

The “Difficult Age” of Eastern Europe and the Case of Belarus

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*Poland and Lithuania are young and strategically inexperienced countries that do not fully understand the consequences of their actions. Their goal is to undermine Belarus internally, to deprive it of its status of agency in international affairs, and to make use of its resources and the outflow of people that may occur as a result of the crisis, writes Valdai Club Program Director **Andrei Sushentsov**.*

The year 2020 became a particularly difficult year for social stability and security in many regions of the world. The pandemic has increased social stress in continental Europe. In France, numerous “yellow vests” demonstrations continue—

thousands have been detained and more than two thousand have been incarcerated; some of them were charged with crimes. Massive public protests in Germany against quarantine measures have led to the largest clashes with law enforcers in several decades and forced the country's President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to talk about a threat to the constitutional order.

Additionally, international crises persist. The U.S. tried to overthrow the government in Venezuela at the beginning of last year. Washington continues to exert military and political pressure on Tehran, and this pressure is accompanied by special operations inside Iran itself. Tensions between Turkey and France over Libya are deepening. Recently, the situation between Turkey and Greece has worsened over territorial claims in the Aegean Sea. Finally, Nagorno-Karabakh has seen the largest escalation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in nearly thirty years.

The year 2020 was a difficult year for Russia and Belarus. As a result of Belarusian elections, part of Belarusian society became disoriented. This was used by external forces, which exerted unprecedented pressure on the Belarusian leadership, comparable to that which was put on the government of Victor Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014 during the Euromaidan protests. This reflects the European countries' policy of double standards, as they categorically reject any form of foreign participation in the settlement of protests at home.

Sanctions were applied against Belarus, and the most acute phase of the electoral campaign coincided with at least one provocation by special services, this time Ukrainian ones, which intended to capture Russian citizens. However, the situation played out in such a way that they were detained by the Belarusian security services under the pretext of accusations of Russian interference in the presidential campaign in Belarus.

Eastern European countries, primarily Poland and Lithuania,

have shown the greatest activity in the implementation of these measures. These are young, often strategically inexperienced countries that do not fully understand the consequences of their actions. Their goal is to undermine Belarus internally, to deprive it of its status of agency in international affairs, and to make use of its resources and the outflow of people that may occur as a result of the crisis. They also intend to damage cooperation between Russia and Belarus. This is the classic strategic tenet—first break your opponent's intentions, then its alliances.

These plans were not realized. The Belarusian leadership continues to hold the reigns. It announced a constitutional reform that should reduce the severity of social confrontation in the country. The Belarusians themselves, through dialogue, should sort out and resolve the fate of their country without external pressure.

Why are Eastern European countries putting pressure on their Belarusian neighbor?

The fact is that the border between two security areas runs through Eastern Europe: NATO and Russia's CSTO. This borderland confirms the existence of deep and insoluble geopolitical contradictions between different understandings of security in Europe. The bloc approach, based on the refusal of the United States to dissolve or transform NATO after the end of the Cold War, as well as the expansion of the bloc towards Russia, has inevitably returned the categories of power confrontation into the European security environment—in contrast to the border zone between Russia and China, where the two countries do not compete for geopolitical influence. For example, Russia and China never support different presidential candidates in any of the Central Asian republics or Mongolia. In contrast to this situation, every electoral cycle in Eastern European countries automatically gives way to geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West. And Eastern European countries, primarily Poland and Lithuania, are most active in this regard. What is the explanation for such activity among Eastern European

countries?

They are constantly worried about the so-called threat from Russia. They recognize that they are on the border of a geopolitical rift, near a strong Russia, while NATO's main security providers are far from Russia's borders and are less concerned about the threat of an escalation of conflict with Moscow. Poland and Lithuania are especially acutely aware of the lack of security guarantees from the leading NATO countries. They are also acutely aware of the lack of agency on the part of the EU. Their measures to put pressure on Belarus are aimed at moving the security buffer farther away from their borders and moving it closer to the borders of Russia. Lacking the tools of hard power, they use soft tools such as pressure, overt support of opposition presidential candidates, interference in the internal affairs of Belarus, information and sanctions pressure. They have already mastered this toolkit quite well.

However, Poland and Lithuania are initiating a conflict that they themselves are unlikely to be able to stop if it follows the most dangerous scenario. Like a child who is held accountable for his actions, they will be the first to suffer if the security crisis in Europe worsens. This crisis will be resolved with the participation of the main security providers in Europe: Russia and the United States. The interests of Poland and Lithuania will turn out to be as secondary as the interests of Serbia, whose actions unwittingly served as a pretext for unleashing World War I.

What real motives should one be guided by in the event of a crisis in any of the geopolitical border countries in Eastern Europe?

The underlying purpose of a constructive solution would be saving lives. Any measures should be aimed at de-escalating the crisis and reducing the likelihood of its aggravation and transformation into a continental crisis.

Over the past twenty-five years, we have repeatedly witnessed

situations where good intentions have led straight to hell: instead of spreading democracy, the imposition of liberal order as a result of an internal crisis and external intervention have created catastrophic situations placing nations on the brink of civil war, leading to mass death and emigration.

Let's not be naïve, there is geopolitical confrontation between the East and the West in Eastern Europe. Its instruments are numerous. They include political pressure, sanctions, multiplying provocations, as well as information and media campaigns. There is no talk of cooperation now. Belarusian society is divided, and external forces are trying to take advantage of this. However, proposals for mediation from Eastern European countries appear to be poorly hidden attempts at manipulation. Let us imagine that the OSCE mechanism is applied in Poland to an unfolding internal political crisis or to popular unrest in Germany or France. Even the very posing of such a question seems absurd. However, this is more of a problem for the OSCE and the European security institutions in the form in which they took shape after the end of the Cold War and demonstrate deep distortions in their institutional design.

Over the past few years, since the Ukraine crisis, European countries should have accumulated negative experiences leading to an understanding of how internal political crises can unfold in fragile Eastern European countries in the event of external intervention. This experience should contribute to the development of balanced and responsible decisions. What Eastern European countries should do now with regard to Belarus is stay away from interfering, thus demonstrating maturity and responsibility.