

An exchange

Russia-Belarus talks signal renewed cooperation against US

25 August 2008

RE: "Russia-Belarus talks signal renewed cooperation against US", 27 December 2007

In light of this article and others on Belarus, what is the considered opinion of the ICFI with regard to the present Lukashenko regime in Belarus? What is your analysis of the material presented, for example, by the Belarus Solidarity Campaign? Neo-Stalinist apologetics, or a sincere attempt to correct pretty chronic misrepresentation of a fairly beleaguered regime? Or possibly both? While I think we can all agree in opposing the machinations of US/EU imperialism with regards to Belarus, what do we think about the regime as it stands?

Athanasius Gardner

Dear AG,

Thank you for your letter.

The WSWs has stated that the aim of US imperialism in Belarus, and across the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, is to win hegemony over a region with vast reserves of oil and gas and strategic control of Eurasia. This conflict is currently being fought out in Georgia between Washington and Russia, which continues to pose the main obstacle to US ambitions in the region.

US-sponsored "colour revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia have nothing to do with spreading democracy, but are attempts to roll back the influence of Moscow and establish pro-US client states. To this end, Washington, and to a lesser extent the European Union, has also sponsored pro-Western groups in Belarus in an attempt to overthrow the regime of President Aleksandr Lukashenko, which has maintained close ties to Moscow.

The WSWs has no political brief for Lukashenko, who is a thoroughly reactionary and authoritarian representative of capitalism in Belarus. Throughout his 14 years in office, Lukashenko has displayed all the anti-democratic characteristics of the new ruling elites across the former Soviet Union. His rule has witnessed the suppression of political opponents, restrictions on the press, dubious election results and state corruption. Student demonstrations during the presidential elections last year were met with beatings administered by riot police and imprisonment.

The Belarus Solidarity Campaign is a UK-based organisation that claims to "highlight both the truth and the reasons behind the lies about Belarus" and "support the progressive policies undertaken by the government of Belarus since 1994."

Referring to several referenda held since Lukashenko came to

power, the Belarus Solidarity Campaign website states: "Lukashenko...is actually carrying out the people's popular will, and not pursuing purely personal goals, nor does he have any 'sponsors' interests to look after.

"As such, Belarus has a particularly strong social policy, in fact its economy is termed as being 'socially orientated.' This means that the Belarusian system allows the economy to work for the people instead of the other way around."

This picture of a leader standing above the interests of any group in society, defending the common interest of "the people," is a gross distortion of political reality in Belarus that simply echoes the propaganda of the regime itself. A cult of personality has been encouraged around Lukashenko that echoes that of Soviet-era leaders. He is often referred to as "Batka," or father figure.

Despite the fact that the country did not undergo many of the most socially destructive reforms—or economic "shock therapy"—associated with the restoration of capitalism in Russia and other ex-Stalinist states after the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus is still a society of great social inequality, based on capitalist property relations and the exploitation of the working class.

Lukashenko's rule has its origins in the break-up of the Soviet Union and the rise of a new capitalist class from the old Stalinist bureaucracy. Lukashenko and his government are instruments of this semi-criminal new bourgeoisie, and share many of the characteristics of its counterparts in the Putin/Medvedev regime in Russia. Independent analysis indicates that social inequality in Belarus, while less than that in Russia and Ukraine, is comparable with figures in some Central European states such as the Czech Republic.

There is nothing in Lukashenko's biography that indicates he had any principled opposition to the pre-1991 Stalinist regime in Belarus and across the USSR, or that he has opposed capitalism since.

Elected as a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of Belarus in March 1990, after serving as a mid-level bureaucrat in the state farming sector, Lukashenko quickly forged a career in the murky world of post-Soviet politics.

The USSR was liquidated December 8, 1991, when Stanislav Shushkevich, then chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, met with Boris Yeltsin of Russia and Leonid Kravchuk, representing Ukraine, to formally declare the dissolution of the Soviet Union

and the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. At the time of its dissolution, the Belarus SSR was one of the wealthiest and most industrially developed republics of the Soviet Union. With much of the USSR's most advanced manufacturing industry, a well-developed petrochemical industry, and a highly educated workforce, the new capitalist class in Belarus was well placed to profit from the liquidation of state assets.

In 1991, the first 40 state enterprises were sold off, followed in January 1993 by a law ordering "destatisation and privatisation of state property in the Republic of Belarus" as the basis for wholesale privatisation.

Although committed to capitalist restoration, the possibility that swathes of the country's industry could collapse or be entirely bought up by foreign capital prompted a section of the Belarus elite to look to state intervention to defend their privileged positions within these enterprises.

It is these layers that Lukashenko represents—those who felt their own status could be threatened by the economic policies of Shushkevich and other "reformers."

Posturing as an anti-corruption campaigner, Lukashenko was elected chairman of the parliament's anti-corruption committee in 1993, and used the post to quickly bring charges against his political rivals, including Shushkevich and 70 others.

The first presidential elections in July 1994 saw Lukashenko standing against Shushkevich and Vyacheslav Kebich. Lukashenko campaigned on a populist platform, with the slogan "defeat the mafia," winning in the second round of voting with more than 80 percent of the vote.

On taking office in 1994, Lukashenko greatly slowed the pace of privatisation, claiming that he wanted to establish "market socialism," in contrast to what he characterised as the "wild capitalism" in Russia under Boris Yeltsin.

As president, he established administrative controls over prices and currency exchange rates, as well as increasing government regulation of private businesses and the renationalisation of major financial institutions. However, many formerly state-owned companies have been partially privatised by Lukashenko, with shares often snapped up by cronies of the president.

Control over the main nationalised industries has also acted as a source of patronage and wealth for Lukashenko and his supporters, while limiting the extent to which foreign capital could dominate the economy at the expense of the local elite.

Lukashenko's economic policies offered a foretaste of those pursued by the Putin administration in Russia from 2000. Neither Putin nor Lukashenko are in any way opposed to capitalism. Both have sought to mitigate the economic turmoil that followed the end of the Soviet Union by forming an alliance between the business interests of the new capitalist class and the state bureaucratic and security apparatuses, the better to defend the essential class interests of their national bourgeoisies.

Lukashenko's use of the symbols and lexicon of Stalinism in Belarus serves merely to foster the type of national chauvinism that was characteristic of the Soviet bureaucracy, mirroring the rehabilitation of Stalinist iconography encouraged by Putin.

Despite the claims of the Belarus Solidarity Campaign that Lukashenko is running a "socially oriented" economy, the true

class character of his regime cannot be obscured.

Several major state-owned companies were privatised under Lukashenko in 2007, including the Minsk automobile factory and several food manufacturers.

In 2008, Telecom Austria bought Belarus's second-biggest mobile phone operator, Velcom. Lukashenko had announced in 2007 that the state-owned company, then called Mobile Digital Communications (MDC), had been sold off for an undisclosed sum to a Syrian investor called Ead Samawi.

That deal had raised accusations of insider dealing, as Samawi is reputed to be a close friend of Lukashenko. The Austria firm bought 70 percent of Samawi's holding company SB Telecom for €730million, with an option to buy the remainder in 2010.

The government in Minsk has stated its intention to privatise two mobile phone companies, including market leader MTS, a joint venture between a Russian firm and Belarus's main telecommunications company, Beltelecom. The third-largest mobile company, BeST, is set to be bought by Turkey's Turkcell.

Under pressure from Moscow, which has used oil and gas prices as a means to force Minsk to make concessions in its state-owned enterprises, much of the petrochemical and energy transit industries in Belarus have been sold off, with Russia's monopoly energy companies the main beneficiaries.

Based on current high economic growth rates in Belarus (almost 10 percent growth in 2006 and 2007), largely driven by the Russian economic boom, the ruling elite is moving to abandon the vestiges of state ownership. The prospect of vast fortunes to be made under current market conditions has moved the Lukashenko government to adopt a privatisation plan for 2008-2010 that will hand over the most lucrative parts of the economy to private ownership.

Divided into two parts, 519 state enterprises will be incorporated as joint-stock companies within the next three years, with a further 147 existing joint-stock companies gradually having their remaining state shares sold off.

A ban on alienating government shares of joint-stock companies specialising in agricultural products has been lifted, and by January 1, 2011, all restrictions will be lifted on private ownership of these former state assets.

Under such conditions, the position of the working class is bound to deteriorate. Any attempt by the workers of Belarus to defend their social position and demand democratic rights will be met with utmost hostility and violence by Lukashenko.

The nationalist chauvinism of Lukashenko, Putin and their ilk across the capitals of eastern Europe must be decisively rejected. Workers in Belarus must forge a common struggle with that of the working class in Russia and across Europe to defend jobs and living standards, as part of the struggle for socialist internationalism.

Niall Green



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