

After Saint Petersburg: Belarus-Russian Relations Back on Track?

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Aleksandr Lukashenko, the president of Belarus, met his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in Saint Petersburg on 3 April 2017. This was the first time the two leaders had met since November 2016. All disputes between the two countries now seem to be resolved – at least according to the official press reports. Russia has agreed to refinance Belarus' gas debt while Belarus will pay back more than 720 million USD in arrears for gas supplies. This energy conflict started in January 2016 when Minsk refused to pay the 132 USD per 1000 cubic metres of Russian gas demanded by Moscow, and insisted on paying only 73 USD per 1000 cubic metres. In order to force Minsk to pay more, Moscow reduced its oil supplies to Belarus by 12 per cent. This move was a blow for Belarus' state budget, which to a large extent comes from re-selling refined Russian oil. According to Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, Russia will now renew its oil supplies to Belarus of 24 million tons a year.

Before the meeting, relations between Belarus and Russia were at a low point. The crisis was not restricted to energy questions, but also involved the acquis of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), visa questions and Russia's desire to open a military base in Belarus. The personal relationship between the two presidents has never been excellent and is unlikely to improve dramatically even after the Saint Petersburg meeting. Before 3 April, several meetings in between were cancelled. In December 2016, Lukashenko did not attend the EEU top summit, also held in Saint Petersburg. Because of his absence from that meeting, the new EEU Customs Code could not come in effect. Also, in February 2017, Lukashenko spent more than ten days near the Russian town of Sochi hoping to meet with Putin – even if the official reason for his presence was a skiing holiday. Even though Putin was in Sochi too – at least for part of that period – the two presidents never met.

Although the 3 April meeting suggests that Lukashenko has now finally given in to Putin and is moving his country back into Russia's orbit after a period of seeking closer relations with the European Union (EU),

that conclusion may be premature. Several questions remain unanswered, or at least have not yet been publicly answered, for instance, if the deal meant that Lukashenko finally had to give in to Putin's demand to open a Russian military base in Belarus. Despite the official declarations, there are still disagreements between the two countries.

Lukashenko will also in the future need somehow to continue balancing Belarus' relations with Russia with the EU in order not to be completely swallowed up by Russia. Belarus is unlikely to scrap the visa-free regime it introduced as recently as in January 2017 for 80 countries, including the members of the EU. That move was met with suspicion by Moscow, which saw it as an example of Belarus' disloyalty. As a response, Putin ordered the Russian security service the FSB to establish a border zone on the border with Belarus.

Notably, the meeting in Saint Petersburg was held in a dramatic setting. On the very same day, a suspected terrorist bomb exploded on the city's metro, killing at least 14 people and injuring more than 60. Also, both presidents have recently been challenged by large anti-regime demonstrations in their respective countries. On 26 March, Moscow saw the largest protests in years in the capital with some 25 000 participants. Altogether, protests were organized simultaneously in more than 95 cities across Russia against corruption in the federal government. In Moscow alone, the police detained more than 1 000 protesters, many of them under 25 years old. Minor protests were also held on 2 April in Moscow and several other cities.

In Belarus, hundreds of protesters were detained when trying to organize a protest march on "Freedom Day" (25 March). That day commemorates the creation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918, and is often used by the country's opposition to demonstrate against Lukashenko. The following day, more arrests were made at rallies in support of those detained the day before.

The wave of protests in Belarus had already started on 17 February and originated in discontent with Lukashenko's notorious Decree no. 3 on taxing "social

parasites”. This decree mandates a 230 USD fine for people who work fewer than 183 days in a year without being registered as unemployed. To the surprise of the authorities, ordinary people came out to show solidarity with the roughly half a million people affected by the decree. After a few weeks of protests that started in Minsk, but quickly spread to the provinces, Lukashenko had to retreat and postpone the implementation of the decree by one year. But protests continued as they had transformed into anti-regime protests against the president himself.

Lukashenko’s main goal is to remain in power. Despite the recent internal unrest, his grip on power remains tight. He controls the security forces and there is – for the moment – no indication of an open split in the regime. Lukashenko has long proved himself a master in manipulating elections and the country’s opposition is weak and divided. Most of the opposition leaders were detained during the days and weeks before the “Freedom Day” march, preventing them even from taking part in the event. It remains to be seen whether the protests will continue. An indication of that will be given on 26 April – the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster – which is also often used for anti-government protests.

In the longer run, however, the regime faces serious challenges. There are clear indications that the “Belarusian model”, i.e. social guarantees without reform, no longer works. This model has been based on a social contract between the authorities and the people by which the authorities have provided economic stability and security for the people on condition that they stay out of politics. For several years, this was possible because Russia subsidized the Belarusian economy, particularly with discounted prices for oil and gas. After 2014, when Russia’s economy faced crisis due to the fall in oil prices and the Western sanctions after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Moscow could not continue to subsidize Belarus. As their standard of living fell, Belarusians started accusing Lukashenko of no longer keeping to his part of the deal. Given the state of the Russian economy, the Kremlin is not likely to go back to subsidizing the Belarusian economy as it did before 2014.

Lukashenko has accused foreign spies of fomenting the protests in Belarus against him. This fear of so-called colour revolutions, allegedly incited by the West, is shared by Putin in Russia. Especially after the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014, the possibility that a colour

revolution in Russia’s neighbourhood could be used as a trigger for another Russian military intervention has been raised. In the case of Belarus, this kind of scenario has been particularly connected to the joint Russian-Belarusian military exercise *Zapad* (West) 2017, to be held in September partly on the territory of Belarus. It has been claimed that the exercise could give Russia the opportunity for military movement, which may prepare the ground for actions against Belarus itself. Lukashenko has, however, rejected these suspicions as groundless. Nevertheless, the new 2016 Belarusian military doctrine raises the threat of “local war”, indicating that the Armed Force take to account such events as the “Arab Spring” and a “Donbas scenario” in a Belarusian context.

On the one hand, a Russia-sponsored coup d’etat in Belarus would be difficult to organize. The Kremlin has several ways of influencing Belarus, in order to keep it within its orbit, not least economically and in the media sphere, and will above all try to avoid chaos in its neighbourhood. On the other hand, given the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, Russia will not just stand by if – in such an unlikely event – the internal situation in Belarus were to spin out of control. The Kremlin knows that, given the rather weak reaction from the West to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the response from the West will again be limited to sanctions. It is far from certain that the Saint Petersburg agreement will be enough to assure Putin that Belarus is tightly anchored to Russia again, and it is also uncertain if Lukashenko’s and the security forces’ response to the recent upheaval in Belarus will be enough to guarantee Putin that Lukashenko still controls the situation in Belarus.

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