



Would an expansion of the Russian Federation to the west be realistic?

There is interest in reuniting Belarus and Russia, but much disagreement as to how this might take place.

THEME I: FEDERALISM AND FOREIGN POLICY

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In December of last year, a federal law was passed in Russia regulating the procedure for the acceptance and incorporation of a new entity into the Russian Federation (see box). But the only more or less realistic candidate for entry into the Federation is Belarus – a former republic of the Soviet Union.

In spite of the stated desire on both sides for unification, there exist some problems and a need to clarify the relations between the two states.

For the last ten years, the basic theme in Russian foreign policy with regard to its relationship with its western neighbour leaned towards thorough integration. To this end, the Russian Federation and Belarus signed an appropriate Agreement, adopted a charter and also formed united bodies: a Supreme Soviet (the executive body) and a Parliamentary Assembly (the legislative body).

There are plans for the near future to directly elect the Parliamentary Assembly. At the present time, there is a draft of a so-called “Constitutional Act” – the quasi-constitution of the Union of Russia and Belarus – which anticipates further integration, including the institution of a common currency, etc. The plan is to pass this Act by holding a referendum in each state.

A difference of opinion on unification

In the last while, the idea of a union has been sorely tested. It concerns some fairly straightforward words on the part

of the Presidents of the two states both on integration and on its form.

The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, reminded Russians: “We should not forget that the economy of Belarus is 3% of the Russian economy.”

Membership in the Russian Federation currently consists of 89 entities.

According to Putin, Belarus could become its 90th entity.

The option of a united parliament with very broad powers and with an incomprehensible mechanism for their implementation cannot function.

Commenting on Putin’s proposal, the President of Belarus, A. Lukashenko, stated that:

“Belarus is an independent state with all the attributes of sovereignty. We do not intend to become the north-western or the north-eastern territory of any country.”

According to Lukashenko, Putin is only offering Belarus a proportional role in the united country. But, as Belarus’s population is 15 times smaller than Russia’s and its economy 30 times smaller, that proportional share will not be very great.

“Belarus would only be one of 90 entities in the Russian Federation,” said Lukashenko at the June 18 press conference, “and there can be no question of that. That is an ‘insult’ to Belarus.”

Nor does President Lukashenko support the alternative suggested by Putin – namely a union between the two countries “similar to that of the European Union”. According to Lukashenko:

“We don’t need that. We have experience of life and cooperation in the Soviet Union and it is precisely this experience that should be exploited.”

On June 24 of this year, there was a large press conference in which Russian and foreign correspondents took part and at which President Putin further clarified his position on the question of relations with Belarus. In answer to the question on the essence of the disagreement with the President of Belarus, Putin said:

“There is no disagreement. It is a working process. It is fairly effective. It is simply time to stop chewing on ten-year-old cud. And we have to determine whether we want to or not, and what it is that we want.”

Options for a united parliament

According to the Russian President, the former division into two states was not only without foundation but detrimental and pernicious both to the people of Belarus and to the Russian people so that the unification of these nationalities must be conducted on an unconditional basis, within the framework of a single state. Putin stressed that there should be neither a

State Duma of the Russian Federation nor a Belarus parliament, no Russian government or Belarus government, but a single union parliament, a single government and a single country.

Whereas before, the discussion focused on, first, the creation of a union of two states, and later fully united states, Putin's statement basically vocalized his preference that Belarus become a part of Russia.

Nevertheless, assessing the draft of the Constitutional Act of a united country, and specifically securing within it such principles as the sovereignty of Belarus, territorial integrity and the right of veto, Putin stated that one must respect the opinions of the Belarus people, who represent the interests of their country.

At the same time, Russia must also be guaranteed sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right of veto. This can be guaranteed with the help of a mechanism used in a unified Europe. When the European Parliament makes a decision, it is confirmed by the national parliament of each country-member of the European Union, is signed by the head of that state, and takes the form of a national law. In this case, the national law has the same standing as law initiated by that country's parliament.

The option of a united parliament with very broad powers and with an incomprehensible mechanism for their implementation cannot function.

The President of Russia stressed:

"I simply fear that, if we choose it in this form, on the basis of these documents, this united parliament will pass laws which will not be implemented either in Belarus, if they don't like them, or in Russia, if they are not liked in Russia.

How to join the Russian Federation

The acceptance of a new entity into the Russian Federation is a procedure that provides for changes in the membership of the Russian Federation as a result of a foreign state, or part of a state, joining it. In accordance with that law, the expansion of the Federation occurs within the framework of stages that are subsequently replaced by mutual agreement and in accordance with an international agreement.

If an entire foreign state is accepted into the Russian Federation as a new entity, it is given the status of a republic, although an international agreement can provide the new entity with another status such as, for instance, the status of a Krai (territory) or Oblast' (province or region).

The foreign state in question initiates the proposal to become part of the Russian Federation. After receiving such a proposal, the President of the Russian Federation must advise the chambers of the Federal Assembly (the State Duma and the Federation Council), the Government and, if required, must hold appropriate consultations with them.

An international agreement can determine a transitional period during which the new entity must be integrated into the economic, financial, credit and judicial systems of the Federation as well as into the system of its bodies. Moreover, a procedure for the Constitutional Court to verify the concordance with the federal Constitution of the given international agreement has been provided for.

If the international agreement is considered constitutional, it is tabled at the Duma for ratification. At the same time, a draft of the federal constitutional law on the acceptance of the new entity into the Russian Federation is tabled and must contain information stating the name, status and boundaries of the new entity as well as the time frame of the transitional period.

After the federal act on the ratification of the international agreement and the federal constitutional law on the acceptance of the new entity have been passed, changes are made to Section 1, Article 65 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which specifies its composition.

And then we will discredit the very idea of unification".

Taking into consideration the inexorable character of the statements made by the Belarus side, it is quite possible that the implementation of a new Russian law

that would allow for taking a new entity into the structure of the Federation might be postponed for a very long time. ☹