Belarus-Russia integration: how to avoid brotherly hugs

In early October 2018, Belarus and Russia settled the agreement about oil supplies for the remaining part of 2018 and for 2019. Unexpectedly, the Russian leadership abandoned pressure on Belarus.

While in August-September, the Kremlin believed that they could force Lukashenka into making concessions in the matters of genuine integration, later they backed down. There exist several possible explanations for the Kremlin’s tactical retreat: the threat of autocephaly of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the interest in laying a gas pipeline, and the approaching talks on the extension of the lease of military facilities.

Why Belarus matters to Russia

Belarus is an important participant of integration processes with Russia (CSTO, EurAsEc, and CIS); moreover, it is the only European participant of these projects.

An intensive flow of freight goes across the Belarusian territory, including that of Russia, delivering to the West around 60m tons of oil and around 40bn cubic meters of gas. Meanwhile, this is a cheap transit. Belarus communicates Russia to its Kaliningrad enclave, supplying the land with gas and electricity.

Lukashenka once said that 10 million Russian citizens worked at Russian enterprises that were connected with the Belarusian technological chain, supplying component parts. Perhaps, the figure is too high. However, this factor is not to be ignored.

High-technology production of Belarusian enterprises of the
military industrial complex is important for the Russian military industry. Especially, after losing manufacturing cooperation with Ukraine, at the background of tension with the West. And especially, if Russia proceeds in the arms race with the West.

The central region of Russia is shielded by the Belarusian air-defence system. In the territory of Belarus, there is a missile launch tracking station and the station of radio electronic intelligence Volga (near Hantsavichy town, the Brest region) and the communication centre for atomic submarines Antey (near Vileyka town, the Minsk region).

One should also take into account the Russian home politics factor, the factor of public opinion. The Russian society wants to see Belarus as an ally, especially at the background of the strained relations with the West.

How Belarus resists Russia’s attempts of “closer” integration

There are several reasons that explain why every time when the Kremlin was about to tie Belarus to Russia securely, after a period of pressure Russia always stepped back.

This happened in 2004 (gas conflict), in 2010 (oil conflict), in 2012 (dairy conflict). The latest one, the energy conflict lasted from May 2016 to April 2017.
Every time Lukashenka responded to pressure by pressing on Russia’s sore spots. Belarus impeded Russia’s communication with the Kaliningrad enclave, cutting off its supply with gas and electricity.

It ceased cooperation in the air defence sphere. It raised the prices for the transit of the Russian oil. Lukashenka made statements that led to assume that Russia had to pay for participation in the CSTO, EurAsEc, and even for the Union State.

In these time spans, Belarus intensified political contacts with the West, to demonstrate to Russia that it could get support there, in particular, in the form of the IMF loans.

**Oil concessions to Belarus: Deal or no deal**

In August-September, the Kremlin believed again that they could force Lukashenka into making concessions in the matters of genuine integration. In August 2018, events unfolded according to the usual scenario. Russia cut off the supplies
of tax-free oil. The Russian information propaganda machine activated its work against Lukashenka. The President of Belarus was very poorly received in Sochi on 22 August. However, after a shower of pressure on Lukashenka, Russia backed down again.

In October, agreements were reached meaning even bigger oil donations to Belarus from Russia. Russia admitted Belarus’s right to receive income from oil refining larger than previously in case oil prices on the world market rise. According to the Russian energetics expert V. Tanurkov, within the agreement on supplies of Russian oil in the volume of 24m tons per year at price $75 per barrel, oil donation to Belarus comprises around $3.3bn per year.

In fact, Russia could have cut oil and gas donations and talked to Lukashenka about the necessity of real integration (as it happened from May 2016 to April 2017). One could make a number of assumptions why Putin put it to a halt such talks already in October.

Fears of Belarusian autocephaly?

First, the Kremlin probably admitted the likelihood that Belarus would follow the Ukrainian example, setting the process of creating an Autocephalous Orthodox Church, independent of the Moscow Patriarchate. The decision of the Constantinople Patriarchate has set up the ecclesiastical law basis for a Belarusian Autocephalous Church, too.

Moreover, autocephaly will not be strongly opposed to with the Belarusian society. According to the opinion poll, held by tut.by portal in October 2018, only 20.12 % supported the Russian Orthodox Church, whereas 26.54 % supported the decision of Constantinople. An informational campaign at the
governmental level would shift the ratio in favour of autocephaly supporters.

Or negotiations on pipelines and military bases?

Second, Belarus and Russia might be negotiating gas pipeline installation across Belarus territory. There is unofficial information that in the first half of 2018, Belarus and Russia started talks on increasing the export capacity of the gas transmission system of Belarus.

Andrei Ravkov, Belarusian Defense Minister. Source: sputnik.by

Laying a new gas pipeline through Belarus territory, alongside with the construction of the pipeline Nord Stream-2, will allow Russia to refuse totally from the gas transit via the territory of Ukraine. One can assume that the Belarusian side will insist that the new gas pipeline should be a state property of the Republic of Belarus.

Third, Belarus and Russia will negotiate prolongation of the lease term for the Russian military objects currently deployed in Belarus. On June 7, 2021, the term of agreements expires concerning the deployment of the missile launch tracking
station Volga and the communication centre for atomic submarines Antey. The Belarusian Minister of Defence Raukou said that before June 6, 2020, Belarus might report on its intention to refuse from the prolongation of these agreements.

It looks like the talks on the prolongation of the lease term for the Russian military objects will not be easy. The Belarusian side will try to take the most of the economic profit from the Russian military objects staying in Belarus territory. Lukashenka personally claimed that there are military objects in Belarus that are important for Russia and for which Russia does not pay. “If the president of Russia forgot about it – it’s high time to remember.”

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Belarus reviews defence policy after Russia disappoints

On 13 February, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka complained about Russia’s unwillingness to arm the Belarusian army. On 23 February, the ideological periodical of Belarusian government published an article by the defence minister, Andrei Raukou, who described how Belarus would defend itself without mentioning any Russian role in it.

According to him, Belarusian army focuses on learning the lessons of hybrid war in Syria. But the concept itself is much more linked to the war in Eastern Ukraine and the minister most probably kept silence about it just to not irritate the Kremlin.

Minsk, in recent years, has been rebuilding its army according
to its own needs and opportunities while ignoring Moscow’s wishes. This conclusion follows from official statements and from the Belarusian army’s rearmament plans. As a result, the Belarusian armed forces increasingly resemble the army of a small European nation.

More military self-sufficiency

Speaking on 22 February at a ceremony marking Defenders of the Fatherland and Armed Forces Day, Lukashenka again repeated his criticism of increasing militarisation in Belarus’s neighbourhood and throughout the world. His statements on Belarusian preparations for defence and rearmament included some remarkable points.

First, probably for the first time, he suggested that Belarus should defend itself on its own. That is, he did not mention Russia in this context at all:

In the event of a military threat, we must be ready for the nationwide defence of Belarus. 70,000 men of our army cannot defend our state. ... the land must be protected by the whole people. ... In the event of a military conflict, we are able, within a short period of time, to arm half a million people and defend the most important facilities by the territorial defence forces. This is the essence of our defence doctrine.

This statement follows related developments in Belarusian government’s views of defence issues. Ironically, they involve militarisation as well. In March 2017 the government demanded that border security agencies increase their military [voiskovoi] components.

Meanwhile, on 7 December Belarusian parliament amended the Law on the Fight Against Terrorism, adding national armed forces
to the list of agencies expected to fight against terrorism. Given the fact that neighbouring Ukraine designated a full-scale war in its eastern regions as an “anti-terrorist operation,” this probably means Minsk is taking further precautions against Donbas scenario.

Chinese friends and problems acquiring new fighter jets from the Kremlin

Chinese armoured vehicles arriving in Belarus. Image: VoenTV.

Secondly, on 22 February Lukashenka emphasised the Belarusian army’s receipt of new arms to respond to new challenges. He praised… not Russia, but China for its help in this sphere. Indeed, on 18 February, Belarusian state media reported that the national army received the second batch of CS/VN3 Dajiang armoured vehicles from China. The first five vehicles arrived back in June 2017 and were even deployed in the “West-2017” drills.

Speaking in the Security Council on 13 February, Lukashenka criticised Russia for its reluctance to equip the Belarusian army as well as the armies of other Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) members. He said,
Russia itself is modernising its armed forces. We are trying, together with other members [of the CSTO], to somehow arm, modernise ourselves and so on. Everyone on its own … But the leadership of Russia today lacks a serious understanding that it is necessary to strengthen the national armed forces … [of] Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and other countries – that, say, Belarus is the main outpost, including for Russia, in the western direction.

Minsk clearly expects more Russian help to develop and maintain the Belarusian army. Too often it suffers disappointment. In recent months, Belarusian officials – from the president to the to the defence minister and air force commander – either keep silent or sound remarkably uncertain about the most important arms deal between Minsk and Moscow of recent times, namely the purchase of new Su-30 fighter jets.

For instance, at a news conference on 14 February, defence minister Andrei Raukou announced that the delivery of Su–30 aircraft to Belarus may not start until 2019. Even more remarkably he completely omitted the Su–30 deal in his major interview to BelTA news agency on 23 February in which he described at length the equipment Belarus plans to purchase for its army.

About a year ago top Belarusian defence officials clearly
insisted that the **Belarusian army** would receive twelve new Su–30s with delivery beginning in 2018. The official reason for the delay cites the Western embargo on the supply of some components for the aeroplanes to Russia, a result of Moscow’s meddling in eastern Ukraine. But it sounds odd given that Russia continues production of the same jets for other countries. Most probably, Minsk still needs to find a way to pay for the jets. After all, it earlier indicated its wish both to get maximum discount and to pay as much as possible with goods and not money.

Historical context casts a different light on the story around rearming the Belarusian army with **Russian weapons**. To put it plainly, today Minsk strives to acquire from Russia a dozen of Su–30 aircraft — not even a regiment. Belarus fought for about a decade and yet, apparently, the problems persist. These are definitely not the “good old days” of Belarus-Russian partnership when, as recently as the early 2000s, Minsk and Moscow even negotiated over assembly production of essentially the same aircraft, the Su–27, in Belarus.

**An army fit for Belarusian needs**

No wonder that, faced with Moscow’s reluctance to arm its Belarusian allies, Minsk simply rearranges its armed forces to suit its own needs and thinks ever less about the wishes of the Kremlin. Describing the process of rearmament in an interview to the BelTA news agency on 23 February, the defence minister, Raukou, called it “selective” and “pointed” [tochechnaya].

In particular, according to Raukou, Minsk will soon modernise its T-72 tanks in both Belarusian and Russian factories, as well as deploy more **Belarusian**—manufactured armoured vehicles V1 and Kaiman, and **Belarusian-modernised** BTR-70MB1. Among its
planned acquisitions for 2018, the armed forces will obtain additional Yak-130 training and light-attack aircraft, TOR-M2 surface-to-air missile systems, radars, and drones.

That means the Belarusian army avoids any comprehensive rearming. It decommissions some equipment without like-for-like replacement if Belarus, as a small country, does not need it itself and Russia refuses to supply a replacement either.

Postage stamps dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Belarusian army and its predecessor, the Red Army.

President Lukashenka, speaking on occasion of the Defenders of the Fatherland and Armed Forces Day, praised new products of national industries being deployed by the state army. He specifically mentioned a new ballistic missile for the Palanez multiple-launch rocket system, a surface-to-air missile system and lightly armoured vehicles. And he altogether failed to mention the new aircraft to be bought from Russia.

To sum up, on the one hand, Belarus fulfils its dues as Russia’s ally and participates in the air defence of the core Russian regions as much as it can. Hence so much attention to surface-to-air missiles, radars and similar equipment.

On the other hand, in other spheres, Minsk prefers to care for its own minimal needs if Russia is not willing to arm its ally. Hence attention to less sophisticated types of armoured
vehicles, drones and aircraft. They suffice for Belarus’s security needs however inadequate they seem from the Russian perspective, which believes that “bigger is better” and focuses on global confrontation with the West. In the longer-term perspective, that means Minsk is going its own way and deciding that “small is beautiful.”

Russia Plays War in Belarus

On 12 March, Minsk and Moscow agreed that Russia will deploy 15 fighters jets in Belarus in reaction to NATO's drills on the border between Poland and Belarus.

However, Belarus remains reluctant to support Russia in the Crimean conflict either politically or militarily. Lukashenka`s regime wants to simply show its loyalty and get its hands on some new equipment.

Belarusian military dependence on Russia remains critical. Belarus conducts only small drills on its own, and many Belarusian officers have received their training in Russia.

Purchases of Russian-made arms at discounted rates remains almost the only opportunity for Belarus to update its own arm supplies, though the country’s military industry maintains strong ties with Russian companies.

Belarus' military dependence on Russia is the result of a deliberate policy continuously implemented by Lukashenko. Belarusian authorities are well aware of the fact that the Kremlin will always financially support Belarus, because it views Belarus as a buffer zone for Russia.
Belarusian Army Will not be a Party to the Crimean Conflict

Although Belarus remains officially a neutral country the Kremlin likes to play war with the West within its borders. The decision to have 15 fighters jets relocated shows that Lukashenka has made a concession to the Kremlin, but this does not mean that Belarus is going to fight for Russia.

It seems that regime wants to testify to its loyalty to the Kremlin after its recent refusal to support Russia in the Crimean conflict. Belarus, it cannot be forgotten, has a strong desire to acquire new military equipment as well.

On 13 March, six Russian Su-27s and three military transport planes landed in Belarus. The same day, Lukashenka said that the redeployment took place at Russia's request. Also on 13 March, the Ukrainian MFA expressed its concern about Russia's attempts to involve Belarus in Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

For many outsiders, Lukashenka looks like the Kremlin’s vassal and the Belarusian army like a division of Russia's armed forces. However, the Belarusian authorities have refused to support the actions of Russia in the Crimea and Belarusian troops continue to remain within the country’s borders.

As a member country of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Belarus can refuse to support any Russian offensive. According to the Charter of the CSTO, Belarus should support other members only during defensive actions. Furthermore, Putin has so far failed to publicly admit that Russian troops have entered Ukraine. Belarus cannot support these troops so long as they remain officially unrecognised.

Belarusian obligations to Russia within the framework of the Union State remain limited to real warfare. Military expert Alexander Alesin explains that "the only way that Belarus will participate in Crimea is to go there with a peacekeeping mission with a UN mandate and at the consent of Ukraine."
Belarusian Military Dependence on Russia

Although Belarus has neither politically nor militarily supported Russia in the Crimean conflict, the Belarusian army remains deeply dependent on Russia.

After the creation of the United Regional System of Air Defense, Russia has effectively gained full control over the Belarusian air force. In the near future, the first Russian military air base in Belarus will begin to operate. This facility is the first of its kind that was personally authorised by Lukashenka. The Belarusian authorities have inherited two other Russian military sites from their predecessors.

Belarusian troops effectively subordinate to Russia. Belarus lacks even its own ground force command.

Military cooperation has always been the sacred cow of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Even during periods of crises between the countries, military collaboration has continued unphased. The existence of a regional army group for the Union State make Belarusian troops effectively subordinate to Russia. Belarus lacks even its own ground force command.

Belarus conducts only small-scale training exercises on its own and operational drills with Russia every two years. The so-called “West” drills have repeatedly made Belarus' relations with Lithuania and Poland very tense. However, some experts argue that Warsaw and Minsk have found that by speculating on an imaginary threat emanating from each other, Poland and Belarus can get money from their own allies in Moscow and Washington, respectively.

Belarus lacks the opportunity to acquire new weapons at market prices and is therefore condemned to begging for them from Russia. In 2012, the Belarusian ruler caused outrage by asking
Russia to finance his country's military. Russia gives great discounts on their wares, but regularly delays the delivery of military supplies. Belarus is still waiting for four Yak-130s and several S-300s to replace their old S-200s.

On 19 February, the Belarusian Ambassador to Russia announced that Belarus will receive Yak-130s in 2015. Previously, Lukashenka said that Russia would support and deliver several military aircraft, but none of this has come into fruition. Russia requires real money from its western partner, not just loyalty.

Many of Belarus men-in-arms continue to receive their military education in Russia.

Many of Belarus men-in-arms continue to receive their military education in Russia. The Secretary of the Security Council Aliaksandr Miazhueu, the Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee Siarhei Huruliou, the Chairman of the State Border Committee Leanid Maltsau and the Minister of Defence Iuryi Zhadobin, all studied in Russia.

According to the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies, “in 2012, fewer than 800 people began officer training in Belarus, while as many as 600 individuals attended courses in Russian military schools.” However, it is noteworthy, that Belarusian officers study in Belarus also in civilian universities. It seems that Centre for Eastern Studies missed this data.

The Belarusian military-industrial complex continues to work primarily with Russia. Even when Belarus fulfils arms contracts with other countries, it still requires components that are produced in Russia. Moreover, Russia keeps pushing for the sale of the MZKT, a Belarusian manufacturer that produces a chassis of world-renowned quality, something that some have speculated could even happen this year.
The military dependence of Belarus on Russia is the result not only of the Kremlin’s efforts, but also the policy of Lukashenka’s regime. Belarus remains reluctant to pay for its own army. The authorities have never afforded the nation's armed more than 2% of the GDP. In the 2000s, the spending was regularly at a level of approximately 1.5% of the nation's GDP.

At the moment, it seems that Russia has also become reluctant to pay – because Belarus is losing its role as the main military ally of Russia. In 2014, Russia is set to start supplying five battalions with the air defence missile system S-300PS to Kazakhstan – free of charge.

In the case of Belarus, Russia requires payment for weapons, albeit with discounts. While there are only three Russian military sites in Belarus, Kazakhstan hosts eleven Russian military sites. The total space they occupy is about the half of Belarus.

However, Belarus will remain an important Russian ally, since it is situated to the west of Russia's heart. Given this, Russia will have to continue to dole out funding, although it will do so in a more and more humiliating manner. The Kremlin will continue to increase its influence, but this does not necessarily mean that the Belarusian army will be a tool of Russian foreign policy.

CSTO: From NATO’s Enemy to Strategic Partner?

This week Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka attended the jubilee summit of the Collective Security Treaty
The summit participants took stock of the organisation's evolution since its founding ten years ago on 14 May 2002, on the basis of the 1992 agreement. They also set targets for the CSTO's future development.

Their goals include two potentially contradictory developments. On the one hand, they hope to enhance cooperation with the West and NATO. On the other, they are set on preventing contagion of the “Arab spring”. Which of these two goals comes to dominate will have a profound impact on Belarus’ future.

The CSTO as a time capsule

Looking back at the decade of political developments outside and inside the CSTO, one gets the impression that the seven CSTO members have remained frozen in time. Belarus and fellow CSTO members Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan remain undemocratic, dependent on Russia, and economically vulnerable.

In the meantime, Belarus’ neighbours Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia have joined NATO and the EU. EU membership and access to the EU structural funds have provided a major boost to these states’ economies and ensured the continuation of democratic transformation. These states participate in NATO’s collective defense system and have revamped their militaries.

Out of the seven CSTO member states only Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have changed rulers

Just like in 2002, when the CSTO was founded, Russia is ruled by President Vladimir Putin and Belarus by President
Lukashenka. The leaders of Kazakhstan (Nusultan Nazarbaev), Uzbekistan (Islam Karimov), and Tajikistan (Emomalii Rahmon) are starting their third decades in power. Out of the seven CSTO member states only Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have changed rulers.

All CSTO members remain disengaged internationally, but Belarus’ relations with the West have been the most strained. In 2002, the EU states imposed their first travel ban on Lukashenka and his ministers over poor human rights violations. Earlier this year, EU diplomats were recalled from Minsk, and the Belarusian leader has become less welcome in the EU than ever.

The CSTO members’ ambitions

What has held this motley alliance of autocrats together? At the time of founding, the CSTO states faced very different external security challenges – from Islamic resurgence in Tajikistan to territorial defense from Western enemies in Belarus. As its members were scrambling to develop foreign policy after the Soviet breakup, the group has been held together mostly by default.

Lukashenka openly prioritised controlling social unrest and bridling the power of Internet as the organisation's main targets

However, the threats of popular unrest after a string of colour revolutions and now the Arab Spring have given the alliance a new meaning and kept the leaders coming to the summits. It is not accidental that the CSTO members emphasise developing the collective rapid reaction forces, created on the initiative of Kazakhstan, whose leader has been in power since 1990. Last year, CSTO chair Lukashenka openly prioritised controlling social unrest and bridling the power of the internet as the organisation's main targets.
Besides developing rapid reaction forces, the CSTO has also moved into building drones. Last year, the Interstate Corporation for Development was launched in order to develop “scientific, industrial and high-tech cooperation in CSTO countries”. The organisation is headed by Ivan Polyakov, a senior CSTO official, and boasts 250 ongoing high-tech projects on its website.

Thanks to the CSTO membership and a close military alliance with Russia, small Belarus has a formidable, even if ageing, military. Lukashenka is keen on using national security it as a **trump card** in negotiations with Russia.

This year Belarus national defence funding reached $550.1mln, a 3.3 percent increase from last year. Just as he **warns** the EU of having weakened border control at the Belarus-EU border, he reassures Moscow that Belarus is a reliable ally in defending the western borders of the “union state”. This year Belarus national defence funding reached $550.1mln, a 3.3 percent increase from last year. At the same time, the armed forces remain greatly impoverished, with average monthly salary around $280.

**Looking into the future**

Putin has redoubled his interest in the post-Soviet space

Judging by Putin’s diplomatic agenda for the coming weeks, the CSTO’s relevance is likely to grow. This year Putin has redoubled his interest in the post-Soviet space. He cancelled his meeting with Barack Obama at the Group of Eight summit in Camp David on 18-19 May and instead has been planning meetings with neighbours. Kazakhstan is the first to be honoured by his presence – on 25 May, and Belarus will enjoy Putin’s visit on 31 May.

Even though Putin seems to have neglected Obama, the new goal of the CSTO seems to be to stand next to rather than in opposition to the US and NATO. Building strategic cooperation
with the West was first outlined in the report on reforming the CSTO by the Russian Institute of Contemporary Development last year. Another area for reform is changing the decision-making process from consensus to simple majority. What do these developments spell for Belarus?

Belying his anti-NATO and anti-Europe reputation, the Belarusian leader expressed interest in the constructive dialogue with the UN, the OSCE, and NATO in his speech at the jubilee summit. He seemed certain that the outsiders would be interested in such cooperation and even boasted that the organization expanded during the chairmanship in 2006 (jointly with Uzbekistan). Emphasizing the “growing prestige of the OSCE in the world”, Lukashenka wants to see the organisation welcome additional members in the future.

However, both cooperation with NATO and majority decision-making will radically alter the costs of Belarus’ participation in the organisation. Without the consensus requirement, there will be no need to waste time persuading or pressuring Minsk into agreement if Lukashenka’s goals diverge from those of Moscow. More importantly, if NATO is to become the CSTO’s strategic partner, the Belarusian leader will have to mend his relations with the West. While none of the CSTO members are democratic, the costs of open repression as well as of angering the US and the EU diplomats may rise.

two potential incarnations of the CSTO – as an alliance of autocrats that helps its members hold down their populations and as NATO’s partner

Whether cooperation with NATO or catering to the political interests of the CSTO leaders dominates is likely to depend on Vladimir Putin’s immediate interests. Yet in the long run, these two potential incarnations of the CSTO – as an alliance of autocrats that helps its members hold down their populations and as NATO’s partner in Iran and Afghanistan – will come into conflict with each other. While even NATO has
cooperated with undemocratic regimes, it is much less tolerant of human rights abuses than the Kremlin.

In addition to the symbolic praise, the CSTO declaration produced at the end of the May summit contains a curious aside on the inadmissibility of economic and political pressure – between the CSTO members as well as on them from non-members. One may only wonder whether this statement alludes to the Russian or the Western pressure and whether Lukashenka is behind it.