

Lukashenka: Russia Cannot Strangle Belarus

Putin is visiting Belarus today on his first trip abroad since his re-election as Russia's president. Alexandr Lukashenka is trying to capitalise on the worsening relations between Russia and the United States caused by the anti-missile defence issue.

It is unlikely that the Belarus government will manage to secure further expansion of Russia's economic support. However, the authorities receive additional guarantees of maintaining the economic support at the current level. At least this year, Russia will not revive sensitive issues in its relations with Belarus.

Lukashenka refrained from making critical statements in relation to the Russian leadership in his annual address earlier this month to avoid creating discontent in the Kremlin. He is trying to make the West believe that Belarusian – Russian relations have been developing in the best of all possible ways.

Addressees of the Annual Address

The people of Belarus were the last of all possible addressees of Lukashenka's annual address delivered on 8 May 2012. In 2011, when the prices rose more than twofold and the average salary shrank to the same extent, the electoral rating of Lukashenka, according to independent sociologists, dropped to the 20% mark. However, even in 2011 Lukashenka was saying that he had been supported by more than 80% of voters during the presidential election held on December 19, 2010, and the following year, taking into account the "worsening of the socio-economic situation", he estimated his rating at 70%.

The parliament was also not among the primary addressees of the speech. During the entire history of its existence since the referendum held on November 24, 1996, the parliament has rejected only one draft law submitted by the Presidential Administration. When Lukashenka needed to speed things up, the parliament (*de facto*, a branch of the Presidential Administration) adopted laws, which were handed down from the Administration, within three days.

The main addressees of the annual address were the West and Russia

The main addressees of the annual address, which included the principal foundations of foreign and domestic policy for 2012, were the West and Russia, i.e. Belarus' main foreign partners. As happens rather often in today's Belarus, the postponement of the address was accompanied by an information leakage organised by the authorities.

The government tried to do its best so that those who study the development of situation in Belarus – analysts, diplomats, politicians – received information that Lukashenka had found the speechmakers-drafted theses related to privatisation to be too liberal. And he allegedly considered the thesis on relations with the West to be too confrontational.

The Cold War Costs and Benefits

The authorities have gotten another opportunity to continue the cold war with the West. It is important for Lukashenka that, after Andrej Sannikau and Zmicier Bandarenka, other personalities who position themselves as leaders, i.e. Mikalaj Statkievich, Paval Sieviaryniec and Zmicier Dashkievich, write petitions for pardons. The government wants to be assured that no groups within the opposition are able to ruin its game plan with the West, which is possible in the not-so-near future, a game plan similar to the one which was played in the second half of 2010.

The authorities believe that the EU will never agree on expanding the economic sanctions

The continuation of repression does not mean that the authorities will burn bridges in their relations with the West. Lukashenka wants to persuade the West that the latter will not have other partners in Belarus and that cooperation has to be developed on his terms, without asking for major steps towards political liberalisation. The authorities believe that the EU will never agree on expanding the economic sanctions.

Currently, Western companies do not intend to participate in the privatisation of Belarusian state property. The privatisation of assets in 2012 for the amount of USD 2,500,000,000 was one of the terms of the agreement with the Anti-Crisis Fund of the Eurasian Economic Community (which is fully controlled by Russia). The sale of controlling shares of Belarusian enterprises to Russian companies is now the main issue of Russia's foreign policy towards Belarus.

The announcement that Lukashenka was not satisfied with theses on privatisation created suspense: what will be the final decision regarding privatisation of major enterprises in 2012? In other words, will the government make steps towards genuine integration, as it is understood by the Kremlin?

Belarus will not fulfill the requirements imposed by the Eurasian Anti-Crisis Fund

Yet again, Lukashenka noted that Belarus will not fulfill the requirements imposed by the Eurasian Anti-crisis Fund for Belarus as far as the sales of enterprises is concerned. "We have rejected all lists of enterprises to be privatized. However, it was not done to humiliate the workers of enterprises. People react in a very painful way. They ask the question: "Don't you need us anymore?"

Talking about concrete enterprises, Vice-Premier Uladzimir Siamahka noted as follows: "Belarus will never ever sell the controlling stock of "Belaruskali" shares. According to him, it would be a crime against the state." Also, Semashko reiterated that Belarus would not sell the controlling share of Minsk Automobile Plant.

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This annual address of Lukashenka had to be made by the time of the presidential election in Russia. Lukashenka's address contains some signals to Russia and Putin, not only for 2012, but also for the long term as well. Lukashenka's statements on privatisation and relations with Russia and the West were intended for his new old partner Putin as he enters his next presidential term. And taking into account Putin's intentions and authoritarian trends in Russia, they regard not only his immediate presidential term.

Lukashenka's team considered it to be relevant to tell the newly elected Putin that they would not make concessions. Lukashenka's speechwriters included a number of rather clear signals in his speech that would not please Moscow anyway, and not to mention that the theses were delivered in Lukashenka's own folk-kolkhoz style. Therefore, the kinds of expressions would appear to be quite offensive to Putin.

Some malevolence was present in Lukashenka's statements about the Belarusian-Russian relations. "If somebody hopes that as soon as Putin comes back, they will start smothering us and try to strangle us with a noose around our necks, it is just a matter of vain hopes".

Putin would like to strangle Belarus but certainly not this year

Following Lukashenka's expressions, it appears that his team does not have new illusions regarding the targets of Putin's

administration in respect to Belarus. In other words, Putin would like to strangle Belarus. However, Putin will not suppress Belarus this year, since it has restricted resources and opportunities.

Lukashenka's team has reason to believe that the main foreign policy issue for Putin's administration in 2012 will be relations with Ukraine. Russia will endeavour to prevent or, at least, complicate to the maximum possible extent Ukraine's movement (while quite a lengthy one) into the EU.

Regarding Belarusian-Russian relations, Lukashenka has good grounds for optimism this year and later on. He hopes that Putin will be bogged down in Ukraine and that the problem of deployment of anti-missile systems would remain at the top of Russia's agenda.