

China's response to the protests in Belarus

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Zhao Lijian, the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was asked to comment on the Belarusian protests at a press conference on 19 August. He said that China respects the "Belarusian people's choice of development path" and backs its sovereignty and independence. He also voiced his hope that the internal "chaos" would end soon and emphasised that Minsk should return political stability at home by itself. Zhao Lijian also condemned attempts, reportedly made by "foreign forces", to divide the Belarusian public. He admitted that there are strong bonds connecting China and Belarus. This was the first statement from an official representative of the Chinese government concerning the events in Belarus since 10 August, when President Xi Jinping congratulated Alyaksandr Lukashenka on winning the election during a phone call.

On 20 August, the English-language daily newspaper *Global Times* (controlled by the Chinese Communist Party) published an article on Belarus written by an analyst from the governmental Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The author warned the Republic of Belarus against taking the same road as Ukraine, which has allegedly become a battlefield for Russia and the West due to EU and US interventions. He suggests that it would be a natural step for Minsk to maintain its close bonds with Moscow, and calls potential Russian intervention as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization "assistance". The Chinese-language media only publishes information on rallies held in support of Lukashenka and remain silent about the mass protests.

Commentary

- The statement from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that the events in Belarus are viewed as a Western attempt to destabilise Lukashenka's regime from outside. The phrase one's "choice of development path" has been traditionally used in China's rhetoric to fend off Western attacks on China's authoritarian political system, while references to "foreign forces" have been seen in previous Chinese commentaries on the so-called 'colour revolutions in the post-Soviet area. The toned down and brief message suggests that, despite the words of support, Beijing is not interested in offering direct diplomatic support to Lukashenka's regime, proof of which also includes the fact that China has refrained from making any official statements over the past few days.
- The fact that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not indicate the source of the "foreign forces" and appealed to Belarus to resolve the problem on its own has provoked speculation among Western commentators that China could possibly push back against

a potential Russian intervention. However, the official comments, which coincided with the videoconference of the leaders of EU member states on Belarus, should be considered as an address to the West rather than Moscow. This was also proven by the general tone of the article published in the *Global Times*, where Russia is indicated as a natural ally of Belarus and the only guarantor of its security and economic development. It is also clear, based on informal statements from Chinese diplomats and experts (who, for example, often unofficially accept the invasion in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea) that China views post-Soviet Eastern Europe as a Russian zone of influence.

- The press release is a clear suggestion that, in Beijing's opinion, the protests should be dealt with by Minsk alone or possibly with some support from Russia. Washington, Berlin, Paris and Brussels have been portrayed as those who are not interested in resolving the crisis and are focused on their own internal affairs. In contrast to this, actions taken by Poland and Lithuania have been presented as attempts to aggravate the crisis in Belarus. Those actions allegedly result from these countries' hostility towards Russia; Warsaw and Vilnius are allegedly stoking the protests in Belarus in the hope that they will spill out into Russia and also provoke anti-governmental demonstrations there. As regards this aspect, the Chinese narrative is more far-fetched than those from Russia and Belarus.