

Lukashenka in Moscow: The Prodigal Son Is Coming Back?

Last Friday, after months of uncertainty, Alyaksandr Lukashenka decisively moved to guarantee his political survival for the foreseeable future by signing a series of agreements with Russia. This was the sequel to Belarus's earlier entry into the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

The agreements came as a disappointment to Western politicians who had speculated that the isolation of Belarus, coupled with the economic crisis, would eventually bring down or at least affect the regime. Speaking on Wednesday, Russian ambassador to Belarus declared that Russian support to the Belarusian regime in 2011-2012 would exceed \$7 bn, and assumed that in two to three years living standards in the country would return to the level of early 2011.

Belarus sold its remaining 50 percent stake of “Beltransgaz” to Russia for \$2.5 bn, giving Russia full ownership over the distribution of Siberian gas pumped to Europe. In exchange, Belarus received a \$10 bn soft loan to [build](#) a nuclear power plant in Hrodna region; a three-year agreement whereby Belarus will get Russian natural gas for less than half the selling price to Europe, saving Belarus an estimated \$3 bn a year; and finally, confirmation of the next tranche of the bailout loan from the Eurasian Economic Community.

Belarus in Russian Hands

The Belarusian regime has sold Beltransgaz, [entered](#) the Eurasian Economic Union, and eagerly taken Russian loans. According to Dzianis Melyantsou of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, Lukashenka essentially reverted to the subsidies mechanism that earlier defined Belarus-Russia relations – even at the price of national independence. As

Melyantsou notes, this is still less of a price to pay than accepting the conditionality imposed by Western nations in return for uncertain promises of financial support.

With Russian support, Lukashenka has more freedom to adopt authoritarian measures. He can use fear in society to avert liberalization and maintain his grip on power. The Belarusian opposition and civil society will have less room to maneuver and will face a new wave of persecutions.

The Russian politicians toyed with the idea of supporting an alternative to Lukashenka recently, but the Kremlin seems to have realized that the Belarusian ruler satisfies its needs by maintaining the status quo, ruling efficiently, and professing a stronger loyalty toward Russia than many other post-Soviet nations. Ahead of the presidential elections in Russia next year, Vladimir Putin touts the integration theme – the Kremlin is willing to help Lukashenka to guarantee his support for the Eurasian Economic Union.

Deutsche Welle is Welcoming Moscow's Influence in Belarus

Now more than ever, the European Union's stance on the 'Belarus issue' matters, because national pro-democracy movement has been weakened and is in need of extensive support. Unfortunately, many in the European Union are apparently comfortable with Belarus staying in the Russian sphere of influence. Particularly disturbing is a recent commentary given by Deutsche Welle (DW) – a public broadcaster supervised by the German government – on the recent agreements between Belarus and Russia.

Andrei Gurkov of DW, emphasized the political component of the new agreements, defining two main tasks of new treaties as “to take under complete [Russian] control the gas transportation system of this country and to stimulate Eurasian integration processes in this country. In other words, to more strongly tie Minsk to itself”. And to leave no ambiguities: “In

principle, both aims correspond with the interests of the Europeans*.”

Even worse, DW has been most concerned with whether the bailouts to Belarus might hurt Moscow in the future. Underlying this is a clear parallel can be drawn between Belarus and Greece: the commentator wants Russia to avoid the problems the EU is now facing. DW analyzes how Russia can gain from issuing loans and seizing Belarusian assets. Gurkov states: “We want to believe that Moscow understands it well and is operating out of sober calculation. A borrower sinking in his own debts will sooner or later pay with shares of the most attractive [Belarusian] enterprises. However, it is very important not to mistake the true value of these assets.”

Such views have been commonplace in Europe. Many believe that already in the late 1990s, the OSCE helped Russia to neutralize Belarusian opposition, giving Lukashenka time to consolidate his rule. Some German diplomats suggested then that Russia could help democratize Belarus.

It appears that today Poland is the only EU country that seriously takes the idea of an independent and free Belarus. The rest of the EU – including the largest members – are not especially interested, and if they are, they often favor the Russian position. The [failure](#) of the Eastern Partnership demonstrated just how little the smaller eastern neighbors matter to most EU members.

EU Can but Does Not Act

In the short term, Europe can do next to nothing about the Belarusian regime. Its best bet is to concentrate on longer-term leverage. Sanctions and isolation, however, are not always conducive to this process and have failed to bring about democratic change in the past in too many cases around the world. Surprisingly, the West keeps talking about punishing the dictatorship even though it is obvious that

Belarus has an open border with Russia and no change will come unless Belarus' ties with an increasingly authoritarian Russia are undermined.

Weakening these ties is not impossible. Belarusians view Europe as the most attractive destination for travel and labor migration. The EU would lose little by removing visa and travel restrictions for Belarus's 9.5 million citizens, who have never posed a serious threat to the EU in terms of security or illegal migration. At present, well-educated Belarusians can only work without restrictions in Russia and Poland. Western countries could also launch more exchange and cooperation projects with the public and private sector in Belarus to provide them with alternatives outside Russia.

The EU should seriously consider engaging Belarusian government officials and regime insiders to provide the nomenclature with an exit option. Even many officials known for their hardline rhetoric are already accepting Western values in practice by sending their children to Western Europe and the United States. If given a choice, they could defect.

But to make them understand that choice the West has to interact with these people and convince them that there are other ways of doing things besides the Russian-style authoritarianism. After all, it is not just some abstract democratic ideal but also the best national interest of European countries to have on their eastern borders a free and stable nation and not a dictatorial outpost of the "Eurasian integration".

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