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The path to peace in Europe also leads via Minsk

Without a free Belarus, there can be no secure Europe. European civil society and politics must set priorities accordingly

No free Belarus without a free Ukraine! This has been one of the central slogans of the Belarusian democracy movement since 24 February 2022, the day on which the Russian war of aggression on the whole of Ukraine began.

It may be a bit exaggerated, but in essence it is correct. If Russia won the war, Lukashenko would probably finally become Putin's vassal. Belarus would have to fear more than ever for its sovereignty. As a result of the removal of the Western 'vector' of his foreign policy, the unprecedented repression following the rigged 2020 presidential elections has placed Lukashenko in a position of enormous dependence on the Kremlin. Lukashenko is still balancing, but no longer between West and East: he keeps finding - apparently relatively skilfully - new ways to be useful to Putin without sending his own troops into Ukrainian territory. Whether Putin ever pushed Lukashenko is an open question, by the way. Perhaps the number and qualifications of Belarusian troop contingents simply seem insufficient to him. But regardless of this, it is clear that in the context of the war, some key decisions have long since been taken over Lukashenko's head in Moscow.

Lukashenko as a 'guarantor of peace'

Remarkably, for the duration of the war Lukashenko was even able to sell his weak position as a strength domestically. In accordance to his rhetoric, the consequences of a change of power could be devastating, especially for Belarus: If there were a pro-Western revolution, Russian troops, who have been permanently on Belarusian territory for a long time, could officially occupy Belarus. And if someone from the regime's ranks were to think of a palace revolution, the negotiating position vis-à-vis Putin would be even weaker than at present - the isolation from the West would remain.

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State propaganda in this regard is flourishing. Independent opinion polls are never beyond doubt in autocracies - but at least they depict tendencies quite reliably. Several surveys recently showed slight gains in the (still poor) approval ratings for Lukashenko. War fanaticism can hardly be the reason. The number of those who support war is vanishingly small. On the contrary, Lukashenko paradoxically appears to some as a 'guarantor of peace' for Belarus. Which seems to be enough. This is due to the fact that although Belarusians are against the war in Ukraine, many of them blame Ukraine or the West for it. However, the deployment of Belarusian troops remains a red line.

The slogan 'No free Belarus without free Ukraine!' suggests that the reverse would be the case. However, this would not be a foregone conclusion. First, of course, it would depend on the nature of the Ukrainian victory: Can Putin hang on to power, for instance? Secondly, the Kremlin's further strategy - an 'annexation' of Belarus would not necessarily be off the table. Thirdly, Lukashenko's manoeuvrability would once again be decisive: At the beginning of the war, negotiations even took place on Belarusian territory. The biggest risk factor for Lukashenko's system, however, would be clear: could a weakened Russia continue to support him sufficiently?

Even a simple resignation of Lukashenko would not automatically lead to free and fair elections. For that, a real 'revolution' would be needed. A weaker economic position and the stigma as 'co-aggressor of the loser' could contribute to new mass protests.

A potential calm before the storm

And what if things happened in reverse order? The slogan 'No free Belarus, no secure Ukraine' is not new. But it can also refer to a post-war period. But could a free Belarus make a safe Ukraine possible by heralding the end of the war? One might say: this is a pipe dream. And there are good arguments for this view.

The repression is enormous, it would take a huge number of demonstrators to repeat 2020, and a six-figure number of critical Belarusians have left the country since then. And Russian troops are stationed on Belarusian territory.

But Lukashenko is unpredictable. What if Belarusian troops are sent to Ukraine after all? What if he feels sure that this will not lead to a 'new 2020'? And yet it does? The population and parts of the army turn against him? Which eventually leads to new elections? And that changes the situation in Ukraine?

Or: Russia initially loses more and more ground in the war on Ukraine. Belarusian demonstrators gain new courage and are no longer afraid of Moscow's intervention. The economic downward spiral does the rest and motivates people to risk everything.

Even if there is no immediate change of power in Minsk, Russia could also be decisively weakened: The innovative spirit of the Belarusian 'anti-war movement' is great, even if its output has been limited so far and it now even faces the death penalty for alleged 'terrorist attacks'. Perhaps the 'cyber partisans' will succeed in pulling off the one, decisive, big coup?

Much of this seems like fantasy. But didn't it seem similar to us in May 2020? Wasn't Minsk similarly 'calm'? We should think about the possibility of the impossible this time.

Belarus' radicalised democracy movement

It helps to realise: The path to peace in Europe (also) leads via Minsk. This becomes even clearer if we play out one last scenario: A negotiated settlement. Lukashenko's own unpredictability and his dependence on Putin would still make Belarus appear to be a risk factor - for Ukraine and even for NATO's eastern flank. As long as there is no democratic transition in Belarus, such concerns will never completely disappear.

There are currently disputes within the Belarusian democracy movement about the extent to which the military struggle of Belarusian units on the side of Ukraine must be encouraged. Overall, the democracy movement has become more radicalised - the peaceful approach of the 2020 protests is receding into the background. But times have just changed, there is war in Europe.

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There are good arguments for a less radical strategy: even Tikhanovskaya's announcement that a directional decision for a European future had been made could certainly be analysed critically, as it disregards the realities of politics such as the massive economic dependence on

that of Russia.

Russia as well as the understanding of many Belarusians for the Russian point of view. But whatever strategy is pursued and how far one wants to commit to a path towards Europe: It is indisputable that the leading heads of the democracy movement stand on the side of Ukraine - the regime on that of Russia.

On the occasion of the two-year 'protest anniversary' on 9 August, EU foreign affairs representative Borrell summed it up aptly: 'Sovereignty and democracy are inseparable.'

Actually, more than 1260 political prisoners and an unjust regime that continues to cling to its power should be argument enough to continue to campaign for the Belarusian people to finally be allowed to freely decide their own fate. But there is a hitch. More and more often, one hears the democracy movement complain that the funding of civil society initiatives abroad has not been extended. Sometimes also because they are held jointly responsible for the regime's actions.

Hundreds of NGOs that have been 'liquidated', free media and free trade unions in exile - all of them, however, continue to need support. Belarusian civil society has awakened in 2020. And now it not only plays a role in the democratisation of its own country: It can also become an important factor for peace in Europe. Without a free Belarus, there can be no secure Europe. European civil society and politics should take this slogan seriously and set priorities accordingly.



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