

Friends or Foes? Developments in Relations between Russia and Belarus

By Matthew Frear, Birmingham

Abstract

On the eve of the Belarusian presidential elections in December, relations between Minsk and Moscow have deteriorated notably. The familiar energy conflicts between Russia and Belarus have been complemented by a very public information war played out in the media of both countries. Russia can no longer be relied upon to provide political backing for Belarus's long-serving president, Alexander Lukashenko, however the Kremlin is not yet openly backing an alternative candidate.

The Rhetoric And Reality of Integration

2009 marked the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Union Treaty, which was to integrate Belarus and Russia. While the past decade has seen numerous high-level meetings and continued upbeat official rhetoric in both capitals, in reality the birth of this ill-defined union has been stillborn. An asymmetrical balance of power between the two republics is unacceptable to Lukashenko, while Russian presidents from Boris Yeltsin onwards have had no intention of accepting Belarus as an equal partner. Plans for monetary union have been all but abandoned, and since 2008 the Belarusian currency has been pegged to the US dollar rather than the Russian ruble. Negotiations on a Constitutional Act, which would form the legal basis of a genuine Union State, remain stalled. Today, the rhetoric of integration is more of a PR project, exploited by both sides for their own domestic needs, but with little chance of becoming a reality.

Furthermore, Russia has found that it can no longer rely on Minsk's unquestioning, loyal support in regional organizations. Lukashenko boycotted a Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) summit last year, declined to take on the rotating chairmanship of the organization and has demurred on signing up to its Collective Operational Reaction Forces. Earlier this year Minsk delayed its ratification of the Customs Union between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). These disagreements have been in response to, or have precipitated, bilateral conflicts with Russia, rather than representing attacks by Belarus against the regional bodies themselves.

Ongoing Economic Conflicts

For many years, Moscow was content to subsidise the Belarusian economy, through preferential access to the Russian market and cheap energy supplies, in return for securing an anti-Western bulwark and loyal ally as a neighbor. Over time however, Russia's interest has shifted to focus more on attaining economic influence over Belarus. There have been a number of oil and gas

conflicts over payments during the past decade, peaking in the New Year of 2006–2007 when Gazprom cut off supplies to Belarus for several days and even oil supplies were briefly interrupted. In the agreement that followed this dispute, gas prices for Belarus were to gradually rise to European levels by 2011, while Gazprom would eventually secure a 50% stake in the Beltransgaz transit pipelines over the same period. At the same time a new agreement on export duties for oil was reached. Since then Lukashenko has persisted in trying to delay the price increases and avoid opening up Belarusian state enterprises to Russian business. Energy conflicts threatened to flare up again in summer 2007 and 2010 (after Minsk's delay in signing up to the Customs Union). Belarus tries to make the most of the limited leverage it has as a transit route for oil and gas supplies to the EU and for access to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. However, with the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline via the Baltic Sea scheduled for completion by 2012, Russia will soon be able to start bypassing Belarus.

Disagreements have also arisen in other sectors, for example the so-called "milk war" in 2009 when Russia banned Belarusian dairy products for a month, triggering Lukashenko's boycott of the CSTO summit in retaliation. Lukashenko has sought to diversify his country's economic links, such as by buying oil from Venezuela, seeking to build business links with China and trying to attract Western investment through limited economic liberalization. The reduction in Russian subsidies has not yet produced the socio-economic collapse some had predicted, and Lukashenko has been able to deflect criticism of the state of the Belarusian economy and rising prices to some extent by pointing to the global financial crisis and conditions elsewhere in the region. Russian economic pressure has also seen Minsk increasingly resort to the rhetoric of defending Belarusian sovereignty, rather than simply emphasizing the socio-economic stability of the country.

New Political Conflicts

More recently, economic differences between the two countries have been compounded by open political dis-

agreements. To date Belarus has refused to recognise the declarations of independence by South Ossetia and Abkhazia, drawing the ire of Moscow. Since the August 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, Minsk has also more actively sought to improve relations with the EU, while at the same time resisting Western calls for democratization. When the Kyrgyz president was overthrown in April 2010, Lukashenko welcomed him to Belarus and expressed dismay at his deposal, which had been tacitly backed by Moscow. Since July this year, Russia's NTV channel has broadcast a series of sensational documentaries, covering amongst other things Lukashenko's personal life, mental health, business interests and the disappearance of opponents in the late 1990s. While the revelations are hardly new, they have never been so widely reported in the Russian information space. Other Russian TV channels and print media have also launched a concerted campaign of attacks against Lukashenko, while providing sympathetic coverage of some opposition candidates in the forthcoming presidential election.

In response Respublika, the official newspaper of the Belarusian Council of Ministers, has published Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov's critique of Vladimir Putin's decade in power. Lukashenko has held press conferences for the Russian media and the Kremlin has responded in return with events for the Belarusian media, at which both sides have been harshly critical of each other. While personal relations between Lukashenko and Putin were never particularly warm and friendly, these events are the most public falling out between Lukashenko and Dmitry Medvedev, with whom the Belarusian president had always tried to maintain the appearance of cordial relations. The impact of Russia's propaganda war in Belarus itself is somewhat limited. For example, independent polling indicates that while half the population in Belarus have heard of the NTV documentaries, less than a third have actually watched any of them and of those who have seen them, only a quarter have had their attitude towards Lukashenko changed as a result, either positively or negatively.

Presidential Elections in Belarus

The next presidential elections in Belarus did not have to take place until February 2011, however parliament was convened early in order to set polling day for 19 December. As such the elections will preempt any potential New Year oil or gas conflict with Gazprom and the Kremlin. Lukashenko hopes to win a fourth term as president, but this year he will not be able to rely on the political backing of the Kremlin and faces the possibility that Moscow will not formally recognise the election results. Although his support in the latest indepen-

dent opinion polls (September 2010) has dropped to just under 40 per cent, around a third of the electorate are undecided and few of his opponents seeking to stand against him can currently muster even one per cent of public support.

Opposition forces in Belarus, who have failed so far in this election to present even a façade of unity, face a challenge in responding to this new external pressure on the regime. Some have made the trip to Moscow to sound out possible Russian backing, but so far the Kremlin has not endorsed an alternative candidate. This has not prevented rumors about who might be the Kremlin's choice or is funded from Russia—be it business interests or Belarusian expats. Contenders for the role have included the poet Vladimir Neklyayev, the economist Yaroslav Romanchuk and the former diplomat Andrei Sannikov. Others on the nationalist wing of the opposition are concerned that Lukashenko could be replaced by a candidate owing his loyalty to Moscow and prepared to turn away from closer ties with Europe. For example the Belarusian Christian Democrat candidate, Vitaly Rymashevsky, has stated he could not rally behind the candidature of Neklyayev if he were presented as the unified candidate of the opposition. Alternatively there are those that contend that ousting Lukashenko overrides all other concerns, even if his replacement's national-democratic credentials are not as strong as they'd like them to be.

Nonetheless, regime change as a result of these elections remains highly unlikely, in spite of Russia's apparent readiness to see Lukashenko finally leave power. Despite the intense propaganda campaign in the Russian media, for now Lukashenko maintains steady support both from a significant section of the public, as well as the various groups in the Belarusian ruling elite. He can pose as a defender of Belarusian sovereignty against Russian oligarchs and expansionist Kremlin ambitions. Elections will be neither free nor fair, although Lukashenko has intimated that he expects his margin of victory to be lower than in 2006. Opposition forces are weakened by infighting; furthermore they have few natural allies amongst the Russian elites, which might allow them to take better advantage of the present deterioration in relations. Any street protests are unlikely to blossom into a popular revolution and it is improbable that Moscow is ready to see Lukashenko removed by force.

Beyond the 2010 Elections

While Lukashenko is likely to win his fourth term, his position could be tenuous. The Belarusian president has proved to be a consummate politician in his 16 years in power and outlasted many predictions of his inevitable fall from power; however he will have to call on all his

reserves of cunning and opportunism to compensate for the long-term loss of political and economic support from Russia. Deals cut with Venezuela, China or the Gulf states have yet to come anywhere near to filling the gap. As Belarus loses its traditional leverage as a transit route, Lukashenko may instead play the geopolitical card, threatening Moscow with withdrawal from the CSTO or the Single Economic Space in the hope of extracting concessions. The thaw in relations with the EU since 2008 has in reality been limited, and Brussels is not going to offer economic and financial support to Minsk simply because Lukashenko promises to turn his back on Russia and partially open up the economy to Western investment. Brussels will want to see more democratization, which would weaken Lukashenko's hold on power. However, agreeing to Moscow's economic demands would equally undermine Lukash-

enko's ability to rule. Russia may be hoping that even if Lukashenko is successfully re-elected, over the next few years he is no longer seen as a guarantor of stability in Belarus, and so there may be a palace coup and a successor from within the regime will oust the president. However, at present there is no obvious potential Kremlin candidate within the administration. Other commentators suggest a scenario in which Lukashenko steps down early on his own terms and hands over to a handpicked successor, possibly even his eldest son, Viktor, who could hit the reset button on relations with Russia and the West. Developments in Belarusian–Russian relations over the coming months and years will be a delicate balancing act, with risks for both sides and the potential for profound changes in the Lukashenko regime and the economic landscape of Belarus.

About the Author

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Further Reading

- Balmaceda, Margarita (2009): At a Crossroads: the Belarusian–Russian Energy-Political Model in Crisis, EUISS Chaillot Paper No. 119, November 2009, available at <http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp119.pdf>
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ANALYSIS

Developments And Trends in the Russian–Kazakh Strategic Partnership

By Fatima Kukeyeva, Almaty

Abstract

The strategic partnership between Kazakhstan and Russia illustrates the multifaceted and mutually beneficial nature of relations between two countries. However, this strategic partnership does not mean the two share a complete identity of common interests. Some issues remain contested and Astana and Moscow should seek to address these and resolve them mutually.

Kazakhstan and Russia both refer to their bilateral relationship as a strategic partnership, illustrating the multifaceted and mutually beneficial nature of relations between the two. There is significant potential for cooperation between the two states in various fields, because Kazakhstan and Russia are important actors in all regional processes within Central Asia. Indeed, both Kazakhstani and Russian policymakers recognize the necessity of collaboration with one another, in order to advance their respective national interests in the cur-

rent global and regional situation. At the present time and for the foreseeable future, Russian–Kazakh bilateral relations will be influenced by the global economic crisis, the consequences of the South Ossetia conflict (2008), the security situation in Afghanistan, energy issues, international terrorism, and creation of a Customs Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Due to the changed geopolitical situation in the former Soviet Union and in the world in general, the definition of a strategic partnership requires new approaches