



02
2022

Quo Vadis, Belarus?

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Introduction

Year 2021 was one of the most turbulent for Belarus since its independence after the collapse of the USSR. In the West Belarus is sometimes called the “European North Korea” and its longtime president Alexander Lukashenko, whom the West no longer recognizes, is dubbed “Europe’s Last Dictator.” Although this country is still to a large extent dug in its communist past, it has overcome

the global economic crisis in 2008 without too many problems and internal turmoil. Belarus has also successfully overcome problems with its neighbor the Russian Federation caused by disputes related to the content and dynamics of the implementation of the establishment of a Federal State between Belarus and Russia to which they previously committed.

Belarusian “phenomenon” with the Covid-19 pandemic

It is worth adding that another major global problem has been bypassing Belarus as if it had an invisible shield. It is the Covid-19 pandemic. To make the astonishment even greater, the state authorities - both political and public health, including the medical profession and science - do not create any panic and catastrophic atmosphere and do not take any dramatic restrictive moves that would significantly affect people's lives and economy.

Although the Covid-19 disease is present in Belarus with the same or similar indicators as elsewhere in the world, the Belarusians have approached the Covid-19 pandemic as if it were a normal situation and treated it as a flu pandemic. According to president Lukashenko, Belarus will be able to deal with the pandemic in the future because it has enough both material and human capacities to deal with it.

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It should be mentioned that there are no lockdowns in case of such an “unconventional” health policy in Belarus. Belarus has not

introduce any restrictive measures to curb Covid-19, and citizens were only called to be cautious, while wearing protective masks is not mandatory either in public places or in shops. Belarus did not introduce either mandatory vaccination or compulsory measures for the unvaccinated by limiting the freedom of movement for unvaccinated persons, as was the case in some countries in the EU. President Lukashenko stated that no one would be forced to get vaccinated, not even health workers, and that vaccination was solely a matter of personal choice of each individual.

Although such a relaxed approach to this global health problem contradicts all the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO), at the same time it has attracted support of opponents of hard lockdowns and mandatory vaccination in the country and worldwide. Therefore even in neighboring Russia, which is fighting the pandemic in a similar way as most other countries in the world, such a health policy of Minsk leaves only a very few indifferent. Belarusian approach toward the Covid-19 is also very popular on Russian social media, and some Russians indicate in their comments that they would gladly move to Belarus to live in the way they used to live before the pandemic and return to the “old normal” with the help of Lukashenko. Of course this intriguing

phenomenon of Covid -19 “in the Belarusian way” should certainly be explored more deeply because as it raises a number of questions that require unambiguous answers, as Belarus is not an isolated island in the middle of the ocean.

Crucial presidential election in 2020

Belarusian path in the nineties was very different from the path the Russia took. Yeltsin’s Russia after the collapse of the USSR carried out painful reforms for years, in line with Western market models and instructions of foreign advisers, which resulted in wide-spread poverty. At the same time, Russia saw the rise of a new caste of super-rich people, the oligarchs, who have infiltrated all pores of political and public life, including the media. Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, who has been president of the country since July 1994, has refused to take the same path.

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Lukashenko did not want to shut down factories or agricultural plants based on the Soviet model of economic functioning and to carry

out the market and social reforms like in other post-communist countries. Lukashenko did this in order to avoid the scenario of workers ending up in the streets, as he was aware of the negative experience of Russian transition in the nineties. In other words, he primarily took care of the country’s social policy and stability, trying to reduce the rise of Belarusian “oligarchs” to a minimum. At the same time, the market for cheap Belarusian industrial and agricultural products was relatively easy to find in the large and starving post-Soviet space, especially in then-economically devastated Russia. This is also a response to the thesis from the introduction to the text, about the partially understandable reasons why Belarus “dug itself in its communist past”.

The presidential election held in August 2020 was the final turning point.

The presidential election held in August 2020, was the final turning point not only in terms of the internal political situation in Belarus, but also in terms of its future relations with the West and the Russian Federation on the long-term basis. The election, or more precisely the West’s reactions to the officially announced election results, according to which Lukashenko achieved a landslide victory and won his

6th consecutive term, in fact determined the future geopolitical status of Belarus through the unfolding destabilization processes led by the opposition leaders culminating in 2021. The clumsy and hasty reaction of the West, especially that one of the new US administration led by Joe Biden (as for the Democrats the fight for democracy and human rights in the world is one of the fundamental principles of their foreign policy) to the above-mentioned election results, was a critical “trigger” that would create a new geopolitical reality in Eastern Europe with of course, much broader impact than the regional one.

The US fell into the same trap as in Venezuela

Putting the struggle for democracy ahead of American and EU’s strategic interests, the Biden administration, followed by the European Commission and then Berlin and Paris, has drawn increasingly sharp moves against Lukashenko and his government: from an all-out support to the Belarusian opposition and mass protests that had very clear outlines of already proven effectiveness of “colored revolutions”, to the introduction of new economic sanctions. In the absence of other concrete measures that would accelerate the change in the desired direction,

the West eventually crossed the threshold of Lukashenko’s patience and in a move that acted as the straw that broke the camel’s back, made some kind of recognition of opposition dissident Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya as Belarusian president. With its decision to support Lukashenko’s opposition led by Tikhanovskaya, the West effectively cut off the possibility of influencing Belarus.

The US and the EU seem to have fallen into a similar trap as in Venezuela, when John Bolton, former national security adviser of president Trump, created US policy toward the country and tried to provoke a political and social change in Caracas with the introduction of drastic measures in a combination of never stronger political sanctions, and then military pressure. It was then that Trump, followed by all the key European capitals, “dismissed” Nicolás Maduro as president, and “appointed” himself the opposition leader Juan Guaidó as president. Of course, respect for facts and correct judgment in decision-making is what always determines the events, leaving Tikhanovskaya and Guaidó as a unique presidential couple that does not have its own state. In other words, these two are not considered for anything other than PR reception in state salons of American and European capitals.

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This was best manifested by the recent migrant mini-crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. It was raised politically and in the media to a much higher level than it deserved, so even the possibility of outbreak of a Polish-Belarusian war, the participation of NATO in it, etc., was mentioned. This is why Angela Merkel, then already serving as acting chancellor of Germany, was forced to react. In order to resolve the situation, Merkel did not call Tikhanovskaya or Warsaw, or any other address in the EU, but the only person who was in command of this process and who could help – the despised and unrecognized Lukashenko. President Lukashenko was probably the real creator of this migrant crisis, perhaps in attempt to provoke the softening of the West's sanctions policy towards his country. Coincidentally or not, shortly after the Merkel-Lukashenko telephone conversation, there was media silence, and presently this migrant mini-crisis is rarely mentioned, although it has not yet been resolved - which is a clear sign of its politicization.

Geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Belarus

The post-election events in Belarus ultimately led to Lukashenko's successful stabilization and the beginning of constructing of a new paradigm, which, in fact, strengthens Russia's role on the geopolitical map of Europe. It could bring Belarus more lasting internal stability which will primarily depend on preservation of the economic and social stability, and external security due to the strengthening of integration processes with Russia. Russia will strive to maintain its control over Belarus permanently, which is even more evident after the military intervention of joint forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Kazakhstan, which occurred after the attempted revolutionary coup in the country with which Russia does not have such a strong integrative links.

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Minsk will try to ensure this stability by gradually implementing internal reforms, for now through a proposal to amend the constitution, on which a national referendum is to be held. For the time being it is sufficient to say that if the referendum succeeds,

while the opposition tries to obstruct it by encouraging citizens not to go to the polls or to cross out voting ballots, the possibility of foreign political and economic influence will definitely be reduced, as well as the influence of the NGO sector backed by the EU and the US. The constitutional changes also plan certain progress in the democratization of the country, such as limiting the president's term to two and similar.

In presenting the geostrategic importance of Belarus one should refer to the words of geopolitical analyst Mario Stefanov from his analysis published on 5 December last year. Speaking about the possibility of war breaking out on the Belarusian-Polish border due to the migrant crisis, he said that Eastern Europe is "Europe's most sensitive place for the breakout of war" because it is located in "Mackinder's geopolitical heart of the world", the so called "Heartland", and there is also Poland "as its point of gravity." Stefanov says the following: "Russia will not just leave Belarus to Western influence and control and will try to keep it at all costs. Belarus is, like Ukraine, a place where a possible war between the West and Russia could take place. Moscow was pushed back on the Ukrainian front and there is no chance it will back off on the Belarusian front in such a situation."

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Stefanov further points out that the Suwalki Corridor is located on the western borders of Belarus, and this corridor it is the only land connection of the Russian Kaliningrad region (located between Poland and Lithuania) with the rest of the Russian territory. At the same time this corridor is of immense importance for NATO because it is the only land communication route which connects Poland to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia." Stefanov adds that in the event of a conflict, Russian forces can quickly and easily cut that corridor, which is only 90 kilometers wide. He also mentions the famous Smolensk Gate on the eastern borders of Belarus, located between the river systems of the Dnieper and the Dvina, which was a historical route of invasions on Russia and the other way around, invasions from Russia to Poland. The configuration of the terrain between the two river systems channelizes the movement of military forces, making it a key strategic area in Central and East Europe and thus making Belarusian position a decisive factor in the geostrategic architecture of Central and East Europe. The Smolensk Gate is the entrance to Moscow, and Belarus is essentially a potential battlefield with the starting point for a possible

breakthrough into the heart of Russia.

The economy of Belarus

Many economic analysts have been predicting an economic crisis in Belarus pointing to warning indicators of plummeting GDP, estimating its decline between 3 and 10%, or at least stagnation of the Belarusian economy in 2021, but this estimations did not prove right. Belarus has, at least for the time being, managed not only to withstand Western sanctions, but also to reach some of the most impressive economic results in the last decade.

Sanctions, imposed by the US and the EU, have been targeting all major Belarusian industries. Sanctions introduced by the EU in the summer of 2021 have delivered a serious blow to Belarusian economy, and these sanctions have included the so-called sectoral restrictions, so they were pointed against producers of petroleum products (Belarus imports crude oil mainly from Russia, and then processes it in its refineries and exports it), producers of fertilizers which are mainly exported to the West, including the EU, producers of tobacco products, and also the financial sector.

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According to official Belarusian data, by the end of 2021 the growth rate of the Belarusian economy was more than 2%, and by the beginning of winter exports of goods and services, compared to the same period in 2020 ("pandemic" year, which blurred the real picture), increased by a third. However, if we take into account that the government planned to increase economic growth rate by only 1.8% in 2021, the above-mentioned reached results, in the newly created conditions, are equal to almost a miracle.

The government even managed to reduce the budget deficit, which amounted to about 2.5 billion USD at the beginning of the year, to around 1.2 billion USD by the end of 2021. Belarus has not only preserved, but also increased its foreign exchange and gold reserves, which have grown by November of 2021 to 8.55 billion USD from 7.2 billion USD at the beginning of that year. All these results allow Lukashenko and his government to declare that Western sanctions were a failure. It is difficult to predict what will happen in 2022, but it is realistic to expect that this year will be more complex than the past, considering that the imposed Western sanctions will only

now “heat up” in their full sway. Therefore, Fitch Ratings agency estimates the growth of the Belarusian economy for this year at only 0.3%, which would be almost stagnation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast for growth of 0.5% is not much more optimistic for Minsk.

Further development of relations between Belarus and the West

Relations between Belarus and the West will be proportional to the relations between the West and Russia. The broken relations between the West and Belarus present a big problem for the EU and the US, as now Belarus is aligned with Russia, and it is hard to expect that relations between the West and its main global geopolitical rivals Russia and China will normalize in the foreseeable future.

In this context, it is not difficult to assess the direction of Belarusian foreign policy not only for this year, as it will be predominantly pro-Russian. It should be pointed out that the long-time effort to pursue a multi-directional foreign policy of Belarusian diplomacy, almost in the manner of non-aligned countries, made Russia nervous, sometimes probably leading it to “a nervous breakdown.”

We should remember the tensions between

Minsk and Moscow over the price of Russian oil for Belarus, when Moscow in 2018 offered Lukashenko market prices, and not the previous “brotherly” prices, as Lukashenko had expected. Moscow has made it clear that if there would be no process of further integration of the two countries, that then there would be no further “brotherly prices” either. Lukashenko, wanting to show Putin his strength and defiance, then turned to Trump himself, seeking to improve the decades of disrupted US-Belarusian relations. Trump reacted very quickly, instinctively realizing a rare opportunity for the US, and sent his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Minsk, who then, logically, even publicly stated that the human rights situation in Belarus was slowly improving. As an act of good will the first American oil tanker soon arrived for the needs of Belarus.

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This is just one occasion that shows how much the Biden administration missed the point with its above-mentioned tactics about the Belarusian post-election results. It is also important to stress that Lukashenko never wanted to recognize Russia's annexation of

Crimea and officially declare Crimea as part of Russian state territory. The fact that Lukashenko has not yet recognized Crimea's annexation has been irritating Moscow because it perceived that Belarus should recognize Russia's full territorial integrity. In the meantime, of course, everything is much different on that issue. Although it is still not official, Lukashenko recently said publicly that it was clear that Crimea was Russian and that as such he would visit it together with Putin.

The West has destroyed Belarusian-Ukrainian relations

Another mistake of the Biden administration and the European Commission is that their hasty and ill-considered anti-Belarusian policy, their underestimation of primarily Russian reaction and support for the weak, disorganized and divided Belarusian opposition, have completely damaged the hitherto very good relations between Belarus and Ukraine, both political and economic. They dragged Kyiv into the process of actively helping the Belarusian opposition, along with Poland, which however, unlike Ukraine, has far less to lose.

Ukraine turned out to be a bigger loser even than the West.

The complete breakdown of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations will now have a very important effect in the scenario of Russian military intervention in Ukraine. In relations with Belarus, Ukraine turned out to be a bigger loser even than the West. Due to Lukashenko's new position on "the Russian Crimea", Ukraine proclaimed him to be "the enemy of the state." This Ukrainian attitude toward Belarus created its new adversary, along with a much bigger and powerful adversary Russia.

Conclusion

The future of Belarus, as well as the stability of the current government led by Alexander Lukashenko, will still depend primarily on the economic rather than security situation in the country. If citizens have a basic living standard secured and have secured employment, and if the level of democratization is raised to a higher level, which is planned in Belarus through constitutional changes, there will be no reason, and therefore no possibility, to easily organize new civil or opposition movements to topple the government in some kind of revolution. For Belarus, as well as for Russia, it is now crucial to ensure the future peaceful transfer of power and even the transition of political and social elites which eventually occurs in every society, in regular and free elections, and not

in political or military coups. Many countries outside the West are traditionally inclined to them, including those of the former USSR. These coups regularly take these countries backwards in terms of modernizing political and democratic processes, as well as in the segment of economic development that is the most important one. This kind of insecurity and instability would impose a heavy price in the new and dramatic global geopolitical processes, as global rivals would know how to take advantage of them.

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