

No alternative to cooperation. The presidents of Russia and Belarus meet in Sochi

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On 22 February, Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka met in Krasnaya Polyana near Sochi. This is the first time the two leaders talked in person since 14 September last year. According to scant official information (no press conference was held), they discussed issues concerning economic cooperation, joining forces in dealing with COVID-19, and continuing integration within the Union State. Putin confirmed the transfer of the Sputnik V vaccine production technology, which will enable its production to be launched in Belarusian laboratories. Referring to the integration process, Lukashenka emphasised that six to seven out of 33 so-called road maps (documents regulating the unification or tightening of cooperation in particular areas) still had to be discussed. Rumours had been circulating for several days about Belarus's intention to negotiate a Russian loan of US\$3 billion in order to address its current needs and to refinance its existing external debt, but these have been denied. The press services of both leaders emphasised the informal nature of the meeting (some of the talks took place while skiing) and its good atmosphere. The event was preceded by the signing of an agreement on the transshipment of Belarusian fuels (redirected from Lithuania) in Russian ports by the transport ministers of both countries in Moscow on 19 February. In recent weeks, there has also been information about Minsk's attempts to renegotiate the terms of Russian gas and oil supplies.

Commentary

- The mere fact that the two presidents met in person, along with the obviously positive propaganda effect, suggest that the Kremlin has decided to support Lukashenka politically and economically in return for only minor (though important in terms of PR) concessions from Minsk, such as redirecting some fuel exports to Russian ports. Moscow, at least in the foreseeable future, relies on Lukashenka, who is isolated in the West, as the only effective guarantor that Russian dominance will continue in Belarus. The Kremlin has eased pressure on Minsk regarding amending the constitution and the two countries' integration since it believes that the mass protests of the Belarusian public against the rigging of elections were initiated and supported by Western countries (especially the USA) as part of the policy of regime change in the post-Soviet area and as an element of pressure on Russia. The development of the domestic situation in Russia in recent weeks has been unfavourable for the Kremlin which undoubtedly contributed to easing the pressure on Belarus. In particular the arrest of the oppositionist Alexei Navalny provoked a wave of anti-Putin protests, which were brutally suppressed by the

authorities, and followed by a deepening crisis in relations with the West. Putin's problems temporarily strengthened Lukashenka's position ahead of the meeting in Krasnaya Polyana. Thus he gained the opportunity to emphasise that he does share some interests with the Kremlin (combating 'colour revolutions') and gave him some room to evade fulfilling his commitments.

- Moscow is ready to take on some of the costs of maintaining the regime, although Lukashenka has been a problematic partner for the Kremlin. Firstly, he has been an assertive player who has a good feel of the situation, reluctant to far-reaching integration with Russia. Furthermore, he is a controversial leader who has lost his social legitimacy. Therefore, a significant increase in the currently limited subsidies for Belarus is unlikely, since this would have excessively strengthened the regime and hindered a possible future attempt to force systemic changes in the Belarusian political system, ultimately leading to replacing the country's leader, which would be beneficial for Moscow.
- Lukashenka has over the past few months been stalling the launch of the constitutional reform approved by Moscow that was announced in August last year in the context of mass post-election demonstrations. The political system transformation was intended to satisfy the expectations of not only the rebellious section of the Belarusian public, but also the Russian leaders. Even though the Russian government supported Lukashenka on an ad hoc basis in suppressing the public protests, it was interested in ultimately weakening his political position. There was a plan to prepare an amendment of the constitution by the end of 2021 and to hold a referendum concerning this issue in January 2022, devoid of any specific content. This was presented by Lukashenka to the National Assembly of Belarus on February 11, and is an obvious sign that he is playing for time and making efforts to maintain the key position in the country. The (at least temporary) decline in street protests has contributed to building up Minsk's assertiveness because this creates the impression that the country's leader is regaining control of the situation.
- In his speech at the assembly, Lukashenka, despite the use of obviously pro-Russian rhetoric, made it clear that he was not interested in opening a new stage of Russian-Belarusian integration that would entail (for example) the creation of supranational authorities of the Union State vested with extensive competences. Moreover, the attempts to change the conditions of fuel supplies from Russia indicate that Minsk's main goal is to maintain, and ultimately even increase, Russian subsidies for the Belarusian economy (which has been adversely affected by the pandemic and the post-election crisis). Given all these facts, it cannot be ruled out that, regardless of the official denial, Lukashenka probed the option of obtaining another stabilisation loan (last September, a decision was made to offer a loan of US\$1.5 billion, of which 1 billion has already been transferred) during his talks with Putin. Lukashenka's present calculations with regard to Moscow, are based on his conviction that Putin wants to avoid a re-escalation of protests in Belarus. These protests might put at risk the Russian influence in Belarus, which is guaranteed by the present regime in place in Minsk. Furthermore, Minsk hopes that the Kremlin will be interested this year in successful – including in propaganda terms – joint Russia-Belarus Zapad-2021 military exercises scheduled for September.

- The talks lasted well over six hours and covered an extensive range of topics on mutual relations. This is in stark contrast to the small amount of official reports on the meeting and the fact that they contain only sparse information. This suggests that it cannot be ruled out that the two leaders made decisions regarding bilateral relations that have not been announced to the general public and will come to light over time. Regardless of the current political situation, Moscow's key objectives concerning Minsk remain unchanged. These include the extensive economic and political integration of the two countries, as well as the increasing subordination of Belarus in the area of security. The only thing that is being modified is the strategy applied to achieve these goals. It seems that this strategy assumes a temporary reduction of pressure on Minsk and a focus on the gradual increase of influence in Belarus in various spheres, taking one (small) step at a time.