The Moscow Times
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Hundreds Protest Russia-Belarus Integration Pact in Minsk

December 09, 2019



Protesters waved flags and chanted “No to occupation,” while video showed people tearing up photos of Putin. **Tatyana Zenkovich / EPA / TASS**

Several hundred people gathered in Belarus' capital Minsk on Saturday to protest against what its opposition views as a loss of independence to Russia.

Protesters waved flags and chanted “No to occupation” as Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi to discuss an integration road map for the two countries. A lack of detail on what a Russia-Belarus integration pact might include has fueled fears that Moscow aims to gain new influence in Minsk in order to eventually absorb it.

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Participants ripped photographs of Putin during the rally, footage shared by the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty news website shows. Protesters also formed a human chain

alongside Minsk's main street, Independence Avenue, Belarussian media reported.

Lukashenko's talks with Putin yielded "a lot of progress" including on resolving differences on Russia's oil and gas supplies to Belarus, Russia's economy minister said.

"The positions have come significantly closer," Russian Economy Minister Maxim Oreshkin said, without providing any detail. The two presidents would meet again in St. Petersburg on Dec. 20, the RBC news website quoted Oreshkin as saying.

However, the two leaders left the negotiations without signing a deal to reinvigorate the so-called Union State and move forward with plans for closer integration between the two countries.

Russia has helped prop up Lukashenko over the past 25 years with loans and energy subsidies. But it started to scale back this help last year, prompting Lukashenko to accuse Russia of trying to bully his much smaller country into a union.

The Belarussian government says it stands to lose hundreds of millions of dollars a year from changes to Russian tax policy and wants compensation. Russia says the subsidies it pays to Belarus cost its treasury billions of dollars.

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Putin's current term ends in 2024 when the constitution requires him to leave the Kremlin. Some critics have speculated he could try to bypass the constitutional limit on serving more than two consecutive terms and retain power by becoming the head of a unified Russian-Belarussian state.

The Kremlin denies this and Putin has said there are no plans afoot to unite Russia and Belarus.

Lukashenko, who did not speak to the press after the talks, last month threatened not to sign an integration deal with Russia if it failed to resolve "oil and gas issues."

The Belarussian leader, who has been in power since 1994, has dismissed opposition fears that a possible integration pact with Russia could end with his country losing its independence to Moscow.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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