

Russia–Belarus: a sham acceleration of integration

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On 4 November 2021, a meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State of Russia and Belarus, attended by the two countries' presidents, prime ministers and speakers of parliaments, was held in the form of a video conference. During the meeting, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has been the State Council's president since 2000, signed a decree launching the implementation of the programme for deeper Russian-Belarusian integration within the Union State in 2021–3. The document mainly involves the 28 union programmes initially agreed back in September, which are intended to lead to the unification of economic, social and energy policies, including the creation of a common gas, oil and electricity market. Commenting on the agreement, Lukashenka stressed the strategic importance of these decisions, and said that they will result in a "reset in the economic space of the two countries", which in his opinion will foster a new quality as regards the movement of services and goods, the operation of common markets, and the implementation of integrated financial, fiscal, industrial policies, etc. Joining the video conference from Sevastopol, Vladimir Putin for his part reiterated his readiness to continue to support the "fraternal" Belarusian nation, and emphasised the symbolism of the agreements being signed on National Unity Day.

In addition, Lukashenka announced that Russia and Belarus would develop the potential for a joint grouping of military forces. During the meeting, a new version of the Union State's military doctrine was approved (although not yet signed). According to the Russian Defence Ministry, this doctrine is intended to boost the two states' defence policy coordination in response to military threats and political and economic pressure from the collective West.

Commentary

- For years, Lukashenka has avoided taking any binding decisions regarding Russian-Belarusian integration, as he is aware of the risk that Belarus's already limited sovereignty (regarding military affairs in particular) might become even more dependent on Russia. This is why he sabotaged the signing of the agreements aimed at deepening integration which the Kremlin tried to force through back in December 2019, on the twentieth anniversary of the Union State's establishment. At present, due to Belarus's isolation and Western-imposed sanctions, Minsk has considerably less room for manoeuvre, and Moscow is the only partner from which it can receive financial assistance, cheap fuel and other types of economic support offered on preferential terms.
- In such a difficult situation, Lukashenka has been forced to formally approve the acceleration of integration in 28 areas. At the same time, there are many indications that

the Belarusian side is continuing its attempts to delay the genuine implementation of the commitments it has made. The most recent statement issued by the two governments, on 10 September 2021, indicates that several issues are still under negotiation, and the deeper integration programme approved on 4 November 2021 is largely symbolic and declaratory in nature. This was also indirectly admitted by Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, who said during the Council's meeting that the approval of the integration plan at the head of state level is merely paving the way for the signature of over 400 bilateral documents. This suggests that the finalisation of specific programmes has been scheduled for 2021–3, and in some cases it has been postponed until as late as 2027.

- The Russian side has abandoned its plan to give the meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State the status of a breakthrough political event. Due to President Putin's ostentatious absence from the meeting held in Minsk, the approval of the integration documents was a mere formality. Moreover, the decree gives no indication that the integration process could accelerate any time soon. In this manner, Russia has manifested its dissatisfaction with the lack of genuine significance of the documents signed, with the fact that Lukashenka is reluctant to carry out a constitutional reform, as well as with Minsk's recent provocative behaviour, including the closing of the Belarusian branch of the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper and the criticism of President Putin offered by the government-controlled media in Belarus.
- Regardless of these apparent disagreements, however, Kremlin policy mainly views Belarus as a territory of strategic importance for Russia's military security. President Putin has reiterated his support for Lukashenka's actions in the field of security to counter "attempted external interference in the internal affairs of both states". In addition, he stressed the importance of bilateral military cooperation, and announced the development of legislation in this field. This means that Russia is interested in Lukashenka continuing his confrontational policy towards the West, as it sees this as a method for ensuring Belarus remains permanently dependent on Moscow. For the Kremlin, the migrant crisis on the borders with the EU being engineered by Minsk, alongside the accusations that Western countries are escalating this crisis, are sufficient arguments to justify Russia's potential increased military presence in Belarus as part of their "common defence space".
- Lukashenka will likely continue his tactic of stalling to the prospective constitutional reforms which have been debated in Belarus over the last few months. Although neither Russia nor Belarus has publicly confirmed this, it cannot be ruled out that during his meeting with Putin in Sochi back in September 2020, against the background of massive post-election protests, Lukashenka pledged to modify Belarus's political system to boost the role of parliament and possibly also to hold early presidential elections. Lukashenka's assurances of his readiness to carry out the reforms, which went beyond the agenda of the Supreme State Council meeting, may indicate that Russia is still putting pressure on him regarding this issue. Lukashenka is reluctant to introduce significant changes to the system of government, and is feigning goodwill while hoping he can avoid having to launch any such political reforms, which could prove risky (including for his position *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin).

