2020 Belarus Crisis: Soft EU response and a missed opportunity

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Introduction

Since its independence in 1991, Belarus has held one free and fair election, which was won in 1994 by Alexander Lukashenko (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe [CSCE], 1994). Since then, he has held on to power through rigged elections and control over media and freedom, increasingly by force. Lukashenko's authoritarian regime has been economically dependent on Russia (Leukavets, 2021), and repressed any Belarusian nationalist sentiment, instead promoting Russophilia as a political strategy since his first election (CSCE, 1994). Russia-Belarus relations had been rocky at times, with Belarus turning occasionally to the west and (very) moderately liberalising in the process, for example after the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Wilson, 2021) or after the 2008 invasion of Georgia (Portela, 2011).

In August 2020, Belarus held its 6th presidential election, which was officially won by Lukashenko with 81% of the vote. The opposition rejected this result, and protests broke out, which were heavily repressed. By the end of the month crowds of 200,000 were appearing at marches (Wilson Center, 2022). The main opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya claimed to have won with about 60-70% of the vote, after being exiled to Lithuania. In 2021, Belarus intercepted a passenger plane carrying Belarusian activist Roman Protasevich, who was on Ryanair flight 4978 between Athens and Vilnius, under the guise of a bomb threat. Protasevich and his girlfriend were arrested and the plane was allowed to continue (Reuters, 2021).

Facing continued protests, to hold on to power, Lukashenko doubled down on ties with Russia, allowing Putin's regime to entrench its interests in Belarus, and later use it as a launching ground for its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Herbst, 2024). How did the EU react, and could it have capitalised on popular sentiment in the country to influence the trajectory of Europe's longest-lasting dictatorship?

EU's Response

The EU's response consisted of 5 sanction packages between the election and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when sanctions were aligned with those concerning Russia. The first three sanctions packages were passed between October and December 2020, and targeted 88 individuals and 7 entities (including Lukashenko and other government officials) with travel bans, asset freezes and a ban on 'making funds available' from EU citizens and companies (Official Journal of the European Union [OJEU], 2020). After the interception of Ryanair flight 4978, the EU enacted two more sanctions packages, along with a ban on Belarusian air carriers entering EU airspace (OJEU, 2021a). These sanctions brought the total number of people and entities affected to 183 and 26 respectively (OJEU, 2021b). The European Council also did not recognise the outcome of the election or Lukashenko as the president of Belarus.

Missed Opportunity

Despite enacting sanctions, the effects of EU action were limited, and did not contain the effects of the regime's repression.

Limited Effectiveness

In 2011 and 2012, the EU sanctioned officials in Belarus as a response to the presidential election of December 2010, which was also plagued by corruption and vote fixing, as well as repression of protests. While these sanctions targeted even more individuals and entities than those in 2020 onwards (243 individuals and 32 entities), as well as an arms embargo, the effect remained limited. These were criticised in 2011 for not properly understanding Belarus, as well as not targeting Belarus' purse: its energy transit and oil businesses (Jarábik, 2011). The same mistakes were repeated after 2020, Belarus continued to act as a stepping stone for Russia's energy business, which was only limited after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Furthermore, EU sanctions struggle to have the same effect as US sanctions for example, with less robust mechanisms, more room for challenges, and a lack (until very recently) of secondary sanctions (Oppolzer, 2024)(Miadzvetskaya, 2021).

Prevailing Ostpolitik Mindset

Despite repeated violations of human rights and democratic norms by Belarus between 1996 and 2022, the EU continued to engage with the country through an Ostpolitik lens, in the sense that just as the EU had a "'soft" stance' on Russia (Tynkkynen, 2024, p. 4), Belarus benefited from this as a transit country[1] and as an ally of Russia. In fact, despite Belarus (re)developing authoritarian characteristics earlier than Russia did, the EU continued to go through periods of détente despite a lack of concrete progress (Portela, 2011), culminating with the invasion of Ukraine. This mindset directly affected Europe's will to sanction fossil fuel energy transiting through Belarus, despite Russian complacency and direct support for the repression in 2020-2021. De-coupling Russian fossil fuels and its actions in Belarus was a continuation of prioritisation of the economy over human rights and values, as seen in the aftermath of the invasion of Crimea.

[1] Both the Druzhba oil pipeline and the Yamal-Europe gas pipeline pass through Belarus.

Russian Response

Russia's response to the crisis and protests was far more decisive than that of the European Union. By the end of August 2020, only 18 days after the election, Putin offered an already formed 'police reserve force to intervene [...] if necessary' signalling a clear approach to the protests, and to increasing control of Belarus (BBC News, 2020), a long time goal for Putin.

Besides political support, Moscow also provided logistical support in the form of media manipulation, through sending its own journalists and reporters and helping 'to stage pro-regime marches', promised economic assistance of $1.5 billion, military exercises and finally a joint operation to thwart a 'coup attempt' (Wilson Center, 2022, pp.3-5).

As a result of this assistance, 28 programs of the 1997 Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus were endorsed in November 2021, harmonising 'policies in energy, finance, customs, and taxation' (Herbst, 2024) which effectively undermine Belarusian decision making capabilities (Zaba & Marin, 2024).

The culmination of the Russian response came, as already mentioned, with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which was partly undertaken from Belarusian soil. A referendum three days later, also condemned as being neither free nor fair, renounced Belarus' nuclear free status, among other constitutional changes (Al Jazeera, 2022), allowing Russian nuclear weapons to be stationed there for the first time since 1996 (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 2023).

Conclusion

	EU	Russia
Financial	Sanctions + €24 million for the opposition	$1.5 billion
Military	n/a	Exercises and 'Joint Operations'
Political	Non-Recognition	Clear Support
Media	Western journalists detained	Russian media manipulation

Figure 1: Comparison table of EU and Russian responses.

Graphic: Andrew Galea Roberts, Sources: Wilson Center, 2022 & BBC News, 2020

Directly comparing Russian and EU responses shows Russia's determination to ensure Lukashenko's success. The EU's response on the other hand, was weaker and came in the context of Ostpolitik mentality with regards to Russia and by extension Belarus. Stronger measures were later applied, with fossil fuel sanctions applied in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, though oil continued to flow to EU countries until very recently through the Belarusian section of the Druzhba pipeline, demonstrating the inability of EU countries to decouple from long time non-democratic, authoritarian states. Whether a stronger response from the EU could have aided the democratic movement in Belarus is unclear, as Russia certainly would have countered this, given the importance of Belarus in its plans for the invasion of Ukraine and in Putin's delusional vision for the restoration of Russia's triune nation.

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