

# The Belarus-Russia Union State: Troubled Integration in Pandemic Elections

Jakob Hedenskog

**T**HE PROCESS OF integrating Belarus and Russia within the framework of the Union State appears to have seriously slowed down due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. During 2019, the level of activities was high, with several top-level meetings. However, despite these efforts, the process failed to produce a final agreement. So what will happen now?

Although the process has stalled significantly, it will likely re-start later in 2020. The Belarusian presidential elections on the 9th of August 2020 will give Russia an opportunity to press the Belarusian leadership harder. The main means of Russian pressure on Belarus are analysed in this briefing, as is the Union State integration process in the light of the ongoing pandemic and the coming Belarus presidential election.

Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko will seek re-election for a sixth term. Upon coming to power in 1994, he almost immediately announced that economic and political-military integration with Russia would be the strategic priorities for Belarusian foreign policy. During the 1990s, Lukashenko signed a number of treaties and agreements with Russia's President, Boris Yeltsin, culminating in the conclusion of the 8 December 1999 Treaty on Establishing a Union State of Belarus and Russia. This document included an ambitious integration agenda, including the creation of a shared constitution, parliament, defence and foreign policy, currency, as well as common custom duties, taxes, etc.

However, the Belarus-Russia Union State has largely remained symbolic. The strategic agreement between Belarus and Russia was based on the exchange of Russian economic assistance, the so-called integration subsidies, for Belarus's geopolitical loyalty. In contrast to its neighbouring states, such as Ukraine, Belarus renounced its aspirations of integration with Western institutions, the EU, and NATO, and instead became a member of several organisations dominated by Russia, most importantly the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Belarus also provided Russia with security on its Western border. In return, Moscow supplied energy

at preferential prices and provided privileged access of Belarusian goods to the Russian market.

This strategic arrangement worked until 2014. After Russia illegally annexed Crimea and initiated the war in Donbas, Minsk started to feel uneasy about Belarus's own security and territorial integrity, as well as about the prospects of being in the middle of Russia's increasing confrontation with the West. Since 2015, Russia has been restricting its support for Belarus and applying economic pressure by reducing oil supplies, increasing oil and gas prices, and restricting access of Belarusian agricultural and industrial goods to the Russian market. For instance, Russian authorities started to gradually implement the so-called "tax manoeuvre" in the oil industry, with the aim of cancelling export duties and replacing them with a mineral extraction tax. This means Belarus will no longer receive a discount on export duties, and Belarusian prices for Russian oil and gas will converge with the market price, thus effectively ending Russian integration subsidies for the Belarusian economy. In December 2018, Russia's then prime minister, Dmitrii Medvedev, issued an ultimatum under which Belarus would only receive economic aid if Minsk agreed to continue the integration process within the Union State.

In a similar way, Russia stepped up its pressure on Belarus in the military sphere. In September 2015, the Kremlin announced it would deploy a Russian military airbase in Belarus without Minsk's prior consent. The Belarusian leadership refused to meet the Kremlin's request. The lessons from the annexation of Crimea pointed to the risk in having a Russian military base on its territory.

To date, the Union State includes two joint military components, a regional group of forces and a unified regional air-defence system. In contrast to the regional group of forces, which is organized and deployed only when war looms, the unified regional air-defence system exists and functions also in peacetime.

Besides the economic and military means, disinformation and propaganda are perhaps Russia's most influential means of pressuring Belarus. Russian language TV channels and

social media dominate the media space in Belarus. Russian propaganda services regularly publish chauvinistic material containing hate speech, questioning Belarusian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and spreading degrading statements about the Belarusian people, language and culture.

Thus, the Kremlin is putting serious pressure on Belarus to integrate with Russia, while the Belarusian leadership struggles to preserve its national independence and strategic autonomy in foreign and security policy. Despite its membership in the CSTO and EAEU, and its integration in the Union State, Belarus still preserves a considerable degree of autonomy towards Russia. It can block the Kremlin's initiatives if Minsk thinks they are inconsistent with Belarus's national interests. For instance, Belarus continues to have normal relations with Ukraine, and has neither engaged in sanctions against Kyiv, nor de jure accepted the illegal annexation of Crimea.

The coronavirus pandemic in 2020 has not only seriously affected the Russian and Belarusian economies, but has also the potential to create increased difficulties for their bilateral relations. On 18 March 2020, Russia closed its border with Belarus, without consulting the latter. President Lukashenko criticised Russia for the potentially bad effects of the border closing on the Belarusian economy. Lukashenko's decision to stage the Victory Parade in Minsk on the 9th of May, in contrast to that of the Russian president, can in this context be explained, at least partially, by his motivation not to portray himself as a coward who is taking orders from the Kremlin.

Overall, Lukashenko has taken a stand ignoring the pandemic, stating that vodka, sauna, and tractors are protecting Belarusians from the coronavirus. Russian media channels and official representatives have made aggressive statements against Belarus's corona strategy and Lukashenko's relaxed attitude. In May 2020, Belarusian authorities expelled a journalist from a Russian state-run TV channel due to a reportage about Belarus's handling of the coronavirus. Parts of Belarusian democratic opposition, which usually criticise Lukashenko for his authoritarian rule, has now criticised him for not taking harsher measures to close down the society to prevent the spreading of the coronavirus. When it comes to the elections, there are certainly great challenges and threat to life and health for the work of election functionaries during a pandemic.

Although the coronavirus pandemic has led to a freezing of the Union State integration process, the 2020 presidential election might present an opportunity for Russia to re-invent its integration ultimatum for Belarus. The pandemic has

neither changed Moscow's striving to re-establish its sphere of interests in the post-Soviet area, nor has it had a moderating effect on tensions with the West.

The most likely scenario for the coming period is that Russia will continue its economic and political pressure, particularly in the energy sphere, much like what we have been seeing since 2015. Another issue coming up soon will be the renegotiation of the lease for the existing two Russian military objects in Belarus – a Russian Navy communications centre and a Volga-type early-warning radar station. In the military sphere, Moscow will also continue to press Belarus on the issue of the military airbase; to expand its influence over the Belarusian Armed Forces; and to maintain or even expand the capability gap between the armed forces of Russia and Belarus by not exporting modern and sophisticated weapons to Belarus. Furthermore, Russia is likely to increase the use of disinformation and Russia-friendly media in Belarus.

Minsk's answer will be to continue to delay the negotiations, without losing the commitment, and in the meantime seek alternatives for Russian energy and credits in order to get through the acute economic crisis. However, as for energy supplies, all alternatives to Russian deliveries, even without the subsidies, tend to be more expensive.

Another scenario is the one of a more active and assertive Russian engagement in connection to the elections. This could include supporting one or several of the potential candidates against the incumbent president. One problem for Russia, however, is that the integration will have to give at least the impression that the participation of the Belarusian side is voluntary. If Russia acts in an overly forced manner, it will risk a backlash.

A third scenario, one where Russia uses military force in order to subject Belarus, is less likely in the context of the elections, although it cannot be completely ruled out in the long term. From its aggression against Ukraine, the Russian leadership knows that the reaction from the West in such a case would be weak and consist mainly of sanctions. It is highly unlikely that there would be any military response from the West. The prospect of a democratisation of the current authoritarian Belarusian regime is extremely low. However, if there was a serious risk that the regime were to disintegrate in an uncontrolled way, Russia would feel its vital security interests were threatened, and it would not hesitate to act pro-actively. Equally, should Belarus cross one of Russia's red lines, i.e. by leaving the EAEU or CSTO, or declaring its intentions to leave the Russian sphere in favour of the West, again, Moscow would not hesitate to act. ■