

NO CHANGE ON THE HORIZON

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BELARUS AFTER THE 2015 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Arkady Moshes & András Rác

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- Incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko is very likely to win the presidential elections in Belarus on 11 October 2015. The opposition is unable and – perhaps, therefore – unwilling to challenge Lukashenko, while a decisive majority of the population supports the president. Meanwhile, the regime and the opposition share an interest in protecting Belarusian statehood from Russia. At present, the key actor in performing this mission is the president, who has been ruling the country since 1994. Also for this reason, there will be no Belarusian version of Maidan in Minsk.
- However, Lukashenko’s foreseeable victory is not going to stop the process of Belarus gradually conceding key elements of its sovereignty to Russia. The regime is not economically sustainable without constant and massive support from Russia. In exchange for this support, Russia has been slowly but steadily strengthening its control over the foreign policy, defence sector and economics of Belarus.
- The EU has neither the readiness nor the resources to confront Russia over Belarus, let alone to substitute the former in supporting Lukashenko, whereas, as stated, a regime change is not to be expected. What is more, even though the Belarusian leadership is undoubtedly concerned about the increasing assertiveness of Russia, it would be a mistake to count on significant policy shifts in Minsk – simply because Belarus is structurally hardly able to conduct any.
- Softening the EU approach towards the issue of political democracy and human rights in Belarus in anticipation of certain geopolitical gains would only compromise the credibility of the EU’s policy as a value-based entity, and not generate any positive change on the ground. Instead, EU engagement with Minsk could focus on issues of trade, the promotion of economic reforms and on education, in order to prepare for the post-Lukashenko – and also for the post-Putin – era.

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Introduction

The Ukraine crisis, and the worsening relations between Russia and the West to a level unseen since the end of the Cold War, presented all countries in the EU-Russian shared neighbourhood with an urgent need to react, to adapt to the changing circumstances and to make new and sometimes tough policy choices. Belarus is no exception to the rule. Although it remains Moscow's closest partner, Minsk is nevertheless reluctant "by default" to follow the former in the confrontation with the West and would rather occupy a niche of its own.

In turn, a number of prominent Western analysts and politicians are ready to see a window of opportunity opening for re-engaging with Minsk. They argue that the approach towards Belarus should be softened in order to reward Minsk for the mediator role that Belarus has played during the negotiations over the war in Ukraine and for the release of six political prisoners last August. The underlying idea is to help Belarus to offset the political and economic pressure exerted by Russia.¹ Moreover, the first step has already been taken: on 31 July, 2015 Brussels decided² to remove 24 Belarusian officials from the sanctions list adopted in response to the crackdown on the opposition protests in 2010.

The presidential elections to be held in Belarus on October 11, 2015 create a certain, and not just symbolic, context for the architects of a new rapprochement. If "progress" in the conduct of the elections is observed, an argument in favour of "turning the page" will sound stronger. The question that will remain, however, is to what extent Alexander

Lukashenko's³ Belarus – as his victory at the polls is inevitable – will actually be capable of bringing about any fundamental changes on the ground.

This Briefing Paper examines the likely domestic and foreign policy evolution of Belarus beyond the presidential election. It will argue that little new can be expected in the behaviour of the regime and that Western actors, the EU in particular, should be very cautious when contemplating a change in the earlier, norm-based approach towards the country.

Belarus and Russia: the gradual loss of sovereignty

The first question that needs to be asked when assessing the international context of the upcoming presidential election in Belarus is whether Belarus can still be considered a fully sovereign country vis-à-vis Russia. From the formal standpoint, since achieving independence in 1991, Belarus has managed to preserve its sovereign statehood. Notwithstanding the fact that from the mid-1990s Belarus and Russia carried out a project of political and institutional integration, the bilateral Union State did not grow into a supranational entity but remained an intergovernmental organization. The main reason for this was that with Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in Russia the *finalité politique* of the organization changed. The original idea of a confederative structure that would give Minsk equal rights in decision-making was replaced by the envisaged integration of the two countries, which would in practice mean a merger, namely Belarus having to become a part of Russia. However, Minsk considered this unacceptable, and Moscow chose not to insist.

Yet, a closer look at the foreign and security policy of Belarus demonstrates that this sovereignty is in reality far from full.

In the sphere of security and defence, if until the mid-2000s Belarus was successful in shifting a part of the economic burden onto Russia without making concessions that would undermine its sovereignty, since then Belarus has become increasingly dependent on Russia both in terms of military capabilities

1 Vladimir Socor, Bringing Belarus Back in From the Cold, Blog, International Centre for Defence and Security, 18 June 2015 (<http://www.icds.ee/blog/article/bringing-belarus-back-in-from-the-cold/>)

2 Council of the European Union (2015), Council Implementing Decision (CFSP) 2015/1335 of 31 July 2015 on implementing Decision 2012/642/CFSP concerning restrictive measures against Belarus, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D1335&from=EN>.

The explanation for the decision lay in the fact that these people were no longer in office. The logic is very strange and unconvincing to say the least, as it implies that resignation or retirement should absolve former officials of responsibility for malpractices or abuse of office when holding that office.

3 The Belarusian names mentioned in the text will be transliterated into English using their Russian-language spelling.

and financing. Furthermore, Russia is the primary raw material supplier as well as the main market for the Belarusian defence industry, which further strengthens the dependence.⁴

A good indicator to follow is the planned Russian air base in Belarusian Bobruysk (or Baranovichi). Lukashenko was initially firmly opposed to the establishment of the base, but apparently has not been able to say No. At the time of writing, Moscow is reportedly pushing hard to secure the deal.⁵ If agreement is reached, the facility will be the first newly established Russian military base in an independent country since 1991. Much will depend on the details, however, namely whether or not the new base will be operated within the framework of the joint air defence system of Russia and Belarus that has existed since 2012.

The gradual decrease in the freedom of decision-making on key foreign policy issues is even more self-evident. In 2008, following the Russian-Georgian conflict, Minsk could still afford not to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite strong pressure from Moscow. However, in the UN General Assembly in March 2014, Belarus had no choice but to vote against the condemnation of Moscow for the annexation of Crimea.⁶

At the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga in May 2015 Belarus once again refused to take a critical stand vis-à-vis Russia. It was reportedly due to the opposition of Belarus (as well as Armenia) that the summit could not arrive at a common position concerning the annexation of Crimea. Participants only

reiterated their previous positions, which made a joint statement meaningless on this point.⁷

Belarus does not enjoy full sovereignty in terms of economy and trade either, due in part to its membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Even though the EAEU is still far from being a fully functional integration body and some rules can be circumvented in practice, the concept of the Customs Union implies that external trade-related decisions should be dealt with on a supranational level and administered by the Eurasian Commission. It is also worth recalling in this context that in the process of creating the Union, Russian national tariffs largely became the basis for the whole organization. This is, of course, only natural given the dominant size of the Russian economy, but it nevertheless further strengthens the argument about the limits of choice that are imposed on Belarus.

Bilateral economic dependence on Russia is another crucial element that decreases the country's ability to take economic decisions. Russian energy subsidies to Belarus account for up to approximately 15% of the country's GDP.⁸ Concerning macroeconomic assistance, in 2012 alone they exceeded 6 billion USD, while the whole revenue of the Belarusian budget was around USD 16 billion.⁹

4 For details, see Anaïs Marin (2013): "Trading off sovereignty. The outcome of Belarus' integration with Russia in the security and defence field." *OSW Commentary*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw, 29 April 2013.

5 *Russkie na podlete k Minsku*, *gazeta.ru*, 3 September 2015 (http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/09/03_a_7737605.shtml).

6 Today's Meetings. General Assembly: 68th Session – 80th Plenary Mtg, Paper Smart UN Meetings, 27 March 2014 (<https://papersmart.unmeetings.org/media2/2498292/voting-record.pdf>).

7 EU Commission (2015), Joint Declaration of the EU Eastern Partnership Summit (Riga, 21–22 May 2015), p. 2 (http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/05/Riga-Declaration-220515-Final_pdf/).

Furthermore, expressions like "illegal annexation of Crimea" and "the acts against Ukraine and the events in Georgia since 2014" are used in the text without even mentioning Russia as an actor, which cannot be viewed as anything other than a colossal concession by the EU. Apparently, this was necessary to prevent the summit from turning into an even bigger fiasco, which would have happened had Belarus refused to sign the joint declaration.

8 Aleš Alachnovič, *How Russia's Subsidies Save the Belarusian Economy*, *Belarus Digest*, 26 August 2015 (<http://belarusdigest.com/story/how-russias-subsidies-save-belarusian-economy-23118>).

9 Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga (2013), *Support as a Means of Subordination. Russia's Policy on Belarus, Point of View*, No. 34, Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw, p. 7 (http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/pw_34_bialorus_ang_net.pdf).

In addition, there is a clear trend of increasing Russian influence in many key sectors of the Belarusian economy. One manifestation of this is the Russian takeover of Belarusian state-owned companies that is taking place generally against the will of the local authorities. The process was very well illustrated in the case of Beltransgaz,¹⁰ but one could also mention the strengthening of Russian positions in the Belarusian petrochemical industry and the telecommunications sector.

Another source of concern for Minsk is the ongoing industrial integration projects between Russia and Belarus. Minsk is worried about losing control over its strategic companies after they become integrated with their Russian partners; a case in point could be the MAZ automotive production plant reportedly planned to be merged with Russian KAMAZ.

It is highly unlikely that any of these processes could be reversed. In order to maintain social stability, which is of key importance for the domestic legitimacy of the Lukashenko system, securing continuous economic and financial support from Russia is a must. In exchange for these benefits, Minsk needs to make increasing concessions to Moscow, effectively making the erosion of sovereignty a permanent trend.

The domestic situation and the presidential election

The level of political activism in Belarus has traditionally been rather low, mostly for historical reasons, as well-documented by Andrew Wilson¹¹ and others. The only notable exception since the collapse of the Soviet Union was in 2006 when the country witnessed relatively large protests following the fraudulent presidential elections. However, in spite of expectations of a “colour revolution” in Minsk, modelled on the changes in Georgia, Ukraine

and Kyrgyzstan, the Lukashenko regime withstood domestic and international pressure.

In 2006 the democratic opposition to Lukashenko was also able to unite, and almost all opposition groupings joined forces in support of a single presidential candidate, Alexander Milinkevich. But the opposition was not able to repeat this experience and nominate a united candidate to challenge Lukashenko during the 2010 or 2015 presidential election campaigns. Opposition parties are weak, deeply divided over both ideological and policy issues, and are reportedly heavily infiltrated by Belarusian secret services. A highly symbolic sign of the current weakness of the opposition is that the United Civic Party, an organization widely perceived to be one of the most important opposition structures, was unable to collect the 100,000 signatures necessary for registering Anatoly Lebedko, the leader of the party, as a presidential candidate.

The ratings are self-evident. According to an opinion poll by the reputed Vilnius-based Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) conducted in June 2015,¹² while Lukashenko’s support stood at 38.6%, the most popular opposition politician and a candidate in 2010, Nikolai Statkevich, would receive only 6.5% of the votes. Statkevich, however, was arrested in 2010, right after the crackdown on the opposition protest, and remained in prison until his sudden release by Lukashenko on 22 August 2015, thus being ineligible for registration as a presidential candidate.

The second most popular opposition politician was Vladimir Neklyayev, a poet and also a candidate in 2010, who also spent several months in jail after the previous elections, with approximately 5.7% support, but who decided not to run. By the time this analysis was completed, it appeared that the authorities would register only one opposition candidate. However, young and relatively inexperienced Tatyana Korotkevich, a “Tell the Truth” campaign activist, enjoyed the support of only 2.2% of respondents in June 2015.

10 Beltransgaz is the gas infrastructure and transportation company of Belarus that operates the main gas transit pipelines in the country. Beltransgaz was state-owned initially, but following a conflict over gas prices in 2010 Russia managed to force the Belarusian government to gradually hand over ownership of the company in exchange for substantial discounts in gas prices.

11 Wilson, Andrew (2012), *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, Yale University Press.

12 Electoral Play of Numbers, Analytics, Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 6 July 2015 (<http://iiseps.org/analitica/832/lang/en>).

It is important to note that the relatively high support for Lukashenko does not imply that the population is satisfied with the current situation, especially when it comes to economic and financial aspects. According to IISEPS,¹³ only about one-fifth of the population thinks that the economic situation in Belarus has improved during the past year, while more than 72% speak about stagnation or recession. The generally negative perception is supported by actual macroeconomic indicators: in May 2015 the International Monetary Fund forecast a 2.25% decrease in Belarusian GDP during 2015.

As pointed out by Polish analysts Wojciech Konończuk and Rafał Sadowski,¹⁴ this is the first time that the Belarusian economy has been in recession during a presidential election year. However, as illustrated by the polling data above, the incumbent president is still very likely to win the presidential elections on 11 October 2015 during the first round, with no serious challenger from the opposition side. This begs the question of why the opposition is not utilizing the worsening economic situation in order to put some pressure on the president through massive campaigning, widespread street actions, and so forth.

Apparently, it would make sense to speak about a certain national consolidation around the leader, emerging as a result of the events in Ukraine and Russia's actions towards that country. According to the same IISEPS polls, when asked whether they support the idea of Belarus's unification with Russia, more than 50% of respondents react negatively. In late 2014 almost 60% opposed the unification. These results are much higher than indicators of ten years ago, when only about 30% were opposed to the idea of Belarus being united with Russia. At the same time, unification supporters constitute less than 30% of respondents. Based on this data, one can assume that since the start of the crisis in Ukraine, the Belarusian population is more concerned about preserving the statehood of Belarus than it was before.

These data help to explain why support for the president is still relatively high and why the opposition does not seem to be eager to organize serious anti-government protests. There are probably two reasons for this. First, the president himself has been continuously speaking about and doing a lot to preserve the country's sovereignty. At least since 2002, when he flatly refused Putin's open proposal about Belarus's accession into Russia, Lukashenko has come to be viewed as a defender of independence. Logically therefore, any compromise here would run counter to Lukashenko's personal interest as only within an independent state can he preserve his own power and remain a sovereign ruler. Second, most politicians, and increasingly the public at large, internalize the point of view that the removal of Lukashenko from power, potentially leading to a pro-Western turn in Belarus, would result in the immediate intervention of Russia, just like in Ukraine.

At this point, it is safe to assume that the opposition will not do much in order to seriously contest the essentially predetermined victory of Lukashenko in the presidential elections¹⁵ – not only because of the brutal precedents of 2010 and the additional political restrictions adopted since then, but also because it is not in their interests to give Russia any pretext to intervene. For this reason any repetition of Maidan, or *Ploshcha* – in Belarusian political jargon, literally meaning “square” – is not to be expected in Minsk after 11 October. Minor protests may occur, and not only in the capital, but nothing on the scale of the events in Ukraine in 2013–2014.

Whatever the reasons for Alexander Lukashenko's ability to remain in office for what will be his sixth term, what matters is that this fact augurs continuity rather than change in the country's policy and system of governance. In other words, there should be no illusions that Lukashenko's autocratic style or his economic views may evolve in the direction

13 Dlya kovo krizis, a dlya kovo i opredelennye trudnosti, Analitika, 6 July 2015 (<http://iiseps.org/analitica/831>).

14 Wojciech Konończuk – Rafał Sadowski, Reading Lukashenko's Belarus Without Illusion, Strategic Europe, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 26 May 2015 (<http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=60190>).

15 Leading opposition forces are urging the population to boycott the elections, as Belarus has a 50% participation requirement for presidential elections. As long as freedom and fairness of the electoral process in Belarus are not guaranteed, this position can be fully understood on moral as well as political grounds, but it would be unrealistic to expect that a low turnout would delegitimize the results in the eyes of the majority of the population.

of political pluralism or market freedoms simply because some external conditions have changed.

Cyclical relations with the EU

Relations between the European Union and Belarus stalled as early as 1997 when the EU suspended negotiations on the bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement due to the deterioration of the situation concerning human rights and democratic freedoms in the country. Since then, relations have remained complicated. However, it is a well-documented feature of Belarusian foreign policy that Minsk has been performing a balancing act between the West and Russia. Lukashenko tried to resist Russian pressure several times by making overtures to the West, but reverted to Russia again thereafter.

Viewed from this perspective, the recent release of political prisoners does not constitute much of a novelty, and actually chimes well with the decade-long cyclical pattern. Lukashenko frequently uses the release of political prisoners as a tool to manipulate and please the West. The present situation is actually very similar to the one in August–September 2008. There is an ongoing financial crisis, which hit Belarus hard. Neither the Western nor Russian economies are in good shape, which limits the financial resources of both and which could potentially be allocated to assisting Belarus.

The shock, caused in the West by Russian actions in Ukraine – as was the case with the war in Georgia back in 2008 – accentuates the importance of geopolitical arguments at the expense of value-based considerations. Elections are imminent in Belarus, and Minsk may signal that it needs Western support to counter-balance Russian pressure, playing both on Western geopolitical sensitivities and especially the economic interests of some states, including but not limited to the neighbouring Baltic states in particular.

Hence, just as it did in 2008, the regime is releasing political prisoners, and expects significant benefits in exchange. Many experts agree that this move was part of the usual manoeuvring policy of Belarus. As pointed out by analyst Diana Potjomkina, taking into account the current state of the Belarusian opposition, the release of the six political prisoners does not actually have much domestic political

significance – in other words, this was an easy chess move for the regime to make.¹⁶

Some signals indicate that this time the expectations of Minsk may become a reality: the Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edgars Rinkēvičs hinted on 25 August 2015 that there would be a need to review the sanctions against Belarus.¹⁷

However, it would be a mistake to overestimate the importance of the release of Statkevich and the other political prisoners, for two main reasons. First, they were freed not because of any fundamental change in the political and legal system of Belarus. They were granted a presidential pardon in the same arbitrary manner as before, by dint of a personal decision issued by the president, which could be the result of anything, including a non-transparent trade-off with Western negotiators. This means that in future, after the presidential elections, anyone may easily be imprisoned again on political grounds. It is worth remembering that the political prisoners were not rehabilitated, and from the point of view of Belarusian legislation they remain convicted criminals, which makes it practically impossible for them to participate in public politics.

Second, the EU is both unwilling and unable to replace the massive macroeconomic support Moscow is providing to Minsk. Moreover, more active EU involvement in financing Belarus would probably imply demands for political liberalization, which is something that Lukashenko cannot afford without endangering his own position.¹⁸

16 Diana Potjomkina, *Freeing Political Prisoners: Lukashenko's 'Chess Sacrifice'*, *Komentāri*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2015 (<http://liia.lv/lv/blogs/freeing-political-prisoners-lukashenkos-chess-sacr/>).

17 Rinkevich: nado proanalizirovat' politiku sanktsii ES protiv Belarusi, *tut.by*, 25 August 2015 (<http://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/rinkevich-nado-proanalizirovat-politiku-sankcij-es-protiv-belarusi.d?id=46374201>).

18 This was proven by the previous attempt at EU–Belarusian rapprochement. On the eve of the presidential elections of 2010 when Minsk also found itself under Russian pressure, the EU offered Belarus generous financial assistance of 3 billion euros in exchange for political liberalization. For details, see: Andrew Rettman, *Poland puts €3 billion price tag on democracy in Belarus*, *euobserver*, 4 November 2010 (<https://euobserver.com/foreign/31203>).

Moreover, one simply cannot exclude the possibility that this recent Belarusian attempt to flirt with the West has actually been coordinated with Moscow. When the EU welcomed the release of the political prisoners, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov laconically commented that Russia was always interested in the normalization of relations between Belarus and the EU.¹⁹ Taking into account the above-mentioned strong dependency of Belarus on Russia, Moscow's position is actually perfectly reasonable: it does not object if someone else, namely the EU, contributes to the costs of keeping Minsk economically afloat because Belarus is already bound to Russia in any case.

Conclusions

The EU cannot transform Belarus against its will and in the face of the strong footholds Russia has in the country. Meanwhile, under the current system of governance and personalities in power, Belarus is very unlikely to change either in terms of its domestic political system or its foreign policy.

The upcoming presidential elections in October are very likely to be won with aplomb by the incumbent ruler, President Aleksandr Lukashenko.

The opposition is not only weak and divided, but is in a way also interested in keeping Lukashenko in power, because in light of the events in Ukraine he is viewed as the best available guarantee for Belarus to preserve its remaining sovereignty. Any anti-Russian, pro-Western development might provoke an intervention by Russia, and this is something that neither the regime nor the opposition can risk. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that Minsk would witness massive post-election demonstrations or any kind of a Belarusian 'Maidan'. Minor protests are the most that can be expected.

This also implies that after the elections the regime will not have to face any significant pressure for change either. The domestic continuity will also be strongly endorsed by Moscow, which shares with the Minsk regime a negative view of both street

protests and the liberal electoral democracy, and which needs an ally against any spread of the practice of changing political leaders from neighbouring Ukraine.

Externally, Belarus is strongly dependent on Russia, in terms of both defence and economy. Continuous Russian support is a prerequisite for the sustainability of the regime, but this support never comes for free. Belarus is slowly, gradually, but visibly losing its sovereign prerogatives and factual freedom of decision-making to Russia. To some extent, Belarus is still able to continue its traditional balancing between the West and Russia, but its room for manoeuvre on issues of principle is rather narrow, as demonstrated by Belarus's refusal to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Taking into account that fundamental internal changes are not to be expected, that Russia still has oversight over Belarus's foreign policy choices and that the EU is not in a position to replace Russia in providing economic support to Belarus, Western actors would be advised to look at the developments in Belarus soberly, learn from past mistakes not to expect a sustainable rapprochement in the relations, and be very cautious in modifying their approach.

Giving up the human rights agenda and suspending the sanctions against Belarus solely in exchange for the release of political prisoners, without any prospects for their legal rehabilitation, would be more than premature. The West and the EU in particular should not mix individual, occasional positive steps with major systemic changes, and reward them as if they were more substantial than they really are. As long as the very nature of the regime that allows people to be imprisoned on political grounds does not change, the occasional release of political prisoners is nothing but a tactical move. The formal recognition of the electoral practices in Belarus as complying with European standards, and the normalization of relations with the regime in Minsk should take place only after all the necessary pre-conditions have been met.

On the contrary, the political and human rights conditionality of the EU's foreign policy towards Belarus should not be given up. This would only weaken the credibility of the EU as a norm-based foreign policy actor, without achieving anything in Minsk.

19 Lavrov: Rossiya zainteresovana v normalizatsii otnoshenii Belarusi s Zapadom, tut.by, 24 August 2015 (<http://news.tut.by/politics/461562.html>).

Instead, the EU engagement with Belarus should keep focusing on trade, economic reforms and education, but apply conditionality when providing financial or technical assistance. The European Union is currently in no position to change hard geopolitical realities or even seriously influence the balance in Belarus's foreign policy. The best that can be done is to prepare for the post-Lukashenko – and also for the post-Putin – era, when real change might take place.

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