolistic system of power would make Russia's interventions in Belarus's domestic affairs easier, but this would also increase interest in a multi-vector foreign policy among Belarusian elites and society. Third, a changing international environment may start having a much larger effect than now. If the crisis between Belarus and the West seriously escalates as a result of Minsk's actions, which would involve Russia in an open confrontation with the West, the Kremlin may suddenly withdraw support for Lukashenko, which would inevitably have implications for the whole model.

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