

UDC 341.17

THE UNION STATE: A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BELARUS AND RUSSIA

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In December 2018, the Russian president Vladimir Putin and Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko agreed to set up an intergovernmental working group on the development of further integration of the Union State. A. Lukashenko had been reluctant to yield more Belarusian sovereignty over to Russia. However, a dispute regarding compensating Belarus for a Russian oil tax manoeuvre prompted Moscow to revisit the oldest disagreement: the 1999 Union State Treaty. Russia presented Belarus what sounded like an ultimatum: financial support in return for greater integration with the Russian Federation. This essay will explore the uncertain future and relationship between Belarus and its supposedly closest ally Russia. Chapter one will discuss the early relationship between the countries following the collapse of the USSR. Following that, the second chapter will discuss the relationship between A. Lukashenko and V. Putin and their conflicting ideas of the future of the Union State, up until the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the deterioration of their relationship. The third chapter will discuss the Russian government's effort at reviving the Union State, including its successes and shortcomings. The fourth chapter will look at the Belarusian response drawing on some primary research (interviews and official documents analysis) carried out to examine the Belarusian perspective in greater detail. Finally, the essay will conclude with an outlook on the future of the Union State and the relations between Belarus and Russia, using a classical realist approach.

Keywords: Union State; Russia; Belarus; European Union; US; Eurasian Economic Union; A. Lukashenko; NATO; integration; sovereignty.

СОЮЗНОЕ ГОСУДАРСТВО: МЕНЯЮЩИЕСЯ ВЗАИМООТНОШЕНИЯ МЕЖДУ БЕЛАРУСЬЮ И РОССИЕЙ

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В декабре 2018 г. Владимир Путин и Александр Лукашенко договорились о создании межправительственной рабочей группы по дальнейшей интеграции Союзного государства. А. Лукашенко не хотел терять суверенитет Беларуси. Однако спор о компенсации Беларуси за налоговый маневр России с нефтью побудил РФ вернуться к давнему разногласию – договору о создании Союзного государства 1999 г. Россия поставила Беларуси условие, звучавшее как ультиматум: финансовая поддержка в обмен на более глубокую интеграцию с Российской Федерацией. Исследуется неопределенность будущих и отношений между Беларусью и, как считается, ее ближайшим союзником – Россией. В первой части работы исследуются ранние отношения между странами после распада СССР. Во второй части статьи анализируются взаимоотношения А. Лукашенко и В. Путина и их противоречивые представления о будущем Союзного государства вплоть до украинского кризиса 2014 г. и ухудшения во взаимоотношениях. В третьей части рассматриваются действия и усилия российского правительства по возрождению Союзного государства, успехи и промахи в этой сфере. С опорой на первичные исследования (интервью и анализ официальных документов) в четвертой части работы рассмотрены действия Беларуси. В заключении представлен реалистичный взгляд на будущее Союзного государства и взаимоотношения между Беларусью и Россией.

Образец цитирования:

Полглэйз-Коростелев Г. Союзное государство: меняющиеся взаимоотношения между Беларусью и Россией. Журнал Белорусского государственного университета. Международные отношения. 2020;2:38–46 (на англ.).

For citation:

Polglase-Korostelev G. The Union State: a changing relationship between Belarus and Russia. *Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations*. 2020;2:38–46.

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Ключевые слова: Союзное государство; Россия; Беларусь; Европейский Союз; США; Евразийский экономический союз; А. Лукашенко; НАТО; интеграция; суверенитет.

The launch of the Union State

The renewed relationship between Belarus and Russia began following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Russian president Boris Yeltsin and chairman of Belarusian parliament Stanislav Shushkevich, along with Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk signed the Belovezha Accords on 8 December 1991, effectively dissolving the Soviet Union to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), though doubts still remained regarding the authority of these three men to do so¹. These leaders seemingly had a close relationship with the onset of independent pathways for their respective countries. However, following independence of Belarus, the country was in turmoil. The economy was shrinking fast; the parliament, due to infighting, provided little leadership, and the country was increasingly relying on Russia's subsidies [1]. Therefore, to stop the chaos, many thought that strong presidential leadership would help to restore order and prosperity in what was then a parliamentary republic. When the national constitution was adopted in 1994, the office of the presidency was created, under which the key functions of the prime minister were given to the president. The powers of the prime minister were diminished to simply aiding the president and culminated in the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet, along with its chairman, in 1996. In 1994, the first presidential elections were held and A. Lukashenko received an absolute majority of the vote (80.6 %) and was elected Belarusian first and until now the only president [2, p. 252].

After A. Lukashenko came to power, Belarus seemed an ideal candidate for integration with Russia, to prevent Belarus from drifting away and establishing ties with the West to fix its broken economy. Belarusian economy had been built around the entire Soviet Union and going at it alone was a hard option for most of the republics. Belarus enjoyed stability and relative prosperity under the USSR and Russia took the opportunity to propose reintegration with Belarus in order to prop up their economy [3, p. 85–118]. Russia also saw NATO expansion eastwards and didn't want to lose its sphere of influence. B. Yeltsin said after signing, in February 1995, the Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation between Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, that "both countries have had a common historical experience for many centuries which had created the basis for the signing of the treaty and other documents for deeper integration of our two countries. Among all the CIS countries, Belarus has

the most rights to such relations due to its geographical position, its contacts with Russia, our friendship and the progress of its reforms"² [4, p. 311]. The integration process began with the climax of this process being the establishment of the Union State of Russia and Belarus on 8 December 1999 [5, p. 27–44].

The Treaty on the creation of the Union State established various institutions and a legal framework, however, the exact nature of the political entity remained vague [6, p. 41–53]. The highest jurisdiction within the union was the Supreme State Council, made up of the presidents, prime ministers, and the heads of both chambers of the parliaments of both countries. Each nation had one vote in the council, meaning all decisions must be unanimous. The subordinate authority was the Council of Ministers, encompassing of the prime ministers of member states, ministers of foreign affairs, economy, and finance, and the state secretary of the union. The legislature is composed of a bicameral parliament, composed of an elected House of Representatives, which consists of 75 deputies from Russia and 28 from Belarus, elected by the general public of each nation, and a house of the union with an equal number of deputies (36) from each nation selected by their respective upper legislative houses. However, due to the ambiguity of the Union State Treaty, the union parliament had never been put into effect. The judicial branch of the Union State, the court of the union, consisted of nine judges appointed for six-year terms. However, like the union parliament, the court of the union was never properly established. The last institution created was the house of audit which controls the implementation of the budget [7].

Each member state retains their own sovereignty meaning that Russia and Belarus have full authority over their own internal and external affairs. The Union State cannot claim representation in other international organisations or overrule legislation or government decisions of its member states, except in cases specified by the Union State Treaty [7]. Thus, the Union State predominantly resembles a supranational confederation similar to the African Union.

However, shortly after its inauguration, and with the election of the new Russian president, both member states lost their enthusiasm for the union, with first Russia, and then Belarus, restoring customs controls along their common border in 2001, suspending the customs union until it was restored in 2010 when a

¹Commonwealth of Independent States [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://mfa.gov.by/en/organizations/membership/list/c2bd-4cebdf6bd9f9.html> (date of access: 31.01.2020).

²Hereinafter translated by G. P.-K.

new customs (Eurasian) union was signed with Kazakhstan [8, p. 7–28]. Therefore, the original plan of a supra-national union was already off to a rocky start. There was no common currency, no common flag, no parliament, and no judiciary. However, despite the original shortcomings, the Union State does provide both citizens of Russia and Belarus the right to work and live in either country without any formal immigration procedures. There are also joint military officer training programs designed to integrate their military structures, known as the Regional forces group of Belarus and Russia³.

In summary, A. Lukashenko didn't agree to the Union State in order to lose sovereignty. The reason for the formation of the Union State was because the

Belarusian economy was collapsing, and membership granted Belarus oil and natural gas subsidies which it could refine and sell for a profit to its Western European neighbours. Membership also provided Russia a way to prevent Belarus from drifting away from its sphere of influence. Therefore, it benefitted both countries at the time. However, there were shortcomings expectations of the Union State versus reality. On the eve of the millennium, B. Yeltsin offered his resignation as president of the Russian Federation, with V. Putin now taking the reins. The following chapter will discuss the new relationship between Belarus and Russia, with V. Putin as new president of Russia, up until the Ukrainian crisis.

The decline of the Union State, the rise of the EEU and the Ukrainian crisis

In order to comprehend Russia's renewed interest in the Union State, and Belarus apprehension towards it, it is imperative to discuss the recent history to set the background. After B. Yeltsin stepped down, V. Putin took his place as president, and a new era of relations between A. Lukashenko's Belarus and V. Putin's Russia began. The two leaders began sparring over the central question of the constitution of the Union State. Would it be unitary or confederal? Who would control the rouble if the union adopted a single currency? A. Lukashenko proposed a Union of equals, which was unacceptable to V. Putin, and in return, V. Putin proposed that Belarus be incorporated into the Russian Federation, which A. Lukashenko thought was inadmissible. V. Putin made evident that it was necessary to "separate the flies from the cutlets", meaning that A. Lukashenko had no rights to equality in their union [9, p. 210]. The talks came to a stalemate in 2000. Nevertheless, Moscow still desired to maintain friendly relations with Belarus. It still provided financial assistance and sold natural gas and oil at below market value. However, Russia's willingness to subsidise Belarus' gas consumption would soon dissipate [9, p. 210].

After talks on the Union State came to a stalemate, V. Putin's attention instead drew to the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) in 2000, which was a regional organisation which aimed for the integration of its member states of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The EAEC utilises the four freedoms of movement modelled after the EU: goods, capital, services and people [10, p. 1–22]. The EAEC evolved into a customs union and eventually developed into what we know today as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2014, with the absence of Tajikistan⁴. Similar to the original plan of the 1999 Union

State Treaty between Russia and Belarus, the future of the EEU envisions the creation of a single currency and greater integration [11].

However, Belarus' relations with the EAEC and the EEU were not smooth either. Significant stages of Eurasian integration were followed by contentious disagreements between Belarus and Russia. Most importantly, Belarus' expectation from EAEC membership was the preservation of beneficial terms of Russian oil and gas deliveries. Belarus also aimed at preserving access to Russian markets for its goods, services and labour force, and to expand its transit potential as a gateway between the EU, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other [12]. However, in 2009–2010, when entry into the common customs code and ratification of the agreements on the establishment of the common economic space were at stake, the two countries went into a lengthy row over energy rents. During that period Russia cut energy subsidies to Belarus and ran a brief anti-Lukashenko information war. In turn, from 2010–2012, Belarus resorted to importing oil from Azerbaijan and Venezuela in its quest to secure more beneficial terms for oil deliveries from Russia [13].

Bilateral disputes like this between Russia and Belarus affect the development of the EEU. The Union State acts as a driver for the EEU, and any dispute between Russia and Belarus leaves progress at a standstill. Director of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research Oleg Makarov stated that Belarus – Russia relations drive forward interaction between the EEU member states, with the Union State being hailed as the example for the future of the EEU⁵. However, in recent years, relations between Russia and Belarus have soured.

The relationship between V. Putin and A. Lukashenko had always been tumultuous, however, it really be-

³Cooperation with Russian armed forces [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.mil.by/en/military_policy/cooperation_RF/#rg-vs (date of access: 31.01.2020).

⁴Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/70/docs/treaty_on_eeu.pdf (date of access: 31.01.2020).

⁵EAEU development to slow down without Belarus – Russia union acting as driver [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/eaau-development-to-slow-down-without-belarus-russia-union-acting-as-driver-127646-2020/> (date of access: 31.01.2020).

gan to deteriorate in 2014, after the infamous Ukrainian crisis that culminated into the annexation of Crimea by Russian forces. This assertion of aggression on a neighbour impacted Belarus' outlook on its ally, with A. Lukashenko affirming his concern of the annexation and asserting his support for Ukraine's territorial integrity⁶. Since 2014, Belarus has been attempting to balance relations with Russia and the West in the fear that what happened to Ukraine may happen to Belarus [14, p. 33–43]. While Belarus has been a member of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) since 2009, an EU neighbourhood initiative intended to provide a framework for cooperation on trade, economic development and wider sustainability including security, good governance, environment, tourism, democracy promotion, etc.; relations with the EU have been unstable [15, p. 365–383]. The 2010 presidential elections in Belarus led to mass demonstrations and arrests in Minsk. The EU declared that the imprisonment of opposition figures and protesters contravened human rights and imposed new targeted sanctions on major Belarusian officials and businesspeople [16, p. 486–505]. However, in 2015, the EU announced it would suspend most of its sanctions against Belarus, following the freeing of the country's political prisoners in August 2015⁷. This is no coincidence and is most likely a tactic used by A. Lukashenko to improve relations with the West to counteract Russian influence in the country. Whilst it's widely regarded that Belarus still remains one of the least reformed countries in the EaP, some aspects of its membership have been beneficial for the country [17]. Due to Belarus' strategic position within Europe, it is best placed to act as a mediator between Russia and the West, in such cases as being a peace negotiator in the war in Donbass. Remarkably, warmer relations with the EU have barely influenced the relations with Russia⁸. David Marples considered Belarus to be a "success story of the EaP" and "A. Lukashenko... has opened a dialogue with the West that has allowed Belarus to

move closer to Europe without breaking its ties with Russia" [18].

However, Russia sees Belarus' improving relations with the West as a threat. To put pressure on Belarus, a tax manoeuvre was initiated in 2014, when the Russian parliament adopted a new law lowering the export duties on crude oil from 59 % to 30 % in 2017⁹. Then in May 2018, V. Putin agreed for the export duties to be reduced to zero by 2024. The tax manoeuvre implies that by 2024, the export duty on oil in Russia, which Belarus does not pay when importing hydrocarbons, will decrease from 30 % to 0 % [19]. A study by Vygon Consulting estimated that Belarus may lose up to 8 bln US dollars by 2024¹⁰. A. Lukashenko, knowing that this would be economically devastating for the country, demanded compensation from Russia. However, Russia refused saying "the tax manoeuvre is a sovereign right of Russia, so it is hardly appropriate to talk about any compensation"¹¹. Instead, Russia proposed linking any sort of compensation to deepening integration with each other. The events that transpired in the 2000s echo the events of recent years, with Belarus asking for more concessions, and Russia offering deeper integration in return for assistance. However, the establishment of the EEU has introduced another aspect to Belarus – Russia relations, which is important to take into account in analysis of bilateral relations. So far, EEU membership has largely allowed Belarus to maintain its economic benefits, and although the EEU has fixed Belarus even closer to Russian institutionally, it has also given Belarus some leverage over Russia. Therefore, Russia has sought to make it their main objective to keep Belarus in line by instigating further integration in return for additional economic concessions. Coincidentally, in December 2018, the then prime minister Dmitrii Medvedev announced plans for the revival of the Union State. The next chapter will discuss this attempted revival, as well as the many disputes between Russia and Belarus over the endeavour.

The revival of the Union State

In December 2018, the then Russian prime minister D. Medvedev announced that they had renewed talks with Belarus regarding deepening integration stating: "The Union State project can be executed in a com-

pletely different way if we make efforts to implement the agreement signed in December 1999, including the creation of those structures that have not yet been created, but which are assumed by this agreement"¹².

⁶President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko answers questions of mass media representatives on 23 March 2014 [Electronic resource]. URL: http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/president-of-the-republic-of-belarus-alexander-lukashenko-answers-questions-of-mass-media-representatives-on-8348/ (date of access: 01.02.2020).

⁷Republic of Belarus presidential election 11 October 2015. OSCE/ODIHR Election observation mission final report. Warsaw : Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2016.

⁸Ukraine, Russia and Europe prepare for negotiations in Minsk [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-proxy1.bath.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=97892123&site=ehost-live> (date of access: 01.02.2020).

⁹On tax manoeuvre and other issues [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.pwc.ru/en/tax-consulting-services/assets/legislation/tax-flash-report-25-eng.pdf> (date of access: 07.05.2020).

¹⁰Belarus may lose \$ 8 billion out of Russia's tax maneuver [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://charter97.org/en/news/2018/11/30/314707/> (date of access: 31.01.2020).

¹¹Russia refuses to compensate Belarus for tax maneuver [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://charter97.org/en/news/2019/7/19/341832/> (date of access: 03.02.2020).

¹²Медведев рассчитывает на подписание в ближайшее время соглашения с Белоруссией о визах [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/5910233> (дата обращения: 14.05.2020).

The Russian newspaper “Kommersant” released the first (leaked) technicalities about the prospective Russian-Belarusian economic integration proposal signed by the prime ministers of the respective countries on 6 September 2019. The agreement advocated a partial unification of the Russian and Belarusian economies after 2021. This entails mutual cancellation of roaming charges from June 2020, the adoption of a unified Tax Code by April 2021, unified customs and energy policies, including the creation of shared regulators for the gas, oil, oil-products, and electricity markets. The agreement also states that the central banks of Russia and Belarus should work according to the same general principles of banking and financial supervision after 2021 (though the deal doesn’t mention the creation of a single currency, which is what the original 1999 Union State Treaty proposed). Russia and Belarus also agreed to establish on consistent laws for observing special economic measures, alluding to Russian counter-sanctions against the West, which Belarus has been suspected of ignoring. After June 2022, Russia and Belarus will also be implementing a coordinated policy in the labour market and social-protection sphere, converging their levels of state benefits. However, the initial agreement doesn’t mention national defence, state security, courts, law enforcement, education, healthcare, science, or the internal structure of the executive branch in Russia or Belarus. The agreement seems to focus more on economic integration rather than political. Nevertheless, the newspaper “Kommersant” calls the integration programme “a rather radical project” that proposes a degree of integration greater in many ways than the European Union¹³.

However, Belarus believes, in the words of minister of international affairs Vladimir Makei, that Russia’s terms of integration are unacceptable, stating that before integrating their economies further, the current problems must be solved. Furthermore, president A. Lukashenko accused Moscow of attempting to incorporate Belarus into Russia using oil and gas leverage, noting that his country would never be a part of the Russian Federation¹⁴. Moscow keeps the Belarusian economy afloat with cheap energy and low-interest loans, but Minsk recognises that allowing too much Russian influence may be a threat to its sovereignty [20, p. 289–291]. Conflicting views between Minsk and Moscow regarding the Union State may cause a crisis in bilateral relations, particularly as Belarus refuses to make concessions

that would undermine its sovereignty. Due to this, Belarus, being located in between two economic blocs, is attempting to walk a diplomatic tightrope, counter-measuring Russia’s attempted assimilation by warming up to the EU. After months of negotiation, Belarus and the EU signed a visa facilitation agreement and a readmission agreement on 8 January 2020, paving the way for improved mobility of citizens, contributing to closer links between the EU and Belarus. This can be seen as a direct move to counteract Russian influence in Belarus at a time when Belarus is seen to either have to choose between Russia or the West. A. Lukashenko stated in December 2019 that it will not cede its sovereignty to any power, whether that be the EU or Russia, and will remain an independent nation. The visa facilitation agreement will make it easier for Belarusian citizens to acquire short-term visas to visit the European Union. Once the visa facilitation agreement enters into force, the visa fee will be reduced from 80 to 35 euro¹⁵. Another way Belarus is attempting to reduce Russian influence is by having denied Russia permission to host an air base on its territory, in September 2019. Russia said that Belarus’ defiance had been an “unpleasant episode”, a previously uncommon but increasing public display of animosity between the nations [21]. The air base clash illustrates the limitations of their alliance as Moscow’s ties with the West have plunged to post-Cold War lows. Not only has Belarus been warming relations with the EU but it also attempted to re-establish relations with the USA. The US has not had an ambassador to Belarus since 2008, when the Belarusian government expelled the ambassador and most US diplomats. Various US sanctions were imposed in 2006 after a presidential election that violated international norms and was neither free nor fair [22, p. 208–211]. However, in recent months, Belarus and the US have sought to normalise their diplomatic relationship and are prepared to exchange ambassadors as the next step, after secretary of state Mike Pompeo paid a visit to Belarus in January 2020 to discuss issues regarding sovereignty, oil disputes and human rights¹⁶.

To conclude this chapter, on the surface, although the Union State negotiations have resumed allegedly on mutual terms, Belarus’ negotiating position is weak. By resisting market reforms that could have diversified imports and exports, A. Lukashenko has instead kept the economy tied to Russia; 40 % of Belarusian exports go to Russia¹⁷. In addition, Russia has decreased

¹³Russia, Belarus to form economic “Confederacy” by 2022 – Kommersant [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/09/16/russia-belarus-to-form-economic-confederacy-by-2022-kommersant-a67297> (date of access: 10.03.2020).

¹⁴Belarus rejects Russia’s “unacceptable” terms of integration [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/01/belarus-rejects-russias-unacceptable-terms-of-integration-a67540> (date of access: 10.03.2020).

¹⁵Belarus, EU sign visa facilitation agreement, readmission agreement [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-eu-sign-visa-facilitation-agreement-readmission-agreement-127147-2020/> (date of access: 10.03.2020).

¹⁶Normalising US – Belarus relations: Mike Pompeo due in Minsk [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://belsat.eu/en/news/normalizing-us-belarus-relations-mike-pompeo-due-in-minsk/> (date of access: 10.03.2020).

¹⁷Foreign trade of Belarus in H1 2019 [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.mfa.gov.by/en/foreign_trade/ (date of access: 10.03.2020).

its reliance on imports from Belarus as part of a broad policy of import substitution¹⁸. Raising the gas price will deprive Belarusian companies of their comparative advantage. Approximately 90 % of Belarus' electricity and heat is generated by natural gas imported from Russia at below market prices [23]. Petroleum products refined from Russian crude oil that is supplied duty free to Belarus account for the largest source of the country's export earnings [25]. However, A. Lukashenko is a master of negotiation with the Kremlin, with a talent for turning weakness into a strength. First, by eliminating political competition in Belarus, he has given V. Putin no option but to deal with him personally. Second, he understands that Moscow needs to present

integration between the two countries as voluntary and does not want to use economic sanctions or other tools of persuasion that could destabilise Belarus. Third, he knows that there is no consensus in Moscow on creating a single currency. Unification of the tax systems would also be problematic because of their different structures. If these measures were implemented, Moscow could end up paying much larger subsidies to keep Belarus stable. Minsk is therefore likely to pursue three options: dragging out the negotiations with Moscow, while continuing to declare its commitment to closer union with Russia, seeking alternative sources of energy and credits, and reforming the economy to lower its dependency on Russia.

Prospects and implications

The future of Belarus – Russia relations, especially in the context of the Union State, is presently uncertain. However, to develop the argument further, first-hand evidence has been collected premised on the author's interviews with a number of experts (academics, policy-makers and practitioners) who understand the political landscape of Belarus and Russia. This additional primary research (full methodology is presented in the references below) will be used to ascertain the future of the Union State.

The following three questions were asked:

1. What are the reasons for the revival of the Union State?
2. What will be a more likely scenario(s) for Belarus – Russia integration?
3. What are the implications for the Eurasian Economic Union?

Mixed answers were received to the first question. For example, Alexey Gromyko from Russian Academy of Science (Moscow) notes that there is no need to discuss the revival of the Union State as it had never really existed before. This strengthens the argument made earlier, in chapter 1, about the Union State being "in name only", falling short of all its initial intentions. However, Grigory Ioffe from Radford (US) claims that the Union State was never dead on arrival, instead claiming that many ordinary citizens see the benefits of the Union State, with the frictionless travel due to a transparent border and mutual employment authorisation. Anonymous British official disagreed that the revival of the Union State was anyhow connected with V. Putin's administration seeking ways to keep him in power (a popular version in late 2019) [25]. This was evidently corroborated by president V. Putin's recent moves to initiate internal reforms in the country. As early as January 2020, Russian president engaged in reforming the constitution and transferring powers from the presidency to parliament. In March, a member of

Russia's ruling party proposed amending the constitution in a way that would "reset" V. Putin's presidential term count back to zero, as he is currently nearing the end of his second-term and would be required to stand down or become prime minister again like in 2008 [26]. However, this suggestion, while supported by Duma, is not yet decisive. It was due to be approved by referendum in April, but due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Russia, it was delayed until further notice. Therefore, the future of V. Putin's tenure looks to be on the trajectory of staying in power until at least 2036, but this all depends on how he, and A. Lukashenko for that matter, come out of the crisis. Nevertheless, most respondents have noted that the Russian government's interest in the Union State has increased in recent years due to the Ukrainian crisis, in an attempt to maintain Russia's influence in the near abroad.

Concerning the more likely scenarios for future integration, the responses also varied. Some noted that Belarus may seek to diversify its trade relations, though this would take time. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, and Belarus' existing dependency on Russia, Minsk can become even more vulnerable to the latter's pressures. However, with the ravaging pandemic, Russia itself has entered uncharted waters and is facing higher risks and uncertainties. A British official noted that there may be a move for more integrated policies, but not deeper political integration, as president A. Lukashenko is clearly reluctant to give up independence. Belarus would do the minimum to keep Russia content, and will be playing the long game by putting barriers in the way to drag the process out. It is difficult to predict what could happen. It will all depend on how both Russia and Belarus come out of the crisis – politically and socially. V. Putin and A. Lukashenko both underestimated the COVID-19 outbreak, though Russia did act sooner. Nevertheless, the likely outcome will be Russia still attempting to negotiate further integration

¹⁸Belarus: economic update [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/560461559660793014/Eng-EcUpdate-BLR-S19.pdf> (date of access: 10.03.2020).

with a weakened Belarus as, according to an EU official Belarus has never been less under Russian control since 1995 as it is today. However, the EU official also noted that military pressure cannot be totally excluded. This will all depend on how stable A. Lukashenko's position is after the crisis. For example, the coronavirus epidemic could lead to a Euromaidan-style revolution in Belarus, as we saw in Ukraine in 2014, which could lead to A. Lukashenko's overthrow. And if this turmoil is occurring in Belarus, Russia may intervene and send its troops in, in an attempt to "calm the situation". Still, this is all in the realms of possibility, and would still not be Russia's first choice.

As for the implications for the future of the EEU, due to the current COVID-19 crisis, the EEU may become a less integrated structure, with member states enacting protectionist policies against each other to prop up their economies and stop the spread of the virus. Evgenii Preiherman from the Council for international relations "Minsk Dialogue" believes this to be a likely scenario, though stating the EEU will still survive, only formally. However, Pavel Tereshkovich from the Belarusian State University believes that the EEU may have two options ahead of them: increased integration or the stagnation of the integration process. We are already witnessing member states applying protectionist policies on one another, and if the COVID-19 crisis

worsens, this may lead to trade wars and even threat of withdrawal from the EEU. P. Tereshkovich draws to the cautious decision of Uzbekistan on 7 March 2020, to become an observer rather than a member of the EEU. The still fragile EEU may become weaker after the crisis and may even disintegrate if Russia – Belarus relations continue to break down. And even if the EEU survives, it is likely that internal infighting will continue, with limited prospects for ever closer integration. After all, as mentioned previously in chapter 1, and pointed out by A. Gromyko, the Union State serves as an example for the EEU to follow. Without the Union State acting as a driver, the EEU too will struggle to progress.

In summary, the analysis in this chapter indicates that the situation for the Union State, and the EEU as a whole, remain unstable and unpredictable. The COVID-19 crisis will test the dependability of each member state towards each other. Responses from experts confirm some previously stated theories for the reason for the revival of the Union State was Russia's intent on keeping Belarus in its sphere of influence. The respondents also noted the possible future of the Union State; Russia will continue to demand further integration in return for subsidised oil and Belarus will continue to diversify its trade in an attempt to become less dependent on Russia.

Conclusion

To conclude, from 1991 onwards, Belarus and Russia have had an ever-changing relationship. What started off as a brotherly alliance has since become more complicated in the last decade. As the Ukrainian crisis unfolded, Belarus feared what happened there may happen in its own territory. Seeing this, Russia immediately took to forge closer ties and further integration with Belarus in order to keep Belarus in line. A. Lukashenko, as a reaction, is now warming up to the West, the EU and the USA especially, in order to balance out Russia's heavy influence in the country.

Russia's mindset for its actions in recent years can be best described by using a classical realist approach. An accepted principle of realism is that a state's main objective is survival. Survival necessitates power over other potentially threatening states. Therefore, the ultimate objective of the state is to maintain power relative to those that would threaten the state's existence [27, p. 633]. Russia sees the US as a threat and resists Belarus developing closer relations with the West. Russia's growing insecurity could play a role in why Russia is working to increasing its sphere of influence [28, p. 60–76]. A realist would contend that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is to further Russia's interests as a great power in the international community and to deter others, such as the US, from challenging Russia. Classical realism would also claim that V. Putin believes that Western interests are to contain Russia's influence

internationally and expand theirs. V. Putin did not want risk losing Ukraine to the US and all the strategic benefits that come from obtaining Crimea, and that applies directly to Belarus, as NATO has been expanding its borders closer to Russia ever since the fall of the USSR. Therefore, Russia chose to invade Ukraine, preserving regional interests, and now Russia is pursuing a different strategy to Belarus, by blackmailing it in order to preserve its influence in the country. Therefore, the realist assumption that states pursue security at all costs may explain why Russia is pursuing power outside of its borders.

It is important to understand that throughout most of its history Belarus had always been part of another entity, whether that was the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Now that Belarus has achieved independence, the president is unlikely to agree to any loss of sovereignty, which would weaken his authority. A. Lukashenko walks a diplomatic tightrope, being situated between two great powers (the EU and Russia) and hopes to achieve a balanced relationship while preserving Belarus' sovereignty and independence. And for Belarus, this is the priority. The Union State Treaty is built on parity. It provides mechanisms to ensure that no Union State decision passes unless Belarus agrees to it. This is why the sides have never fully implemented the treaty. It is hard to ima-

gine that Moscow will ever give Minsk equal say on a broad array of issues. Belarus, for its part, cannot agree to anything short of parity, as this would amount to a loss of sovereignty.

The future of the Union State is uncertain. Our contemporary world, especially with the advent of COVID-19 makes prediction difficult. Coronavirus could lead to further integration, in order to survive. If Belarus fails to diversify its economy and diplomatic relationships, it may eventually find itself in a more precarious position. The country would not only become more vulnerable to Russian pressure but also, would increasingly look – to foreign observers – like a country with an uncertain future, a perception with damaging political and economic repercussions.

However, the crisis could lead Belarus to improve relations with the EU further. The EU would do well to help it in this endeavour, because – as recent years have shown (particularly Belarus' position on events in Crimea and the Donbass) – Belarusian sovereignty remains important to European security. Moreover, the EU would struggle to improve its relations with Russia if Belarus descended into chaos. In this sense, a stable Belarus is key to easing tensions between Russia and the West.

While uncertainty currently prevails, the Belarusians, along with other neighbouring nations, look forward to building more stable and cooperative external relations, and only time will show what shape they are likely to take.

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Received by editorial board 19.06.2020.