

Belarus Needs CSTO, CSTO needs Belarus

Six out of seven member states attended an unofficial summit meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Astana, Kazakhstan, on August 12-13. Isolated from the West and in the midst of an economic crisis, Belarus was one of the most enthusiastic summit participants. CSTO chair this year, Belarusian president used the floor as to draw attention to his immediate concerns: social unrest and the power of internet.

While other CSTO members were also concerned about violence in Afghanistan and US troop withdrawal plans, Alyaksandr Lukashenka brought the situation in North Africa and the Middle East into focus. Even though Tunis, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Egypt and Yemen are far from Belarus and far beyond the CSTO immediate sphere of interests, the protests in those countries hit close to home, and he stressed that an adequate CSTO response to anti-government protests is necessary.

The Belarusian leader believes social inequality, corruption, and political conflicts rather than political repression and authoritarianism as the primary sources of protests. The Belarusian side also thinks that outside tinkering has played a role. Drawing lessons from the protesters' use of internet and social networks (the case even in Belarus) Lukashenka called on CSTO members to strengthen their capabilities in cyber warfare and internet surveillance.

Today Lukashenka seems the most enthusiastic CSTO advocate. He is actively campaigning for increasing in the role of the CSTO and strengthening the Collective Rapid Response Forces. CSTO is the only military block in which the isolated Belarus takes part, and as a result the country takes its responsibilities

with utmost seriousness. As Lukashenka noted, Belarus “does not have a single CSTO document that is still not ratified”.

In contrast to Uzbekistan, whose President Islam Karimov didn't attend the summit as he was busy flirting with NATO and disappointed with CSTO, Belarus not only played a leadership role at the summit, but has devoted the front pages of its official newspapers and web sites to the meeting. Gone are the times when Minsk would take liberties and boycott CSTO meetings (as happened in 2009 after Russia's ban on Belarus' dairy products). Today CSTO is the only forum where Belarus is still welcome.

The organization's focus is on Central Asia, but Belarus fits right in, at least as far as the regimes of member states are concerned: in 2011 out of the seven CSTO members only Kyrgyzstan and Armenia were classified as “partly free” while the rest were considered “not free” by the Freedom House. All of CSTO members are also leaning toward Russia; not surprisingly, some Western analysts suggest CSTO could become an anti-NATO alliance.

Convenient for Belarus, CSTO has a right to offer expedient aid to member states, which includes sending “peacekeepers” to member-states territories in cases of anti-governmental protests. It can only do so when officially asked for help, which takes care of the situations in which such “help” could be unwelcome. Belarus' position on such interventions became clear last year when Lukashenka appealed for intervention in Kyrgyzstan to restore Kurmanbek Bakiyev to power.

Interestingly, among the priorities proposed by Belarus at the nonofficial summit was creating a legal framework for drafting a list of personae non gratae on the territories of CSTO countries. Denying visas to US and EU officials as well as international human rights advocates on a unilateral basis is clearly not enough for Belarus.

Belarus' activism in CSTO is also useful for Russia. Busy taking to the West and preparing for presidential elections, Moscow can safely leave CSTO diplomacy to beleaguered Minsk and avoid potential accusations of imperialism.

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