Commentary
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A New Chapter in Belarus-Russia Relations after the Elections?

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Summary

The upcoming presidential elections in Belarus are likely to mark a critical (dis)juncture for the country in general and, in particular, for its relations with Russia. The two allies have exhausted the model of bilateral relations that served them well in the past and need to open a new chapter in their relationship. What this chapter might look like and how long and bumpy the road to it is going to be will depend to a large extent on the outcomes of this election.

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Old grand deal

Since December 2018, Belarus and Russia – traditionally close allies – have been locked in a dispute over the fundamentals of their relationship. **Moscow has demanded closer integration, whereas Minsk has declined any new integration proposals that can diminish its sovereignty.** This is not the first time the two countries have had discussions of this kind, but today's international circumstances make an important difference. Amid the ongoing structural transformation in the international system, **no way back to business as usual** seems possible in Russia-Belarus relations.

In the mid-1990s, Minsk and Moscow struck an informal grand deal whereby the former exchanged **geopolitical loyalty for economic benefits** offered by the latter. In other words, Belarus ensured Russian security interests by avoiding meaningful political and military cooperation with the West and, in return, received low oil and gas prices and privileged access to Russian markets and funding. A unique bilateral integration model –

the Union State – was set up in 1999 to facilitate the arrangement. The allies agreed to closely coordinate foreign, defence, economic and social policies while retaining their political sovereignty.

The relationship was far from ideal, as Russia's occasional attempts to make it cheaper for itself or to use economic leverage to exert political pressure would trigger **public disputes and even so-called energy and trade wars** – for instance, when Moscow blocked the imports of Belarusian goods or cut oil and gas deliveries. In response, Belarus would reach out to the West to demonstrate that it had other options in case Russia did not make concessions. The trick seemed to work and once the allies found **a mutually acceptable compromise** everything would return to normal.

Intra-alliance security dilemma

Things started to change post-2014, when the events in Crimea and Donbas triggered a major confrontation between Russia and the West. As geopolitical tensions rose, so did differences between Moscow and Minsk. The former wanted the ally's unequivocal support, but the latter, instead, adhered consistently to a neutral stance on Russia's conflicts with Ukraine and the West, which many in Moscow interpreted as abandonment. At the heart of the friction is what the International Relations (IR) theory calls an "**intra-alliance security dilemma**," which never existed before when Russia had less conflictual relations with the West. Back then, Minsk could safely offer Russia its full geopolitical loyalty without the fear of getting entrapped in a Russian-Western conflict not of its own choosing. After 2014, this was no longer the case.

As a result, the old grand deal between Belarus and Russia is losing value for both.

> For Minsk, it has become **too risky to preserve the same level of geopolitical loyalty to Russia**, whereas little else can convince Russia to keep the same amount of economic benefits for Belarus.

In light of this dilemma, the countries spent most of the year in 2019 in tough negotiations about ways of deepening integration within the Union State but failed to reach a compromise.

A new chapter?

This does not mean that Belarus's relations with Russia are necessarily ill-fated. Nor does it mean that Belarus might now become "another Ukraine," which is next to impossible even if Aliaksandr Lukashenka were to lose power following the elections.

Yet it is equally evident that the **disagreements between Minsk and Moscow are too fundamental** and that their accommodation would require a qualitatively new model of bilateral relations.

Both governments seem to realise this but have quite incompatible ideas about ways forward. **Russia insists on deepening integration** by unifying legislation in most economic sectors: for example, adopting common tax and civic codes, implementing unified customs and banking regulations, creating single regulators in energy and financial markets, etc. Importantly, Moscow also wants to create new supranational institutions, which Minsk claims would undermine its sovereignty. Belarus, on its part, insists that before discussing any new integration ideas Russia has to deliver on the **commitments it undertook in the past**, both within the Union State framework and in the Eurasian Economic Union. Specifically, it demands **equal oil and gas prices** for Belarusian and Russian business entities, which should already have been facts of life given the existing level of economic integration.

> Thus, the central question now is whether **Minsk will be strong enough to stand up for its national interests** in further negotiations with Russia after the elections.

If Belarus comes out of the presidential campaign significantly weakened by internal political divisions and with another crisis in relations with the EU and the United States, Russia will gain the upper hand to impose its own bilateral agenda.

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