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VIRTUAL FOREIGN POLICY IN BELARUS AND RUSSIA

By Taras Kuzio

Since the mid-1990s Belarus and Russia have declared a "union" as their strategic foreign policy goal. But, as a Russian newspaper recently put it: "The five years of the existence of the Russian-Belarusian union demonstrated that it is possible to declare (this union) but impossible to create it." [1] Vladimir Voronin, the communist who was elected Moldova's president only nine months ago, abandoned his earlier pledge to take Moldova into the union, dismissing it as "more words than real action." He saw no benefit to Moldova in joining a virtual union.

The union between Russia and Belarus was a consequence of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's election in July 1994 and his establishment of an authoritarian regime. Russian President Boris Yeltsin was interested in playing the nationalist and pan-Slavic card in order to draw away voters from his main challenger in the 1996 presidential elections, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov.

Two years into the project, Lukashenka was complaining that things were moving slowly and that Russia was not "ready" for a union. A year later he accused Russia of approaching the union question in an unserious manner.

With Vladimir Putin's election as Russia's president, Lukashenka changed his tune. Putin, who has re-instituted Russia's Soviet-era national anthem, has also described the union as an "epochal event" that "paves the way to a union of

states that will require a judicial basis and a common economic, defense, and humanitarian space." For the time being, however, the union remains virtual.

#### THE UNION AS A STEP TOWARDS REVIVING THE SOVIET UNION?

It remains unclear whether the union is to be a stepping stone to reviving the Soviet Union in a new form or to a different type of union. On a visit to Cuba this year Lukashenka noted President Castro's "fervent support" for the union: the Cuban leader presumably hopes it will lead to the revival of the Soviet Union. However, neither a revived Soviet Union nor a new union are of interest to any other CIS leader, including Russophile states like Armenia, Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. President Leonid Kuchma has more than once ruled out Ukraine's membership in the union. Nevertheless, Russian nationalists and communists remain optimistic that the CIS states queue up to join as soon as the union is created.

Plans to broaden membership have always faced two fundamental problems. First, the union was only backed by the communists in the other CIS states. In Belarus this is clouded even further because one Communist Party backs the union while another opposes it. In Ukraine, everyone to the right of the communists, including Oleksandr Moroz' Socialists, reject it.

Second, only Belarus believes that the union will lead to a relationship of equal states both of which will retain their sovereignty. Everybody else, from the Belarusian opposition to all other noncommunists in the remaining ten CIS states, see the union as the loss of Belarusian sovereignty to Russia. This is also how Central Europe and the West see it.

#### ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Military integration and cooperation has gone further than economic. "Economic integration has simply not come about." [2] The union cost Russia US\$1.5-2 billion per annum in 1996-1997, according to Andrei Illarionov, Director of the Moscow-based Institute of Economic Analysis and Putin's economic adviser. This cost is due to Russia writing off Belarus' energy debts, charging it around one third of the price it charges Ukraine for gas and allowing Belarus to exploit their customs union by taxing goods in transit from Russia via Belarus.

The Belarusian Chamber of Representatives, the upper house of parliament, voted on April 12 to ratify an agreement to introduce a single Russian-Belarusian currency on January 1, 2005. The ratification of the accord was tied to Russia's dispersal of a US\$100 million credit. If a joint currency is in fact introduced in three years time this will

significantly increase Russia's influence over Belarusian domestic affairs.

The reconciliation of two very different economies and economic policies in Belarus and Russia may yet impede the speedy introduction of a joint currency. Putin--at least publicly--remains committed to economic reform within an authoritarian political structure. Lukashenka, on the other hand, regards the post-Soviet economic reforms conducted in Russia, Ukraine and some other CIS states as disastrous. What, then, is Lukashenka's solution to the problem of reconciling economies with different levels of reform? The answer is staring Russia in the face, Lukashenka believes: "Russia should make an effort to employ our model of reform as soon as possible. We are showing Russia how an economy should be reformed, with a view to Russia's mistakes." [3] Unfortunately for Lukashenka, Yeltsin did not listen to this advice. Neither is Putin likely to do so.

Orienting Belarus towards Russia and obtaining direct and indirect Russian subsidies postpones dealing with economic problems in Belarus, such as its inflation rate, which is the highest in the CIS. Union with Russia is "actually saving our country and our economy," Lukashenka believes, because it allows him to maintain living standards.

#### MILITARY INTEGRATION

Russia has obtained what it seeks from Belarus within the military sphere. Lukashenka, however, is prepared to go much further than Russia in creating a "300,000-man joint Belarusian-Russian military group"--a proposal Putin has not supported given that the need for such a large military force is unclear. Against whom would it be aimed? Poland, the Baltic states, NATO, Ukraine or all of them? The proposal smacks more of Lukashenka's Sovietophile, xenophobic and ideologically driven view of the outside world. This view of the world contradicts Russia's more pragmatic relationship with the West and NATO, a relationship that has grown into an informal alliance since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. With Russia half seriously talking about future membership of NATO and lessening its objections to NATO enlargement, Lukashenka's worldview is not in line with Putin's.

In addition, Belarus' usefulness in military terms is less than meets the eye. For all of Lukashenka's Sovietophile views, he has never expressed any interest in security issues in the Trans-Caucasus or Central Asia. Belarusian armed forces are forbidden by law to operate outside their republic. Although Belarus is a member of the CIS Collective Security Treaty it plays no role in CIS security or peacekeeping operations in Tajikistan-Central Asia's border with

Afghanistan–Abkhazia or South Ossetia. A poll by the Belarusian Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies found 52 percent of Belarusians are afraid that a union with Russia would lead to Belarusian armed forces being dispatched to "hot spots" like Chechnya.

#### RUSSIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELARUS

Russia has been very happy to reciprocate Belarusian support within the international arena by turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in Belarus. As Putin admitted, "The Russian Federation has always backed the Belarusian position at international forums. So it has been and so it will continue." [4] Yeltsin's human rights commissioner, Oleg Mironov, conferred a spotless human rights record on Belarus after a visit to "dispel the myths about human rights violations in Belarus." He claimed that Belarus has an independent judicial system, constitutional court and supreme court, guarantees the right of an opposition to exist, no interethnic conflicts and a civil code. Russian and CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly officials have given glowing reports about the "fairness" of Belarusian elections.

Turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in Belarus not only ignores the views of all Western countries, multilateral bodies and international human rights organizations, but even Belarusian violations of Russian human rights. Lukashenka has repeatedly criticized the Russian media for its mocking and critical portrayal of himself and Belarus. His response has been to occasionally cut off Russian television broadcasts. If Ukraine curtailed Russian television in such a manner, the Russian Foreign Ministry and parliament would undoubtedly denounce this as an "infringement of the rights of Russian speakers." Not though, in the case of Russia's closest ally, Belarus. Even the murder of an ORT cameraman, Dmitry Zavadsky, by a Belarusian presidential death squad did not stir Russia's Foreign Ministry, parliament or nationalist organizations to action. Again, one can imagine the outcry if he had been murdered in Ukraine.

#### CONFUSED OPINION POLLS

There has never been overwhelming support in Belarus for a union with Russia. The idea enjoys greater support than does integration with Europe, but backing for the union with Russian has never gone above fifty per cent. Zerkalo, the sociological service of the Belapan Information Company, found that only 47 percent of Minsk residents supported unification with Russia while 20 percent disapproved. A poll taken by the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies nationwide found that 47 percent supported a union, 34 percent opposed it and 16 percent said they would boycott a referendum on the issue.

Given the country's authoritarian political environment, Belarusians do not have the opportunity to freely express their will on this question. Lukashenka's pet project is opposed by one of the country's two communist parties and anti-Russian national democrats along with centrist business, Russophone and former nomenklatura political interests. If this alternative viewpoint to union were allowed equal access to the media it is not at all certain Lukashenka's pet project would be successful.

Belarusians are also only too aware that standards of living are higher in Poland than in Russia. A poll by the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies found 85 percent saw life in Poland as preferable to life in Russia. Asked to name exemplary countries, 40 percent said Germany, 20 percent said the United States and only 0.5 percent said Russia.

#### VIRTUAL UNION OR GUBERNIA?

Lukashenka's pet project suffers from being a virtual policy that lacks clear-cut definitions and goals. Neither Lukashenka nor Belarusians are at all clear what kind of "union" they seek. In the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies poll, 63 percent answered affirmatively to the question "Do you want Belarus to be an independent, sovereign country." Only 10 percent said no. Does union mean that Belarus will join Russia as a gubernia or autonomous republic? Within the large body of Russian supporters of union with Belarus, the communists, who most closely follow moves on integration, define "union" as Belarus becoming part of Russia. Russian nationalists agree with their communist allies.

Polls taken to measure support for a "union" between Belarus and Russia fail to come to grips with how "union" is defined. A similar problem exists when dealing with pro-union support in Eastern Ukraine. When polls seek to ascertain support for a "union" that is only vaguely defined, it obtains high support. When "union" is defined more clearly as full political unification, support for union in Belarus drops by half. Clear majorities in both Russia and Belarus back a "union" that does not harm their independence.

The type of "union" that has large support is one that is opposed to Belarus being absorbed by Russia, would give both parties greater sovereignty than in the former federal Soviet Union and more closely resembles a confederation. Belarusians assume that integration into a union will not harm their sovereignty—a proposition that is naive, to say the least. A decade of Belarusian independence has increased the number of Belarusians who appreciate independence and are therefore

opposed to any union that would harm this status. "The sovereignty and independence of the Belarus state are sacred notions to every citizen," Lukashenka said[5], because they remain "inflexible and unshakeable." Lukashenka has always categorically rejected proposals from Russian Communists, and at times former President Yeltsin, that a union meant the six oblasts of Belarus becoming part of Russia. "No president of Belarus would take that step. Belarus had more sovereignty in the Soviet Union," Lukashenka complained.[6] "Even Stalin did not plan to deprive Belarus of its sovereignty," Lukashenka has claimed.[7] In his eyes, the union would be between two equal sovereign states, something one finds difficult to imagine when one side has a population 150 times larger.

Lukashenka, with his ideological amalgam of Soviet Belarusian nationalism and pan-Slavism, is highly wary of some within Russia. He has said he will always defend his country's sovereignty because he possesses sufficient "healthy nationalism" to secure the country's interests. Some Russian circles, he has complained, believe for some reason that Belarusians "have only recently climbed down from the trees and have eaten all the bark and leaves from these trees..." and thus are forced to seek Russian aid. Such a view is wrong, humiliating and offensive to Belarusian "national dignity," he said.[8] Lukashenka has regularly complained about the Russian media's portrayal of Belarusians as still wearing peasant clothes and only seeking to milk Russia because they are "beggars." [9]

#### THE UNION AND RUSSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Fears of NATO enlargement have played less of a role in Russian support for a union with Belarus than its own confused post-Soviet identity. This confusion is also found in Belarus.[10] Belarusian Foreign Minister Ivan Antanovich told the Russian Academy of Sciences that the union was based on a "1000 year tradition of making a great state," a historical myth. Such a state should be "Slavic Orthodox." The Russian Orthodox patriarch sees this union differently, believing that Belarusian independence, like that of Ukraine, is a "misunderstanding." He believes that the union is a stepping stone towards gathering "the scared lands of the one and single fatherland." Lukashenka would only partly agree, because he seeks to reconcile his support for Belarusian independence, within an overall understanding of sovereignty developed in the Soviet Union, with his pan-Slavic yearning for closeness to Russia.

Belarusians and Russians look upon union in different ways because of the legacy of Soviet nationality policy. Both sides appeal to pan-Slavic sentiment, but Belarus also developed a Soviet Belarusian nationalism in the Soviet Union. The Russian SFSR had no separate institutions until 1990 and

therefore territorial loyalty to this republic failed to develop among Russians. Russian loyalty was directed to the Soviet Union, while Belarusian loyalty was divided between Soviet Byelorussia and the Soviet Union. Russia has therefore inherited little sense of having an ethnic identity distinct from the Soviet Union--unlike Serbia in its relationship with Yugoslavia. The weakness of Russian ethnic nationalism has been clearly seen in the failure to mobilize the 25-million-strong Russian diaspora (the rebellion in Transdnierster was backed by Russian-speaking Sovietophile elites). Russian organizations in Ukraine, Belarus and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union appeal to supra-national--not exclusively Russian ethnic--issues. President Putin told the Congress of Russian Compatriots (i.e. Russian speakers) in October that they spiritually belonged to the Russian nation, a view that must disturb Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Estonia and Latvia (but not, presumably, Belarus). Only 68 percent of Russians consider themselves Slavs and 22 percent deny it, according to a Public Opinion Foundation poll.

Russians and Belarusians constantly refer to themselves as being close in "roots, language and culture," as Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov and State Duma Chairman Gennady Seleznev have put it, and the citizens of one state do not feel like they are in a foreign country when traveling to the other.[11] Russian Deputy Prime Minister Valery Serov sees Belarus and Russia as having been split apart.

#### TOWARDS A VIRTUAL UNION

The evolution and amorphousness of the Belarusian-Russian union reflects the inherited confused identities found in both Belarus and Russia where the "union" idea is defined in different ways. The slow progress in realizing their union is also due to the fact that Russia is more interested in developing relations on the international stage as a great power, through an alliance with the United States.

#### NOTES

- 1 Vedomosti, 23 March 2001.
- 2 Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 3 July 2001.
- 3 Delovoy Mir, 18 December 1997.
- 4 Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 18 April 2000.
- 5 Belapan, 1 January 1999.
- 6 Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 23 May 1998.
- 7 Interfax, 30 July 1999.
- 8 Respublika, 6 July 1999.
- 9 Yantarnyi Krai, 2 September 1999.
- 10 Clelia Rontoyanni, A Russian-Belarusian 'Union-State': a defensive response to Western enlargement? Working Paper 10, 2000, One Europe or Several? (Brighton: University of Sussex,

2000).

11 *Obshchaya Gazeta*, 8-14 May 1997 and *Rabochaya Tribuna*, 14 March 1997.

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