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# DGAP POLICY BRIEF

## Four Scenarios for the Crisis in Belarus



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As protests continue to galvanize Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko is consolidating his grip on power. Volatile domestic dynamics – and Russia’s reactions to them – will shape the discredited regime’s future. This paper outlines four possible scenarios for Belarus up to one year from now. They include options for Russia and the EU, whose strategic objectives differ, but whose short-term interests align: preventing bloodshed, avoiding open geopolitical conflict, and preparing for a post-Lukashenko transition.

– **Frozen Belarus:** The regime survives with Russia’s help but without a bloody crackdown. Control over society is restored but remains fragile. Economic crisis triggers new unrest. The EU maintains sanctions and supports civil society but has little room for maneuver in Belarus.

– **Slow-Moving, Transitional Belarus:** After his inauguration, President Lukashenko announces a political transition. A new constitution is adopted, and elections are held in 2021. While opposition is tolerated, the transition is dominated by regime elites who champion their favored candidates. Both Russia and some member states of the EU are actively involved.

– **Blood-Soaked Belarus:** Protests continue, provoking a large-scale, violent crackdown with many fatalities. Internal conflicts grow within the regime. Moscow keeps dominating the process via its links to Belarusian security elites. The EU’s role is limited to damage control.

– **Force Majeure in Belarus:** Lukashenko leaves his post unexpectedly and presidential elections must be held within 70 days. Independent candidates backed by various external players run; a politician who is supported by Russia wins. The EU prefers to rely on the OSCE rather than act on its own.

## DANGEROUS DEADLOCK AND DEEPENING POLITICAL CRISIS

In the aftermath of presidential elections on August 9, 2020, which were followed by massive demonstrations and brutal repressions, the situation in Belarus has moved into a dangerous deadlock. While President Alexander Lukashenko has managed to prevent the immediate collapse of his regime,<sup>1</sup> he has not succeeded in calming the nationwide protests. Opposition demonstrations have been fueled by both the announcement of election results that were – even by the standards of Lukashenko’s 26-year rule – extremely falsified and unprecedented post-election violence by police forces.

Widespread, brutal repressions infuriated and mobilized a broader spectrum of Belarusian society against the regime, including citizens who had previously been apolitical.<sup>2</sup> This was true not only in Minsk, but also in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> Unlike in previous years, these protests are prevailing.

In order to understand this phenomenon, one needs to note that the domestic legitimacy of Lukashenko’s regime has not been determined by elections since 1996. Rather, its legitimacy was based on a functioning social contract, financed by Russian subsidies, that provided relative well-being for Belarusian citizens in exchange for their political passivity. A deep political crisis had been building for years stoked by the long-term economic stagnation of the 2010s, the lack of any prospective for reform, Russia’s reluctance to keep financing the Belarusian regime, and, most recently, Lukashenko’s failed management of the coronavirus crisis. The events around the elections on August 9 then catalyzed pent-up grievances resulting from these developments.

Going forward, both the Lukashenko regime and the opposition lack full legitimacy inside and outside Belarus. The numerous violations of transparency before, during, and after the recent elections make the actual result of the vote impossible to define.

Consequently, no one – neither Lukashenko nor opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya – can rightfully claim victory. Tikhonovskaya’s recent declaration at the extraordinary meeting of the European Parliament on August 25 that “We are the majority now”<sup>4</sup> is as unsubstantiated by reliable and representative data as the presidency of Lukashenko.

The unprecedented police violence that followed the elections on August 9 – even when compared to the forceful disbursement of protests after those in 2006 and 2010 – has also contributed to Lukashenko’s loss of presidential legitimacy among considerable parts of Belarusian society.<sup>5</sup> At least three protesters lost their lives,<sup>6</sup> hundreds were injured, and thousands suffered from arbitrary arrests, beatings, and, in certain cases, systematic torture documented and broadcasted via social media. Still, Lukashenko’s threatening behavior on August 23, when he posed with an automatic rifle, demonstrated that he would hold on to power for as long as possible.

Meanwhile, because the opposition has little institutionalization, its Coordination Council can hardly constitute a credible political alternative. The opposition’s lack of democratic political experience and shortage of resources, as well as the somewhat unplanned presidential candidacy of Tikhonovskaya, all play a role. As does the fact that the Council operates partially from Lithuania, which gives the regime the opportunity to accuse Council members of being the agents of foreign powers and instigating a “color revolution.” Moreover, the regime’s repressions and threats are preventing many important actors, particularly business players, from supporting the Coordination Council.

### Demonstrations, Strikes, and Coherence of the *Siloviki*

The current protests are unique in two ways. First, except for the first few nights, the demonstrations have remained peaceful. Thus, police violence has been unilateral, which further erodes the regime’s domestic legitimacy. Second, the protests have been

1 The European Union does not recognize the results of the presidential elections held on August 9, 2020, in Belarus. Hence, when the text refers to Alexander Lukashenko as president, it is merely done in order to refer to the position he currently holds without recognizing the legitimacy of his presidency.

2 Vadim Mojeiko, “Three main threats to the Lukashenka regime now,” *Belarus Digest*, August 16, 2020: <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/three-main-threats-to-the-lukashenka-regime-now/>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

3 Alena Mikhalkovich, “Protesters in rural Belarus took the authorities by surprise,” *Belarus Digest*, August 18, 2020: <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/protesters-in-rural-belarus-took-the-authorities-by-surprise/>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

4 Alexandra Brzozowski, “Belarus has woken up, opposition leader Tikhonovskaya tells EU lawmakers,” *Euractiv*, August 25, 2020: <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/belarus-has-woken-up-opposition-leader-tikhonovskaya-tells-eu-lawmakers/>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

5 Pointed out even by prominent Russian analysts, such as: Dmitri Trenin, “Game Over for Lukashenko: The Kremlin’s Next Move,” Carnegie Moscow Center, August 17, 2020 <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82493>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

6 Two people were killed by the police while a third person died in police custody. Several others are still missing.

supported by strikes in several crucial enterprises operated by the Belarusian state. These strikes have the potential to become particularly dangerous to the regime because they affect the already stagnating economy. Also, the police cannot simply repress them because the regime is evidently unable to replace workers.

The sustainability of the strikes is, in fact, one of the key domestic factors that will define the possible outcomes of the current political stalemate. At this writing, strikes appear to be losing momentum, mostly due to a sophisticated combination of threats from the regime and the lack of financial resources to compensate the salaries lost by striking workers. Given that strike committees have already been formed, a second wave of strikes cannot, however, be ruled out.

The other main domestic driver of developments in Belarus is the *siloviki*, particularly the question of whether these security forces will remain loyal to Lukashenko. During the two weeks following the election, Lukashenko has largely managed to consolidate his power and, so far, has kept defections to a minimum. Parts of the Belarusian state bureaucracy are hedging, cautiously measuring their chances. But as long as the regime remains solid, so does the loyalty of the bureaucratic elites. Lukashenko has flatly refused any compromise or negotiation with the opposition, indicating that domestic political tensions will be prolonged. The longer the face-off between protesters and police forces continues, however, the more likely that cracks will appear in the loyalty of the security apparatus. This particularly concerns the army, which is largely composed of conscripts, and police personnel in the countryside who, because they live in the communities in which they serve, have close ties to the locals.

## THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The current crisis in Belarus has the potential to result in destabilizing consequences for the EU's eastern neighborhood for years to come. Ongoing tensions in Belarus are not, however, the result of geopolitical choices, as they were in the case of Ukraine. Rather, they have been driven solely by domestic political considerations.<sup>7</sup> As both Belarusian and Russian experts, as well as a detailed Russian sociological survey, point out, geopolitical considerations did not play a role in the election campaign.<sup>8</sup> Because the candidates did not represent competing geopolitical choices between Russia and the West, the current situation in Belarus cannot be described as a color revolution – a fact noted even by a prominent Russian analyst close to the Kremlin.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the campaign focused exclusively on domestic political issues.

### Russia: Despite Strong Interests and Leverage, Deadlock Remains

Unlike the EU, Russia has multifaceted, well-institutionalized channels of immediate influence over the Belarusian regime, particularly over its security apparatus and considerable parts of its economy. Also, Russia has strong, strategic interests in and over the country that are in line with its foreign policy toward the post-Soviet space, namely preserving the coherence of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union. In addition, Moscow intends to prevent the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU.

When it comes to questions of who becomes the leader of neighboring countries, Moscow usually prefers to make personalized choices instead of merely relying on its institutional leverage or traditional dependencies. Since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, Lukashenko has conducted a delicate balancing act between Russia and the West. While this has long been tolerated by Moscow, Lukashenko, who was never an easy partner, has increasingly become a serious irritant.<sup>10</sup> Hence, Russia's

7 Fyodor Lukyanov, "Сами с усами: происходящее в Белоруссии вызвано внутренними причинами, а не внешними" [Yourself with a Moustache: Events in Belarus are Caused by Internal Causes, Not External Ones], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs], August 10, 2020: <<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/sami-s-usami/>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

8 Igor Okunev, Marianna Shestakova, Emma Bibina, "Минск и вся остальная страна: территориальная дифференциация электорального поведения жителей Белоруссии" [Minsk and the Rest of the Country: Territorial Differentiation of Electoral Behavior of the Inhabitants of Belarus], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs], August 19, 2020: <<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/differenciatsiya-belorussii/>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

9 Lukyanov, *ibid.*

10 The arrest of 33 operatives of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, by Belarusian authorities on July 29, 2020, only infuriated Russia even further. Lukashenko used these arrests to accuse Moscow of trying to interfere in the presidential elections. After the elections, and following two direct phone conversations between Lukashenko and Putin, the Wagner operatives were released without any charges.

main objective in the August 2020 presidential elections was apparently to keep Lukashenko in power but weaken him enough to downgrade his geopolitical maneuvering, making him much more vulnerable to pushes for deeper economic (and possibly military) integration with Russia under the framework of the Union State.

Following this objective, Russia actively supported all the significant opposition candidates in the presidential elections, albeit to varying degrees and by different means that were not necessarily coordinated by the Kremlin. Various Russian corporate and other interests backed all the new opposition candidates. Meanwhile, Russia's often biased and opinionated state media covered the Belarusian election campaign largely objectively, sometimes even with sympathy for several opposition candidates.

Still, the intensity and extent of the current crisis surprised Moscow, as evidenced by Russian President Vladimir Putin's swift congratulation of Lukashenko on August 10,<sup>11</sup> which considerably narrowed Moscow's maneuvering space. While the Kremlin will do its utmost to keep Belarus in its own geopolitical sphere, it prefers to keep the costs of this effort not only as low as possible, but also covert. Thus, in the short term, the Kremlin will give Lukashenko time to take action. Its preferred scenario is a managed transition that does not lead polarized Belarus toward a breaking point.<sup>12</sup>

#### A Disengaged US and a Cautious EU

In contrast to its role in previous upheavals in the EU's eastern neighborhood, the United States is, at present, largely concentrating on its own domestic issues. Though the visit of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Minsk in February 2020 marked an important milestone in bilateral US-Belarusian relations, the ongoing presidential election campaign currently hampers the efficiency of the US administration. While its slow response to the Belarus crisis is part of this trend, Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun's visit to Vilnius and Moscow from August 24 to 27, 2020, was a sign that Washington is still paying close attention and considering its options. At the same time, both Moscow and Minsk

are aware that Biegun represents an administration whose future is uncertain.

Meanwhile, the European Union's attitude toward the Lukashenko regime was fundamentally altered by the post-election violence. Previously, the crisis in Ukraine – and particularly the mediating role Minsk played in it – had made the EU remarkably more tolerant of Lukashenko's authoritarian practices.<sup>13</sup> The EU lifted most of its sanctions on Belarus in 2016, for example. The August 19 declaration by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other EU leaders about the EU's non-recognition of the Belarusian elections, however, makes it impossible to return to the pre-2014 status quo, i.e. the tacit recognition of Lukashenko despite his authoritarian practices in exchange for geopolitical benefits.

The leverage of the European Union in and on Belarus is limited both in terms of capacity and willingness. Due to the lack of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, bilateral relations are only institutionalized at a low level. Financial assistance from the EU is marginal compared to the subsidies Belarus receives from Russia. Moreover, the EU's interest in ensuring that Belarus is able to maintain its sovereignty limits the EU's ability to engage in any actions that could result in a large-scale Russian takeover effort. All in all, while certain EU member states are able and willing to devote considerable political resources to Belarus, the EU as a whole is less so.

Please note: The Republic of Belarus recognizes two official languages, Belarusian and Russian. The choice of transliterating Belarusian names on the basis of their Russian equivalents was made here in order to help the wider public more easily comprehend the situation in Belarus; thus, it does not represent any political or other preference.

11 Президент России [President of Russia], "Поздравление Александру Лукашенко с победой на выборах Президента Белоруссии," [Congratulations to Alexander Lukashenko for his Victory in the Presidential Elections in Belarus], August 10, 2020: <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63872>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

12 Henry Foy, Max Seddon, "Putin prepares for a controlled succession in Belarus," *Financial Times*, August 20, 2020: <<https://www.ft.com/content/53c4f8ec-c2da-48db-9459-6dc717e79b9c>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

13 Maxim Samorukov, "Can Russia-West Divide Save 'Europe's Last Dictator' in Belarus?," Carnegie Moscow Center, August 10, 2020: <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82447>> (accessed August 25, 2020).

# Four Scenarios for Belarus

Based on the current situation, domestic dynamics are likely to remain the primary determinant of political developments in Belarus. Certain domestic dynamics, however, will cause external powers – not only Russia, which is the main player, but also the EU – to get involved to various degrees in order to secure their interests. Four distinct scenarios are outlined below for the development of Belarus over the next three to twelve months. It was not among the objectives of this paper to define the probability of each of them, but we have indicated where Russia's actions may be decisive.<sup>14</sup>

## SCENARIO 1: FROZEN BELARUS



### Situation:

Following a broad but not extremely violent crackdown, Lukashenko stays in power with substantial help from Russia. Protests remain peaceful but gradually die down. Repressions and human rights abuses continue but remain selective and not outrageously brutal. *Silovik* elites remain loyal to the regime, forcing many political activists to leave the country to avoid getting detained. Control over society is restored but very fragile. A crisis of legitimacy prevails both within the country and vis-à-vis the West. In terms of foreign policy, as relations with the EU stagnate, Russia and China become Belarus's only remaining, prospective partners. Subsidies arrive only from Russia, but their amount is decreasing due to the mounting problems of Russia's own economy. The deepening economic crisis, as well as the sustained legitimacy deficit, make a second wave of unrest highly likely. Its most probable culmination is the local elections scheduled for 2022. As the dynamics of the domestic situation remain volatile in this scenario, the geopolitical interests of external actors play a key role.



### Foreseeable interests and actions of Russia:

Moscow is interested in keeping Belarus weak and isolated from the West. Russia keeps assisting Lukashenko to stay in power, preferably by covert, non-military means, such as media manipulation and security assistance. Moscow provides the subsidies necessary to sustain the basic functionality of the regime in the short term. Due to the inherent economic hardships of Russia, however, sufficient subsidies are not sustainable in the long run. Hence, the Kremlin needs to prepare for a second wave of unrest, most likely by building up a strong presidential candidate whom it can utilize once the situation matures for it.



### Role of the EU:

The EU initially maintains targeted sanctions while increasing the amount of assistance that it redirects to civil society. Meanwhile, the prolonged stalemate gives the 27 EU member states an opportunity to rethink their policy toward Belarus going forward. Preserving EU unity on sanctions between Belarus's deeply engaged neighbors (Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia) on the one hand and more distant members (France and others) on the other will be hard. Doing so will require even more diplomatic efforts by Germany, as well as by EU High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell and President of the European Council President Charles Michel – both of whose capacities are already overstretched by other crises. Short-term measures acceptable to the whole EU-27 could include a special solidarity fund (or European Endowment for Democracy) to be set up to support the Belarusian opposition. Simultaneously, the EU capitals could try to limit the emigration of Belarusian youth and elites by various means, such as providing scholarships conditional on a subsequent return to Belarus, or providing financial support to independent media channels and NGOs operating in the country. As long as these actions remain low-profile and do not fundamentally endanger Lukashenko's rule, the regime and Russia are both likely to largely tolerate them. A major crackdown might be more expensive politically than the profits it would bring.

<sup>14</sup> The authors would like to express their gratitude for the insightful comments they received from participants of the expert digital workshop held on August 24, particularly Balazs Jarabik, Olga Dryndova, Liana Fix, Sarah Pagung, Ingo Petz, Astrid Sahn, Susan Stewart, and Jakob Wöllenstein.

## SCENARIO 2: SLOW-MOVING, TRANSITIONAL BELARUS



### Situation:

At his presidential inauguration, Lukashenko announces a political transition, reform of the constitution, and a referendum on it. He promises new elections to be held in one to two years. The opposition will not be forcibly oppressed, but it will remain co-opted as Lukashenko is unlikely to recognize the legitimacy of the Coordination Council. The transition is conducted under the control of the regime while the *silovik* and bureaucratic elites champion their own candidates. In foreign policy, the balancing strategy is restored via political dialogue with and economic assistance from the EU, making this scenario geopolitically intensive.



### Foreseeable interests and actions of Russia:

Moscow's key interests are to ensure that Belarus's geopolitical orientation does not change and Minsk does not loosen its ties to the Eurasian Economic Union, CSTO, and Union State. The longer the transition takes, the more Moscow is going to be able to utilize its influence and increasingly steer the events. Still, the transition will remain dominated by the domestic dynamics in Belarus. A too deep constitutional reform is against the interest of Moscow: instead of establishing a parliamentary democracy, Russia prefers to preserve the presidential or semi-presidential system. Moscow promotes economic reforms that open Belarus up to Russian capital, but not to the West or China.



### Role of the EU:

Due to a lengthy and largely peaceful domestic transition process, the relative importance of Belarus in EU foreign policy decreases. The EU's core interest is to ensure a managed, stable transition. With regard to constitutional reform, the EU intends to move Belarus toward a semi-presidential or parliamentary system. Strengthening civil society is a key tool for fostering the long-term pluralization of the Belarusian political system. Economic reforms and privatization will be crucial objectives to achieve. In practice, however, encouraging European investment will be dependent on the depth of reforms related to the market economy and, particularly, the rule of law.

The EU also provides economic and humanitarian assistance and keeps its sanctions in place until democratic elections are held. Meanwhile, both Russia and the EU foster a gradual, negotiated transition, which is in their shared interests.

## SCENARIO 3: BLOOD-SOAKED BELARUS



### Situation:

*Silovik* elites cannot keep the tensions between the regime and society low. Demonstrations and strikes not only continue, but also become larger and increasingly violent. Meanwhile, Lukashenko keeps refusing any compromise. In several places and on several occasions, bloody crackdowns take place with numerous fatalities. The economic crisis adds to political grievances. Cleavages and loyalty conflicts increase within Belarusian *silovik* groups (the police and OMON<sup>15</sup> versus the army versus the KGB). Russian elites are also divided along their different interests and connections to various Belarusian elite groups, and the Kremlin is concerned about getting bogged down in another conflict on top of the one in Ukraine. Hence, Russia decides to abandon Lukashenko, whom the deepening crisis forces to flee into exile.



### Foreseeable interests and actions of Russia:

Russia will play a key and active role during the crisis. Domestic instability in Belarus provides fertile ground for various levels of Russian meddling and interference. Moscow will dominate the post-Lukashenko period. The Kremlin is highly likely to retain its current role as the core guarantor of Belarusian security. As costs would be too high for Russia, military occupation is unlikely, but it cannot be ruled out. Russia would probably try to secure a military base on Belarusian soil. Meanwhile, Russian business circles will use the chaos to further privatize the key economic assets of Belarus. As the turbulence is likely to keep Western investors out, the sole rival of Russian capital will be Chinese investments.

<sup>15</sup> OMON is a Belarusian law enforcement unit under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.



**Role of the EU:**

Due to the lack of capabilities and willingness to actively interfere, the EU's role remains limited to damage control. The EU provides humanitarian assistance and large-scale asylum for political refugees, supports Belarus's remaining civil society, and cooperates with the OSCE to determine some kind of mediatory involvement for the latter. Individual EU countries, led by the Baltic States and Poland, play an active role in trying to commit considerable resources to shaping domestic events in Belarus, but the EU as a whole does not. Sanctions remain in place and also get extended as more and more atrocities occur. Meanwhile, the uninterrupted transit of energy resources needs to be assured – requiring the EU and Russia to cooperate. Nevertheless, Russia's lack of action to stop the initial crackdowns in Belarus will further weaken the EU's willingness to seek any strategic normalization with Moscow.

is more likely, however, that in order to prepare for such a case and avoid any surprises, the Kremlin is already thinking about whom it sees as an acceptable successor. Russia's key short-term objective is to prevent any kind of pro-Western political player from becoming president.



**Role of the EU:**

The EU's priority is to ensure that free, fair, and transparent elections can take place – though this is apparently in conflict with Russia's interests. The EU intends to make sure that proper international observation is conducted, preferably via the OSCE. Some member states may get engaged in supporting certain presidential candidates, but the participation of the EU as a whole remains limited. Sanctions will be maintained until proper, democratic elections take place.

**SCENARIO 4: FORCE MAJEURE IN BELARUS**



**Situation:**

Lukashenko leaves his post unexpectedly, either driven out by Moscow or because of personal, possibly health-related, reasons. According to the current, as yet unreformed constitution, presidential elections are to be held within 30 to 70 days. Without the “archenemy” Lukashenko in place, Belarusian society is quickly polarized along different political values. The lowly institutionalized political system hampers normal, structured campaigning. Independent candidates participate in the presidential race, enjoying varying support from society and backed by various external players, primarily Russia and Poland-Lithuania, and possibly even Ukrainian elite groups.



**Foreseeable interests and actions of Russia:**

**a)** If Moscow managed Lukashenko's exit, the Kremlin is already prepared and has its own candidate. Due to this comparative advantage over all other political forces, the pro-Kremlin candidate is highly likely to become the new president.

**b)** If Lukashenko's exit is a surprise to Moscow, the 30 to 70 days left until the elections is an extremely short time. In this case, the Kremlin would be unlikely to build up its own candidate from scratch. It



# Conclusions

As of August 25, 2020, developments in Belarus are likely to evolve toward the first scenario, “Frozen Belarus,” possibly combined with the second one, “Slow-Moving, Transitional Belarus.” Lukashenko appears to be stabilizing his power, but – due to the massive deficit of legitimacy he is facing from both inside and outside the country – his control over society will remain weak and contested. Russia is assisting him by political, informational, and other means, thus enabling him to preserve his power, at least for a while. Inherent tensions and the regime’s inability to solve them, however, are leading Belarus towards an inevitable transition, which the Kremlin intends to manage closely.

Despite its dominant position, Moscow is now also in a peculiar situation as it tries to avoid an internal conflict while Belarus is becoming increasingly polarized. The Kremlin is facing tough choices about how to handle current tensions.<sup>16</sup> A deep and prolonged political crisis in Belarus might result in the structural destabilization of the country, which could force an intervention that Russia has been trying to avoid. A military occupation, as a measure of last resort mentioned in the “Blood-soaked Belarus” scenario, would come with many risks and high costs, including deaths and casualties that would occur if elements of the Belarusian armed forces or population openly resist.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, supporting Lukashenko for too long may result in losing the sympathy of Belarusians for Russia for a long time to come.<sup>18</sup>

This intertwined set of problems may well make Russia open for a negotiated solution to be developed together with Lukashenko and the chief *siloviki*, as well as representatives of the opposition. The EU, and particularly Germany, would also need to be at the table because Berlin could closely coordinate with France as well as with Poland and Lithuania. All of these countries have influence over EU resources and the Belarusian opposition and can also play a critical role in preserving the EU’s unity in this crisis.

This leads to the conclusion that, although the EU is in a considerably weaker position than Russia when it comes to shaping events in Belarus, its hands are not empty. The most important tool it has is the possibility to influence the democratic opposition and provide immediate financial support. Moreover, additional economic measures and political means are also available, such as allowing more Belarusian goods into the single market. EU High Representative Borrell announced recently that he is ready to visit Minsk. The EU is also suggesting to get the OSCE involved as a mediator because this would allow Russia to have an institutionalized oversight over the mediation efforts, thus hopefully building at least some trust in the Russian decision-makers. All in all, the EU indeed has the potential to become a valued, constructive partner in the settlement process – not as strong as Russia, but not unimportant either.

## Russia and the EU: Strategic Priorities Differ, but Short-Term Interests Largely Coincide

It is important to recognize that the short-term interests of the EU and Russia largely seem to match. Both want further bloodshed to be avoided, the current crisis to be managed in a peaceful way, and the succession of Lukashenko to take place rather sooner than later.

The preferences of the EU and Russia do, of course, partially differ in the long term – particularly in regard to the process of Lukashenko’s succession. While the EU would advocate for free and fair elections, Russia would clearly intend to secure the victory of a candidate over whom Moscow can exercise strong influence. These two priorities do not necessarily conflict as the Belarusian people could freely elect a president who would favor preserving the country’s close ties to Russia.

By recognizing the shared interests of the EU and Russia, as well as the possibility of realizing them through coordinated policies, it might well be possible to keep Belarus from becoming the next theater of geopolitical confrontation between the East and West, Russia and Europe.

<sup>16</sup> For details on Russia’s options, see, for example, Trenin, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Gustav Gressel, “Russia’s military maneuvers at the Belarus border – a message to the West,” European Council on Foreign Relations, August 18, 2020: <[https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_russias\\_military\\_manoeuvres\\_at\\_the\\_belarus\\_border\\_a\\_message\\_to\\_t](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russias_military_manoeuvres_at_the_belarus_border_a_message_to_t)> (accessed August 25, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Artyom Shreibman, “Мнение. Артем Шрайбман. Какой диалог может спасти страну,” [Opinion. Artyom Shreibman. What Kind of Dialogue Could Save the Country], Tut.by, August 24, 2020: <<https://news.tut.by/economics/697754.html>> (accessed August 25, 2020), and Trenin, *ibid.*



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