

## A demonstration of Eurasian solidarity

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The Prime Ministers of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, the member states of the Common Economic Space established at the initiative of Russia, issued a joint statement on 11 March in which they deemed unacceptable the sanctions against Belarus introduced and announced by the European Union and the United States. They stated that the sanctions have created artificial barriers to economic cooperation within the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space (CES) which they have created; have affected the economic security of the area; and are adversely affecting the process of Eurasian integration. A similar statement was issued on 24 February by the presidents of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev and of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Both instances are a response to a request from Belarus; on 14 February a letter on the matter was submitted by Belarus' deputy prime minister Syarhei Rumas to Viktor Khristienko, the Chairman of the Eurasian Economic Commission (which coordinates integration within the CES).

### Commentary

- Both the existing and planned economic sanctions against Belarus result in reducing the opportunities for Belarusian companies and businessmen to cooperate with the West. The sanctions' consequences will be important for Belarus, but should not affect relations within the Common Economic Space, nor Russia and Kazakhstan themselves. From the standpoint of Russian interests, limiting Belarus's contact with the West may have significant positive effects, as it will make Belarus's dependency on cooperation with Russia even more pronounced. Besides, it is likely that Russian companies will take over the existing customers of those Belarusian enterprises which are subject to the sanctions, especially in the petrochemical sector. The declarations by the prime ministers and presidents must therefore be regarded as a form of political support for Lukashenka, and not as a defence of common economic interests.
- The Russian government's support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka, whom they themselves have often criticised, appears primarily to be aimed at demonstrating that Belarus is in the Russian sphere of influence, and that Russia regards the West's increasing involvement in that country's internal affairs as an infringement of its interests. Kazakhstan's participation in defending the Belarusian president against Western pressure is part of the opposition which Astana constantly raises to Western interference in its internal affairs. This opposition has intensified, especially since the recent parliamentary elections and the suppression of protests in Zhanaozen, which were severely criticised by the international community. At the same time, Kazakhstan has

found it convenient to support the initiative of its most important political and economic partner, Russia.

- The use of the Common Economic Space structure to give political support to Lukashenka seems to confirm that Russia has initiated a new phase of integration within the CIS, which is intended to bring about the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union in that area, thus going beyond mere economic cooperation among the member states. Furthermore, Russia, which in turn is determined to have other states (especially Ukraine) joining Eurasian integration process, is using the newly formed structure to support Lukashenka politically as another example of the benefits which the leaders involved in this process can expect to gain.