

# Russia-Belarus talks signal renewed cooperation against US

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Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Minsk December 13 for two days of talks with the president of Belarus, Aleksander Lukashenko. Their meeting came just prior to a session of the Russia-Belarus Union, a body established in the 1990s to encourage integration between the two countries.

International political analysts have speculated that the frosty relationship between Putin and Lukashenko is thawing, opening up the possibility that the two ex-Soviet states are advancing towards a merger.

Pavel Borodin, secretary of the Russia-Belarus Union executive body, which is responsible for facilitating any unification process, stated that no major constitutional changes would be formally agreed to in Minsk. He insisted that that any future draft of a planned constitution for a new unified state would be considered by representatives from both governments and would be subject to approval by parliamentary votes and national referenda in Russia and Belarus.

Instead, Putin and Lukashenko were scheduled to discuss technical issues on how to make the existing partnership function more effectively. "They are going to discuss pragmatic issues," Borodin said, adding that too many differences remained over how to proceed with a union.

Referring to speculation that there would be discussion of a political union, Lukashenko said to his Russian counterpart during a press conference in Minsk that he was "surprised your visit prompted a stir in the West."

Lukashenko added, "There's no subtext here. We're friendly allied states and I would be surprised if you [Putin] didn't visit."

The Kremlin had earlier dismissed reports that Putin and Lukashenko would discuss a union. Both presidents were, however, willing to acknowledge that closer military cooperation was on the agenda.

"Belarus is ready to play its role in the issues of the planned deployment in Europe of US missile defence systems," Lukashenko said, referring to US plans to establish missile defence bases in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Kremlin has angrily stated its opposition to these bases, which it views as a threat by Washington to Russia's missile-launching capabilities.

Though Lukashenko did not give further details of what help his government would give to the Russian military, it is expected that the two countries will develop a joint response to the planned US missile bases. In November, a senior Russian military spokesman indicated that the Kremlin was considering locating missiles in

Belarus in a countermove to Washington's plans. Belarus shares a border with Poland, with which it has very poor diplomatic relations, and is not far from the Czech Republic.

Lukashenko also said he would work with Russia on the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, which limits weapons levels of both NATO and Russia. Putin recently formally announced the suspension of Russia's obligations under the CFE, citing Washington's disregard for the limitations it imposes.

Police dispersed small demonstrations held over two days prior to Putin's arrival in Belarus. Around 300 mainly young protesters in Minsk held placards saying "Putin go home" and "No union with Russia." Police detained many people and reportedly badly beat a leader of the opposition group Young Front. Lukashenko's regime has been widely condemned for human rights abuses, holding unfair elections and detaining political prisoners.

On December 10, Putin said he supported his Kremlin ally, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, to become Russia's next president. As expected, Medvedev quickly offered Putin the post of prime minister should he win power, as is expected, in next year's presidential election.

Putin has claimed to have a "moral right" to retain power and has made little secret of his intention to retain influence after he leaves office.

The post of prime minister in Russia is a weak one relative to the presidency, a power gap that has only grown wider under Putin's period in charge at the Kremlin. Political scientists and the media have speculated that the creation of a union of Russia and Belarus would require a new position of president of both republics in the confederation—a post that Putin might fill, giving him a continuing position of real power after he leaves office in March 2008.

"I don't think it is a coincidence that Putin's trip to Minsk follows Medvedev's nomination," said Sergei Mikheyev of the Russian Institute of Political Technologies.

Russia and Belarus signed an agreement in 1996 that envisaged close political, economic and military ties. This was strengthened the following year when an executive of the Russia-Belarus Union was formed and a customs and immigration union was established. However, efforts to integrate the two countries' economies and political structures have foundered, with heated disputes over oil and gas prices compounding the evident mistrust that Putin and Lukashenko have for each other.

For the tiny elite of Belarus, mainly drawn from the old Stalinist bureaucracy, such a union is aimed at securing the oil and gas

supplies that the country receives from Russia, as well as gaining the backing of the Russian state in the suppression of the working class. For the Russian ruling class, Belarus is a strategically vital country for energy exports and a possible forward base for its nuclear and conventional forces in response to the growing belligerence of Washington in the central and east European region.

Commenting on Putin's visit to Belarus, Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov said, "I wouldn't be surprised if Putin tries to speed up a union with Belarus to become the president of the unified state."

Russia's *Ekho Moskvy* quoted unnamed members of the Lukashenko administration saying that Moscow and Minsk had struck a deal in which Putin would become president of a Russia-Belarus union, while Lukashenko would be speaker of its parliament.

Pavel Borodin dismissed claims that the Russia-Belarus Union was being fast-tracked in order to create a role for Putin: "It is not being prepared for the sake of any specific personality," he told a press conference in Minsk. But official denials in Moscow and Minsk have not quelled growing commentary in both countries that Putin's visit to Minsk, his first formal visit since 2003, indicates a renewed interest in the merger.

Many doubt that such a deal can be reached. "The two nations have opposite interests," Alexander Klaskovsky, a political analyst in Minsk, told the Associated Press. "Moscow wants to expand its presence in Belarus, while Minsk wants to get economic assistance while maintaining full sovereignty," said Klaskovsky.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Lukashenko was a strong advocate of the formation of a new union between Belarus and Russia, apparently in the hope that Russia's relative weakness and the political instability in the Yeltsin-era Kremlin would allow him to play a major role in a new unified state.

However, following the election of Putin in 2000, Lukashenko's ambitions were put in check. An increasingly assertive Russian diplomatic policy, enabled by the alliance of the state security apparatus with sections of the oligarchs, under conditions of very high prices for Russia's oil and gas, saw Putin pushing increasingly unacceptable deals onto Minsk.

"Putin and Lukashenko have sought to outmaneuver and cheat one another over the past few years," commented Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of *Russia in Global Affairs* magazine.

In 2002, Lukashenko angrily rejected a proposal from Putin's administration that Belarus be incorporated into the Russian Federation. Relations between the two regimes reached their nadir in early 2007, when Russia more than doubled the price of highly subsidised energy supplies to Belarus. As a result, the Lukashenko government was forced to accept the sale of half of the national gas pipeline company to Gazprom, Russia's state gas monopoly.

Lukashenko then described Russia as a "huge monster," even going so far as to compare the price hike to the country's occupation by Germany during the Second World War, when much of the then-Soviet republic was reduced to ashes and millions of its citizens were killed or made prisoners.

The Kremlin still holds the fate of Belarus's energy supplies in its hands. In August, Gazprom threatened to halt future natural gas

shipments if Belarus failed to pay its debts, and new negotiations between the two countries in 2008 will decide what further price increases, if any, will be introduced.

During the visit, Putin offered a conciliatory gesture to Lukashenko, promising that the price for Russian gas to Belarus would only rise slightly next year. He also offered a US\$1.5 billion loan to Minsk cover recent increases.

The talks on military cooperation and possible political union between Russia and Belarus are driven by deep national and international tensions.

Washington's planned missile defence shield, its backing of various "colour revolutions" in former Soviet states and its military adventurism are pushing Moscow to take countermeasures such as the movement of Russian missiles into Belarus.

Recent speeches by Putin, such as his vociferous condemnation of American foreign policy at the Munich Security Summit this year, echoed in other statements by leading military and civilian figures in the Kremlin, have expressed the intention of the Russian elite to reassert its interests on the world stage, bankrolled by the flood of oil and gas wealth into the state treasury.

Putin, and the coalition of oligarchs and leading security figures upon which he relies for support, realise that the US is intent on rolling back the scope of Moscow's power in the region of the former USSR, possibly threatening the break-up of the Russian Federation.

They fear that powerful forces opposed to the Kremlin's ruling cliques could ally themselves with Washington, posing the danger of a "colour revolution" in Russia. The US already tried to instigate one in Belarus in 2001 and again in 2006, without success.

The ruling cliques in Moscow and Minsk are considering the possibility of a Russia-Belarus Union as insurance against this threat. The fact that so massive an undertaking as the union of two states is being linked to the personal ambitions of presidents Putin and Lukashenko indicates the parlous state of political relations within the ruling elites of Moscow and Minsk, such that these authoritarian figures are required to arbitrate and settle scores between rival factions.

Such a union, should it come to pass, would be treated with utmost hostility by Washington, which would make every effort to destabilise it. The more likely scenario of a closer military alliance between Russian and Belarus will also be fiercely opposed by the US, opening up a new stage in the conflict between Washington and Moscow for dominance in the region.



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