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CHANGE MAY BE A FOOT IN BELARUS

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“Russia has no intention of occupying Belarus” declared the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, in February 2017, three days after Russia set up controls along the length of its border with the only country with which it has a union treaty. This statement was added to the voices of alarm of national (and some international) experts who suspect that Moscow has plans to bring down Lukashenko, making use of fervently pro-Russia social organisations, such as veterans’ and Cossacks’ associations, sections of the Orthodox Church, military clubs, youth camps, and so on. All this feeds the concerns hovering over the capital of the country considered Moscow’s most loyal ally. Relations between Russia and Belarus have never been without discord, it is true, but since the annexation of Crimea by Russia, which Minsk has still not recognised, the gap between statements and reality has been growing steadily.

This new reality translates, for example, into a significant deterioration of commercial relations. In 2016, the volume of trade between the two countries followed the trend set in 2015, showing a general fall of 62.7% compared to 2012, the best year in the history of their bilateral trade. In exchange for Minsk’s political alignment with Moscow and in order to guarantee the safe transit of its energy products through Belarusian territory towards the European market, Russia has been subsidising the Belarusian economy with advantageous prices, in particular with regard to its energy needs. According to calculations by Reuters, the subsidies to Belarus for Russian energy amount to as much as \$3 billion a year, around a third of the state budget revenues.

In general, the economic growth of Belarus suffered in 2016 due to export income decline and weak domestic demand. The World Bank predicts that the economy will remain in recession in 2017. This poor economic situation has pushed Lukashenko to diversify his economic partners so as to counterbalance the heavy dependence on Russia. All the more so given Russia has been cutting its oil exports to the country because of the dispute between the two capitals over the price of crude, which Minsk wants to reduce, and because of the payment delays accumulated. Lukashenko knows that, though his neighbour is by far the more powerful partner, each needs the other and their interdependence is substantial: Belarus, nestled in the heart of Europe, is a strategic component of Moscow’s agenda and its stability, both political and economic, is essential to the Kremlin. It is this relative balance of power with Russia that is prompting Lukashenko to seek alternative economic and diplomatic ways to increase his room for manoeuvre with Russia. And since the annexation of Crimea this policy has been stepped up.

Like Putin, Lukashenko yearns to continue in power and, like Putin, he fears the mere idea of a colour revolution. Thus, the argument of national independence and sovereignty is a useful tool in the strategy to help the regime survive. This is his main asset when addressing his people, who show clear signs of wearying of the deterioration of the economic situation. Hence, Lukashenko has resisted Russia's military plans, as shown in 2015 by the rejection of the installation of a new air base on Belarusian territory, close to the border with Ukraine. In Moscow, many analysts and politicians have expressed their discontent and concern about Minsk's attempts to deploy a more multivectoral foreign policy, particularly in its relations with the European Union and United States. The facts that Lukashenko has decided to allow the citizens of 80 countries visa-free entry for five days and that Brussels – which until recently referred to Belarus as “Europe's last dictatorship” – has doubled its bilateral aid in 2016 and lifted most of the sanctions against Minsk have not gone unnoticed in Moscow. Neither did Lukashenko's **comments** in his meeting with the US Chargé d'affaires in July 2016 that he “did not hide” the interest in mutually beneficial relations with Washington and that his country had no “such liabilities to other states that would be contrary to our cooperation with the USA”.

But it is not only Minsk's foreign policy that raises concern in Russia. The powerful Russian nationalist groups, electronic media and written press have for some time been attacking Lukashenko and his government for any initiative promoting Belarusian identity, whether it be the culture, the language or the history. Immediately, the accusations spring up of discrimination against Russian speakers (an overwhelming majority in the country) and pandering to the nationalist opposition. The perception underlined in these allegations is that Belarus is, in fact, an integral part of the *russkiy mir* (Russian world), a concept that proposes that what is Russian extends out beyond the country's territorial borders and includes not only language and origin but also a shared civilisational identity built on history and proximity. Belarus is seen as a *natural* part of this world. And for many years, Belarusian society has seemed to justify this view, even if the common background was plainly more Soviet than Russian. But public opinion has begun to change and the events in Ukraine were a turning point.

The introduction of a new fee for those who do not work full time, known as the “law against social parasites” brought thousands of people in various cities across the country to the streets in the largest protests seen for years. But opinion polls show that though discontent about the material conditions is growing and prompting desire for change, citizens continue to value the current status quo. Despite being under the influence of the Russian media (which 60% follow and trust), they no longer consider union with Russia to be the best option, in contrast to previous years. A **survey of opinions** in June 2016 shows that Belarusians want to maintain their independence: 54% of those surveyed said they were against the union with Russia, with 24% in favour; 10 years ago the majority supported the union. By contrast, in December 2015, 53.5% of those surveyed supported integration with Russia and 25.1% that with the EU; by July 2016 the proportions had changed to 42% and 34%, respectively. As **Andrew Wilson suggests**, this trend may indicate a degree of willingness among Belarusian citizens to exchange the social contract they had with Lukashenko for a security contract.

For some time now there has been speculation about the deterioration of relations between Minsk and Moscow and its consequences for the region and the European Union. This time it seems to be more serious. It's worth keeping an eye on Belarus.