

Russia on Belarus: modifying the tactic, not the strategy

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The escalating political crisis in Belarus, the dramatically falling public support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and the suppression of the mass protests have made the Kremlin modify its current policy towards Minsk. The relatively good condition of mutual relations demonstrated by both sides proves that Moscow's plans last year to increase pressure on Minsk in order to push through the so-called constitutional reforms have been postponed. Lukashenka has adopted an ostentatiously pro-Russian stance, and the pressure has eased as a result of this. This suggests that the Kremlin is interested in continuing support for the regime in Belarus, provided that it effectively pacifies any manifestations of social protest.

The Kremlin's apparent mildness

Russia's pressure on Belarus was eased as a result of its assessment of the current external and internal challenges Russia is facing. The Kremlin sees the greatest threat as possible political changes in Belarus that are not controlled by Lukashenka. A successful 'colour revolution' in Belarus, a country which has a very strong impact on Russia's military security in the Western theatre of operations, would be unfavourable not only for military reasons. Shaking the stability of Lukashenka's regime could also become a catalyst for an increase in anti-Putin sentiment ahead of the autumn parliamentary elections in Russia. Russia is interested in making Belarus increasingly isolated on the international arena, because this leads to an entrenchment of Belarus's dependence on Russia. One example proving the effectiveness of this policy is the radical anti-Western turn manifested by Lukashenka, who also emphasises the shared common interests with Russia in the area of counteracting 'Western aggression' and combating foreign ideological subversion. At home, this struggle with the alleged Western influence takes the form of an escalation of repression against independent circles and the Polish minority.

The Kremlin has not given up on implementing the basic assumptions of its policy towards Minsk in the medium term. These envisage the intensification of efforts to promote the idea that Belarus belongs in the Russian cultural circle and to weaken the influence of the independent media and Western culture, to enhance economic and political integration, and ultimately to subordinate Belarus in the military sphere.

Integration...

Moscow is aware that when Lukashenka declares his loyalty as an ally, he is counting on further financial support for his regime, including low-interest loans and energy preferences. However, Russia is unlikely to significantly increase subsidies for Minsk in the near future. It is more likely to leave the financial argument as an easy-to-use tool for putting pressure on Lukashenka. Its main strategic interest, which it has so far delayed in implementing, is the

consolidation of its control over Belarus under the Union State Agreement and the 31 'road maps' that have not been revealed to the public. Easing the pressure on Lukashenka in the area of integration only means a change in Moscow's tactics. It should be expected that Russia, which is interested in announcing success in this process, will force Lukashenka to make concessions.

...and its acceleration in the military and security areas

Since the beginning of this year, Russia has been increasingly active in the area of military cooperation with Belarus. The plans to hold the Zapad 2021 military exercises in Belarusian military training grounds in autumn this year have been used by the defence ministries of the two countries as a pretext to launch the next stage of building the mechanisms for the integration of the Belarusian and Russian armed forces. The training activity aimed at improving the interoperability of Russian and Belarusian airborne units has been intensified. Furthermore, the process of Russian officers training soldiers of the Belarusian land and air defence forces has also been initiated. Lukashenka publicly agreed to the Russian Air Force using Belarus's airports. The visible acceleration in achieving the full interoperability of the armed forces of both countries is important for Russia, which treats this process as a demonstration of strength against the US and NATO and as a deterrent on NATO's eastern flank.

The ministries in charge of national security have intensified contacts to strengthen the current cooperation. In December 2020, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and Russia's National Guard signed a cooperation agreement. The general provisions of the document can be used, if necessary, as a basis for physical support from the Russian Federation for Belarusian OMON units tasked with suppressing street protests. Moscow is still interested in cooperation involving the protection of the northern and western borders of Belarus, as well as the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. There are signs that intelligence cooperation has intensified, including in the Ukrainian section: a KGB collaborator collecting military information was exposed in March this year in Volyn Oblast.

The bridgeheads of Russian influence

Moscow is not giving up on other ways of maintaining its influence in Belarus. The basic tools in this regard include maintaining contacts with representatives of the nomenklatura and informally supporting those of its representatives who are critical of Lukashenka's policy. Officially, this task is largely being carried out by the Russian ambassador in Minsk. The nomination of Yevgeny Lukyanov (who served as ambassador to Latvia and who has extensive experience in conducting financial operations) for this position is a sign that Moscow attaches great importance to the supervision of the activity of Belarusian companies and businesspeople operating on foreign markets. One example of Moscow's support for people whom Lukashenka has removed from the nomenklatura is provided by the fate of former Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Rumas. Fearing that he might be arrested, he moved to London, and shortly after that ended up in Russia. He accepted the position of a supervisory board member at the Russian Agricultural Bank. It cannot be ruled out that electing representatives of the Belarusian nomenklatura who could form a new government of the republic after Lukashenka leaves is an element of the *modus operandi* adopted by the Russian Federation.

Moscow's activities also include supporting rump pro-Russian organisations. In early March, the founding congress of the Soyuz party was held in Minsk. Its leader is Sergey Lushch, whose activity dates back to the mid-2010s. He has been involved in popularising the "Russkiy Mir" ('Russian World') concept which promotes the vision of the triune Slavic nation. The party's political manifesto is limited to spreading the slogans of the alliance and integration with Russia, and supporting Lukashenka's 'constitutional reform'. Bringing together the supporters of a close alliance with the Russian Federation under the aegis of the new party will not meet with wide public support, including inside the circles favouring Lukashenka, and thus Soyuz's activity will not change the architecture of the Belarusian party political scene. The activation of pro-Russian circles is one of the instruments used by the Kremlin to undermine the self-confidence of the Belarusian leader and to remind him that Russia has a political base in Belarus ready to participate in the transition of power.

Lukashenka's limited room for manoeuvre

Lukashenka realises that there is no alternative to the unequal alliance with Russia and is aware of the fundamental importance of the economic and energy preferences which it offers. Nevertheless, he assumes that, despite the international isolation and the resulting lack of room for manoeuvre, he may expect support from the Kremlin in the near future. He is also trying to use Russia's fears of the destabilisation of the domestic situation in Belarus to obtain economic preferences. On 17 March, the Belarusian ambassador to Russia, Uladzimir Semashka, was authorised by the prime minister to negotiate amendments to the contract on Russian gas supplies signed in 2011. Since the beginning of this year, the Belarusian regime has also resumed attempts made in previous years to obtain compensation for changes in the taxation of the Russian oil industry, resulting in a significant increase in oil prices over the past few years. Minsk has declared its willingness to cooperate closely in all spheres, but this does not mean that it is ready to amend the constitution in a manner that will be beneficial for Russia while also being risky for itself. Lukashenka will be particularly cautious about the development of a party political system in Belarus, which is currently very limited. Therefore, it is unlikely that new parties, including the pro-Russian Soyuz, will be registered in the near future. At the same time – in order to strengthen his negotiating position and to demonstrate loyalty to Moscow – Lukashenka offers the military dimension of bilateral cooperation. This is seen, for example, in the plan to create three training centres for both land and air forces. One of these, the air force training centre, is to be located in Belarus (Babruysk, Baranavichy and Lida are being considered). Belarus is also likely to grant the armed forces of the Russian Federation consent for a 25-year extension on the lease of two military facilities in Hantsavichy and Vileyka. While offering to support Russian activities in the military sphere, Lukashenka hopes that the Kremlin will modify its plans regarding the integration of the economic and political space and will allow him to independently create directions for the development of the internal situation.

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