

Winds of change in Belarus: implications for the EU

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Executive Summary

- > The crisis in Belarus arising from the contested August 2020 presidential election is unprecedented: primarily internal, it has important repercussions for the region and the European Union.
- > Within the European Union, the crisis has altered the dynamics of the traditional division of labour. Despite a new leadership promise by Belarus' neighbour Lithuania, the Union should generally focus more on speaking with one voice in this crisis.
- > From the regional perspective of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the crisis has highlighted that the EU has to rethink its approach to the country, revitalize the multilateral dimension of the Partnership and further strengthen its cooperation with key cooperation partners, notably Ukraine.
- > From the general viewpoint of regional stability, the Belarus crisis could substantially alter security in Central Europe and cause its further militarisation. There is still a window of opportunity, however, that a national dialogue in Belarus could maintain the security-related status quo and possibly also re-dynamise EU-Russia cooperation in their 'shared neighbourhood'.
- > To ultimately deal with the consequences of the 2020 elections, the EU needs to rethink its policies by enhancing humanitarian aid, retargeting political dialogue towards civil society, imposing targeted sanctions regarding Belarus and reinforcing its energy diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia.

Election fraud followed by the disproportionate use of force against peaceful protesters in Belarus strongly weakened the legitimacy of the country's leader, A. Lukashenka, as the Belarusian people have shown their

palpable desire for change. Reacting to the protests that arose after the August 2020 presidential election in Belarus, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated: "The Belarusian population wants change, and wants it now. The EU stands by them" (EEAS 2020). Even if the outcome of this ongoing political crisis remains uncertain, it may have profound (geo)political consequences for the EU's external action, altering security arrangements in Central Europe and affecting the Eastern Partnership (EaP). It is thus essential for the EU to re-consider its relations with Belarus in order to build a constructive and comprehensive approach towards Minsk.

This policy brief discusses the current political crisis in Belarus and suggests ways policy-makers in the EU might respond to it. It begins with a clarification of the Belarusian unrest and the EU's hesitant response. The brief then discusses the possible (geo)political repercussions of the crisis for the EU before considering various ways to address them.

EU relations with Belarus

In its relations with Belarus, the EU has always seemed rather reserved. An authoritarian regime closely allied with the Kremlin, Belarus under Lukashenka was viewed in Brussels as little more than a Russian satellite state. As a result, the EU's engagement has been limited, favouring a stable, albeit not democratic, neighbour.

Relations between Brussels and Minsk have been overshadowed by problems ever since Belarus fell into authoritarianism in the mid-1990s. Following the 1996 unconstitutional referendum that significantly extended the powers of the Belarusian President, the ratification of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was suspended in 1996 and no Action Plan has been adopted to date (EEAS 2016). Human rights violations, limited political contacts with the West and repeated election frauds have become 'business-as-usual' in the country.

As a result, the EU opted for a policy of ‘critical engagement’, limiting the bilateral dialogue to selective, mostly technical cooperation, for example within the 2008 Framework Agreement on technical cooperation and through the 2020 visa facilitation agreement. In turn, Lukashenka gradually transformed the country into a Soviet-model authoritarian regime, presenting himself as the guarantor of state sovereignty vis-à-vis the EU. Paradoxically, however, the deterioration of his country’s relations with Brussels has made it even more dependent on the Kremlin, raising legitimate concerns about its sovereignty.

The unprecedented nature of the 2020 crisis calls the rationale of the EU’s approach vis-à-vis Belarus into question.

Uniqueness of the 2020 Belarus crisis

The current turmoil in Belarus is unique for at least two reasons. First, the protests triggered by the 2020 presidential election fraud and subsequent police brutality, have never been so massive, continuous and widespread across the entire country. They demonstrate profound changes in the Belarusian society, which is now prepared to express its utter dissatisfaction with the leadership in Minsk.

Second, the public awakening in Belarus cannot be compared to Ukraine’s Maidan or the Armenian Velvet revolution. In contrast to Ukraine’s aspirations towards EU and NATO membership, the protesters in Belarus do not pursue any foreign policy goals. Instead, their demands are triggered by the most serious internal crisis of the regime resulting from discontent with its unprecedented brutality. Moreover, the geopolitical constellation of the Belarusian crisis is distinctive, too. Despite the strong economic bounds and military presence, Russia has neither the same security leverage over Belarus as over Armenia (due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict), nor comparably strong geostrategic interests as in the case of Ukraine with respect to the Black Sea region (Kazharski and Makarychev 2020).

These two aspects of the crisis point to opportunities for the EU to engage with Belarus: on the one hand, it could lend support to the democratic transition by engaging with the Belarusian civil society; on the other hand, there may be a greater opportunity to cooperate with Russia than in the cases of Ukraine or Armenia.

The EU’s initial weak response to Belarusian turmoil

If compared to its experience with the other countries of the Eastern Partnership, the EU has initially been rather

prudent when it came to playing an active role (beyond rhetoric) in this new turmoil in its Eastern neighbourhood.

This cautious approach can, first, be explained by the fears of escalating its conflict with Russia. The EU is wary of turning this primarily domestic Belarusian crisis into another geopolitical contestation with the Kremlin by taking a more active stance. An engagement via the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) which has been accepted by Russia in other cases (such as in the Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh or the ‘5+2’ negotiations format on Transnistria), appears to be a more viable solution.

However, the pressure not to neglect the neighbour is on, with the EU having already been accused of expressing insufficient solidarity with the Belarusians evidenced by more attention given to the fall-out of police brutality in the case of George Floyd’s death in the US than to democratic protests in its vicinity (Mielnik 2020, p. 158).

Second, this apparent lack of interest on the part of the EU may stem from the current intra-EU political and institutional setting. Politicians from Poland, a traditional advocate of the Eastern cause, are hardly visible in the present division of labour, and the Commissioner responsible for neighbourhood comes from Hungary, a currently equally discredited country due to rule of law issues. By contrast, the most prominent positions, along with the Presidency of the Council, are held by individuals coming from the ‘old’ member states, often having different priorities than Central and Eastern European members. Warsaw’s attempts to call an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council to discuss the situation in Belarus already on 10 August – the day after the elections – illustrate this: it succeeded only after complementing the agenda with items related to the Eastern Mediterranean and Mali, and resulted merely in the start of discussions over sanctions.

An even more pronounced example of the neglect of the ongoing crisis by leading EU figures from Western Europe could be observed after the emergency video conference of the European Council on 19 August when the EU’s Internal Market Commissioner Breton claimed that “Belarus is not Europe, it is on the border of Europe” (Poland In, 2020) or when, on another occasion, the Spanish MEP Pineda accused the Belarusian opposition candidate, Tsikhanouskaya, of “looking for bloodbath” (Walsh 2020).

In this cacophonous context, the evident leadership void was, somewhat unexpectedly, filled by Vilnius. It is in Lithuania that Tsikhanouskaya found refuge to continue her combat and was first recognized as elected leader of

Belarus (Seimas of Lithuania 2020). Interestingly, this seems to suggest that the insights of a small, but credible country, may be more valued by the EU institutions and other member states than appeals of a member currently perceived as breaching the rule of law.

Altogether, the intra-EU interest divergence and varying assessments of the gravity of situation constitute a powerful illustration of the EU's weak position vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbours. It compels the Union to consolidate its efforts and speak with one voice. At the same time, the situation may also plead in favour of handing the leadership in dealing with the Belarus crisis to the OSCE.

The fact that the Belarus crisis has also affected the dynamics on the regional level reinforces the need for a more coherent EU approach as well as the rationale for a stronger role for the OSCE. As the latter is composed of both Eastern and Western actors, and both Russia and Belarus are fully-fledged members of OSCE, a national dialogue under this umbrella might be a suitable way out of the crisis.

The effects of the Belarus crisis on the Eastern Partnership: opportunities and risks

Belarus has been of undeniable importance for the Eastern Partnership region both as a transit country for energy sources and as a host of the peace negotiations for the conflict in Donbas.

A possible regime change could further enhance its cooperation with regional partners and revitalize the multilateral dimension of the EaP, enabling Minsk to join the club of like-minded states. This would not necessarily mean that the latter shall (or could) become an ambitious frontrunner and simply follow Georgian, Ukrainian or Moldovan paths leading to the conclusion of association agreements with the EU. Given its complex ties with Russia, the more foreseeable scenario for Minsk is to mimic Armenia and Azerbaijan, balancing pro-Russian and pro-Western sentiments and interests, and not aspiring to become a member of the EU. Due to the same strong bond with the Kremlin, however, any attempt of approximation with the West, even the most superficial one, may have negative geopolitical consequences.

While there may be these prospects, the Belarusian crisis has so far contributed to a further decomposition of the EaP. Whereas the democratic movement in Belarus has found overwhelming support of Ukraine and Georgia, Armenia together with Azerbaijan and Moldova congratulated Lukashenka on his widely-questioned victory. Furthermore, where the current turmoil has scaled up support to the Belarusians by its neighbours at a

societal level (also in Moldova and Armenia), in some cases it has further deteriorated relations at the highest political level.

This dividing effect of the crisis does not diminish the value that the transition experience of the other EaP countries (in particular, Ukraine) may hold for Belarus. Kyiv's ambition is to pursue the approximation with the EU to the largest possible extent and to extend the bilateral cooperation to new domains. The Belarusian turmoil may create a window of opportunity for Ukraine to tighten its cooperation with the EU, sharing the aim of supporting the neighbour and making Brussels perceive Kyiv as a strategic partner in the region, sharing its transition experience and having considerable geopolitical interests in settling the crisis.

It is precisely this latter role Ukraine could play that Lukashenka tries to prevent in his attempt to stay in power and gain Russian support. This was illustrated on 11 September when – in violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations – Belarusian custom officers searched the car of Ukrainian Ambassador to Belarus Kizim on the Belarus-Ukraine border. This shows that under Lukashenka Belarus is likely to further distance itself not only from the EU, but also from its non-EU neighbours, possibly rolling back onto the already slow progress. This distancing will primarily concern the neighbouring Ukraine, as Belarus will certainly fail to keep its role as a host of Ukraine talks when losing its 'situational neutrality'. Additionally, Lukashenka's 'bargaining game' of trading off sovereignty to Russia for political support and subsidies poses a real risk of Belarus losing its sovereignty.

The resultant elimination of Belarus as buffer zone between the EU and Russia may have important consequences for regional and European security.

The Belarus crisis and the 'Russian factor': possible implications for regional security

Russia plays an important role in EU-Belarus relations. The Kremlin perceives Belarus in terms of its policies towards its 'near abroad' (the 'shared neighbourhood', in the EU jargon). This has already been used by Lukashenka when trying to activate the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to engage Russia in – what is so far – an internal crisis. For this purpose, Minsk has publicly denounced the threats coming from its neighbours Poland and Lithuania, both NATO members.

So far, Russia has refused to talk to the Belarusian opposition leader Tsikhanouskaya and the Belarusian Opposition's Coordination Council. Fears about possible

democratisation and ‘Westernization’ of Belarus as well as a potential spread of the revolutionary mind-set to Russia make the Kremlin rather watchful. In contrast to European politicians who started to develop dialogue with the Belarusian opposition, Moscow has noticeably increased its contacts with Lukashenka’s regime, possibly expecting to make trade-offs as regards the deepening of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. This runs counter to the otherwise widening rift over political integration within the ‘Union State’ between Belarus and Russia, oil prices and trade disputes. These reinforced contacts have raised fears about the erosion of post-Soviet independence of Belarus.

Such a scenario poses serious concerns in terms of a possible militarisation of Eastern Europe, altering the security context in Central Europe. Although Belarus under Lukashenka has remained more pro-Russian rather than a mere ‘buffer state’, as an independent country it has managed to provide security for Poland and Lithuania and to defend the Suwalki corridor linking the Russian exclave Kaliningrad with Belarus. A militarization of Belarus would thus eliminate the last area in the ‘shared neighbourhood’ that is free of direct EU-Russia confrontation and would further cut off the Baltic states. The EU’s apparent unwillingness to use its energy diplomacy and foreign and security policy more forcefully suggests that the international costs of such actions for Russia may be low.

To maintain a security-related status quo in Eastern Europe, the EU must learn its lessons from the past and consider engaging in a dialogue with Moscow aimed at jointly handling the turmoil in the shared neighbourhood. While the minimum target should be cooperation to support a peaceful settlement of the ongoing crisis, in a very optimistic scenario one could even envisage the Belarus crisis as a stepping stone for building mutual trust and cooperation around regional security between the EU and Russia.

Recommendations: the way forward for the EU

While the Belarus crisis is primarily an internal conflict, the country occupies a strategic position that makes it important for both the EU (especially Central Europe) and Russia. Although a direct engagement of Brussels in the conflict may be undesirable and could cause significant geopolitical repercussions, the EU’s and its member states’ support for the unprecedented civic activism in Belarus is vital for maintaining European security and EU legitimacy in the region. Going forward, the EU’s approach should therefore rely centrally on three pillars.

First, the EU’s current internal East-West divide and the limited role of the East risks marginalising the Belarus crisis as a topic and undermining the EU’s role in tackling it. The EU member states should therefore be called upon to sincerely cooperate on the elaboration of a strategy that goes beyond the (absence of) particular interests. This latter should include, but not be limited to, the imposition of targeted sanctions aimed at the Lukashenka regime which would give a strong signal of the EU’s united position. An assertive response by the EU could, for instance, consist of a refusal to buy electricity imports from the Astravets power plant in Belarus, the project that has already raised major concerns among the Central and Eastern European countries in terms of its safety.

Furthermore, to effectively respond to the Belarus crisis, the EU needs to keep Russia in check. For this, the EU could intensify its energy diplomacy vis-à-vis Moscow in the framework of the Russian-backed Nord Stream 2. Given the poisoning of key Russian opposition leader Navalny and the situation in Belarus, the completion of this project would further embolden the increasingly aggressive foreign policy course of Putin’s Russia.

Second, the enduring urge for freedom and democracy of the Belarusians should prompt the EU to develop an integrated approach to support victims of police brutality, promote dialogue with the Belarusian civil society and freedom of speech. In particular, this could be done by using EaP platforms and engaging the other Eastern Partnership countries, notably Ukraine, in exchanges of experience and good practices, further liberalising visa requirements and sending targeted aid.

Third, the EU needs to advocate for OSCE mediation with a view to starting a dialogue on a democratic transition of power with the help of the Coordination Council of Belarus. In this respect it is crucial to engage with Russia by inviting the Kremlin to the negotiation table instead of waiting for it to take the lead.

To conclude, while it is important, as HR/VP Borrell (Cué 2020) stated, not “to turn Belarus into a second Ukraine”, the political crisis in the shared neighbourhood should not see distancing of the EU either. The current phase of the conflict provides some space for its peaceful resolution, and the EU’s role in it is indispensable for the Belarusians.

Further reading

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