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THE CRUMBLING EASTERN EUROPEAN “PEARL” WITHIN THE BRI STRATEGY: CHINESE DOMESTIC MEDIA’S COVERAGE OF THE 2020 BELARUSIAN PROTESTS AND BILATERAL TIES

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Since 1994, Alexander Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule and his regime’s grip on power has strengthened continuously, at the great cost of diminishing Belarusian civil liberties. Throughout these years, Lukashenko’s foreign policy underwent several recalculations that focused on attempts to maintain societal stability, improve the country’s economic situation and, more importantly, to balance Belarusian ties with the EU and Russia. Over time, society’s calls for liberalization of the country became a huge challenge for the government. As a result, Lukashenko’s regime became increasingly oppressive and based on ruling with an iron fist. Every Belarusian presidential election was increasingly absurd and questionable, with evidence of various restrictions placed on movement, internet access, the use of fake ballots, etc. Society’s growing anger boiled over after the 2020 presidential elections.

These events and the regime’s violent crackdown on protesters attracted the international community’s attention. While the main actors in this ongoing crisis are Russia and the EU, as a result of the Belarus regime’s diversification of its foreign policy over the last decade, China has undoubtedly beco-



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me yet another significant actor in the country. Belarus is of strategic importance to China, mainly economical but to some extent also political. The joint Sino-Belarusian Great Stone Industrial Park megaproject, once referred to by Xi Jinping as the “pearl” within the BRI project, reflects the great importance that China attaches to potential economic gains by strengthening its economic presence in the country. Since the 2020 Belarusian protests started, China has been closely monitoring the situation in Belarus and redrawing its foreign policy objectives in Eastern Europe as well as considering potential scenarios regarding negative consequences to the BRI.

Interestingly, a few weeks before the eruption of the Belarusian protests, in Russia’s Far East region, the Khabarovsk Krai protests broke out and share a very similar pattern and catalyst: dissatisfaction with the regime and its grip on power. Recent successes of a non-ruling Russian party in the region resulted in the arrest of anti-establishment governor Sergei Furgal. Despite the distance between these two hotspots, both protests share very similar characteristics that led to both groups voicing their support for each other. This trend of popular protests in authoritarian countries is a worrisome reality to China, which also borders Khabarovsk Krai; therefore, Beijing is undoubtedly closely monitoring both situations.

However, judging from the relative flexibility on reporting the Belarusian protests in China, the overall atmosphere of the domestic media indicates that there is little reason to believe that Beijing would be willing to step up their efforts to support Lukashenko both do-

mestically and internationally. Instead, in the event the Belarusian people are unable to solve the crisis on their own, China would leave this crisis for Russia to solve. Given Belarus’ important geopolitical position and economic potential within the BRI strategy, how worried is China about losing its “pearl”?

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Belarus

Both countries established formal relations in 1992, but it is only over the last decade that Sino-Belarusian ties have been greatly strengthened by broadening and intensifying bilateral cooperation in various spheres. The signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement between Belarus and China in 2013 reflects Belarus’ potential to play an important role in Chinese economic and (to some extent) political strategies in the region, particularly in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China’s choice of strategic partners is a complicated process involving numerous variables. In the case of Belarus, establishment, and maintenance of close ties with the Belarusian regime is based on these core considerations:

Ideological closeness: both countries share similar authoritarian methods of governance as well as comparable views on human rights and civil liberties that profoundly differ from the Western viewpoint.

Economic considerations: Belarus is in grave need of economic and technical assistance, and China’s so-called “no

strings attached" investment strategy is more favorable to Belarus as opposed to Russia's pre-conditional (politically-oriented) economic support as well as access to the EU's investments based on real progress in terms of liberalization in the country.

Strategically useful location for China's greater economic and political aspirations in Eastern Europe: due to Belarus' important geographic and geostrategic location as well as its access to both the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), China views Belarus as a potential location for an important hub needed to fulfill its BRI project in the region.

Ease of dealing with Lukashenko's regime: for the past decade, Lukashenko has been extremely pro-active and enthusiastic about strengthening Sino-Belarusian ties. China has been provided with a favorable political environment and relative freedom for investments. For the Chinese government, Belarus is seen as a politically and societally stable country (as opposed to post-2014 Ukraine, which was originally viewed by China as the most viable location for a core regional hub of the BRI).

Chinese interests in Belarus are, above all, economy-centered. Given Belarus' favorable geographic location and access to both the EU and EEU markets, the focal point of China's ties with Belarus is based on development of the BRI project in the region. The major recipient of Chinese investments is the Great Stone Industrial Park, a joint Sino-Belarusian project which is seen as one of the symbols of China's BRI mega project's global aspirations. This special economic zone, created in 2012,

aims to attract foreign technology companies and, with the established rail, highway, and air links, acts as a major hub for the BRI towards the EU and EEU markets. The ongoing Belarusian protests resulted in a high degree of instability and unfavorable conditions for investors; therefore, the future development of this project in Belarus is becoming increasingly unclear. Even given the potential effects on Chinese investments in the country and the probable loss of favorable conditions for establishing an important hub for the BRI, China remains passive and unwilling to allocate more resources in support of Lukashenko's regime. As seen from China's passive response and very limited support for Lukashenko, it is obvious that Belarus needs China more than China needs Belarus. China values Belarus' (limited) diplomatic support and treats it as an ideological partner within the larger democracy vs. autocracy struggle. It would prefer to continue dealing with Lukashenko's regime; however, China is not willing to get actively involved in what is clearly within Russia's sphere of interests or even influence. Pragmatism and economic calculations are guiding China's foreign policy with Belarus (and recently, these calculations are turning against Belarus due to slow progress on joint projects in the country as well as due to the fact that numerous Belarusian investments using Chinese loans fail to bring any profit). But Minsk, on the other hand, sees its ties with Beijing as a means for the regime's survival and a stabilizing factor that helps the Belarusian government to balance its ties with its immediate neighbors and, most crucially, lower its dependence on Russia and the EU.

China is Considering Potential Outcomes of the 2020 Belarusian Protests

Undoubtedly, Beijing is closely monitoring the situation in Belarus and is cautious of potential outcomes of the Belarusian crisis. The repetition of its carefully worded official statements and relatively passive behavior do not mean that it is not preparing itself for possible outcomes. With the help of recent Chinese and foreign media reports as well as analytical articles (See references: , , , , ,), three different future scenarios for Belarus can be identified in relation to Chinese interests in the region (ranked in terms of preference):

Scenario 1: Lukashenko manages to secure his grip on power (most preferred)

This particular scenario is the most preferred by China because it, to some extent, maintains the status quo. For the last decade until the 2020 Protests, Lukashenko's regime maintained a very favorable political and economic environment for Chinese investments and BRI infrastructure projects. Both countries benefited from the deepening cooperation and trade relations. In this scenario, Lukashenko succeeds in securing his control of the country. This type of situation would probably be achieved with the help of Russia and result in diminished political independence in return for Russia's continuation of economic and political support as well as its support of Belarusian special police units to gain traction against anti-go-

vernment protesters. For China, given the fact that Russia supports the BRI, further Belarusian dependence on Russia is acceptable. Both countries have avoided interest clashes in Belarus; both China and Russia maintain different economic and political interests in the country (for example, both countries refrain from stepping on one another's toes in terms of their economic interests, as China focuses more on smaller plants, infrastructure and the technological sector, whereas Russia invests considerably in heavy industries and is actively involved in privatization of large Belarusian enterprises). In terms of the political environment, China would prefer this scenario due to the relative ease of dealing with Lukashenko's regime. After all, it was Lukashenko who first showed the initiative and willingness to expand the scope of cooperation with China in order to counter Russia's increasing grip on Belarus. With the support of Lukashenko's regime, China benefited from a favorable environment for investment and the incorporation of Belarus into its BRI plans. However, there are several major drawbacks under this scenario that are not favorable to China. In the event Lukashenko remains in power, it will inevitably result in a significant breakdown of EU-Belarus relations which, in turn, would negatively affect the already frail Belarusian economy. Furthermore, plans to establish Belarus as China's gateway to Europe within the BRI framework will become almost unattainable. Ultimately, Lukashenko's astounding efforts to remain in power might succeed in the short term, but this particular scenario will likely merely prolong the inevitable outcome.

Scenario 2: Russia actively becomes involved in the crisis and establishes a much more dependent and pro-Russian government in Belarus (with or without Lukashenko) (less preferred)

In the 2nd scenario, Russia intervenes and either ousts Lukashenko from office by establishing a more pro-Russian government or pushes for progress towards integration. It is unlikely that the public will completely cease the protests, and so public dissatisfaction would remain. However, in the event Russia succeeds in establishing relative stability and order, China could accept such a scenario if its investments in Belarus remain secure. Given increasing Chinese investments and trade with Belarus, it is very likely that Belarus would naturally continue to maintain a close relationship with China, mainly due to the economic benefits. For Russia, it is also beneficial because it would share some of Russia's burden of providing economic support to Belarus. However, EU-Belarusian ties would be substantially severed; therefore, Minsk would not be able to effectively act as China's hub and a gateway to European markets. From China's perspective, this scenario is more unpredictable, and the risks involved are greater, but it is still acceptable.

Scenario 3: Belarusian anti-government protesters successfully oust Lukashenko's regime and establish a new government after fair elections (least preferred)

In this scenario, Belarusian anti-government protesters oust Lukashenko's re-

gime and hold fair and independent elections. The 3rd potential scenario is by far the least preferred by the Chinese government due to a high level of unpredictability and uncertainty with regards to future Sino-Belarusian bilateral relations and Chinese investments. For China, many variables come into consideration: would the new government lean towards the East or the West? Would it reshape its relationship with Russia? What would be the view of a new government towards continuation of existing plans involving the Chinese BRI? What further fuels China's anxiety vis-à-vis Belarus is the lack of the government opposition's public expression of how it sees the future with China and its economic cooperation. Even though this scenario would fix Belarus' relations with the EU, stabilize the country and prevent economic decline, which would benefit China's BRI strategy, it involves a lack of clarity as to the opposition's view regarding Belarus' future relationship with China.

Flexibility of Chinese Media Reporting Based on the Development of the Situation in Belarus

Chinese president Xi Jinping was one of the first foreign leaders to congratulate Alexander Lukashenko on his disputed re-election. However, judging from the relative flexibility on reporting the Belarusian protests, the overall atmosphere of the domestic media indicates that there is little reason to believe that China would be willing to step up their efforts and show their support for Lukashenko both domestically and internationally. While the world media extensively

reported and followed the situation of the 2020 Belarusian protests from the very beginning, Chinese reporting was inconsistent and adaptive to the situation. The nature of the reporting can be divided into two categories: media reporting in the early stages of the crisis and in the latter stages (since around September). In the early stages of the protests, the reporting was relatively vague and brief with a clear pro-Russian and pro-Lukashenko bent. In addition to this, there were instances in which Chinese media (intentionally?) mis-reported the situation to depict overwhelming support for Lukashenko.

In the early development of the Belarusian crisis, most of the largest Chinese government-controlled media outlets only briefly reported on the Belarus situation, without providing more details, which is partly due to the sensitive nature of the crisis (i.e. large-scale anti-government societal demonstrations). The largest media outlets, such as Xinhua News and CCTV News, published pro-Lukashenko reports that were in accordance with the official position of the Chinese government¹⁴. Only a few smaller media outlets and blogging platforms were not overly one-sided or pro-Russian¹⁵ and attempted to go into more detail (and were not censored) regarding the Belarusian protests. This, along with Chinese government officials' carefully worded statements, is based on the fact that China clearly calculates its position and adapts according to the development of the protests, i.e. in the early outbreak of protests, it was not clear whether the protests would increase in size and intensity, therefore supporting Lukashenko's regime was seen as a risk-free choice. Due to



Fig. 1: The headline reads: “Belarus: 70.000 people gathered in the capital to support the government and defend the country's peace”; however, judging from the symbolism and the following video footage of demonstrators with clearly anti-government posters, this particular demonstration was clearly anti-Lukashenko, contrary to the way it was reported by this media outlet (Phoenix News).¹³

an inability to predict which side would succeed, China carefully guided domestic media to maintain some flexibility. China has no adequate tools of influence to change the course of the protests; therefore, it needs to adapt to the actual situation.

In contrast, around September, there was a moderate shift in the focus, scope and nature of reporting on the Belarusian protests by the Chinese media, which was especially reflected in increased reporting on social media sites and blogging platforms. Chinese government and major media outlets continued to maintain their relatively unchanged position since the beginning of the protests by repeating statements that “China respects the Belarusian peoples’ freedom to make their own choice” and “resolutely opposes any foreign

actors that would instigate division and chaos within Belarusian society". In addition to this, major media outlets openly but carefully sided with Lukashenko's

regime, stating that "China believes that with President Lukashenko's leadership, Belarus can restore political and societal stability"¹⁶.



Fig. 2: The headline: "The FM of Belarus: foreign forces are creating chaos" (Source: CCTV News)¹⁷



Fig. 3: The headline: "Member of the Russian Duma: the US attempts to exploit the Belarusian situation to damage Russia's stability" (Source: CCTV News)¹⁸



Fig. 4: The headline: "A change of tune? Pompeo states that the US supports Belarusian sovereignty". This particular article takes an interesting point of view by interpreting Pompeo's speech with Alexander Lukashenko as a sign of changing attitudes towards non-recognition of the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections. The article also states that this phone conversation might also indicate that the US does not fully support Lithuania's and Poland's active diplomatic campaign to get rid of Lukashenko. (Source: Xinhua News)



Fig. 5: The headline: "Russia's Minister of Defense condemns Western intervention in Belarusian internal affairs" (Source: Xinhua News²⁰)

However, on the other hand, less influential media outlets and especially personal blogs much more extensively reported on the Belarusian regime's violent crackdowns and excessive use of force against protesters as compared to reporting during the early stages of the protests. Their coverage of the Belarusian protests is more down-to-earth: publications cover the struggle of the protesters, tragic Belarusian history during the Soviet era, etc. The fact that such reports and personal blogs are not censored indicates that the Chinese government is carefully observing the situation and leaving some flexibility to recalculate its position if fundamental change in Belarus occurs.



Fig. 6: The headline: "A Belarusian woman's path to running for the presidency". The article is a detailed biography of Belarus' leading opposition figure Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.²¹



Fig. 7: The headline: "Large-scale protests continue over 6 weeks, Belarusian President Lukashenko "secretly" takes an oath of office"²².

More in-depth Chinese analytical reports and academic commentaries on the Belarusian situation in China can be divided into two categories:

1. Articles that are mostly focused on the economic side, the fate of Chinese investments and potential effects on the BRI strategy in Eastern Europe (as reflected in articles 4 and 7),
2. Geopolitical and anti-Western rhetoric that identifies the West/NATO as the main trigger for the crisis (reflected in articles 6 and 24).

While being predominantly optimistic regarding Sino-Belarusian economic ties, the BRI's future in the country and overwhelming benefits for Belarus to seek continuation of relations with China, these reports also share the view that Western forces are actively intervening in Belarusian domestic affairs and further inflaming the crisis. These geopolitically oriented analyses can be further divided into harsh/biased anti-Western analyses and less biased and constructive analyses. The domi-



Fig. 8: The headline: "President, please step down! Large crowds of protesters demonstrate in Belarus' capital, 100,000 involved in huge clash"²³



Fig. 8: The post: "Protesters went to Kurapaty forest today to visit the site of a mass execution during the era of Stalin, which is now a memorial site for victims of political oppression. In these past few months, Belarus constantly is having a feeling of intertwined history"²⁵

nating argument is that the West/NATO is the main force behind the ousting of Lukashenko’s regime and that they are also actively involved via social media in the organization of protest activities. Less biased analyses still assume that foreign (Western) forces play an important role, but other factors are also identified, such as the poor economic performance of Lukashenko’s government and the Belarusian public’s long-standing dissatisfaction with the country’s development. Under normal circumstances, Lithuania is very rarely mentioned in the Chinese media. Interestingly, its “diplomatic weight”, leadership and activeness in support of the Belarusian people’s protests were overwhelmingly disproportionate given Lithuania’s small size and very limited diplomatic and economic power. This is clearly reflected in Chinese analytical articles in which Lithuania, either solely or along with Poland and other immediate neighbors, was frequently mentioned in a negative light, but even more frequently in a positive light.

Conclusions: The Future of the BRI’s “Pearl” Remains Unknown, but China is Not Too Worried

One of the characteristics of Chinese foreign policy is its hierarchical structure: China deals with foreign countries differently based on numerous factors, including economic potential, political environment, the society’s attitude towards China, etc. Even though in the last decade Sino-Belarusian relations have experienced a boost in coopera-

tion, encompassing different sectors, judging from China’s response to ongoing Belarusian protests, it is clear that Belarus needs China much more than China needs Belarus.

Benefits for China	Benefits for Belarus
Diplomatic support on the international stage (very limited)	Considering Belarus’ struggling and shrinking economy, close ties with China have huge potential to improve the country’s economic situation
A country with cheap labor and low competition that has the potential to become a springboard to EU and EEU markets	Amidst continuous pressure from Russia to take further steps towards integration and calls from the EU for political reforms, China is an alternative that helps Lukashenko maintain independence
Ease of doing business with Lukashenko and relative stability of his government (pre-2020 protests)	Chinese financial investments and loans, which are sorely needed for the Belarusian economy, are much more desirable due to their “no (political) strings attached” nature, as opposed to various pre-requisites needed to be fulfilled for investments from Russia and the EU
Ideologically similar values supported (authoritarian style of government, lack of liberal and democratic tools, similar attitude to human rights, which differs from Western views, etc.)	A strategic partnership with the UNSC permanent member gives Belarus much-needed diplomatic support at the international level

The Chinese government’s official position remains unchanged – it reiterates its support for the Belarusian people; however, at the same time, it carefully shows sympathy for Lukashenko, who according to their statements, is capable of restoring stability within Belarusian society. Chinese state media reaffirms the government’s position and seldomly publishes reports regarding the protests, and when it does, they are often relatively brief and vague. The nature of the reporting is clearly pro-Lukashenko and pro-Russian²⁶, and relian-

ce on governmental sources from these two countries makes the reports biased. However, since around September, there seems to have been a surge in the domestic media's reporting of the actual situation in Belarus, especially seen on private blogging sites that cover excess use of force by the Belarusian regime against protesters. Smaller media outlets provide readers with on-the-ground footage, photographs of the protesters' struggle and use of force by police units against civilians. The fact that there is relative flexibility in coverage of the protests and that these blogging websites are not censored indicates that the Chinese government is maintaining room to maneuver because it would not be in its interests to side with one of the actors in the crisis, given the uncertainty in Belarus.

EARLY STAGES OF THE PROTESTS

Predominantly pro-Lukashenko stance as well as pro-Russian rhetoric in terms of possible solutions to the Belarusian crisis, very few personal blogs discussing the Belarusian crisis.

Over-reliance and extensive use of Russian and Belarusian officials' statements and their official media reports.

Some footage from the Belarusian street protests is falsified (e.g. using footage of anti-government protesters' demonstrations but reporting them as pro-Lukashenko rallies).

Official reports mainly involve mention of Western powers' intervention in the domestic affairs of Belarus.

LATER STAGES OF THE PROTESTS (SINCE AROUND SEPTEMBER)

Despite the government's unchanged rhetoric, some minor media outlets and especially personal blogs more extensively report on the real situation of the protests, comparable to the reporting in the West (reporting of the Belarusian regime's use of excessive force against protesters, violent crackdowns, etc.).

The earlier trend remains; however, some media outlets and blogging sites report the actual situation (e.g. citing the BBC, among other Western sources).

Much more accurate reporting including actual on-the-ground footage, photos of Belarusian police violence against civilians, etc.

This particular trend remains; however, it is not as dominant, particularly among personal blogging websites.

China is not willing to allocate more diplomatic and political resources to solely support Lukashenko because it involves greater risk of damaging future Sino-Belarusian relations. Furthermore, there is no clear indication from the anti-government movement regarding its willingness/unwillingness to break existing ties with China that might shift Beijing's stance on this issue. In the last few years, Sino-Western relations have deteriorated, whereas Sino-Russian ties have strengthened. Belarus is undoubtedly within Russia's sphere of interest; therefore, China would likely support a Russian solution to the crisis. China's main interest in Belarus lies in econo-

mic cooperation: mainly, fulfillment of its BRI plans in the region. Beijing is undoubtedly closely monitoring and analyzing both the Belarusian and Khabarovsk protests. Even though China's political and societal system is much more solid and stable compared to those of Russia and Belarus, a drop in Chinese economic growth below what Beijing has promised its population could result in the occurrence of a very similar scenario. Even though the Chinese BRI's "pearl" is crumbling, China is not too worried: existing Sino-Belarusian cooperation in various fields makes China an important partner for Belarus, with or without Lukashenko's regime.

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