



Russia-Belarus Open Disagreement Reflects Complexities in Moscow-Minsk Relations

OE Watch Commentary: At a December 2018 summit of the Eurasian Economic Union – currently consisting of five former Soviet Republics – President Lukashenko of Belarus launched into an unexpectedly open and direct questioning of energy policy with Russian President Putin. While Lukashenko specifically underscored the seeming unfairness in the price Belarus pays for Russian natural gas at the meeting, oil represents another point of contention between the two states. Russia’s so-called “tax maneuver” – Moscow’s decision to lower the export tax on its oil over the next six years – is expected to lead to a significant decrease in Belarusian revenues, as Minsk would be required to stop charging export tax as well (Belarus is a major transit state for Russian oil). The accompanying excerpted article from *Pravda* provides some additional context. At a follow-on bilateral meeting on 25 December in Moscow, the Kremlin’s published, brief transcript of the opening statements revealed a more amicable tone; however, lingering issues persist between the two states.

Notwithstanding a series of agreements (e.g., the Union Treaty) signed by Minsk and Moscow in the late 1990s that aimed at closer integration, President Lukashenko (in power since 1994) has endeavored to maintain an independent foreign policy and overall sovereignty of Belarus. Minsk plays an important regional diplomatic role within the framework of the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine, periodically hosting meetings of representatives (“working subgroups”) of the Trilateral Contact Group (made up of Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation, or OSCE). Minsk also participates directly in the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, with eight personnel deployed (per SMM statistics, as of 24 December 2018).

Regarding defense matters with Russia, Belarus has regularly participated in expansive Russian military exercises, such as Zapad (“West”) 2017 and Zapad 2013. As well, Belarusian and Russian servicemen train together in regular exercises of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), along with military representatives of the other CSTO members – Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Yet, despite Moscow’s stated intent in 2013 to establish a Russian air base within Belarus – which had followed a 2009 air defense agreement – this has not yet come to fruition. Moreover, President Lukashenko in late 2018 specifically noted that there was no need for such basing.

Lukashenko has of late tacitly encouraged an increase in Belarusian language usage, though the great majority of Belarusian citizens utilize Russian as their language of choice (both are official languages in Belarus), and Lukashenko delivered his first formal address in Belarusian in 2014. Whether this, in concert with other recent trends, reveals a legitimate sovereignty concern of the longstanding ruler – especially in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis – remains to be seen. Lukashenko has also increased his engagement with the EU and even recently softened his tone toward the US, to some effect: the release of Belarusian political prisoners in August 2015 led the (Council of the) EU to temporarily suspend most sanctions then directed against Minsk. Current sanctions (“restrictive measures”) expire on 28 February 2019. Against the backdrop of these developments, it is evident that a Russian-Belarusian bilateral relationship that once seemed to be quite automatic, has for some time now appeared to be more convoluted. **End OE Watch Commentary (Sarafian)**

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Vladimir Putin on Friendly Match of National Hockey Stars. Ice arena “Bolshoy”, Sochi, 4 Jan 2014. - With Aleksandr Lukashenko, Viacheslav Fetisov and Valeri Kamensky.

Source: Kremlin.ru [CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>) or CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)], https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fetisov_Lukashenko_Putin_Kamensky_Sochi_4_January_2014.jpg.

Source: “Будет ли Россия присоединять Белоруссию (Will Russia annex Belarus),” *Pravda*, 17 December 2018. <https://www.pravda.ru/world/formerussr/belorussia/17-12-2018/1402767-0/>

President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko made a statement that under the pretext of deep integration, Moscow wants to include his country within the Russian Federation...The crux of the conflict is that [President] Putin, [Prime Minister] Medvedev, and [Deputy Prime Minister] Kozak are firmly broadcasting “between the lines” to the President of Belarus that no benefits and unique offers will come until Belarus begins to integrate deeper into the Russian economy, and Lukashenko does not want to betray [Belarusian] sovereignty for a barrel of oil...