

7. What do you think of Russia's policies with regard to Belarus?

Volha Abramava

Russia's behavior is pragmatic and in line with its national interests. Perhaps you know that I have always been a Pro-Russian politician and simultaneously a pro-European one. I am trying to maintain a balance. I realize that this region is under two influences. As a pragmatic person, I believe that the situation should be preserved in the national interests of Belarus. Russia's policy toward Belarus does not simply meet its national interests. It has support among the Russians. Alyaksandr Lukashenka acts in a similar way – he pursues foreign and internal policies that have support among a majority of people here.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

Russia is in a difficult situation. The empire has collapsed, but the imperialistic ideals still exist. Moreover, these are the only ideals Russia has at present. There were precedents in history. Empires disintegrate, but an imperialistic mentality remains. The loss of control over Georgia and Ukraine prompted Russia to take a tough stance in advancing its geopolitical interests. I do not like its imperialistic mentality.

Paradoxically, at the moment in Belarus Lukashenka's selfish interests coincided with the interests of the nation.

Yauhen Babosau

I think Russia's policy with regard to Belarus has two sides. Unlike Belarus, Russia has tycoons who are interested in forcing Russia into subjection to the West rather than into a union with Belarus. That's why these tycoons obstruct the unification of the peoples. We have every reason to do that... Thirty-eight percent (!) of Belarusian women are married to Russians and Ukrainians, this is scientific data. Thirty-eight percent, more than a third! And 36 percent of men are married to Russians, Ukrainians or representatives of other nations. This can't be determined by any borders or treaties.

My former post-graduate student comes from the Ural region. When his mother died, he had trouble attending her funeral. Travelling there costs much. And if she had lived in Vladivostok? There is an acquaintance of mine, a professor, living there. He is Belarusian, from our country. How can I visit him? This is not a problem of interpersonal relations, this is an economic problem, I have no money to buy a ticket to visit him. This is an obstacle... I've been invited to attend a congress of Russian sociologists in Moscow. But one has to pay a fee of 450,000 rubles. And now I'm thinking whether I should go there. This is the problem. And what about a university student? He would never manage to do this!

The problem of the Belarusian-Russian relationship has two sides. On the other hand, they are very much interested as we are the western frontier, a buffer with the West. If anything happens, Belarus will be the first to stand in the enemy's way! We all remember what happened to the Brest Fortress.

Anzhalika Borys

Russia pursues imperialistic policies.

Henadz Buraukin

Unfortunately, I have an impression that the Russian government and public reanimate ideas of imperialism. Many Russians, including cultural

figures, want Russia to be great and impose its will on other peoples, former Soviet nations in the first place. Have you noticed that the Soviet Union has been perceived lately as a version of the Russian Empire? Such a perception is very strong in Russia. From the history viewpoint, the Soviet Union was not an equivalent of the Russian Empire. Even Lenin wanted to do away with the Russian Empire. At present, Russian politicians, including top officials, allow others and take liberty themselves to draw parallels between the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. They accept the fact that the Soviet Union no longer exists. They even accept the fact that the Soviet Union cannot exist. But they want the Russian Empire restored. They want Russia to control Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Georgia. I do not know, may be they want to control, the Baltic states, but they are cautious about it. I am wary of such political trends in Russia.

The Russians are very much concerned about the reversal of Russification. In Belarus, they believe, Russian speakers do not have problems. But they take an absolutely imperialistic approach to language policies of Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine and Moldova.

I worry about trends in the political circles of Russia reminiscent of something associated with fascism. Zhirinovskys³¹, Zatulins³² and others have an opportunity to use television and other means to call for the use of force against countries that behave not in a way they consider appropriate. The

³¹ Vladimir Volfovich Zhirinovsky (Russian: Владимир Вольфович Жириновский; born 1946) – a Russian politician, deputy and vice-chairman of the State Duma, has done a great deal to foster a reputation as a loud and boisterous populist who speaks on behalf of the Russian nation and people, even when the things he says are precisely what many people, at home or abroad, do not want to hear. He is also well known for his boasts pertaining to other countries, having expressed a desire to reunite countries of the ex-Soviet ‘near abroad’ with Russia, and dreaming of a day ‘when Russian soldiers can wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean’. ‘Ukraine does not exist. Russian governors must sit in Kyiv and Minsk’, ‘True Russian borders are the borders of September 1917’, he once said.

³² Konstantin Fyodorovich Zatulins (Russian: Константин Федорович Затулин; born 1958) – a member of the Duma who, along with Zhirinovsky was banned from entering Ukraine over his anti-Ukrainian statements.

public does not denounce their statements, or very few representatives of the public voice concern, while others applaud. These statements heightened sentiments and led to attacks on foreigners, especially with a different color of skin, and synagogues. I worry because Belarus is becoming more involved in Russian political affairs. If we get infected with the same disease, it will be a tragedy for our history, for our young national state.

Ales Byalyatski

Russia pursues shortsighted and narrow-minded policies with regard to Belarus based on basic instincts. It does not have any strategy in relations with Belarus. Its policies are based on a dim-witted, military-style pragmatism. Russia pursues the same policies in relations with the other former Soviet republics. This is why the Baltic states promptly withdrew from all 'union' treaties and economic blocs involving Russia. They did it despite all the economic losses they incurred and continue to incur. These nations realized that if they remained in that post-Soviet swamp, they would have paid five times the price they paid by severing ties with Russia. Russia has imposed an economic blockade on Georgia and Moldova. The same fate awaits Belarus if Russia does not change its policies. But it has no reason to revise its policies. It is such a huge country. Only Ukraine, probably, means something to Russia as a big economy. Other countries are nothing. Belarus and Ukraine also are important transit routes to Europe for Russia. Since small countries like Georgia and Moldova are of little geopolitical importance, Russia taunts and bullies them. Russia treats all small nations surrounding it like a drunken soldier treats prostitutes in a brothel.

I don't think it will change its attitude to these nations in a foreseeable future. Therefore, Belarus should escape to the EU. Figuratively speaking, Belarus should build a five-meter wall on the east as soon as possible, leaving only 10–20 crossings for cultural and family contacts. Otherwise it will end up in trouble. The history of unions with Russia is a big tragedy with millions of victims. I don't mention economic losses, only human ones.

Pavel Daneika

I am sure that Russia does not have any foreign policy. Russia is just unable to produce any meaningful foreign policy for the simple reason that it is unable to articulate national interests. Imperial thinking determine at large Russia's actions today. I believe these actions conflict with Russia's priorities. The point is how we define priorities. If we think that a major task of a state is to achieve prosperity, which will be safely protected from outside and internal threats, then apparently Russia's current foreign policy runs counter to such developments. Russia bases its foreign policy on other assumptions, on some ideological assumptions. They still think in territorial terms. They still consider it important to be feared. The attitude is a result of a complete jumble of various legacies that has nothing to do with modern Russia and people that live there.

That is why it is wrong to say that Russia pursues some policy toward Belarus. Some imperial structures do display our-satellite, younger-brother and our-ally attitudes and conviction that something depends on them. But this affects either 'mainstream' people through inherited propaganda tools or 'lunatic' intellectuals that know much but understand little. Serious ruling groups see this as a game. In a rather cynic way, they exploit a set of existing stereotypes to achieve their own ends.

Andrey Dynko

I regard this policy as cynically pragmatic. But I also view it as short-sighted. Russia's policy in the past decade was based on the unconditional support of Lukashenka's autocratic regime, with Moscow keeping secret hopes that Belarus will finally return to Mother Russia. This policy ignores the fact that the repressive regime in Belarus runs counter to the interests of many layers of Belarusian society, that it is not natural for a Central European country. Belarus is the only country to have such a regime, there are no such regimes anywhere

near. The regimes in Croatia and Slovakia crumbled long ago. And this leads to the Belarusian civil community's great disappointment at Russia.

I called this policy cynical. If we set aside all half-words and apophysis phrases, the policy provides for the assimilation of the Belarusian people as such. I have difficulty finding another example of a European country pursuing a strategic goal of capitalizing on a favorable situation and annexing another country, destroying its specific national character. This is what has caused reasonable misgivings among the Belarusian national elite and Belarusian businesspeople. And this adds to earlier psychological traumas in relations between Belarus and Russia.

However, I hope Russia will remain a democracy and a responsible member of the Euro-Atlantic community. Belarus and Russia have pretty significant economic contacts, even despite the fact that Belarus has been raising its exports to the EU and decreasing exports to Russia in recent years. Nevertheless, Russia remains Belarus' largest neighbor, a country with which Belarus has the longest border. I consider it to be a major task of Belarusian intellectuals to find scenarios of cooperation with Russia whereby Russia would cease to be a source of insecurity for Belarus and would contribute to its sustainable development instead.

Valery Fralou

I don't quite understand it as far as it concerns common sense. Well, I do understand it in terms of short-term interests. Russia's intention to retain its sphere of influence extending beyond its borders is logical. Some transient economic interests, the gas pipeline also matter.

But strategically I don't understand this policy. Russia still continues supporting Alyaksandr Ryhoravich Lukashenka although he has long been an obstacle on Russia's way. Some issues at certain stages are resolved but this does not help create an EU-like union in which we would co-exist as two brotherly nations.

I make no secret of my pro-Russian views. Nationalists here consider us to be enemies who are surrendering Belarus. We don't want to surrender it! Our views simply stretch beyond theirs. And Russians deem us nationalists. The pro-Russian, sober-minded, constructive opposition seems to be needed by no one.

There is some progress in Russia which I visited before the New Year. There is the European Forum bringing together 200 to 300 people from former Soviet Union countries. The Efficient Policy Foundation led by Gleb Pavlovsky invites constructive pro-Russian politicians to attend. I visited the forum before the New Year, there were not 300, but some 60 delegates, who got together to have a New Year party. I was there, as well as Kazulin... After a conversation with Modest Kolerov, a department chief in charge of the CIS affairs, I had an intention to toss away the forum and head home, to Minsk. I talked later to Kokoshin, Gleb Pavlovsky who placated me a bit, but I still left Moscow in a bad mood.

I care not only about Belarus. I care about Russia as well, because we and Russia have so much in common. Here, in Belarus, the traditional opposition seeks to bar us from the political space. Mind you, they were very cautious to all proposals that we came up with while serving in the House of Representatives (changes to the Electoral Code, the contract system). If they support our initiative, this will mean that we have reached a high level and gained influence, and who then are they? This is what they thought. There was a quiet internal war between major forces in the opposition (and it continues now), and they are not letting us enter their space. That is why they sometimes stick some labels on us: 'They will surrender Belarus! They don't speak the mother-tongue!' or something of the kind.

When we were holding a hunger strike in my apartment, there were many UCP representatives and Viktor Ivashkevich, deputy chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front. We used to sit with him on my balcony and talk about our views, have some arguments. I say to Ivashkevich: 'I have a much better sense of Belarus than our liberals have. Because I grew up here, because I was raised by my Belarusian grandmother who was illiterate and

my aunt who dropped out of school after four grades'. Of course, I have some Russian features as my father is Russian and mother is Belarusian. I served in Russia for a long time and Russia is dear to me.

They want to divide us. 'Well, if you are for Belarus, then you're against Russia. If you are for Russia, you will pressure Belarusians'. This is a stupid thing to say. The European Union has united, while we still consider who of us is more democratic, who is guided by what principles and who wants to incorporate whom, etc.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

Russia's policy is the policy of an empire. Generally speaking, Belarus is a colony for Russia. Moscow seeks to take as much as possible from Belarus. All other things are of no interest to Russia.

But not only Russia is to blame in this regard. Because we are also to blame in many respects. We have allowed ourselves to have this government. And we ourselves intended to be strangled in a brotherly clasp. Nonetheless, this policy is not for many years. It is a short-term policy. It seems to me that certain attempts are being made in Russia to review its policy regarding Belarus and take a different view on what is happening in relations between it and Belarus. But these attempts originate with individual politicians and analysts, not the government. But such attempts are in place and I believe that Russia's policy regarding Belarus will undergo changes in the near future.

It is another matter that this may not occur at all if plans to establish the Union State as a unitary and monolithic state materialize.

Syarhey Kalyakin

Russia has pursued a shortsighted policy with regard to Belarus lately. On the one hand, the Russian government declared Belarus a strategic partner, but on the other it has turned a blind eye to the growing differences between the two countries. The countries have been trying to form

a union for ten years since 1996. But Belarus was much closer to Russia in 1996 than in 2006 in economy, politics and society.

Russia advances its interests in relations with Belarus, Poland advances its, the EU advances its and the United States advances its interests. This is natural. But to my mind, the Russian government does not correctly understand the country's interests. By supporting the current regime Russia alienates half of the Belarusian population and slows down Belarus' transition to democracy. Opponents of the regime – a younger and more educated part of the population – view Russia as an obstacle to democratization and development of their country. The longer Russia supports the regime the more supporters it loses in Belarus and abroad. Russia should change its attitude and let the Belarusians decide their fate. Russia could even speed up the democratization of Belarus by insisting that the country stand by its human rights commitments within the union. Russia has a bigger influence on Belarus than the EU or the United States. It should show its willingness to help Belarus deal with its problems. Russia could join the international effort to resolve the crisis in Belarus.

Kasya Kamotskaya

Russia supports the dictatorship with its gas and oil. It also provides information and diplomatic support.

Syarhey Kasttsyan

There are two directions in Russia's policy with regard to Belarus. On the one hand, Russia's workers, villagers, progressive intelligentsia, and part of politicians push for a strong union of Belarus and Russia. However, some politicians, who are not ethnic Russians, oppose the union. Gazprom's recent decision to raise its gas price for Belarus was taken under pressure from forces guided from Washington. It came a week after an economist from Western Europe suggested in an interview with *EuroNews* that Rus-

sia should be pressured into increasing the gas price. It would undermine the Lukashenka regime, which cannot be changed through an election, he said. But the Russian people oppose the move – a demonstration against Gazprom is set to take place in Moscow on April 3. On April 2, an assembly of non-governmental organizations of Belarus and Russia is expected to address a resolution against the gas price hike to President Putin and Gazprom. I think the Russian people will be able to force Gazprom to reverse the treacherous decision aimed to prevent Belarus and Russia from forming a strong union.

Vyachaslau Kebich

There are two policy lines in Russia. One political – Russia does not want to lose Belarus and seeks to maintain good relations with the country because Belarus is its only corridor to the West. There is also an economic policy line. Gazprom, for instance, it is not engaged in politics. It seeks to sell gas at as high price as possible. But the political line has prevailed so far in relations with Belarus.

Anatol Lyabedzka

Russia does not have a well-considered clear strategy with respect to Belarus. Moscow was just as unprepared for the presidential election in Belarus as Brussels. This is why Moscow did not want any changes to happen in Belarus. Since Russia was unprepared to be an active player in Belarus it wanted Lukashenka to win the election and it also wanted the poll to be fraudulent because that weakened the Belarusian leader. Lukashenka's weakness gave Russia leverage in economic and political relations with Belarus.

I expect Moscow (and Brussels) to change its tactics. Moscow will start to invest in the political infrastructure. It will be funding pro-Russian political groups in Belarus and raising a Belarusian 'Yanukovych'. As soon as this has

been done, Russia will be taking tough and pragmatic actions. There are advantages and disadvantages in such a situation. The advantage is that Lukashenka would have two battle fronts – the First and Second Belarusian – in the East and in the West. It would be much more difficult because his resources would be stretched.

The disadvantage is that Russia may be able to 'sell' a candidate supported by pro-Moscow forces.

Vasil Lyavonau

This is an erroneous and shortsighted policy.

Aleh Manayeu

Speaking a scientific language, I would term it inadequate, i.e. not corresponding to reality. Specifically, this inadequacy reveals in the fact that Russia is making an all-out effort, especially after the recent color revolutions, to restore its influence in those countries, supporting hard liners and conservative elites instead of attempting to establish mutually beneficial cooperation with the new leaders and elites. Russia's policy thereby naturally runs into conflict with the national interests of neighbors. Whatever attitudes may be to these new leaders and elites, it is obvious that the national interests of any country should be fixed on the future, not the past. Putin said in public that Russia was accustomed to dealing with the elites in neighboring and other countries that are in power. He linked Russia's support of Akayev, Lukashenka and Kuchma to this. This is what I call an inadequate policy. What he meant saying that Russia was accustomed? What his predecessors did had more minuses than pluses. The collapse of the Soviet Union was evidence of that. He should change that policy irrespective of what was before. But, unfortunately, does not do so. We could see this during the recent presidential election in Belarus. Even at the end of 2005, there were some hopes, disputes and discussions based

on previous relations of Belarusian counter-elites with Russian partners. But now it is evident that the Russian leadership has decided to preserve the status quo. I would not judge how this met the national interests of Russia. I think it did not. But that certainly did not meet our national interests. I do not know how long this will last. Some change is happening. The 2004 gas row is evidence. But does this mean that Russia's policy regarding Belarus is becoming more adequate? If we saw that these steps are taken to make the Belarusian government follow a more democratic policy, respect the rights of its citizens, be more open for the external world, and so on, we could assert that the policy of Russia is becoming more adequate. But we see that these steps are for absolutely other purposes.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

I believe that Russia is making a big mistake by trying to use a 10-million nation for advancing its geopolitical interests. This policy has no prospects. It is a day's strategy. Having recognized the rigged election and the illegitimate president, the Russian government alienated many people, primarily the young ones who will steer Belarus in the future and with whom Russia would have to build relations. We have always told Moscow's political elite that Russia is strategically interested in democracy in Belarus. I would describe our approach as pragmatic. Russia is a neighbor with whom we intend to maintain open, mutually beneficial and friendly relations based on economic ties and prosperity of the peoples, not selfish political interests.

Anatol Mikhailau

Russia lacks the sense of reality in its policies with regard to other former Soviet republics. Surprisingly, even its attempts to pursue what could be viewed as national interests are often counterproductive.

Ales Mikhalevich

Russia treats us as its vassals. We are a country that is de facto governed by Russia in key areas.

Tatsyana Protska

Russia does not have a long-term well-considered foreign policy with regard to any country. It takes sporadic actions. There are various trends in Russia and it is unclear where it will end up. On the one hand, it backs America, but on the other it flirts with China. It is trying to improve its relationship with the EU. All those movements affect its relations with Belarus.

Russia considers it important to maintain friendly relations with Belarus. Belarus is a European country and a member of European organizations. Every vote counts if you want to push through a decision. Belarus is a transit country and Russia is aware of its geopolitical importance.

In addition, many Belarusians speak Russian and both nations are nostalgic for the Soviet Union. The latter is of special importance. There are many people and politicians in Russia who would like to revive the Soviet system by correcting its 'defects'. Belarus remains the most sovietized nation of the former Soviet Union. The Communists sought to establish an exemplary buffer between the Soviet Union and the West. Efforts are underway to revive that model.

Many Russians settled down in Belarus after World War II, which also makes the Russian government interested in the country.

Russia is a bargaining chip in Belarus' internal politics. Both democratic opposition and authorities always turn to Russia for financial support. Russian money is the most attractive.

One should also note close economic ties between Belarus and Russia.

Andrey Sannikau

I don't see any serious and positive policy with regard to Belarus so far. Because there is this stubborn support of the regime (which existed both under Yeltsin and continues now under Putin), of all these processes that drove Belarus to dictatorship and totalitarian rule. Despite all things, Russia still does not notice its errors. Russia does not make friends for the future. The Russian leadership, as always, is busy creating an image of a strong global power. Maybe, we should not expect Russia to behave differently. But three-four or even five years ago, when it was yet unclear what policies Putin would pursue, there were some voices saying that 'if we want to be a democracy, why don't we support democratic trends in neighboring countries?' One cannot make friends through force! I believe that most Belarusians do not have so much liking for Russia as Russian and our state-run media outlets represent it. It is obvious that if Moscow had conducted a different policy, one could have speculated about the existence of a choice between the European Union and certain ties with Russia (not with the Russia – Belarus Union State!). But now I say categorically: our history has taught us a lesson and we won't have such a choice in the future.

Stanislau Shushkevich

I view it as an imperial one... But I would like to make a clear separation... I like Russian people. I have an impression that all peoples across the world like Belarusians. And Russians like them very much. But the Russian leadership has always been an enemy. The Russian authorities, whoever they may be, have always been enemies of Russian and other cultures. Russian art figures, from Pushkin, Tolstoi, Chekhov to Solzhenitsyn have criticized the government. I don't know where such leaders whose consciousness takes a back seat come from. Take present-day events. Interference in Belarus' internal affairs is a common occurrence. The Chernomyrdin-Stroyev-Seleznyov band visited our country in 1996. Now Gryzlov has come: he has allegedly

seen documents proving that the opposition was preparing falsification. I don't know any other country whose leadership is as much unscrupulous as that. Only Russia has such.

I want to say once again that my favorite writers are Russian. One can speak much about Russian composers, inventors... As for their government... They just have the bad luck to have such government. We also do, but I believe this ailment is coming from that country.

I have Russian habits, Russian-like absence of mind, I love Russians. I don't like their leaders because they are not intellectual. For me, an intellectual is a well-educated person who sticks to certain principles. What principles can Zhirinovsky, Gryzlov or Rushailo have? None. In this view, Putin confirms that he has no principles either. I've studied in detail Putin's article titled 'Russia on Milleniums Border' published in late 1999. The article contained general phrases and was meant to please everyone: it included such terms like statehood and whatever you'd like to see. And statehood means imperial-style policies. It's a disgrace that a country like this survives only thanks to oil revenues.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

I see it as a traditional policy for Russia.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

To answer shortly, Moscow's policies conflict with the national interests of both Russia and Belarus.

Andrey Vardamatski

Russia pursues a shortsighted policy with regard to Belarus. It cooperates with official structures whose future is uncertain. Other segments of

society are aware of that and will take a cautious attitude to Russia when the situation changes.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

The full answer would take more than one paragraph. In brief, nothing has changed in its policies, or, to be more precise, its essence becomes clear again to those who expected changes. Chubais described Russia as 'a liberal empire'. An empire cannot be liberal – this is clear now to those who did not understand it before. Interestingly, Russians know little about Belarus and do not understand trends in our society. Decision-makers do not get beyond stereotypes. They consider an oil and gas tap an all-purpose tool. May be this is good?

Usevalad Yancheuski

Lukashenka and his policies are very popular in Russia. The Russian media says now little about Belarus – in fact, it has been keeping silence since Putin came to power. But people, the most reliable tool of distributing information, keep talking. Some have relatives here, others visit Belarus on business trips. They see how the Belarusians live and feel respect for Lukashenka.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin treats Lukashenka in a strange way. Its attitude is insincere and somewhat foolishly patronizing.

Some Russian politicians like to indicate that everything will immediately change in Belarus as soon as they lift a finger. But they can lift all fingers and also toes, nothing will change in Belarus. Many in Russia have already realized that but are still reluctant to acknowledge. They should do that, particularly after their defeat in Ukraine in 2004.

Russia is lucky to have Lukashenka elected as president of Belarus. Only thanks to Lukashenka's honesty, Russia has supporters in a westward direction.

7. What do you think of Russia's policies with regard to Belarus?

Belarus gave Russia everything it could. Russia should not press more demands because fulfilling them will run counter to Belarus' interests. We cannot give more.

Russia should not push off its sole supporter. Neither should it keep it in the lobby. Russia is not an empire any longer. Instead of naively playing an 'Energy Superpower' game, Moscow politicians should realize that energy and gas are Russia's demons if they do think about their country. The demons will kill the country as they killed the Soviet Union.