Commentary
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Where Is the Political Crisis in Belarus Headed?

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Summary

Belarus has long been known as the 'last dictatorship in Europe' – a nickname former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice gave it in 2005. Since 1994, when Alexander Lukashenka won his first presidential ballot, not a single Belarusian election has been recognised by the West as free and fair. As a result, during most of the 26 years of Lukashenka's tenure Belarus was under US and EU sanctions for human rights and democracy violations. However, in spite of numerous crackdowns on the opposition in the past, the Lukashenka government managed to preserve overall internal stability, which was also important for regional security given Belarus's strategic place between East and West. However, because Belarus has now entered the most serious and dramatic political crisis in its contemporary history, this time might be different.

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Alexander Lukashenka enjoyed considerable popularity in society and, even though each presidential election he participated in except for the one in 2015 would ignite a degree of political confrontation in Belarus, the incumbent's popularity was enough to avoid any major crisis. Yet, since about 2012 an important trend has been unfolding, which has gradually eroded his support base – that is, the country's decreasing economic performance and its implications for the government's vast social policies. Whereas in 2001-2010 Belarus's average annual GDP growth stayed at 7.5 per cent, in 2011-2019 it went down to 1.2 per cent. As a result, the authorities had no option but to start trimming the so-called 'social contract', which for almost two decades ensured political stability in exchange for socio-economic benefits.

> In other words, under the social contract system different societal groups would enjoy stable economic growth and social security while they were expected to stay loyal to the government.

The gradual disintegration of the social contract system has had a double effect. On the one hand, it made a significant part of Lukashenka's core electorate angry with his policies, which no longer delivered enough social security. On the other hand, it stimulated many Belarusians to look for better opportunities either in the private sector or abroad. This latter category started to see Lukashenka as a problem exactly for the opposite reason: his attempts to preserve at least the basic elements of the social contract system implied high taxes and other difficulties in conducting business.

Growing dissatisfaction with the state's socio-economic policies was aggravated by a series of government mistakes. Perhaps the most detrimental one was the way the authorities handled the COVID-19 crisis, in particular, Alexander Lukashenka's rhetoric that the coronavirus was just psychosis and his insistence that mass events should continue to take place despite the epidemiological danger. His position seems to have made many Belarusians think that the president did not care about the lives of ordinary citizens.

And then the presidential election campaign began. Given the background developments – in particular, the gradual collapse of the 'social contract' and the government's disastrous reactions to the COVID-19 outbreak – the election quickly turned into a plebiscite. Many people (even though it is impossible to tell how many, because no independent opinion polls are allowed in Belarus) appeared determined to vote against Lukashenka and cared less about who his rivals were. And when the Central Election Commission proclaimed Lukashenka's landslide victory with over 80 per cent of the vote on 9 August, mass protests began across the entire country. Protests gained real momentum several days later when the country learnt about unprecedented police brutality against the demonstrators. At that point many observers started jumping to the premature conclusion that Lukashenka's days were numbered.

However, the incumbent has managed to regain the initiative. Two factors might have helped him. Firstly, Moscow put its political weight behind him, which was a crucial signal for the Belarusian state apparatus and, most importantly, the law enforcement agencies, which the incumbent strongly relies on. And secondly, the protest movement failed to translate its grassroots energy into a political strategy aimed at forcing Lukashenka to leave office.

As a result, the political crisis in Belarus is almost certain to become a prolonged one.

> Lukashenka is strong enough to survive, at least for the time being; but he is not strong enough to crush the opposition altogether, as he would normally do in the past.

In this situation, Russia has become a real kingmaker and a great deal depends on its position after Alexander Lukashenka requested Russian security assistance in case the internal situation gets out of his control. Vladimir Putin was quick to confirm Moscow's readiness to offer such help and has generally backed Alexander Lukashenko. For Russia, Belarus has a critical geostrategic significance and, hence, it wants to avoid a situation when the change of government in Belarus might threaten its interests if the new authorities intensify relations with the West, like it was the case in Ukraine. Moreover, the Kremlin appears unwilling to watch the leaders of post-Soviet states being overthrown by popular protests. However, this does not mean that Moscow has committed to supporting Lukashenka endlessly and unconditionally. It will likely be assessing future developments and adjusting its Belarus policy with a view to strengthening and diversifying its leverage over Belarus.

While other international actors have only very limited leverage over the Belarusian situation. What seems to be a key task for all actors involved is to make sure that the situation in Belarus does not get geopoliticised, as was the case in Ukraine, and, thus, does not further undermine the stability of the whole East European region.

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