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‘Russia Is a Part of Belarus,’ President Lukashenko Quips

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Russia should join its smaller neighbor Belarus rather than forcing Minsk to join Moscow’s orbit, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko quipped Tuesday, days after the latest round of integration talks between the two ex-Soviet allies.

Moscow and Minsk are members of a bilateral “union state” and have in recent months discussed a projet for even deeper ties. The ongoing talks have fueled speculation that Russian President Vladimir Putin could retain power as the head of a new supranational body beyond 2024, when his current term ends.

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“The simplest option that Russia and Belarus will accept in terms of a union state: You join Belarus,” Lukashenko said in an interview with Russia’s Ekho Moskvy radio station.

“Why are some of you inviting us to join Russia? Why aren’t you considering this [other] possibility?” he asked. “Take a listen: Russia is a part of Belarus.”

Lukashenko, who has relied on Russian loans and cheap energy during his 25-year rule over Belarus, floated a similar idea this spring.

Russia, an economy 29 times the size of Belarus, began to scale back energy subsidies and loans to its smaller neighbor last year. Putin last week conditioned further gas discounts to Belarus on progress with the “union state” project.

In Tuesday’s interview, Lukashenko warned that a forceful attempt to make Belarus a part of Russia could trigger a war with the West. Belarus has been uneasy over the prospects of integrating further with Russia after Moscow seized the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014.

In comments on Wednesday, the Kremlin said it did not view Lukashenko’s contentious words as hostile toward Russia.

“Some rough edges are inevitable. But that doesn’t spoil the overall background,” Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov said at a daily briefing as quoted by RIA Novosti.

“We’ve done a titanic job in agreeing an entire package of roadmaps on advancing integration and strengthening the Union State,” the state-run news agency quoted Peskov as saying.

A senior member of Lukashenko’s government has said that Belarus and Russia plan to resolve their remaining differences over gas, oil and tax issues this week. Putin and Lukashenko will then sign the integration package at an as-yet unknown date, Belarus’ first deputy prime minister Dmitry Krutoy was quoted as saying.

The sides have postponed discussions of deeper political integration until the next stage of talks, Russia’s RBC news website cited two unnamed sources familiar with the negotiations as saying Wednesday.

In his comments to Ekho Moskvy, Lukashenko denied that he and Putin addressed forming a “supranational” body (which Russia and Belarus call “item 31” in their integration roadmap) during recent talks.

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