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Ukraine: relations with Belarus suspended

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On August 28, the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, announced that “at present, all contacts with Belarus have been suspended [and] will be unblocked only when we find out that they do not bring political, reputational and moral damage to Ukraine.” One day earlier, Mr Kuleba had also stated that Kyiv would join the EU's declaration of 11 August 2020 which states that the elections in Belarus were unfair and envisages the option of imposing personal sanctions on selected representatives of the local regime.

Kuleba's statement was preceded by President Volodymyr Zelensky harshly criticising Lukashenka's actions on 15 August and summoning the Ukrainian ambassador in Minsk for consultations two days later. The reason for this was the transfer to Russia of 32 members of a private military company, the so-called Wagner Group, who had been detained in Belarus on 29 July and accused before the elections by the government of intending to destabilise the internal situation. As many as 28 of them, including 9 Ukrainian citizens, had fought in Donbas on the side of pro-Russian separatists. The Belarusian government suggested that they could be transferred to Kyiv, which had been officially requested by the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine. After they had been transferred to Russia, Lukashenka intensified his accusations against the Ukrainian government, for example, blaming it for external aggression and instigating protesters to start a ‘colour revolution’ in Belarus.

Commentary

- Kyiv's decision to suspend relations with Minsk is a manifestation of the worst crisis in bilateral relations since 1991. It cannot be ruled out that Ukraine will join the individual restrictive measures imposed by the EU on selected representatives of the Belarusian regime. Furthermore, if the stance presented in the statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 28 August is consistently maintained, political contacts will be frozen. The refusal to transfer the members of the ‘Wagner Group’ to Ukraine has been viewed in Kyiv as an act undermining bilateral relations and a cynical move by Lukashenka, using Ukraine in his game with Moscow. The groundless and increasingly aggressive accusations against Ukraine (and Western countries) of supporting and even controlling the protests have also been deemed unacceptable. The fact that these decisions by Minsk have had a major impact on intensifying criticism from the Ukrainian government is evidenced by the evolution of its stance on the post-election situation in Belarus. In a statement issued on 10 August by the Lublin Triangle (the ministers of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania), the government in Kyiv backed the proposal of mediating in the dialogue between the government and the public in order to settle the situation in

the country. On the same day, in a similar vein, President Zelensky appealed for refraining from the use of violence and for developing political solutions by peaceful means. On the evening of 15 August, apparently without consulting the President's Office, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs upheld its will to support its neighbour in dealing with the “difficult episode”.

- Kyiv's stance could have also changed due to public sentiment in Ukraine – the vast majority of civil society and influential media have supported the Belarusian revolution, and some of them have criticised the government for responding too mildly. In the following days, President Zelensky also appealed for help for persecuted Belarusian citizens. For example, the ban on crossing the Ukrainian border introduced on 26 August due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic will not apply to them upon his request. At the same time, the Ukrainian government has invited IT sector workers and company owners to come to Ukraine.
- So far, the two countries have had good neighbourly relations, and contacts at various levels, including the highest ones, have been regular. Minsk has also hosted meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group since 2014, the purpose of which is to regulate the situation in Donbas. One of the reasons why the talks were conducted in Minsk was the fact that, following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Belarusian government became visibly concerned about the Kremlin's policy and tried to position itself as an impartial intermediary (including by refusing to recognise the annexation of Crimea) rather than only as an ally of the Russian Federation. However, Kyiv perceived Belarus as an uncertain partner, fearing a further increase of Russia's military and political presence in that country. It now seems that this distrust has further increased because the political crisis in Belarus, which is weakening Lukashenka, is perceived in Ukraine as a factor that may further strengthen Moscow's influence.
- The government in Kyiv is also concerned about the deepening economic crisis in Belarus and its impact on trade. Belarus is Ukraine’s fifth largest trade partner (after China, Russia, Germany and Poland). The value of trade in goods in 2019 reached US$5.3 billion (4.7% of Ukraine's trade volume) – including imports 3.7 billion (6.1%) and exports 1.55 billion (3.1%). Fuel imports are vital for Ukraine, and Belarus is a major fuel supplier. In 2019, they accounted for 54% of all imports from this country and 38% of all fuel imports. Ukraine was also concerned about possible cuts in supplies due to anti-regime strikes. However, imported fuels originate predominantly from the Mozyr refinery, where the strike action has had hardly any impact.