



PERSPECTIVES

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Russia, Belarus, and the Empire Debate

by Emil Avdaliani

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Belarus is growing increasingly isolated and is pushing itself more and more into Russia's embrace. Moscow is taking the opportunity to cement Belarus as a buffer state against Western geopolitical influence. But contrary to the established analysis, unless there is a real chance of a pro-Western government being installed in Minsk, Russia is unlikely to push for any radical scenarios, including full integration.

After months of tension between Belarus and the West, the forced grounding of a Ryanair plane in Minsk—an event EU leaders called a “hijacking”—caused ties between Belarus and the West to hit a new low. The West is likely to take a harsher line against Minsk, which is bound to have geopolitical repercussions for Belarus-Russia ties.

The conditions are now ripe for Russia to initiate major moves on the Belarussian front. Moscow could pull Minsk very close by providing economic concessions, and could push to establish a military presence on Belarussian soil. After all, President Alexander Lukashenko is isolated and is likely to remain so throughout his time in power. This state of affairs is pushing him to seek political and economic support from Moscow and makes him vulnerable to the will of Russia’s leadership.

Yet surprisingly, Moscow has been relatively inactive on the Belarus question ever since the crisis that erupted in that country after presidential elections that are widely believed to have been rigged.

Whenever the Belarussian and Russian presidents talk, rumors abound about possible progress on the union state project and the likelihood that Russia will establish a military presence in Belarus. But so far, there have been no meaningful changes. Lukashenko’s statement in April, just before a visit to Putin, that “one of my principal decisions [over] a quarter of a century of

presidency” was about to be made caused a flurry of commentary and speculation that a Belarus-Russia merger was imminent—but no such grand announcement has been made.

Lukashenko’s role in these delays should not be underplayed. Though geopolitically vulnerable, he has proved his mettle as a tough negotiator. At no point in his career, no matter how pressured he was by foreign actors or internal troubles, has he ever positioned himself as weak.

There is, of course, no guarantee that a union state—a project that dates back to the 1990s—will not be announced at future talks between Belarus and Russia. But we would be wise to reconsider not only Lukashenko’s negotiating prowess but also basic aspects of our traditional understanding of Russia’s strategy in Belarus.

The established analytical consensus holds that Moscow would use troubles in the neighboring country to pursue deeper military cooperation and institutional integration. This thinking should be revised. That is not to say that Russia is no longer interested in Belarus or that this interest has subsided. For Russia, Belarus will continue to play the role of an important buffer state against the West, whether the Western threat is represented by the EU’s economic push eastward or by NATO’s military expansion.

The idea of Slavic brotherhood serves as a strong bond within elements of Russia’s political elite, but the push for integration with Belarus reflects much more than this. It would mark a definitive break in the model of Russia’s ties with its immediate neighbors and specifically those that are members of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Moreover, the union state would indicate a return to something many Russians fear—an official empire. While it is true that over the past three decades Russia has annexed and invaded territory and has consistently tried to influence Belarus, Ukraine, South Caucasus, and Central Asia, it still resembled a much more liberal empire than the Soviet one. Moscow largely avoided taking direct political control over non-Russian territories. Crimea was an exception, but there too, annexation was possible not only because of Russia’s military bases but also because of the peninsula’s large Russian population. In other words, for the Russian political elite, the annexation of Crimea did not seem like seizing foreign territory or empire-building.

Contrary to what many think in the West, the Russian political elite has not clearly decided in favor of a formal empire. In fact, as the country moves toward the post-Putin period, the integrationist vision with regard to Belarus and its neighbors is likely to subside. Again, this does not mean Moscow will

dissolve the EEU or reconsider its ties with smaller neighbors—simply that Soviet era-inspired integrationist projects are relatively unlikely.

The pursuit of political and economic integration with Belarus would imply the fruition of something many Russians fear: the spending of Russian money on a neighbor whose industrial and economic base might not bring as many advantages as could be desired. Expenditures could indeed far outweigh the benefits. For Moscow, Belarus is not Ukraine; its economic weight is not worth an outright and immediate merger. The country would serve as an effective buffer zone, but the Russian security and military elites understand (albeit silently) that NATO expansion does not constitute as much of a threat as is often portrayed by the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, Moscow will continue to draw Minsk closer and will monitor the latter's deteriorating ties with the West. Moscow will use those divisions to promote some of its vital interests in Belarus, but will remain hesitant to make a definitive move. Perhaps the likeliest scenario in which Russia would directly project its military power and move the integrationist project forward is if a popular revolution prevails in Belarus and an openly pro-Western or reformist-minded government comes to power.

Negotiations on sensitive issues (a single currency, a unified tax code, etc.) will continue, but in the same vein as in previous years if not decades. Sensational breakthroughs are unlikely. Lukashenko will remain unwilling to concede, while Moscow will remain undecided on whether it should follow a hard "imperial" path.

For the time being, the existing hybrid option of slowly increasing Russian economic and political influence in Belarus will likely continue. Much will depend on popular discontent inside the country. Should pre-revolutionary conditions emerge, Moscow's response might evolve from a hybrid to a military or more altogether integrationist option.

Emil Avdaliani teaches history and international relations at Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. He has worked for various international consulting companies and currently publishes articles on military and political developments across the former Soviet space.