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(Dis)unity of the Visegrad Group countries in the face of the crisis in Belarus

The presidential elections in Belarus and the post-election protests have raised a discussion in Central European countries. The Belarusian issue was debated during the meetings of the Visegrad Group, including the V4 summit organized on September 11, 2020 in Lublin. The Belarusian issue highlighted certain differences within the Visegrad Group. However, there is still no declaration by the heads of government of the V4 that would emphasize the common position on the perception of the situation in Belarus. Such a position is necessary, irrespective of the joint statement of the presidents of the Visegrad Group published on August 19.

The issue of Belarus is perceived differently in each of the V4 countries. So far, no agreement has been reached at the level of the heads of government. The statement of the presidents of the Visegrad Group, in which they called for dialogue between the Belarusian authorities and the society, to organize free presidential elections and to respect Belarus' sovereignty was positively received. However, due to the systemic position of state leaders in individual political systems of the V4 member states, it is necessary to develop a firm position of the V4 by the prime ministers, regardless of the fact that the Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian approaches to the crisis in Belarus differ fundamentally, both in the details and the general view of the situation.

Czech Republic

After the outbreak of the crisis in Belarus, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš (ANO), emphasized several times that he strongly supports the conducting of free presidential elections in that country. He talked about it, among others, in his statement published in social media on August 16, 2020, where he added that the European Union should start negotiations with the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, in order to prevent the escalation of the conflict and the development of events as in Ukraine (annexation of Crimea). Prime Minister Babiš' commentary for one of the Czech newspapers was similar. In a text published on August 26, Babiš stated that the elections in Belarus had probably been rigged and that Alyaksandr Lukashenka had repeatedly violated basic civil rights by continuing to persecute the opposition and trying to suppress public protests. The Prime Minister of the Czech Republic repeated that the EU should mediate in Belarus and stressed his involvement in the issue of Belarus. In a cited article, Babiš said that he had contacted not only the EU leaders, but also the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, and Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, because unlike the West, the Central European countries have experienced firsthand what the Belarusians are now trying to do and, therefore, they have a better understanding of the situation. It is worth adding that in August the Czech Prime Minister met with representatives of the Belarusian minority in the Czech Republic.

A breakthrough in the position of Prime Minister Babiš in relation to the situation in Belarus was brought by the Polish authorities' proposal that the opposition candidate Swiatlana Cichanouska should participate in the summit in Lublin organized by Poland on September 11, 2020. The Czech Prime Minister was the first V4 partner to refuse to meet with the candidate of the Belarusian opposition. He explained his approach by saying that he did not want to take hasty decisions that could turn out to be inconsistent with the EU position or could be used by Belarusian propaganda. The refusal to the invitation to meet with Cichanouska was criticized by representatives of the Czech opposition, including Alexander Vondra (ODS), who described it as a disgrace to the entire Czech Republic, and Markéta Pekarova Adamova (TOP 09), who called Prime Minister Babiš a coward.

The President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, and other presidents of the Visegrad Group countries, issued a statement on the situation in Belarus, on August 19, 2020 and before the European Council's meeting. Within, they called on the Belarusian authorities to open the way to resolve the conflict and respect human rights and

freedoms and declared their support for the organization of free presidential elections. The presidents of the V4 also called on foreign entities to refrain from actions undermining the independence and sovereignty of Belarus, however, they pointed to the role of the EU in establishing a dialogue between representatives of the Belarusian authorities and society. It is worth noting that President Zeman, apart from a joint statement by the V4 presidents, avoids making any statements about the situation in Belarus.

The Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tomáš Petříček (ČSSD), also spoke about the conflict in Belarus. Like Prime Minister Babiš, he emphasized that the EU should first develop appropriate strategies for action in the face of the situation. At the same time, he warned against any external intervention. On August 24, the Czech Government approved the creation of a fund in the amount of 10 million CZK to help Belarusians affected by the restrictions of the regime of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The amount, obtained from the funds of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, will be used to support civil society as well as legal and psychological assistance to people suffering repression as a result of participation in protests – including journalists.

The discrepancy in the Czech authorities' approach to the crisis in Belarus clearly shows the position of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. In a special resolution adopted on August 19, 2020, Members of the Chamber of Deputies condemned the brutal repression and the inadequacy of the Belarusian security services against Belarusian citizens, and expressed their solidarity with the repressed people while calling on the authorities to release political prisoners. At the same time, they rejected several drafts of detailed resolutions, e.g., on the non-recognition of the official results of the presidential elections published by the Belarusian State Election Commission and on the introduction of Czech sanctions against persons responsible for serious violations of human rights in Belarus. The deputies representing ANO, ČSSD, and KSČM who were present at the meeting, almost entirely voted against these resolutions.

Slovakia

Slovakia belongs to an informal coalition of states that supported a flexible EU policy towards Belarus. The growing repressive nature of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime has made Slovakia to increasingly oppose violations of human rights and democratic principles. As a small state, it started using its soft power by supporting the third sector. Slovak non-governmental organizations started cooperation with their counterparts from Belarus in the late 1990s, and actively supported the Belarusian opposition during the next elections.

It was similar after the presidential elections in August 2020. Under the influence of the repression that hit the Belarusian opposition, the Slovak Government took an official position on the events in Belarus. The Belarusian authorities have been called to end the violence and respect fundamental human rights immediately, as well as to fairly investigate and punish the perpetrators of the persecution. Calls were made for the immediate release of the detained participants of peaceful protests and establishing a dialogue with civil society, leading to a quick repetition of the presidential elections. The government has also announced the opening of borders and asylum for protesters, as well as scholarships for students expelled from Belarusian universities. The special role of the EU in solving the crisis in Belarus was emphasized. Slovakia's President Zuzana Čaputová also expressed full support for the government.

The attitude of the Belarusian ambassador to Slovakia, Ihar Laszczeni, also influenced the attitude of the Slovak authorities to the situation in Belarus. In a video published in mid-August on the Internet, this experienced diplomat and former advisor to President Lukashenka expressed his solidarity with the protesters in Belarus. The ambassador of Laszczenia said that "like all Belarusians" he was shocked by the news of torture and beatings in his state. He stressed that in Slovakia he represents "Belarus and the Belarusian people, which according to the Constitution are the only source of power". Slovak diplomacy took note of the fundamental statement of the Belarusian ambassador. Ivan Korčok (SaS), Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, described this position as bold and unambiguous. Laszczenia was the only Belarusian diplomat in the EU states who decided to take such a step. The Slovak authorities declared the possibility of granting him asylum. In addition, on September 9, the Slovak ambassador to Belarus, together with diplomats from some EU

states, began their duties in the apartment of the Nobel laureate and member of the opposition Coordination Council, Sviatlana Alekseevich. This is to prevent her from being detained and to show her public support.

Slovakia took part in the summit of the Visegrad Group states, which took place on September 11, 2020 in Lublin. During the press conference, the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Igor Matovič (OL'aNO) and other V4 leaders asked the Belarusian authorities to stop human rights violations and to release political prisoners without delay. The group's leaders discussed the need to initiate impartial proceedings against repressive people and called for dialogue between the Belarusian Government and representatives of Belarusian civil society. Thus, the political decisions of the summit largely coincided with the official position of the Slovak authorities. As part of supporting Belarusian citizens, the V4 leaders proposed an "economic plan", which would include, inter alia, cooperation between small and medium-sized enterprises, energy policy, IT sector, and infrastructure. Details of the plan are to be presented at the next European Council summit. At the meeting, there was also a proposal to launch a visa-free regime for Belarusians. It should be noted that during the Lublin summit, Prime Minister Matovič described Poland as the leader of the V4 in contact with Belarus.

Hungary

When analyzing Hungary's attitude to the events in Belarus, we should start with the visit made in Minsk by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Fidesz) a few weeks before the presidential elections. On June 5, 2020, the politician met with Alyaksandr Lukashenka. As it was emphasized in the press release published several hours before the event, the visit took place at the invitation of the President of Belarus. During the meeting, Orbán emphasized the need to deepen economic cooperation, which is to be achieved by the launch of another credit line by the Hungarian Exim Bank, in the amount of EUR 40 million (the value of the previous one exceeded EUR 60 million). During his visit to Minsk (capital of Belarus), the Hungarian Prime Minister assured that Hungary was involved in the Eastern Partnership, which, however, is not reflected in reality, especially when taking into account the Hungarian-Ukrainian relations. Orbán emphasized that Hungary is in favor of lifting the sanctions against Belarus, which, in his opinion, constitutes an obstacle to the normalization and building of mutual relations. Therefore, despite the sanctions, there is a practice of trading with subsidiaries of entities on the sanction lists.

It should be noted that since the beginning of the crisis in Belarus, the Hungarian authorities have refrained from commenting on anything related to Belarus. Hungary did not make an appeal to organize transparent presidential elections or end the violence against Belarusians, which is used by the secret services. In his speeches, the Hungarian Prime Minister speaks of supporting Poland's position. Importantly, there is no Hungarian position, which is a deliberate policy.

It is also worth mentioning the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó (Fidesz), who said that when considering the situation in Belarus, one should take into account the geopolitical location of this country – near Russia, by implication. It is cooperation with this country that hides behind Hungarian restraint. Engagement in Belarus could endanger Hungarian-Russian relations, which is not in Hungary's interest.

It should further be added that during the meeting of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin in Sochi (September 14), the President of Belarus, quoted by the website belta.by, was said to have said: "I once asked my friend Viktor Orbán about cooperation with other countries, especially with the EU because of its special position." The mention of Orbán's name during the meeting in Sochi, at a time so critical for the Belarusian regime, clearly defines the Hungarian position towards Lukashenka. The reports on Hungary's opposition to the meeting of the V4 prime ministers in Lublin (September 11) with Sviatlana Cichanouska have the same effect.

From Hungary's perspective, the pursuit of Hungarian interests in the region is possible only in such a constellation in which Lukashenka remains the president, and Russia has the ability to exert a strong influence on Poland's eastern neighbor. In a situation in which the regime survives, Hungary's position to do

business in Belarus will be strengthened in opposition to other EU countries, primarily Poland and Lithuania. In this way, the favor of the Russian President is also maintained.

Conclusions

The positions of the Visegrad Group countries on the presidential elections and post-election protests in Belarus are not uniform. The Prime Ministers of Slovakia and the Czech Republic called for dialogue between the authorities and the protesters and for the organization of new elections several times and in various forms. They also called for the end of violence and the punishment of the perpetrators of persecuting the opposition. The Hungarian Prime Minister approaches the Belarus crisis from a great distance. At the same time, it should be noted that in the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia there is a visible double track in their perspective on Belarus' crisis. On the one hand, the authorities of these countries condemn the escalation of violence and warn against external intervention in Belarus. On the other hand, there is a noticeable waiting for appropriate steps to be taken, first of all, by the EU, which would be involved in resolving the conflict through mediation mechanisms.