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POLICY BRIEF

**BELARUS AND THE EU
AFTER THE 2020
AWAKENING: LIMITED
ROOM FOR MANEUVER?**

Aliaksei Kazharski

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Belarus and the EU after the 2020 Awakening: Limited Room for Maneuver?

Aliaksei Kazharski

Introduction

The year 2020 brought unprecedented change to Belarus. Following evidence of massive fraud during the August presidential election and the ensuing brutal crackdown on protestors, which included violent deaths and tortures, Belarus's civil society found new forms of mobilization and self-organization resulting in hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets.

The mass protests, which continued for several months, did not bring about a quick regime change. However, the 2020 events dealt a severe blow to the political legitimacy of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The old model, in which the majority of Belarusians exchanged political non-participation for social stability and a modest growth in living standards, finally came to an end. The regime reorganized itself, with the so-called siloviki (the police and secret services) now becoming its main pillar. In response to the mass mobilization of the civil society, repression against political opponents surged, and Belarus clearly started exhibiting totalitarian tendencies.

Internationally, Lukashenka was once again isolated from the West. This put an end to the previous period of rapprochement with the EU, which followed the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Some expressed fears that Russia would take advantage of the situation and absorb Belarus.

As Belarus came into the spotlight of international attention, various experts and commentators drew quick analogies, some of which, however, could be rather misleading. Instead of comparing Belarus to other countries, this paper sets the present state of affairs in Belarus against the background of previous developments. Over the years, Minsk's relations with the European Union and Russia tended to develop in cycles. Domestically, these cycles were marked by increased political repression or relative liberalization of the political regime. This paper argues that, even if the present situation is to be seen as yet another such cycle, it would have to be characterized by new circumstances, under which the options of all players involved are severely limited and the room for maneuver has decreased.

2020 protests and the crisis of expert knowledge

Up until 2020, Belarus would come into the focus of international attention only every once in a while. Occasional splashes of visibility had to do with post-election protest crackdowns or, as a matter of exception, with the “diplomatic breakthrough” that Lukashenka enjoyed in 2015, when Belarus provided the platform for the Normandy Format and the signing of the Minsk II agreements.

Generally perceived as a relatively small and unimportant country, Belarus has had the cliché of “Europe’s last dictatorship” firmly attached to it since the 1990s. Experts had it down as a close ally of Russia, and for many, it would be interesting only in that capacity. The tendency to perceive Belarus via its relationship with Russia typically dominated. Apart from that, expert knowledge of Belarus *per se* tended to be shallow and fragmented.

Some of the popular stereotypes would portray the country as a “North Korea” in Eastern Europe. Various “anti-mainstream” counter-narratives, on the other hand, tried to present it as an island of stability and social welfare amidst the raging sea of neoliberal capitalism (Žižek 2020). Neither image was anywhere near being an accurate description of what actually went on in the country under Lukashenka’s rule (Barkouski 2021).

Unsurprisingly, when the 2020 protests erupted, we witnessed a general shortage of expertise on Belarus. On the one hand, the country’s visibility had

increased drastically. The international public was both shocked by the reports of unprecedented police brutality and tortures in custody and fascinated by the strength of the anti-authoritarian civic mobilization. Representatives of the Belarusian opposition also gained a new hitherto unprecedented symbolic status. Former presidential candidate and leader of the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has been touring the Western capitals and has been officially received by many political leaders.

On the other hand, however, international expertise on Belarus was clearly unable to keep up with the events. Lack of deep knowledge led many commentators to grope for quick analogies. The 2020 Belarus protests have been compared to a number of historical events in other countries, including the 1989 revolutions in Central Europe (the Visegrád Group) and the Baltic states (Marques 2020) and the more recent anti-authoritarian political mobilization in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Naturally, these comparisons contained a grain of truth in them insofar as all these events could be seen as driven by a grass-roots demand for democratic change. However, quick analogies with Ukraine, for instance, were as frequent as they were misleading (Mackinnon 2020). They simply ignored the multiple vast differences in regime type, political culture, and geopolitical circumstances (see Shraibman 2018).

For someone who did not follow Belarus closely prior to 2020, thinking in terms of analogies was only natural. However, the key to understanding the present state of affairs lies not in comparing Belarus to Ukraine in 2013 or Czechoslovakia in 1989. Rather, it is in *comparing Belarus to Belarus*. Situating the recent developments within a longer timeframe helps us understand what and how much 2020 has changed and what the actual future implications of these changes might be.

History and its lessons

The historical roots of Lukashenka's regime go back to the 1991 collapse of the USSR. Under the Communist regime, Belarus had been an economically successful, highly industrialized Soviet republic with a relatively well-educated and hard-working population. In terms of its post-Communist transition

prospects, Belarus would not have looked bad at all. However, in comparison to the Baltic states, or even Ukraine, Belarus's society was less prepared for independence psychologically. Throughout much of the 20th century, the Communist regime had worked thoroughly on blocking the development of an independent national identity in Belarus (Marples 1999). In the first years following 1991, there was social frustration caused by economic hardships, which quickly bred a Soviet nostalgia and resentment for the transition. Many people felt they had lost more than they gained.

Lukashenka's 1994 stunning victory could thus be seen as a very early case, or a foreshadowing, of the later "illiberal-populist" revolt in Central and Eastern Europe. The latter also capitalized intensively on the popular disappointment regarding some of the fruits of the post-Communist transition (Magyar 2016). However, Lukashenka went even further than that. He championed the restoration of the unity of the former Soviet empire. Apparently, he hoped to someday become the president of the so-called Union State of Belarus, replacing the aging Boris Yeltsin as the *de facto* ruler in Moscow. That dream never came true. However, Lukashenka's geopolitical loyalty to Moscow allowed him to extract substantial economic support from Russia, which, in turn, was converted into redistributive social policies at home. The nature of the so-called "social contract" (Haiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009) between the regime and the population could be explained as political non-participation in exchange for relative economic stability and modest growth.

The price that Belarus had to pay for this political model was its close military alliance with Russia, delayed economic reform, and the suppression of the civil society, freedom of speech, and democracy in the country. This is where Lukashenka's interests also began to overlap with those of the Kremlin. Russia was visibly losing in its competition with the West as a regional player. Its lingering imperial identity demanded that it play the role of an alternative pole of power in Eurasia. Yet, at the same time, it had nothing to offer the Eastern European post-Communist countries in terms of an attractive development model. Therefore, apart from threats and a direct use of force, the only way of preventing these countries from choosing the West over Russia was to sponsor local authoritarian regimes that would keep these countries isolated from the European Union.

In consolidating his authoritarian regime, Lukashenka never hesitated to sacrifice good relations with the West. International scandal and diplomatic isolation were unpleasant but negligible circumstances in comparison to the imperative of regime survival. Thus, following the 1995-1996 constitutional referenda (whose results were not recognized by the West), the initial Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, which was signed in 1995, remained unratified (European Commission 2021). In 1998, during the infamous “sewage scandal,” ambassadors from almost two dozen countries faced eviction from their residences in Drazdy, with many governments making a formal protest to Minsk (UPI 1998).

In March 2008, following a round of sanctions against Belarusian petrochemical companies, the US ambassador to Minsk had to be recalled. The authorities also insisted on reducing the number of American diplomats to five and, for the next twelve years, there would be no US ambassador in Minsk.

In December 2010, following a presidential election, the authorities brutally cracked down on a mass protest in Minsk, detaining all oppositional presidential candidates who had criticized Lukashenka. The crackdown came amidst a rapprochement with the EU. The EU had recently included Belarus in its Eastern Partnership initiative (2009) and lifted sanctions against the regime. Following the crackdown, relations were frozen for several years. In 2015, Minsk had a diplomatic breakthrough and served as a platform for the Ukraine talks.

The first lesson to be learned from these multiple episodes is that neither isolation nor international outrage are very new to Minsk. Sanctions may be personally unpleasant and are likely to provoke a nervous reaction, but their costs are usually negligible in comparison to the overall objective of regime survival. Following the 2020 election, some countries declared they would not recognize Lukashenka as the legitimate president of Belarus (Jačauskas 2020; The Ukrainian Weekly 2020). While these gestures may be very important symbolically, it was unclear what they would mean in practice and whether they would create a situation that would be quite new for Minsk. The broader economic sanctions introduced in the wake of the 2021 Ryanair plane incident were indeed a new thing. It was, however, also unclear whether they could be an effective deterrence or compellence instrument as long as regime survival would remain an overarching goal.

The second lesson that could be learned from history is that the freezing of relations would end in a thaw more than once. With respect to Belarus, throughout the years, the EU has acted according to two intertwining logics. The first logic could be named domestic or organizational. Often, the EU's and its member-states' governments' knee-jerk reaction to violations of human rights is to isolate and sanction authoritarian regimes. However, foreign policies in democratic countries are also subject to domestic political cycles. New generations of politicians have incentives to come up with new solutions and try carrots where sticks have not worked before; though in retrospective, these carrots may turn out to be not much more effective than sticks, as the EU's policy of engaging officials in Minsk has demonstrated.

The second logic in dealing with Belarus has been geopolitical. This logic has been largely informed by the evolving geopolitical environment and changes in Russia. Over the two decades of Putin's rule, Russia has progressed, from being a country that some even hoped could help import some democracy into authoritarian Belarus, to being an irredentist power that directly threatens the territorial integrity of its neighbors. Belarus, though formally allied with Moscow, can not count on being safe in the long run either.

The EU's *realpolitik* engagement of the Minsk regime took this into account. The Minsk lobbyists were also actively trying to convince the West that even a dictator like Lukashenka was better than a hypothetical Russian occupation of Belarus. The imminent occupation scenario was not substantiated by any serious evidence. However, this narrative sold fairly well in the West, owing to the new geopolitical circumstances, which were defined by the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and, in particular, by the 2014 Ukraine crisis.

Other regional developments could also play a role in modifying the EU's approach. Experts observed that Brussels was limited in its capacity to fulfill the initial ambition of its neighborhood policy, which was to transform the adjacent countries into a stable and prosperous "ring of friends." Amidst the multiple crises on its borders, the EU was becoming more lenient and pragmatic in dealing with authoritarian and "illiberal" leaders next door (Pomorska and Noutcheva 2017). Belarus's rulers, on the other hand, were trying to brand themselves as regional "stability donors" capitalizing on the symbolic role they played in the signing of the Minsk II agreements. This last

round of the EU-Belarus rapprochement, which started with the Ukraine crisis, came to an end abruptly in August 2020.

Assessing EU policies: a decade of engagement?

The decade of the EU's policy of engagement could be given different assessments depending on the understanding of the policy objectives. If the overarching policy goal was to prevent a Russian invasion and de facto end of Belarus's independence, then this policy certainly succeeded. However, it is unclear whether, in the short to medium-term perspective, this scenario was anything more than a phantomic threat to begin with. It is certainly true that Russia developed an increasingly aggressive attitude in the post-Soviet area over the years, gradually crossing various "red lines," from the recognition of Georgia's breakaway provinces as independent states in 2008 to the direct annexation of another state's territory in 2014. Even so, in retrospective, the Kremlin's aggressive moves seemed more or less reactive. They were a response to what Moscow, continuously thinking in terms of its own geopolitical paranoia, interpreted as Western attempts to encroach on its "natural" sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area.

Lukashenka did not miss the opportunity to blackmail the Kremlin with the possibility of developing closer cooperation with the EU. His engagement in the Eastern Partnership, his non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and his somewhat ambiguous stance on the Ukraine crisis certainly did not go unnoticed by Moscow and the Western capitals. At the same time, Lukashenka never crossed any red lines of his own. Belarus remained a loyal military ally of Russia, no democratic transition was in sight, and Lukashenka's room for geopolitical maneuver always remained limited by the very nature of his regime. No authoritarian country could ever hope for a genuinely deep integration with the EU. From Russia's perspective, Belarus was also not an easy bounty. In terms of a potential territorial acquisition, Belarus's symbolic weight was not comparable to that of Crimea. Additionally, a hypothetical annexation of a country with a population of nine and a half million would probably be punished with massive Western sanctions. Long story short, the

repetition of a “Ukrainian scenario” was not too likely, at least as long as the political situation in Belarus remained unchanged, and there were no risks that Belarus would actually leave the Russian “sphere of influence.”

On the other hand, if we assume that the goal of the EU’s policy was not to protect Belarus from a hypothetical “Ukrainian scenario” but to stimulate gradual economic and/or political reform, then the policy clearly failed. The 2016 parliamentary elections brought some token “democratization,” with two oppositional candidates winning seats in the House of Representatives. Apart from that, regime liberalization never went very far beyond releasing the political prisoners that were jailed in the previous round of crackdowns. Some Belarusian analysts described this as the business of trading hostages with the West (Karbalevi 2008).

Economic reform never made it anywhere either. Lukashenka continued to cling to his own model of a paternalistic, state-controlled economy and had spoken on numerous occasions against privatization of state enterprises and other structural reforms. Around the start of the previous decade, Belarus’s state propaganda tried to sell the idea of an *authoritarian modernization* in Belarus, which would create some kind of an Eastern European Singapore, an undemocratic but modern and economically prosperous state. There was much talk about the IT sector and Chinese investments, which were to become a miraculous source of economic growth. By the end of the 2010s, it was clear that none of these hopes would materialize. As Russia cut down its economic assistance, Belarus’s economy was clearly stagnating, and living standards were deteriorating. No gradual transformation had been achieved in Belarus, whether in terms of politics or the economy, and the Western policy of engagement could do little to help there.

Finally, if the central aim of the EU’s approach had been to enhance Belarus’s sovereignty by somehow making it stronger and more independent vis-à-vis Russia, then it has been an abysmal failure. In the 2020 political crisis, the threat of a Russian hybrid scenario loomed more real than ever (Bohdan 2020). In August, Vladimir Putin declared that he had formed a police reserve force that could be sent to Belarus, if necessary (BBC 2020). No doubt, for Lukashenka to invite armed Russian units that he did not

control would be the option of last resort, so these statements also need to be taken with a grain of salt. However, it is true that the crisis left Lukashenka severely delegitimized in the eyes of the West and thus increasingly dependent on Russia, both politically and economically (see Leukavets 2021). The recent transfer of Belarusian oil exports from the Baltic countries to Russian ports in the Leningrad Oblast is one sign of this (Warsaw Institute 2021). Talks of a “deeper integration” between the two countries have been resumed, though Lukashenka is certain to resist a real transfer of power to Moscow as much as he can. In sum, if we assume that the overarching aim of the EU’s policy in the last decade was to enhance Belarus’s sovereignty and to decrease its dependence on Russia, then, as of 2021, its fruits look rather disappointing.

After 2020: more of the same or “same same but different”?

Putting things in a longer-term perspective, it is not difficult to observe that Belarus’s relations with both the EU and Russia have been developing in cycles. Lukashenka’s strategy has been long described as “playing both sides” (Nice 2013). In the process, the regime went through several crises and challenges but proved to be a regime of “adaptive authoritarianism” (Fear 2019) that always found some room for maneuver. Seen from the long-term perspective, the present situation may resemble some of the previous cycles. It will certainly not be the first time that Minsk is isolated from the West and turns to Russia. (Soon, however, the Kremlin will once again find out that, when it comes to a so-called integration, Lukashenka may compromise on small things but does not intend to surrender any of his own sovereignty to Moscow.)

So, is there then nothing new about the present situation? On the contrary, one could argue that it is characterized by a certain novelty, due to the fact that the options for every involved actor have become severely limited, at least for the time being.

The regime

For Lukashenka, the present situation is anything but comfortable. Following 2020, his room for maneuver has arguably decreased more than any other player's. He launched a campaign of mass intimidation because he needs to demonstrate that he has the situation in Belarus under firm control. He is sending a message to multiple audiences, which include both his own law enforcement and civil servants and his frenemies in the East. To Moscow, Lukashenka remains an asset only as long as he can prevent Belarus from collapsing into an uncontrolled regime change with a hypothetical pro-Western government eventually coming to power in Minsk.

The Kremlin seems to be careful to not provoke a regime change and even extends its public support to Lukashenka in critical moments. However, it also seems to be tired of empty promises and to have neither the will nor the capacity to restore the previous levels of economic support. The profitable business of reexporting processed Russian natural resources (which, in the past, practically made Belarus a *petrostate without oil*) is over, as are the "fat years" during which the regime could redistribute part of the oil wealth. The "authoritarian modernization" failed without even starting, and no Eastern European Singapore was born out of the post-Soviet paternalist dictatorship. IT companies, which were supposed to be a new source of national income, are fleeing Belarus, and the authorities have very little to look forward to in terms of economic growth.

This would be a perfect time to ask the West for some help, except that this door seems shut now, perhaps for good. After unprecedented brutality, going back to business as usual, if at all possible, would probably take several years, unless there was some kind of a major geopolitical earthquake like the 2014 Ukraine crisis. For the dialog to begin, the West would probably demand, as a minimum, the release of all political prisoners and some sort of investigation into the mass police brutality and tortures. That would already be something, which would be too costly for the regime, as it would jeopardize its current grip on power. However, following the May 2021 Ryanair plane incident this scenario seems even less likely. As a number of analysts pointed out, through this unprecedented incident, the Belarusian domestic political crisis was *externalized*. Many in the EU began to identify Lukashenka as a regional

security issue rather than just a local human-rights one. This clearly goes against both the liberal European notion of building “a ring of friends” and the more *realpolitik* logic of finding compromises with authoritarian regimes in order to achieve tactical security objectives for the Union.

The Ryanair plane incident was further exacerbated by the flow of irregular migrants into Lithuania. Lukashenka openly stated that, in response to economic sanctions, Belarus would stop helping the EU guard its borders. Vilnius, however, accused the Minsk regime of deliberately weaponizing international migration in retaliation for Lithuania’s active support of the protest movement in Belarus. All this contributes to a new European perception of Belarus in which its rulers are seen as increasingly dangerous and unpredictable. This is the complete opposite of the image of a “regional stability donor” which the official Minsk was trying to sell the West following its 2014 “diplomatic breakthrough.”

Lukashenka’s room for maneuver has also been narrowed down by the fact that there have also been some cracks in the regime itself. In August, several Belarusian high-ranking diplomats abroad resigned in protest, and there were other, less pronounced expressions of discontent among the diplomatic corps. These events were absolutely unprecedented. The regime had resorted to crackdowns before, but the state apparatus had always appeared monolithic. In this case, even some law enforcement members decided to part ways with the regime. The authorities managed to preempt a mass desertion of the law enforcement, among other things, by cracking down on public initiatives like BYSOL, which had offered financial support to those policemen, who voluntarily resigned from service (Davies 2020).

Law enforcement members are also on the hook. Thus, for many policemen, retiring from service prematurely would mean having to repay large sums of money that cover their student and mortgage loans (Salidarnaść 2020). On the other hand, in a truly critical situation, this is probably not the best instrument for ensuring loyalty. While many among the police force and those in civil service presently do not have the courage to part ways with the regime, at least some of them must realize that the present situation is a dead end in the long run. None of this contributes to the robustness of the existing political system and its ability to absorb further shocks.

Finally, Lukashenka is now faced with a new Belarusian society. The levels of political mobilization, self-organization, and horizontal solidarity, which the latter demonstrated in 2020, were truly unprecedented. Some observers even went as far as calling this a rebirth of the Belarusian nation (Przybylski 2020). Many citizens, who previously preferred to remain apolitical, were now actively involved in politics. After several months of street protests, the regime seemed to have won a tactical victory, and the opposition leaders were publicly admitting that the authorities had managed to take control of the streets (Le Temps 2021). An online poll, which a German research center carried out in December 2020, cited fear as the most frequent reason for not taking part in the protests (Douglas et al).

However, this did not mean that things could go back to business as usual. Arguably, a point of no return had been passed in the relations between the state and the society in Belarus. The existing political regime had suffered a severe crisis of legitimacy and many had learned their lessons about how politics worked in their country. In particular, this applied to those who had remained politically passive in previous years and were now exposed to shocking levels of violence. In a situation where no new sources of economic growth are likely to be discovered and the authorities have little to offer the population besides police truncheons, reinventing the so called “social contract” seems to be an impossible task.

In the end, Lukashenka emerged both strengthened and weakened from the 2020 crisis. The regime now relied much more heavily on the police, army, and the secret services (the *siloviki*) and managed to keep the repressive apparatus consolidated for the moment. However, the crisis dealt a severe blow to the political legitimacy of the regime, both domestically and internationally, and drastically narrowed its room for maneuver.

Opposition and civil society

The options of Belarus’s opposition and civil society also remain limited. Contrary to what some protestors might have expected, the 2020 summer-fall protests did not bring about quick change. Some visible cracks in the system

had appeared, but there was no active *elite fragmentation*. (Elite fragmentation is typically quoted as a key precondition for the collapse of authoritarian regimes.) Furthermore, the street protests were grassroots decentralized, and thus, their momentum did not depend much on the opposition leaders' circumstances. However, the most prominent members of the Coordination Council were either imprisoned or forced to emigrate, and thus, the Council could form a focal point for potential elite defection.

The Kremlin committed itself to supporting Lukashenka, despite the multiple public gestures that Tsikhanouskaya and other opposition leaders made, striving to assure Moscow that regime change in Belarus would not mean leaving the Russian sponsored post-Soviet integration frameworks. Foreign policy agenda was also conspicuously absent from the street protests. Unlike on the Ukrainian Maidan, EU flags were rarely present here if at all. The protest movement seemed to be deliberately avoiding geopolitical issues, focusing on the domestic demands for free and fair elections, rule of law, and an end to brutality (Kazharski and Makarychev 2021).

In principle, there was no shortage of opposition leaders who could be friendly to Russia and with whom Moscow could easily do business. The options varied from the Gazprom bank affiliated Viktor Babaryka to the former minister of culture Pavel Latushka, whose connections among the high-ranking civil servants (*nomenklatura*) would certainly help in the power transition process. But the Kremlin has always had its own very peculiar approach to political change in the post-Soviet area. As a result, prominent opposition figures either ended up in prison or had to take refuge in the EU. Tsikhanouskaya toured foreign capitals and received much public support from Western political leaders. However, the West had no instruments to make Lukashenka resign, or at least, it was not willing to use them. In the end, Tsikhanouskaya's team had to play with whatever cards it had. A general strike announced in the fall of 2020 did not work out. The more recent attempt to use the *Holas* (Voice) online platform in order to organize a national vote in support of a dialog between the authorities and the people gathered around 750,000 votes. Though an impressive number, it did not create the feeling of a clear majority.

Massive repression has made not only political but also civic and cultural activism in the country significantly more difficult. Prior to 2020, Belarus was

enjoying a period of what some referred to as “soft Belarusization” (see Marin 2019). Though the term itself is misleading, there were indeed certain observable tendencies in Lukashenka’s neo-Soviet regime towards a reappropriation of historical and cultural Belarusian symbols, which had previously been used largely by the anti-regime opposition. This coincided with a growth of public interest in the Belarusian language, history, and culture. Massive use of the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia (Chase) coat of arms during the 2020 street rallies demonstrated that the broader public had appropriated them as symbols of anti-authoritarian protest (see Kazharski 2021; Kulakevich 2020). The ensuing repressions dealt a severe blow to this “soft” national revival. For instance, the famous Symbal.By brand, which was credited with mass popularization of the historical white-red-white colors through its merchandise, had to close its store (Symbal.By 2021). Other important centers of Belarusian culture also fell victim to the crackdowns. The state Kupala Theater, which for many years had been a token of national identity, was literally left standing empty when its entire company walked out in solidarity with their former director Pavel Latushka.

In short, the August protests gave birth to a new political subject, the Belarusian civil society. However, its options remain limited. The democratic protest movement did not manage to bring about a quick regime change, and Lukashenka launched a strong counteroffensive. Among other things, the authorities actively try to use the counter-extremism and counter-terrorism agenda as a pretext for further crackdowns. Prominent members of the Coordination Council have already been added to the list of people linked to terrorism (Kudrytski 2021), and there are indications that new laws against the “glorification of Nazism” would be used to prosecute protestors (Euroradio 2020). Attaching the “Nazi” label to the democratic opposition essentially follows the same propaganda trope of the Kremlin that, in the past, has been used against Ukraine (see Gaufman 2017) and the Baltic states (Król 2017).

Many suggest that in a situation when both sides have limited options, the regime and the civil society are bound for a long war of attrition. The protest movement may have changed its form, but it shows no signs of giving up. However, this war of attrition is likely to result in long-term uncertainty for Belarus and massive loss of human capital, as many talented and economically active people will be fleeing the country.

Russia

The Kremlin's options in Belarus have always been limited by its own, very peculiar approach to the post-Soviet countries. On the one hand, Belarus has clearly been a case of "sponsored authoritarianism" (Leukavets 2021), and Russia's economic and cultural influence (Rudkouski 2021) in Belarus has remained strong. On the other hand, the symbolic importance of alliances that Moscow had been sponsoring in order to confirm its hegemonic status in the post-Soviet area translated into a situation of *mutual* dependence. Not unfrequently, this resulted in a situation of the *tail wagging the dog*. The Kremlin had no choice but to accept Lukashenka despite his oftentimes confrontational behavior and unwillingness to deliver on the integration agenda.

Lukashenka, in turn, had been careful to neutralize the possible pro-Russian alternatives in Belarus. For example, in the 2020 presidential campaign, the two major candidates Viktor Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanouski were preventively imprisoned. Babaryka had worked as head of Belgazprombank, a subsidiary of Gazprombank, and was rumored to have had ties with Moscow. Tsikhanouski had once even been a supporter of Putin's annexation of Crimea, though he said to have changed his mind later, seeing how the Russian state media had been lying about the protests in Belarus (Radyjo Racyja 2021).

In Belarus, Moscow has always been entrapped by its imperial identity, which required sponsoring its strange allies or, to be more precise, clients. By 2021, Russia itself was undergoing regime erosion. The protests in Khabarovsk erupted almost simultaneously with the Belarusian protests, and the slogans of solidarity with Belarus that the Russian protestors used (Makarychev 2021) were hardly music to the Kremlin's ears. Naturally, the political situation in Russia was nowhere near to that of Belarus. Relative to the population size, the number of people that took to the streets in Moscow following the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny in February 2021 were but a fraction of the 2020 Minsk mass protests. Still, it is not difficult to guess that these protests have not helped to alleviate the traditional *Maidanophobia*, i.e., fear of the so-called "color revolutions," which the Kremlin, it seems, sincerely believes to be a Western plot.

It is likely that irrational fear of a revolutionary spillover was the main reason why the Kremlin extended its support to Lukashenka, despite the multiple disappointments he brought in the past. By the spring of 2021, the talk of a hypothetical “constitution reform,” which Moscow was pushing for during the active phase of the protests in 2020, had all but died down. Lukashenka does not seem to be willing to make any changes to his absolutist political system. Chances are that the “reform” will end up being what the so-called Union State of Belarus and Russia has always been, i.e., a phantom, a promise that was often made to Moscow but was never fulfilled.

The Kremlin’s options are limited above all by its own, self-created vulnerability. Its peculiar approach to domestic and international politics have locked it into supporting Lukashenka. At the same time, it cannot force him into a “managed” transition of power in the Russian or Kazakhstani fashion. Muddling through with things unchanged, however, has its own risks and costs. Lukashenka will remain a toxic figure for both the citizens of Belarus and the international community. Backing him publicly harms Russia’s soft power in Belarus, while any serious integration deals signed after 2020 could be easily questioned later on the grounds of the president having been illegitimate.

The European Union

In the past years, the EU has been swamped with multiple crises, both within the Union and on its frontiers. Its security strategy, based on stabilizing the neighborhood by exporting good governance and economic prosperity, has worked only partially at best. Consequently, crisis management needs have pushed it towards closer cooperation with dubious leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The EU’s relations with Minsk had improved following the Ukraine crisis and the “diplomatic breakthrough” that Lukashenka enjoyed as the host of the negotiations. From the point of view of Brussels, having another crisis in the East was the last thing it wanted at the moment. Against the background of a war in Ukraine, “Europe’s last dictatorship” (with its relative stability and predictability) was beginning to look almost amiable.

2020 put an end to the illusions of stability. However, with memories of the 2014 Ukraine crisis still fresh, the EU was very careful not to “geopolitize” its stance on Belarus, probably fearing that this could trigger a reaction from Russia. On the other hand, insofar as the EU’s public image was one of an entity built on norms and values, it could not simply play *Realpolitik*. Brussels could not ignore the massive demand for democracy demonstrated by the protests or the brutality of the crackdowns that were truly unprecedented, even for Belarus. Some estimate that Europe has not seen this scale of repression since the 1969-1974 colonel junta in Greece (Novy Čas 2021a), and April 2021 brought new reports of a systematic application of torture executed on the detained protestors (Novy Čas 2021b).

The EU’s options are also more limited now than before. With the instruments it is presently willing to use, it cannot secure a democratic transition in Belarus, and nor can it easily go back to business as usual. Human rights violations in the neighborhood were one thing, but the Ryanair plane incident and the “little migration crisis” that Lithuania is experiencing now make engagement much more costly, as these issues immediately concern the security of the Union and its citizens. On the other hand, it can be argued that the engagement policy practiced towards Belarus prior to the 2020 crisis did not bring any tangible results in the end. No gradual transformation, either economic or political, was achieved. All this means that, following 2020, the EU will have to reinvent its strategy towards Belarus in case it still wants to be present there as a meaningful actor.

Conclusion

2020 was a historic year for Belarus, marked by unprecedented political mobilization. This mobilization politicized large segments of the Belarusian society, whose indifference had hitherto been a key factor of regime stability. Decentralized grassroots protests gave birth to a new civil society, as innovative forms of horizontal solidarity and creative approaches to local community building emerged. Thus, 2020 changed the political landscape of Belarus forever, and there are certain points of no return that have been passed in the relations between the regime and the society.

The authoritarian regime reinvented itself by drastically expanding the scale of political repression as compared to previous years. In the new situation, with political mobilization surging, and its political legitimacy shrinking, it could no longer rely on the “selective punishment” method that it had previously used to intimidate the politically active minority. The short-term prospects for the civil society in Belarus may therefore be grim, as the authorities clearly see mass repression as an effective tactic and are placing the logic of regime survival above any ethical, political, or economic concerns. No real dialog with the opposition and the civil society is likely to take place under these circumstances.

For all the domestic and foreign actors involved, the room for maneuver has narrowed and the policy options have become more limited. The authorities have locked themselves into a strategy of repression and intimidation. The Western foreign policy option is now unavailable, at least for the time being. This means that the previous scheme of playing the East against the West will not work in the near future, unless there is a major geopolitical development that will overshadow the Belarus crisis.

The Kremlin, in turn, has locked itself into supporting the official in Minsk, but its leverage on Lukashenka remains limited. It certainly has the capacity to bring the regime down, but it is not able to secure a managed transition that would leave Belarus with a new, Russia-friendly but less toxic ruler. Russia's backing of Lukashenka has already lost it some friends in Belarus, and from now on, he will generally be a very bad investment.

The EU's leverage in Belarus is more modest, and its options are also limited. Following 2020, it will be much more difficult, if at all possible, to start another round of engaging Minsk. The decade of engagement policy (2009-2020, with interruptions) did not bring any tangible results. No gradual transformation, whether political or economic, has been achieved, and Belarus remains both dependent on Russia and potentially threatened by it, as the 2020 crisis clearly demonstrated. The EU will need to both reinvent its strategy towards Belarus and prepare a clear emergency plan in case there is abrupt change. The collapse of an authoritarian regime is never an event one can quite predict. In the meantime, the EU should show more solidarity with the victims of mass political repressions, which are happening right at its doorstep.

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