

The delicate strategic position of Belarus in the post-Soviet space

Belarus, a country of about ten million inhabitants over an area equal to about two thirds of Italy and whose territory is mainly flat, remains historically characterized by a propensity to act as a link and mediator between the Russian world and its western neighbors, in particular Poland. In fact, throughout its history, despite being a Slavic country of Orthodox tradition, Belarus has had intense contacts with Poland and Lithuania and has felt their cultural and linguistic influence until the 18th century, when it was annexed to the Russian empire and later to the Soviet Union. After the annexation, the cultural specificities of the country were generally neglected and assimilated to Russian culture and language. The use of Russian is predominant in urban areas while in the countryside Belarusian, a language that has Russian, Polish but also Lithuanian roots, result of a complex linguistic syncretism stratified over the centuries, still partly resists.

Indeed, this cultural stratification determines a certain tolerance and open-mindedness towards both Europe and Russia, to which most Belarusians feel very close, while retaining their own well-defined cultural specificity.

Belarus' failure, so far, in playing an intermediary role between Europe and Russia after the end of the Cold War, is essentially due to its serious economic degradation linked to the dismantling of the "Soviet market". The Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986 in neighboring Ukraine has aggravated the situation making Belarus even more dependent on foreign countries. This tragedy -that affected, more or less severely, a large part of Belarusian territory, in particular the southeastern province of Gomel- has forced the government to open up to foreign humanitarian aid to try to treat those who still suffer from its consequences - in particular children - through prolonged stays abroad.

Furthermore, the relative absence of the Western states -unable to develop courageous, attractive and mutually advantageous perspectives of cooperation with the countries that have just emerged from the Soviet experience- has weighed significantly in the political choice of Belarus. The implementation of important assistance programs such as the European Tacis, designed to help Eastern European countries in this transition, has proved to be insufficient.

Since 1994, without valid external support, Belarusian society * has preferred to support Lukashenko's project of rapprochement with Russia to govern the difficult transition process, within the framework of the Unified Economic Space, together with Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Lukashenko's repressive methods, generally more authoritarian than those of the neighboring states, though not substantially

different, have provoked strong international reactions and annoyed the Russian President Putin himself.

Il riavvicinamento tra Minsk e Mosca è stato soltanto la prima tappa di un processo che sembra proseguire in gran parte dell'ex Urss a prescindere da futuri sviluppi politici ed in mancanza di vere alternative poiché i negoziati con l'Unione Europea si rivelano spesso lunghi e tortuosi

In the absence of real alternatives and regardless of future political developments, the rapprochement between Minsk and Moscow represents the first stage of a process that seems to continue in much of the former USSR. Negotiations with the European Union are often long and tortuous and threaten to leave the countries east of Warsaw in a sort of limbo whose end is not easily predictable. This pushes the potential regional candidates for pre-accession to the EU (especially Ukraine) to wavering or "multi-vector" policies, as some politicians prefer to define them in order to hide their underlying inconsistency.

However, the Russia-Belarus union clashes with the various economic policies implemented in individual states. Lukashenko has always refused to initiate massive privatizations that would risk limiting his room for maneuver with regard to western entrepreneurs but also against the Russian oligarchs of the oil and gas sector, a real lever of power of Russian foreign policy toward neighboring states and not only.

In fact, market prices or preferential and "favorable" prices are used as a parameter to determine the intensity of political relations between Russia and the states of the "near foreign", as Russians pompously define the countries of the former USSR over which Moscow intends to exert some form of influence, as *primus inter pares*.

Despite the crisis, Belarus remains one of the leading industrial centers of the former USSR, in particular as regards the electrical engineering industry. This allows Lukashenko and the Belarusian economic lobbies behind him to avoid finding themselves in a systematically weak position in front of the Kremlin. This strategy of rapprochement with Moscow and the use in politics and economics of a nostalgic old-Soviet ideology characterized by an accentuated gradualism in economic reforms severely limits the free market and foreign investments, subjecting them to the strong control of state bureaucracy. This has prevented the shock of an economic transition to capitalism as it occurred in other countries of the area and the formation of any pocket of unemployment and, therefore, of social unease.

This has granted Lukashenko the consent of the electorate that is nostalgic of the former USSR's social security, in particular that of pensioners and of the population

of backward rural areas, that he has skillfully combined with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church and of the directors of state-owned companies.

With his tireless political and ideological activism, Lukashenko reiterates the concept, dear to him, that a strong and responsible policy connected with social security is preferable to abstract values such as democracy. Corporate and collectivistic values, presented as typically Slavic Orthodox, are explicitly opposed to individualistic Western ones. The unity of the people, the gradual economic growth in respect of social equality and the exaltation of Orthodox spirituality all side up against Western materialism. The care of local traditions and the continuity and specificity of Belarusian culture represents the spiritual rooting of the population to the land and, above all, the protection of agriculture. This concern is mainly economic, given the social importance of the now archaic agricultural sector - organized in state owned kolkhoz- that a fierce foreign competition with high production capacities and quality standards would inevitably put in serious difficulties, if not completely wipe out, with easily imaginable, serious social consequences.

The basis for this difficult rapprochement between Russia and Belarus is, therefore, primarily economic and military. This new cooperation has fostered close collaboration between the Defense Staffs of the two countries, culminating in the joint management of the Baranovichi military base for the surveillance of NATO activities, and has allowed the re-launch of the military industry of the two countries. The intense collaboration of the two armies has also allowed to put a temporary brake on the enlargement of NATO and to create a sort of traditional defense wall for the Russian Federation. In the eyes of the Russians, the progressive enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty in Europe has taken the character of a real encirclement with the entry in 2004 of Bulgaria and Romania in NATO. Besides Bulgaria being a country sharing common Slavic roots and traditionally friendly towards the great neighbor that is now politically oriented towards the West, both states overlook the Black Sea an area of strategic importance for the transit of oil from Russia and from the increasingly important region of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to Western Europe.

In addition, Belarus has multiplied trade agreements with Russian companies and regions, generalizing, where necessary, exchange in kind in particular regarding raw materials that Belarus substantially lacks.

In the medium period, this element may allow Belarus to become the "assembly workshop" of the former USSR, as before 1991, in advanced technological sectors such as electrical engineering, which represents the greatest development

opportunity in an economic segment characterized by strong international competition.

This proves that the Russian-Belarusian rapprochement rests more on a solid economic, strategic and historical synergy than on the grounds of the common "Slavic brotherhood" presented by Belarusian media. Putin, certainly, would prefer negotiating with Minsk through a not so riotous and more "presentable" international leader, less independent in his choices in foreign policy and less ambitious on the post-Soviet scene. Above all, he would prefer dealing with someone more willing to accept pressure from the Russian "new state capitalists" that peek at the large industries of the Belarusian republic to revive synergistically the Russian industrial and technological potential. In fact, following the 2005 Kyoto agreements, also ratified by the Russian Federation, it still has some growth potential at its disposal compared to 1990, the year chosen as the reference parameter, which could ease its dependence on the export of raw materials.

Moreover, in spite of its apparent monolithic power, the internal struggles within the Belarusian presidential administration seem to point to the Kremlin's attempt to insert its pawns to support the clan of the "reformers", pro privatization and close to the former Russian KGB. Privatizations would ultimately benefit the men of power at the head of the large state-owned enterprises close to Putin.

This group seems to oppose the clan of the "tough guys" gathered around Lukashenko. This group wants to maintain a highly centralized power in order to preserve the dependence of its citizens on the State and thus avoid unwittingly laying the foundations for the creation of new centers of economic and political power independent or, to some extent opposed, to government authorities. As is well known, a strong growth of the private sector can lead to the creation of economic interests divergent from those of the central government.

Despite the growing tensions, Putin hesitates to embark on a showdown with Lukashenko whose regime shows obvious signs of fatigue but still allows Russia to supply the West of hydrocarbons by circumventing and putting pressure on Ukraine, increasingly oriented to the West. Hence, the great blackmail potential of Belarus and the ambiguous "union" policy pursued for several years by the two countries, albeit with many distinctions and conditions on the part of Lukashenko. Entering unconditionally into political and economic structures that would severely reduce its possibility of autonomy and fundamental strategic value would inevitably degrade Belarus to the status of a mere Russian province.

The "union" policy therefore changes according to the relations between the leaders in power in Minsk and Moscow and to the necessary tradeoff between geopolitical advantages and economic disadvantages, in particular for Russia. A union between the two countries would necessarily entail huge costs for Russia that would have to bear the economic restructuring of a rather poor country. Obviously, this would not fail to create internal tensions for the wealthier partner, whoever it might be, that would have to finance it or provide services. This happens in the case of Russia and Gazprom which, though a highly nationalized company, does not necessarily share the long-term strategic objectives of the central government that does not sufficiently take into account the criteria of economic profitability on which the company is based.

While Gazprom is interested in supplying as much gas as possible to Belarus at almost market prices the Russian government is interested in supplying it at a lower cost in order to keep the neighboring country in its strategic orbit and, above all, to strengthen its strategic anti-NATO role. All the more so, at a time when the deployment of American missiles in Poland and the related radar listening stations in the Czech Republic seems to be near.

Belarus' strategic value for the Russian government will increase in direct proportion to NATO's potential military threat against the Russian Federation. It would obviously increase in the event of an upcoming accession of Ukraine to the multinational military alliance that would most likely definitively compromise the existence of the Treaty on the limitation of conventional forces in Europe (CFE), which Russia has already unilaterally declared suspended in 2007. This growing strategic value of Belarus will not fail to have positive effects for Lukashenko in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

Cooperation between the two partners rests on solid foundations, which have given rise to many forms of integration and complementarity between regions and businesses. Lukashenko has re-launched a dynamic that he no longer fully masters. Though differently than in the Soviet past, many Belarusian companies have regained their traditional place within the post-Soviet space -still deeply involved in a disintegration-re-aggregation process- and, thanks to the customs union, continue to take advantage of the large Russian market as an outlet for their products that would not find a market elsewhere.

What will happen in the future?

Now that we are beginning to reflect critically on the transition model to capitalism promoted in the East after 1989, the generalized privatization process, which would

greatly strengthen the weight of Russian investors in the energy sector, raises some important strategic and social problems. How will this orientation evolve from now on? With, without or despite Lukashenko?

Over the next few years, will the EU somehow integrate and manage Lukashenko in the context of its proximity policy (managed by former Austrian Foreign Minister, now Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero Waldner)? Alternatively, will he prove to be an insurmountable obstacle for a European Union in which the rule of law, market economy and the respect of human rights are a precondition and, therefore, unavoidable elements of legal civilization?

Lukashenko, in the context of his accentuated patriarchal conception of the State, appears reluctant to allow the birth of a State subject to the rule of law within his country. In the near future, this is the great question for an EU interested in creating an area of prosperity (or at least free of misery and social uncertainty) and assuring security on its borders, in which Poland and Lithuania are preparing to constitute an important regional factor of economic and political integration.

As historical annotation, we can observe that while in Western Europe, thanks to the common belonging to the Union, disagreements and "hereditary enmities" seem to have been overcome, in Eastern Europe they still represent a reality, only shortly "hibernated" and repressed during the communist period. This is evident in the long-standing Russian-Polish and Russian-Latvian discord or the case of Belarus itself. Poland and Lithuania intend to play the role of unyielding political interlocutors towards Moscow in the name of the Western values of freedom and democracy but also because of ancestral and apparently irrational sectarian or geopolitical rivalries and never dormant grudges. For this reason, historically, this area has never ceased to be a matter of political contention between nations.

At the international level, both Poland and Lithuania enjoy US support in their regional policy, at the center of which Belarus is currently located, as it fits perfectly into a sort of renewed strategic US "containment" in an anti-Russian function. However, by establishing democracy and market economy in the largest number of countries governed authoritatively in important strategic areas, the so-called "rogue states", the US also aim at wearying the European Union. In fact, an excessive territorial enlargement could weaken internal cohesion and, consequently, the political effectiveness and international incisiveness of the EU.

Thus, the US intend to limit as much as possible Russia's rebirth, even if only in the role of regional power, through the erosion of its area of influence and its energy isolation from western markets.

The idea that does not find the European Union members in tune with Washington, in particular the governments of Rome, Paris and Berlin. The latter, in particular, has strengthened its traditional ties of collaboration with the Russian Federation, which generally consist in the exchange of German high-tech and productive investments - destined to the modernization of the Russian economy in transition- for Russia's supply of raw materials and political support in the international arena. These European states are well aware of the fact that the isolation and, hence, the instability of Russia represents a serious danger for the political stability of Europe and that energy imports from the Russian Federation are now indispensable for the energy and economic security of the European Union. Furthermore, a possible political and military collaboration between the EU and the Russian Federation would allow a better management of international crises and counter balance the excessive military power of the US.

All in all, Belarus is now at the crossroads of a "civilization fault line" between the West and Russia and at the center of a constellation of very varied and diverse, if not openly contrasting, regional and international interests, where past and present overlap seamlessly. Only strong external pressures connected to the modification of the international situation, economic growth and a gradual generational turnover will change the current state of affairs in Belarus.