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## RUSSIA'S UNION WITH BELARUS: EXPENSIVE AND TROUBLING

**O**n April 2, Presidents Boris Yeltsin of Russia and Alexander Lukashenka of Belarus signed a treaty creating a union between their two countries that will include common citizenship, a common currency, and joint armed forces. The top legislative and executive representatives of the two countries will participate in a supranational ruling body—a Supreme Soviet or Council. Other states have been invited to join the union. The hard-line parliaments of the two states are likely to ratify the treaty.

The union comes with a multibillion-dollar price tag that neither Moscow nor Minsk can afford—but that the West may be asked to finance. The Yeltsin government is in arrears to its soldiers, workers, and pensioners, and close to \$150 billion in debt. Social unrest and disillusionment in Russia are growing. The treaty with Belarus will further slow market and democratic reforms in both countries and may help Russia's aggressive pursuit of a heavy-handed "integration" of the Commonwealth of Independent States. What is more, it will exacerbate geopolitical tensions by putting Russian troops along the borders of Ukraine and the Baltic states, 700 miles closer to Western Europe, in a position to threaten Russia's pro-Western and reformist neighbors.

**Ideology, Geopolitics, and Economics.** The union between Russia and Belarus panders to Great Russian nationalist sentiments in Moscow, and was hailed primarily by Russia's hard-liners. Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov praised the "Union which is stretching again from Brest to Vladivostok." Nikolay Ryzhkov, the hard-line Soviet-era Prime Minister, stressed that the union is open to other countries and invited Armenia to join. Russia's market-oriented reformers, such as First Deputy Prime Ministers Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov, as well as the Yabloko faction in the Duma, all oppose the treaty as detrimental to Russian reforms.

Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, who is close to Russian energy interests, and Foreign Minister Yevgenii Primakov lobbied energetically for the treaty. Russia's powerful oil and gas companies want a pipeline to the West that would run through Belarus. Current pipelines run through Ukraine, which collects transit fees and one day might shut down energy facilities. The Belarus route would be under the control of Russia's oil companies as well as that of its military.

Foreign Minister Primakov, who was a foreign policy adviser to Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Gorbachev, is a champion of restoring Russia's alleged "sphere of influence" in the "near abroad." He sees the Russian-Belarusian *Anschluss* as a powerful response to the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which he vehemently opposes. As a result of the treaty with Belarus, Russia's tanks again may be on the borders of Poland, which soon will join NATO, while Russian tactical nuclear weapons may target European capitals from Belarusian soil. Moreover, Russian

troops in Belarus may be inserted in a giant bulge into Eastern Europe along the Polish, Ukrainian, and Baltic borders.

**An Unreformed Basket Case.** Belarus will be a political and economic albatross around Russia's neck. It is the least-reformed country of Eastern Europe. Only 12 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) is produced by the private sector. Inflation in April alone is projected to be 8.5 percent, while 22 percent of its population lives below the poverty line. Moreover, Belarus was most severely affected by the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion in 1986; hundreds of thousands suffer from cancer and radiation poisoning. Industrial production continues to plummet. The World Bank estimates that Belarus needs \$5 billion annually to return to its 1989-level GDP and resume economic growth. Foreign investment in 1996 was a paltry \$4 million; between 1991 and 1997, foreigners invested only \$179.3 million in Belarus.

The country's political performance is even worse. President Lukashenka is a former collective farm chairman who rose to power on a populist platform, promising a crackdown on corruption and reunification with "Mother Russia." He has been known to speak of Stalin and Hitler with admiration. He jailed many opposition figures, ordered the police to beat demonstrators peacefully protesting his dictatorial policies, and expelled foreign journalists, including Russians.

Belarusian politics are getting too small for Lukashenka. After "delivering" Belarus to Moscow, he now aspires to become a leader of Russian imperialists. As a leading member of the future Supreme Council, he will be in the national limelight in Moscow. Lukashenka is typical of a sort of national elite that prefers to play the politics of the imperial metropolis rather than develop the independence of the home country. In the event of President Yeltsin's illness or incapacity, Lukashenka may become a real power in Moscow.

**What Is at Stake?** Moscow's embrace of Belarus and its hard-line leader indicate that the winds of imperial aggrandizement once again blow from the Kremlin. A confluence of great power interests in the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's office, and within the communist and nationalist opposition in the Duma have succeeded in forcing post-communist Russia toward the slippery slope of imperial rebuilding. Whether Russia will go all the way is open to debate, but chilly winds are making Russia's neighbors shiver and seek security guarantees.

The United States should make it clear to Russia that the rebuilding of an empire—whether by force or by stealth—is unacceptable. The United States should and will protect its interests in the region, as well as those of its allies. Even an unsuccessful attempt by Russia to rebuild a "superstate" may lead to great instability, the collapse of reforms, possible bloodshed, and a flow of refugees into Europe. The United States should take all possible measures to prevent Moscow from rushing to rebuild an empire that repeatedly sought hegemony in Europe. The United States and its allies need to extend a lifeline of security and political cooperation to Ukraine, the Baltic states, and the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

**Anemic U.S. Reaction.** The Clinton Administration has not done enough to counter the dangerous policies brewing in Minsk and Moscow. In March 1997, Lukashenka expelled the U.S. embassy's First Secretary, Serge Alexandrov, and Soros Foundation Executive Director Peter G. Byrne. Although the U.S. government advised Minsk against sending an Ambassador to Washington, President Clinton did not deal with the likely repercussions of the Russian-Belarusian union during his recent summit with President Yeltsin.

Despite protests in the U.S. Congress and the European parliament, unification is on its way. Congress should conduct hearings on this unsavory merger. The United States should raise the issue of the Russian-Belarusian union in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations, and offer broad support to the Belarusian democratic opposition and to those in Russia who understand the dangers of this ill-conceived alliance. Washington should also work to reduce World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and bilateral assistance programs to Russia by the amount Moscow will spend financing this expensive foreign policy adventure.