

END NOTE

WILL LUKASHENKA SURVIVE AS PUTIN LOSES INTEREST IN UNION WITH
BELARUS?

By Taras Kuzio

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has become increasingly isolated and out of step with international developments since his re-election and the 11 September terrorist attacks against the United States -- a trend best evidenced by the country's tepid relations with its closest ally, Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has not shown the same level of interest in the much-touted Russia-Belarus Union, which is based on an interstate treaty that came into force in January 2000, as did his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. As "Izvestiya" recently wrote, Lukashenka's problem is that he no longer has an ally in the Kremlin. "The chill in Russian-Belarusian relations appeared as soon as Putin replaced Yeltsin," "Izvestiya" added. Moreover, the presidential elections held in Belarus on 9 September, in which Lukashenka won in the first round with 75.62 percent of the vote, "marked a dramatic decline in relations between Moscow and Minsk" because it was reminiscent of a "farce," "Izvestiya" commented.

Four issues plague the union, which have caused Putin to lose interest in the union. First, Putin has openly poured cold water on the idea of equality between Russia and Belarus, upon which Lukashenka has always insisted. Pavel Borodin, the state secretary of the Russia-Belarus Union, told Russia's NTV television that Lukashenka's proposed model for the union, which he presented to Putin last month, is "nonsense" and "simply foolish."

Second, the Belarusian economy is only 3 percent as large as Russia's, as Putin pointed out, but Belarus is demanding the right of veto while maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Lukashenka disagrees with the common perception in Russia that Belarus is using the union to obtain subsidies. Complaining about this view of Belarus as a freeloader, Lukashenka said, "Nobody has allowed himself to voice such an insult during the 10 years of Belarus's independence and sovereignty."

Third, a major stumbling block is how the union should be organized. On this question, Lukashenka increasingly sounds like his nationalist opponents when defending Belarusian sovereignty in the face of Russian efforts to define the union as the incorporation of Belarus. Lukashenka rules out Belarus becoming the 90th subject of the Russian Federation. This is totally out of the question for

Lukashenka because, "No president of Belarus would take that step. In the Soviet Union, Belarus had more sovereignty." He went on to complain, "Even Stalin did not plan to deprive Belarus of its sovereignty."

Syarhey Kastysyan, a deputy of the Belarusian Chamber of Representatives, rejected Putin's proposals for "a single state" with one government and parliament. The Belarusian understanding of "union" is akin to a new confederation of equal, sovereign states comparable to what the USSR was moving toward in late 1991.

Fourth, Lukashenka's hostility to economic reform includes opposition to the Russian takeover of the still small number of privatized companies. Lukashenka warned Russia that he would never "betray" Belarusian state interests and "give up Belarus to anybody," adding that he does not "need to sell enterprises to some Russian oligarchs."

Fundamentally, Putin's waning interest in the union amid these four disagreements is because the Russia-Belarus Union was always understood differently by Russia and Belarus. Both Yeltsin and Putin saw it in non-ideological terms, as a useful attribute to their foreign-policy arsenal and geopolitical designs. Putin prefers to view the union as building on the experience of the European Union.

But Lukashenka has always seen it very differently. As a Sovietophile pan-Slavist, he is ideologically committed to the union as a stepping-stone to a revived USSR, however unlikely that is a decade after it disintegrated.

In the late 1990s, a union with Belarus was a means for Russia to assert itself as a "great power" vis-a-vis the West and NATO expansion. Unfortunately for Lukashenka, Putin has tempered his opposition to NATO expansion, which has resulted in the development of a new "19+1" relationship between the alliance and Russia. Unlike Belarus, Russia is no longer engaging in the sort of anti-Western and anti-U.S. diatribes that it earlier unleashed during NATO's bombing campaign in Kosovo and Serbia. Lukashenka's continued "anti-Westernism," as exemplified by his hostility to the OSCE presence in Minsk and to NATO expansion, seems increasingly anomalous in the aftermath of 11 September.

After the creation of the NATO-Russia Council and Ukraine's announcement that it intends to seek NATO membership, Lukashenka is unsure where to turn. Aware that he is being increasingly isolated, Lukashenka has now invited NATO to take part in annual military exercises.

Lukashenka's calls for a "300,000-strong joint Belarusian-Russian military group" have also not been supported by Putin -- presumably because it is not clear who such a force would be directed against. Although Belarus is a member of the CIS Collective Security Treaty (now Organization) its usefulness to that structure is not evident, as Lukashenka has always opposed the use of Belarusian troops outside Russia and Belarus. A new law adopted this month allowing Belarusian troops to undertake military missions abroad rules out sending them to "hot spots."

To Putin, the advancement of Russia's "strategic partnership" with Ukraine is now more important than a union with Belarus. The decision to create a Russian-Ukrainian gas consortium, which means an

end to the idea of building a pipeline through Belarus, reflects Moscow's greater interest in Ukraine as a strategic asset. In addition, Ukraine under Kuchma, unlike Belarus under Lukashenka, is allowing Russian capital to take part in privatization. By 2005, 70 percent of commodities made in Ukraine will be produced with the participation of Russian capital.

As Russia increasingly cold-shoulders him and his regime, opportunities will arise for the Belarusian opposition and disgruntled elites to move against him. The Lukashenka regime no longer looks stable, and his popularity ratings are at an all time low of 25-30 percent.

"The Washington Post" recently called upon Russia to prove its commitment to integration with the West by withdrawing its support for Lukashenka. If Moscow accepts this advice, Lukashenka is finished.

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