

***Belarusian-Russian Diplomacy: Anger, Threats and Irritation***

*Julija Narkeviciute, Florian Chapalain, Eastern Europe Studies Centre*

Recent conflict between Belarus and Russia over the ban of Belarusian dairy products exported to Russia is clearly more than just a technical or economic dispute. In fact, Russia either does not have disputes with former USSR states or has exclusively politicized or military ones aimed at showing the insubordinate its dependence on Russia. Thus the present ‘economic discrimination‘ imposed on Belarus would not be so surprising if not the unprecedented rhetoric of both sides proving that neither side intends to give up. One can understand why Russia is waiting for an apology: it has never been the other way round. The question is, what gives A. Lukashenka so much self confidence in the face of harsh economic conditions and complete dependency on Russian energy resources.

Some might think that the reason of such self assurance are Belarus’ improving relations with the West, the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and A. Lukashenka’s hopes that Belarus can resort by leaning to the EU. Indeed, the EaP caused an ambiguous reaction in Russia. Moscow showed discontent and worries about the EaP, considering it as the new Trojan horse of the EU, but still officially continued to support Belarus’ wish to take part in the new program. Its concerns about the new program were repeatedly voiced by Sergei Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who declared in April: “We have listened to the statements from Brussels saying this is not a question of expanding the sphere of influence and that it is not a process which is directed at Russia. We would very much like to believe this”<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, Moscow was inciting the EU to invite Belarus to join the partnership. Sergei Prikhodko, presidential aide stated: “We are happy that realistic attitudes towards Belarus have gained the upper hand in Brussels”<sup>2</sup>.

Economic argument might be one explanation of such ambiguous position. Belarus has been a burden for Russia since the collapse of USSR, any financial help coming from the West would lighten the weight on Russian shoulders. In July 2002, talking about reshaping economic agreements with Belarus, Putin stated that “there can be no attempts to restore the USSR at the expense of Russia’s economic interests”<sup>3</sup> emphasizing Moscow’s inability to see any real interest in tightening economic links with Belarus. However, this argument should be discussed considering the low amount of funds planned to be

<sup>1</sup> *Russia voices new concern over EU Eastern Partnership*, <http://www.eurobusiness.com/news-eu/1240927321.84>, [04.28.2009].

<sup>2</sup> *Lukashenko says Belarus committed to cooperation with EU-2*, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20090417/121185810.html>, [04.17.2009].

<sup>3</sup> Kommersant, 14 June 2002, *In Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, 54, 24, 2002, p.2.

injected in Belarus by the EU, roughly 21 millions of euro, nothing compared to the Russian economic implication in the country. According to the official data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic Of Belarus, 30.4% of the foreign direct investments, accounting for \$1.160.8 million, were coming from the Russian Federation in 2007. Not to forget the \$2 billion loan (3/4 of it has already been transferred, the last 500 million tranche has been delayed due to yet another dispute over the loan's currency: Lukashenka prefers dollars whereas Russia seeks to commit Belarus to return the loan in Russian roubles). In short, Brussels' announced help seems petty, Moscow has certainly no reason to be worried to lose its economic grip on Belarus, Belarus in its turn has no reason to believe EU can offer something comparable to Russia's support.

Moreover, what might have appeared as a reason for Russia to be annoyed, can be considered as developments to its own advantage. Indeed, participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership initiative meant that Belarus will not recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The visit of the delegation lead by Head of the Presidential Administration of Belarus Uladzimir Makiej in Sukhumi on May 12-13 and the commitment of Belarus to establish future economic, social, cultural and humanitarian contacts with two breakaway states scattered the last possibility of their recognition by Belarus.

However, by joining the partnership, Belarus and its government are recognized as the official interlocutor of European institutions. That can be seen as favourable to Russia since weakening opposition's movements will thus prevent the - extremely low - risk of 'coloured revolution' and guarantee that the ruling regime in Minsk will not be too hostile to Russia, and will not drift away from its sphere of influence overnight. Then a bunch of issues are expected to rise in the near future if the EU wants the partnership to be a success: "The EaP anticipates a free trade zone, but before this can take place, its members must be members of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Belarus is not a member of the WTO and has no immediate prospects of acceptance"<sup>4</sup>. Closely linked to the free trade zone issue, visas will be problematic as well. The EaP customs control policy is to clash with actual agreement between Belarus and Russia. It stipulates that controls will eventually be transferred to the outside borders of the whole enlarged community whereas Belarus and Russia formerly agreed on abolishing border between them, and to draw their union's limit in the west, on the edge of the EU. Furthermore, if the EaP could in theory lead Belarus to get involved in European energy security and defence initiatives too, it already has such relationships in place with Russia. Thus, because Russia's 'good-will' will be essential

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<sup>4</sup> David Marples, *Belarus and the Dilemmas of Eastern Partnership*, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[swords\]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews\[any\\_of\\_the\\_words\]=belarus&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=34917&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=a34166934c](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[swords]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews[any_of_the_words]=belarus&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34917&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=a34166934c), [04.29.2009].

for the implementation and any future improvements of the EaP, Russia will surely acquire new political leverage in negotiations with the EU. Instead of observing the partnership from the outside, Moscow will have its Trojan horse in the organisation and might have to step in the program in the long run. Moreover, the absence of Presidents of the biggest EU countries also suggests the slight interest raised by the project among its main funders. Nicolas Sarkozy, Gordon Brown and Louis Rodriguez Zapatero were notably absent from the conference. All of these elements may lead Russia to believe the EaP won't be more than a new kind of GUAM organization or Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, a talk shop unable of major achievements.

Therefore the EaP can not be considered neither as the single explanation of Russia's anger nor the reason of A. Lukashenka's self confidence. More probable explanation of Russia's irritation would be its failed expectations to force integration processes of the Union state project in the face of the economic crisis and worsening economic and financial situation in Belarus. The disagreements between Russia and Belarus and disruptions in the creation of the common state began when V. Putin came to power in Russia determined to accelerate the unification processes. Since then the relations between to states were quite strained. In 2004 there was a gas dispute that drew relatively little attention from the international community. The dispute was followed by a more notorious energy conflict in 2006. Then a number of upstarts and controversies related to the energy delivery and prices, "economic blockades", disagreements over a number of issues in the process of the Union state's creation (over Constitution, common currency). Belarus' reluctance to recognize separatist states in South Caucasus, disinclination for a closer Union under Russia's supremacy, annoying A. Lukashenka's rhetoric towards high Russian officials, protectionist economic policies towards Russian import in Belarus (on tobacco, fish, alcohol and other products) and Belarus' flirt with the West (the EaP initiative; recently European Council has given Belarus the status of a special guest), were the combination of factors that triggered recent annoyance.

A. Lukashenka's firm position may be explained by the fact that there is no pro-Russian politician in Belarus who could pose a serious challenge to A. Lukashenka. Thus the speculations about A. Lukashenka's post being at stake during this conflict are merely a bluff. However, Russia can otherwise punish Belarus: the hints about the possible 'energy war' are already flying. It was not difficult for A. Lukashenka to see that coming. But supposedly A. Lukashenka has made a great insight: Russia will anyway provide Belarus with energy resources, be they cheaper or not. Being insolvent Belarus will let its debt rise and Russia will have no other chance but to render a credit or delay the payments. Having that in mind the matter of fact can only be the price that Russia will set. And Belarusians are not beginners in the

negotiations with Russia on this issue. What can Russian threaten Belarus that Belarus has not yet experienced and pulled through? Apparently knowing that gives the President of Belarus so much courage.