

# Russia Is Not Willing to Pay for its Imperial Prestige

This week, after a bitter gas transit conflict with Belarusian government, Russian Gasprom declared that preliminary gas prices for Belarus next year should be about USD 250. Now it pays 185 dollars. Even some naïve oppositional analysts welcomed what they considered 'European' prices, joking of Lukashenka's 'stupid' wish to live 'of Russian cost'.

The prices for gas and oil, they forgot, are specific prices. Since gas and oil depend on infrastructure to ship them to consumers, therefore the Russian gas price for Belarus shall be different one than tariff for more distant Germany or Belgium. Furthermore, the prices for such strategic commodities are anyway politically influenced. So, Belarus which has allied itself with Russia since 1995, has all reasons to demand be given cheaper gas and oil than other countries.

And at least it should not be suddenly hit by arbitrary Russian decisions to increase price by almost 100 dollars. After all, the Belarusian side has carried out its part of agreement with Kremlin – it gave Moscow a small bit of imperial grandeur by agreeing to be a 'small brother' and ally, it secured a segment of Russian borders and followed most Russian foreign policies. So why Russia agreed to sell China its gas considerably cheaper than Belarus?

It seems that this time it is Russia that wants to live as an empire 'of Belarusian cost', by giving Lukashenka nothing for it, and even openly threatening and abusing him. Russian elites' greed is stronger than imperialistic appetites? As a columnist Vitaly Portnikov put it in his article published on grani.ru,

*... if there are no money, why to play an empire? If Belarusians and Russians are almost one people, then is it acceptable to send brothers an ultimatum? Freeze them [by cutting gas supplies in winter]? Threaten with sanctions? Indeed, that state, whose abolishment has been named a biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century by Medvedev's predecessor [Putin], that state began to fall apart not the moment when US President Ronald Reagan declared it to be 'an evil empire', and not the moment General Secretary Gorbachev proclaimed 'glasnost' and 'perestroika'. It has fell apart when Moscow decided to put a blockade on Lithuania [which was then a part of the USSR].*

Something similar is now happening with integration initiatives of Belarus and Russia from previous years. Really, Moscow presently pursuing a greater aim – Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan – did not even bother to do anything with numerous previous agreements with Belarus – on integration and establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia – which legally stay in the way of new Russian endeavor to reconquest lost lands.

They were not cancelled, nor amended, nor even mentioned by anyone, as Belarusian political analyst Vitali Silitski points out in his article on the website of BISS. It seems, that for Russian not only pathetic alliances and brotherhood but even solid legal documents are just empty papers to be torn anytime deemed necessary. Or as a Russian proverb put it,

*A guy is a master of his word, he can give it and he can take it back.*

Or as Silitski said,

*All treaties concluded with today's Russia and its leadership preoccupied with [imperial] greatness can remain just a useless scrap of paper, if Kremlin sees an opportunity to act*

*according to the right of the strong. The [European] enthusiasts of various 'Streams' [projects to build pipelines to ship Russian gas and oil into Europe – Nord and South Streams] should think better on it.*

Such behavior makes today's Russian government a clear security threat not only for former Soviet republics, but even for Europe as a whole. The post-Soviet countries realized it, and Moscow does not allow them to forget – going from aggression against Georgia to gas conflicts with Belarus and Ukraine and continuing with coup d'etat in Kyrgyzstan.

So far, European Union did not react to Russian policies strongly enough to stop Kremlin. Eastern Europe clearly lost its importance for European strategists, preoccupied with southern and southeastern flanks of European foreign policy. Yet the time might show that Russia and aftermath of its activities in former Soviet countries will pose much bigger threat to European security. After all, it is Russia which while ever more supplying Europe with oil and gas, demonstrates outright contempt for agreements with partner countries and maintains a lawlessness on its own territory.

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