Commentary
February 19, 2021

Minsk Announces Possible Changes to its Foreign Policy

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Summary

Foreign policy featured among the central topics of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA), on February 11–12. This is no surprise, as the ongoing political crisis, which broke out following the August 2020 presidential election, has had a disruptive impact on the country's international affairs.

Originally published in the Eurasian Daily Monitor

Like what occurred after most previous presidential campaigns in Belarus, the European Union and the United States did not recognize the official election results as legitimate and introduced new sanctions against Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime. The latter retaliated by implementing its own restrictive measures against EU officials, downgrading its participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative and demanding that EU members Poland and Lithuania (seen in Minsk as the main drivers behind the European sanctions) downsize their embassies and recall ambassadors for consultations. Moreover, in response to each new package of sanctions, Minsk increased the level of repression inside Belarus.

All this has ignited a fully-fledged diplomatic crisis between Belarus and the EU, effectively reversing the efforts to normalize Belarusian-Western relations undertaken in the preceding years.

> Ukraine's desire to move the venue for Donbas peace talks from Minsk elsewhere further aggravated the situation and undermined Belarus's efforts to establish itself as geopolitically neutral ground in Europe's East, which shaped its foreign policy thinking in 2014–2020.

As a result, semi-official voices began to emerge, arguing that Minsk should change its foreign policy course. For example, the chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the parliament's lower chamber, Andrei Savinykh, made a public case that the multi-vectored concept, which Belarus has adhered to since the early 1990s, no longer serves the interests of the country. Instead, in his opinion, Belarus should drop its futile attempts to develop relations with the West and start bandwagoning with Russia on all major international issues.

However, this line of thought did not receive support during the ABPA. On the contrary, both President Lukashenka and Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei stressed that multi-vectorism should remain the guiding foreign policy principle even under current circumstances. The latter contended that many of Belarus's achievements in the past three decades were made possible only thanks to its multi-vectored foreign policy. Moreover, he underscored that Minsk remains interested in a strong EU and a strong Transatlantic partnership.

While amid the diplomatic confrontation with the West such rhetoric might have raised some eyebrows in Minsk, Moscow and even Western capitals, it is comprehensible and was readily predictable for at least three reasons.

First, given the ongoing transformation of the international system, preserving multi-vectorism is still a prudent line for Belarus to follow. Unlike what the proponents of changing the foreign policy concept have argued, growing great power competition opens up new diplomatic and economic opportunities for a small state like Belarus. By making use of these opportunities, the state expands its room for international maneuver and, thus, improves its resilience in the face of multiple geopolitical risks and uncertainties. On the contrary, bandwagoning with a single great power under such international circumstances would amount to effectively abandoning sovereignty.

Second, the country's "small open economy" requires a multi-vectored foreign policy. In other words, Belarus is vitally dependent on foreign trade, and the Russian/Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) market alone simply cannot provide for all of its needs.

And third, according to various available public opinion polls from the recent and more distant past, no single foreign policy vector enjoys the support of the absolute majority of Belarusians. Hence, dropping the multi-vectored concept would only aggravate the already grave problem of polarization in society and further undermine the country from within.

Yet while the ABPA made a clear case for preserving Belarus's multi-vectored foreign policy, it still produced some ambiguity, which led to numerous contradictory and even antithetical interpretations in the media. The ambiguity resulted from two other proposals made by Makei. Namely, he suggested that Article 18 of the acting Constitution, which says that Belarus "pledges itself to become a neutral state," be amended. In his opinion, the pledge no longer corresponds to international realities. Also, he put forward the idea that the government should amend the so-called "33-33-33" formula of foreign trade diversification. It now stipulates that a third of all exports should go to Russia/EEU, another third to the EU, and yet another third to other countries of the world. According to Makei, in its new version the formula should look like "50 [Russia/EEU]–25 [EU]–25 [rest of the world]."

The ambiguity grew following Makei's words that the foreign ministry pledges to "prepare a new foreign policy concept" in light of recent developments. For inattentive Belarus watchers, this might, indeed, have sounded like proof that a change to the country's foreign policy course is underway. But it is important to point out that Belarus has never had a foreign policy concept before (though it has a national security concept). Thus, if such a document is prepared, it would not replace anything; and in all probability, it would simply reiterate the existing multi-vectored vision in the most ambiguous language possible (as any strict conceptual wording would impose counterproductive limitations on Minsk's ability to maneuver).

As to the proposed modification of the foreign trade formula, it fairly accurately reflects the current reality on the ground.

> Even during the period of the rapprochement with the EU, Minsk was barely able to achieve the 33 percent target and export more to the highly protective EU market. Now that Brussels has introduced sanctions against Belarus and suspended most cooperation programs, the target is simply beyond realistic reach.

The proposal to delete the neutrality pledge clause from the Constitution does carry more symbolic weight, as in recent years Minsk made careful attempts to build on Article 18 when promoting itself as neutral ground for peace talks and as a "situationally neutral" actor in the region. However, in actuality, Belarus has not been neutral since it acceded to the Collective Security Treaty at the end of 1993. Moreover, it has bilateral defense commitments with Russia and has always taken them seriously. Thus, even if this proposal is reflected in a new version of the Constitution, it will not bring much *de*

facto change to Belarus's foreign policy. On the other hand, it will certainly earn Minsk some additional points in Moscow's eyes—clearly an important motivation behind the idea.

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