



Compounded Crisis in Belarus: Drivers, Dynamics and Possible Outcomes?

By Pal Dunay and Graeme P. Herd

Context to the Crisis

Until 2014, Belarus had embraced its Soviet legacy identity. After the Russian annexation of Crimea and its subsequent support for the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, elite discourse in Minsk favored a geopolitical shift away from Moscow and emphasized Belarus' independent statehood and strategic autonomy. Elites tolerated and even co-opted a more nationalist agenda (including re-interpretations of history and the increased visibility of nationalist symbols) and a clearer delineation emerged between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian public groups in Belarus, inspired also in part by the Ukrainian reform process, though this was not clearly reflected in institutional politics. Belarusian national identity lacks the deeper anti-Russian sentiment inherent in that of Ukraine.

Russia responded by enhancing its profile in Belarus through increased *Russkiy Mir* and *Rossotrunichestvo* activities to positively shape public opinion, even as it distanced itself from Lukashenka. In the last few years, Russia more publicly challenged Lukashenka to make good on his pledges by signing and implementing the thirty-one roadmaps for Union State integration. The Wagner debacle of July 29 further strained relations, not least as President Alyksandr Lukashenka instrumentalized the arrests to suggest that Russia was the greatest threat to Belarusian sovereignty and only he could defend its statehood.

The current political crisis can also be attributed to a number of accumulating internal proximate factors, which eroded support for an incumbent president seeking a sixth five-year term after twenty-six years in power: the mismanagement of COVID-19 responses; a lost economic decade in which recovery shackled the IT sector and entrepreneurship and initiated the 2017 “parasite tax” protests; the rise of “autocrat fatigue”; a generational change with those under forty years old not identifying with Lukashenka’s Soviet era models and mentality; and a generalized resistance to the idea that the election could be rigged as usual. The existing social contract was at breaking point.

Structural Economic Dependence of Belarus?

Belarus attempts to reduce its heavy dependence on Russia, its single most important economic relationship, but in reality there are no other viable alternatives. Close to sixty per cent of Belarus imports come from Russia, which also provides the majority of its loans. As of the end of 2018, \$7.6 billion of Belarus debt was Russian. When the demonstrations started, Russia provided debt relief worth \$1 billion; this was increased to a total of \$1.5 billion following the Sochi meeting between Presidents Lukashenka and Putin on September 14, 2020.

Chinese investment concentrates in the so-called Great Stone (China-Belarus) industrial park that began as a \$2 billion venture and has significantly grown, facilitated by large-scale tax reductions, tax-breaks, and tax-exemptions. Belarus's primary economic importance is associated with the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) rail transit routes, which run through Belarus to the Duisburg Intermodal Terminal. In 2018, the value of China's exports were seven times less than Russia's, though China's trade, investments, and loans are not characterized by political conditionality. Indeed, China provides Belarus loans even when Moscow uses oil supply to put Minsk under pressure; for instance, China opened a RMB 3.5 billion (approximately \$500 million) credit line in December 2019.

The Belarus IT sector was one of the fastest growing sectors in Belarus: its share of GDP was 5.5% in 2019 and this was expected to double by 2023. It is integrated into the EU economy and its relative autonomy in Belarus generates some political risk. Over 2,500 founders, investors, and employees of Belarusian IT companies signed an open letter calling on the authorities to end the violence. Software development specialists and IT communication service providers with portable skills will now look to relocate to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic, among other states, who stand ready to simplify conditions and assist and support their integration.

What of the Opposition?

Before the presidential election, a number of candidates who opposed President Lukashenka and were pro-Russian were imprisoned or fled the country. Parties and civil society organizations, such as the Belarusian Popular Front, the Belarusian Green Party, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, the Belarusian Christian Democratic Party, the Movement for Freedom, and the citizens' initiative "Our House" published "Our Values," a "Programme of the Belarusian opposition." It advocated cutting ties with Russia, leaving the Union State, the Eurasian Union, the customs union, the CSTO, and placing a ban on Russian takeover of Belarusian companies. It also favored NATO and EU integration, banning Russian television, closing the borders to Russia, and opening them to the West. These parties were liberal and marginal parties and groups created in the 1990s. Their existence provided the impression of a pluralist polity and their narrative a convenient target against which Lukashenka could publicly rail.

Belarusians protested electoral fraud. The opposition to Lukashenka crafts clear and easily understood messages. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya noted, "The revolution in Belarus is not a geopolitical revolution. It is neither an anti-Russian nor a pro-Russian revolution. It is neither anti-EU nor pro-EU. It is a democratic revolution. The demand of Belarusians is simple: a free and fair election." In other words, the opposition now appears to suggest that Belarusian geopolitical orientation would remain largely unchanged, but the regime (leadership and rules and norms) would be subject to a "democratic revolution" through free and fair elections. The opposition is self-organized and runs a highly visible non-violent and feminized campaign, with a strong social media presence (including "Cyber Partisans," a group of anti-government hackers), a civic national identity, and geographical spread throughout Belarus. While mobilization potential is greatest in Minsk, smaller protests have occurred in Homel, Vitsiebsk, Mahiliou and Hrodna, as well as in regional towns including Valkavysk, Salihorsk, Lida, Orsha, and Baranavichy.

Opposition efforts have been met with massive repression and physical violence. Lukashenka refuses to enter into dialogue and uses abduction, arbitrary detention, threatens murder, deportation (Coordination Council leaders) and demonizes peaceful protestors. Approximately 13,000 demonstrators have been arrested since August 9, 2020, a huge number for a country with a population of 9.5 million.

Understanding Russia's Approach?

After the announcement of President Lukashenka's electoral victory on August 9, 2020 and subsequent demonstrations against electoral fraud, Russia could increase the price for its support and assistance to the significantly weakened regime. While Russia could not fully control Lukashenka as president, an unregulated, unexpected, and sudden meltdown was even less tolerable, given Moscow would have even fewer levers of influence. Indeed, at a Russia-Belarus forum being held in Moscow on September 29, 2020, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel-General Andrei Kartapolov stated, "The Russian Armed Forces, faithful to their allied obligations, will carry out all the tasks set to defend the interests of our peoples and ensure the security of the Union State [between Belarus and Russia] under all circumstances."

Although President Putin himself announced that if the situation in Belarus gets "out of control" it would order a "law enforcement reserve force" to intervene, President Putin's clear preference is for a "stable managed transition." This involves coercing Lukashenka into implementing the Union State agreement and using the façade of constitutional reform and rigged elections to coopt opposition into supporting a "less toxic" pro-Moscow successor to Lukashenka. Russia could then exert "horizontal influence" over Belarus through loyal parties, officials, and politicians; a single currency with the Russian Central Bank running monetary policy; a KGB-FSB merger; extension of free leases on existing military bases (for example, Hantsavichy and Vileyka); and by agreeing to the creation of new bases and deployments. This process could take six months to two years. Russia calculates that Lukashenka has no alternative to Russian support as he cannot end the protests and lacks a public mandate to rule. He cannot reconstitute a multi-vector foreign policy and has no face-saving off-ramp save exile in Moscow with family, having rejected the "honorary retirement" position of head of legislative body of the State Union. Moscow also recognizes Western influence in Belarus is weak (symbolic sanctions and lack of EU consensus at twenty-seven, given the role of Cyprus) and that a managed, stable transition aligns EU and Russian interests.

Lukashenka is determined to remain President ("Plan L"). He realizes the more he gives Russia, the more expendable he becomes. He has the ability and political will, as he has demonstrated, to purge, imprison, and eliminate potential successors. Lukashenka's "credit history" of habitual behavior is to meet Moscow's pressure with promises and delay, insisting on first constitutional reform, then fresh elections, but offering no timetable. Indeed, his surprise inauguration on September 23, 2020, at which understandably no external guests were invited, could signal that he believes there is no transition to manage. Putin loses leverage over Lukashenka when he references Belarus as Russia's "closest country" and Lukashenka as the "legitimate president." Other signals of support that strengthen Lukashenka include extending the *Slavyanskoe Bratstvo* (Slavic Brotherhood) 2020 military exercise to September 25, as well as the provision of the loan of RT media personnel and other advisors and consultants in an effort to shore up the regime. In addition, Lukashenka is adept at manipulating Putin's strategic psychosis regarding the threat of a "color revolution," the "Yanukovych syndrome" ("too little brutality, too late"); and the "first

Minsk, then Moscow” mantra, rendering Putin a hostage to the logic of his own rhetoric: if protestors are running a Western-backed color revolution, how can Lukashenka “bow to the street” and open a dialogue?

For Russia, risks abound. The opposition is unlikely to accept the “half measures” inherent in the Russian-managed transition. Integrating an educated, Slavic, Soviet mentality population is one proposition, but integrating a self-organizing society with a strong civic identity, democratic aspiration, and an awakened nationalist protest potential is quite another. Russia is keenly aware of the danger of becoming too deeply wedded to Lukashenka, thereby alienating the Belarus population. By definition, the successor to Lukashenka would be less dictatorial (no veto-wielding power) and of course pro-Russian. Viktor Babaryka, an imprisoned presidential candidate and former head of *Belgazprombank*, would be a likely contender. Whoever the successor, the risk would be that the new president becomes more autonomous over time, with Belarus acting less as a buffer, instead becoming more permeable as the gravitational pull of EU increases.

Regional Responses?

- **The EU Parliament** refused to accept Lukashenka as the legitimate president. On September 23, 2020, following the abrupt and secretive inauguration ceremony, which would allow Lukashenka to start his sixth presidential term on November 5, 2020, Germany announced that Lukashenka would not be recognized as a legitimate president, with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Czech Republic among other states following suit. On September 26, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron stated, “What is happening in Belarus is a crisis of power, an authoritarian power which fails to accept the logic of democracy and which clings by force. It is clear that Lukashenka must go.” EU states will now disengage with Lukashenka’s regime and shift focus to re-engaging Belarusian civil society over the long term, both across generations and in the regions, not just cities where the majority of activists live.
- **Ukraine** hosts Belarus citizens on its territory although it has closed its borders in response to the second COVID-19 wave. After ninety visa-free days, their status will have to be regulated. The crisis in Belarus brings into question whether the OSCE’s Minsk-group, which addresses the Donetsk-Luhansk conflict, should be physically located in Minsk once virtual meetings end. The core strategic issues for Ukraine are:
 - 1. How to avoid being manipulated?
 - 2. How to assess the effects of a likely Russian militarization of its northern border (in addition to its eastern and southern)?
- **Poland** plays an important largely symbolic role through hosting opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, providing an office in Warsaw and a welcome similar to official delegations. In addition, many activities aimed at integration of Belarusian students affected by repressions also under the Kalinowski Scholarship Program (coordinated by East European Studies of University of Warsaw) have been set up.

- **Lithuania** is of the view that positive democratic change is not a foregone conclusion and there is a perception that Russia can offer more to Belarus than the West, given limited western influence. They recognize “winter is coming” and that students will return to their studies and street demonstrations will get smaller.
- **Latvia** plays a smaller role than either Lithuania or Poland. Riga is of the view that the “genie is out of the bottle,” civil society has gained significant strength and there can be no return to the *status quo ante*. The opposition is not anti-Russian and hence cannot be challenged or criticized by Moscow. Latvia is also considering accepting Belarus refugees, if conditions become too unbearable.

Conclusions

The role of Minsk as mediator and Belarus as a stabilizing factor in former Soviet space is over. Belarus faces economic collapse, shares a border with the EU but has broken dialogue with the West, and is largely isolated. The ability and will of the Belarusian people to protest has been underestimated and a return to a pre-election status quo does not appear possible. Belarus’s compounded crisis threatens to further tarnish Russia’s image and reputation and the “democratic spark” or “virus” could create an unwelcome, from the Kremlin’s perspective, example to Russian civil society itself.

Change to authoritarian regimes and political systems are rarely triggered by peaceful demonstrations alone but, as in the case of Franco’s Spain, can be the result of a slower incremental liberalization process that prevents the regime’s sudden collapse. For such transformations to be sustainable, international support is a critical element. In the short term, Belarus may experience a change of leadership regime but politico-economic system changes and integration westwards is a long-term proposition.

A “democratic revolution,” if not economic liberalization, would cross Russia’s red lines: Belarus would no longer be a buffer and popular protest would have succeeded in enacting regime and system change. Such transformation would be accompanied by temporary economic contraction and instability. Furthermore, it is not clear when and under what conditions the change may occur. For the time being, President Lukashenka uses external fellow autocratic recognition of his presidency to legitimize his internally illegitimate and unpopular regime.

If there are obstacles to transition and then consolidation of democratization processes, what of the alternative scenarios? Short of direct Russian intervention, might “Plan L” therefore ultimately be adopted? “Plan L”—the restoration of the status quo ante at a degraded level—aligns Putin’s interests with that of Lukashenka, even if it alienates the population. Lukashenka has broken with the West, is Moscow-dependent, and is maintained as a tarnished autocratic president. As such, he will guarantee Belarus as a Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union member, fully embedded in Russia’s privileged sphere of influence. “Plan L” ensures Belarus functions as a strategic buffer with the West.

Alternatively, might a “Belarus 2020; Russia 2024” logic prevail in Moscow, leading to Russian “preventative occupation” and then “preventative annexation” of Belarus? Russian talk show hosts refer to the opposition as “terrorists” and leading security officials accuse the West of instigating a color revolution. Sergei Naryshkin, the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, stated, “Fighters for renewed Belarus are trained in Poland, Georgia, Ukraine and the

Baltic states with participation of instructors from the CIA and the Pentagon as well as U.S. non-governmental organizations affiliated with the [US] Department of State.” Such sentiments psychologically prepare public opinion for annexation and legitimizes this option.

Would coercive annexation in the name of “responsibility to protect” result in a paradoxical end-state: westward territorial expansion secures Russia’s position as a spoiler European pariah power, one that can more easily threaten to bridge the Suwalki gap and render the Baltic states indefensible, and, at the same time, protects Russia’s strategic autonomy in the face of creeping dependency on China’s capital, technology and markets?

This *MC Perspectives* was inspired by a “Belarus in Crisis” virtual on-line seminar, which was hosted by the GCMC on September 22, 2020. Around fifteen GCMC alumni from the region and invited academic analysts participated in this event.

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