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Why Fears of a Russia-Belarus Merger Never Come True

For now, the Kremlin is more interested in keeping things in Belarus stable and predictable.

By Dzianis Melyantsou

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Relations between Belarus and Russia continue to baffle observers with their unpredictability. Just a year ago, the two countries were holding tough negotiations over road maps outlining their closer integration, which, ironically, only made public their growing differences. Following the August presidential election in Belarus, which threw the regime into crisis, the irritation previously shown by both sides was suddenly replaced with demonstrative cooperation. The Kremlin supported Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko throughout the biggest protests in the country's history, and continues to back him in his conflict with the West.

Only one thing has not changed throughout all of this: the fear that Moscow will take advantage of Minsk's growing problems to carry out a hostile merger with its neighbor as

payback for its help. In reality, however, the interaction between the two countries reveals an entirely different dynamic.

For years now, every time Lukashenko goes to Russia, there is speculation that he is preparing to relinquish Belarusian sovereignty. The fact that this has never happened does not stop this speculation from increasing in intensity every time. The same thing happened ahead of the summit between the two leaders in Moscow last month, yet once again, nothing of the sort was announced.

Of course, it's possible that not everything that was said behind closed doors was made public, but it's far more likely that if such a crucial decision for Belarusian sovereignty had indeed been made, it would have happened during Lukashenko's earlier visits to Russia, when his position was far more vulnerable than it is now.

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Still, the idea that Lukashenko has promised major concessions on integration or to carry out constitutional reform in exchange for Russia's support during the protests refuses to go away. Yet it's nearly nine months since the presidential election, and no significant moves in either of those directions have been made.

Of course, the Russian side is prepared to play tough to put pressure on Minsk, but the Belarusian negotiators — especially Lukashenko himself — should not be underestimated.

For this reason, it would be hasty to dismiss the theory that the Belarusian protests were convincingly presented to Putin as anti-Russian and pro-Western, and as aiming to deprive Russia of a key ally, thereby weakening its western flank. In this respect, all the West's actions — immediately coming out in support of the protests, and calling on Russia to refrain from interfering — played right into Lukashenko's hands.

It's undeniable, of course, that a certain destabilization of the Belarusian regime and ensuing isolation from the West was objectively in the Kremlin's interests. It has drastically reduced Lukashenko's room for maneuver and severely damaged his position in talks on integration with Russia. But it's unlikely that Moscow's plan included the full collapse of the Belarusian power system and risk of a civil war. Such a turn of events would have forced Moscow to intervene, and to invest enormous resources to normalize the situation.

The international context is also important. Amid Moscow's confrontation with the West, Minsk's significance as an ally is growing—both in military and strategic terms, and in psychological terms. In 2010, the Kremlin demanded that Lukashenko sign an agreement on a single economic space in exchange for support in the presidential election. Ten years later, the Belarusian authorities got away scot-free with using anti-Russian rhetoric, the Wagner mercenaries scandal, and dragging out talks on the integration road maps.

It appears that the Kremlin was more interested in keeping things in Belarus stable and predictable. Minsk may sometimes be an uncooperative ally for Moscow, but in this situation, it was more appealing than the unpredictable outcome of trying to boost Russia's influence by destabilizing a country that borders on the heart of Russia.

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After all, even while performing a balancing act between Russia and the West, Lukashenko has always more or less accommodated Russian strategic interests. He has never put in doubt Belarus's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union, called for the closure of Russian military facilities on Belarusian territory, or for an end to the joint guarding of the Union State borders or the joint air defense system. In some ways, the Belarusian president had already paid for Russia's support.

Lukashenko has succeeded in quashing the protests, stabilizing the situation, and preventing a schism within the ruling elite, but now his room for maneuver in foreign policy is severely limited. Russia is not Belarus's only partner: there is still China, with which Minsk's political, trading, and military cooperation is consistently growing. Still, political isolation and Western sanctions will inevitably push the Belarusian regime closer into Moscow's embrace.

This is happening already: the number of joint military drills with Russia is increasing; cooperation between the two countries' intelligence agencies is being demonstrated by events such as the recent uncovering of a planned coup against Lukashenko; and Belarusian exports are being rerouted via Russian ports, since their previous routes went through countries that have sanctioned Belarus. Another guarantee of loyalty could come in the form of a full-fledged Russian military base opening on Belarusian territory, something that has been under discussion for many years.

At the same time, Belarus's weakened position has not altered its traditional interests — or Minsk's readiness to defend them. This is becoming increasingly obvious as the Belarusian regime regains control over the situation at home. During talks on further integration, Minsk continues to demand equal access to energy resources and an end to trade restrictions: "no equal conditions, no union," in Lukashenko's words.

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In any case, negotiations have not yet even touched on real issues of sovereignty: a single currency and the integration of military organizations. It seems, therefore, that we can expect the continuation of the long and not always smooth integration process that has been ongoing for more than twenty years—without any sensational breakthroughs, mergers or acquisitions.

Large Belarusian enterprises that depend on exports will continue to be active in various parts of the world. In that sense, Belarus will continue to have a multi-vectoral element, albeit in an altered format due to its problems in the West. Its geographical position and the structure of its economy also require it to maintain a working relationship with the neighboring European Union, as well as with individual EU states. Sooner or later, therefore, Minsk will come to some kind of new version of its balancing act.

Given the worsening standoff between Russia and the West, a more important question hangs over the deal between Minsk and Moscow, under which Minsk offers a close military alliance and takes into account Russian strategic interests in exchange for Moscow's economic and political support. Paradoxical as it may seem, that deal is what guaranteed — and continues to

guarantee — the preservation of Belarusian sovereignty and independence.

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