EUROPE 25.08.2020 | Nils Schmid

Belarus at a crossroads

Giving support, but not patronise – this is the only way Europe can contribute to a peaceful solution to the conflict

Read this article in German.

The protests in Belarus against the obviously falsified presidential elections are now entering their third week. On Sunday, a rally of around 250,000 people again took place in capital city Minsk, with thousands protesting in other Belarusian towns and cities.

All evidence suggests that the leadership in Belarus cannot go back to business as usual. With much of the population, President Lukashenko has gambled away his authority – even among the employees of state-owned companies, the group that has been his power base for decades. As in Hans-Christian Andersen's famous fairy tale, people in Belarus have now recognised that the emperor is naked.

Even if Lukashenko, with the help of his repressive state apparatus and with the support of Moscow, should stay in office for a while, his time is up. He will no longer be able to restore his former authority, which was based not least on promises of political and social security; for many years this actually guaranteed him the necessary support among the population. His obvious failure during the Covid-19 pandemic and his increasingly bizarre appearances since 9 August have led to a dramatic loss of confidence; as a result, the first signs of a move toward disengagement can now be seen within the power apparatus.

Meanwhile, the opposition is also in the process of improving its organisational structure and thus giving the various protests a visible and legitimate representation of interests. At its inaugural meeting on 19 August, the Coordination Council dealt with basic issues of self-organisation and adopted a resolution with political demands. It is committed to overcoming the political crisis on the basis of the Constitution, but not to attempt any constitutional amendments or a change in foreign policy.
The loss of trust in the population that came about due to election fraud

and violence can be remedied only by the resignation of the government. At the same time, the people are demanding an end to the violence and political persecution, as well as legal investigation of the events and the release of all political prisoners. According to the opposition, new elections in the near future, held according to international standards, will prove decisive for overcoming the political crisis.

The EU's prudent reaction

So far, Germany and the European Union have acted in prudent and restrained fashion. The EU's objective is to provide support and solidarity to those standing up for democracy and free and fair elections, at considerable personal risk to themselves, but without being accused of meddling in internal affairs. Nothing would be more counterproductive and more damaging for the Belarusian opposition than a commonly held impression that the protests were instigated and directed from outside. At the same time, there are those in Minsk and Moscow who are already eagerly tinkering with this narrative.

The EU's emergency summit on 19 August reached a consistent and correct decision not to recognise the result of the elections. The envisaged personal sanctions, to be directed solely at those responsible for the election fraud and the violence against peaceful demonstrators, will also send the right signals.

30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, everything indicates that in Belarus as well, the desire of the people to take political fate into their own hands can no longer be suppressed.

A reallocation of funds to support Belarusian civil society, as proposed by EU member states, is the right approach at this time. Lithuania's proposal to set up an EU fund for the Belarusian victims of oppression also deserves support.

It is imperative that the government in Minsk immediately release all political prisoners, put an end to violence and repression against the protesters, and respond to the opposition's demand for a 'round table' to overcome the political crisis.

Even if the EU as a whole does not seek a role of mediator for itself, the Weimar Triangle, for example, consisting of Poland, France, and Germany, could offer to act in that capacity. Bilaterally, to the extent possible, we should not interfere with measures in the areas of economy, trade, investment, culture and education, so as to avoid adverse effects on

interpersonal and civil society contacts. Instead, we should strive for a selective reinforcement of our promotion of civil society. Moreover, if the situation were to deteriorate further in the short term, we should offer to take in persecuted opposition members.

The role of the OSCE

With the OSCE, we have an institution that is certainly well suited to activity in this area. The OSCE has several options available to it when attempting to overcome tensions in Belarus. Assuming the political will of all those involved, these measures can contribute to mediating between the various parties involved in discussions within Belarus on how to proceed, and to carrying out the will of its electorate. It seems unthinkable that the current confrontational situation could be overcome without new elections taking place. The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) provides it with the appropriate instruments and expertise to monitor compliance with democratic standards in elections.

In this context, the appointment of a special envoy from the OSCE Chairmanship should be considered: this would form a starting point for the role of the OSCE in a possible transition process in Belarus and thereby lead the mediation between the government and the opposition for the purpose of new elections. It would also be possible to send a 'fact finding mission' at short notice.

Furthermore, a possible activation of the 'Vienna Mechanism' or the 'Moscow Mechanism' should be considered. The 'Moscow Mechanism' would serve as a politically strong, high-profile OSCE instrument for making the protection of human rights a long-term issue; this would send a signal to Belarusian civil society as to the OSCE's commitment. However, the Belarusian side has not yet shown any signs of cooperating in this respect.

While a group of participating states is required to activate the 'Moscow Mechanism', the 'Vienna Mechanism' can be set in motion by a single participating state. In reality, Belarus always has the option of torpedoing both procedures by refusing to cooperate.

Nevertheless, it might be most acceptable for Minsk and Moscow to give an active role to the OSCE and a possible fact-finding mission to investigate human rights violations or allegations of election fraud – as opposed to a mission organised by the EU. After all, as OSCE participating states, both Belarus and Russia would be entitled to take part in such a mission.

In the next few days and weeks, the course will be set for how things will proceed in Belarus. The Belarusian population already deserves our respect for their courage and perseverance. 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, everything indicates that in Belarus as well, the desire of the people to take political fate into their own hands can no longer be suppressed. We should encourage them to do so while refraining from steering them in any particular direction.



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