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Actions and Reactions:

Political Crisis in Belarus as Seen from Brussels and Moscow

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ABSTRACT

Belarusians have taken to the streets of their cities and towns for over five months now, demanding free and fair elections after the presidential vote in August had been blatantly rigged. 'The longer the political crisis drags on, the more Russia's and the EU's actions matter.

The perception of the Belarusian political crisis in the East and the West is a different one. The elites in Russia view the protest as coordinated by the West, whereas the EU considers it as a purely domestic issue. Russia has a high interest in Belarus, in terms of security, economics, culture etc. For the EU, stability in its neighbouring country is essential. It is questionable how long Lukashenka will stay in power, as he is not a promising partner, neither for Russia, nor for the EU.

INTRODUCTION

The presidential election on 9 August 2020 in Belarus was followed by peaceful protests of the Belarusian public who did not recognise its results: too manifold were the reasons to assume that the elections were rigged. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya who was supported by large parts of the population was attributed 10,12% of the votes by the Central Electoral Commission, whereas Aliaksandar Lukashenka according to official figures received 80,10% of the votes cast.

Up to 200.000 Belarusians took to the streets to protest peacefully against the alleged election fraud. The largest protests took place in the capital city of Minsk, but big rallies also occurred in other major cities as well as in small towns. They were supported by diverse groups of society: men and women, students and the elderly, workers and employees from public and private enterprises. However, these protests were countered with an unseen scale of violence by Lukashenka's regime. The Belarusian security forces used stun grenades, pepper sprays, water cannons and batons against the protesters. Until now, more than 33.000 people have been arbitrarily detained since the August elections. 179 [as of 16 January 2021] have

been convicted to prison sentences and were acknowledged as political prisoners by human rights organizations. At least five people died.

The scale of the current political crisis in Belarus has been unprecedented in the country's history. While there is still some support for Lukashenka among Belarusians, available data shows that it does [not exceed 25%](#). The protests and the violent response inevitably caused an international backlash, which the Belarusian public and key stakeholders were waiting for. Both Lukashenka and the opposition reached out to Belarus' neighbours, namely Russia and the EU, calling for their support. Moscow and Brussels reacted, each with their own aims and interpretations of the situation in mind. This paper aims to shed some light on the two different assessments of the political crisis in Belarus by its big neighbours and give some recommendations to EU foreign policy stakeholders.

BELARUSIAN POLITICAL CRISIS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

The EU and its member states closely observed the protests in Belarus and took measures on different levels as a response to the crisis.

EU sanctions

Only after nearly two months of peaceful protests of the Belarusian society, the European Union finally reached an agreement on 2 October 2020 to [impose first restrictive measures](#) against the Belarusian regime. These measures included travel bans and asset freezes for individuals identified as responsible for the unacceptable use of force and torture, arbitrary arrests and the misconduct in the electoral process. Lukashenka was not put on the list at first, as there were still hopes in Brussels for possible diplomatic interventions. Moreover, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel aimed for the EU to be a possible mediator in the dialogue between Lukashenka and the opposition, in which they wanted to include Russia as well. But as the EU realized that peaceful discussions between the opponents would not take place in the near future and

that therefore the EU would not be able to play the role as a mediator, Lukashenka was finally put on the sanction's list another month later [on 6 November](#).

Finally, the [third round of sanctions](#) against Belarus was imposed on 17 December, targeting 88 officials as well as 7 companies close to Lukashenka that are mostly active in the military industry. The 2010/2011 sanctions, in comparison, included 243 individuals "[from the innermost circles of the regime](#)" and put "[32 companies linked to three tycoons closely connected with the president](#)" under trade sanctions. An [arms embargo](#) against Belarus has already been in force since 2011.

Looking at the unprecedented force used against the protesters, [Tsikhanouskaya called on the EU, US, UK and Canada](#) for tougher sanctions, especially against state companies and businesses close to Lukashenka. Besides official sanctions, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) temporarily stopped most of their activities in Belarus.

The 2020 EU sanctions against Belarus were rather weak, especially because of the way they were imposed, namely too slowly. This was, on the one hand, due to the fact the EU did not want to send a too harsh message in the beginning to keep the door open for possible mediation. On the other hand, it was linked to the institutional problem of unanimity in EU foreign policy: under the current ruling, individual member states can use their consent to specific questions as a leverage to other member states' approval of a different issue of – sometimes national – interest. Cyprus used this leverage in the current example in order to receive support from fellow member states to sanction Turkey over its oil and gas drilling in the Mediterranean.

But one must remain realistic: as the EU's footing was too weak in Belarus. Its sanctions would never have had the leverage to change Lukashenka's behaviour, which the EU was

aware of. But besides the [coercing and constraining function](#), sanctions also aim at signalling. Out of the [seven enterprises](#) that have faced sanctions since December 2020, four are operating in the military industry and one is specialized in facial recognition software. With the decision to sanction them, it can be argued that the EU was reaching out for the constraining function of sanctions to minimize the violence against civil society and journalists. However, it is questionable to what extent these entities really depend on the EU market, compared to the Russian one. In other words, it remains to be seen if these sanctions do really hurt these enterprises and if therefore the constraining function can be successful. Without doubt, the signalling function of the sanctions was effective. Belarusian authorities were and still are aware that the EU does not tolerate their behaviour and that the EU is carefully observing the developments and is reaching out to civil society and supporting the victims of unjustified violence.

EU rhetoric

Even if EU sanctions could be harsher, the rhetoric of the EU vis-à-vis Belarus was very clear from the beginning: The EU and its member states refused to recognize Lukashenka as the president of the country after the elections in August 2020. The EU repeatedly condemned the use of violence, the criminal persecution and torture of the protesters in Belarus. Furthermore, after the elections many heads of state and government as well as foreign ministers met with Tsikhanouskaya as the leader of the opposition to whom they promised support for the Belarusian civil society. Moreover, they joined her call for new elections, the immediate release of all political prisoners and those arbitrarily arrested during the protests and the end of violence.

In [August](#) and [December](#) 2020, the EU reallocated financial support to the Belarusian civil society and independent media that was originally intended for the Belarusian state. In August, 53 Mio EUR were disbursed, whereby 50 Mio were foreseen for coronavirus emergency

support and 3 Mio EUR for victims of repression and as support for civil society. In December, 24 Mio EUR were allocated to civil society and media. In the same month, the European Parliament awarded the *Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought* to the [“democratic opposition in Belarus, represented by the Coordination Council, an initiative of brave women and political and civil society figures”](#) which can be seen as another strong symbol of support to the Belarusian people.

EU member states' response

While leaving the strategic questions for Belarus-EU relations to Brussels, various EU member states started with short-term help for the Belarusian society to keep the people-to-people contacts alive and not to isolate the country.

The Polish embassy and consulates which were closed due to the coronavirus pandemic opened again at the end of August and offered a simplified visa application system for Belarusians who wanted to enter Poland for professional and humanitarian purposes. Estonia reopened its Visa Applications Centres in Belarus at the end of September. Lithuania started to grant entry permits for special humanitarian reasons and to grant political asylum to those whose lives are in danger. Latvia started a fast-track visa application procedure to relocate Belarusian businesses and their employees. Already in early September, the Baltic states that historically and geographically look back at a close relationship with Belarus joined forces and issued an entry ban on Lukashenka and 29 other Belarusian officials.

Several EU member states offered scholarships for Belarusian students who were expelled from their universities after taking part in the protests in Belarus. Lithuania offered 100 government scholarships for Belarusian students to continue their studies outside Belarus. The Belarusian university in exile based in Lithuania, the European Humanities University, also reserved additional spots for the Belarusian youth. Many other countries followed

suit: e.g., Poland (Warsaw University), Slovakia (Comenius University and Slovak Technical University, Bratislava), the Czech Republic (Masaryk University, Brno) and Estonia (Tallinn University and Tallinn University of Technology).

As a response to these actions, Belarus expelled Lithuanian and Polish diplomats. As a sign of solidarity, many European member states – e.g. the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Romania and Bulgaria – temporarily recalled their respective ambassadors. At the beginning of the crisis, ambassadors from many EU countries laid down flowers at the spot where the first protester died in August 2020. Furthermore, they gathered at Belarusian Nobel Laureate and Coordination Council member Sviatlana Alexievich's house when more and more signs appeared that she would face persecution by the regime. However, this event was also cited to underline the weakness of the EU in Belarus: only when diplomats were physically present, the EU was able to protect a Belarusian citizen who presumably was forced later on to leave the country.

Irrespective of the importance of EU actions for the Belarusian civil society on a day-to-day-basis, one must be aware that they represent crucial symbols but they do *not* have real leverage to *impact the course* of the current crisis. What these symbols certainly do, is to influence the perception of the EU among protest sympathizers, which the EU could benefit from in case of a democratic transition.

EU's perspective on Belarusian crisis

Throughout the protests, media in EU member states constantly linked the protests to a *democratic change* and a *democratic uprising* of the Belarusian people. However, the endeavours of the Belarusian society – especially at the beginning of the uprising – were not necessarily linked to a democratization of the system. The protests did *not* seem to be nourished by a political vision of whatever colour, it did not seem like a choice between a

democratic and an autocratic system. A [study shows](#) that in January 2020, 52% of Belarusians thought that their country was heading in the wrong direction, whereas only 29% were confident about Lukashenka's path. The source of the public uprising can be perceived as anger and discontent with the current system which is another reason why the EU assesses the protests as a purely domestic affair. The poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic was potentially the peak of the iceberg in an overall poorly functioning system. Belarusians wanted their voices to be heard, have a right to express their opinion and elect a leader themselves.

However, during the protests and with the establishment of the Coordination Council, an institutionalized opposition body that emerged from the protests, the rhetoric changed. The main goals of the Coordination Council are [“to facilitate the transfer of power and ensure social cohesion on the basis of the Constitution. The Coordination Council does not intend to change the constitutional order or the foreign policy of the country.”](#) Furthermore, the restoration of *rule of law*, *civil rights* and status of the Republic of Belarus as a *democratic and legal state* are further key terms mentioned in their Resolution, where the word *democratization* does not appear. While the West labels the Coordination Council with this term, the Council does not contradict, but is careful to use the term itself.

How closely the protests and violent suppression are observed in the EU varies from member state to member state. Belarus' direct neighbours, Lithuania and Poland which also share a common history are the staunchest supporters of the Belarusian civil society. In many countries across Europe solidarity protests were organized on various scales and frequencies, often initiated by Belarusian diaspora. In general, media in EU member states continued to report about the protests throughout autumn and winter and the topic continued to be on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels.

EU-Belarus collaboration: Which framework?

In general, the EU and Belarus look back at a fluctuating relationship, which has been marked alternately by sanctions (2006 and 2010/2011) and thaws. While Belarus is one of the six partner countries in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework, it has not fully exploited its collaboration possibilities, largely due to the lack of political will of its elites. Although there is a relatively fruitful exchange on the expert level, only serious discussion on a high-ranking level can advance the overall collaboration of the partner countries. However, this door remains closed for the time being, as Belarus downgraded its participation in the EaP to an expert level, as a response to the current sanctions.

Belarus remains the last of the EaP partners who has not yet signed a framework partnership and cooperation agreement with the EU. However, one can not only blame Belarus, as the political will from the EU's side is limping as well. After Belarus granted a unilateral visa liberalisation for EU citizens arriving at Minsk National Airport in 2017, the EU only followed suit with visa facilitation for Belarusian citizens, which after lengthy discussions entered into force in July 2020.

The good news in this context is that a framework to possibly strengthen EU-Belarus relations does already exist, even if it still needs to be further developed and adapted to the circumstances: The partners should make use of it if there is a genuine interest for deeper cooperation, once the question about the next legitimate leader of Belarus is solved.

BELARUSIAN POLITICAL CRISIS AND RUSSIA

Russia's first reaction to the Belarusian protest in the aftermath of the August elections was somewhat delayed. Putin congratulated Lukashenka as the newly elected president already on the following day, but his message was rather restrained. Otherwise, Moscow remained silent in its public stance towards the events in Belarus and carefully observed the

situation. Putin and Lukashenka talked on the phone four times throughout August.

A clear public signal of Russia's backing of Lukashenka came on 27 August when the Russian president promised a military reserve to support the regime in Belarus. On 3 September, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin met with Lukashenka in Minsk. On 14 September, Lukashenka met with Vladimir Putin in Sochi. There, Putin supported a constitutional reform announced by Lukashenka and promised a loan of 1,5 Bio USD, partially to refinance the previous loans by Russia to Belarus.

There are several reasons why Russia decided to support Lukashenka. First, he is a well-known, even if disliked, figure in Moscow's political circles. He has been dramatically weakened by the Belarusian protest and [lost his legitimacy among the majority of Belarusians](#). Despite that, he managed to stay in power relying on close loyalists and the security apparatus. A weak Lukashenka does not have a choice but to rely on Russia and is more likely to yield to its demands. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and other members of the opposition have claimed to be Russia-friendly, but they are largely unknown figures in the Kremlin and thus represent greater uncertainty. If they were to take over the leadership in Belarus, they would also enjoy the support of the West and, consequently, have more leverage vis-à-vis Russia's interests.

The chances that the West will talk to Lukashenka at all are very slim, as he was not even recognized there as president. Furthermore, both Putin and Lukashenka are authoritarian leaders. Letting Lukashenka fall in the neighbouring Belarus as a result of mass protest would set a precedent for Russia's own population that might feel encouraged to make a similar attempt. Finally, from the Kremlin's perspective Lukashenka does not need to stay president for long. But in the short period that he will still rule, he could ensure a transit of power in accordance with Russian interests.

The Russian elites' perspective on the Belarusian crisis

Russia considers the protest and political crisis in Belarus as an attempt to carry out another "colour revolution". Russian political elites generally regard colour revolutions as instigated from the outside. In their view, post-Soviet societies are incapable of self-organization on a mass scale and require external support to bring about a political upheaval. Any sort of public unrest is also seen as an existential threat to statehood. This perception is based on the assessment of Russia's own experience with radical political transformations in the past century. Today, both 1917 and 1991 are perceived by the elites as catastrophes and collapses of [national statehood](#).

Bearing this in mind, Russian political elites view the Belarusian protest as a *project* of the West. They talk about the protesters as about a disoriented part of the society that external actors took advantage of. In an interview from 12 November 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the "[decrease in mass protests evidently reflects an understanding among those who sincerely had taken to the streets and wanted to be heard that the situation needs to be calmed down, that one needs to turn to a constructive dialogue](#)".

He cited the constitutional reform announced by Lukashenka as a sufficiently clear proposal to start such a dialogue. Lavrov further stated that the protests were wearing down due to the fact that "[sincere people who wanted a better life and wanted a dialogue with authorities](#)" left the streets already. On one hand, this assessment indirectly recognizes the legitimacy of Belarusians' demand for Lukashenka to go. On the other hand, it also shows Russia's disrespect to formal rules and procedures, such as elections, when the political interest (of Russian elites) is at stake.

Demonstrations in Belarus are perceived as a foreign intervention that is led by Poland and the Baltic states where Tsikhanouskaya and many members of the Coordination Council

are now based¹. Also, the popular channel NEXTA on the messaging platform Telegram that is used by the protesters to coordinate and Belarusian TV station Belsat both operate from Warsaw. This fact is cited as further evidence of foreign involvement in the Belarusian protest movement. The fact that throughout autumn and December 2020 European leaders met with Tsikhanouskaya is further viewed as an attempt to destabilize the political situation in Belarus and create divisions between Belarus and Russia by receiving an “illegitimate” leader on such a high level.

Such representation of the events in Belarus is surely further inflated in the rhetoric of public officials and through state media. However, at its core it points to a genuine self-perception of Russia’s role in its neighbourhood. Russia perceives Belarus, as well as other post-Soviet countries, as having obtained independence exclusively as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The legitimacy of the Belarusian national claim is now put to a test. It remains to be seen whether the *formal* sovereignty will become a real one. Russia’s own identity is *fluid* and goes beyond the state borders. Therefore, from the Russian point of view, the EU’s support to Belarusian people is seen as a foreign intervention, while Russia’s support to Lukashenka is seen as legitimate. To use a metaphor that is still prominent in the public discourse, as a *Slavic brother* – certainly an older one – Russia sees its role in preventing the *family* from falling apart. This is the lesson that has been drawn from the Ukrainian case.

Russian media have extensively covered the events in Belarus. They became [the third most memorable](#) issue for Russians in October, preceded only by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to monthly polls conducted by Levada Centre, the Russian population gives its rather steady support to Lukashenka. Two weeks after August elections, [57% thought](#) that he should

remain president, while only 17% saw the opposition candidate as the legitimate leader. In [September](#) and [October](#), about 40% of respondents had their sympathies lying with Lukashenka. About 20% sympathized with the protesters, while around 37% were indifferent to both sides. Those [who trust state TV](#) sympathize predominantly with Lukashenka (about 50%). Those who use the internet and social networks sympathize with Lukashenka significantly less (only 12%) but do not overwhelmingly sympathize with the protesters either (32%).

Constitutional reform and Russia’s plans for Belarus

Lukashenka’s response to the protest was to announce a constitutional reform. However, little detail is available about what exactly will be reformed. Lukashenka mentioned constitutional changes already in 2018 when he was still a strong ruler and considered a controlled power transition to a hand-picked successor. A constitutional reform under Lukashenka today would amount to a series of cosmetic changes. The protesters and the opposition do not take this initiative seriously, as it would in any case not respond to their central demand, namely new and fair elections without Lukashenka.

Moscow wants Lukashenka to carry out constitutional changes as well. At their meeting in Sochi, Putin enthusiastically supported this idea. But their visions of this reform might differ significantly. Moscow’s interest in the constitutional reform in Belarus lies in the decentralization of the political system. If Lukashenka’s [power vertical](#) is broken down into multiple centres, they can be occupied by persons more convenient to Russia. This concerns not only the government and parliament, but also state enterprises (that can be privatized), media, the education sphere, etc.

Lukashenka is an acceptable actor to carry out the transition but is expected to leave the

¹ Belarusian authorities condemn the opposition for ‘intruding into the events in Belarus from abroad, despite the fact that many of them, including Sviatlana

Tsikhanouskaya, were forced to leave the country by the very same authorities.

political scene afterwards, within a year or two. He is seen as an unreliable partner in the Kremlin, having built his entire pre-election campaign on the anti-Russian sentiment, dropping it and asking Moscow for help as soon as his position at home was challenged.

Lukashenka himself wants to stay in power, even if not necessarily in the role of president. While he claimed that he would not cling to power, he repeatedly stated that he would not give it away either, especially to an 'unknown president'. In December, he suggested making the Belarusian People's Congress a constitutional body, prompting political observers to compare this reform to the revival of the Soviet communist party. By transferring certain presidential powers to the Belarusian People's Congress and becoming its head, Lukashenka might intend to reconcile his ambition to stay in power with his earlier promise not to be the president under the new constitution. However, already in January 2021, his statements indirectly indicated that the Belarusian People's Congress might remain just a formal body without significant powers. As usual, without giving specific details, on January 10, Lukashenka announced that a constitutional reform proposal will be finished by the end of 2021. This further demonstrates his willingness to slow down the process in order not to carry out the reform any time soon.

A potentially even stronger Russian presence in Belarus might not be taken well in society. While the Belarusian population has an overall friendly attitude to Russians, over the past thirty years a distinct Belarusian national identity emerged and has been reinforced by the protest movement of 2020. At the same time, Russia took for granted its soft power in this country after the collapse of the USSR, investing little resources in relevant policies in the following years. Also, by supporting Lukashenka, Russia further alienates Belarusians. Survey data from November 2020 show that the number of Belarusians supporting the union with Russia [fell by 11%](#) compared to September. This might indicate the formation of a

new trend, according to Belarusian sociologist Andrey Vardamatski.

GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSION

The overall mistrust in international politics and heightened tensions between Russia and the EU further constrict space for a joint discussion on Belarus. Multilateral formats, such as a possible OSCE mediation, have not gathered necessary support in Belarus itself. Belarusian authorities have declined to collaborate in the framework of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism, which was invoked due to the human rights violations related to the election fraud and the suppression of protests. This serves as another indication that the Belarusian regime would probably not accept the organization as a mediator for the overall conflict neither.

The EU's main interest in Belarus is to have a stable country on its border. While the EU's humanitarian support has done a lot to alleviate the hardships of the Belarusian people, it can hardly turn the tide in the overall dynamics of the crisis. The EU sanctions came late and were of symbolic nature, compared to earlier sanctions imposed against Belarus. The EU is aware that its comparably weak presence in Belarus lies behind this, that is why it cannot not take up a bigger role in the current crisis.

Brussels has also drawn lessons from the Ukrainian situation and tried to avoid a geopolitical confrontation with Russia this time, even if the circumstances in Ukraine and Belarus differed extensively. There is no such identity split between East and West - Russia and the EU - in the Belarusian society as there is in Ukraine. Furthermore, the political landscapes, including an extensive party system and strong civil society organizations in Ukraine, cannot be compared to the Belarusian scene.

High Representative for Foreign Affairs of the EU Josep Borrell called on Russia not to intervene in Belarus already at the end of August, even before the EU acted itself. In general, one can feel some contradiction in the EU's overall

rhetoric: The clear objective of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission is *Weltpolitikfähigkeit* of a *geopolitical and strategically autonomous EU*. It promotes stronger EU involvement in Asia, Africa and South America while remaining restrained at its own border, namely in Belarus.

Russia, on the other hand, clearly has a leverage in Belarus. Belarus has been a member of all Russia-led multilateral projects, including the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Union State of Russia and Belarus. Belarus hosts two Russian military bases that are of strategic importance to Russian presence around the world. The country is also highly dependent on Russian energy resources and Russia is the major trade partner for Belarus. The two countries are culturally close too.

Russian elites' belief that the Belarusian protest is organized by the West leads them to view the domestic crisis in Belarus as another front of a broader geopolitical conflict. Therefore, as one [analyst aptly noted](#), the situation in Belarus has not impacted the EU-Russia relations just *yet*. It might do so in the future, if Russia intensifies its presence in Belarus to an extent that the EU will be affected directly, e.g. by establishing another military base on Belarus' territory. The EU will have to react, once Moscow proceeds with specific actions. Thus, the EU appears to be in a wait-and-see position now.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The perception of the Belarusian uprising in the East and the West is a different one. The elites in Russia view the protest as coordinated by the West, whereas the EU considers it as a purely domestic issue. Russia has a high interest in Belarus, in terms of security, economics, culture etc. For the EU, stability in its neighbouring country is essential. It is questionable how long Lukashenka will stay in power, as he is not a promising partner, neither for Russia,

nor for the EU, not to mention the Belarusian people. Russia has a high interest that Belarus, its partner in various multilateral formats like the Eurasian Economic Union, continues to have a pro-Russian leader. Meanwhile, the EU seeks to establish good relationships with the newly formed Coordination Council that has already indicated as well that it does not intend to change the foreign policy of the country. Many experts assess that the *point of no return* has been passed, that the population will not return to their homes and silently bear all the things they do not agree with any longer: change has come to the country – especially in the mindset of the people. Moreover, it is very likely that EU-Russia relations themselves will be affected by the current crisis in Belarus.

From an EU perspective, it will be essential to resort to the already existing framework to strengthen the EU's relationship with Belarus, namely the Eastern Partnership. In case of any further deterioration of the situation, it is important that the EU reacts promptly: the signalling function of sanctions is stronger the quicker the signal of disagreement with certain actions comes. Furthermore, the EU could think about imposing sectoral sanctions and thus reaching out to the constraining function of sanctions, which could affect the income of the regime. Short time term assistance, as already provided by the EU such as offering scholarships for students, visa for people fearing repression and violence or financial help for civil society and journalists, should be continued. While the EU's sanctions in the Belarus crisis might have been mostly limited to the signalling function so far for good reasons, it is essential for the EU, and for the stability in its neighbourhood, that policymakers do not close their eyes now and are prepared for more to come: examining and confronting itself with possible scenarios of an already inevitable political transition in Belarus might be the key.

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