

Opinion – What the European Union Can Do for Belarus

Written by Kareem Salem

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KAREEM SALEM, SEP 10 2020

This year saw Europe's most authoritarian ruler grossly and repeatedly miscalculate. Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, the country's ruler since 1994, has downplayed the coronavirus pandemic and has deepened long-held frustrations about the country's political system and stagnating economy. These events sparked an election campaign that saw overwhelming support for his opponent Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, exposing Lukashenko's political vulnerability, leading the Belarussian President to patently falsify election results. Since then, the resilience of Lukashenko's regime has been tested by an extraordinary wave of protests and worker strikes, which has swept across Belarus.

For much of the last 26 years, the European Union has viewed Belarus a mere Russian satellite, with a woeful record of political oppression and human right abuses. Indeed, Belarus is the most 'Russianised' of the post-Soviet countries, given that 70% of Belarusians speak Russian at home, and Russian outlets occupy two-thirds of the Belarusian media space. Belarus is also linked to Russia across five integration agreements, which allows Moscow to advance its economic and security objectives. To maintain his grip on power, Lukashenko has systematically sought to exclude, intimidate and repress political opposition. The Belarussian leader has also used referenda to amend laws and even the constitution to extend his authority. These developments have meant that Belarus has long remained on the margins of EU enlargement efforts.

This has not, however, prevented Lukashenko from skilfully and cyclically turning to Brussels, especially during a downturn in relations with Moscow. The first case emerged following the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, in which Belarus joined the Eastern Partnership framework in 2009. As part of this temporary shift towards the EU, Lukashenko released political prisoners and loosened his grip on the media and opposition, which led Brussels to lift sanctions against Belarus. However, relations quickly deteriorated following Lukashenko's crackdown on political opponents following the 2010 presidential election, which resulted in the return of individual EU sanctions against 177 Belarusian nationals. For Lukashenko, the EU was no longer seen as an important component of his foreign policy, as he had successfully reached an agreement with Dimitry Medvedev, who by then had temporarily succeeded Vladimir Putin, on an excise-free supply of oil in exchange for Belarus signing agreements on a Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan.

This pattern repeated itself in recent years, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. The Belarusian President's active facilitation of the Minsk peace talks and decision to release most jailed opposition paved a way to a new chapter in relations with the EU. Emphasis was based upon building dialogue and fostering economic ties. In this vein, an EU-Belarus coordination group was established to foster dialogue between both parties spanning topics of mutual interest with respect to trade, customs duties, agriculture and research. Human rights dialogue between Brussels and Minsk had also resumed in which a range of issues relating to the death penalty, freedom of expression, assembly and association, among others, were discussed. Belarus was also actively engaged with regional and sub-regional European organisations, notably holding the rotating presidency of the Central European Initiative in 2017. These developments raised eyebrows in Moscow, sparking Russia the following year to relaunch talks with Lukashenko on finalising plans for deeper integration.

Despite the return of a positive dynamic in EU-Belarussian relations, the opening of dialogue also demonstrated its

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limits. Engagement with the Lukashenko regime did not attest to any true progress being made on human rights, contrary to hopes and expectations fostered by the release of six political prisoners in 2015 and presidential elections held the same year under conditions of restraint in the use of violence. Lukashenko's autocratic system of societal control and political power remained intact, preventing any real progress in democratic reforms. In spite of all the dialogue, increasing the trade volume also proved challenging, as the basis of Belarussian exports to the EU comprised petroleum products (produced from Russian crude oil), which have progressively decreased over the years as a result of persistent disputes with Moscow over future crude oil supplies.

Thus, in light of the recent rigged presidential election and the brutal crackdown by riot police towards demonstrators, has effectively made the prospect of future relations with Lukashenko untenable for officials in Brussels. With the Belarus protest movement now entering its fifth week, all evidence suggests that the regime cannot go back to business as usual. So far, the EU has responded prudently to the ongoing crisis by imposing economic sanctions only on senior Belarusian officials, whom they believe were responsible for rigging last month's presidential election and violent crackdown on opposition demonstrations. Although Lukashenko has been spared, this decision drew condemnation from Moscow, prompting Putin to warn protesters and the West that Russia would not be afraid to deploy a special reserve force of security officers to restore order in the event of chaos in its western neighbour.

This, however, risks creating another anti-Russian hotbed on Russia's doorstep. Belarus is not Ukraine 2014; the uprising is not fuelled by the desire to break with Moscow through eventual membership in NATO and the EU. A violent and prolonged crackdown supported by Moscow would inevitably lead an increasingly radicalised Belarusian population that views Russia as thwarting its desire for a greater political voice. To Putin's disadvantage, this might bring geopolitical factors into play that are currently absent from the debate in Belarusian society and therefore fuel interest in joining the West.

At present the EU has few levers to directly influence events in Belarus. With European leaders preoccupied by the growing resurgence of COVID-19 and fresh tensions between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean, the EU cannot afford to see the crisis unfolding in Belarus spiral out of control. Forefront of European concerns is to avoid a repeat of its failed mediation attempts of February 2014 regarding the Ukrainian crisis, in which Russia was not involved at a high level in discussions, which consequently undermined the whole process and subsequently led to the deepest East-West crisis since the Cold War. Europeans have therefore urged Putin to push for dialogue, but has so far declined.

European officials should not be discouraged by the Kremlin leader's line. The German government could ramp up economic pressure on Moscow by threatening to completely withdraw Germany's involvement in Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, which would definitely get the Kremlin leader's attention. Abandoning the project would damage Putin's latest effort to strengthen Russia's energy stronghold on Europe and prevent the Kremlin leader receiving a significant financial boost. Given that relations between Berlin and Moscow have been strained in recent weeks by the poisoning of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny with Novichok, a chemical nerve agent, it is therefore not in Putin's interests to further strain relations with Europe --thus engagement with the EU on the situation in Belarus would be a positive step in healing recent tensions.

In this spirit, the EU should stress to Putin the importance of new elections under the supervision of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the dispatch of an impartial independent expert to prevent future abuses on the streets. Europeans have nothing to lose in adopting this foreign policy position.

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