Commentary
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The Belarus Test for the “Geopolitical” EU: A view from Minsk

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Summary

The EU lacks leverage in Belarus. Doubling down on policies that failed in the past makes no sense and can only have unintended consequences. To gain relevance in Belarus and become “geopolitical” the EU should recognise painful truths about itself and the world.

Contents

1 What does it take to be geopolitical in today’s world?
2 Irrelevance and lack of leverage
3 The Russian factor
4 Learning unpleasant lessons

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Six months have passed since an unprecedented political crisis broke out in Belarus. In August and September 2020, the country saw the largest and most dramatic protests in its sovereign history. Against that backdrop, numerous observers jumped to the conclusion that the days of the authoritarian ruler Alexander Lukashenko were numbered. Some countries, including EU Member States, refused to recognise him as the legitimate leader of Belarus and called for a new election.

However, half-a-year later Lukashenko continues to control the country. Unless something unexpected happens in the months to come, protest activities are unlikely to reach again the level and intensity they had in 2020. Yet, sporadic public manifestations of protest and targeted government repressions in response will continue to sustain tensions. For Belarus, this has established a new quality of societal life, which has aggravated pre-existing splits and created new ones.

> In a longer term, unless some national consensus is found, these deepening splits in society might destroy Belarus’s sovereignty from within.

Besides the Belarusians themselves, the crisis also creates obvious challenges and risks for Belarus’s neighbours, including in the security realm. For the EU, the Belarus case tells a lot not only in terms of its bilateral relations with Minsk or ability to defend democratic values, but even more so in terms of the EU’s recently proclaimed ambition to become a geopolitical actor. Hence, Brussels and other European capitals would do well to recognise painful truths, which explain their consistent failures in Belarus, and to understand the broader implications of these truths for the EU’s foreign policy.

What does it take to be geopolitical in today’s world?

Before discussing those truths, a few words about the EU’s geopolitical ambitions will help to set an overall framework. Only recently, the term “geopolitics” seemed to be a taboo in the EU. Officials and pundits alike would claim that the EU does not do geopolitics and that the very concept was outdated. Therefore, President von der Leyen’s announcement that her Commission would strive to be “geopolitical” invited numerous questions about the meaning of such a geopolitical turn and whether the EU is actually capable of becoming a geopolitical actor.

While EU institutions are still to offer their own vision for a geopolitical EU, two aspects appear evident. *Firstly*, by dropping its previously held views about geopolitics the EU is reacting (unwillingly) to ongoing structural transformations in the system of international relations, which no longer can be ignored. The world is clearly becoming less cooperative, more brutal, transactional and trickier as great power rivalry is back as a defining characteristic of international politics. This is a qualitatively different reality compared to the benign post-Cold War liberal international order and there are no reasons to expect that the latter will simply restore itself after a short period of turbulence.

Hence, *secondly*, under such transformational circumstances the EU’s ambition to “learn to use the language of power” requires that the Union be serious about expanding its international leverage with a view to becoming an indispensable actor at least in its neighbourhood. In other words, to be able to use the language of power the EU needs to matter internationally to a degree that other actors cannot ignore what Brussels thinks and wants.

Irrelevance and lack of leverage

The Belarus case points to a problem the EU has when it comes to leverage, relevance and powers to promote its interests and values even in the immediate neighbourhood (the 2020 war in Nagorno Karabakh is another recent manifestation of the problem).

The EU started issuing various statements on the deteriorating situation in Belarus already in the initial weeks of the 2020 presidential campaign – when it saw the first signs of election irregularities. Some EU diplomats take great pride in this fact, adding that Brussels also managed to produce a declaration by the High Representative less than 48 hours after the election day and adopt conclusions on Belarus by the President of the European Council a week later. In their opinion, all that demonstrated diplomatic resolve and efficiency and showed the EU’s interest in Belarus. Indeed, August is a holiday season in Europe and such quick reactions do amount to bureaucratic prolificacy. Yet, looking beyond the bureaucratic logic there is hardly anything Brussels can be proud of.

All the numerous EU statements and declarations have simply been ignored by the Lukashenko government.

> The EU’s demands have had zero effect: state repressions have only intensified; the number of political prisoners continues to grow and the prospects for a national dialogue are now worse than before last summer.

The sanctions, which the EU started to introduce in October, are having the very same effect (zero!) and are only aggravating the situation on the ground (see below).

Thus, if the Belarus case tells us anything about the EU as a geopolitical actor it is the story of lacking leverage and irrelevance. For analysts of EU-Belarus relations this is hardly any surprise. In 2014-2020, the relations witnessed the most significant rapprochement since the mid-1990s, and during that period the EU had a good opportunity to strengthen its leverage vis-à-vis Belarus and become an actor that matters. Brussels wasted the opportunity.

In the past years, Minsk reiterated on numerous occasions its interest in deepening relations with the EU. In particular, it offered to start talks on a framework agreement, as until this day Belarus-EU relations are regulated by the 1989 agreement between the USSR and the European Economic Community. Minsk desired to diversify its foreign economic relations and to lessen economic dependence on Russia by expanding

cooperation with the EU. Needless to say, that had such plans materialised Minsk would have become more dependent on the EU, which would have created leverage for the latter.

However, instead of working towards those ends, EU officials preferred to put out all sorts of preconditions for starting negotiations. For instance, they issued dozens of statements demanding that Minsk introduce a moratorium on the death penalty or otherwise no substantive talks on broadening economic relations would be possible. As a result, after years of lost opportunities the death penalty is still there and the EU’s leverage vis-à-vis Belarus remains miniscule, if any at all.

The Russian factor

Thus, it is only natural that Russia remains the only game in town in Belarus. European diplomats and pundits are actively discussing, both publicly and privately, the dilemmas Russia faces in Belarus and some even find consolation in the fact that Moscow does not have easy options when dealing with Lukashenko. As true as it is, these discussions only emphasise the EU’s own lack of leverage. Hence, the EU has nothing else to do but to appeal to Russia for understanding and hope that the Kremlin will hear its arguments about the importance of free and fair elections in Belarus. Indicative of this were several conversations EU leaders had with Vladimir Putin in the immediate aftermath of the Belarusian presidential elections. But to no avail.

Moscow has its own reasons to continue supporting Lukashenko under current circumstances.

> In a nutshell, Russia cannot accept the very possibility that post-Soviet leaders get toppled by what it considers Western-inspired “colour revolutions”. And there is no point in trying to convince the Russian leadership otherwise.

Moreover, all tensions with Lukashenko notwithstanding, Moscow knows him well, whereas it sees current opposition leaders as either anti-Russian or simply unpredictable. Given Belarus’s geostrategic significance for Russia, Moscow concludes that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. This position will not change, and the EU can do nothing about it.

Learning unpleasant lessons

This is a grim picture for the EU, even though Belarus constitutes just one case in the Eastern neighbourhood and on others the EU’s track-record might look better.

Yet, the EU would do well to recognise that its lack of leverage and political irrelevance in the context of the Belarus crisis poses a significant challenge for its geopolitical ambitions, not just for bilateral relations with Minsk.

Therefore, learning unpleasant lessons from dealing with Belarus will also help the EU to assert itself as a geopolitical actor.

First of all, the EU ***should learn to avoid “default” policies from its traditional playbook if they consistently fail to deliver intended results***, even if they are popular with the public. In the Belarusian case, these are sanctions.

After many years of EU sanctions against Belarus we have abundant empirical evidence and academic research showing that sanctions do not work. Namely, they fail to deter repressive behaviour and to force the regime to roll back previously made repressive decisions. If anything, sanctions have had the opposite effect in Belarus. The Lukashenko government retaliates to each new episode of sanctions by increasing repressions and by further restricting the EU’s presence on the ground, which further erodes the EU’s relevance in the country. Also, in contrast to intuitive expectations, sanctions ensure that political prisoners remain behind bars longer than what could be the case otherwise: again, we know that from the past.

Many EU officials admit that sanctions perform a symbolic function only. As a senior diplomat from a Member State put it in a private conversation with the author, “if we do not introduce sanctions against the Lukashenko regime now, we will look like idiots in the eyes of our publics.” This is a fair point, as EU officials represent the will and values of the Europeans. Yet, it might be helpful to ask a more strategic question: if the EU keeps applying instruments that clearly do not work what will its foreign policy ultimately look like in the eyes of the Europeans and other nations?

Secondly, the EU should ***learn to formulate foreign policy goals that are consistent with its geopolitical powers today and help to expand them in the future***. This involves the need to identify rationally immediate and longer-term foreign policy priorities and available resources for achieving them.

In the Belarus crisis, the EU, thus, needs to recognise its current lack of political relevance and reasons that have led to it. It should also admit that without leverage its multiple statements and declarations are useless and, therefore, now Brussels should

rather focus on the most critical and attainable goals:

- Offering humanitarian aid to those who have suffered from repressions;
- Avoiding a geopolitical confrontation with Moscow because of Belarus;
- Reducing military risks in the Baltic Sea region, which have grown in light of the Belarus crisis;
- Helping to lower the levels of violence in Belarus through backchannel diplomacy, which the EU has already used in the past to deal with Lukashenko in crisis situations (e.g. the missions of former High Representative Javier Solana and former Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nickolay Mladenov).

> The EU’s longer-term thinking should be guided by the need to start gaining serious leverage vis-à-vis Belarus or otherwise “a geopolitical EU” will remain a dream.

Finally, the EU should also ***think carefully about the “face” of its foreign policy in the east***. Poland and Lithuania have taken the lead in shaping the EU’s reactions to the Belarus crisis. This is natural due to geography, which predetermines the primary interest of these Member States in Belarusian affairs. Yet, it is exactly Poland and Lithuania that are seen with utmost scepticism and distrust both in Minsk and Moscow. Therefore, having Warsaw and Vilnius lead on the Belarus file is not the most prudent approach the EU could take. Instead, the EU should think about balancing Polish and Lithuanian activeness with Berlin’s larger credibility in the eyes of the EU’s difficult partners in the east.

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