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“A calm atmosphere”: The future of Belarus-West relations after the parliamentary election

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Summary

The lack of opposition representation in the parliament after the vote on 17 November frustrates Western officials. Their muted criticism bodes ill for relations ahead of next year’s presidential poll. Belarus may manage to keep frictions under control with the US, but EU relations are likely to prove more challenging as the 2020 election approaches. EU and US policy towards Belarus may diverge, which could bring unintended consequences.

Contents

1 A tepid reception
2 Dividing Europe and America?
3 Potential consequences

A tepid reception

Western politicians consider elections the lifeblood of politics. They place great value in the conduct of direct elections and representative democracy, and they pay attention to elections in Belarus. In 2016 the elevation of Alena Anisim and Hanna Kanapatskaya to the parliament smoothed the path to warmer relations between Belarus and Western states. The fact that two non-loyalist voices would be heard in parliament offered, in small measure, the promise of wider political debate among the people’s representatives.

Belarus accredited more than one thousand international observers for the parliamentary election. This included several hundred monitors from the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) – the opinions of which the EU and the US hold in high regard.

On election day President Lukashenka insisted that Belarus cared about the recommendations made in the previous OSCE reports. Still, the OSCE/ODIHR/PACE preliminary report notes that the election ‘proceeded calmly but did not meet important international standards.’ The EU’s External Action Service issued a statement that similarly spoke of ‘an overall calm atmosphere’ but lamented a ‘lost opportunity.’

The final report from the OSCE-led observation missions, which Western states dominate, will presumably reflect this language.

> Praising the ‘calm atmosphere’ is like a schoolteacher praising a pupil’s efforts but omitting to comment on any achievements.

In the end, ‘calm’ was as much as Lukashenka had promised.

Dividing Europe and America?

The US chimed in by acknowledging the ‘peaceful conduct’ of the election, although added that the findings of the observation missions were ‘deeply troubling.’ In fact, the main consequence of the parliamentary election for Belarus’s relations with Western states could prove to be that the US and EU members states’ approaches to Belarus diverge.

The EU’s focus on liberal democratic values as the basis for building relations isn’t an entirely normative matter. EU power depends on the world operating in a manner convenient to it. The EU does not have the hard power – understood in terms of military capabilities – to shape the world otherwise. Thus, the EU has come to believe in its own soft power and, to borrow scholar Ian Manners’ term, normative power.

> The EU cannot yield on its liberal principles without compromising, or at least acknowledging the limits of, its own power.

On the surface the US shares the EU’s commitment to liberal democratic values: there have been suggestions that it views the conduct of Belarusian elections in 2019 and 2020 as a condition for removing its sanctions on Belarus. Recent remarks by Vladimir Makei may have been partly directed at the persistence of the US sanctions regime. He knows that the US has committed considerable time and resources recently to improve relations and will not want to squander those efforts.

The US, beneath the veneer of liberal democracy, is a very different kind of entity to the EU. It relies on its hard power and it is US military bases around the world, not liberalism, that first and foremost keeps it at the top of the power hierarchy. Whether it admits the fact or not, the US has fewer compunctions about developing relations in the absence of liberal democracy. It is more willing to let naked geopolitical considerations determine its foreign relations.

Potential consequences

I argued elsewhere that the lack of non-loyalist voices in the new parliament may prompt a renewed deterioration in Belarus-West relations. The conduct of the presidential election next year will either soften or exacerbate divisions between EU and the US about the place of values as a condition for developing relations. A differential relationship with the EU and US might seem attractive to Belarus’s leaders at first glance, but it contains the seeds of three potentially negative consequences.

First, a return to past frictions with the EU could undermine the potential for increasing trade. Although widely discussed over the past decade, many trade opportunities remain unrealised. Belarus, with some justification, has blamed the EU side for this. When Andrea Wiktorin, the outgoing head of the EU delegation to Belarus, left her post this year it was claimed that she had presided over a trade increase between 2015 and 2018. This was a rhetorical trick: trade volume was higher the year before she arrived than when she left (data here, see bottom of page 3). Moreover, trade dipped in 2016 and 2017, which is to say that there was no discernible trend. Despite these failings, the EU is the second largest export market for Belarusian goods and geography ensures that it is far more useful to Belarus than the US in economic terms.

Secondly, even if trade remains static, Belarus uses Western states to countervail dependence on Russia. Diverging EU and US policies towards Belarus will only intensify debates within (and between) Western states about those policies and the lack of consensus is likely to reduce these states’ appetite for working with Belarus. This could undermine Belarus’s leverage with Russia.

Finally, Russia has always been more suspicious of US power than EU power. Russia has come to perceive both as threatening, but in different ways.

> The EU does not represent a military threat as the US does; it is perceived as a more equivocal threat, arguably more insidious, but one that requires a more cautious response.

If Belarus-EU relations suffer, and Belarus manages to keep relations with the US on an even keel, then Russia may see this as the justification for stepping up its efforts to expand its military presence in Belarus.

Western politicians expect the 2020 election to keep Lukashenka in power, but they will look for evidence of a free and fair contest. In the meantime, one cannot help but wonder if they will step back ever so slightly from engaging with Belarus. At least the atmosphere will remain calm.

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