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Russia vs. the People of Belarus: Towards a Geopolitical Revolution?

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Belarusian society has traditionally been considered pro-Russian. Since the beginning of the Belarus–Russia integration projects in the mid-1990s, Russian influence has been derived not only from its financial and economic leverage, military cooperation, and Moscow-aligned President Lukashenko, but also from close linguistic and cultural links between the societies. Russia has been seen as Belarus’s closest friend and most important foreign policy partner.

However, two factors have overshadowed Russia’s soft power in Belarus. One is that Russia has lacked a well-defined policy of attraction towards Belarusian society. Russia’s policies have traditionally prioritized deepening economic and political integration, which depended on engaging with Lukashenko, while its links with and influence over Belarusian society were taken for granted. The promotion of Moscow’s public appeal was de-facto outsourced to Lukashenko, who became the main conduit of Russian soft power in Belarus. The president associated the official state ideology with Russia, promoted the Russian language, controlled the Belarusian Orthodox Church and suppressed societal forces that promoted Belarusian language, culture and heritage. Close economic ties, migration flows, and people-to-people connections made Russia the main work and travel destination for Belarusians. The other factor is that despite the depth of connections to Russia, Belarusian society has been de-facto ambivalent—both pro-Russian and pro-EU. Opinion polls suggest that ideally Belarusians would prefer maintaining good relations and ties with both Russia and the EU.¹

As soon as conditions changed, Russian appeal in Belarus started to weaken. First, after the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine war, Lukashenko’s regime reviewed its ideology and attempted to distance itself from assertive Moscow and its “Russian World”. Pro-Russian ideologues were dismissed from the presidential administration and state mass organizations were re-booted. Belarus’s national idea was redefined from being a cradle of Eastern Slavic civilization and a locomotive of inte-

gration in the post-Soviet space to the defense of the country’s sovereignty. The regime changed its attitudes towards Belarusian language and culture, restricted the activities of pro-Russian groups and media, and empowered civil society to promote Belarusian culture and identity.

Second, society and its attitudes evolved. It outgrew the Soviet nostalgia of 1990s, experienced the economic boom of the 2000s and went through a societal modernization in the 2010s, affecting its values and aspirations². Today, people increasingly envision Belarus as a modern European country. Local opinion leaders closely associate themselves with Central-Eastern Europe, not Russia³. Meanwhile, the conservative turn in Russia ran counter to growing support for market economics, rule of law and self-expression in Belarusian society⁴.

Consequently, the support for Belarus’s independence steadily rose. In 1999, IISEPS recorded that an equal number of Belarusians supported and objected to hypothetical unification with Russia⁵. In 2019, the pro-regime Institute of Sociology showed that only 7.7% would agree to join the Russian Federation; 49.9% were staunch supporters of Belarusian independence, and 36.1% of respondents would only agree to supranational integration with Russia⁶.

Finally, Russia’s economic troubles lowered its attractiveness as a destination for Belarusian workers and, in turn, made Poland increasingly appealing. While Russia’s Ministry of Interior counted around 120 thousand labor migrants from Belarus each year in 2017–2019, over 55 thousand Belarusians received the “Polish Card” in 2017–2019, and 35 thousand were granted work permits in Poland in 2017 alone⁷.

Russia’s demands for deepened integration, including the Medvedev Ultimatum in 2018, secretive negotiations on 30+1 integration maps in 2019, and campaigns in state and non-state media which declared an imminent threat to Belarusian independence have limited Moscow’s political appeal. One result: as recently as 2014, surveys recorded pro-Russian views on the part of Bela-

1 https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_5_2019.pdf

2 See, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/the-belarusian-paradox>

3 <http://www.research.by/publications/wp/2001/>

4 It has been volatile though in the 2010s. See, for instance, Life in Transition Surveys II and III.

5 <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=3125&lang=en>

6 <https://socio.bas-net.by/polovina-belorusov-vystupaet-ne-za-soyuznicheskie-a-za-partnerskie-otnosheniya-s-rossiej/>

7 <https://nashaniva.by/?c=ar&i=218489&lang=ru>

rusians regarding the war in Donbass and the Crimea annexation. In 2016, BAW polls recorded that over 60% preferred union with Russia, but only 40% of respondents supported Union relations with Russia by 2019⁸.

Moscow's support of Lukashenko during the mass protests of 2020 may hasten the erosion of ambivalence towards Belarus's geopolitical orientation and the decline of Russia's popularity in Belarus. Sociologists record that among members of the Belarusian public which take part in large-scale Sunday protests, attitudes towards Russia have gradually radicalized. In mid-August, Russia was viewed rather positively: one joke on the eve of the Putin-Lukashenko summit in Sochi went: "Sasha, drink some tea, it's Putin's treat"⁹. At the end of August, protesters still voiced no concern over Russia, mainly requesting it not to intervene and still hoping Moscow would support the Belarusian people, not Lukashenko. Only a small minority viewed Moscow's actions as unfriendly and dangerous¹⁰. In September, however, concerns over Russia's actions increased sharply¹¹.

Even if Russia's policies towards Lukashenko would hypothetically revert, the growing pro-EU aspirations among the youth indicate that Belarusians' ambiva-

lence towards the country's foreign policy priorities may eventually come to an end. Recent surveys by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) and John O'Loughlin et al. show that younger Belarusians (35–45 and younger) differ dramatically in their values and political attitudes compared to older generations. They prefer Western (52%) to the Russian (13.9%) and Belarusian (14.5%) political systems, and want to move towards the West rather than Russia (50.4% to 23.3%)¹². A June 2020 survey by ZOiS confirms the findings underlining that young Belarusians prefer integration with the EU even if it leads to estrangement from Russia (55% to 14.9%) and strongly oppose union with Russia (70%).

The consolidation of a pro-Western outlook takes time. Moreover, it might lead to another revolution, which, if it takes place, will not be inwards-oriented like that of 2020, but rather a geopolitical one. In the meantime, the West's inconsistent and confused engagements with Lukashenko's regime and its indecisiveness over the future of Belarus only favours Russia and delays the rooting of pro-Western preferences in Belarusian society.

About the Author

Ryhor Nizhnikau is a Senior Research Fellow at the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia programme at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. He focuses on Russian and EU policies in the post-Soviet space as well as domestic developments in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. His publications include *EU Induced Institutional Change in Post-Soviet Space: Promoting Reforms in Moldova and Ukraine* (London: Routledge) and "Love the tender: Prozorro and anti-corruption reforms after the Euromaidan Revolution" (in *Problems of Post-Communism*, forthcoming).

8 <https://news.tut.by/economics/532361.html>; <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5e3ad1429a794740b8d1ecf4>

9 <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/09/18/golos-ulitsy-aktsii-krome-protestnogo-haraktera-imeyut-vse-bolshiy-komponent-solidarnosti.html>

10 <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/08/28/golos-ulitsy-na-aktsii-tsarila-atmosfera-bolshe-napominavshaya-narodnye-gulyaniya-i-karnaval.html>

11 <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/09/09/golos-ulitsy-polovina-oproshennyh-ne-verit-v-vozmozhnost-peregovorov-s-rezhimom.html>; <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/09/03/golos-ulitsy-usilivayutsya-nadezhdy-protestuyuschih-na-raskol-vo-vlastnyh-elitah.html>

12 <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/17/is-belarus-in-the-midst-of-a-generational-upheaval/>