Can Belarus Survive without a Multi-Vector Foreign Policy?

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Summary

Lukashenko's post-August turn away from the West and toward Russia is no guarantee that Belarus will not return to a multi-vector foreign policy sometime soon.

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Since the summer, Minsk's foreign policy rhetoric has undergone extraordinary shifts. Shortly before August's presidential election, the Belarusian authorities accused Russian mercenaries of planning to destabilize the country. Then, several days later, they trained their fire on the West, alleging a plot to oust Lukashenko while thanking Moscow for its support.

Something similar happened in 2010. That year's presidential race took place against the backdrop of an information war with Russia, whose leaders and television channels relentlessly attacked Lukashenko. Meanwhile, senior EU diplomats visited Minsk to discuss the prospect of normalizing relations.

Everything changed when the Belarusian authorities cracked down on the opposition, dispersing demonstrations with force a day after the vote. The West sanctioned Belarus, and Minsk's differences with Moscow faded, paving the way for Belarus to play an active part in Eurasian integration.

> The foreign policy changes we witnessed in August 2020, then, are neither unprecedented nor random, and are clearly linked to Lukashenko's determination to hold on to power. When the threat to his rule grows, Lukashenko decisively severs ties with the West and embraces Russia.

After all, the West multiplies such threats by refusing to recognize election results, supporting the opposition, and imposing sanctions on Belarus's ruling elite. Russia, by contrast, preserves Lukashenko's rule with its assistance, even if it makes various demands of him.

Why, then, does Lukashenko always revert to trying to open a dialogue with the West? Would it not be more logical to stick with Moscow and avoid irritating it with talk of a multi-vector foreign policy? It appears not.

> As the danger of losing power recedes, the authoritarian leader's foreign policy logic changes. Political survival is deprioritized in favor of what is often called the national interest—the objective needs of the country and the expansion of opportunities and minimization of risks for it on the international stage—and the tension between the state's interests and those of the autocrat dissipates.

Belarus's geography and history lend themselves to a particular approach to securing the national interest: the diversification of foreign policy and economic ties, a staple of Lukashenko's rhetoric until recently.

In recent years, the international situation has changed in ways that make such diversification all the more important. For Belarus, the most critical development has been the economic and military-political fallout from the Ukraine crisis.

Its economic consequences were felt almost immediately. Belarus's dependence on the Russian market means that any economic crisis in Russia automatically becomes an economic crisis in Belarus, as was the case in 2014–2016, when Belarus's economy suffered more deeply and for longer than Russia's. The experience showed Belarus's leadership how total economic dependence on one state can turn any geopolitical shock into tangible economic losses.

Russia responded to Western sanctions with import substitution, including in sectors where Belarusian companies held strong positions. As it became clear that the policy was here to stay, Minsk embraced the goal of diversifying its foreign economic ties, and the 30–30–30 formula emerged, dividing Belarus's exports to the Eurasian Economic Union, the EU, and the rest of the world into three more or less equal shares. Lukashenko himself called it a formula for national security and sovereignty.

Clearly, the diversification of foreign economic ties required Belarus to also diversify its foreign policy ties, not by fundamentally revising its priorities but by normalizing and deepening its relations with the EU and the United States to meet the needs of the

Belarusian economy. Belarus would have to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, at the risk of alienating many in Russia.

Moscow was even more irritated by the Belarusian authorities' actions in the military-political arena, from their equivocal position on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia to their refusal to host a Russian air base. For the first time since Lukashenko's rise to power, Moscow's relations with the West were worse than Minsk's, not because of anything Minsk did right, but because of how far things had deteriorated for Moscow.

These events greatly complicated a long-standing arrangement between Belarus and Russia serving as the basis not only of Russo-Belarusian relations, but also of Belarus's overall foreign policy. In exchange for its geopolitical loyalty to Moscow, Minsk received economic perks like discounted gas and preferential access to the Russian market.

Minsk came to fear that its silent obedience on foreign policy matters would put its security at risk, while the prospect of a military clash between NATO and Russia threatened to entangle Belarus and turn the country into a site of constant tension, to the detriment of both its economy and its relations with neighboring states.

Minsk's influence on the overall situation would be minimal. Already, Moscow had shown itself to be indifferent to the views of its allies and open to making fateful decisions on international security without consulting them.

Hence the dilemma facing Minsk after 2014, one familiar to small states situated between geopolitical power centers. Either Belarus would continue to unconditionally support Moscow on all key international issues, aware of the growing risks to its security but hopeful of the continuation of Moscow's economic assistance and the extension of its nuclear umbrella, or it would pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, making relations with Russia more difficult but, if successful, bringing Belarus security and economic dividends. Belarus opted for the latter option, as have most countries in its predicament.

> Yet the August presidential election again divorced Lukashenko's priorities from the national interest, and the two issues are unlikely to realign until the Belarusian leader feels he is no longer in danger of being ousted.

The Western vector of Belarusian foreign policy is likely to remain in crisis until then, since Lukashenko currently associates the West with risks and threats rather than opportunities. The Russian vector, on the other hand, is seen in positive terms only, although that will change if Moscow stops backing Lukashenko or the West reengages with the regime and drops its demand for new elections.

Belarus's return to a multi-vector foreign policy is, however, inevitable, whether Lukashenko stays in power after the revision of Belarus's constitution or his rule comes to an end. Any successor to Lukashenko will have even more reason to diversify the country's foreign policy and economic ties: a task that will be easier to complete without the burden of an authoritarian past.

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