The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Belarus Protests Have Explosive Potential for EU-Russia Relations

The Belarusian revolution is far from over, and there are many scenarios in which the EU and Russia won't be able to keep their differences over Belarus from escalating.

By Arkady Moshes

December 01, 2020



JOHANNA GERON / POOL / EPA / TASS

The Belarusian revolution is far from over, and there are at least three scenarios in which the EU and Russia won't be able to keep their differences over Belarus from escalating from the current moderate competition into an open geopolitical crisis like that seen in Ukraine.

Belarus has been engulfed by protests ever since the contested presidential election back in August, and whatever happens, it seems things cannot ever just go back to the way they were, with President Alexander Lukashenko ruling indefinitely. Yet the reaction of the West, above all the European Union, differs greatly from what we saw during both revolutions in

neighboring Ukraine.

Collectively, the EU is proving very slow and reluctant to deviate from the path of minimal involvement in the Belarusian crisis. It doesn't recognize the official election results, which declared Lukashenko the winner, but nor has it recognized opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as president, calling instead for the two sides to engage in a "national dialogue."

The first individual sanctions were only introduced in mid-October, and the list was at first a mere quarter of the size of its equivalent list back in 2011, even though the scale of repression back then was incomparable with today's. Lukashenko himself was only included on the list in mid-November.

Intensive phone conversations between European leaders and Moscow at the start of the crisis show that Europe was trying to avoid a flare-up in its relationship with Russia, as well as with the Belarusian leadership.

The EU's behavior has a convenient formal explanation. The general consensus is that the Belarusian revolution is not a geopolitical one. The Belarusians are not choosing between the West and Russia, so let them decide for themselves, the thinking goes. But that doesn't take into account the fact that Russia did make a clear choice: to support Lukashenko. It's also hard to swallow the argument that the EU is simply incapable of making decisions quickly, not to mention during a pandemic. After all, it had no such difficulty when Ukraine was in crisis.

Related article: Russia's Top Diplomat Accuses West of Meddling in Belarus

The real reasons for the EU's restraint must be sought elsewhere. The first reason is fairly obvious: Russia's position in Belarus is simply far stronger than the EU's, and not only in terms of Minsk's economic dependence on Moscow, the joint integration structures, or the career opportunities for the Belarusian elite in Russian business. Just as important is Russia's readiness to escalate the situation by using force, if necessary.

Moscow has various options for what happens next. It could stake everything on Lukashenko remaining in power: after all, despite all his bold rhetoric, he has never crossed a red line and tried to take his country over to the West. On the contrary: by refusing to implement reforms, he guaranteed that Belarus would remain dependent on Russian subsidies.

Alternatively, Moscow might opt to bet on constitutional reform that would bring a pro-Russian party to dominance in the Belarusian parliament, or it might choose some other way of getting its own people in power in Minsk.

The EU's influence looks lackluster in comparison. Brussels supposedly relaunched its relationship with Minsk after 2015, but took things no further. The EU (with good reason) decided against buying Lukashenko's loyalty, and did not provide the country with the financial assistance upon which the Belarusian regime had clearly been counting.

At the same time, the EU did not demand domestic political liberalization, which damaged its reputation among pro-European Belarusians, and created the illusion for the regime that

from now on, the EU would always ignore the country's domestic politics. It was enough to simply lament to EU ambassadors about Russian pressure, and to arrest pro-Russian bloggers or supposed mercenaries from time to time.

An illustration of how little the EU's word is worth in Minsk was the fact that EU diplomats had to go in person to the home of the Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich in September to prevent her from being arrested like other leaders of the opposition coordination council. In other words, protests and expressions of concern by the EU would not have been enough: nothing less than the physical presence of European nationals with diplomatic immunity was required. In the end, Alexievich had to leave the country anyway.

There are other reasons for the EU's passivity, however. Clearly the EU is very reluctant to publicly discuss why its policy of showering warmth on Lukashenko ended in failure. It doesn't want to figure out why all those handshakes, visits to Minsk forums, and praise for Lukashenko's contribution to the Ukraine peace talks didn't end in any positive results, and why he was so quick to sacrifice normalizing relations with the EU for the chance to cling on to power. That reluctance is understandable: such soul-searching might end up costing some EU lobbyists for rapprochement with Lukashenko their careers. But without taking stock of failings, it's hard to develop a fundamentally new policy—especially if it's the same people still in charge.

It's entirely possible that the EU is hoping that Russia will replace Lukashenko one way or another, or at least secure significant constitutional reform, which would make Belarusian politics more competitive and give the EU the opportunity to gradually increase its influence there without an open geopolitical conflict.

Ultimately, Brussels simply has nothing to offer Minsk right now, other than the abolition of visa requirements. It can't even offer basic macrofinancial support. Reforming the Belarusian economy would require billions of dollars to ease the difficulty of the transition period. There's no way Brussels can get a political mandate for that kind of help right now, and extolling the advantages of various expanded partnerships to Belarusians without stumping up any cash will prove futile.

The fundamental problem with analyzing the situation from today's perspective, however, is that the Belarusian revolution is far from over. There are at least three scenarios in which the EU and Russia won't be able to keep their differences over Belarus from escalating from the current mild competition into an open geopolitical crisis like that seen in Ukraine.

The first scenario is a sharp increase in Russian influence. If the Belarusian economy takes a drastic turn for the worse, including as a result of Western sanctions, then Russia will have to bail it out. Then Moscow may be tempted to take some assets in return; to push for political integration; or—most importantly from the West's point of view—to open new military bases in Belarus. In that case, European countries will start to actively stand up to Russia, which will lead to a conflict, regardless of how seriously Belarus resists attempts to curtail its sovereignty.

Related article: Key Belarus Opposition Figure Charged With Graft and Fraud

The second scenario envisages the Belarusian revolution entering a geopolitical phase. Sociological research shows that Russia's support for Lukashenko is eroding pro-Russian sentiment among Belarusians. A large section of society is turning once again to Europe for their geopolitical orientation. If the columns of protesters start unfurling EU flags (like in Ukraine, Georgia, and even Belarus itself back in 2010), then the EU will have to change tactics and adopt a more active policy.

The third and final scenario is that of a new reset in relations between Brussels and Minsk. If Lukashenko remains in power, that scenario barely seems credible. But if he is replaced by someone from within the current regime, or—especially—by a new figure, then that outcome is virtually inevitable. And then it might be Moscow that loses patience.

When we say, therefore, that the Belarusian crisis has not impacted on the relationship between Russia and the EU, we should be careful to add "yet."

This article was first published *by the Carnegie Moscow Center.*

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/12/01/belarus-protests-have-explosive-potential-for-eu-russia-relations-a72189