Commentary
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Belarus and Russia Dispute the Fundamentals of Their Relationship

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Summary

Over the past several months, Belarus has found itself in yet another conflict-in-progress with Russia. As always, it started with a cascade of economic issues, primarily centered on Russia's so-called oil "tax maneuver" and the financial losses it will incur on Belarus. Several rounds of negotiations during last summer and autumn seemed to produce solutions to the disagreement over the tax maneuver that were acceptable to both sides. However, in December it became obvious that the problem was far from over. Somewhat unexpectedly for Minsk, Moscow set a new condition for resolving the issue – that Belarus and Russia should return to the idea of the Union State and implement the 1999 Union State agreement.

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This new Russian condition – or ultimatum, as some commentators call it – adds novelty to the unfolding dispute, particularly when compared to the numerous past disagreements. It also makes the situation more serious, as it touches on the very fundamentals of Belarusian-Russian relations. Yet, calm analysis, rather than headlines-driven alarmism, is needed to properly understand what is happening.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Boris Yeltsin signed the Union State agreement in 1999, at the close of the latter's presidency. The document foresees, *inter alia*, the future creation of a single currency, a joint accounting chamber and customs, adoption of a common constitution, as well as the introduction of a Union State parliament and government. All this causes a lot of alarm in today's Belarus. But it would be an overstatement to call the treaty an instrument for incorporating Belarus into Russia. Even back then, the Belarusian side made sure to include crucial checks and balances into the treaty and ensured that it was based on the principle of parity, as the Belarusian analyst Valeria

Kostyugova emphasizes. For example, the two states preserved their sovereignty over most policy areas; whereas union-level decisions could not be passed over the objection of either side.

Of course, today the agreement is simply outdated. Not only has the world changed dramatically since 1999, but Belarusian-Russian relations have gone through numerous developments that have seriously affected how Minsk sees this relationship and its own future. To be sure, the two countries remain close partners with unique interdependencies in various areas, but at least two factors make the Belarusian authorities more skeptical about reviving the unification process.

The first one is Russia's growing geopolitical escalation with the West. Here, Belarus's national interests and Russia's intentions diverge increasingly visibly. While Moscow wants Minsk to join it in the geopolitical confrontation, Minsk is trying hard to adhere to its situational neutrality on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and to promote the de-escalation of geopolitical tensions. The overwhelming view in Minsk is that Belarus will become the primary victim, both economically and militarily, if the escalation continues.

> In a worst-case scenario of a kinetic collision between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Belarusian territory would inevitably become a battleground – something that has already happened numerous times in history.

The second reason is trust, which is the currency of any integration bloc. Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Anton Siluanov said that trust toward Belarus had been lost in Moscow. However, Belarus holds a comparable attitude toward Russia. Moscow's unilateral actions (like the tax maneuver) and its frequently demonstrated lack of willingness to comply with decisions taken by the Eurasian Economic Commission (the executive body of the Eurasian Economic Union, of which Russia and Belarus are both founding members) compel Minsk to question whether Russia truly supports proper integration between equal partners or whether it sees integration as a way to subdue neighbors for its geopolitical goals.

As a result of the above-mentioned factors, recent months have seen a growing wave of Russian information attacks on Belarus; initially by marginal imperialistically minded websites and now even by some big Russian media.

> At the same time, Moscow does not appear to have a long-term plan for Belarus, beyond a general and contradictory desire to somehow limit Belarus's foreign policy maneuvering while simultaneously lowering the costs of the alliance for Russia's budget.

According to Lukashenka, he had a somewhat similar impression after his two meetings with Putin at the end of December.

Whatever Russia's exact motives are, the Belarusian authorities have clearly outlined the contours of their position in the negotiations. Relations with Russia are absolutely crucial for Minsk and will remain so for a long time and under any government. But Belarus is not going to trade its sovereignty to preserve the *status quo*in relations. In Lukashenka's words, "I am not going to sell the country for a barrel of oil".

It is symbolic that on the same day Lukashenka spoke about the utmost value of Belarusian sovereignty, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus notified the United States government that it had lifted the cap on the number of US diplomats allowed in the country – a move *Foreign Policy*magazine called a "breakthrough". In reality, this decision by the Belarusian authorities follows several years of negotiations between Minsk and Washington. But it is also obvious that recurrent tensions with Moscow and all sorts of "unification with Russia" narratives incentivize Minsk to turn increasingly to diversification and hedging in its foreign policy.

One more problem around this current dispute deserves a separate mention, and it involves the media coverage surrounding it. In many respects, it already resembles the media hype and hysteria whipped up two years ago in anticipation of the Zapad 2017 military exercises. At that time, leading Western outlets reported stories about a purportedly imminent Russian takeover of Belarus or a planned attack by Russian troops on Ukraine or the Baltic States from Belarusian territory. Of course, nothing of this sort ever occurred. But the lessons from that case have clearly not been learned.

> Thus, everyone, including Western capitals, will benefit from more a more sober and professional reading of current Belarusian-Russian relations as well as of their implications for European security.

This will also help to find practical solutions in the region. Today, Belarus faces serious challenges to its own sovereignty, but most of them lie in the economic realm. Hence, the government in Minsk needs to focus on these challenges as systematically as possible. And so do Western states, if they really support strengthening Belarus's sovereignty.

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