





The Belarusian **CRISIS**

And the Influence of Russia

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The large-scale protests after the August 2020 presidential election in Belarus are proof that many Belarusians are not ready to accept the victory of incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko that was announced by the Central Election Commission. According to the official results, he won more than 80% of the votes. The situation was further aggravated by the unprecedented level of police violence against protesters who took to the streets to express their disagreement with the official election results. The Belarusian authorities relied on Russian support and accused the West of organizing protests with the aim of overthrowing the government. However, Lukashenko made similar accusations against Russia before the election protests. Why did the situation turn upside down? Let us consider the reasons.

Lukashenko has ruled the country for 26 years and is the longest-reigning leader of a European country (not counting monarchs). He was first elected in 1994, and reelected in 2001, 2006, 2010 and 2015. In 2004, he initiated a referendum that removed from the constitution a limit to the maximum number of terms the same person can hold the presidency. During his tenure, Lukashenko has repeatedly been accused of restricting civil rights and freedoms and usurping power. There were accusations of organizing political assassinations — several opponents of

A woman in a former Belarusian national flag reacts as opposition supporters gather during a rally to protest the official presidential election results.

Lukashenko disappeared without a trace in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Western countries, in particular the United States and members of the European Union, have on several occasions imposed sanctions against Lukashenko and a number of people close to him. He is often called “the last dictator of Europe” in the Western press.

The country’s relations with the West changed significantly after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the Crimea and Donbas, which began in 2014. Largely because Minsk has become an international platform for negotiations to resolve the situation in Donbas, Lukashenko has managed to establish contacts with the West and gradually have certain sanctions lifted. In 2020, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Minsk. For the first time in 12 years, the U.S. and Belarus agreed to exchange ambassadors. There have been major changes in domestic politics as well. Until 2014, the Belarusian state considered all Belarusian speakers to be oppositionists. Politically, Belarus was considered Russia’s closest ally.

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Everything changed in the spring of 2014. After the Russian attack on Ukraine, an active advertising campaign started in Belarus to popularize the Belarusian language, national traditions, ornaments and clothing. For example, for several years a “Vyshyvanka Day” has been held in Belarus. (The Vyshyvanka is the embroidered shirt in the Ukrainian and Belarusian national costumes. It is not part of the traditional Russian costume). In recent years, Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei and other high-ranking officials have often worn Vyshyvankas. This was meant to bring into the consciousness of Belarusians the origins of their country and its distinct culture compared to Russia’s. Perhaps Lukashenko understood that what happened in Crimea and Donbas, where the local population lived for many years within Russia’s de facto cultural space, could be repeated in his country.

Since 1994, when Lukashenko was first elected president, Russia’s influence in Belarus grew steadily, reaching a peak in 1999 when the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia was signed. According to its provisions, the two states should merge into one and be known as the Union State, with a common flag, coat of arms, currency, a single

army, parliament, council of ministers and other supranational authorities. Some believe that Lukashenko signed the agreement in the hopes of leading the Union State in the future. But it was not Lukashenko who became the successor to then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin, but the protégé of the Russian secret services, Vladimir Putin. After that, the desire of the Belarusian president to follow the path of integration diminished sharply. Over the more than 20 years of the Union State project, practically nothing outlined in the integration plan has been implemented. There are only a few formal institutions that are independent of the influence of the two states. For example, there is the position of the state secretary of the Union State, currently held by Grigory Rapota. However, neither the state media of Belarus nor Russia actively publicize his work.

The Russian side has consistently blamed Lukashenko for the lack of progress in implementing the provisions of the Union State treaty. Lukashenko, in turn, has spoken about the primacy of economic integration and demanded Russian energy resources at domestic Russian prices. Over the past 20 years, relations between Russia and Belarus have had their ups and downs. At the same time, no one has essentially questioned their allied character. Since 2018, Russia has become more and more insistent that Belarus transition to deeper integration and the creation of supranational authorities. Minsk, in turn, started talking about compensation for the shortfall in revenues of the Belarusian budget because of Russia’s oil taxes. Then-Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev responded with a choice: Deepen integration and count on benefits, or keep everything as it is and lose Russia’s financial and economic support.

During 2018-2019, Minsk and Moscow negotiated to deepen integration. According to media reports, talks covered the unified tax code, the foreign trade regime and the civil code, a unified accounting of property and similar social guarantees, almost unified banking supervision, a unified regulator of the oil, gas and electricity markets, and harmonized state regulation of industries. Many Western and Russian experts linked Russia’s pressure on Belarus with Putin’s desire to solve the problem of retaining power after 2024, when his next presidential term expires. It was assumed that Putin would become the president of the new united Russia-Belarus state. One way or another, Russia began firmly demanding that Lukashenko give up some of the power, transferring it to the supranational level and, in fact, consent to the gradual loss of his country’s sovereignty. This did not suit Lukashenko, and relations between the two countries reached unprecedented levels of tension. In 2019, probably at the personal request of Lukashenko, Russian Ambassador to Belarus Mikhail Babich was recalled. At the end of 2019, negotiations on deepening the integration of Belarus and Russia were frozen. In 2020, Putin resolved the issue of reelection by amending Russia’s constitution and resetting his presidential terms. After that, Russia relented for a while, easing the pressure on Belarus. However, it looks like it was just a tactical retreat.

In 2020, a presidential campaign began in Belarus that initially did not threaten Lukashenko, who held all levers



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko

of influence. Nevertheless, the campaign from the very start developed differently from the expected scenario. Previously, Lukashenko's competitors were the so-called systemic pro-Western oppositionists, who called for a sharp break in relations with Russia, the return of the Belarusian language to the status of sole state language and other initiatives. These oppositionists did not enjoy wide support and it was easy to tie them to the West, as Lukashenko had repeatedly done before. At the beginning of 2020, Sergei Tikhanovsky, the creator of the popular "Country for Life" YouTube blog, Viktor Babariko, the head of the Russian-capitalized bank Belgazprombank, and former Deputy Foreign Minister Valery Tsepkalo unexpectedly announced plans to run for president. All three were nonsystemic oppositionists. They were speaking Russian and did not demand the severing of ties with Russia. Instead, Tikhanovsky, Babariko and Tsepkalo focused on the country's fatigue from Lukashenko and the need for better economic management. These oppositionists excited Belarusians and revived a long extinct political life in Belarus.

By bringing criminal charges and arresting candidates, and by denying their admission on the ballot, Belarusian authorities managed to neutralize the competition. Sergei Tikhanovsky and Viktor Babariko were imprisoned on charges of violation of public order and money laundering, respectively. Tsepkalo, like Tikhanovsky and Babariko, was denied registration as a candidate. Fearing persecution, he left the country. As a kind of political lightning rod, authorities registered as a presidential candidate Tikhanovsky's wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who is not a professional

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politician. Most likely, the Belarusian authorities soon regretted that decision. Despite a short election campaign, she managed to gather all opposition forces around her and became the symbol of changes yet to come. After the election, Tikhanovskaya, like many Belarusians, did not recognize Lukashenko's victory. Large-scale protests began across the country. In addition to rallies, Belarusians staged economic protests, such as strikes, boycotts of goods produced at state-owned enterprises, and nonpayment of utilities and fines. As a result, a large-scale political crisis broke out in the country, which affected the economy. Belarus' gold and foreign exchange reserves fell in August 2020 by almost \$1.4 billion. The national currency depreciated sharply. In addition, many local information technology companies either moved to other countries or indicated they were considering that possibility.

Russian journalists interview Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, left, in Minsk in September 2020.



Media Influence

A significant percentage of Belarusians feel that they are part of the Russian cultural space. The older generation watches Russian TV channels, while many people who are middle-age are guided by Russian and pro-Russian internet media and social networks such as Vk.com (Vkontakte.ru) and Classmates (Ok.ru). At the same time, young people use the Russian Telegram messenger for communication. It has become especially popular and is used as a news aggregator and for the coordination of protests, leading some in the media to declare the situation in Belarus the world's first "Telegram revolution." Telegram is a project of Russian executive Pavel Durov, who holds oppositional views and left Russia a few years ago. Telegram messenger has continued functioning in Belarus despite internet lockdowns blamed on the government.

There are claims that the protests in Belarus are fueled and coordinated by pro-Western Telegram channels, such as Nexta. That may be so. However, in early 2020 dozens of anonymous Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels took tough stances toward Lukashenko. Popular channels such as Belorussian-Russian Dialogue, Tricotage and Bulba of Thrones disseminated messages such as "Lukashenko's regime is doomed" and actually called for a change of power in Belarus. There are reports that these channels are administered from Russian territory and possibly connected to the Kremlin. Lukashenko has accused Russians of spreading fake news about him by using Telegram. Additionally, criticism of Lukashenko by both traditional and new Russian media increased in early 2020 and continued until Election Day. For example, in May 2020 the

state-owned Channel One Russia, available in Belarus, aired a report that Belarus significantly underestimated the number of COVID-19 deaths. After the report, the film crew was stripped of its accreditation and expelled from Belarus. Lukashenko has repeatedly called COVID-19 "Corona psychosis" and refused to introduce quarantines, meaning the TV report was an attack against him personally.

However, the rhetoric of the Russian media has changed dramatically since then. Putin was one of the first to congratulate Lukashenko on his electoral victory. After that, Russian channels began accusing the Belarusian protesters of radical nationalism and fascism, while accusing the West of organizing protests. Lukashenko invited employees of the Russian TV channel Russia Today to work in Belarus, replacing a number of local TV presenters who resigned in protest of state policies. The same pro-Russian Telegram channels, which earlier called for Lukashenko's overthrow, now do not support the protesters and advocate unification with Russia as the only way out of the political crisis.

Russia's Strategy

So why did Russia provoke protests in Belarus? Obviously, not for the victory of an opposition candidate or the holding of fair democratic elections in the country. And the point is not that Russia could not have its own candidate in the elections. If desired, a pro-Russian politician could be found. Moreover, taking into account Russia's influence in the media sphere, a victorious Russian-backed candidate is possible. However, Russia has practically no democratic countries as



A woman and her child in Minsk, Belarus, react during a government crackdown on a protest supporting the Coordination Council, which was created to facilitate talks with President Alexander Lukashenko on a transition of power.

allies. Authentic democratic elections in Belarus would lead to an open discussion of the pros and cons of relations with Russia. Candidates would have to speak publicly about plans for further integration with Russia. According to opinion polls, the deepening of such integration is not supported by a majority of the population. This means that such an election could not be carried out in a democratic Belarus. Moreover, the democratization of the country would inevitably lead to the emergence of pro-European forces in the local parliament and a gradual drift away from Russia.

Obviously, the goal of the Russian media attack was to weaken Lukashenko as much as possible, with the aim of further coercing him into integration. One must assume that Putin is moving in this direction. The brutal suppression of mass protests, police violence, and the arrests of journalists and public activists have already led to new Western sanctions against Lukashenko and the country's top leadership. The door for improving relations between Belarus and the U.S., as well as the EU, is closed for now, at least while Lukashenko remains in power. This, in turn, pushes Belarus into the arms of Russia. Only Putin volunteered to protect Lukashenko. Putin has stated that Russia is ready to send its forces to support "law and order" in Belarus. The Russians have made it clear they are ready to support the Belarusian economy with loans. Naturally, Putin's help will not be free of charge. The Russian leader will remember all past grievances and demand guarantees of deepening integration.

Realizing he has no other allies, Lukashenko has turned to Putin. He stated that together with Putin he would defend

the common fatherland "from Brest to Vladivostok." There is no doubt that Russia will now demand the practical creation of this common fatherland. However, declarations alone or the creation of new decorative integration bodies will not be enough. Lukashenko may have to pay for Putin's support with a part of his country's sovereignty.

Of course, it is better to be the president of your country than a vassal of Russia. Lukashenko may try to continue his attempts to maneuver and delay integration. In this case, Russia may switch to another plan for the transition of Belarusian power. By no means will it be a democratic transition, but a constitutional reform publicly supported by Russia. It may be in Putin's interests to redistribute power in Belarus so that it passes to a group of defense and security officials linked to Russia in one way or another. Lukashenko has repeatedly stated that he is ready to carry out constitutional reform and share power. In the case of public support from Russia for such an idea, he actually will have no choice.

Even the West can support the idea of constitutional reform in Belarus. Yet it is worth remembering that the beneficiary of such a reform can be Russia. Therefore, the West needs to closely monitor ongoing events and actively respond to everything that happens. At the same time, it is necessary to be careful and not give Russia a reason to declare Western interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Because the scenario of forceful resolution of the crisis — under the pretext of saving Belarus from Western provocateurs — always remains on Putin's table. □