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Cornered: Lukashenka's foreign policy since Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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I. Lukashenka's double crisis

Russia's invasion of Ukraine seemed to be a blessing for Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Prior to February 2022, Lukashenka found himself in the middle of a double crisis, which put the regime's survival in question. First, the rigged presidential elections of August 2020, followed by massive protests, undermined the regime's domestic legitimacy. Second, a migration crisis, orchestrated in 2021 and continuing until today, damaged its international standing.

After August 2020, the pillars of domestic stability vanished: the regime had to resort to unprecedented repressions to suppress the revolutionary mood in society and maintain its grip on power. Attempts to regain public support and at least partial legitimacy by means of promises of his "last term" in office and domestic power-sharing culminated in a cosmetic overhaul of the constitution on 27 February 2022 – only a few days after the Russian invasion.

As of February 2022, EU-Belarus relations were in tatters, too. Brussels was slow to react to the repressions, trying instead to mediate between Lukashenka and his political opponents in exile and to launch a so-called "national dialogue". However, the Union could not stay idle in the face of Minsk's hijacking of Ryanair flight 4978 in May 2021. Meanwhile, the mentioned migration problem on the EU-Belarus borders demanded that any ambivalence in the Western approach be left in the past. The EU adopted a principled – negative – stance towards Minsk, which obtained a new quality after Lukashenka's Belarus became an enabler of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

By 2022, Russia, or rather, to be precise, Vladimir Putin, had further strengthened his role, on the one hand, as a kingmaker in Belarus, and on the other hand, as the main factor that prevents the Minsk regime's otherwise likely collapse. The model of the Belarus-Russia relationship, which for nearly three decades had been allowing Lukashenka to balance between bowing to Moscow and periodically frustrating the Kremlin, became a thing of the past. Lukashenka's role as an instrument in Moscow's hands was the main reason why it felt no pressure to change its approach¹.

II. A perceived opportunity

In this context, Russia's aggression against Ukraine became an unexpected opportunity for Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his foreign policy. Three important developments stand out in this regard. First and foremost, Lukashenka emerged as Putin's only formal ally. Providing Belarusian territory and airspace for attacking Ukraine – and thus unavoidably making the country a crucial element of Russia's military planning – elevated the status of Lukashenka himself in the Russian system of power. As happens in personalist autocracies, his unique access to and frequent tête-à-tête meetings with Vladimir Putin, unavailable to most Russian elite figures, only underlined his newly acquired value. In turn, Moscow did not have any other choice but to grossly support its friend and co-aggressor.

Second, Belarusian society had to reassess its attitudes towards the regime. Lukashenka's public positioning, amplified by propaganda, as the only person who can protect Belarus from sliding into the war has definitely helped him to restore some credibility inside the country. Driven by the fear of a potential spillover of the war, which is inherent in the majority of the Belarusian populationⁱⁱ, some societal groups started to look at the regime as the lesser evil. In turn, disappointment with the Belarusian emigrant opposition facilitated this process.

Third, Lukashenka saw an appropriate moment for trying to establish a new balance in relations with the West. As in 2014, when he played this gambit successfully, Minsk also this time envisioned itself in the role of a mediator between Kyiv and Moscow. In a letter to EU officials on 6 April 2022, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Uladzimir Makey called for a return of the pragmatic spirit of normalization, just as was done in 2016-2019. On 5 May 2022, in an interview to the Associated Press, Lukashenka stated that he shared the concerns of the West as regards "common" security. Also, he lamented that the "Russian operation is taking too long", warned against the use of the nuclear weapons, and highlighted his alleged role in trying to reach a peace dealⁱⁱⁱ.

At the same time, Minsk has made diplomatic attempts to extend ties with the Global South, especially China. In September 2022, on the margins of a summit of the heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states in Samarkand, Lukashenka and the Chinese leader Xi Jinping decided to raise the level of bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

III. Reality strikes back

However, triumphalism in Minsk did not live long. At the moment of writing (December 2024), on the eve of Lukashenka entering his seventh term in office, domestic equilibrium cannot be maintained without the use of force. Foreign policy gains have not had any impact on the repressive machinery, which runs at full speed. Belarus has over 1,400 political prisoners. The “negative” consensus as regards the war cannot turn opposition-minded people into a support base for the regime, which creates a vicious circle as the authorities further intensify their repressions.

But foreign policy also brings setbacks – and the longer it goes on, the more setbacks arise. As the war in Ukraine became protracted, the West not only refused to pay attention to Lukashenka’s “peace-loving signals”, but, on the contrary, hardened its approach. Poland, the NATO and EU member most-affected by both the migrant crisis and the persecution of the Polish minority leaders in Belarus, continues to insist on strict conditionality in relations with Lukashenka. As the perception of Belarus in the West as merely a westward extension of Russia strengthens, Western sanctions slowly blur the distinction between Moscow and Minsk. In turn, in April 2023, Ukraine recalled its ambassador Ihor Kyzym from Minsk, which was a clear signal that Kyiv also no longer viewed Minsk as an independent actor, let alone a mediator. Symbolically, Kyzym was not replaced. Instead, in February 2024 he was appointed as an MFA special envoy with the particular task to work with Belarusian democratic forces.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, relations with non-Western powers also soured. China is a prime example in this regard. In October 2023, Belarus did not receive an official invitation to the third summit of the “Belt and Road” initiative in Beijing, which must reflect some kind of negative dynamics because Lukashenka had taken part in similar

summits in 2017 and 2019. The summit, which celebrated the 10th anniversary of the initiative, brought together the leaders of 130 countries, yet Minsk was only invited to send a low-profile delegation to a side event on anti-corruption. Beijing also shifted its focus to alternative transport routes, such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor.

Even Minsk's traditional partners from the post-Soviet spaces have started to demonstrate their diminishing interest in relations with Belarus. Kazakhstan's president Kasym-Zhomart Tokaev has snubbed Lukashenka publicly several times. Speaking to Kazakh farmers, he reacted to an invitation from Lukashenka to join the Union State of Russia and Belarus: "I appreciated his joke"^{iv}. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan openly stated that he would not visit Minsk for as long as Lukashenka is in power. This controversy, however, is not about personalities: Lukashenka has been openly taking the side of Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia.

A strategic intensification of contacts with Asian, African and Latin American countries is hardly a way out for Belarus either. Lukashenka's visits to states like Mongolia and Pakistan, its participation in the World Climate Summit in Azerbaijan, or it receiving delegations from, for example, Azerbaijan, Iran and Vietnam (all of which took place in 2024) might create a picture of his active international involvement, which propaganda amplifies, but the reality remains unimpressive. Trade with these states cannot increase significantly as neither their respective governments nor Minsk have available financial resources to credit Belarusian exports, especially exports of machinery. And, politically, when dealing with Belarus, every national leader will have to tread carefully so as not to provoke problems with Washington and other Western capitals, regardless of whether the contacts in question concern the issue of compliance with Western economic sanctions or, in general, the very fact of dealing with the "non-handshake-worthy" Belarusian leader.

In the same vein, a new major security initiative, the Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security, fell flat. Hosted by Lukashenka in 2023 and 2024, it did not attract high-level foreign attendance: in 2024, only the Serbian deputy prime minister, the

foreign ministers of Hungary, Russia and Syria, and top officials of the CIS, CSO and CSTO took part⁴.

The country's engagement with non-Western organizations has been particularly problematic. Lukashenka was visibly offended at not having received an invitation to join BRICS – unlike Kazakhstan, which officially rejected it. He called the BRICS partner status of Belarus an “anteroom” – loosely translated, verbatim, as a changing room in a bathhouse. SCO membership, which Belarus finally secured in July 2024, was a minor consolation. This organization has been stagnating for quite some time and, crucially, membership in SCO does not promise noticeable economic benefits. All that Lukashenka could reply with was criticism of both SCO and BRICS for their lack of action.

But most importantly, Lukashenka's value as Russia's ally has gone down. As compared with 2022, Moscow now looks extremely self-confident in terms of its international status. Not only has the Russia-China partnership deepened, the Kremlin has also built new situational alliances with Iran and North Korea. It is noteworthy that the latter two not only provide Russia with weapons, but North Korea also sends troops to fight on the Russian side in Ukraine. Lukashenka simply cannot do the same. If he sends Belarusian troops, he will face the risk of a popular uprising and losing the power. This implies that even in relations with Moscow, Lukashenka can no longer pretend to be a central figure, let alone the key ally.

In response, Lukashenka resorted to rhetorical attempts to distance himself from Moscow. While before he was saying with complacency that Belarus was a “co-aggressor”, in October 2024 he admitted that he had never authorized or even approved the Russian actions in February 2022. The confession that he was at best informed about the Russian invasion of Ukraine and did not participate in decision-making is worth a lot. It implies not only that Lukashenka's Belarus can hardly be seen as a sovereign nation, but also that its leader put himself into a situation in which all he can do is follow orders from the Kremlin in exchange for economic assistance (and, plausibly, asylum in Russia for himself and his family if things go wrong).

This shows that the Western principled approach is working. Belarusian presidential elections will take place in January 2025, half a year ahead of schedule, which is the best possible indicator that the regime feels itself to be in trouble. Lukashenka's presidential campaign, among other things, aims to take Lukashenka out of deepening international isolation. His "peace-loving" statements, government reshuffles and releases of small numbers of political prisoners primarily are an invitation to the West to restart talks^{vi}, which Minsk needs to balance its precarious position vis-à-vis Moscow. If Lukashenka has learned one thing about Russia, it is that no one, even its closest partners, should take the Kremlin's protection and/or economic support for granted. For decades, Lukashenka was Putin's preferred choice in Belarus for a number of reasons, the most important of which was the transactional costs of (and looming risks of) his replacement. But in the situation of war, all previous experiences may not matter any longer. In case Ukraine loses the war and the West admits Ukraine's and its own defeat by means of a legally binding agreement with Russia, a change of personalities in power in Belarus and even the country's annexation by Russia cannot be ruled out. Lukashenka is no doubt aware of and worried by such a scenario.

This means that the Western approach should be tightened further. Dictators of Lukashenka's type understand power and feel weakness, including their own weakness. Pressure on the Minsk regime coupled with a deepening of ties with Belarusian society should be the baseline of the Belarus policy of the West.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Moshes, A., & Nizhnikau, R. (2022). The Belarusian Revolution: Two Years after the Storm. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 30(4), 485-492.
- ⁱⁱ 57 percent were afraid that Belarus might be pulled into the war, according to a Chatham House poll conducted on April 8–18, 2022.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Lukashenko: I feel that this operation is taking too long!” An interview with Associated Press, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLqNB7fwFn4>
- ^{iv} “Prezident oznakomilsya s khodom vesenne-polevykh rabot”, Akorda, 29 May 2023, <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/prezident-oznakomilsya-s-hodom-vesenne-polevyh-rabot-2943727>
- ^v Minsk Hosts 2nd International Conference on Eurasian Security, 1 November 2024, SCO, <https://eng.sectesco.org/20241101/1597235.html>
- ^{vi} A. Moshes and R. Nizhnikau (2024), Lukashenko opens window of opportunity for Western influence, EU Observer, <https://euobserver.com/news/arfa85b69c>

