Commentary
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The Lukashenko Factor: Prigozhin's rebellion and Belarusian sovereignty

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Summary

The story of Prigozhin's rebellion undermines the basis of the established narrative about the loss of sovereignty by Belarus.

When the world media reported breaking news about the rapid movement of military columns of the PMC "Wagner" through the territory of Russia, few could imagine that this story would have any Belarusian dimension. However, after the reports that the conflict was de-escalated thanks to the mediation of Aleksandr Lukashenko, this dimension turned even more unexpected. Many commentators immediately began to question the very possibility that the leader of Belarus could play an active role in the largest internal Russian crisis in the last three decades. According to them, Lukashenko is too dependent on the Kremlin to enjoy any kind of agency, not to say to influence the outcome of such events.

Such a logical construction reflects the opinion that dominates in the West, among the Belarusian opposition and in some circles in Russia. Without nuances and shades, it boils down to the perception of Minsk as a non-independent actor that retains sovereignty only formally, but in reality only implements the will of the Kremlin in its policy. But the more information about the Belarusian factor appears in the context of the rebellion in Russia, the more noticeable are the discrepancies between this opinion and the reality. And the more obvious are the reasons why commentators continue to insist on such a superficial attitude towards the sovereignty of Belarus, as well as the problems associated with this, including for the future of European security.

Commentators who reject the possibility of Lukashenko's mediation in the Russian crisis offer several versions of what happened. They are united by the thesis that the Kremlin simply used him in its scenario, ordering him to play the role of a peacemaker.

> However, these conspiracy explanations do not answer one simple question: What kind of a cunning plan was it that suddenly turned Lukashenko into a hero while the Russian leadership itself looked so unfavourably?

Under its own scenario of events, if we assume the existence of such, the image costs for the Kremlin would in any case have been lower without the involvement of Lukashenko than with his participation. The fact that, after the end of the rebellion, the Russian media began to actively downplay the importance of the Lukashenko factor speaks of the same.

In addition, this is confirmed by the fact that the parameters of the deal between the Kremlin and the rebels are beginning to transform after Putin's meeting with representatives of the PMC "Wagner" on June 29. Clearly, the initial parameters of the deal were not well thought through, as they were achieved in emergency conditions thanks to the prompt mediation by Lukashenko with the goal of avoiding large-scale bloodshed and destabilization of Russia.

Therefore, analytically it seems obvious that the leader of Belarus could find himself in the role of an intermediary between Putin and Prigozhin only thanks to his own proactive actions. It became possible for two obvious reasons. First, Lukashenko himself was interested in preventing a further escalation of the conflict within Russia, since it would automatically mean serious security and economic challenges for him. Secondly, for 29 years at the head of Belarus, he dealt with, perhaps, every more or less significant character in the Russian government and business circles, he is aware of the political alignments in Russia like no one else. On 24 June, he was able to quickly navigate what was happening, applying his exclusive knowledge and connections to achieve his own goals.

Active actions in one's own interests is a basic definition of agency and sovereign behaviour, especially in crisis situations. Therefore, the story of the Wagner rebellion undoubtedly undermines the basis of the well-established narrative about Lukashenko's loss of independence and Belarus's loss of sovereignty. However, numerous commentators still refuse to accept these obvious facts and continue to insist on conspiracy theories. This circumstance points to, perhaps, the main problem of the whole discussion about the sovereignty of Belarus.

> Many in the West and in the Belarusian opposition regard this discussion not as a way to clarify the real state of affairs in Belarus, but as an instrument of political struggle against Lukashenko.

After 2020 (and especially after the migration crisis of 2021), the argument that the West should limit its interaction with Minsk and impose massive sanctions against it was partly based on the thesis of the loss of sovereignty by Belarus. "If Minsk is not independent", the supporters of this argument said, "then what is the point of talking to Lukashenko? If Belarus is already absorbed by Russia, then why be afraid that the West is pushing Minsk into the arms of the Kremlin with its sanctions?"

From this position, the interpretation of Lukashenko's role in resolving the Russian crisis ceases to be an analytical task, as does the interpretation of Minsk's foreign policy in general. After all, immersing yourself in the nuances and shades of grey of Belarusian politics on the basis of facts and their analysis, and not political slogans, means recognizing not only that Belarus retains sovereignty, but also the agency of Lukashenko himself. And this can quickly change the content of the international discussion about Belarus: it will no longer be based only on the cliché "Minsk is a vassal of the Kremlin" and will start to wonder about ways to increase Belarus's room for manoeuvre in order to further strengthen its sovereignty.

In this sense, the words of Oleksiy Danilov, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, written a day after the Russian rebellion, are indicative. He expressed the opinion that Alexander Lukashenko could take part in negotiations on the conditions for ending the war between Moscow and Kiev. And this reaction is understandable. Lukashenko's role in de-escalating the crisis in Russia makes Minsk's claim for a seat at future negotiations on regional security, voiced back in April 2022, more justified than it seemed before.

> This is good news not only for Belarus itself, whose sovereignty is indeed facing its biggest challenge since its acquisition.

This is also in the interests of the West and regional security. In 2019, the former commander of the US Army in Europe, Ben Hodges, noted that "it is in the interests of all that Belarus can remain a sovereign country", as it "can play a key critical role for security and stability in Europe." Since that time, the structural realities in the region have changed dramatically, and therefore, a return to the situation of 2019 is impossible. However, the daunting task of arranging European security in the extremely dangerous

new geopolitical conditions lies ahead. And here, sovereign Belarus can again play an important role, since military de-escalation and the stabilization of the region are in its national interests.

That is why serious analytical attention should be paid to the role of Minsk in stopping the Wagner rebellion, instead of habitually trying to use the discussion of Belarusian sovereignty to fight Lukashenko personally. If we continue to follow the advice by Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda and treat Belarus as a "province of Russia", then with a high probability we will once again be able to convince ourselves of the magical power of self-fulfilling prophecies.

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