

A Brotherly Takeover: Could Russia Annex Belarus?

A merger between the two countries looks unrealistic for now.

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Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko / Kremlin.ru

Minsk and Moscow are like an old married couple; they tend to air their long-standing grievances in public. This time, a dispute over compensating Belarus for a Russian oil tax maneuver prompted Moscow to revisit the oldest disagreement: the 1999 Union Treaty that has never been implemented.

Russia issued Belarus what sounded like an ultimatum: financial support in return for greater integration with the Russian state. But with the constitution preventing Russian President Vladimir Putin from seeking another term after 2024, many viewed the ultimatum as a threat. A barrage of publications, official statements, and even anonymous social media posts claimed that the annexation of Belarus is inevitable. Such a move, the theory goes, would then allow Putin to become president of the Russian-Belarusian Union State.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, analysts cannot entirely rule out this possibility. That said, we can assess the current likelihood of the annexation scenario and disprove some myths common among those predicting it.

Let's start with a foundational myth. Many Russians incorrectly believe that capricious Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is the only obstacle preventing Belarus—the most Soviet of former Soviet republics—from happily joining the Russian Federation.

However, in reality, the number of Belarusians who support the country's independence has steadily and consistently grown. Twenty-eight years of living in a separate state with all its legal and political attributes—an entire generation of people raised in an independent Belarus—have affected the nation's collective identity.

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Even if the majority of Belarusians support a union with Russia, they don't see it as a future merger of the two countries. Polls show that 55–75 percent of people steadily support the country's current level of integration with Russia. But when asked to choose between Belarus's unification with Russia and the country's sovereignty, only 15–20 percent are willing to support deeper integration, and less than 5 percent would want to see Belarus as a part of Russia.

Moreover—unlike in Ukraine, Moldova, or Kazakhstan—Belarusian supporters of Russia aren't confined to certain areas of the country. There is no Belarusian Crimea or Donbas that could be used to destabilize the Minsk government. Unlike pro-Western Belarusians, Russia supporters lack their own political force. They aren't mobilized, even by the standards of Belarus's rather indifferent society. And they don't face discrimination on the basis of language or cultural differences, so they can't allege that Minsk and Western Belarusian nationalists trample upon their Russian identity.

Nor is Belarusian support for a Russia-oriented foreign policy unanimous. When offered not just the choice of “Russia vs. EU,” but also “equally close relations with everyone” and “against joining any alliance,” up to 60 percent of Belarusians pick the neutral path. If the Belarusian authorities opt for a neutral foreign policy, the majority of the country's population will enthusiastically support this position.

Even the so-called “Soviet Belarusians,” who completely reject any nationalist aspirations, see Russia as a country of oligarchs, social inequality, corruption, crime, and bad roads. When these people—most of whom are public sector employees and senior citizens—wax nostalgic about the “big country,” that country more resembles today's Belarus than Russia in terms of social policy.

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Thus, Belarus may appear a surprisingly pro-Russian and Russian-speaking country, but Moscow will most likely fail to find its base among Belarusians.

In fact, joining Russia has been a taboo subject in Belarusian politics for many years. Even the country's communists take independence as a given. And the authorities have demonstrated that they are prepared to harshly punish those who dare cross this political red line. In 2017, commentators expressing excessively pro-Russian views found themselves charged with provoking interethnic strife and held in pretrial detention for a year.

Moreover, it's difficult to cobble together a "Russian party" in a country that lacks genuine political parties and a developed network of nongovernmental organizations. Besides, Belarus is an authoritarian state that will instantly crack down on any attempt to destabilize the regime. The Belarusian authorities censor critical statements on Russian TV, are willing to block popular social networks, and have never shied away from arresting and preventatively detaining opposition activists. These measures are traditionally aimed at the pro-Western opposition, but the repressive state apparatus can crush pro-Russian protests too.

But let's imagine that the takeover of Belarus happens. Will the Belarusian people resist occupation?

A June 2015 poll suggests 19 percent of Belarusians would be willing to take up arms. But this question is too hypothetical to be taken seriously. Much would depend upon how the conflict developed and the positions of elite and security forces factions. Furthermore, like Ukraine, Belarus has several national-democratic and nationalist parties that view Russia as an aggressive empire that poses an eternal threat to Belarusian independence.

An actual takeover attempt would likely stoke these sentiments, leading to mass protests in large cities.

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More importantly, no one—including Moscow—can be sure there won't be serious resistance. Hence, in planning a takeover, Russia would need to be ready to crush public protests and overcome guerilla warfare.

Beyond this, the Belarusian political regime is the fundamental obstacle to the country's close integration with anyone. Authoritarian rulers cannot share their power—not inside the country, not with external forces. Aside from some drastic personal threats, it's difficult to imagine what Moscow can offer Lukashenko to induce him to give up his power. Money, a yacht, or a Sochi villa doesn't come close to the opportunities and status afforded by being in full control of an average-sized European country.

Thus, the only option that remains for Russia is to provoke a split within the Belarusian elite and foster a pro-Russian faction in its midst. But this path is hardly straightforward.

While the Belarusian ruling class is not uniform in its views—it consists of pro-European diplomats, pro-market technocrats, conservative security operatives, communist factory directors, and just plain career-oriented government officials—it is united by its enduring loyalty to Lukashenko. The Belarusian president has a monopoly on foreign policy and integration questions. No government official is allowed to venture outside of the president's position on these issues.

Moreover, many (if not all) high-ranking government officials have benefited from the country's sovereignty. After leaving public service, they can enjoy a carefree life in a small and well-managed country that has not been divvied up into zones of influence by oligarchs. Were the two countries to merge, the arrival of Russian big business to Belarus could deprive these officials of both their current positions and their peaceful retirements.

Even if there are dyed-in-the-wool Russophiles in the Belarusian government, betraying the country's leader carries excessive personal risk—especially when the plot's success is far from guaranteed. One could lose everything—including his or her freedom—by so much as flirting with Moscow. This is doubly the case in a system where government officials justifiably fear monitoring by the security services.

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Many in the Western media believe that the Belarusian security forces are packed with Russian agents, since most of the current generals graduated from Russian military academies. But it is difficult to measure how strong these ties are today and why a few years of study in Russia outweigh decades of service in independent Belarus. So far, there is no reason to believe that Belarusian security offices—who are being monitored by one another—have even the slightest inclination to surrender the country's sovereignty.

Besides, many forget that Moscow hasn't staged a successful coup abroad since the Soviet Afghan War. It's much easier to chip off a rebellious piece of a country's territory than to topple a strong regime.

Therefore, if Russia really wanted to absorb Belarus, its only option would be to use (or threaten to use) force and potentially face popular resistance. So the real question is whether such a takeover is actually worth it for the Kremlin.

The possible liabilities include the costs of the takeover and subsidies for a 10-million-strong region, which would likely face Western sanctions similar to those imposed on Crimea, since the United States and the EU won't recognize Belarus's annexation. What goal can justify these costs for Moscow?

If Russia were set on annexing more territory, we could expect it to start with the far less problematic breakaway South Ossetia region of Georgia. But that has not happened, suggesting that Moscow is at least somewhat concerned about provoking another round of tensions with the West. And if Putin is so obsessed with his job approval ratings to forcibly annex entire states, why did he recently take the unpopular step of raising the pension age in Russia?

According to polls, Russians have been expressing greater support for a peaceful foreign policy for months now. They want their government to return to domestic issues. The Kremlin is obviously aware of the numbers. This means that an attempt to boost ratings by annexing Belarus could actually backfire, causing popular discontent, especially if it generates new sanctions and financial losses.

In other words, if Putin wishes to remain president after 2024, annexing Belarus and then

becoming leader of the Union State is rife with unpredictable risks. A better option would simply be to amend the Russian Constitution.

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