

Borrell: "Lukashenko is like Maduro. We don't recognize him, but we have to treat him."

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Body

"Yes, mister Lavrov? This is mister Borrell." The interview, conducted on Thursday during a break of the Quo vadis Europe course he has been leading for 20 years at the Menéndez Pelayo International University, in the quiet paradise of the Magdalena Palace in Santander, ends as planned when the Russian Foreign Minister calls him to talk about Belarus. Josep Borrell (The people of Segur, 73), European High Representative for Foreign Affairs, tanned in a thousand battles, will chat with him in a hall of the palace trying to convince him that this time it is not like the Fiasco of Ukraine: now the EU does not want to fight geostrategic control with Russia, only promote democracy and help Belarusians who demand freedom. The EU's foreign minister has spent the whole summer putting out fires. And he still has a lot of left.

Question. How far will the EU go to get Alexandr Lukashenko to leave power peacefully?

Response. The case of Belarus is not comparable to that of Ukraine. There was a tension between the European vocation and that of partnering with Russia, the protesters carried European flags. It had a geopolitical dimension. Belarusians aren't arguing now whether Mom or Dad. They simply call for a civil rights and liberties regime. There are no European flags in the demonstrations. And the EU also does not intend to turn Belarus into a second Ukraine. We need to push for political reform but avoid appearing as a distorting factor that is how we might be perceived on the Russian side. This tension between Europe and Russia was put to rest, with violence and with a disintegration of Ukrainian territory that still lasts. Today's problem for Belarusians is not to choose between Russia and Europe, it is to achieve freedom and democracy, which are core values of the European Union and which we will therefore support.

Q. Is it not in the EU's interest that Belarus does not fall into Vladimir Putin's hands?

A. We are especially interested in Belarusians being able to live in a regime of political freedoms, and have good relations with our entire neighborhood. A very complicated neighborhood, as has been demonstrated this summer. From the Sahel to the Middle East, through Libya, Turkey, Iran and now Belarus, our entire neighborhood is conflicted. And EU has no magic wands. We have financial resources, we have mobilized 50 million euros to help Belarusian society, we have political influence, but Belarus should not be a second Ukraine.

Q. There are no European flags, but there is a certain desire for Westernization, of democratization in Belarus. Can it happen as in Ukraine, that this desire for openness ends upside down, in greater control of Putin in that area?

A. It is also the right thing to avoid. That's why we're in touch with Russia. The President of the Council spoke with President Putin and I with Minister Lavrov to avoid misunderstandings and for decisions to be taken on the Russian side that could destabilize the situation. As early as 2010 we said that these choices were false, and Lukashenko responded with the same violence to the protesters. In 2006 we already established sanctions against Lukashenko himself and 230 perpetrators. Then he made a timid liberalizing move, let go of a few political prisoners, we wanted to believe it was a good sign, and we lifted all the sanctions. It's clear that now we'll have to put them back on.

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Q. For the EU, does Lukashenko have to fall?

A. We do not recognize you as a legitimate president. We don't recognize Nicolas Maduro either. From this point of view Maduro and Lukashenko are in exactly the same situation. We do not recognize that they have been legitimately elected. However, whether we like it or not, they control the government and we have to keep dealing with them, despite not recognizing their democratic legitimacy. The aim is for Belarusians to have the opportunity to express themselves freely. That is what the European Council decided.

Q. What should Europe have with Russia, which wants to take up more and more space?

A. The relationship with Russia is as complex as the relationship with China. He's a polyhedron with a lot of faces. With Russia, on the one hand we sanction it but on the other we have an energy dependence that for some countries is very strong. It doesn't look the same with Russia if you're Lithuanian or Portuguese. Russia is an actor in international politics, eager to re-play a power role, not the only one who feels the old imperial temptation. But, whether we like it or not, there are many problems that we have to deal with Russia to try to solve them, from the Arctic to Syria.

Q. Are you concerned about the possible poisoning of the opponent Alexei Navalni?

A. Of course we are concerned, and we are also concerned. A plane is taking him to a German hospital. These things remind us of events that have already worried us. But it's still about to be verified.

Q. Why is it so hard to consolidate democracy in Russia?

A. Not just in Russia. Democracy is very unconsolidated in many countries around the world. In others there is worrying democratic fatigue. We Europeans are unaware of the enormous luck we have of living in the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social solidarity in the world.

Q. Does Putin respect the EU?

A. Are you asking me about Putin or Trump? When Putin acts as he acts, first in Syria and then in Libya, and earlier in Ukraine, he does so using his military potential and his willingness to act with a regional hegemonic power. It would be easier for him if the European Union did not exist. Then I would only have to deal with countries one by one, and some would have little to say. Precisely to deal with risks and threats at our borders, the European Union is increasingly right to be.

Q. France wants to approach Russia.

A. France has a more aperturistic position with Russia, right. But Germany too, is well aware that Russia is a market and an energy supplier. The situation in Poland and the border countries formerly dominated by the Soviet Union, particularly the Baltics, is different. The problem we have in Europe in making a common foreign policy is that we do not share the same view of what our threats are. Because we don't have the same story. And that's why our worldview is different. I give an example: Poles believe that they owe their freedom to the United States and the Pope. And they're right. But I as a Spaniard think that I have endured the Franco dictatorship largely because of the support of the United States and the Vatican. Foreign policy is the projection of the rest of the world of your historical identity.

Q. Does the recovery fund save the EU?

A. The virus has had a great catalyst effect of European integration. Without it we would continue to say that you cannot go together to financial markets, that debt-financed transfers cannot be given. Once again it is proven that the EU is built in crises. Or according to the saying, they forcibly hang.

Q. Can the pandemic have saved the EU?

A. You've given it a new look. At the beginning of the pandemic, Europe had a very bad image. We saw Italians burning European flags. And a save who can, with the Germans who didn't want to sell their stocks of sanitary equipment to Italy and Russian and Chinese planes landing in Milan with the flags displayed saying here we are, that we are the good ones. At first the picture was not brilliant. But then there was a joint, difficult-to-make response, which broke molds. We must be satisfied. Europeans now see Europe mobilising by organizing solidarity in a deeper way.

Q. Is Spain prepared to spend that money well?

A. It's not going to be easy to execute those billions. Because transfers don't go unconditionally. But there will be no men in black in the troika's sense, because there will be no macroeconomic adjustments, but there will be logic conditionality for these resources to be used for the purposes to which it is intended, developing the climate response, the ecological transition, the digitization of the economy. No men in black, no blank checks. It is logical that there is concern about the implementation of this ambitious plan.

Q. Is there concern about Spain's political situation, particularly with an unprecedented coalition in Europe?

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A. Not particularly. Look, I was a minister of public works, it was my turn to manage a lot of the structural funds. That was easier because the structural funds were basically public works infrastructures that we knew how to build. But we were the ones who managed the structural funds the best, and that was a barrage of money. Now it's more difficult, because a waiter who has run out of work on the Costa del Sol is not just going to tell him that his future will be green and digital. He'll say, "OK, but what about my present?" In the short term there is a problem of rent maintenance and business capitalization, which is a more micro job. This will require great administrative effectiveness for all countries.

Q. If Donald Trump wins the election, we're heading into a world of trade warfare between two great superpowers, with China. How is the EU placed there?

A. The EU has to define its own international policy and not be pressured into that Chinese American confrontation that is going to mark this century. Right now, the US has lost a vote in the Security Council because it has not voted on its proposals on the arms embargo on Iran countries such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom. But it's not just Trump, there's a bottom current in American society that's the relationship with China. Surely both Americans and we have sinned from a certain naivety and now we want to level the playing field. The thing is, we do in one more way, let's say, negotiated.

Q. Does Europe have to take more care of its own defense without always relying on the US?

A. This is what is called European strategic autonomy, which does not mean that we are leaving NATO. The euro gives us some European strategic autonomy, without the euro Spain would not have been able to leave Iraq, poor peseta if we had had it. But we don't have it yet on defence, as demonstrated in Libya. We must build it in a complementary way to that which gives us NATO membership. Developing a European security and defence policy is one of the tasks I have to do, knowing that not all European countries see it the same way and not everyone has the same interest in it.

Q. Can the situation in Libya lead to an immigration crisis like Syria's?

A. It's not Libya, it's the immigration pressure coming from the Sahel. On Syria we have agreements with Turkey discussed and debatable, but we are not giving money to the Turkish government, we are giving money to refugees in Turkey, which is 3.7 million people, the largest mass of refugees that any country hosts.

Q. Isn't it a outsourcing of aProblem?

A. The alternative is for European societies to decide to accept that these 3.7 million exiles come and settle in Europe. Do you want it? Well, if you don't want to find a workaround. Making a policy requires defining goals according to your capabilities. Putting your head in the sky by no longer having your feet on the ground doesn't do much good.

Q. Is there no way to prevent people from dying on the sea off Europe?

A. Yes, but this requires regulating immigration and asylum at European level, and for too long the EU has been unable to do so. Immigration cannot be a deregulated phenomenon, which instills fear in societies, because it is easily manipulable. But Europe needs immigration. Some European countries do not want to recognize it, they prefer to age than mix, like the Japanese, by the way. Others are more open. But we all need to make up for our demographic bump with immigration. Ah, and let's call things by name: the war in Syria did not send migrants, he commanded exiles, as the Spanish Civil War sent exiles to the French beaches, exactly the same.

Q. Is there a risk of armed shock between Turkey and Greece?

A. It's a very tense situation. In the Council of Foreign Ministers that we had this summer, which I spent with a phone in each ear, the three most commonly used words were solidarity with Greece and Cyprus; de-escalated, because there are many warships maneuvering in the same area and the other day there was an accidental clash between a Greek ship and another Turkish that tomorrow may be something else; negotiation. With Turkey things have gone from bad to worse, we need to rebuild the relationship and that is only done by negotiating.

Q. Will there be sanctions against Turkey?

A. The Council asked me to submit a panoply of possible sanctions. There have already been some managers of companies that do drilling. If things don't go better, we'll have to act, but we're trying to avoid it. My job is not to put firewood but to avoid increased tensions.

Q. It welcomed the Israel-United Arab Emirates agreement but some partners believe it may be a stab in the Palestinian cause.

A. Depends. We have a good relationship with Israel, with the Emirates, with the Palestinians. Everything has advantages and disadvantages. This agreement has served at least to prevent the announced annexation of the

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Jordan Valley that would have been a point of serious disregard with Israel during the summer. What we have said clearly from the EU is that the peace plan presented by Jared Kushner is not a good basis for negotiation.

Q. He's been in office for nine months. Is it frustrating to have to agree everything unanimously?

A. I came to the post convinced that the rule of unanimity had to be abandoned and now I am more than ever. But I am aware that to change unanimity... unanimity is needed, and such a thing does not exist, everyone wants to keep the right to veto. It's an exciting charge where you have to be very patient, know it's a marathon. I thank life for having the opportunity to finish my political career in such a demanding position.

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