

“The Nihilism of Principles” by Lukashenko

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The foreign policy activities of the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on the Azerbaijani track and his eccentric rhetoric regarding the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict raise a number of questions that need to be clarified. First of all, to what extent are the steps of the Belarusian leader synchronized with the position of Minsk's main ally – Moscow? Secondly, to what extent is Lukashenko's radicalization conditioned by the factor of interpersonal relations with the ruling political team in Armenia, and what are the purely pragmatic, objective interests of Belarus that push it to the anti-Armenian, in fact, vector of its foreign policy in the South Caucasus? And finally, how far can Minsk reach in contributing to the deterioration of the relations of the Yerevan–Moscow–Minsk triangle within the framework of the CIS, CSTO and EAEU organizations?

A. Lukashenko's statement at the meeting with I. Aliyev in Baku on 16.05.2024 is considered as the trigger of the latest diplomatic scandal and the next round of tensions between Yerevan and Minsk. Then the Belarusian leader openly admitted that he had discussed with his Azerbaijani counterpart the forthcoming 44-day war in Karabakh and that he fully supported Baku in this endeavor. The fact that Lukashenko's statement turned out to be too frank is indirectly evidenced by the fact that the Belarusian state media and the presidential press-service subsequently cut this part of the president's speech, while the Azerbaijani media, for well-known reasons, focused on it the most. Besides, Lukashenko's visit to Azerbaijan in May became an accentuated gesture of “unfriendliness” towards Armenia, a CIS and CSTO ally, because the Belarusian leader visited Nagorno Karabagh on 17.05.2024 and during this trip he repeatedly and demonstratively expressed his satisfaction with the new *status quo* in this region after the deportation of the indigenous Armenian population.

Nevertheless, the Belarusian president's revelations were nothing new for experts and the public. Lukashenko never hid his sympathy for Azerbaijan and Ilham Aliyev personally, even though his “*special relations*” did not quite fit into the logic of Belarus' commitments within the integration unions with Armenia at the time when Serzh Sargsyan was its leader.

Back in November 2016, the Azerbaijani president awarded his Belarusian counterpart with the Order of “Heydar Aliyev” as a token of gratitude for his personal contribution to friendship and a wide range of fruitful interaction between the two countries. And it was indeed deep and wide. Thus, in 2005–2018, Belarus supplied Azerbaijan with more than 150 T-72 tanks, about a dozen Su-25 attack aircraft, about 150 howitzer artillery and self-propelled artillery systems, several dozens of *Polonez MLRS*, as well as other weapons worth hundreds of millions of dollars. This is evidenced by the investigation of Belarusian opposition journalists published on *Euroradio*. In return, Baku has established supplies of crude oil to Belarusian refineries, which were at a standstill due to the rough political and economic relations between Minsk and Moscow, which began in the 2000s and were constantly felt until 2020.

¹ The original /in Rus./ was posted on our website on 25.06.2024.

The existence of several bilateral economic and military-technical interests between Minsk and Baku could not but affect their political relations and lead to coordinated steps on various issues of foreign policy and international agenda of importance for both sides. Of course, this interaction could not bypass the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, with regard to which Belarus every year takes an emphatically pro-Baku position. Moreover, it did so without demonstrating at least formal commitment to its obligations within the framework of official allied relations with Armenia. Characteristically, even the Turkic countries of Central Asia – members of the CIS and the CSTO – that due to the known circumstances keep rather closer ties with Azerbaijan, at least until the events in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, tried to maintain a more balanced position and rhetoric in the above mentioned context. It was this factor that became the basis for repeated sarcastic statements by Azerbaijani politicians and Ilham Aliyev himself that Baku “*has more friends and allies in the CIS and the CSTO than Yerevan*”. The significant role of A. Lukashenko in the formation of such a configuration is undeniable, as he not only contributed to luring Baku into the policy of the mentioned integration unions, but also personally repeatedly tried to force Yerevan to solve the Karabakh problem in line with Baku's demands and conditions. This is evidenced by the recording of his conversation with Serzh Sargsyan on the margins of the CSTO meeting in 2016, during which the Belarusian leader was persuading his Armenian counterpart to cede “*5 districts around Karabakh*” to Aliyev for a substantial sum of “*\$5 bln*” in the first stage. None of the interlocutors subsequently denied the authenticity of the recording. Lukashenko himself has repeatedly confirmed that he did indeed make considerable effort to persuade the Armenian leadership to cede Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan “*in exchange for Baku's promises of financial and economic assistance to Yerevan*”. In April 2021, for example, the Belarusian president said in an interview with domestic media that even before the change of power in Armenia in 2018, he had received a request from Aliyev to “*personally talk to the Armenian leadership*” about accepting Baku's conditions for the “*de-occupation*” of Karabakh.

According to Belarusian opposition journalists, Lukashenko's policy on the Karabakh problem and Armenian–Azerbaijani relations in general has always had an accentuated pro-Azerbaijani character, with the claim to fully support Baku's plans for a military solution of the problem. This is evidenced by the volume of Azerbaijani–Belarusian arms deals. On the one hand, the Belarusian president expressed interest in a political and diplomatic solution to the problem, and on the other hand, he used the *status quo* in Nagorno Karabakh, established after 1994, to ensure large-scale supplies of Belarusian military-industrial complex products (MIC) to the Azerbaijani market. As early as October 2020, a Belarusian journalist Alexei Karpenko, in his investigative article on the true volume of Belarusian weapons sold to Azerbaijan wrote that Lukashenko “*could not have been unaware*” that these deadly weapons would sooner or later be used against “*allied Armenia*”. He was aware of this, but he pretended to be concerned about the course of events and tried to convince the Armenian leadership at least of his neutrality. This was the case, for example, on 01.10.2020, when he called both Aliyev and Pashinyan to express his “*deep concern*” about the outbreak of hostilities. By that time, Lukashenko had already repeated contacts with the Armenian

prime-minister and had repeatedly stated in public that he was ready to cooperate with Pashinyan and facilitate his gradual introduction into the affairs of the integration unions.

It is hard to argue that the reason for the abrupt change of the course on Armenia was the change of power in Yerevan and Lukashenko's possible personal dislike of Pashinyan. Of course, the way of thinking of politicians of the Lukashenko type implies that they pay special attention to the personal characteristics of their partners and therefore, in one way or another, affect the dynamics and productivity of their political interaction with them. The special connection and ease of communication between the Belarusian leader and his Azerbaijani counterpart can serve as such an example. According to Russian political scientist Arkady Dubnov, Lukashenko and Aliyev “*are brought closer by trust based on the absolutely post-Soviet mentality of these leaders*”. At the same time, however, as the analysis of Belarusian politics in the context of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict shows, Pashinyan's personality was not really a determining factor for large-scale adjustments in Minsk's Armenian–Azerbaijani policy. The political-psychological type of Serzh Sargsyan's personality, which is “*closer*” to that of Lukashenko–Aliyev, did not prevent the Belarusian leader from deepening cooperation with Azerbaijan for years at the expense of the existential interests of “*allied*” Armenia.

As for Pashinyan's personality itself, it is most likely that Lukashenko's noticeable “*verbal*” emancipation and his recent revelations were influenced by the Armenian prime-minister's inexperience and short-sightedness in making important decisions (problems with the arrest of Yu. Khachaturov, the then Secretary General of the CSTO, etc.), as well as Pashinyan's political and biographical trajectory of a convinced “*Westerner*”, which *apriori* excludes ordinary communication not only with Lukashenko, but also with other partners in integration unions.

In this regard, it can be assumed that the behavior and personality of N. Pashinyan has most likely become a convenient reason for A. Lukashenko to deepen his interaction with I. Aliyev and bring it to the public level, rather than the reason itself. It is obvious that the Belarusian president long ago (before Pashinyan) decided on the “*Azerbaijani priority*” and intended to further expand the front of political and economic interaction with Baku. The formal alliance with the Republic of Armenia has not and will not stop him on this path. According to another Belarusian opposition journalist, the head of analytical projects of the *BelaPAN* news agency Alexander Klaskovsky, “*the money does not smell for Lukashenko*”. “*Lukashenko is not afraid to spoil relations with Yerevan, because Armenia is not dangerous for him, and there is nothing to get from it*”. According to this reasoning, Azerbaijan is a different matter, and here the Belarusian president sees a great source of financial and economic benefits.

Klaskowski's claims about Lukashenko's pragmatic nature are not only based on the Armenian–Azerbaijani precedent in Belarusian politics. International media and expert circles have long been talking about Lukashenko's inherent way of managing the country's affairs without regard to the interests of his closest allies. Moscow itself has repeatedly fallen victim to such manipulative actions. A distinct example is the story of Minsk blocking the pumping of allegedly “*low-quality Russian oil*” to Europe in response to the rising prices of

raw materials for Belarusian oil refineries. A scandalous situation arose with Minsk's unauthorized sale of the products of the Russian *Uralkali* company, which had set up its operations in Belarus. One can also note the practice of the Belarusian authorities of importing Western food products (apples, shrimps, meat, etc.) into Russia under the Belarusian label without the permission of Moscow. Obviously, Alexander Lukashenko was not embarrassed by the obligations to maintain openness to allies and respect their political and economic interests. In this context, the activity of official Minsk in cooperation with Baku, which directly affects the interests of Yerevan, should not be surprising. Within the framework of Belarus' policy of “nihilism of principles”, these actions should be considered a norm rather than an unfortunate misunderstanding.

“I asked Ilham Heydarovich during the face-to-face meetings: if it is possible – a place for Belarus, please give it to us. And Ilham Heydarovich supported this approach”. This phrase, uttered by Lukashenko after his visit to Azerbaijan in May, shows his plans to expand participation in Azerbaijan's economic projects aimed at the *“restoration of Karabakh”*. Lukashenko has made it clear to the Azerbaijani side that if Minsk supports Baku in the military-political plan of NKR's conquest, supplies it with arms and does everything to limit any activity and actions of the CSTO in Azerbaijan's interests, then it has the right to benefit materially from the results of the *“war of liberation”*. It can be assumed that this is the reason why the venerable politician Lukashenko on 16.05.2024 quite consciously uttered the scandalous phrase that he actually *“in every possible way promoted”* Aliyev's militaristic ambitions.

Based on open sources, the Belarusian leadership in Nagorno-Karabakh is primarily interested in construction tenders, agricultural projects and livestock clusters, the possibility of expanding the sale of agricultural machinery, etc. According to representatives of the Belarusian Cabinet of ministers, during Lukashenko's visit to Nagorno-Karabakh, the delegations of the two countries signed several economic agreements in the total amount of \$50mln. However, Lukashenko seems to be aiming at much larger and more significant joint projects in Karabakh and Azerbaijan as a whole, which could bring big dividends to Minsk. Judging by Lukashenko's own words, as well as the materials of the Belarusian media, Baku has promised its colleagues from Minsk to find an opportunity for large-scale cooperation in Karabakh, even if this would require squeezing out other partners of Azerbaijan. The Belarusian president personally expressed in Karabakh that he is aware that there are many interested parties in the economic projects of *“revival of the region”*, but he also hinted that Minsk will not give up its expectations.

Thus, it becomes clear that the Belarusian president expresses readiness to further increase interaction with I. Aliyev even in conditions when this trend clearly affects the future fate of the format of integration structures on the post-Soviet space. Armenia under the leadership of N. Pashinyan signals that the contradictory behavior of Belarus in this case is one of the strong reasons that make Yerevan reconsider the rationality of its membership in the CIS and the CSTO. At the same time, Belarus sends messages about its readiness to accept the relevant decisions of Yerevan without *“considerable regrets”*, because after 2018 Armenia allegedly did everything to harm the harmonious and productive work of the

“unions”. At the same time, Minsk operates with the argument that its close relations with Baku should not “disturb” the partners in the integration structures, as they are conducted in the generally accepted format of close bilateral, allied relations, outside the framework of any military-political alliances. Thus, Lukashenko makes it clear that he is not bound by any restrictions regarding Armenia and will not take into account its interests either in the status of a member of the CIS and CSTO or, above all, after its possible rejection of integration alliances.

The Belarusian–Azerbaijani political and economic interaction continues to grow. It is not excluded that cooperation in the military-technical sphere, the data of which, according to the Belarusian opposition, were classified by Minsk after the Armenian–Azerbaijani war of 2020, will also grow in parallel.

Finally, in the context of this issue, the question of whether this line of official Minsk is coordinated with Moscow or whether it is a product of individual approaches of the Belarusian political authorities is of particular importance. According to Arkady Dubnov, a Russian expert on the CIS, Lukashenko would not have allowed himself to openly radicalize relations with Yerevan against the background of synchronous rapprochement with Baku without Moscow's involvement. According to Dubnov, by calling Aliyev “*the unconditional leader of the South Caucasus*”, Lukashenko is expressing compliments that cannot be expressed directly from Moscow. “*But it is convenient to do it through Lukashenko*”, – the Russian expert explains, – “*so here the complementary Slav–Caucasian policy works very well*”.

As a result, it is unlikely that the Russian factor will be able to play the role of a stabilizing factor, which, at least under the conditions of N. Pashinyan's stay in power, will try to balance the relations between Yerevan and Minsk, at least within the framework of integration unions and in the name of preserving their format. Given the tension in Moscow's relations with Yerevan, it is indeed difficult to avoid the feeling that the Belarusian leader feels Moscow's understanding and loyalty behind his back. Another question is how acceptable Lukashenko's eccentric outbursts and revelations are to Moscow. After all, Moscow should understand that the recognition of the Belarusian president's support of the Azerbaijani aggression against the NKR by the Armenian society and political circles is projected on Putin himself due to the known circumstances. For the Armenian common man and Western-oriented politicians, in a broad sense, there is no need to differentiate the relations of the Putin–Lukashenko strategic nexus with the RA, NKR and the whole South Caucasus. Many people in Armenia tend to take it for granted that the steps of the Russian–Belarusian tandem are coordinated, which means that Russia is behind Belarusian support for Azerbaijan, and Lukashenko's anti-Armenian outbursts cannot take place without coordination with Moscow.

Given the growing friction and synchronous diplomatic scandals in Yerevan–Minsk and Yerevan–Moscow relations, it is difficult to assume the opposite. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that Russia's strategic interests in the region should logically be dissonant with Lukashenko's desire to simply increase profitable relations with Baku to the detriment of Yerevan. After all, if Lukashenko has nothing to “take” from Armenia and

“*nothing to fear*” from Yerevan, then for Putin the issue of deteriorating relations with Armenia is rooted in a complex of strategic and global security problems of the Russian Federation. For Russia, the Armenian–Azerbaijani issue and the South Caucasus pile of problems cannot be solved a priori by ad hoc measures and, moreover, by emotional “outbursts”. Russia, unlike Belarus, cannot afford to build relations with the South Caucasus in the paradigm of immediate economic benefits or personal sympathies. By default, the Russian game in the South Caucasus cannot be conducted in the logic of the interests and preferences prioritized by politicians of Lukashenko's formation. Otherwise, it can only mean the complete degradation of the state system of this country and the decline of its era of power. Therefore, the paradox of Moscow's behavior, which does not lend itself to pragmatic understanding, requires a separate consideration.

Why does Moscow not want to rationally separate the concepts of “*Pashinyan*” and “*Armenia*” in its foreign policy agenda? Why is it snatching from the hands of certain circles of the Armenian opposition the last trump cards with the help of which they try to prevent Yerevan from a radical drift towards Eurocentrism? Why is it contributing to the final bankruptcy of its own military-political alliances, which are already “cracking in all its joints”? And finally, it should be understood whether Moscow coordinates eccentric-radical actions of allied leaders like Lukashenko, or whether their excessive freedom and initiative leads Moscow to the complete loss of control over the “*junior allies*”?