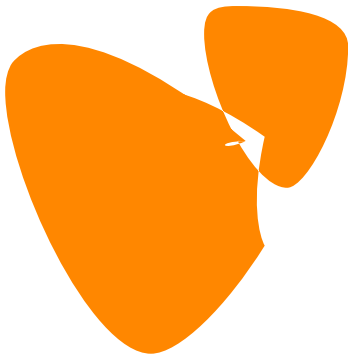


Belarus and Russia: turbulent relations



ТЫРОР

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka (left) and Vladimir Putin, President of Russia. © imago images / ITAR-TASS

These winter months have been chaotic for relations between Minsk and Moscow. In early December 2019, Belarusian ambassador to Russia Uladzimir Semashka sparked controversy in Belarus with a speech at the Eurasian Economic Integration conference. He said that Minsk needed to follow the goal of deep integration with Russia set out in previous agreements, which included the creation of a common parliament and government. Semashka also claimed that most of the road maps for deep integration had been agreed on and that the two sides would soon reach consensus on the remaining ones.

Some commentators fear that such integration might mean the end of Belarusian statehood. Belarusians acted quickly, starting protests on 7 December against steps towards integration that would impair the independence of their state and taking to the streets on several occasions since.

The Union State: fact or fantasy?

In the 1990s, Belarus and Russia signed several milestone documents on economic and political integration. By far the most important was the 1999 agreement on creating a Union State, a confederate polity with a common currency, a coordinated foreign and security policy, and a union parliament and government based on the principle of subsidiarity—the practice of taking decisions as close as possible to citizens. The Belarusian and Russian national

parliaments and governments were to be retained, but they would transfer a significant share of their competencies to the union bodies. Asymmetry between the two countries would be not only political but also legislative, as seventy-five of the 100 lawmakers in the union parliament would represent Russia.

This is one of the 'previous agreements' Semashka spoke about. Yet many of these supposed accords do not exist in reality. Even economic integration, which was to be the cornerstone of the partnership and is regulated by the Eurasian Economic Union, is far from complete. Belarus did not join Russia when it imposed sanctions on the European Union—in fact, Minsk helped European suppliers circumvent Moscow's measures. Belarus utilizes its generally positive political relationship with Russia (including usually concordant voting in the United Nations), its status as a "brotherly nation", and the formal integration framework for economic benefit. Russia, in turn, routinely engages in trade wars with Belarus, using its typical strategy towards its neighbors: leveraging economic power for political gain.

From time to time, Russia reminds Belarus of the 1999 agreement and pressures Minsk to concede its political positions. Tensions reached a high point in March 2019, when the Russian ambassador to Belarus Mikhail Babich claimed that Belarusian economic demands were 'excessive' without closer political integration, that Minsk was failing to progress towards the goals set in 1999, and that Belarusian politicians were using Russia to create the image of an enemy. The Belarusian foreign ministry responded categorically that Babich 'must have confused a federal district with a sovereign state'.

Some analysts have suggested that Russian President Vladimir Putin, who will not be able to seek re-election in 2024, sees the Union State as a potential vehicle to preserve his influence by moving from the Kremlin to become a confederate leader. However, the 1999 agreement did not provide for any kind of ruling figure for the union.

Belarus, unexpectedly resistant

More importantly, there seems to be no sign of Belarus ceding its independence. In late 2019, the issue was on the agenda once again—during the cold season, when Russia likes to leverage its position as Belarus's primary gas and oil supplier. In his speech, Semashka reiterated what Belarus often claims: it has not

relinquished the 1999 agreement, but there are problematic issues to be discussed. These include gas prices—Belarusian industry relies on discounted gas from Russia to be competitive—and oil re-export regimes.

Reports suggest that Russia and Belarus are currently debating a common customs code, a tax code, and an external trade regime. This is indeed deep economic integration. But significantly, a common currency, a common foreign and security policy, and supranational institutions have not been on the agenda to date.

Four meetings between Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka and Putin in December 2019 were largely fruitless. Minsk was not ready to make the concessions Moscow expected of it. As a result, according to Belarusian analyst Arsenii Sivistkii, Russia may leverage its subsidies to Belarus to force it into a deal. Failing that, Moscow could launch scenarios that would prevent Belarus from turning to the West. Should the plans of Minsk to diversify its energy supplies - including transit from the Baltic states - come into fruition, these scenarios would become all the more likely.

There is little reason to believe that Belarus, and Lukashenka personally, would agree to Putin becoming a Union State leader with any real powers. Putin, in turn, is unlikely to accept a merely symbolic position.

Newly proposed constitutional changes in Russia, which divert powers away from the president, might provide an alternative route. Putin could change the role within Russia while effectively maintaining power. The Union State plan could, therefore, be discarded—for this purpose. Ultimately, Russia's annexation of Belarus—something that has been actively discussed for two consecutive winters already—is unlikely to happen. Yet the Kremlin's political and economic pressure on Belarus is unlikely to end in the foreseeable future.

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