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Belarus's Security Environment in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2020 Domestic Political Crisis: Assessing immediate implications and strategic risks

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Summary

The coronavirus pandemic cannot be qualified as a Black Swan in the foresight theory terms. Scientists and intelligence analysts in various countries made multiple warnings about the possible occurrence of such a crisis in the field of public health in the last decade. However, as the events of 2020-2021 showed, the world as a whole and the vast majority of states were not ready for the spread of COVID-19. Neither medically, nor economically, nor politically.

A year and a half after the beginning of the pandemic, we can observe that the primary medical and socio-political shock from the emergence of a new disease has been overcome. The virus itself is no longer a complete "stranger". Humanity is still far from defeating COVID-19, as its spread is accompanied by new mutations that may require new vaccines. However, the overall situation no longer looks as extreme and out of control as it did in early and mid-2020.

At the same time, numerous implications and side effects of the pandemic will remain forever in the most diverse areas of our lives. In the expert environment, a broad consensus has emerged quickly: COVID-19 has not become a driver of fundamental changes both in international relations and security and in individual societies. Rather, the pandemic has significantly accelerated pre-existing trends and processes, as well as exacerbated numerous pre-existing problems in every country and every region. In other words, it "accelerated geopolitical time" and became a test and a massive "stress on the public immune system". In almost every country, COVID-19 detected the most

complex socio-political problems and "attacked" them with renewed vigor, revealing the contradictions underlying them. Belarus not only became no exception, but, on the contrary, turned into one of the most striking examples.

A year after the beginning of the Belarus political crisis, it is obvious that a head-on collision of political opponents inside the country has led to an unprecedented weakening of Belarus as a whole. The country is weakened even more by the quickly and predictably following geopolitization of the internal political crisis. As a result, Belarus is becoming increasingly vulnerable to multiple challenges and threats, and less and less able to effectively manage multiple risks. First of all, this concerns the sphere of national security, which, by definition, is the main priority of any state.

The state of security in Belarus, just as the state of security of the entire region of Eastern Europe, began to cause serious concerns in the spring and summer of 2020, as the outbreak of the pandemic complicated cooperation, dialogue, and implementation of confidence-building measures in the field of security and led to unprecedented uncertainty. The geopolitization of the Belarus crisis contributed to an even greater rise in regional tensions. So far, it is difficult to assert with certainty whether we have witnessed irreversible transformations in the regional security system, or whether the most dramatic contradictions "tearing" this system apart can still be resolved. However, in any case, we can state qualitative changes in the security environment in and around Belarus. This circumstance, amid the background of the emergence of new global and national challenges, requires a strategic assessment of the specific risks that Belarus is already facing or may face in the future.

To that end, the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations conducted the present research titled Belarus's Security Environment in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2020 Domestic Political Crisis: Assessing immediate implications and strategic risks. The research assesses and compares global and national risks affecting the internal and international security of Belarus in the new conditions of the pandemic and the political crisis.

The research project encompasses two parts:

1. The special issue of the Minsk Barometer monitoring, drafted in the middle of 2020, which analyzes Belarus's foreign policy and security status in the context of the first COVID-19 pandemic waves.
2. The mapping of the long-term national security risks that takes into account such risk characteristics as (i) the likelihood of realization, (ii) the impact of realization, (iii) the risk's criticality, as well as (iv) the risks' interconnectivity.

Interactive version of the report is available here.

Static version of the report is available in the PDF file down below.

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