

Opinion – Lukashenka's Future in Belarus

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, AUG 25 2020

More than two weeks have passed since the presidential elections in Belarus. On Sunday, August 23, over 200,000 peaceful demonstrators poured into the centre of Minsk, continuing to protest against the official results, which have Aliaksandr Lukashenka winning more than 80% of the votes. Over 6,000 people have been arrested since 9 August, four killed by riot police and many suffering beatings and torture in detention centres. The president responded by ordering military units and equipment to Minsk and placing barbed wire around the Museum of the Great Patriotic War and the obelisk dedicated to the victory in the Second World War – the site of the previous week's demonstration. Whereas earlier he equated the protesters as collaborators of the Kremlin's Wagner Group, now he is referring to them as fascists, paid and sponsored by the West, with NATO making provocative troop movements on the Belarusian border.

Lukashenka arrived at the presidential palace by helicopter, and alighted with his son Mikalai, both wearing bullet-proof vests and carrying air rifles. A more symbolic manifestation of the severing of his links with his people could hardly have been imagined. He has called repeatedly for Russia to intervene to stop the protests. On Monday, he instigated a crackdown of the opposition, starting with the leaders of the strike movement, and three members of the Coordinating Council, initiated by electoral candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is widely believed to have won a majority of the votes.

What next? The situation is one of stalemate. Though widely unpopular, Lukashenka is not about to retreat. He has nowhere to go. His lengthy rule and six election campaigns, with the exception of 2015, have been interspersed with protests, acts of violence and retribution, barely legal changes to the constitution through referenda, and the silencing of critics through fines, imprisonment, and in at least four cases prior to 2020, murder. His situation, however, is unprecedented, because he has never faced such a level of popular opposition, which can be coordinated via social media, much of which seems to be beyond his comprehension or control.

There are several ways forward, all of them difficult. First, Lukashenka could declare martial law. The country moved much closer to that state on 23 August. Such a move would isolate the state in Europe, likely leaving Russia as its main partner, though China has also been supportive. It would lead to mass arrests perhaps on a scale hitherto unseen. It would not be well received by Moscow, which wishes to keep its trading links open with the West. It would be unlikely to pacify the population given the scale of the street movement and readiness to protest. The insurgency has been referred to as a national awakening but it is also one of weariness with this long presidency, which no longer offers prospects of more freedom and prosperity. Martial law would render Belarus a backwater of Europe, back to the darkness of Stalinist times.

Second, Russia could intervene. There is no doubt that the Russian leaders regard Belarus as a close partner and part of the Slavic family and the Russian World. Russia is the main supplier of energy, a military partner with two bases in Belarus, and Russian media floods the airwaves. By the 1970s in Soviet Belorussia, Russian was the main spoken language. Only for a brief period, between 1990 and 1995, was Belarusian elevated to the state language, before one of Lukashenka's referenda elevated Russian to that same status. Whoever leads Belarus has to deal first with Russia, and in truth Lukashenka did not perform badly in that regard once he had abandoned his quest for a unified state in the early 21st century. For many years, Belarus received heavily subsidized oil from Russia, which it then refined and resold to Russia for a healthy profit.

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Under Vladimir Putin’s leadership, Russian businessmen began to move into Belarus. Russia acquired the former Belarusian state pipeline, it sought mergers between automobile plants, though the large potash factory at Salihorsk (Belkali) remained elusive, protected by the Belarusian government. Putin resurrected the Russia-Belarus Union, established in 1999 but more or less moribund subsequently. Lukashenka resisted Russian demands for an airbase on Belarusian territory but took part in the military manoeuvres of Operation Zapad (West), which anticipated a NATO attack and a Russian-Belarusian counter-attack into the Baltic States. The last such exercise was in 2017.

For Putin, however, Lukashenka has become an irritant. He is reliably pro-Russian but a difficult partner who has probably outlived his usefulness. Russia needs a leader with whom it can work on various projects. An invasion to reinstall an unpopular president would in turn promote anti-Russian sentiment, which at present does not exist in most of Belarus. Of course, from Moscow’s perspective, Lukashenka must not be removed violently, or as a result of a popular uprising. But if he were to go quietly and be replaced by a compliant figure, the future of the relationship would be secure. That at least is one option surely being mulled over by Putin and his colleagues. Should the protests continue in large numbers, the choice becomes more realistic.

Third, Russia and the European Union could mediate a solution to the Belarus crisis. Germany and Russia have been discussing such an option. Poland and Lithuania are supportive of the opposition movement. The question then is whether Russia would accept the existence of the Coordinating Council (over 70 members and a small presidium) and new elections. The option would not work if Lukashenka remains in the presidential palace, surrounded by OMON troops, KGB, and the army. If he could be persuaded to leave, move to Russia, Turkey, or some other country prepared to accept him, then Belarusians could be encouraged to end the protests.

For that to happen, the opposition needs a clearer step-by-step program, perhaps beginning with a return to the 1994 Constitution, which was in place for only 30 months, restoring the original 260-seat parliament and a viable, impartial Constitutional Court, and limiting the presidential term to two five-year periods, should the president be re-elected. Tsikhanouskaya had an opportunity to be the catalyst of this change, but chose, understandably to put family first and flee to Lithuania. Nevertheless, if she could be persuaded to return, and could do so safely, she would be the natural leader of the transitional stage and provide it with legitimacy.

The protesters, unarmed, and without a leader or program, can only go so far. They have demonstrated a desire for change (encapsulated by Viktor Tsoi’s famous anthem), and an end to the 26-years of dictatorship. They need to move on from an environment that is typified by Minsk’s wide Stalinist-style streets and Soviet-era monuments, with newly added edifices still geared to the victory in a war that started over 80 years ago and create something new. Belarus exists, but what is it? On 25 August it celebrated 29 years of independence, and by now the people know who they are and who they are not. But there is a long way to go, and a very careful path needs to be trodden if they are to reach their goals without further suffering.

About the author:

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