

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**The Bison And The Bear:
Belarusian - Russian
Relations 2003 - 2006**

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Key Points

- * The gas dispute between Russia and Belarus' – although largely ignored in the West – proved that Russia will use energy supply as a political and economic weapon.
- * Belarus' is not a failed state, nor is it likely to become one in the foreseeable future – barring outside pressure – and should be encouraged to engage more with its non-Russian neighbours first and then the rest of the world. Belarus' is too important to be left in its current state of comparative diplomatic limbo.
- * Belarus' has actively developed its relationship with Russia, under the pro-Russian presidency of A.G. Lukashenko. However, Belarus' has not turned into a “colony” of Russia; it still maintains a significant degree of control over its own economic and political destiny.
- * Belarus' is very important to Russia, in terms of trade and security and as Russia's most important ally in the fSU. These are important considerations when speculating on assisting “regime change” in Minsk.

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A few years ago, the Russian gas monopoly complex, *Gazprom*, threatened and then stopped supplying gas to a European country. Curiously enough, there were no howls of protest or emergency meetings of the EU to discuss the situation and bring Russia back to the negotiating table; instead, the country in question was left to fend for itself and find its own solution to the problem. When one realises that the European country in question was *only* Belarus', the West's non-reaction becomes more comprehensible. Despite being Europe's 13th largest state and, depending on one's reckoning, lying at the very heart of Europe itself, in geopolitical terms Belarus' is far from being in the minds, even less in the hearts, of many of Europe's senior political leadership. The US has a more active attitude towards the Belarusian political leadership, being keen to inculcate regime change there and encouraging the removal of Europe's "last dictator" from the political scene.

Yet within its own geopolitical sphere, Belarus' is an important country and one which deserves much more study and analysis than has been the case to date. It's an important trading partner of Russia, Poland and Germany. Its geographical position means that the important Yamal-Europe pipelines carrying gas and oil to the rest of Europe go through its territory, as do many of the most important road and rail links connecting the north and south of Europe, as well as Europe and Asia. Its arms sales are now beginning to rival Russia in the international arms market, much to the latter's chagrin.¹ Despite the fact that the regime is both authoritarian and repressive,² the country remains a relatively stable and functioning society. Belarus' may be a lot of things but it is not a "failed" state, in the commonly accepted view, and in comparison with the social, economic and political turbulence in a number of its neighbours (including Russia), Belarus' has enjoyed and still enjoys a fair degree of social and societal cohesion which many envy. This cohesion should also serve as a warning to those keen on seeking to change the regime in order to make things "better" for the Belarusians: the people themselves are a cultured, well-educated, mature nation and will, in the fullness of time, transform their country, without undue assistance from "outside".³ Attempts to cajole the people into speeding up the process – even with the blessing and connivance of Russia, which is currently almost impossible to imagine – would run the very real risk of introducing an unpredictable degree of instability in a politically and ethnically fragile part of Europe.

Assuming that A. G. Lukashenko wins the next presidential election in March 2006 - in what way would this be a disaster? Will Lukashenko's re-election spell the end of stability in Belarus'? Will the national economy grind to a halt? Will his re-election increase the prospect of military confrontation with any of his neighbours? Taking into account the record of his years in power, it would be safe to assume that Lukashenko thrives on stability and order and will consequently do nothing to radically alter the local geopolitical position. Similarly, the current political leadership in Moscow will do nothing to aid or abet the overthrow of its most reliable ally. Moscow has endured the "coloured revolutions" of the past 18

months, lost a lot and gained nothing. It would not be in the interests of the Russian state to help to overthrow the current government in Minsk. Indeed, given the recent decision to ensure another year's supply of cheap gas to Belarus' throughout 2006 and its own actions against NGOs, there is ample evidence that Moscow wants the Lukashenko regime to survive and will play its part to ensure that is the case.

Over the past few years, a number of issues have pushed forward, or slowed down, the momentum in the Belarusian-Russian relationship. Some – like the realisation of the Union state project – have been peculiar to Belarus' and Russia (although, technically speaking, if the Union state project is ever formally realised, it would be open to new members, should anyone else want to join); others – such as the supply of cheap energy – have also been an important factor in Russia's relationship with Ukraine, Moldova, EU, etc. In examining these and other matters, this paper will allow the reader a more detailed picture of the recent history of the Belarusian-Russian relationship, one which would not be found easily in the current Western literature. As much as possible, the material used has been drawn from sources published in the region itself. The mutual benefits which both countries enjoy from the relationship may not be immediately obvious, but they have to be taken into proper account. Is the bison caught in the clutches of the bear, or is the bear being held at bay by the points of the bison's horns, or are they contentedly living side by side?

Union state

This has been the subject of so many agreements and treaties over the years that it is not stretching things too far to label the whole thing a “project” – will it ever be formally realised and the Union state actually come into being on the world map? The Union state, as it currently exists, does so largely on paper – after all, it only has a budget of 2.71 billion rubles, i.e. less than that of Ulianovsk *oblast'* and it cannot achieve much out of funding a few joint economic projects.⁴ The small budget, however, has not stopped recent speculation concerning its potential to provide Putin with a job post-Russia's presidential election in March 2008.⁵

The whole process began in June 1992, when Belarus' and Russia, newly-independent states, formally established diplomatic relations. Belarus' had not been an independent nation in, quite literally, centuries, having been for most of its history either part of the Russian Empire, or part of the USSR (although, technically speaking, it was independent for a very brief period after the October 1917 Revolution). In short, unlike Russia or Ukraine, prior to becoming independent in 1991, Belarusians did not have a particularly strong perception, or knowledge, of being “independent”.⁶ Thus it was not long – especially following the election of the country's first-ever president, A G Lukashenko in July 1994 – before the former *kolkhoz* chairman and avowedly firm fan of the USSR, began overtures to Russia which started the process of creating a more formal arrangement between the two states whose ultimate aim was a unified state: hence the creation of the Community of Russia and Belarus' in 1996 and the Union of Belarus' and Russia in April 1997. In December 1999, another important step took place with the signing of the treaty on the creation of the Union state – the treaty envisaged the creation of a single customs and economic space, as well as the unification of the energy and transport systems, co-ordination of foreign, defence and security policies, etc.⁷ “Leading” organs have been created, namely the Higher State Council and the Standing Committee. There has even been discussion concerning a parliament for the Union state, consisting of two chambers, the lower chamber being created as a result of

direct elections in both countries.⁸ Putin's first foreign visit as President was to Belarus' in April 2000.⁹

And yet the Constitutional Act still remains unsigned and the continuing stall in introducing the Russian ruble as Belarus' formal currency has still not been realised. Both states have travelled a certain distance along the unionist path, so to speak, but have stalled at the final few hurdles. They seem to have got bogged down in the detail associated with the Constitutional Act, creating the impression that, for different reasons, both states would seem to be re-considering their final positions in relation to the project and have, perhaps, even lost faith in bringing it to full and complete realisation. There are a number of reasons why Belarus' seems to be dragging its heels on the issue, not least economic, and an underlying concern about exactly how much Belarus' will be giving away if or when it throws in its lot fully with Russia.

For a start, as the economy has developed along the lines of what is now termed "a socially-oriented market economy", Minsk is wary about how its economy will integrate with Russia's "oligarchic capitalism", which places considerably less emphasis on the economy working for the social benefit of the masses, as opposed to the private profit and gain of a few. As many pro-Lukashenko sympathisers within Russia are keen to point out, large-scale industry in Belarus' still has a very pronounced social duty to perform, in the way that used to be the case in the USSR, i.e. large factories had to adopt a social package to ensure that the workers were happy with their lot, therefore they had to provide kindergartens, subsidised holidays for the workers at resorts, in-house medical care, etc., which, by and large, Russian enterprises no longer do.¹⁰ Lukashenko has created his own alternative economic model, where the state controls 75% of the economy and some 54% of the adult working population still works in the state-controlled sector.¹¹ In Russia, the state only controls 35% of the national economy. Of the fSU, only Turkmenistan controls more.¹² In Belarus' privatisation of industry is not viewed as an end in itself, but as a means to find "an effective owner of private property", so the state, even after privatisation, will still keep a controlling proportion of the shares for a number of years, to ensure that the new owners are in for the long haul, as opposed to the quick profit.¹³ Belarus', under Lukashenko, has adopted very much a "hands on" approach to the economy, unlike Russia. This state control is something which Lukashenko seems very reluctant to give up, even under pressure from Russia to privatise the country's energy sector and allow greater access to Russian firms to operate within Belarus'. From the point of view of the supporters of Belarus' economic model, it has been a great success, allowing Belarus' to avoid much of the social and economic pain endured by Russia over the past 15 years:

"If we compare the results of the economic models introduced in Russia and Belarus', then there is no way that one can call the latter 'dying'. According to UN data, only 22% of the population of Belarus' live below the poverty line; in Russia, the figure is 50%. Belarusians live, on average, 4 years longer than their Russian counterparts; crime in Belarus' is 50-60% lower than in Russia; the state apparatus is less damaged by corruption; consumption of meat and milk products, per head of the population, is considerably higher."¹⁴

Belarus' is no beggar state, nor is it an economically failed one, either. Whilst its interventionist approach may not be to the liking of everyone, according to official statistics the results speak for themselves: despite the doubling in the price of oil as a result of the ruble devaluation of 1998, GDP in the period 1996-2000 still increased by 36%; wages were x10 higher in 2004 than in 1994; exports continued

to increase year on year, as did industrial production.¹⁵ Even if Lukashenko's model of economic intervention is at odds with the experience of many elsewhere, its figures are impressive and the people seem to have accepted the economic path set by Lukashenko's regime as the one which best suits them.

Given the very different economic goals being pursued by both states, could one of the factors encouraging Lukashenko to quietly re-think the Union state project be that he is convinced that Belarus' economy will suffer as a result of its integration with the more free-wheeling, strong, non-socially market-oriented economy of its larger neighbour? The Belarusian economy continues to grow – in the period 1996-2004, according to official calculations, it has recorded an average annual rate of growth of 8.6% - and with the regime's recent emphasis on science and technology leading the way for the continuing development of the Belarusian economy – there seems to be a realisation by at least part of the country's leadership that the Union state may not be as attractive a proposition for Belarus' as it once appeared.¹⁶ Minsk's reluctance to introduce the Russian ruble and its acceptance that Moscow be the sole emissary for the Union state become more obvious day by day. Belarus', with its own currency, trades with over 150 countries. After the collapse of the USSR, Belarus' did not break its ties with many of the fSU and is the only one which annually holds festivals of culture, economic and trade exhibitions, designed to promote not only cultural links between Belarus' and the fSU, but also trade and economic links.¹⁷ Foreign trade turnover in 2004 amounted to just under \$33 billion; even with the EU countries, despite restrictions, trade in 2004 was over 35% up on the 2003 figure and stood at over \$8 billion.¹⁸ This would all change if the Union state project became a reality.

A very interesting paradox could arise here: as Belarus' continues to develop along its distinctive socio-economic path, both its need and desire to fully realise the Union state project become less and less. Lukashenko may, quite literally, be presiding over a successful and independent Belarus'. This may not have been his original intention, but events seem to be heading in that overall direction. It is now 15 years since the collapse of the USSR and 8 years since the horrendous ruble devaluation, yet Belarus' is still an independent, sovereign state and, although Russia is extremely important to Belarus' economic development – both in terms of trade and as a supplier of relatively cheap energy – Belarus' has been successful in learning how to survive on its own two feet.

Lukashenko may swear eternal friendship to Russia but judging by his deeds as opposed to his words, he seems now to be very reluctant to sign away his country's control over its economy and its social development. He may have grown more comfortable in the post of president and realised that his ambition to head a Union state will never come about, because of opposition from inside Russia.

Like a number of other issues, Lukashenko's use of the Union state project at home seems to increase during a pre-election/referendum period.¹⁹ However, as Belarus' continues to defy the odds of social and economic implosion, the appeal of formal unification with Russia lessens with the passage of time – for instance, in September 2003, 38% of those polled in Belarus' were in favour of unification with Russia; by May 2004, this figure had fallen to 30%.²⁰ For a variety of reasons, there will always be a core element of support for unification, but this core would appear to be getting smaller, especially when Belarusians compare and contrast living conditions in Russia with other neighbouring states. Thus, Lukashenko's use of the Union state project as part of his electoral platform may well diminish over time: indeed, one of the former advisers to the State Secretary of the Union state – P Borodin – has already commented on the possibility that the March 2006

Belarusian presidential election result may well kill off the whole project in its entirety or, at least, confirm Minsk's lack of interest. The Union state project could easily die through neglect.²¹

Energy

As has been demonstrated throughout the first few weeks of 2006, energy is a major tool in Russia's foreign policy strategy. This is not the place to detail what can be taken as a given: Russia has vast reserves of oil and gas and it also controls a vast pipeline network, so if it doesn't actually own all the oil and gas pumped from Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Caspian Sea region, it usually controls the pipelines carrying them.²² It will use oil, gas, electricity – and the pipeline network to help bolster "friends" and make life more uncomfortable for "non-friends". Russia has recently demonstrated what it can do in relation to energy supplies. But we had ample proof of Russia's political use of energy long before it turned off the gas taps to Ukraine; it had already done that to its closest ally – Belarus', but the West turned a blind eye and Russia felt emboldened to do it again. With predictions that Russian oil and gas production will not peak for another 10-15 years, Russia could be wielding the big energy stick for quite some considerable time yet.²³

Following an agreement with Russia signed in April 2002, *Gazprom* guaranteed that it would meet Belarus' annual gas requirement at the subsidised, internal Russian rate on the proviso that Minsk, in turn, would privatise its own gas monopoly - *Beltransgaz* – on terms favourable to *Gazprom*: in other words, *Gazprom* would be allowed to buy the majority shareholding of *Beltransgaz*. To cut a long story short, *Gazprom* was prepared to buy its share for \$700-800 million. Unfortunately for *Gazprom*, Minsk had done its own calculation of the market value of the company and demanded that *Gazprom* stump up \$2.5 billion. Lukashenko argued that, with a state monopoly, he was simply defending Belarus' national interests.²⁴ Needless to say, neither *Gazprom* nor the Kremlin were impressed by Minsk's demands and, in their eyes, Lukashenko had reneged on an important part of the April 2002 agreement so, in September 2003, it was announced that *Gazprom* had changed its mind about exporting gas to Belarus' at the internal rate and that Minsk would now be required to pay the full market price – a massive hike from 912 rubles per thousand cubic metres to \$80.²⁵ *Gazprom* offered an olive branch: if Minsk stuck to its original agreement, fresh talks could be held concerning the proposed price increase.²⁶ Minsk's initial response was to play the whole thing down, insisting that it was simply "a small economic misunderstanding" between the two countries and that it had nothing to do with Lukashenko's earlier refusal to introduce the Russian ruble as the national currency for Belarus' as a prelude to formal re-unification of the two states.²⁷

The Kremlin's attempt backfired: putting pressure on Minsk encouraged anti-Russian sentiment within Belarus. There were open denunciations of Russia's "imperial plans" by a section of the Belarusian political establishment and a picket of the Russian embassy in Minsk. A few of the more nationalist demonstrators even demanded the withdrawal of Russia's military bases from Belarus' and an end to military co-operation.²⁸ Belarus' had and still has a "good hand" and, given its relative stability and prosperity, can negotiate with a degree of confidence with Russia's political leadership. It should never be assumed that, either because of its size, or its energy dependency, or its close ties with Russia, that Belarus' is in thrall to Russia. Even before the gas dispute had broken out, Lukashenko publicly stated, following an earlier attempt by Russia to use energy as a political weapon against the regime: "we can no longer tolerate such dependency and contempt from one state".²⁹

So, in January 2003, he signed a law “on gas supply” and instructed the government and the country’s Academy of Sciences to work out an energy security programme to 2020, with the emphasis on developing the country’s network of hydro-electric and coal-fired power stations. There was speculation concerning Belarus’ developing a civilian nuclear power programme but, given the expense and the problem associated with who would supply the necessary nuclear fuel, this would appear to have been put on hold, for the time being at least.³⁰ Thus, even before the Yalta summit in September 2003, Belarus’ was giving serious thought to reducing its energy dependency on Russia and had also begun exploring options to meeting its future gas demand from non-*Gazprom* sources. Its overall strategic aim, in terms of its energy security, is to reduce the role of natural gas in the country’s total energy equation from 93% to just 63% by 2020. This would also help significantly reduce the impact of Russia’s use of the energy card as a political weapon against Belarus’ in the future and allow Belarus’ to maintain both its economic and political sovereignty and independence. It would be ironic if, despite his previous record, Lukashenko turned out to be the man who, taking full advantage of his growing economy, ensured his country’s independence from Russia!

The president showed that he was not going to be easily beaten down over the issue and retaliated by threatening to increase the price of the transit of Russian gas through Belarus’ and by reviewing the “rent-free” basis of Russia’s military bases in Belarus’.³¹ These were not idle threats: in 2003-2004 the volume of gas shipped through Belarus’ by *Gazprom* amounted to 21-23 billion cubic metres.³² The two Russian military bases at Gantsevichi and Vileyka were reckoned to have cost Belarus’ “tens of millions of dollars” in terms of passed over rent and unpaid bills since their creation in the mid-1990s. As Lukashenko has pointed out on a number of occasions, not only does Russia enjoy the very cheap use of these two invaluable – to Russia – strategic military bases but also the added security to its western approaches through the armed forces of a militarily and politically very reliable ally: “Belorussia maintains the security of Russia on its western border. From Riga to Kiev, with the exception of the Belarusian Armed Forces, there is nothing else.”³³

On the eve of the CIS summit in Yalta in September 2003, Russia was not only a “player” but also, if you like, “the banker”, being the main supplier of energy to Belarus’, and unless or until Belarus’ was prepared to reconsider its position in relation to the privatisation of *Beltransgaz*, then all the Russians had to do was sit tight and let Minsk fold. However, as president, Lukashenko had been dealing with the Russians for over 10 years and “schooled” in the Soviet system, knew how to play the game. The economy, the geographical position of his country and its importance to Russia’s national security, the question of transit of Russian gas, the stability and the pro-Russian nature of the regime in Minsk, etc., all these factors had ensured that Lukashenko was at the table with a strong hand and could also sit things out and see who would blink first. Needless to say, when he and Putin met to discuss the issue, nothing was publicly resolved, although “informed sources” did confirm that both men had discussed the question of privatising *Beltransgaz*. So, on the surface, at least, no one had blinked and both were still sitting at the table.³⁴

Negotiations were then conducted between the two main companies involved, *Gazprom* and *Beltransgaz*, although the politicians were never far away.³⁵ Over the next few months, Lukashenko continued to adopt a “harder” line in his negotiations with the Russians and also began to explore further alternative energy supplies from countries like Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Lithuania.³⁶ He also

opened a new flank attack by raising the issue of financial compensation for the losses which would be incurred by Belarus' in the event of the Union project being fully realised.³⁷ By his government's calculations, union with Russia would cost Belarus' approximately \$20 billion - which did not include the value of all the services and subsidies rendered to Russia, for instance border security measures; the rent-free military bases; the cheap transit of gas and oil, etc.³⁸ Whilst Moscow did agree that some financial compensation would have to be paid to Belarus', the mechanism and the exact amount would have to be carefully worked out.³⁹ As with many other aspects of the Union state project, a commission was duly created to work out the exact method of compensating the projected losses to the Belarusian budget.⁴⁰

The dispute then took a number of twists and turns, all of which revealed that Russia and Belarus' were heading for a serious rupture. As had happened in 2002, *Gazprom* accused Belarus' of stealing gas which, in turn, encouraged Lukashenko to throw in his lot with Ukraine in a joint effort to challenge *Gazprom's* attempts to establish a stranglehold on the supply of the precious "blue fuel" across the whole of the CIS energy space.⁴¹ Lukashenko also began to speak in unusually harsh words about Russia: in a live TV broadcast, at the end of October, he described Russia as "a dangerous country", stating that in Russia "there is no order, theft and anarchy reign. It's a mad country. We do not want to live like that. Maybe, in our country, we have two-three people who want to live like that only."⁴² By early November 2003, the "gas war" was having an increasingly pronounced political impact: according to opinion polls in Belarus', only 18% were now in favour of the Union state project.⁴³ On top of that, a number of political parties and NGOs banded together to form a "European Coalition", whose main aim was to get Belarus' into the EU within 4 years.

For a brief period, the political opposition in Minsk played down their "anti-Lukashenko-ness", sensing a possibility that they could gain some success in the 2004 parliamentary elections.⁴⁴ Their sense of possible future electoral success would have been heightened by the drop in support for the Union state project: "in the past few months, the number of those supporting Russian-Belarusian integration has dropped by a third".⁴⁵ This was not simply a reflection of the increasing hostility being felt by many at Russia's Big Brother tactics over the export of gas to Belarus', but also a result of increasing Belarusian control of media outlets. Local TV programmes assumed a greater anti-Russian stance, comparing and contrasting the "peace and order" in Belarus' with the "disorder" and "crime" in Russia. Needless to say, this had an impact on the views of many Belarusians but it would be wrong to exaggerate the success of authorities' attempts at manipulating the views of Belarusians, many of whom would have direct knowledge of, as well as blood ties to Russia. The Belarusian Ministry of Information released figures showing that, despite the relatively expensive price of many Russian newspapers and journals, they still accounted for 25% of the total volume of sales in Belarus'.⁴⁶

By the end of the year, both Belarus' and *Gazprom* were making overtures to Turkmenistan to replace or add to their existing gas supply. At the end of the day, it was *Gazprom* which walked away with a 25-year agreement for the purchase of billions of cubic metres of gas; the Belarusians only had a promise that the Turkmen president, S Niyazov, would pay an official visit to Minsk in March 2004 and discuss Belarus' need for gas.⁴⁷ Even if Belarus' had negotiated an agreement, it would still have needed the approval of *Gazprom*, whose pipelines would have transported the gas from Turkmenistan to Belarus'. It is difficult to see how politics

would not have interfered in the realisation of such a deal, even at commercial rates. At the end of the day, Niyazov did not even pay his official visit to Minsk.

Talks on the gas issue were planned for January 2004, but were postponed. As of 1st January 2004, in an attempt to force Minsk back to the table, *Gazprom* stopped exporting gas to Belarus' and stated that supplies would only be resumed after a new contract – on terms favourable to *Gazprom* – had been signed.⁴⁸ Despite this obvious piece of economic and political blackmail, there were no howls of protest from any of the major European powers, or the US for that matter. No one seemed to mind much that a European country, in the middle of winter, was being deprived of its main source of energy.

Minsk did not panic, nor did it succumb to Russia's blatant use of energy to get its own way. It reached agreement with a number of Russian private gas companies – *Itera* and *Transnafta* – and ensured that enough gas would be supplied to meet Belarus' demands, at least until the spring.⁴⁹ This took the pressure off for a while and showed that Minsk still had a few options to play. *Gazprom* maintained that "normal service" would be resumed as soon as Lukashenko agreed to the privatisation of *Beltransgaz* at *Gazprom's* price. The latter was now prepared to buy the Belarusian gas company for \$600 million; well below the now increased \$5 billion Belarusian estimate.⁵⁰ Adding further pressure was Russia's giant electricity producing company, RAO "EES Rossii", headed by A Chubais. It decided that Belarus' was not paying enough for electricity and increased the price by 28%. It had also been thwarted by Lukashenko's regime from gaining much of a foothold in the Belarusian energy market, other than as an exporter.⁵¹

Following this massive price hike, Minsk simply stopped buying electricity from Russia. It was becoming increasingly obvious that, in the words of one commentator: "the supply of gas and electricity to Belarus' is a powerful lever of pressure on Minsk by Moscow".⁵²

In 2003, Minsk imported 5.5 billion kilowatt hours of electricity from Russia; however before the price increase, it had intended to import only 3.5 billion kilowatt hours from Russia in 2004 – already a clear indication that Belarus' was pursuing a policy of reducing its energy dependency. Its attempt to regulate the price increase – at the internal Russian domestic rate of 12%, as opposed to the "foreign" external rate of 28% – within the confines of the Union state treaty failed.⁵³

In order to cover the immediate shortfall, Minsk looked to Kiev for assistance, and Ukraine, already an important supplier of electricity to Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, etc., stated that it could supply electricity to Belarus'. There would be no technical problem, all that would be needed was to agree on the quantity and price. According to expert analysis, Ukraine would be able to supply Belarus' with some 1 billion kilowatt hours per year.⁵⁴

Minsk still had to look elsewhere. It began negotiations with Lithuania, but Lithuania's surplus capacity was not great – experts reckoned that it could only supply Belarus' with an additional 200 million kilowatt hours per year.⁵⁵ However, that avenue was to prove fruitless: the Lithuanian electricity company is a subsidiary of Chubais' "EES Rossii" and, falling in line with its parent company, also increased the price of its electricity to Belarus'. Belarus' tried to exclude the Russians from the negotiating process, but failed. The Lithuanian company then stated that it was now selling all its surplus electricity to Russia, so, as of 1st February 2004, Belarus' stopped importing electricity from Lithuania.⁵⁶

Minsk turned towards itself. In the short term, it increased the output from its own hydro-electric power stations, including speeding up repairs and bringing online a station located near Minsk and was successful in finding an alternative supplier of fuel oil for its power stations – Kazakhstan. The country adopted a long-term energy plan, whose main emphasis was not only the construction of more hydro-electric and coal-fired power stations, but also importing more energy from non-Russian sources - oil from Kazakhstan, gas from Turkmenistan, coal from Poland, even electricity from Latvia.

Work has now begun building a hydro-electric power station on the banks of the River Neman which, when completed, should meet the entire domestic energy requirements of one of Belarus' largest cities, Grodno. There are also plans to construct a further four such stations on the river Dvina to help meet the supply of electricity for the country as a whole.⁵⁷ If everything goes according to plan, the long-term consequences of such a policy would be to underline the sovereignty and independence of Belarus' from Russia; as stated before, in practical terms, Lukashenko has taken steps, especially in terms of his country's long-term energy policy whose practical impact will be to lessen Minsk's reliance on Moscow, not increase it.

Gas imports were a more intractable problem. So infuriated had Lukashenko become over the stance of *Gazprom* that he even threatened to pull Belarus' out of the Union state altogether.⁵⁸ Lukashenko adopted a different tack to the whole issue: if Moscow was insistent on introducing "market relations" in its dealings with Minsk, then so would Minsk. He instructed the head of his administration, Ural Latypov, to draw up, in effect, a "bill", itemising the "market cost" of Russia's military infrastructure in Belarus'; the costs of the border infrastructure which Russia directly benefited from; the market cost for the transit of Russian oil and gas through Belarusian territory; the market cost of road and rail haulage through his country, which Russia enjoyed at preferential rates, etc. The total "bill" for Russia could be as high as \$20 billion.⁵⁹ On the surface, whilst the tactic may have appeared petty, his actions at this time are hardly those of a leader in thrall to the men in the Kremlin. His background may not have prepared him to be the ideal "Citizen No. 1" of his country, in certain areas – outside of Russia and Belarus. He appears uncomfortable in the larger international arena – but in other areas, his style works. In resolving its recent gas crisis with Russia, Ukraine lost its entire government; Belarus' lost neither its government, nor even one government minister.

The gas crisis was eventually resolved through a mixture of private capitalism, market forces, compromise, sheer determination on the part of the Belarusian leadership to stick it out to the bitter end and a probable realisation on the part of the Russian leadership that it was better to lose the battle, rather than the war. Better keep Belarus' on board, as an ally, rather than as a recalcitrant friend. If *Gazprom* maintained its dominant position as Minsk's main supplier of gas, at least that would ensure Moscow would still have a degree of influence over whatever regime was in power in Minsk.

Two of Russia's independent gas companies – *Itera* and *Transnafta* – stepped in and assured Minsk that not only could they meet Minsk's gas requirements for 2004, but were also prepared to meet its requirements for 2005 at a price which Minsk was willing to pay.⁶⁰ This forced *Gazprom* into a re-think, not just because it risked losing a major customer, but because it also still had designs on *Beltransgaz*. Lessons had been learnt from the failing of "EES Rossii". By August 2004, reports began appearing in the press that *Gazprom* had made a new offer to Belarus'

concerning price and volume. The new offer was a compromise – *Gazprom* was offering less gas than Belarus’ wanted (19.1 billion cubic metres, as opposed to 21.5 billion), but at least at a price which Minsk could afford, \$46.68 per thousand cubic metres.⁶¹

Minsk’s refusal to budge on the issue, as well as its increasingly obvious public efforts to develop an energy relationship less reliant on Moscow would appear to have worked. Russia’s stance would also seem to have shifted back towards the realisation that Moscow did gain from its relationship with Minsk and had decided that Minsk was an important ally that was better to keep on board. Moscow would still meet the bulk of Belarus’ gas requirements and, in that way, ensure that it had influence on its closest neighbour. After all, they were still two states on the road to unification...

Russia needs and has a stable ally on its western border – why run the risk of taking steps which could lead to the country’s implosion? Hence the decision in December 2005, guaranteeing Belarus’ 21 billion cubic metres of gas, at \$46.68 per thousand cubic metres, for 2006 – the year of Lukashenko’s virtually certain re-election.⁶² Cheap gas will ensure another year of stable, economic growth which, in turn, should ensure another presidential election victory for Lukashenko.

Despite speculation, particularly in 2003-2004, concerning Russia’s potential role in ousting Lukashenko, given the nature of the current regime in Moscow and the important role that Belarus’ plays under Lukashenko for Russia, this is not going to happen. In the recent past, such speculation has come from a variety of sources – including Russia’s political elite, for example, Boris Nemtsov, but also from past political opponents of Lukashenko (S S Shushkevich), various commentators on Belarusian affairs (particularly D Marples), and the Russian press itself, which ran a number of reports concerning alleged meetings involving the Russian and US Ambassadors to Belarus’, at which both statesmen are said to have discussed political alternatives to Lukashenko.⁶³ However, what better rebuff to such speculation than the conclusion of the recent gas agreement between the two states?

Russia does not want to trigger a chain of events which would lead to instability in Belarus’ and possibly the replacement of the regime by one more favourably disposed towards the West than to Moscow. Russia has gained nothing from the earlier “coloured revolutions” and has no intention of starting one in an ally of such importance. For the time being, Moscow needs Minsk as much as Minsk needs Moscow. Could Moscow hope for a more reliable ally than Minsk under Lukashenko? In a New Year newspaper interview, he had the following to say about Russia and the Russians:

“First of all, I would like to hope that the Russian state occupies a worthy place in the world and that it transforms itself from being a large state into a great power, at last, and shapes the face of our planet...And the other important thing is that you, the Russians, are certain that here in Belarus’ you have true and faithful friends. We have always been and always will be defenders of your interests. We will be those types of friends on whose shoulders you can always lean.”⁶⁴

Economic and defence “common space”

Contrary to popular perception, Belarus’ is not a lone player on the world stage – it has diplomatic representations in 46 countries and has 34 foreign embassies in Minsk⁶⁵ - and its relationship with Russia, although an extremely important one, does not make Belarus’ a glorified province of the Russian Federation. Its ability to seek out non-Russian sources to meet its future energy requirements showed that Belarus’ was able to think outside the “Russian box”, so to speak. It could be about time that the West stopped demonising the regime and began to engage it. It suits Russia’s interests best when no one in the West is prepared to listen, never mind talk, to Belarus’ – the West isolates the regime and then complains about it being in the embrace of the Russians!

For the time being, both countries benefit greatly from their mutual relationship and, as long as Russia does not support the “isolation” of the Lukashenko regime, Lukashenko can live with what the rest of the world thinks about him, including the US. This section of the paper, therefore, will examine how each gains from the relationship.

(i) Economy

Trade between the two countries has now reached significant levels – in 2004, the trade turnover between Belarus’ and Russia had reached \$15.5 billion, Belarus’ being Russia’s second most important trading partner after Germany.⁶⁶ Russia is Belarus’ largest trading partner, accounting for some 60% of Belarusian exports.⁶⁷ However, Belarus’ trade with EU countries continues to grow – despite attempts at politically isolating the regime, the EU seems to have no problems economically interacting it: trade with EU countries in 2004 being 35% up on the figure for 2003.⁶⁸ Belarus’ foreign trade quadrupled between 1994-2004.⁶⁹ International politics would appear not to have interfered too much with international economics.

In 2003, approximately half of Russia’s oil exports to the EU passed through Belarus’, as well as 21-23 billion cubic metres of gas.⁷⁰ As one Russian analyst put it:

“While trade [between Russia and Belarus’] is important, transit is vital. Belarus’ is the principal route for Russian oil and gas shipments to Germany, Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, as well as Russia’s Kaliningrad enclave. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus’ did not engage in massive theft of Russian gas in the 1990s. This made transit through her territory preferable from the Russian perspective.”⁷¹

Thus, at an economic level, both states are extremely important to one another and accrue various benefits from cheap energy, cheap transit, various joint economic projects, etc., and a local market for one another’s goods and services. Trade is booming between the two countries and looks set to stay at a very high level, but it is a mutually advantageous economic relationship – both states, conversely, would lose a lot if anything was to happen to upset the stability of one another’s “common economic space”.

(ii) Security

The security/defence sector is one of the most prominent areas of mutual benefit: in Belarus’, Russia has a very reliable and stable ally, one whose armed forces train regularly and whose borders are considerably less porous than a number of

Russia's other neighbours. Belarus' gains through having as an ally one of the world's great powers – hard to imagine a situation where a military threat to Belarus' would not be partly combated by Russian military force – and in having access to the physical space to train the country's own defence forces.

During the height of the gas crisis, it was reported in the Russian press that Lukashenko instructed the power ministers to draw up a "bill" for the cost to Belarus' in assisting Russia maintain its security. A group of experts, drawn from the Belarusian MoD and the defence-industrial complex, met in one of the government's residences near Minsk and attempted to estimate how much Russia would have to pay to maintain the level of security provided by Belarus' if Belarus' was not an ally of Russia. Minsk has neither confirmed nor denied these Russian reports, but in February 2004, when the export of gas to Belarus' was stopped, Lukashenko did make the following public remark:

"Belarus' serves Russia for kopeks – anti-aircraft defence, road and rail transport. They fly, they use our transport network, they go about our country – all practically for nothing."⁷²

Russia has two publicly acknowledged strategic bases in Belarus' – the early warning missile attack radar station at Gantsevichi, 48 km from Baranovichi, and the missile submarine communications base at Vileyka (Minsk *oblast*).⁷³ According to open sources, the 'Volga' station at Gantsevichi occupies 200 hectares and employs some 2,000 personnel (up to 15% of whom are local civilians). Its main purpose is two-fold: 1) to act as part of Russia's network (Gantsevichi being an updated replacement for the site at Skrunde, Latvia, closed in 1998) and monitor flights of ballistic missiles and objects in space; 2) to track the movement of the West's nuclear-powered submarine fleets.⁷⁴

The inter-state agreement which created the station was signed in 1995 and is valid until 2020. The agreement allows Russia to operate the base rent-free; Russia, in return, allows Belarus' to train its own defence forces at Ashuluk (Astrakhan *oblast*) free. Using agreements concluded with other former republics of the USSR, Belarus' reckoned that it could be losing up to \$5 million per year in rent for the base.⁷⁵

The communications base at Vileyka allows Russia to communicate with its ships and submarines in the central and northern Atlantic. During the Cold War, it was a key link in maintaining contact between the High Command of the Soviet Navy and the USSR's fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. The Russian facility occupies 600 hectares and is served by 350 naval personnel and an undisclosed number of locally-hired civilians. The inter-governmental agreement which gave rise to the station was concluded in 1994, runs for 25 years and once more allows Russia to operate the base rent-free. The estimated annual loss to the Belarusian budget is in the order of \$5-7 million.⁷⁶ In a rare public comment on the cost of maintaining Russia's security to Belarus', the Deputy CGS of Belarusian Armed Forces, Major-General P Tikhonovsky, in a live TV interview, stated that Belarus' spent annually on anti-aircraft defence measures "protecting Russia's borders" more than \$40 million per year. Somewhat ironically, he added that "for us, this is a huge figure. Russia pays nothing of this figure."⁷⁷ Emphasising the relative uselessness of the information obtained by these bases to Belarus', one ex-Belarusian Minister of Defence, General P Kozlovsky, argued that Russia should give Belarus' free gas "for 50 years": "if Belarus' did not give its agreement for the operation of such a base [as Vileyka] on its territory, Russia would be blind in a significant area of the world's seas".⁷⁸

There are other, less obvious costs to Belarus' in helping Russia maintain its military and border security, ranging from border security infrastructure to maintaining aerodromes able to handle Russia's strategic bomber fleet: in all, Lukashenko gave a preliminary estimate of the "cost" to Belarus' in assisting Russia maintain its security at \$21-25 billion.⁷⁹ Although the figure is, at best, a qualified guess, it did make a crucial point: without Belarus', Russia would have to spend a lot more on safeguarding its western borders and maintaining its strategic defence both at sea and in space.

In return, Moscow provides Belarus' with security as an ally of one of the world's largest powers, with influence all over the globe. As long as Moscow and Minsk do not fall out, Belarus' is relatively safe from external threat or aggression. Moscow also allows Minsk to use its training ground at Ashuluk for free and helps itself by giving the Belarusians the S-300 ground missile complex, a vast improvement on their own S-125.⁸⁰ In an interesting turn around on the whole cost issue, the Commander of Belarusian air defence troops, Lieutenant-General O Paferov, refuted rumours that Belarus' was intending to present a "bill" to the Russian MoD. Paferov added significantly that: "Belarusian expenditure on maintaining Russian military bases on the territory of the republic is considerably smaller than Russian expenditure when allowing the Belarusian military to use Russian training grounds."⁸¹

Two other important areas of military co-operation arise in the financial-industrial group "Defence Systems"⁸² and the joint Russian-Belarusian Regional Grouping of Forces. This is a grouping which, like so many other parts of the Union state project, largely exists on paper. But if it was ever needed, it would play a prominent part in combating military aggression from a western direction.⁸³ Lukashenko has stated that the "nucleus" of this military grouping is the "Belarusian Armed Forces. In the event of conflict, however, it will be strengthened by the Russian Federation."⁸⁴ Even if the commitment is only on paper, it shows a joint commitment, and Belarus' and Russian units regularly train together and observe one another's military exercises. Given the increasing political pressure being brought to bear on Lukashenko's regime – the US Congress' Belarus' Democracy Act of 2004 being an obvious example⁸⁵ – it must be a great support to know that your biggest trading partner and neighbour and still one of the world's main nuclear powers is committed to your defence and security. But Belarus' is not enjoying a free lunch at Russia's expense: its strategic location in the heart of Europe; its relatively well-trained and reasonably well-equipped military force; its stability, all help to enhance Russia's security. Whilst it is possible to quibble the figures, the overall argument is incontestable – to maintain the level of security which Belarus' provides would cost Russia extra time, effort, money and manpower. Similarly, it is doubtful whether Belarus could ever earn enough to maintain appropriate levels of internal and external security. Thus, economically and militarily, Belarus' and Russia need one another: they are in a symbiotic relationship, both gaining from one another. Economics and security simply help to strengthen the ethnic and cultural ties that bind the two states already together.

Conclusion

The EU and the USA may not like Lukashenko's regime and, if the election in March 2006 is deemed to be rigged – unnecessary given the relative unpopularity of the political opposition in Minsk⁸⁶ – the EU has already intimated that "further

appropriate restrictive measures” will be taken against Belarus’.⁸⁷ However, as this paper has outlined, the key relationship for Belarus’ is with Russia. If Putin was to turn his back on Lukashenko’s regime, then its days would be numbered. However, as this paper has tried to show, Belarus’ importance to Russia is not likely to diminish. It’s an important market for Russian goods and services; militarily, it’s an important asset; politically, could Russia wish for a more pronounced pro-Russian leader in charge of Belarus’ than Lukashenko?

And yet, in the gas crisis, Lukashenko revealed himself to be more of a defender of Belarusian sovereignty and independence than he had previously indicated. Whether we like him and his repressive regime is not unimportant, but is unlikely to cause him many sleepless nights. His popularity rating is significantly ahead of any of his political opponents who, whether they are in Belarus’ itself or operating from abroad, are barely known amongst the Belarusian electorate. Lukashenko has two conditions to satisfy to remain in power – ensuring that his own electorate is sufficiently content not to take to the streets and force him out and, secondly, ensuring that Russia still views him and his regime as important to Russia’s national interests. If he fails to fulfil the latter condition, then Russia could make life intolerable for his regime but, for the time being, Russia will resist attempts to demonise the regime or engage in political cat-calling. It will not add to the country’s “isolation” from the mainstream of European and world events and will continue to engage with Belarus’. For its part, Belarus’ will reciprocate by continuing to be Russia’s staunchest ally.

Russia and Belarus’ may not be the US and UK of the fSU, but they’re not far from it and, as long as Minsk and Moscow continue to view events nationally and internationally in approximately the same way, their mutual dependency will continue. Regardless of the screeches of the eagle, the chatter of the sparrow or the crowing of the cockerel, in the Eurasian forest the bison and the bear can quite easily live side by side together.

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