PISM POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

NO. 198 (1628), 25 SEPTEMBER 2020 © PISM

BULLETIN

Ukraine's Response to the Political Crisis in Belarus

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Alexander Lukashenka has so far been seen in Ukraine as a guarantor of Belarus' independence from Russia. Therefore, the Ukrainian authorities initially avoided condemning the electoral fraud to avoid weakening the Belarusian president. That have since tightened their positions in response to Lukashenka's accusation that Ukraine helped initiate the protests. However, Ukraine will not become actively involved in resolving the crisis in Belarus and will limit itself to reacting to Belarusian provocations and supporting EU policy towards that country.

Ukraine's Response. The country initially refrained from condemning the electoral fraud and pacification of the post-election protests in Belarus. In his comment of 10 August, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy did not refer to the legality of the results of the presidential elections in Belarus, but called for refraining from violence, without clarifying the context. Ukraine's restrained approach was related to the efforts to extradite members of the Wagner Group (a private military company of mercenaries) who were arrested in Belarus, suspected of involvement in the Donbas war on the Russian side. At the early stage of the protests, Ukraine also wanted to keep as much political flexibility as possible in its affairs with Belarus.

Ukraine's position changed after Lukashenko mentioned in his statement "aggression organised by the EU and Ukraine". In response, on 15 August, the Ukrainian MFA condemned the violence of the Belarusian authorities, and on 17 August, Ukraine recalled its ambassador in Minsk for consultations. After Lukashenka repeated the accusations against Ukraine on 28 August, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba announced the suspension of diplomatic contacts. Shortly afterwards, on 8 September, Kuleba announced the halt of preparations for the Third Forum of Regions of Ukraine and Belarus, which was to take place in October in Grodno with the participation of the presidents of both countries.

Ukraine also decided to coordinate its policy towards Belarus with the EU. On 10 September, Ukraine joined the statement of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the presidential elections in Belarus, which condemned the brutality of the Belarusian police and called on the authorities to engage in dialogue with the opposition. The Ukrainian parliament adopted a resolution on 15 September on the situation in Belarus that reflected the EU document. It recognised that the presidential elections were not fair and supported EU sanctions policy. However, the resolution did not gain broad acceptance in parliament—228 of the 345 deputies present at the session voted for it, mainly from the ruling Servant of the People faction and the pro-European opposition. Some members, including the leader of Servant of the People, Davyd Arakhamia, argued that Ukraine should not take a stance on this matter and remain neutral. Since 23 September, Ukraine, along with the EU, refuses to recognise Lukashenka as the legitimate president of Belarus.

At the same time, the Ukrainian government is not pursuing an active policy of support for the Belarusian democratic movements, so as not to provoke the Belarusian authorities. Ukraine has limited itself to permitting crossings of the border (closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic) to, among others, people seeking asylum or holding work permits. At the same time, Kuleba condemned Belarus for "provocations", including the deportation of opposition activists to Ukraine—members of the opposition Coordination Council, Ivan Kraucou and Anton Radniankau, as well as Maria Kalesnikava.

The Ukrainian authorities have paid more attention to potential economic gains than to humanitarian issues. Zelenskyy ordered the government to prepare laws liberalising the procedures for employing IT workers from abroad, targeting Belarusian programmers. The Ukrainian

government also launched an online information platform for the programmers. In addition, Denis Aleinikov (Dzianis Aleynikau), who helped establish the Belarusian Hi-Tech Park, was employed as an advisor to the Minister for Digital Transformation of Ukraine. He aims to create a similar initiative in Ukraine, which could attract a significant part of the Belarusian IT sector (which generated $2.2 billion in income in Belarus in 2019). About 300 professionals from this sector emigrated to Ukraine in the first month since the outbreak of the protests.

Importance of Belarus for Ukraine. Belarus, due to its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, is perceived in Ukraine as a direction of potential Russian aggression. For this reason, it is crucial for Ukraine to prevent the full integration of Belarus and the Russian Federation within the Union State, especially in the military sphere. The emergence of other Russian military bases or the subordination of the Belarusian army to Russian command would, according to Ukrainian experts, increase the risk of Russia taking military action against Ukraine. The risk of the emergence of armed provocation is high due to the unregulated Belarusian-Ukrainian border—work on demarcation of less than half of it is still ongoing.

Until now, Lukashenka has been perceived by Ukraine as a guarantor of Belarus' independence from Russia. The role of Belarus as host of meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine was perceived positively in Ukraine—as manifestation of the policy of neutrality pursued by Belarus (regardless of the country's membership in a military alliance with Russia). Ukraine's sympathetic attitude towards Lukashenka did not change despite his ambivalent approach to the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war. Support for Ukraine's territorial integrity is limited to declarations, however, since at the UN, Belarus voted against the condemnation of the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

Although Belarus is not a key trade partner for Ukraine (fifth in imports and 12th in exports), it is of strategic importance for its supply of energy resources. Imports from Belarus cover almost 40% of Ukrainian fuel requirements. They are particularly important given the lack of processing capacity among Ukrainian refineries to satisfy fuel consumption in the country. What is more, fuel imports from Russia, which is perceived by Ukraine as a threat to its energy independence, is the main alternative to supplies from Belarus. Similarly, the Ukrainian authorities assess the possible acquisition of Belarusian refineries by Russian companies as part of further integration within the Union State, as a threat.

Conclusions and Prospects. The Ukrainian authorities will not initiate independent actions to resolve the political crisis in Belarus but instead will coordinate them with the EU. For this reason, Ukraine is likely to introduce sanctions similar to those of the EU against members of the Belarusian regime responsible for the brutal pacification of the protests. Lukashenka's consent to deeper integration with Russia may, however, encourage Ukraine to support the Belarusian opposition more actively or to coordinate its policy towards Lukashenka with other countries from the region, including Poland and Lithuania within the framework of the Lublin Triangle.

Ukraine may propose to change the host of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine. Such a decision may be taken especially in response to Russian policy, for example, in case of the involvement of Russian forces in Belarus or the escalation of military action on the Russian side in Donbas. Poland, as a member of the OSCE, can support such an initiative by Ukraine, since conducting talks in Minsk strengthens the Lukashenka regime, legitimising it as a neutral intermediary.

If Belarus imposes sanctions on the use of Baltic ports to export Belarusian goods, Ukraine will seek to redirect exports from Belarus to Ukrainian Black Sea ports. In turn, it is unlikely that Ukraine will impose a trade blockade on Belarus given its high dependence on fuel supplies from that country.

Ukraine will try to benefit economically from the political crisis in Belarus. To this end, the Ukrainian authorities will try to attract Belarusian IT companies and professionals and may also try to create additional benefits for workers in other sectors, such as the automotive industry. This creates a challenge for Poland, which is also trying to create favourable conditions for Belarusian IT employees to emigrate. Ukraine may be more attractive to many Belarusian migrants due to its cultural and linguistic similarities and the lack of visa requirements. However, Poland can compete primarily in terms of wages and a more developed sector of new technologies.

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