Belarus in the Eurasian Economic Union: Enough is Enough

Last week, Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei criticised cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union. Minsk is no longer hiding that its own position on the EU-led Eastern Partnership initiative starkly differs from Russia's stance on the issue.

Although Minsk continues to assure Moscow about its brotherly support, brazen commentaries from pro-Putin commentators in Russia leave little doubt: the Kremlin does not believe these assurances. The Belarusian leadership responds by turning to Western countries or even China as a counterbalance.

By putting pressure on Minsk, Moscow believes it has driven Belarus into a corner. Yet there may be an exit still – and it leads westwards.

Minsk Paying for Russia

In criticising the newest post-Soviet integration initiative of the Eurasian Economic Union, Makei pointed out that the creation of a common economic space had essentially been delayed until 2025, and a series of exemptions and limitations currently exist within the Union. The economic basis of the project, as well as sincerity of its participants, have raised a number of questions.

Indeed, since 2014 trade between the Eurasian Economic Union member states has been declining. In reality, each country appears to be going its own way. Makei recently stated that “Kazakhstan strives to rapidly join the WTO. And meanwhile there are more than 3.5 thousand items in which Kazakhstan is
in the negotiation process with the WTO to achieve a reduction in customs protections.” As a result, Kazakhstan has a more liberal trade regime than other Eurasian Economic Union member states.

However, it is actually Belarus who suffers from these kind of actions from its partners in the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia joined the WTO much earlier and it is also ignoring the interests of Belarus and Kazakhstan. Russian politician Yuri Boldyrev recently commented on the matter by stating,

We have simply betrayed Kazakhstan and Belarus, or in the very least did not show concern for them. We promised them to join the WTO together — you can well remember the public statements to this effect. And then we joined unilaterally. And since then both Kazakhstan and Belarus, as the members of the Single Customs Space, are bearing the costs of these developments. At the same time they do not have the right to defend their own interests.

Minsk is not willing to pay for Russia's image project — the Eurasian Union — out of its own pocket. Even less so in view of the fact that Moscow cares less and less about its ally. Russia not only joined the WTO while ignoring Belarus, it also launched a massive intervention in Ukraine without informing Belarus.

The Kremlin consistently denies Minsk new military hardware all while demanding from Belarus a Russian air force base within its borders, and Putin is not hiding that he does not regard Belarus or Kazakhstan as allies. For him, Russia's sole allies are its own army and navy.

Can Russia Make Lukashenka Dance the Can-Can?

Emboldened by improved relations with the West, the Belarusian authorities rebuffed the Kremlin over the Eastern Partnership as well. Last month, Makei emphasised that the idea of Eastern
Partnership was “necessary, needed, and useful”. That stands in stark contrast both with Putin's recent criticism of the Eastern Partnership and with the statement by one senior Russian official, Putin's closest associate Igor Shuvalov, who called the Partnership “a grave mistake” and the reason for the war in Ukraine.

These statements, however, do not indicate that Minsk is deliberating any radical change in its foreign policy orientation. Belarus' location and close economic ties with Russia mean that Belarus will remain its important ally, a reality that is taken into consideration by every responsible political player in Belarus, be they members of the authorities or the opposition. Living next door to Russia can at times be both a strategic asset and liability for the Belarusian state.

Therefore, when top Belarusian officials repeatedly state that Minsk's friendship with Russia is healthy as ever, these words reflect their heightened awareness of the sensitive nature of their ties at present. It does not, however, mean that Belarus is a marionette of Russia.

Balazs Jarabik of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commenting of Belarus' resistance to making outright anti-Russian public statements said that EU politicians understand the precariousness of Minsk's position. Therefore, “everybody is looking at Minsk with understanding.” President of the European Council Donald Tusk admitted that “Belarus is genuinely independent and neutral on the issue [of Crimea's annexation] which is so important for both the EU and Belarus itself.”

However, the Kremlin may well hold another view. Rostyslav Ishchenko, a Ukrainian political commentator who in recent years became known for his close contacts with Russian government and support for Putin, recently dismissed Lukashenka's independence. At an event organised by the
Russian Gorchakov Foundation in Moscow he claimed, 

Politically, it is not difficult to force Lukashenka to dance the can can. In two days time Russia could announce that it does not consider Belarus a sovereign state and in three days Lukashenka faces a Maidan and full-fledged foreign aggression, because he is nothing and his name is holds no meaning.

Kremlin Driving Minsk Towards the West

Ishchenko's words are not the first verbal threats launched this year by people known to be close to the Russian government. These attacks and the Kremlin's public dismissive stance towards its own allies has produced any number of consequences – one has only to listen to Belarusian officials to see its effects.

In May, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna conceded that Minsk hopes that the EU will help Belarus strengthen the economic basis of the nation's independence by providing access to European financial institutions and supporting Belarusian efforts to join the WTO. In June, Belarus' Foreign Ministry spokesman commented that despite Washington maintaining sanctions against Belarus bilateral relations are improving.

Earlier this month the chairman of the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament Uladzimir Andreichanka announced that Minsk was working on returning to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Belarus lost its special guest status there after the controvercial 1996 constitutional referendum.

Due to its economic, political, cultural and historical ties Belarus cannot afford enact dramatic changes in its foreign policy. At the same time, Minsk faces the increasingly cynical attitude of Kremlin and draws its own conclusions. No one
should overestimate the importance of the intergovernmental organisations and initiatives promoted by Moscow, like the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Union State of Belarus and Russia, or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

It looks the Eurasian Economic Union is following the path treaded by similar initiatives – despite the loud rhetoric coming out of the Kremlin, few concrete results have been seen as a result. For its part, Minsk is learning from its past experiences – and it is certainly not going to spoil its relations with the West for dubious Kremlin projects. The West could gain a lot if it continue to work with Minsk by encouraging a pragmatic line in Belarusian politics.