Commentary
June 29, 2023

What Does Lukashenka's Role as Mediator in Russian Crisis Imply?

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

Summary

As the entire world watched in disbelief during the rapidly unfolding mutiny in Russia organized by Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group on June 23 and 24, hardly anyone could imagine how its endgame would ultimately play out.

In particular, the factor of Belarus seemed nowhere close to the conflict's equation and, yet, in the end, it suddenly proved decisive for how tensions deescalated. The role that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka played in this context carries several key implications that the West would do well to take seriously.

On the morning of June 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued an ominous video address to the nation calling the rebellion an act of "treason" and "a deadly threat to our statehood". He promised that "all those who prepared the rebellion" would "suffer inevitable punishment." In response, Prigozhin released an audio message in which he asserted that "the president was deeply wrong" and that "no one is going to turn themselves in at the request of the president, the FSB [Federal Security Service] or anyone else". He added that the Wagner fighters "do not want the country to live on in corruption, deceit and bureaucracy." This indirect exchange made things clear:

> The conflict was no longer just between Prigozhin and the top brass of the Russian Ministry of Defense (as had been portrayed by all sides beforehand); it had effectively transformed into Wagner's "deadly threat" to the Putin regime.

At that point, as the rebel troops were marching toward Moscow, it appeared inevitable that the confrontation would result in intense fighting and bloodshed. However, when their most advanced units were only about 200 kilometers away from the Russian

capital, a breaking news statement came from the press service of the Belarusian president. It announced that Lukashenka had been in talks with Prigozhin "for the entire day" and that the latter accepted Lukashenka's "proposal on stopping the advance of Wagner's armed units in Russia's territory and on further steps meant to deescalate tensions." The statement underlined that "an absolutely advantageous and acceptable variant to defuse the situation is available, including safety guarantees for fighters of the private military company Wagner."

The announcement caught everyone by surprise. Numerous comments followed that questioned the validity of Belarus's claims. Observers clearly found it difficult to even connect the dots between the developments in Russia and the Belarusian president, as previously Belarus had been mentioned publicly in the context of the crisis only once—when Putin and Lukashenka conversed over the phone earlier that day. But the Russian president held similar conversations with the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkey, and nothing seemed to point to any special role for Lukashenka.

> Moreover, the narrative about Minsk having become Moscow's vassal, which dominates in the West and some Russian circles, made it even more difficult for many to believe that Lukashenka could in fact exercise any agency at the height of Russia's most serious political crisis since 1993.

And then the parties to the conflict started to corroborate Minsk's interpretation of events. Both Prigozhin and Putin essentially confirmed that the Belarusian president had indeed stepped in as a mediator and managed negotiations for a deal to deescalate the whole situation. Later, Lukashenka himself provided the most detailed account to date of how the mutiny unfolded and how his brokering efforts played out.

Nonetheless, media publications continue to appear, including in Russian opposition-minded outlets, that still question Lukashenka's role, referring to anonymous sources in the Kremlin. Two main lines of reasoning are offered: either the whole rebellion was a Kremlin-orchestrated plot to find the weak links in the Russian government's chain of command, or the mutiny happened for real but the authorities kept everything under control. Both hypotheses leave little room for Lukashenka's agency and, hence, the thinking goes, the Kremlin simply decided to use him as a cover.

Yet, this conspiracy-driven reasoning is hard to buy. Using Lukashenka merely as cover in a pre-arranged scenario makes no sense for Moscow when (and this has been the case), in the end, both parties to the conflict look to have been weakened by it. In stark contrast, Lukashenka's image across Russian society has skyrocketed to that of a hero.

For this same reason, it is hardly surprising that Russian media outlets are producing stories built on anonymous sources in an effort to undermine Lukashenka's strengthened stature inside Russia.

While it is indeed too early to make far-reaching conclusions about the causes and effects of the rebellion, at least two inferences about Minsk's role in brokering the deal and its broader implications for Western policy toward Belarus are in order.

> First, the situation has clearly demonstrated that Minsk has indeed preserved a great degree of agency and can use it proactively to pursue its own interests, especially when those interests are clear.

This time, Lukashenka had every reason to push for an end to the rebellion, as the prolonged destabilization of Russia would have meant excessive security and economic risks for Belarus. For instance, a major crisis within Russia could have incentivized units of Belarusian nationals fighting in Ukraine to start implementing their long-declared plans to overthrow the Lukashenka government by force. Minsk does not see these units as a sizeable threat per se, but any fighting on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border has the potential for quickly escalating to the level of an interstate war or even a conflict with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Furthermore, a destabilized Russia would have an immediate negative impact on the Belarusian economy, which is now hugely dependent on economic cooperation with Russia. Thus, as Lukashenka exercised his agency to prevent the adverse developments in this situation, in the same way, he will make use of this autonomy once he has enough room for maneuver as well as clearly identified and realistic interests vis-à-vis the West.

Second, due to his decades-long first-hand experience of dealing with the Kremlin and key actors in Russian society and business, Lukashenka has become an exceptionally knowledgeable Kremlinologist. Arguably, this is what made his mediation possible in the first place. Following the mutiny, he has reentered the Russian domestic and foreign policy stages as a central actor. And while this carries both opportunities and risks for official Minsk, it also creates possibilities for the West to open a new channel of communication with a view to reducing risks in relations with Russia.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations