



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

RUSSIA'S COERCIVE MEDIATION STRATEGY IN BELARUS

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To make up for its economic weakness, Russia leverages its intelligence capabilities, experienced diplomats and broad diaspora to execute its strategies and tactics. Moscow uses hybrid warfare, reflexive control, active measures and coercive mediation to punch above its weight in international relations. Coercive mediation is a peace-building approach coined by David Lewis in his article, “Russia as Peacebuilder? Russia’s Coercive Mediation Strategy.” Lewis argues that for Russia, peace negotiations and coercive military actions are linked. He identified coercive mediation as a unique strategy that Russia uses to wield influence around the globe: Russia aims to be both negotiator and mediator to stop the fighting through a top-down approach, informed by power politics. The strategy stands in sharp contrast to the liberal peace-building model favored by the West. Lewis describes liberal peace building as:

“Internationally brokered peace negotiations, often accompanied by peacekeeping forces or other forms of military intervention; internationally monitored elections; a focus on human rights, gender equality and protection for minorities; the promotion of rule of law and Security Sector Reform (SSR), and constraints on the use of force by parties to the conflict.”

Russia’s realist-constructivist view of international relations underpins coercive mediation. Moscow tends to conduct relations with the world on the basis of *realpolitik*, in which states are the primary actors in an anarchic system, international relations are a zero-sum game, military power is essential, self-interests are paramount and Russia is destined to be a great power. Informed by Russia’s worldview, coercive mediation relies on powerful actors with regional equities to

achieve stability. Because the approach values stability and sovereignty rather than Western conceptions of human rights and democracy, Russia can negotiate solutions that liberal peace building cannot.

Lewis’ coercive mediation framework is an effective tool to understand Russia’s actions in Belarus. Through further analysis, one can expect Moscow to pressure Belarus to make constitutional changes, further integrate the Union State and provide Russia with military basing options in Belarus. However, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is a shrewd politician and will not cede sovereignty easily. His top priority is to remain the most powerful actor in Belarus.

APPLYING SEVEN TENETS OF RUSSIA’S COERCIVE MEDIATION STRATEGY TO BELARUS:

Obviously, interpreting Russian motives is challenging. However, one can comprehend Russian strategy by observing Russian actions and reading what its leaders say (and do not say). It is also important to note that Lewis’ seven tenets are not a blueprint. It is a context-specific framework that is dynamic and pragmatic. Lewis outlines seven tenets of coercive mediation that are not all-encompassing, but rather broad guidelines that Russia uses in various contexts.

1. The goal is to stop the fighting, not to transform societies.

Since the end of the Cold War, Western states have promoted ideas such as the democratic peace theory, the responsibility to protect, a rules-based world order and human rights. Russia has little concern for social

transformation or other liberal ideals. Lewis notes that “Russia is not concerned with achieving social transformation or democratization but aims only to introduce a minimum of political order, in line with Russia’s geopolitical interests.” Consequently, Russia has backed a wide range of partners, including the Taliban in Afghanistan and the rebel leader Khalifa Hifter in Libya.

One can clearly observe the first tenet in Belarus. When the protests in Minsk began, Moscow had little concern for Belarusians’ democratic aspirations. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin was very concerned that another “color revolution” might occur. As in Ukraine, Russia is far more concerned with stability and preserving its interests in Belarus than it is with the democratic aspirations of the people. Furthermore, Russia argues that these democratic aspirations are merely Western concoctions.

Moscow believes that the line between war and peace is blurry. Peace talks are an inevitable extension of war, and the two cannot be separated.

While protests and street violence are not the same as conventional fighting, from Russia’s perspective the two are synonymous. Russia views street protests as a form of hybrid warfare that is funded, instigated and supported by Western governments. This is why in August 2020, when protests were at their height, Lukashenko said that Russia offered assistance to “ensure the security of Belarus.” For Moscow, if protests and street violence can topple a regime in Ukraine, it can happen in Belarus. And if it can happen there, it can happen in Russia.

2. The only guarantee of stability is a strong state.

Russia’s vast landmass and history of revolutions inform its worldview that a strong state led by a strong leader is needed to ensure stability. Too much democracy is destabilizing, and a strong state is the only solution. According to Lewis, the Kremlin believes that “democratization and elections are often destabilizing, and it is better to have an authoritarian strongman who can keep order than a pluralist polity that allows terrorist and militant groups to flourish.” Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya is an example of a strongman who provides order to a potentially unstable region.

While this tenet is a truism of the Russian mindset, its application to Belarus is slightly nuanced. As the Belarusian president for 27 years and the only president that Belarus has known since the fall of the Soviet Union,

Lukashenko is exactly the type of strongman that Russia typically prefers. In the short term, this is why Moscow backs him — he is seen as the only leader with enough political clout, control of the Belarusian elites and loyalty of the security services to quell the protests. However, in the long term there will be tension between the stability Lukashenko can provide and his questionable loyalty to Russia. Despite his impeccable strongman credentials, Russia has not given Lukashenko its full backing because he has a history of distancing himself from Moscow by adopting multivector policies aligned with the West.

3. Powerful states are better mediators than weak states.

It is far easier for a small number of strong states to impose their will on warring parties than for a large number of weak states to broker a cease-fire that accommodates the concerns of all parties. Lewis notes that “the entrance ticket to the negotiation room is the power to influence armed groups on the ground.” For example, in Afghanistan, where there are countless tribal and ethnic factions, Russia chose to limit the number of participants to simplify the process and filter the strong from the weak.

Lewis’ third tenet is clearly applicable in Belarus. In general, Moscow prefers fewer actors at the table and insists that those actors have power to influence the situation. This preference is intensified when conflicts arise in regions with Russian historical ties, such as Georgia, Ukraine or Belarus. In Belarus, Russia is negotiating with one other actor: Lukashenko. They have no interest in allowing the opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the Baltic states, the European Union, Ukraine or any other potentially interested actors to join the talks. For one, they know that these other actors would insist on democratic reforms that could push Belarus away from Russia.

4. Military activities and peace talks are closely interrelated.

Moscow believes that the line between war and peace is blurry. Peace talks are an inevitable extension of war, and the two cannot be separated. Lewis observed that Russian views on peace talks are inherently linked to power politics, especially military power. Those actors who can wield military power get a seat at the table. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban’s strong military position granted them significant leverage at the negotiation table.

Unlike Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenko controls hard power in the form of the Belarusian military, the security services and the Belarusian elite. In December 2020, the Belarusian Interior Ministry published an agreement between its security services and Russia’s security services that “allows for police and security operations in Belarus by troops from the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia), which is controlled directly by the Kremlin.” By ensuring Russian security services access to Belarus, Moscow

Orthodox believers wait to kiss an icon during a service and ceremony in Kyiv, Ukraine, marking the 1,025th anniversary of the Christianization of the Kievan Rus. GETTY IMAGES



gains the ability to shape events on the ground if it deems necessary. The degree that Russia can infiltrate the Belarusian security forces will have a direct relationship on the effectiveness of coercive mediation.

In regard to the conventional military, Putin and Lukashenko agreed during their September 2020 Sochi meeting that military exercises between the two countries in Belarus would continue as planned. In March 2021, Lukashenko publicly expressed a desire to host new Russian fighter jets and pilots as long as Belarusian pilots are also allowed to fly the aircraft. Although Lukashenko wants Russian technology, he has thus far resisted Kremlin requests to open military bases in Belarus. Russian military basing in Belarus will be an important litmus test to see how far Russia can push Lukashenko. A change to this position could indicate that Lukashenko is losing leverage.

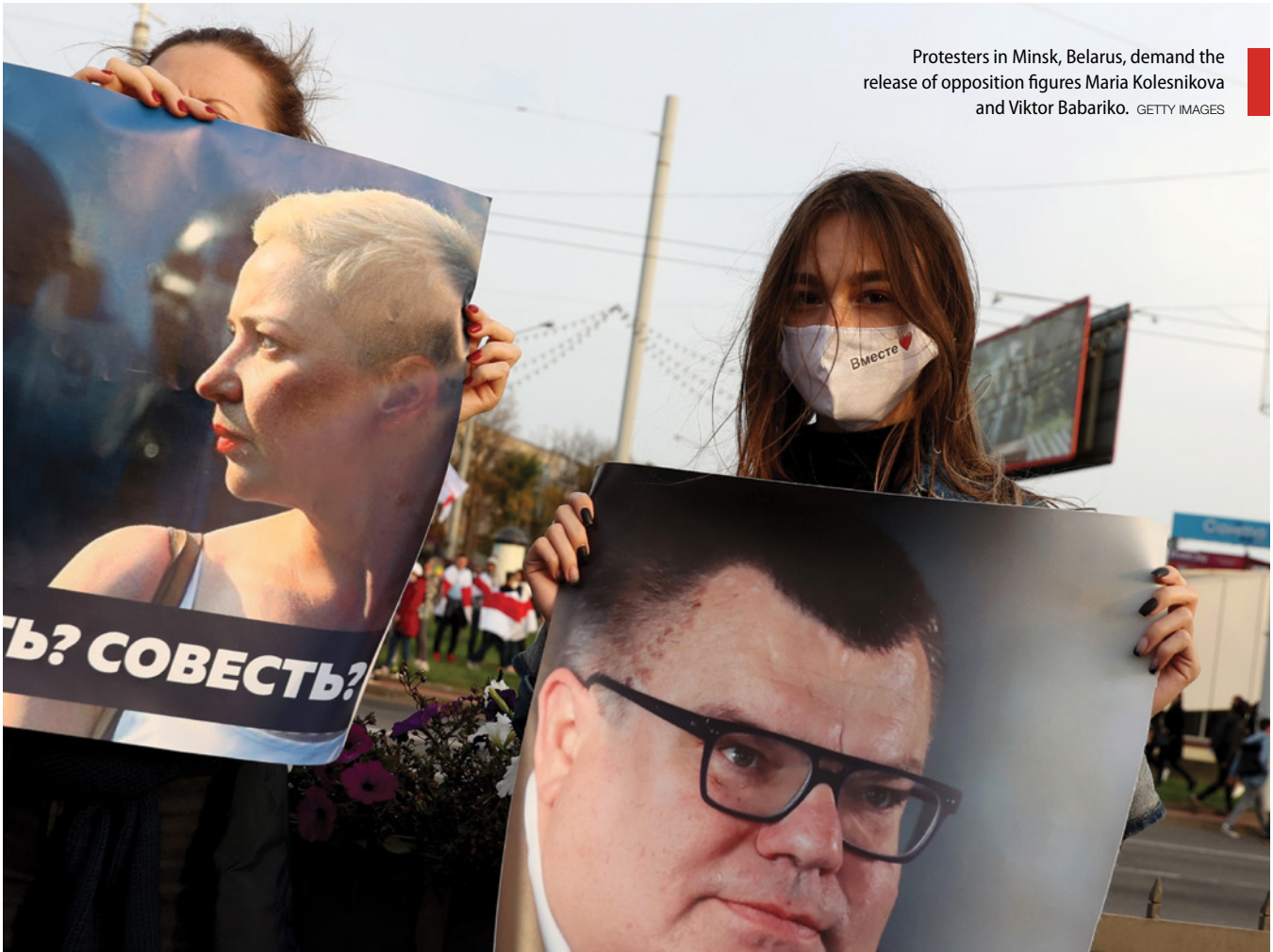
Russia's focus on military power allows it to become a participant and negotiator. By becoming part of the problem, Russia ensures that they will be part of any solution. This is often advantageous because it allows Moscow to shape events on the ground and shift the balance of power during negotiations. However, Dr. Graeme P. Herd, a Marshall Center professor, observes that this creates a

paradox because in some instances Russia does not want a solution. If there is a peace agreement, then there is no longer a need for Russian intervention. Without Russian intervention, it can lose leverage. This paradoxical phenomenon can be observed in Moldova and its break-away Transnistria region, where Russia has maintained its military presence in Transnistria indefinitely. During this time, Moldova has slowly moved away from Russia toward the West. Recently, Moldova joined Ukraine and Georgia to petition the EU for greater cooperation in the future. By freezing the conflict for so long, Moscow eventually lost some leverage in the region.

5. Unscrupulous methods are acceptable to persuade parties to agree to peace proposals.

War and politics are dirty. For Russia, peacemaking is also dirty. Coercion, blackmail, business promises, aid manipulations and various human rights violations are fair game if it secures a favorable peace. For example, Russia used peace negotiations following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to gain influence in the region. In their paper, "Russian Crisis Behavior, Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey?," Lewis, Herd and Richard Giragosian note,

Protesters in Minsk, Belarus, demand the release of opposition figures Maria Kolesnikova and Viktor Babariko. GETTY IMAGES



“Whereas Nagorno-Karabakh was formerly the only conflict in the Former Soviet Union with no Russian presence, Russia now has military bases in all three states in the South Caucasus (over 11,000 troops) and expanded its economic leverage through its presence in policing transport corridors (Meghri and Lachin).”

Russia uses wide latitude in the ways and means available to achieve its desired ends. With Russia’s assistance, Lukashenko silenced journalists, violently cracked down on protesters and detained 25,000 people to dissuade further dissent. On the economic front, Russia gave Belarus a \$1.5 billion loan. This money is critical because the EU levied sanctions on Belarus following the August elections. Belarus already owed other creditors more than \$1 billion and Russia’s state-owned Gazprom energy corporation more than \$300 million. Thus, Belarus needed money, and Russia was the only country willing to give it a loan. It is impossible to know what Lukashenko gave up in return for the \$1.5 billion, but Russia’s leverage is obvious.

On May 23, 2021, Lukashenko forced Ryanair Flight 4978 from Greece to Lithuania to land in Minsk, where Belarusian authorities arrested opposition activist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega. The bold

action is reminiscent of Russia poisoning Sergei Skripal and Alexander Litvinenko in the United Kingdom. While Moscow’s role in the Ryanair flight is unclear, the broader message to activists who challenge the Russian or Belarusian regimes is clear: You are not safe anywhere. These are examples of how Russia uses unscrupulous methods to achieve its aims.

6. All conflicts have a regional dimension.

Rather than universal principles like human rights, Moscow analyzes each conflict through a regional lens with deference toward the powerful actors in the region. According to Lewis, Moscow’s “starting point for any conflict resolution is to achieve a regional consensus on a way forward.” In Libya, for example, Russia analyzes the region’s powerful actors to achieve peace and preserve Russian interests.

In Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and other areas with deep Russian ties, Moscow adjusts its calculations slightly. Rather than analyzing the powerful actors on the ground, Russia takes a more heavy-handed bilateral approach. In regions that Russia deems within its privileged sphere of influence, Russia is willing to accept high strategic risk to ensure those areas remain in Russia’s orbit.

As with Ukraine, Russia has deep historical, ethnic and regional ties to Belarus. Russia and Belarus trace their roots to the Kievan Rus, a ninth century federation of East Slavic peoples. According to the Belarusian National Statistical Committee, 83% of Belarusians identify as Eastern Orthodox, 72% of Belarusians speak Russian at home (26% speak Belarusian at home), and 56% of Belarus' imports come from Russia.

Along with historical and cultural ties, Belarus and Russia have political linkages. Russia and Belarus signed the Union State agreement in 1999. The agreement allows citizens to travel, live and work in either country without formal immigration procedures. However, Union State initiatives have stalled. In his article published by the London School of Economics, Oleg Chupryna notes: "In the mid-1990s, Lukashenko proposed the idea of a 'Union State' between Belarus and Russia. An agreement to this effect was signed in 1999. It has been suggested that Lukashenko's ultimate aspiration was to become the President of a shared state, given Boris Yeltsin, his Russian counterpart, was suffering from ill health at the time. In the end, the rise of Putin as Yeltsin's successor [ended] these ambitions. Lukashenko, unwilling to play a secondary role, quickly lost interest in the union." Protests in Belarus have weakened Lukashenko's negotiating position, and Russia appears ready to energize some of these Union State initiatives. These historical, cultural and political linkages provide Moscow with a great deal of information and leverage for its coercive mediation strategy in Belarus.

7. The West is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Under Putin, Russia has become more outspoken about its frustration with Western intervention. Lewis notes, "Moscow argues that the intervention of Western powers is one of the primary causes of conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere." From Russia's perspective, "liberal peace building," "war on terror" and "democracy promotion" are merely narrative frameworks that the West uses to pursue its interests around the world.

Putin is equally skeptical of the West's foreign policy approach toward Russia. Putin recently told the Federal Security Service of the West's containment policy: "This is not competition as a natural part of international relations, but a consistent and highly aggressive policy aimed at disrupting our development, at slowing it down and creating problems along our external perimeter and contour, provoking internal instability, undermining the values that unite Russian society, and ultimately, at weakening Russia and forcing it to accept external management, just as this is happening in some post-Soviet states." Born and educated in the Soviet days, Putin has fertilized and nurtured this anti-West perspective to the point where it is now a philosophical belief of Putin's operational code.

Moscow views Belarus as another example of the West meddling in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state. In Russia's and Lukashenko's view, the protests in Belarus are fueled and organized by Western security services, nongovernmental organizations and media outlets. Regardless of the veracity of Russia's claims, according to former BBC Moscow correspondent Angus Roxburgh, it is a narrative that Putin truly believes. Thus, Russian leaders believe that protests in Belarus are at least partially a Western concoction to turn another former Soviet state toward the West.

BELARUS IS DIFFERENT.

Using Lewis' coercive mediation framework to analyze Russia's actions in Belarus indicates that, to varying degrees, all seven tenets of Russia's coercive mediation strategy are applicable to Belarus, making it an effective tool to understand Russia's approach there. However, unique facets of Russia's strategy in Belarus go beyond Lewis' framework. Thus, the situation there is different than Russia's coercive mediation approaches elsewhere.

RUSSIA'S RED LINES IN BELARUS ARE DIFFERENT.

Putin considers Belarus and Ukraine, unlike a faraway place like Libya, to be extensions of Russia. He elaborated on this belief in Kyiv in July 2013 during the 1,025th anniversary of Vladimir the Great being baptized into Orthodox Christianity. As tensions peaked between Ukraine and Russia over Ukraine's pending association agreement with the EU, Putin reminded the Ukrainians that Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians are one people. He said: "As your agenda and your main program outlines state, you are here to discuss the significance of Ukraine's civilizational choice. This is not just Ukraine's civilizational choice. Here at this site, at the baptismal site on the Dnieper River, a choice was made for the whole of Holy Rus, for all of us. Our ancestors who lived in these lands made this choice for our entire people. When I say 'for our entire people,' we know today's reality of course, know that there are the Ukrainian people and the Belarusian people, and other peoples too, and we respect all the parts of this heritage, but at the same time, at the foundations of this heritage are the common spiritual values that make us a single people."

For Putin, the Ukrainians did not really have a choice whether to turn their back on Russia and join the EU. That choice was made in 988 by Vladimir the Great. When he chose to be baptized, Vladimir forever linked the descendants of the Kievan Rus, including those in modern-day Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, as one people. Six months after the 1,025th anniversary celebration, Russia annexed Crimea.

As it does in Ukraine, the Kremlin has significant red lines in Belarus that, if crossed, would result in forceful action. For example, Russia will not allow violent protesters to overthrow Lukashenko, as the Ukrainians did to

then-President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 during the Euromaidan protests. Significant threats of overthrow would trigger the activation of Russian security services and conventional military. For both Belarusian stability and its own regime survivability (in light of the protests supporting Putin critic Alexey Navalny), Russia cannot be seen “bowing to the street.”

THE LONGER LUKASHENKO IS IN POWER, THE GREATER THE RISK OF GROWING ANTI-RUSSIAN SENTIMENT IN BELARUS.

Russian foreign policy tends to see movements in black and white — either as pro-Russia or pro-West. However, Carl Bildt, former foreign minister of Sweden, argues in the article “The Armenian model for Belarus,” published in *The Strategist*, that the protests in Belarus are different than the Orange Revolution or Euromaidan in Ukraine. In Ukraine, Euromaidan was a direct response to Yanukovich abandoning European integration. In Belarus, Bildt said, “Domestic concerns are clearly playing the more salient role, and questions about the country’s orientation vis-à-vis Europe or Russia are almost totally absent. Belarusians are simply fed up with the 26-year reign of a man who is increasingly out of touch with society.”

Polling tends to support Bildt’s assertion. However, attitudes are shifting. According to Carnegie Moscow Center writer Artyom Shraibman, “A telephone survey of 1,008 people conducted on November 5-8 (2020) by the Belarusian Analytical Workshop (BAW) asked respondents whether the Belarusian people would be better off in the

EU or in a union with Russia. Forty percent opted for a union with Russia, while 33% chose the EU, compared with 52% and 27% in September, respectively.” Although this shift is noticeable, Shraibman says that fluctuations are common in Belarusian society. Shraibman explained Belarusian dissonance by noting, “Belarusians admire the EU because life is better there, but love Russia because it is ‘theirs’: i.e., close to their hearts.” How Moscow balances these risks going forward will be important to watch.

Lukashenko is a savvy political actor who has been in power for 27 years and is often referred to as “Europe’s last dictator.” Replacing him with a Russian loyalist will not be easy. Ruling within the Russian sphere his entire life, Lukashenko is intimately familiar with Russian coercive mediation. For example, by labeling the Belarusian protests as another Western color revolution, Lukashenko is holding Putin hostage to his own rhetoric. How can Putin decry the West’s role in Navalny protests, but condone such treachery in Belarus? Lukashenko is also wary of Russia favoring any of his political rivals. Viktor Babariko, the former head of Belgazprombank, a Russian-owned commercial bank based in Belarus, was considered Lukashenko’s most serious political challenger when he was arrested in 2020 on bribery and tax evasion charges. He was convicted in 2021 and sentenced to 14 years in prison after a trial condemned internationally as a sham.

Putin is uncomfortable with Lukashenko because the Belarusian strongman has clashed with the Kremlin on a range of issues. In the past, Lukashenko accepted

Belarusian Airborne Brigade members march during a ceremony commemorating the day Minsk was liberated from Nazi occupation by Soviet troops during World War II. GETTY IMAGES



loans from Russia and the International Monetary Fund to retain sovereignty and solidify his position atop the Belarusian government. Lukashenko also balked at a proposal to build a large Russian military base in Belarus. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Lukashenko would not condone Russia's actions, which angered Putin.

Lukashenko understands that an overreliance on Russia makes Belarus susceptible to Russian coercive mediation. This is why he has a long history of flirting with the West to balance Russian influence in Belarus. However, the door for cooperation with the West has closed. Lukashenko's election rigging, his treatment of protesters and the forcing down of Ryanair Flight 4978 eliminated the possibility of future cooperation, thus boxing Lukashenko into closer ties with Moscow. Despite his reduced options, Lukashenko's political savvy and knowledge of Russian coercive mediation is a barrier to Russia installing a loyalist of its choosing.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM APPEARS TO BE RUSSIA'S PREFERRED WAY FORWARD.

Despite his unwillingness to leave office, Lukashenko did open the door to constitutional reforms. Following his September 14, 2020, meeting with Putin, Lukashenko agreed in principle to make constitutional reforms, but has thus far failed to outline specifics or commit to a hard timeline. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov publicly indicated that Putin is growing impatient with the pace of Lukashenko's constitutional reforms. During a November 26, 2020, visit to Minsk, Lavrov noted, "As President Putin has repeatedly stressed, we are interested in seeing these initiatives happen." Russia wants stability and a strong state in Belarus. Pushing Lukashenko toward constitutional reform maintains a strong state, but also increases Russian leverage over the Belarusian strongman while offering a fig leaf to those tired of Lukashenko's rule.

On February 16, 2021, Lukashenko hosted loyal Belarusian elites in Minsk at an All-Belarusian People's Assembly. He indicated that he would support constitutional reform that "would delegate authority to other branches of power" and offered support to enshrine the All-Belarusian People's Assembly into the new constitution. Such a move could pave the way for Lukashenko to transition out of his current presidential role into a "chairman of the assembly" role, whereby he satisfies Russia's desire for constitutional reform, but maintains his position as the most powerful man in Belarus.

Another pressing question is the leverage Lukashenko has over Moscow. While his leverage appears minimal, Lukashenko has one big trump card — Russia's lack of alternatives. Russia wants loyalty and stability. Lukashenko appears to be the best option for providing it. He will have to publicly kowtow to Moscow. He may have to sacrifice some Belarusian sovereignty and move forward on some Union State initiatives. Stalled Russian proposals such as a common currency will be back on the

table. Lukashenko may also have to grant basing rights in Belarus to the Russian military. Thus far, Lukashenko has resisted ideas of a Russia-Belarus merger. In March 2021, Lukashenko called such a merger "silly" and insisted that Belarus would remain a sovereign and independent state. Whatever concessions Lukashenko makes, he will exact a high price. In return, he will seek job security. Whether it's as Belarusian president or chairman of a newly empowered assembly, Lukashenko will likely remain the most powerful actor in Belarus.

CONCLUSION

Lewis' coercive mediation framework is an effective tool to understand Russia's approach in Belarus. There, one can observe aspects of all seven coercive mediation tenets. Specifically, Russia is far more concerned with stability and securing its interests than recognizing Belarusian democratic aspirations. Moreover, Russia chose to negotiate with Lukashenko because he controls the Belarusian elites, military and security services. To achieve its ends, Russia will utilize unscrupulous methods. Conditional loans, extortion and utilizing leverage are normal methods through which it exerts its will. Russia also takes into account regional factors. In the former Soviet space, Russia will enforce hard red lines. As it did in Crimea and the Donbas, Russia will not hesitate to use military power to ensure Belarus does not shift west. Finally, Russia views the West as the problem. It believes that popular movements, such as those in Belarus, are Western-concocted color revolutions designed to encircle and weaken Russia. As a result, Moscow is willing to accept strategic risk within its privileged sphere of influence to secure its interests.

There are many unique takeaways from Russia's coercive mediation strategy in Belarus. There, Russia has significant cultural and economic advantages. Belarusians are proud of their historical links to Russia and they're deeply dependent on Russian resources and markets. Polls indicate that Belarusians have more favorable views of Russia than they do of the West. Despite Moscow's local advantages, Lukashenko is a savvy political actor who intimately understands Russia's coercive mediation strategy. He has a long history of resisting Putin's aspirations for power and control. In the past, Lukashenko flirted with the West to resist Russian control. However, Lukashenko's election rigging, his protester crackdowns and the Ryanair Flight 4978 episode shut the door on his ability to play the West against Russia. Thus, he is holding a weaker hand than before the elections. However, Lukashenko retains leverage because Russia has few alternatives to fill his position. At some point, Lukashenko may agree to constitutional reforms where he shifts from president to chairman of a newly formed assembly. Looking ahead, Lukashenko will likely remain the most powerful actor in Belarus. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, reports of Lukashenko's death appear to be greatly exaggerated. □