

Alexander Lukashenko: Europe's Last Dictator, but for How Much Longer?

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, JAN 30 2023

Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko is oftentimes described (unflatteringly) as Europe's 'last dictator'. He is certainly a relic of Belarus's Soviet past, probably Vladimir Putin's closest "foreign" confidante. He is, thus far, the country's first and only president. In 1993, he was promoted to lead the Belarusian parliament's anti-corruption commission. Ironically, he thus owes his political break to anti-corruption activities which launched a career based on fear. In recent years his manipulation of European asylum seekers for political gain and his stalwart support for Putin's war in Ukraine are notorious. In addition, the lengths to which his regime is willing to go to sustain its power make him a feared despot at home and abroad.

Perhaps the bizarre quality of his political absolutism has been the positive associations he inspires with the "rose tinted" memories older citizens have of the Society-era pension regime. It is often forgotten that memory is myopic, since the Presidency delivered a welfare pittance to elderly "heroes" who immediately spent everything to the profit of state shops. The state was the biggest beneficiary of all from that primitive economy. Yet there is a nostalgia factor which is undoubtedly part of Lukashenko's capacity to maintain his grip. This seems now to be wearing off. Via Al Jazeera, an anonymous but well-placed Belarusian source noted, "I thought he saved us from the wild capitalism of the 1990s, and I voted for him twice... but Russians survived it and are far better off... we are 30 years behind".

Lukashenko won a sixth term in the August 2020 disputed election which likely fatally terminated Minsk's prior relationship of sceptical election observation conducted by Western governments. In the post-election period, Belarusian police and intelligence attacked thousands of protesters. The USA, EU and UK now formally deny Lukashenko is a legitimate president. With increasing sanctions Lukashenko's sole international supporter remains Putin. Yet in his rhetoric, Lukashenko is predictably on the attack. As with Putin, outside observers have started to look at their psychology manuals. "His behaviour over the past year has shown that political isolation has turned him into a delusional, paranoid and petty man," notes Ivar Dale of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

If there is a secret to Lukashenko's success as a dictator it may lie in his understanding of paying his security services well – and so they back him from Minsk to every village across country. His tight control of Soviet-era collective farms and state-run plants means he has no rival billionaire oligarchs. Only a limited middle-class intelligentsia survives as he forced intellectual protestors into exile, and finally he benefits unequally by backing the Kremlin, a pact he brokered in 1997.

Even so, these are bleak days for Lukashenko. Manipulating migrants and the forced landing of a RyanAir passenger plane in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, to arrest a Belarusian dissident are not the actions of a stable democratic nation. How do we explain the anatomy of what can be more accurately described as a dictatorship?

A Belarusian constitution enacted in early 1994 paved the way for his first democratic presidential elections. Lukashenko campaigned as an independent on a populist platform: He stated: "I am neither with the leftists nor the rightists. But with the people against those who rob and deceive them." Lukashenko won outright the second round of the election on 10 July with 80.1% of the vote. Shortly after his inauguration, he addressed the State Duma of the Russian Federation in Moscow proposing a new Union of Slavic states, which would culminate in the creation of a

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supranational union of Russia and Belarus in 1999.

Further, in February 1995, Lukashenko announced a referendum on the controversial issue of the Russification of Belarus. It went ahead and Belarus have had Lukashenko ever since. On 7 September 2004, Lukashenko called a referendum to eliminate presidential term limits. This was held on 17 October 2004, and according to official results, was approved by 79.42% of voters. On 19 March 2006, exit polls showed Lukashenko winning a third term in a landslide, amid opposition reports of vote-rigging and fear of violence. In September 2008, parliamentary elections were held. Lukashenko had allowed some opposition candidates to stand, though in the official results, opposition members failed to get any of the 110 available seats. OSCE considered the vote as "flawed", noting "several cases of deliberate falsification of results". Opposition members and supporters demonstrated in protest in the capital and in every regional centre in large volumes. There were thousands of arrests, detentions without trial and probably hundreds of state-orchestrated deaths. It is difficult not to see this as a deliberate campaign amounting to arbitrary execution of protestors.

Lukashenko was one of ten candidates registered for the presidential election held in Belarus on 19 December 2010. Again OSCE described the elections as "flawed" while (conversely) CIS mission observers announced, "free and transparent". On 11 October 2015, Lukashenko was elected for his fifth term, and on 9 August 2020, his sixth. Mass protests erupted across Belarus following the 2020 Belarusian presidential election which was marred by allegations of widespread electoral fraud. Again, there were many thousands of arrests, arbitrary detention without legal process, and likely hundreds of state-sanctioned murders of protestors. Reports from the international Red Cross suggested arbitrary executions in the streets of major cities. On 17 August 2020, the European Parliament issued a joint statement which stated that they do not recognise Alexander Lukashenko as the president of Belarus, considering him to be persona non grata in the European Union. The US, UK and Canada have also invalidated the results.

As a subtle way of off-setting the ever-building internal opposition, Lukashenko has shown a capacity to ponder regime transition. What he has in mind is either an extension of the "family business" via his kin, or failing this, a perpetuation of his trusty security apparatus. On 24 April 2021, Lukashenko announced that he would sign a decree to amend emergency transfer of power. Yet, since the November 1996 referendum, Lukashenko has effectively held all governing power. In contemporary Belarus, outside observation and reportage is severely restricted. Independent polling is all but non-existent. Surveys are monopolized by the government, which either does not publish complaints, or uses them as propaganda. Nevertheless, the evidence available suggests that Lukashenko faces greater risk to his pre-eminent regime than at any previous time in power. He has enormous civic opposition and strong parliamentary fractionalization. His loyal security apparatchiks are no longer unflinching, and Lukashenko senses enemies around every corner.

For a man who emerged as something of an accidental dictator, he has proven resilient. Yet, we may now also be looking at the endgame, not just the anatomy, of a modern dictatorship.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.