

RUSSIA-BELARUS RELATIONS | IT'S COMPLICATED!



The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) set to integrate four former soviet economies – those of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia, – was finally launched on January 1, 2015. However, the initiative is now facing numerous challenges at both regional and bilateral levels. But the Ukraine situation has had some serious impact on Moscow's relations with its EAEU counterparts. This article will look more in detail on how the Ukraine crisis has affected the Russia-Belarus relations: are we really facing a breakdown, or the current disposition just follows the logic of the «strange» partnership between Moscow and Minsk?

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The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) set to integrate four former soviet economies – those of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia, – was finally launched on January 1, 2015. However, the initiative is now facing numerous challenges at both regional and bilateral levels.

First of all, for Russia, the whole idea of the EAEU was that of driving Ukraine into the economic alliance¹. Late in 2013, the chances to assure at least a certain level of an institutionalised economic cooperation between the Customs Union and Kyiv were still there. However, as the developments in Ukraine get more dramatic, the possibility of Ukraine ever joining Russia within the EAEU becomes bleak.

Given that, the initial concept of gathering the national economies of the FSU region under the auspices of a new integration mechanism (dominated by Moscow) was called into question. But even more than threatening the viability of the EAEU as a whole, the Ukraine situation has had some serious impact on Moscow's relations with its EAEU counterparts. This article will look more in detail on how the Ukraine crisis has affected the Russia-Belarus relations: are we really facing a breakdown, or the current disposition just follows the logic of the «strange» partnership between Moscow and Minsk?

| The Game Is On

As the economic situation in Russia became tougher following the economic sanctions and rouble's slide so became the dialogue between Moscow and Minsk. Although usually drawn as Russia's top ally in the region, Belarus' Lukashenko seemed to mind his own political business.

Soon after the embargo on the EU food products was introduced Moscow banned imports from a number of Belarusian meat-packing plants: the officials found that the production did not meet Russia's sanitary requirements². What is more, the border control of all the Belarusian imports was tightened as Minsk was suspected of reimporting the banned EU production to the Russian market³. Thus, one of the EAEU key principles – the abolishment of border controls, – was violated, according to Belarusian side.

So, even though the sanitary control gambling between Russia and Belarus is no new, under the current circumstances Moscow's move was conceived by official Minsk as undermining both bilateral ties and the EAEU integration.

By defining Russia's policy towards Belarus as "stupid and brainless"⁴ Lukashenko warned that the approach chosen by Moscow might cast shadow on the integration project "nurtured" by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan⁵. These words were followed by Lukashenko's visit to Kyiv on December

1. A. Kumina, *Quelles perspectives pour l'intégration eurasiennne ?*, Institut Thomas More, 04.02.2014. URL: <http://www.institut-thomas-more.org/fr/actualite/quelles-perspectives-pour-lintegration-eurasiennne.html> (in French).

2. "Russia Says No to Belarusian Meat" ("Россия отказывается от белорусского мяса"), BBC News, 26.11.2014. URL: http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/business/2014/11/141126_belarus_food_import_ban_russia (in Russian).

3. "Rosselkhozнадзор Will Make It More Complicated to Import from Belarus" ("Россельхознадзор усложнит ввоз продуктов из Белоруссии"), Vedomosti, 24.11.2014. URL: <http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/36360341/rossiya-ustanovila-produktovuyu-granicu> (in Russian).

4. "Russia's financial crisis may bury Putin's Eurasian dream", Reuters, 14.01.2015. URL: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/01/14/uk-russia-crisis-cis-idUKKBN0KN16T20150114>.

5. "Not a Game: Why Lukashenko Came to Kyiv?" ("Не какие-то игры: зачем Лукашенко приехал в Киев"), RBC, 21.12.2014. URL: <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/21/12/2014/5496a50b9a7947d9774ea47b>.

21, 2014 where the President of Belarus once again pointed out his country's neutral position regarding the crisis in the southeastern Ukraine and reaffirmed his willingness to maintain and develop the Minsk peace process as well as economic ties with Kyiv, its second largest trading partner⁶.

The visit itself (paid just two days before the 2014 CSTO and EurAsEC summits in Moscow) was regarded as Lukashenko's attempt to show both Putin and the West his independent stance and transmit his peacemaker ambitions: but did Moscow hear anything new?

| Russia-Belarus: Strange Allies

Although drawn as one of the Russia's top allies in the FSU region, Belarus has always been a complicated partner to deal with.

For the Soviet economy, Belarus was a sort of "assembly plant" that is why the fall of the USSR undermined both raw materials and products supply and access to distribution markets for the Belarusian end production. With the domestic economy at stake, it was largely the donations assured by Moscow that helped Minsk survive the tough era of 1990s: according to K. Koktysh, at various times the gas transit fees paid by Russia accounted for 30-55% of the Belarusian national budget⁷.

Given a high level of economic interdependence, the project for the Union State of Russia and Belarus was born back in 1997⁸. However, the initiative has never worked in a proper way. In fact, the year 1997 has seen the first serious crisis in Russia-Belarus relations since the collapse of the USSR: it was caused by the fact that the two countries and their political elites had different views on how to work together within the supranational institution.

With the first term of Vladimir Putin the antagonism even seemed to deepen: the integration model proposed by the Russian side was deemed by Lukashenko as an attempt to incorporate Belarus as a new federal subject of Russia. The project was therefore harshly opposed by Minsk.

The conflicts have become a natural part of the bilateral game⁹. Sooner or later, the disputes ended up being settled: the high level of economic and political interdependence between the two countries just dictated so. Moscow has always been the leading economic partner for Belarus (around 40% of all Belarusian exports in 2014 went to Russia¹⁰) and the main source of energy resources (oil, gas). In reverse, Minsk has always been important for Moscow, too.

Apart from being a market for the Russian production, Belarus has always played a crucial role as a transit point for the Russian gas and oil exports to the EU. But it has also been a country hosting two Russian military facilities (Vileyka VLF transmitter in Minsk region and Hantsavichy Radar

6. "Lukashenko to Promote Minsk Peace Process" ("Лукашенко поспособствует проведению переговоров в Минске"), BBC News, 14.12.2014. URL: http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2014/12/141221_lukashenko_poroshenko_talks (in Russian).

7. "Koktysh K., Russia and Belarus – doomed to be together", RIAC, 26.01.2012. URL: http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=97#top.

8. "The Union State: Official Documents", The Union State's Official Web-Portal. URL: <http://www.soyuz.by/about/docs/> (in Russian).

9. Barry E., "Milk War' Strains Russia-Belarus Ties", *The New York Times*, 14.06.2009. URL:

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/15/world/europe/15belarus.html?_r=2&; "Loveless brothers", *The Economist*, 11.01.2007. URL: <http://www.economist.com/node/8521935>.

10. "Russia-Belarus Foreign Trade Dynamics", The Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Russian Federation. URL: <http://www.embassybel.ru/trade-relations/> (in Russian).

Station in Brest region) that might be complemented by a third site in the short run¹¹. Those are the cards usually played by Lukashenko when trying to seal a deal with Moscow. And as the international situation is becoming tougher for Putin with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Lukashenko is trying to gain as much points as he can.

That was perfectly shown during the press conference that took place on January 29, 2015. As far as Belarus' stance on the EAEU future is concerned, Lukashenko's message was clear enough: alluding to the recent trade disputes between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, Lukashenko said that his country could leave the EAEU unless the integration mechanism assured equal rights for all the member states¹². At the same time, when answering the questions about the domestic financial situation in Belarus, Lukashenko sounded hopeful for getting new loans from Russia if needed¹³. Thus, the disposition as of today resembles more of a "cold peace" than of a "cold war" or "tilt away"¹⁴.

Trying to act as an independent leader Lukashenko still has to balance all his steps against Russia's position. For Moscow Lukashenko is a difficult partner but a partner it got used to. This "love to hate" formula seems to satisfy the both parties as in the end, the bilateral disputes break even: the President of Belarus knows how to get what he wants without getting too far and Moscow lets him do so.

What is more, despite the ostracism Russia's now facing in the international arena, Moscow still believes that Lukashenko needs Putin more than Putin needs Lukashenko. That is true not only as far as the size and the power are concerned, but also since the very political figure of Lukashenko is still outrageous with the West he is flirting with when at odds with Moscow. The bilateral agenda could therefore be subject to ups and downs due to the overall conjuncture, but the dialog with Lukashenko seems to last no matter what. The tone of this dialog is nevertheless decisive to the future of the EAEU.

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11. "More Russian Military Sites in Belarus" («Российских военных баз в Беларуси станет больше»), DW, 06.08.2014. URL: <http://www.dw.de/российских-военных-баз-в-беларуси-станет-больше/a-17832759> (in Russian).

12. "EAEU Falling Apart?" ("Союз обрुшимый"), Gazeta.ru, 30.01.2015. URL: <http://www.gazeta.ru/business/2015/01/30/6392321.shtml> (in Russian).

13. "Lukashenko: Russia Will Help Belarus If Needed" («Лукашенко: Россия при необходимости «подставит плечо» экономике Белоруссии»), Gazeta.ru, 29.01.2015. URL: http://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2015/01/29/n_6871097.shtml (in Russian).

14. Standish R., "Russia May Need to Say 'Do Svidaniya' to Belarus", *Foreign Policy*, 30.01.2014. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/30/russia-may-need-to-say-do-svidaniya-to-belarus/>.