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THE BELARUSIAN REVOLUTION OF 2020

AFTERWORD

The Belarusian Revolution challenged the Lukashenka regime but did not bring it down. It is, however, clear that the structural factors behind the revolution have been sustained. The West should increase efforts to achieve political and economic transformation in the country.

Belarus has drawn considerable international attention during the past year. On the one hand, the domestic political crisis caused a true humanitarian catastrophe with tens of thousands of people incarcerated, tortured, otherwise repressed, or forced to leave the country. On the other hand, the sudden but logical metamorphosis of the Minsk regime presented a foreign and security policy challenge for the EU to which Brussels had no answer.

In August 2020 Belarus was deeply shaken. For a moment, a widescale popular protest against the rigged presidential election seemed capable of putting the country's long-time leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his system of governance in a tight spot. However,

the regime survived the revolutionary tide. The reaction that followed brought about an unprecedented crackdown on civil society, independent media, and the country's nascent middle class.

There are several reasons why the regime did not collapse. First, the democratic movement lacked leadership and coherent organization. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, believed by protesters to have won the election and duly becoming a symbolic figure, was in practice unable to assume the role of a unifying and universally acknowledged leader. Moreover, several opposition centres that emerged, primarily in Vilnius, Warsaw and Riga, competed among themselves. Lacking experience, the democratic movement faced

numerous organizational challenges and suffered from obscure principles of work and decision-making. The leaderless nature of the protest, originally seen by some analysts as an advantage due to the regime's inability to decapitate such a protest, ultimately worked against it. Disorganized, the protesters could not take a stand against the centralized state and its massive and loyal repressive machinery.

Second, the opposition proved unable to present a clear platform that would attract and tie together various social and particularly elite groups. Nor was a positive agenda for post-Lukashenka Belarus offered. In other words, whereas the protesters knew all too well what they were fighting against, they did not

know what they were struggling for. This lack of clarity concerning both tactical and strategic goals played its part in the eventual de-mobilization of society.

Third, the external conditions were not favourable either. Russia intervened on the side of the regime and granted it the necessary political, diplomatic and financial resources. For a year now, Moscow has not given any reason to doubt its support for Lukashenka. In contrast, the EU was too hesitant to go beyond condemnatory rhetoric. Its decisions were belated and contradictory. Symbolically, the first three rounds of sanctions (adopted on October 2, November 19, and December 17) were weaker even in combination than similar measures taken in January 2011 in response to the crackdown on the opposition after the presidential election of December 2010, which was also rigged. Lukashenka himself was not a target of sanctions until November 2020.

All of this, however, does not mean that the revolution has come to an end. Structural drivers behind the protest and popular grievances have not been addressed and cannot be addressed through repression. Lukashenka's choice to run

a divided country in a divisive way cannot restore stability. Furthermore, the regime's obsession with taking revenge for the unrest a year ago makes it mistake-prone.

A major miscalculation took place in May when Belarusian authorities hijacked a Ryanair plane that was crossing the country's airspace en route from Greece to Lithuania in order to detain an opposition activist, Raman Pratasevich. In response, the EU imposed targeted economic sanctions on Belarus that may eventually bite. If Lukashenka continues to escalate, for example by allowing illegal migrants or drugs to reach the EU, more sanctions may follow, aggravating the internal situation.

Looking ahead, the West should, first of all, firmly recognize that the democratic transition in Belarus is in its interest. The EU in particular should learn from past mistakes – of being too indulgent towards the regime, which considers the West an ideological and geopolitical threat – and avoid re-engaging with it until preconditions are met, be this with or without Lukashenka at the helm.

European capitals should also realize that waiting for Moscow to “fix” the problem may promise

temporary stabilization, but is much more likely to turn Belarus into a source of long-term geopolitical tension. Equally, the West's concern that pressure on Minsk will drive Belarus deeper into Russia's arms is misguided. As its continued support illustrates, the Kremlin considers Lukashenka to be the best available guarantor of Belarus staying within the Russian orbit.

Instead, the West should stick to the principled approach. It is important to maintain pressure on the regime, to identify and close potential loopholes in the sanctions regime, and demand the unconditional release of political prisoners. Even more importantly, the West should consider how to facilitate democratic transition in the country, helping civil society to rebuild its capacity beyond opposition structures abroad. It should do its utmost to make sure that the national dialogue gets underway in the country, the purpose of which will be the beginning of the political liberalization and economic reforms that the Belarusian people aspire to. Eventually, this could lead to the orderly departure of the current regime and Belarus's transformation into a modern European nation. /