

# The Russian Opposition and Putin: Do They Differ When It Comes to Belarus?

The idea that democracy will [come to Belarus](#) from Russia and with Russian help has been prevalent in the West almost as long as Lukashenka has ruled the country.

In fact the current Russian leadership has little regard for either Belarusian democracy or Belarusian independence. After all, Putin once proposed that Belarus join Russia to form one federal entity or as six provinces. Do the other political forces in Russia hold different views?

This week, the Belarusian media widely discussed a blog post of the rising star of the Russian democratic opposition, Alexei Navalny. Writing in 2008, Navalny described the Belarusian language in openly derisory terms. Belarus as a separate nation apparently remains for him a not very serious reality. When the post caused a scandal on the Belarusian web, Navalny simply deleted the text. No explanation or apology followed.

## **Imperial Communism**

Navalny is known for his nationalist past, and according to some commentators, the statement probably has more to do with his past than his present. But other Russian opposition figures also appear not to be very supportive of a democratic and independent Belarus. The Russian opposition nowadays encompasses all possible political forces, so their attitudes towards Belarus differ, yet usually ends in some kind of revanshist stance.

The Kremlin's court opposition – the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) – consistently use imperialist rhetoric. Its leader

Vladimir Zhirinovski proposed last year to integrate Belarus into Russia so that: "Now we [Russia] will have eight federal districts. Let's have the ninth one – Minsk federal district [...]" And for the time being he urged: "Stop feeding Belarus." Anyway, he noted, "Belarus would not go anywhere – nobody needs it in Europe."

Interestingly enough, Zhirinovski was probably the only mainstream Russian politician who [very vocally decried](#) the election fraud during the last presidential elections in Belarus in 2010.

Another key oppositional movement in Russia is the Communist Party. Its leader Gennadi Zyuganov regularly meets Lukashenka and usually [supports him](#) when Minsk has a falling out with the Kremlin in some new dispute. The Russian Communist leader took the side of Belarus in [the recent Belaruskali and Uralkali scandal](#) as well.

Zyuganov calle the unification [*obyedinenie*] of Belarus and Russia "the major task." With all his nostalgia for the Soviet Union, Zyuganov prefers not Soviet internationalist slogans but chauvinist Tsarist-times rhetoric. "For me, Russians [*russkie*] are the Great Russians, Little Russians [*Ukrainians*] and White Russians [*belorossy – sic!*]. I believe that the greatest tragedy of our peoples is the rift that took place [in 1991] – that divide is unnatural, abnormal, immoral and – to a significant extent – criminal."

The average Russian communist supports not Belarus as a nation but something which he sees as a good political and socioeconomic model built by Lukashenka. In 2011, Zyuganov declared in Strasbourg that an "improved USSR has been maintained in Belarus."

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A famous supporter of Russian communists, Noble Prize in

physics laureate and Belarus-born Zhores Alferov publicly defended Belarusian sovereignty after Putin's 2002 proposal to annex Belarus to form of one or six provinces. Alferov, who is proud of his Belarusian origins, said unification should take place along the lines defined by Lukashenka and Yeltsin.

The leader of major Russian social democratic party Just Russia Sergei Mironov has also met Lukashenka many times. During the 2012 presidential elections in Russia, Mironov proclaimed as his aim, "creat[ion of] a confederation of Slavic states including Russia, Ukraine, Belarus." Moreover, in the past Mironov accused the Belarusian leadership of avoiding the implementation of integration agreements with Russia and a lack of interest in said integration.

New rising political stars express very similar attitudes towards Belarus. Sergei Udaltsov entered politics as leader of Communist youth organisation Vanguard of Red Youth (AKM) and is currently leader of the Left Front. The Left Front, according to its program, aims at the "revival and development of a united federative state in the post-Soviet space". The AKM activists last year carried out propagandist activity in Kurapaty – where victims of political repressions in the USSR in 1930s were shot. They brought with them leaflets entitled Stalin Was Right.

### **Imperial Liberalism**

The liberal political forces have become rather marginalised in Russia over the past decade. Lukashenka accused Anatoly Chubais – a central figure among Russian liberals – of being "an enemy of integration." Yet such accusations levelled against the former Russian Deputy Prime Minister are first and foremost related to the history of the 1990s.

Chubais then stepped in at the last minute to stop Lukashenka's plot to take over power in Russia by making an ailing Yeltsin sign an integration treaty. Still, Chubais in a

public debate with Lukashenka has sworn that “unification of our nations is absolutely unavoidable,” and expressed his regret that “politicians have lost their way” with the integration initiatives.

Moreover, it was Chubais – actually born in Belarus – who in 2003 proposed the idea of building a Russian “liberal empire.” He is not an exception in his [dismissal of Belarusian statehood](#). Another major intellectual figure of the Russian liberal movement, Nikolai Svanidze, openly called Western Belarus “Eastern Poland” when discussing Soviet history.

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On the other hand, as early as 2002 leading Russian liberal politician Boris Nemtsov tried to convince the Kremlin to negotiate with the pro-independence Belarusian opposition. In July, he signed an agreement with United Civic Party of Belarus about collaboration and emphasised, “If you become a free country, Russia will also have a such chance. You have a better chance to become democratic since Russia has an imperial complex, you are in the middle of Europe and you do not have the “Caucasian” factor.” Unlike most other Russian politicians Nemtsov does not oppose Belarusian statehood in principle.

### **Who Shall Democratise Whom?**

Such a widespread dismissive attitude on the part of most Russian politicians is based on a similar mood that prevails in Russian society, one which has nostalgia for a Great Russia, if not of Soviet then of Tsarist kind. Thus, according to a survey by the Russian Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), 61 per cent of Russians are willing to support a revival of the Soviet Union.

The first attempts to democratise Belarus through Russia date

back to the late 1990s. After the last presidential elections in Belarus, the idea of democratisation through Russia once again came up. A member of the German Bundestag, Marieluise Beck, called for the EU and Russia to fight together for democracy in Belarus. Some former Western diplomats [also supported this idea](#).

Who can fight with the West against the Belarusian regime on the Russian front? The majority of both the ruling and opposition political forces have doubts even about Belarusian statehood. Only marginalised groups with minimal political clout display any interest in a free and independent Belarus.

Of course, Moscow can topple Lukashenka at short notice. But instead of cultivating democracy, Russia will only replace Lukashenka with someone less stubborn who would better suit Russia's geopolitical vision – one which does not include Belarus as a separate nation.