

“Euro-Belarusian”

Breakthroughs in Belarusian foreign politics

Undoubtedly, Belarus could already be an EU member. According to experts, its starting conditions in the early 1990s were no worse than those of Poland or the Czech Republic's. This compact country with its relatively well-developed industry (being the former “assembly hall” of the Soviet Union), skilled and hard-working population, and historical and cultural roots bound with Europe, met all the requirements for fast-track integration with the democratic community of the Old World. Furthermore, the country was pervaded by a relatively democratic atmosphere characteristic of a parliamentary republic – the Belarus Supreme Council saw a liberal - Stanislav Shushkevich - come in to head it. What's more, in quite a short time a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Belarus and the EU was developed.

The romantic period of the young Belarusian democracy, however, rapidly came to an end. In 1994, the institution of presidency was established and the first presidential polls were triumphantly won by Alexander Lukashenko, a former Sovkhoz director. Factors which have also had an adverse impact on the pro-European trend in the young Belarus included the dismissal of democratic changes and the turn of foreign politics towards Moscow. This was the first negative breakthrough.

By force of inertia, in 1995, Lukashenko flew to Brussels to sign the PCA, yet the strategy to reinforce authoritarianism soon set him sharply against the West. The EU refused to recognise the results of the 1996 referendum (which granted the president virtually dictatorial competences and led to the dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus) and froze ratification of the PCA. Belarus gained the image of the “last dictatorship of Europe”, while representatives of Belarusian authorities were denied the right to cross EU boundaries.

Using mass media, Lukashenko successfully managed to manipulate the collective consciousness, making the society believe that the blame for this confrontation rested with the traitorous imperialists of the West, averse to the independent direction of Belarusian politics.

More and more Euro-Belarusians

Even a momentary warming of EU-Belarus relations increased the number of the so-called “Euro-Belarusians”. This dynamic was observed by sociologists from the Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI) - an independent, respected institution

conducting regular national public opinion surveys. One of the traditional questions in the survey is as follows: "If Belarus now held a referendum on EU accession, what would be your response?", and in September 2008 the percentage of the population enquired for and against this hypothetical accession was respectively 26.7% and 51%. In September 2009, the rate of EU accession supporters in Belarus had climbed to 44.1 % (with 32.8% opposed).

Nevertheless, experts caution against euphoria. "A Euro-Belarusian" is an arbitrary term. As Oleg Manaev, a prominent Professor of Sociology from Minsk, points out, for a large majority of the respondents "the prosperity prevailing in the EU is decidedly more important than democracy and freedom of mobility."

Professor Manaev argues that the pro-European orientation in the Belarusian consciousness is not too profound or strong. The current tendency can be understood by reference to the radical change in the rhetoric of power. If previously the government's stance was overtly anti-Western, then the currently prevailing catchword is that of "pragmatic dialogue" with Europe. Lukashenko has repeatedly thanked the EU, IMF and the USA for their support during the global economic crisis.

Belarusian politologists emphasise, however, that in case the relations between the government of Belarus and the EU worsen, propagandist "brain washing" may cool down the outburst of euro-enthusiasm in the society again. It is enough to observe that the percentage of "Euro-Belarusians" in an identical NISEPI survey in December 2002 was nearly 61%. Several years of Lukashenko's "cold war" with Europe, which lead to the imposition of a ban on representatives of Belarusian authorities travelling to the EU, had terrible consequences.

The top elites of the regime, thus, have access to sufficiently strong instruments of manipulation within the consciousness of Belarusian society. An authoritarian regime, a compliant parliament, state-controlled mass media and stagnant development of civic society – in these circumstances, whether Belarus will take a pro-European direction largely depends on Alexander Lukashenko and his entourage.

The Caucasian War and the reception of the oil and gas grant

What forced the authoritarian leader, who displayed "brotherly integration" with Russia, to partial verification of his geopolitical orientation and to start a game with a European direction?

Disenchanted with hollow promises of closer integration in recent years, the Kremlin has reinforced pressures on Minsk. Moscow demanded the sale of attractive assets and began imposing the Russian rouble as a common currency. Lukashenko sensed that his power was endangered and began to put up resistance. Moscow responded by making consistent cuts in energy concessions, generously awarded earlier to its closest ally. Subsequent Russian efforts directed in 2008 against Georgia made a particularly unpleasant impression on Belarusian authorities. It became obvious that the empire rising from the ashes was not going to play diplomacy with its noncompliant neighbours.

If previously Minsk felt at ease obtaining Russian subsidies, staying under the nuclear umbrella of Moscow, then presently it became an issue of utmost urgency to seek Western support to avoid dependence on the Kremlin. Furthermore, the war in the Caucasus induced Europe to re-envision its relations with Belarus, and, as a result, the intentions of Minsk and Brussels unexpectedly converged, and the global financial and economic crisis which painfully affected Belarusian economy, heightened the need for support from the West. This year, the financial system of the country whose authorities until recently followed an anti-Western course, paradoxically stays afloat only thanks to Western credit.

The betrayal of democracy or consistent Europeanisation of Belarus?

The new stance of the EU towards Minsk has led to a sharp difference of opinions between the representatives of Belarusian opposition. More radical members of the opposition accuse the EU of renouncing the principles of democracy and human rights, and of commercialisation of relations with the regime. It was also said that Lukashenko should not be invited to Prague to the May summit to inaugurate the “Eastern Partnership”.

The other part of the opposition supports the EU’s idea of including Belarus in the European context. Proponents of this perspective assert that the cold attitude of Europe not only fails to bring any effects but could also push Lukashenko into the bear hug of Russia.

Alexander Milinkevich, the most popular oppositionist and head of the For Freedom movement, became a leader of the second oppositional faction. It is also under his aegis that the “Belarusian Independence Block” was established. The outcome of the efforts by the communities focused around Milinkevich was the Belarusian European Forum, held on the 14th of November 2009, which adopted an agenda for activities of a pro-European civil society. Opponents of this camp accuse Milinkevich of amicability, of alleged activity for legitimisation of dictatorship in Europe, and of supplying it with money from the West.

It is also worth pointing to the fact of division between the civic society and political opposition, the former being more prone to act “here and now”, and to extend the space of freedom step by step rather than to dream of the miraculous, instant triumph of democracy.

The power tempts and pricks

For the last year, Alexander Lukashenko repeatedly asserted that the advancement of relations with the European Union is beneficial for Belarus. Even today, 14% of Belarusian export is destined for EU markets. Besides, the country is hungry for investments and innovative technologies from abroad. But Lukashenko still counts on authoritarian modernisation. Development of civic society appears to the president to jeopardise the pillars of the established one-person power system. Therefore, once in a while, Lukashenko cautions the EU against imposing political demands. This rhetoric, however, is accompanied by silent concessions. For the past year, we have seen a decrease in the number of politically motivated arrests, and a few disfavoured newspapers have returned to the system of national press distribution. Recently, accreditation has been awarded to European Radio for Belarus. Furthermore, a bill on changes in electoral law is currently being developed. Analysts argue though that these concessions are insignificant and of a propagandist character, being of no systemic relevance. Nevertheless, they might also be the droplets that hollow-out the stone. Much depends on the extent to which civil society will be able to use the half-opened window of opportunities.

Another important issue is the crisis which forced introduction of economic reforms – without them Belarus cannot count on money from the International Monetary Fund, nor an influx of foreign investors. And transformation of the economic base may, in turn, contribute to acceleration of changes in political superstructure.

Finally, the composition of the ruling class also comprises ordinary people who want to travel to the West and legalise their capital. An alternative to the transformation of Belarus into a Russian province is not at all after the heart of the Belarusian *nomenklatura*.

The attitude to the European perspective among ordinary citizens is not – as shown by sociological research – unequivocal. Some, particularly representatives of the older generation, are still influenced by the traditions of Soviet paternalism. These people are afraid of a collapse of the social model they became accustomed to, and so the pro-Russian stance prevails in this group. At the same time, many Belarusians hope that European orientation will improve their chances of attaining material prosperity. Pro-European attitudes with an accent on values and the spiritual dimension are most characteristic of the youth, businessmen, educated people and

the intellectual elite. It is worth noting that these make up an active part of society – the opinion leaders.

“Belarus, more than other countries – including those which have already entered the EU, is ready to join the European community. Evidence for that is the many indices, including indices concerning mentality, and characteristics of the country”, says Andrey Vardomatsky, head of the Nowak independent sociological institute.

To remember everything

We have to be mindful of the fact that in historical terms Belarusians have been strongly bound with Europe. At the time when Rus was held in Tatar bondage, the modern cities of Belarus, as a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Kingdom of Poland, also enjoyed Magdeburg law, breathing with the spirit of the Old World’s freedom. These lands were for centuries within the European civilisation context, and only the two centuries of the Russian Empire’s rule strongly imprinted themselves on historical memory.

The project of a ‘federal state’ with Russia ended in fiasco, and fortunately so, as proponents of the European option claim. In spite of the fact that the authorities of Belarus have not resigned from the political game with Moscow, the Europe-oriented trend of Belarus – if fragile at present – has a chance to turn into a geopolitical choice.

Alexander Klaskousky