



russian analytical digest

www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html

RUSSIA AND BELARUS

■ COMMENTARY

Russia's Role in Relation to the Political Protests in Belarus 2
By Margarita M. Balmaceda
(Seton Hall University/Harvard University)

2020: Year of the Great Break for Belarusian Statehood 3
By Siarhei Bohdan
(Freie Universität Berlin)

The Standoff over Constitutional Reform in Belarus
Leaves the EU and Russia on Opposite Sides of the Barricades 5
By Fabian Burkhardt
(Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg)

At a Loss: The Kremlin Has No Winning Belarus Strategy 7
By Arkady Moshes
(Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki)

Russia vs. the People of Belarus: Towards a Geopolitical Revolution? 9
By Ryhor Nizhnikau
(Finnish Institute of International Affairs)

Puzzled by Belarus, Russia Struggles to Respond 11
By Oxana Schmies and Joerg Forbrig

■ INTERVIEW

Lukashenka's Waiting Game: How Russia Has Tipped the Balance in Belarus 12
Interview with Lev Gudkov
(Levada Center for Public Opinion Research, Moscow)

■ OPINION POLL

The Attitude of the Russian Population towards the Presidential Elections of 09 August 2020 and Related Protests in Belarus 17

Russia's Role in Relation to the Political Protests in Belarus

By Margarita M. Balmaceda (Seton Hall University/Harvard University)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

Aleksander Lukashenko may have withstood the first wave of protests, but the writing on the wall does not bode well for him.

When the demonstrations against fraud in the August 9 presidential elections started, Lukashenko was caught by surprise, showing how much he had lost touch with Belarusian society. The apparatus of repression may not have changed much since the 1999 disappearance of opposition members Viktor Hanchar, Anatol Krasouski, Yury Zakharanka, and Dzmitry Zavadski, but Belarusian society had. When, eight days after the beginning of the protests, he made a point of visiting the flagship Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) factory, hoping for a boost of support by provoking the audience, he was shocked by the loud boos and chants of “ukhodi!” (meaning: “leave!”). Since then, he has redoubled on repression and also on attempts to secure the loyalty of the security apparatus, such as through bestowing, a day later, official state awards on 200 security officials related to post-election operations. Since that visit to the MTZ, Lukashenko has been unable to avoid the reality of how tenuous his control over the country (and also over the country's nomenklatura) is. With pressure from below, local majors are quietly facing the choice of the extent to which they should enforce repressive measures ordered from above. Lukashenko's September 24 inauguration to a new presidential term, conducted in secrecy and without previous public announcement, is an example of his growing awareness of the tenuousness of his power.

Another significant development visible already from the first days after the elections has been the strikes at important export-oriented factories, such as the Byelorussian Steel Works (BMZ) in Zhlobin, home to 80%

of Belarus's steel production and nearly \$1bn exports per year, or top nitrogen fertilizers producer Hrodno Azot. Both of these factories depend directly or indirectly on the energy rents accrued by Belarus as a result of its unique energy relationship with Russia—BMZ on low energy prices needed for the energy-intensive foundry process, and Hrodno Azot on nitrogen produced on the basis of natural gas (production of nitrogen fertilizers not only depends heavily on gas as a source of energy, but also as a raw material, as it constitutes 80% of the material needed for its production). These rents—and their clever management—have been highly significant for the stability of the Belarusian regime since the early 2000s (see my 2014 book *Living the High Life in Minsk*), but have been substantially reduced in the last years as a result of changes in international energy markets. With less rents making their way to the nomenklatura and trickling down to the population as a whole, the legitimacy and appeal of the Lukashenko regime has gone down significantly, and, conversely, the need for raw repression has gone up. The levels of violence used by the security apparatus in the last weeks are unprecedented. They may hold the regime in place in the short term, perhaps even for a few years, but the entire edifice of Lukashenko's power is becoming increasingly feeble, hence the need for increased repression. Next time around, it may give up right away. Within this background of increased repression, Lukashenko's agreement meeting with jailed opposition leaders, including former presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka on October 10, is an example of how tenuous the situation is, and how desperately he is holding on to power.

About the Author

Margarita M. Balmaceda is Professor of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University and associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University.

2020: Year of the Great Break for Belarusian Statehood

By Siarhei Bohdan (Freie Universität Berlin)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

It seems obvious that Belarus–Russian relations and integration should be considered as a dynamic process rather than some static construct, yet too frequently analyses handle them exactly so, for example by considering the framework of the Union State of Belarus and Russia as the basis for describing the current links between Minsk and Moscow. After almost two decades of Russia’s dominance over Belarus slowly diminishing, this year saw a radical change of the dynamics. Never before in the history of the Republic of Belarus have we witnessed such active Kremlin intervention into Belarusian politics as today. This can be said with respect to the Belarusian government and its opponents.

Considering the position of the Belarusian regime, one sees something which resembles an incremental capitulation. Politically, Lukashenka made a U-turn and switched from lashing out at Russia before the election to calling for Russia’s help and verbally attacking the West, NATO and all neighbour states. Militarily, Minsk launched in mid-August extensive and provocative military exercises on NATO borders and increased the scale of joint manoeuvres with Russia. Economically, it has threatened to boycott the ports of the Baltic republics and reduce or stop transit from the Baltics and Poland via Belarus. All these moves correspond to the wishes of the Putin regime—both articulated (e.g., it publicly demanded that Minsk join its plan to boycott the ports of the Baltic republics for about three years) and presumed (provocative drills on the border with Lithuania and Poland near the so called “Suwalki Gap” were never proposed openly, but they surely correspond to the wishes of Putin’s generals).

Lukashenka suddenly moved to undertake the steps cited in the by-far-not-exhaustive list above some days after the manipulated election which saw unprecedented incidents of probable involvement of Russian actors, some of whom are not known to act without Putin’s sanction. Let’s remember two outstanding cases. First, Viktor Babariko—who spent most of his profes-

sional life in the finance structures of the Russian Gazprom empire and until very recently remained the head of Belgazprombank¹—entered the presidential election campaign. Although he soon got arrested, the staff and network of activists he managed to organise continued working and became the basis for an innovative and brilliant campaign which included the merger of the three candidates’ staffs and featured three women as alleged leaders of the campaign to replace Lukashenka as president².

Second, a detachment of Russian mercenaries was detained near Minsk a week before the election. A series of explanations was offered by the Russian side, for instance that they were travelling through Belarus to Turkey, Sudan or Venezuela, yet all of them seem implausible. Two aspects of this incident are remarkable—whatever formal work contracts these mercenaries had concluded at the time of the arrest, most of them had participated in the wars in Syria and the Donbas and were affiliated with the so-called ‘Wagner’ private military company. Neither ‘Wagner’ nor other such groups are known to use Belarus as a transit route for their deployments.

Needless to say, both Gazprom and ‘Wagner’ are fully integrated into Putin’s regime and, therefore, these cases are no operations of some rogue or marginal actors. Moreover, the public statements of Babariko only added new questions regarding his affiliations and dependencies. For instance, he quite positively described the scenario of Belarus being incorporated into Russia³. Concerning the controversial package of Belarus–Russia integration measures focused on introduction of a common currency with Russia (i.e., the Russian rouble) in exchange for continued preferences in the gas and oil sphere, which had been fiercely opposed by the Belarusian government because of its harmful consequences for the country despite the Kremlin’s pressure, Babariko made contradictory statements yet indicated his willingness to consider such integration⁴, including intro-

1 Belgazprombank is almost completely owned by Gazprom and Gazprombank of Russia, with each of them holding 49,02%.

2 Александр Класковский, Штабы противников Лукашенко объединились. Что смогут три красивые женщины? 17.07.2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20200717/1595007938-shtaby-protivnikov-lukashenko-obedinilis-chto-smogut-tri-krasivye>

3 Алеўціна Снежына, Глава «Белгазпромбанка»: я не верю в добровольные изменения в нашей стране, 12.02.2020 <https://naviny.media/article/20200212/1581485459-glava-belgazprombanka-ya-ne-veryu-v-dobrovolnye-izmeneniya-v-nashey>

4 «Экономика находится в предсмертном состоянии» Газета „Коммерсантъ“ №96 от 02.06.2020, стр. 4 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4364667>

duction of a common currency with Russia⁵. Of course, these are not the only cases in which the need to investigate probable Russian involvement is obvious. The background of another candidate, Sergei Tikhanovski (after his arrest replaced by his wife, Svetlana, who is claiming victory in the election), remains extremely opaque. After his return from Moscow he entered politics, launching an innovative and intensive campaign throughout Belarus which undoubtedly cost significant sums. Prominent oppositional bloggers and media raised questions about the origin of the money, yet he failed to clarify the issue.⁶

Money remains the biggest elephant in the room in terms of political developments in Belarus this year. Whatever Lukashenka says about Western intervention, anyone with even minimal knowledge of the Belarusian opposition knows that in this campaign Western donors provided no serious assistance to any political actors. Moreover, in recent years such assistance for various segments of Belarusian oppositional community has dwindled. No significant sums could be raised inside Belarus for oppositional political actions either. So where did the money for political projects of the ‘new opposition’ come from? The questionable explanation usually offered insists that these prolonged and intensive political campaigns of 2020 were undertaken by volunteers.

The biggest disappointment, however, is the reluctance of both political activists and the media independ-

ent of Belarusian government to investigate these and other probable traces of Russian involvement (by the Kremlin or other actors). The same media which after the Crimea annexation studied the biographies of Belarusian army generals looking for any signs of pro-Moscow sympathies have this year downplayed such themes. A case in point is the minimal media coverage of the scandalous revelation from Ukrainian activists of Sergei Tikhanovski’s visit to Crimea, links to pro-Moscow activists there and positive comments on Putin’s “Russian World.”⁷

The Belarusian regime—because of its socioeconomic and political models—was a problematic case not only for the EU, but also for Russia. Especially the more liberal members of the Russian economic establishment despised Lukashenka’s state, yet for a long time he could counter them by reaching out to the Russian military and playing on the Soviet nostalgia of ordinary Russians. Yet in the 2010s the latter two factors have weakened—the Russian army and defence industries reduced their dependence on their Belarusian allies, and the Russian population for various reasons lost their sympathies towards Lukashenka. Noticing how Belarusian policies in all areas were increasingly different from the Russian ones, the Kremlin had every reason to get involved in this election as never before—probably playing on all sides of the political confrontation in Belarus.

About the Author

Siarhei Bohdan, Dr. rer. pol., Research Fellow (Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter) at the Freie Universität Berlin, worked from 1999–2010 (with interruptions) for the Minsk-based *Nasha Niva* weekly, and is author of the bimonthly national and regional security review published by Minsk Dialogue.

5 Главный соперник Лукашенко на выборах: вождя должен сменить менеджер, 02.06.2020, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/06/02/glavnyu-sopernik-lukashenko-na-vyborakh-vozhdy-dolzhen-smenit-menedzher.html>

6 Влад Шведович, Раньше фоткался с Собчак, теперь — с Северинцем. Кто же он такой, политический блогер Сергей Тихановский? 21.11.2019 <https://nashaniva.by/?c=ar&i=241067&lang=ru><https://nashaniva.by/?c=ar&i=241067&lang=ru>

7 «Русский Крым/Мир» Сергея Тихановского: Расследование InformNapalm, 25.07.2020, <https://gazetaby.com/post/russkij-krymm-mir-sergeya-tixanovskogo/167052/>

The Standoff over Constitutional Reform in Belarus Leaves the EU and Russia on Opposite Sides of the Barricades

By Fabian Burkhardt (Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

A Geopolitical Crisis

Constitutions are thought to be of little interest in non-democracies. Unconstrained authoritarian rulers bend and amend them at will, and they are regularly violated. Belarus appears to be a case in point: in 1996, Aliaksandr Lukashenka staged a power grab which many see as a *coup d'état*, and in 2004, he had presidential term limits removed altogether. Forty per cent of constitutional articles are either dormant or trumped by more restrictive presidential decrees or administrative regulations according to Anatol Liabedzka, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's ombudsman for constitutional reform (currently under administrative detention himself). Nonetheless, the current standoff shows that constitutions are crucial focal points for the management of regime succession and conflicts. They help coordinate the elite and send signals to the population and the international community alike, even when the autocrat is not constrained.

Belarus's long-term ruler Lukashenka and the opposition leader Tsikhanouskaya (in line with the *Coordination Council*) pursue irreconcilable goals. Lukashenka aims to divert attention away from the recent fraudulent election and wants to wear down and split the opposition by means of a lengthy constitutional amendment process. Its only goal: to bolster his grip on power. By contrast, the opposition seeks free and fair elections *first* before an open debate on the constitution could eventually be launched.

The EU and Russia officially state that a solution to the conflict should be achieved by Belarusians themselves. But the EU supports Tsikhanouskaya's call for new elections and does not recognize Lukashenka as a legitimate president, while Russia endorsed Lukashenka's constitutional reform as a means to overcome the current crisis. What started as a purely internal standoff over the fraudulent election and state repression is now a *de facto* geopolitical conflict.

Lukashenka's Approach: Constitutional Amendments as Diversionary Tactics

Lukashenka's aim is straightforward: the constitution needs to be changed in order to prevent fundamental change in principle. As early as 2012 Lukashenka announced it was necessary to "reform the political sys-

tem of Belarus." Since then, he has built up expectations that change was imminent without making any credible commitments regarding the what, when and how of the amendments to the institutional framework. In 2014, Lukashenka announced that Belarus had established itself as a sovereign state, that the post-communist "transition period was over". Sooner or later, he said, a new Constitution needs to be adopted.

In 2016, Lukashenka called for a group of "wise men and lawyers" to analyze the Basic Law. Moreover, the Belarusian ruler carefully monitored non-democratic power succession management in the post-Soviet space in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. When in 2018 Serzh Sargsyan failed to retain power in the course of Armenia's Velvet Revolution after moving from the presidential into the prime minister's seat, Lukashenka's appetite for constitutional change suddenly waned (<https://presidential-power.net/?p=8485>). But in Spring 2019, Lukashenka announced he had tasked the Constitutional Court to work on suggestions for reform which were then supposed to be implemented at some point after the 2020 presidential elections. At meetings with members of the opposition *Public Constitutional Commission* and the Court's chairman Petr Miklashevich in 2019 and 2020, Miklashevich declined to comment on details of the reform. He was forbidden to do so, he said, by deputy head of the Presidential Administration Olga Chupris, who oversaw the process.

On 28 August at a special meeting of the Permanent Council of the OSCE in Vienna, Belarus presented its plan to exit the crisis by means of constitutional reform. This proposal should be seen in the context of Lukashenka's track record. Lukashenka has been consistently secretive and nontransparent—his secret inauguration on 23 September being the best illustration thereof—and the process is tightly controlled by the Presidential Administration and exclusive: even regime insiders and loyalists have little knowledge or active participation in it. Lukashenka stated that work is underway on the third version of the reform package, but nothing is known about the content of the first two versions. In public, some redistribution of presidential powers to the government and parliament as well as a more active role of political parties—which might also imply including a proportional element into the electoral code—are usually

mentioned as the main content of the reform. The process pursued by Lukashenka includes the following steps: deputies of the House of Representatives are called upon to collect citizen input by 25 October; after a *Nation-wide Discussion* on the amendments, an *All-Belarusian People's Assembly* will be held; and lastly, after a referendum on constitutional changes, new elections are to be held around 2022 or later.

Lukashenka has close to zero credibility when it comes to the content (reducing presidential powers) and process (making it more inclusive) of the reform. His visit to the KGB detention facility on 10 October to meet political prisoners was never meant to be the beginning of a dialogue. The goal was to co-opt Viktor Babaryka and his representatives in the *Coordination Council* and therefore split the opposition through 'divide and rule'. Since 20 August, a criminal case has been opened against the *Coordination Council* for harming national security (Art. 361 of the Criminal Code); on 16 October, Belarusian authorities confirmed there is an international arrest warrant out for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, a move supported by Russia.

Russia Sees Lukashenka's Constitutional Reform as a Mechanism to Stabilize the Situation

Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov supported Lukashenka's pursuit of constitutional reform on multiple occasions. On 02 September, Lavrov stated: "In this respect, we assess [...] the initiative of President A.G. Lukashenka to conduct a constitutional reform as very promising. We think [...] that such a political process could become a useful platform for a national dialogue, could contribute to overcoming the current situation, and could guarantee the normalization of the situation, the stabilization of society." (https://www.mid.ru/ru/vizity-ministra/-/asset_publisher/IcoYBGcCUgTR/content/id/4308072). When hosting his Belarusian counterpart on 14 September in Sochi, Putin called Lukashenka's constitutional reform proposal "logical, timely, reasonable." Lastly, Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov lauded Lukashenka's visit to the KGB prison as an "inclusive dialogue."

This rhetoric appears to suggest that Russia unequivocally supports Lukashenka's plans. In reality, Russia's stance on Belarus is more complicated, as the Kremlin faces a dilemma. Lukashenka's firm grip on power over decades also meant that Lukashenka was the 'only game in town' for Russia to negotiate bilateral relations with. Lukashenka nipped any alternative channels of communication in the bud. The short stint of the hardliner Mikhail Babich as Russian ambassador in Minsk from August 2018 to April 2019 demonstrated how protec-

tive Lukashenka was of his monopoly on power. On the other hand, 'Lukashenka fatigue' is certainly widespread in Moscow: it is well understood that Lukashenka is a geopolitical adventurer whose own interests do not always align with those of Russia, and that his domestic standing is on more shaky ground than ever before.

A tedious constitutional reform process over months or even years equals a protracted 'civil war of attrition' that will be costly both for Lukashenka and the opposition. Moscow is likely to do just as much to keep Lukashenka on top of the process. Moreover, it will try to keep its support as cost-efficient as possible and will seek to make use of Lukashenka's weakness to chip away at Belarusian sovereignty in further negotiations of the bilateral road maps. In the meantime, a protracted constitutional reform process gives Moscow the opportunity to reach out to potential alternatives to Lukashenka to whom it could jump ship if/when the time is ripe. A redistribution of presidential powers to the government, parliament and political parties would mean that alternative centers of power—and therefore interlocutors—could emerge. Moscow, however, has a preference for a strong presidency as it needs only one single reliable interlocutor to do business with. Therefore, even if a 'negotiated power transition' scenario emerged, Moscow's interests would not align with those of the opposition since the negotiated transition would most likely be 'intra-elite'.

The Belarusian Opposition Is United: Free and Fair Elections before Constitutional Reform

Proposals for constitutional reform are a traditional element of opposition politics in Belarus, one such example being the 2013–2015 *People's Referendum* campaign. Even though the Babaryka, Tsikhanouski, and Tsepkala campaigns and later the united opposition candidate Tsikhanouskaya are what one might call the 'new' opposition, they share many commonalities with the 'old' opposition parties and movements.

First, they share the rejection of the 1996 constitution and call for a reform process based on the 1994 constitution, with presidential term limits and proper separation of powers as core demands (<https://democracy-reporting.org/lukashenkos-offer-what-to-think-of-constitutional-reform-in-belarus/>). For example, Viktor Babaryka and his lawyer Maksim Znak proposed a constitutional referendum in June, one day after Babaryka was arrested. Second, beside content, there is also personal continuity with the 'old' opposition. Tsikhanouskaya's representatives for constitutional reform are Anatol Liabadzko, the former long-term chairman of the *United Civic Party*, and Mechislau Hryb, the chairman of the Belarusian Supreme Council from 1994 to 1996 affiliated with the *Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (People's*

Assembly). Together with former Constitutional Court judge Mikhail Pastukhou, they have been active in the *Public Constitutional Commission* since 2019. One project of the *Coordination Council* and the election monitoring platform *Golos* is to collect verified electronic votes for the strategy “free and fair elections first, constitutional reform later” (<https://golos2020.org/constitution>). The campaign *Svezhy Vetsjer*, promoted by *Coordination Council* core member Andrey Yahorau, also petitions to boycott any constitutional change as it perceives Belarusian sovereignty as endangered (<https://канстытуцыя.бел/>). Russia might not only be interested in keeping Lukashenka in power or in negotiating a power transfer, but also in fundamentally undermining Belarusian sovereignty by sneaking in a provision on the priority of the Union State over the Belarusian constitution. Indeed, according to Art. 61 of the Union State Treaty, in the course of deeper integration, the basic laws of both member countries would need to be amended.

What sets the ‘new’ opposition apart from the ‘old’ is that it has managed to stay surprisingly united despite unprecedented pressure by the authorities. Ideational and personal continuity with the ‘old’ opposition, as well as their united position of non-recognition of the August presidential election and of Lukashenka’s constitutional

reform plans, explain why Lukashenka forced presidium members of the *Coordination Council* abroad or arrested them. It also explains why the opposition’s *People’s Ultimatum*, which demands Lukashenka step down before a national strike is announced, set 25 October as the date for the fulfillment of its demands: this is the deadline Lukashenka set for citizen suggestions to his constitutional reform plan.

The stakes are high, and the EU and Russia find themselves on opposite sides of the barricades. Calls upon the OSCE to become a neutral mediator in the conflict between Lukashenka and the opposition are naive at best. Russia (in the person of prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin) already once mediated in a constitutional crisis in 1996. The result: it was only Russia that recognized the 1996 constitutional referendum, while the EU and US rejected it as a *coup d’état*. The effect the 1998–2002 Advisory and Monitoring Group of the OSCE (<https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/99/Wieck.pdf>) had on Lukashenka and the future trajectory of the regime is visible to this day. Whether history will repeat itself this time will largely depend on the courageous Belarusian people themselves.

About the Author

Dr Fabian Burkhardt is a research fellow at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg. His research focuses on executive politics and elites in authoritarian regimes, with a regional focus on Russia and Belarus. He contributed a country study on Belarus for an edited volume on constitutional politics in Central and Eastern Europe (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-658-13762-5_19) and published on concepts of the Belarusian nation among regime, opposition, and civil society actors (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137489449_7).

At a Loss: The Kremlin Has No Winning Belarus Strategy

By Arkady Moshes (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

Well in advance of the Belarusian presidential elections, it was quite clear that Moscow would make an unequivocal choice in favor of the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko. This forecast could be safely made from two arguments.

First, the Kremlin cannot be expected to agree to resolve the question of who should be in power in Belarus through free and fair elections, let alone through popular protest. That could create a precedent for Russia itself, and therefore, ought to be ruled out from the outset. Second, despite his ability to occasionally frustrate

Russia, Lukashenko is generally a partner with whom Moscow can confidently engage. So long as he stays in control in Belarus, the country will not build a trust-based relationship with the West and will not start the economic and political reforms necessary to make Belarus more resilient and less structurally dependent on Russia for economic assistance.

For these reasons it should not have come as a surprise that Moscow placed its diplomatic, economic and information resources behind the self-declared “winner” and even promised to provide police reinforcements if

the situation so required. In view of this, many observers have rushed to the conclusion that Russia is strengthening its grip over its neighbor.

However, this conclusion may well be premature. In reality, preferring the continued incumbency of Lukashenko to the opportunity of resetting relations with Belarus does not create a new situation but simply brings Russia back to the old dilemmas that the Kremlin has not been able to solve for decades.

One crucial problem is that Moscow is very reluctant to take on the risk inherent in replacing Lukashenko with somebody more to its liking. Without Lukashenko in the center and in charge, the system in place, which is based on personal loyalty to the leader, would most likely collapse. Infighting would start among the various groups, and control over the situation could be lost.

After the events of 2020, a hypothetical “replacement” has only become more difficult. On the one hand, Moscow has not been able to protect those opposition figures, such as banker Viktor Babaryko, whom the analytical community has viewed as potentially representing Moscow in Belarusian presidential races. That makes Belarusian elites much more cautious than before when considering whether to play along with Moscow, given how personally unsafe such a position currently is. On the other hand, a departure by Lukashenko *after* the protests—whatever the real reason might be—would inevitably be seen inside the country *as a result* of the protests. This would return political competition to Belarus and make any future ruler more attentive to Belarusian public opinion and elite interests regardless of, and possibly to the detriment of, Moscow’s preferences. In this scenario, instead of dealing with an autocrat with clear interests and understandable instincts, the Kremlin would be facing a figure with divided loyalties who would be much less predictable.

However, sticking with Lukashenko is not a winning strategy either. In the case where Lukashenko becomes so weak that Moscow can impose deep political integration upon him that borders on the loss of the formal sovereignty or territorial integrity of Belarus, the transfer of economic assets under the control of Russian

companies, or the deployment of new Russian military bases in Belarus, a new, and this time national-democratic, uprising may take place. If successful, it would nullify all of Lukashenko’s commitments and all of Russia’s gains. To prevent this, a Russian military intervention might be required, which would be costly both economically and politically and would not necessarily be popular inside Russia. A new crisis could be provoked rather than prevented.

But if Lukashenko is instead able to once again consolidate his regime, the situation will return to the status quo ante: Moscow will keep burning resources to propel the regime in Minsk, whereas the latter will continue to drag its feet and feel in no way obliged to deliver on its promises of integration. At best, Russia will be able to cut the level of the subsidies it provides, as it intended to do before the 2020 elections. However, this cannot be taken for granted, as an inefficient Belarusian economy will need more support for the regime to fund its social contract with the remaining power base. Furthermore, the Kremlin is simply not able to preclude the possibility that several years from now, yet another attempt to achieve normalization with the West will be launched as occurred in 2008 and 2014. The geopolitical motivation for such rapprochement remains intact on both sides, whereas normative factors in the behavior of the West should not be exaggerated. With such motivations in place, a diplomatic algorithm could no doubt be found.

Yet, it is also plausible that even if Moscow massively supports Minsk while respecting the sentiment of the Belarusian people for sovereignty, the Lukashenko regime will nevertheless not be able to stay in power as many dictatorships have done in the past. The gap between the modernizing Belarusian nation and its archaic ruler is widening, and the 2020 protests have reached an unprecedented scale that does not augur well for the regime’s future. The later that Moscow starts to prepare itself for a post-Lukashenko Belarus, the higher the chance is that Russia’s relations with the new Belarus will be very problematic.

About the Author

Dr. Arkady Moshes is Programme Director of the Research Programme on the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in Helsinki. His research focuses on EU–Russian relations as well as the foreign and domestic policies of Ukraine and Belarus. He recently coedited “What has remained of the USSR: Exploring the erosion of the post-Soviet space”, FIIA Report 58, 2019, and coauthored “Belarus in search of a new foreign policy: why is it so difficult?” in *Danish Foreign Policy Review* 2020, Copenhagen, 2020.

Russia vs. the People of Belarus: Towards a Geopolitical Revolution?

By Ryhor Nizhnikau (Finnish Institute of International Affairs)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

Belarusian society has traditionally been considered pro-Russian. Since the beginning of the Belarus–Russia integration projects in the mid-1990s, Russian influence has been derived not only from its financial and economic leverage, military cooperation, and Moscow-aligned President Lukashenko, but also from close linguistic and cultural links between the societies. Russia has been seen as Belarus’s closest friend and most important foreign policy partner.

However, two factors have overshadowed Russia’s soft power in Belarus. One is that Russia has lacked a well-defined policy of attraction towards Belarusian society. Russia’s policies have traditionally prioritized deepening economic and political integration, which depended on engaging with Lukashenko, while its links with and influence over Belarusian society were taken for granted. The promotion of Moscow’s public appeal was de-facto outsourced to Lukashenko, who became the main conduit of Russian soft power in Belarus. The president associated the official state ideology with Russia, promoted the Russian language, controlled the Belarusian Orthodox Church and suppressed societal forces that promoted Belarusian language, culture and heritage. Close economic ties, migration flows, and people-to-people connections made Russia the main work and travel destination for Belarusians. The other factor is that despite the depth of connections to Russia, Belarusian society has been de-facto ambivalent—both pro-Russian and pro-EU. Opinion polls suggest that ideally Belarusians would prefer maintaining good relations and ties with both Russia and the EU.¹

As soon as conditions changed, Russian appeal in Belarus started to weaken. First, after the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine war, Lukashenko’s regime reviewed its ideology and attempted to distance itself from assertive Moscow and its “Russian World”. Pro-Russian ideologues were dismissed from the presidential administration and state mass organizations were re-booted. Belarus’s national idea was redefined from being a cradle of Eastern Slavic civilization and a locomotive of inte-

gration in the post-Soviet space to the defense of the country’s sovereignty. The regime changed its attitudes towards Belarusian language and culture, restricted the activities of pro-Russian groups and media, and empowered civil society to promote Belarusian culture and identity.

Second, society and its attitudes evolved. It outgrew the Soviet nostalgia of 1990s, experienced the economic boom of the 2000s and went through a societal modernization in the 2010s, affecting its values and aspirations². Today, people increasingly envision Belarus as a modern European country. Local opinion leaders closely associate themselves with Central-Eastern Europe, not Russia³. Meanwhile, the conservative turn in Russia ran counter to growing support for market economics, rule of law and self-expression in Belarusian society⁴.

Consequently, the support for Belarus’s independence steadily rose. In 1999, IISEPS recorded that an equal number of Belarusians supported and objected to hypothetical unification with Russia⁵. In 2019, the pro-regime Institute of Sociology showed that only 7.7% would agree to join the Russian Federation; 49.9% were staunch supporters of Belarusian independence, and 36.1% of respondents would only agree to supranational integration with Russia⁶.

Finally, Russia’s economic troubles lowered its attractiveness as a destination for Belarusian workers and, in turn, made Poland increasingly appealing. While Russia’s Ministry of Interior counted around 120 thousand labor migrants from Belarus each year in 2017–2019, over 55 thousand Belarusians received the “Polish Card” in 2017–2019, and 35 thousand were granted work permits in Poland in 2017 alone⁷.

Russia’s demands for deepened integration, including the Medvedev Ultimatum in 2018, secretive negotiations on 30+1 integration maps in 2019, and campaigns in state and non-state media which declared an imminent threat to Belarusian independence have limited Moscow’s political appeal. One result: as recently as 2014, surveys recorded pro-Russian views on the part of Bela-

1 https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_5_2019.pdf

2 See, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/the-belarusian-paradox>

3 <http://www.research.by/publications/wp/2001/>

4 It has been volatile though in the 2010s. See, for instance, Life in Transition Surveys II and III.

5 <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=3125&lang=en>

6 <https://socio.bas-net.by/polovina-belorusov-vystupaet-ne-za-soyuznicheskie-a-za-partnerskie-otnosheniya-s-rossiej/>

7 <https://nashaniva.by/?c=ar&i=218489&lang=ru>

rusians regarding the war in Donbass and the Crimea annexation. In 2016, BAW polls recorded that over 60% preferred union with Russia, but only 40% of respondents supported Union relations with Russia by 2019⁸.

Moscow's support of Lukashenko during the mass protests of 2020 may hasten the erosion of ambivalence towards Belarus's geopolitical orientation and the decline of Russia's popularity in Belarus. Sociologists record that among members of the Belarusian public which take part in large-scale Sunday protests, attitudes towards Russia have gradually radicalized. In mid-August, Russia was viewed rather positively: one joke on the eve of the Putin-Lukashenko summit in Sochi went: "Sasha, drink some tea, it's Putin's treat"⁹. At the end of August, protesters still voiced no concern over Russia, mainly requesting it not to intervene and still hoping Moscow would support the Belarusian people, not Lukashenko. Only a small minority viewed Moscow's actions as unfriendly and dangerous¹⁰. In September, however, concerns over Russia's actions increased sharply¹¹.

Even if Russia's policies towards Lukashenko would hypothetically revert, the growing pro-EU aspirations among the youth indicate that Belarusians' ambiva-

lence towards the country's foreign policy priorities may eventually come to an end. Recent surveys by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) and John O'Loughlin et al. show that younger Belarusians (35–45 and younger) differ dramatically in their values and political attitudes compared to older generations. They prefer Western (52%) to the Russian (13.9%) and Belarusian (14.5%) political systems, and want to move towards the West rather than Russia (50.4% to 23.3%)¹². A June 2020 survey by ZOiS confirms the findings underlining that young Belarusians prefer integration with the EU even if it leads to estrangement from Russia (55% to 14.9%) and strongly oppose union with Russia (70%).

The consolidation of a pro-Western outlook takes time. Moreover, it might lead to another revolution, which, if it takes place, will not be inwards-oriented like that of 2020, but rather a geopolitical one. In the meantime, the West's inconsistent and confused engagements with Lukashenko's regime and its indecisiveness over the future of Belarus only favours Russia and delays the rooting of pro-Western preferences in Belarusian society.

About the Author

Ryhor Nizhnikau is a Senior Research Fellow at the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia programme at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. He focuses on Russian and EU policies in the post-Soviet space as well as domestic developments in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. His publications include *EU Induced Institutional Change in Post-Soviet Space: Promoting Reforms in Moldova and Ukraine* (London: Routledge) and "Love the tender: Prozorro and anti-corruption reforms after the Euromaidan Revolution" (in *Problems of Post-Communism*, forthcoming).

8 <https://news.tut.by/economics/532361.html>; <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5e3ad1429a794740b8d1ecf4>

9 <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/09/18/golos-ulitsy-aktsii-krome-protestnogo-haraktera-imeyut-vse-bolshiy-komponent-solidarnosti.html>

10 <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/08/28/golos-ulitsy-na-aktsii-tsarila-atmosfera-bolshe-napominavshaya-narodnye-gulyaniya-i-karnaval.html>

11 <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/09/09/golos-ulitsy-polovina-oproshennyh-ne-verit-v-vozmozhnost-peregovorov-s-rezhimom.html>; <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/09/03/golos-ulitsy-usilivayutsya-nadezhdy-protestuyuschih-na-raskol-vo-vlastnyh-elitah.html>

12 <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/17/is-belarus-in-the-midst-of-a-generational-upheaval/>

Puzzled by Belarus, Russia Struggles to Respond

By Oxana Schmies and Joerg Forbrig

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

The rapid and dramatic unfolding of events in Belarus has surprised and baffled many inside and most outside of the country. Its closest partner and patron, Russia, is no exception. For over two months now, Russian politicians, pundits, and media have struggled to develop a clear and coherent response to the upheaval that has engulfed their neighbor. This indicates that for the Kremlin all options remain on the table for the solution of the Belarusian drama, which contrasts with Western fears of an imminent Russian intervention to salvage the status quo.

The original expectation in Moscow toward the Belarusian presidential election was that Alyaksandr Lukashenka would once again assert his power but then find himself, given growing discontent in society, in a weakened position. In the eyes of the Kremlin, this would make him more likely to give in to long-standing demands for deeper integration between Belarus and Russia. Such propositions, including a common currency and joint institutions, have long met with staunch resistance from Lukashenka out of fear of surrendering his power.

What the Russian leadership did not seriously expect, however, was the possibility that Lukashenka and his regime could be toppled by a popular uprising. Yet, given the ongoing mass mobilization of Belarusians and the regime's evident failure to suppress citizens any longer, a Belarus without Lukashenka suddenly became a real prospect. Nowhere, apart from the inner circles of power in Minsk, is the headache bigger now than in Moscow.

Surprise and confusion were more than obvious in the immediate Russian responses to the situation. Politically, and still in line with the original expectation, President Vladimir Putin rushed to congratulate Lukashenka and expressed his hope for further integration between their countries. Simultaneously, however, a choir of different and critical takes on Belarus swelled up. As was to be expected, Russian opposition leaders reproached Lukashenka for his conduct in the election and its aftermath. More importantly, influential Kremlin loyalists struck unusually critical tones. Konstantin Kosachev of the Federation Council, Konstantin Zatulin of the State Duma, or Alexey Pushkov, a senator, all lamented fraud and disinformation during the campaign and blamed the Belarusian ruler for his complete ignorance of citizens' concerns. This striking diversity, usually a sign that no clear guidelines had been issued by the Krem-

lin, was mirrored in initial media coverage of the events in Belarus. Whether RIA Novosti, TASS, or Interfax, news agencies provided extensive reporting on protests, strikes, and police brutality.

A somewhat clearer position seemed to emerge only with a meeting of the Security Council two days after the election. According to insiders, the central question discussed was "Who lost Belarus?", indicating that Russian officials effectively saw no way for Lukashenka to stay in power. The new question for the Kremlin became whether the defeated strongman would step down swiftly or, as a preferred option, after longer negotiations between the regime and the opposition. This play for time is another indication of the extent to which Russia was taken aback by events in Belarus.

Lukashenka must have sensed how the dynamics in Belarus and in Russia were turning against him during the first week after the election. Out of desperation, he started to shift the narrative onto a geopolitical plane. In two phone conversations with Putin a week after the elections, he portrayed what was going in the country as Western aggression against him, accusing EU countries of staging a "color revolution" to topple him and NATO of amassing troops on Belarus's western border. This justified, he said, security assistance within the Union State of Russia and Belarus as well as within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-led defense union that Belarus is a member of. The Kremlin remained cautious, however. When Lukashenka claimed that Russia had promised help in averting the alleged threat, Putin's spokesperson swiftly clarified that there was no need for Russian assistance at that stage.

That said, Russian politics and media adopted the narrative of a Western hand in Belarus. State-media reporting variously highlighted alleged links between the opposition and EU countries and the United States. A concerted social-media campaign was launched to discredit the opposition and protesters as Russophobe puppets of the West. Senior Kremlin officials repeatedly slammed foreign—read: Western—meddling in Belarus. Even this anti-Western spin, however, represents a standard position and paranoia among Russian officials and media rather than a stance that is supportive of the Lukashenka regime.

In short, a clear Russian approach to the situation in Belarus is yet to emerge. The Kremlin appears to be weighing two options. The first is to drop Lukashenka.

Any new government will inherit a far-reaching dependency of Belarus on Russia: politically and institutionally, economically and financially, in the energy and media fields. This makes it near impossible, and the complete absence of anti-Russian sentiments among protesters makes it even less likely, that a post-Lukashenka Belarus would turn away from close ties with Russia. The question for Moscow, no less than for Western capitals, is how to facilitate a transition in power, how to avoid violence, and whether to approach this scenario multilaterally or unilaterally. This scenario, whatever its details, would broadly parallel Russia's acceptance of the change in government in Armenia in 2018.

The second option is to try to prop up Lukashenka once again. In the extreme version, this would mean a military intervention, which comes at incalculable risks and costs for Russia. Somewhat more moderately, Moscow may try to help the regime—through less overt security assistance, influencing in traditional and social media, and serious financial support—to ride out the

popular rising. This is the option that the Kremlin has chosen, at least for the time being.

Either way, the Kremlin risks turning yet another neighbor of Russia from friend into foe, suffering further reputational losses from siding with an international pariah, and once again putting up—in a complete U-turn from its recent positions—with a disliked, unreliable, and losing Lukashenka in power in Belarus. This scenario resembles, as many in Moscow will be aware, Russian approaches to Ukraine at various stages over the last 20 years.

The fact that Russia is yet to position itself clearly in the Belarus crisis should be reason for hope among the majority of Belarusians that is bravely trying to rid itself of a brutal dictatorship. It should also be reason for the international community to double down on its effort at facilitating a peaceful transition to a post-Lukashenka Belarus. In such a joint effort, Russia still has the chance to play a less-than-destructive role.

About the Authors

Oxana Schmies is an expert in international relations, security policy and Russian affairs based in Berlin, Germany.

Joerg Forbrig is director for Central and Eastern Europe at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

An [earlier version](#) of this article was published as a Transatlantic Take with the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

INTERVIEW

Lukashenka's Waiting Game: How Russia Has Tipped the Balance in Belarus

Interview with Lev Gudkov (Levada Center for Public Opinion Research, Moscow)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

The following interview was conducted by Manfred Sapper, chief editor of the German-language journal *Osteuropa*, on 30 August 2020. Lev Gudkov, a sociologist, is the director of the Levada Center for Public Opinion Research (Moscow).

Osteuropa: How would you describe what is happening in Belarus?

Lev Gudkov: We are seeing a crisis of the totalitarian regime that emerged in Belarus after the collapse of the totalitarian Soviet system. Regardless how the crisis ends, the authoritarian government will not continue in the form in which it has existed for the past 26 years. It has become obvious that the regime does not have the resources to maintain itself. Without the support of the imperial centre in Moscow, it is unsustainable.

Why have people been able to overcome their fear and cynicism?

There are two explanations, one psychological and the other economic. The economic explanation is that, since 2014, the business model of the Lukashenka regime has ceased to function. One reason for this is the low price of oil. With its two refineries for processing oil from Russia, Belarus is just as dependent on oil as its neighbour. The other reason is the conflict with Moscow. After the annexation of Crimea, Lukashenka tried to exploit the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West in order to extract subsidies from Moscow, discounts on oil and gas and preferential treatment in numerous business matters. Otherwise, he threatened to move Belarus closer to the West.

However, Russia did not allow itself to be blackmailed, and instead cut concessions for Belarus in order to pressure the country into forming a union. Both factors have led to economic stagnation, which was felt particularly by the truck manufacturer MAZ, whose production has decreased by two-thirds in the past few years. The social situation has also worsened. Today, real incomes are still at the same level as they were in 2008.

And the psychological explanation?

What for people in western democracies seems the most normal thing in the world is, for people in totalitarian systems, nothing of the sort. Vote against a dictator requires enormous inner effort. It's not just about overcoming one's internalized fear of the police, of the KGB, or of losing one's job. What is even more difficult is tolerating the emotional dissonance that arises if one wants to escape conformism, which acts like a form of collective capture. Breaking away produces a feeling of disloyalty. Orwell called it thought crime.

But whoever throws off this iron armour, whoever overcomes the feeling that there are no alternatives, suddenly regains their self-respect. The more people that succeed in doing this, the more the feeling of collective euphoria and absolute solidarity spreads. It's hard to describe. People realize that they are not alone, that they have become a force that keeps on attracting others. The extraordinary mobilization that the opponents of Lukashenka have attained has had a snowball effect. Suddenly, fear has gone and with it the habit of powerlessness. Time has suddenly started moving again; eternal stasis has given way to hope for change, for a new life without tyranny and violence. Everyday cynicism and the deep-rooted, chronic feeling of humiliation have given way to a new sense of self-respect, together with a determination to defend it.

What image do people in Russia have of Belarus?

A very positive one. Belarus is said to be the country to which Russia is most favourably disposed. In the surveys carried out by the Levada Centre, it always comes above China and Kazakhstan.

Why is that?

Russia and Belarus have many links. The border is open. Russia is Belarus's most important trading partner and many Belarusians work in Russia. All Belarusians speak fluent Russian. Russians and Belarusians largely share the same culture, many of them even watch the same TV channels. As a result, Russian state propaganda is very influential in Belarus. All of that reduces the prejudices and reservations on both sides.

Are people in Russia in favour of unification?

No. They're not particularly interested in absorbing Belarus into the Russian Federation. According to our surveys, only 13 per cent of the Russian population are in favour of unification. Most people think that relations should stay as they are.

How does this compare with the image Russians have of Ukraine?

Kremlin propaganda portrays Ukraine as a foreign and hostile country. It persistently discredits the Ukrainians' pursuit of democracy and their focus on the West. Until the annexation of Crimea, this was a hard job: relations were too close, the two countries had a shared culture, economic ties, and above all people had family connections. The Maidan Revolution and the annexation of Crimea changed everything. Aggressive state propaganda has succeeded in convincing many people in Russia that there had been a coup in Ukraine, and that radical nationalists had seized

power: the so-called *banderovtsy*, fascists and enemies of Russia. The only course open to Russia, according to the propaganda, was to protect Russian-speaking Ukrainians from genocide. Today Ukraine has an extremely negative image in Russia. That would be unthinkable in the case of Belarus. Until recently, Lukashenka was continually emphasizing the country's common interests with Russia and his loyalty to Soviet values. His outbursts against Moscow after the Kremlin's failed attempt to merge Russia and Belarus into a single state got little coverage in Russia.

Are there similarities between events in Belarus and the upheavals in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine?

The situation in Belarus is completely different. Armenia and Georgia had armed conflicts with neighbours or separatists. Armenia has been at war with Azerbaijan for 30 years over Nagorno-Karabakh. Georgia suffered defeat in the war against Abkhaz separatists in the early 1990s and in the war against Russia in 2008. That left marks.

What sort of marks?

A big role is played by negative consolidation, by which I mean internal social integration achieved by ostracizing external enemies. The wars have had an impact on society and domestic policy, but also on foreign policy towards Russia, the West and Turkey. Belarus doesn't have any of that. Its political culture is much closer to Russia's. Soviet thinking persists, including prejudices against the West.

What is Moscow's attitude towards the protests in Belarus?

There have been various phases. The Putin leadership was obviously surprised by developments and at first didn't have a clear position. The Kremlin took a reserved, even contradictory approach to the election result. Putin congratulated Lukashenka, but his tone was cool and formal. Politicians who usually act as nationalist agitators took a surprisingly negative tone. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy talked of vote-rigging and Konstantin Zatulin announced that Lukashenka had lost the election. Aleksey Pushkov, the chair of the Duma's foreign affairs committee, who normally whips up anti-western feeling, took a similar view. Even Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova effectively conceded Lukashenka's defeat. He had made many mistakes, she said, and bore responsibility for the protests. Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov later corrected this line. Since there had been no foreign independent observers during the election, he said, there was no conclusive evidence for Lukashenka's defeat.

How do you interpret these contradictory signals?

The Kremlin did not want to support Lukashenka openly. Initially, it said that there were no plans to deploy troops to Belarus because there were no grounds to do so under the Collective Security Treaty. At the same time, high-ranking politicians and Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov were warning against any 'interference by foreign external powers in the internal problems of a federate state'. Only Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party, came to the defence of Lukashenka, warning that the actions of the opposition could lead to the country's disintegration.

And Putin?

Putin made no comment. And as long as Putin remains silent, there is no clear position. So the *siloviki* didn't say anything, either. During this phase, something approaching pluralism reigned in the media. Some television stations were talking about the danger of a 'new Mайдan' and western provocation. This 'West' alternated between Poland, Lithuania and the USA. However, other stations broadcasted sympathetic reports on the protests.

During this phase it seemed possible that if the Belarusian opposition could agree terms that suited Moscow, Putin might consent to Lukashenka's removal. The opposition explicitly declared that it wanted to continue the country's close partnership with Russia and maintain economic links. In contrast with the Euro-Maidan, there were no anti-Russian slogans at the Minsk demonstrations.

This phase is over.

Yes. The Kremlin is now helping Lukashenka to 'restore order'. Moscow has despatched secret service agents to Belarus as 'consultants', along with television journalists and technicians to replace their striking Belarusian counterparts.

The Kremlin is now backing Lukashenka's suppression of the demonstrations. This is also reflected in the Russian state media, which has launched a massive campaign to discredit the Belarusian opposition, accusing it of wanting to destroy the alliance between Russia and Belarus.

Putin declared that Russia would establish a 'reserve force from members of the security services' in order to prevent 'armed robbery' and to combat 'extremist forces with political slogans' sent by western intelligence agencies. He indirectly labelled the Coordination Council a tool of 'foreign powers'. After the Belarusian Security Council decided to quash the protests in Belarus on 28 August, Putin proclaimed that 'the presidential election in Belarus is over'.

The Belarusian opposition doesn't see it like that. Tens of thousands of people continue to take to the streets.

The only way the opposition can force the regime to change course is by mobilizing even more people. This would have to involve a general strike across the whole of industry and transport sector. Employees of state television and radio would have to refuse to work and the army and the police would have to declare themselves neutral.

Is there a risk that violence will escalate?

That's up to those in power. Consider the putsch in Moscow, 30 years ago in August 1991. Back then, the army, the KGB and the police refused to comply with the directives of the Emergency Committee. Their formal justification was that it was not clear who the legitimate ruler of Russia was. However, the 'Tbilisi syndrome' also played a big part. The army's reputation had been severely damaged after the suppression of peaceful protests in 1989 and 1990, first in Tbilisi, then in Baku, Vilnius and Riga. The generals did not want to take responsibility for further violence against the civilian population.

There is no sign that power apparatus in Belarus has been paralysed in a such a way. If Lukashenka were to decide to shoot at the demonstrators, that would inevitably happen at some point. But it can be a long time before cracks appear. And the opposition doesn't have time. People's willingness to take to the streets is subsiding.

The law of the excluded middle?

A round table to prepare for free and fair elections would have been one way out of the impasse. But that's now out of the question. Lukashenka is sticking to his original line: 'new elections over my dead body!' He wants to wear down the movement by digging in and carrying out further repressions. He's waiting for his opponents to show signs of exhaustion so that he can set the state security bloodhounds on them. He wants revenge. Anyone who has taken part in protests or strikes will be subject to harsh penalties.

Do you predict a Belarusian variant of Tiananmen, with tanks crushing peaceful demonstrators?

Hopefully it won't come to that. The regime in Minsk prefers targeted repression: members of the Coordination Council and the leaders of strikes are being taken out of action through prison sentences. All other visible members of the protest movement will be blacklisted, they will lose their jobs.

After a short time when it looked as if the regime might crumble, Lukashenka seems to have got the upper hand again. It's possible that he will try to hasten the course of events by declaring a state of emergency, ordering a lock-down and closing the borders. He's already prepared the ideological ground for this by claiming that Belarus is being threatened from outside and that a conspiracy is underway. There's reason to fear that he'll be able to see this through, because he has the administration, the army and the forces of the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, behind him. Neither can it be ruled out that the regime could stage an incident on the border, in order—as happened in Poland in 1980—to impose martial law and begin suppressing the movement completely. This kind of 'incident' would provide the justification for troops to be sent from Russia to 'normalize the situation'. But that would spell the end of the Lukashenka regime's independence.

What options are left to the opposition?

It is extremely unlikely that the opposition will be able to achieve its aims through purely non-violent and constitutional methods, especially as the country's judiciary and all other state institutions are completely under the control of the dictator. The opposition lacks organization. Initially, its horizontal mobilization structures were an advantage,

but such an amorphous, fluid community is difficult to sustain over a longer period. The momentum of a movement collapses if there is no organization to plan and determine what the next steps will be, and in what order problems should be addressed.

Are the protests in Belarus influencing public opinion in Russia?

Events are being closely monitored. They are seen as a prototype for potential developments in Russia. The Kremlin media are now crying that a coup is being orchestrated from abroad, as supposedly happened in Georgia, and twice in Ukraine. A few liberal commentators are linking the protests in Belarus with those in Khabarovsk, where people have been demonstrating for over two months against the detention of the local governor. But the Kremlin propaganda machine has succeeded in convincing many people that the protests against the regime in Belarus represent a threat.

How?

The results of a survey the Levada Center carried out between 20 and 26 August show that Russian society has a predominantly negative reaction to the events in Belarus. Fear of destabilization is reflected in a significant increase in support for Putin and other representatives of the Moscow leadership compared with four weeks previously. A large number of respondents acknowledge—albeit reluctantly—that people are protesting in Belarus because they have had enough of Lukashenka, because the standard of living in Belarus has declined, and because they are scandalised by vote rigging and by the violence of the police. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents mentioned one of these factors. And yet 39 per cent believe the protests were provoked by the West or the Belarusian opposition. Whether it's out of a desire to conform, fear of change or for some other reason, 57 per cent of respondents hope that Lukashenka will remain president, and only 17 per cent say they support Tsikhanouskaya. The rest say that they are not following events or that the election result is of no importance to them. Forty-eight per cent think that by and large the elections were run 'properly', while 36 per cent believe that the official results were falsified.

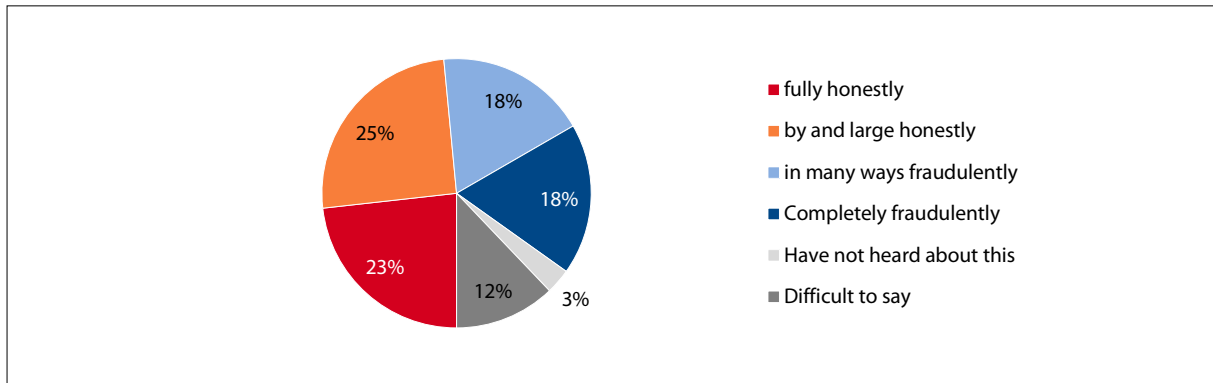
There is no doubt that attitudes in Russia are strongly influenced by state propaganda, which frightens them with narratives about large-scale unrest, a 'new Maidan' and hostile acts on the part of the West. It is above all older people with basic educational qualifications employed by the state that are susceptible to such narratives, that is to say the Putin regime's social base.

Translated by Sarah Rimmington

The original (longer) Russian version of the interview is available on the website of the journal *Osteuropa* at <https://www.zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/blog/vlast-i-nasilie/> The interview was first published in German on the journal's website at www.zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/blog/themenschwerpunkt/fokus-belarus/

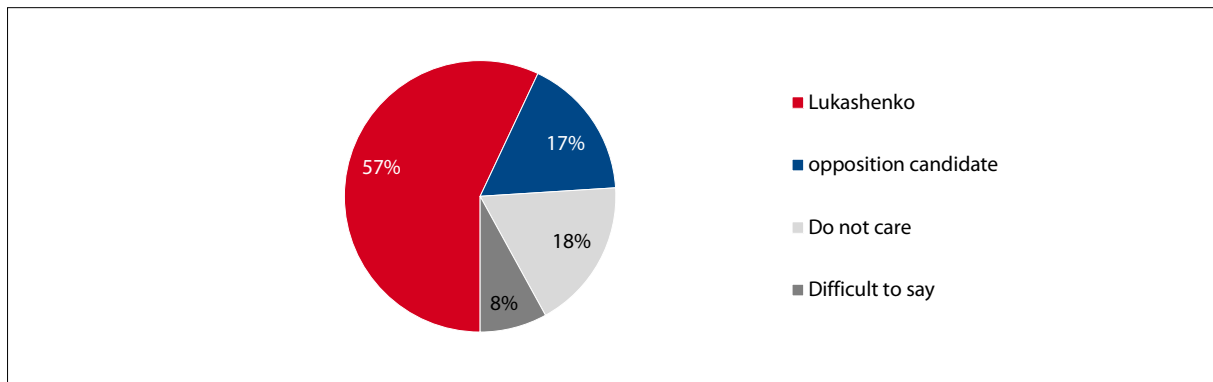
The Attitude of the Russian Population towards the Presidential Elections of 09 August 2020 and Related Protests in Belarus

Figure 1: Do You Think That the Presidential Elections in Belarus Were Conducted Honestly or Fraudulently?



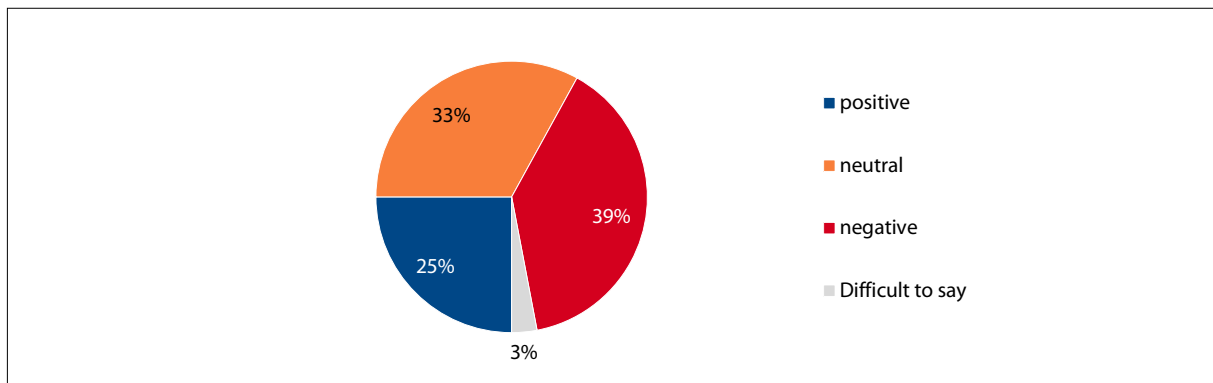
Source: representative poll of the Russian population by the Levada Center, last week of August 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/08/27/vybory-i-protesty-v-belarusi/>

Figure 2: Would You Prefer Alexander Lukashenko or an Opposition Candidate as President of Belarus?

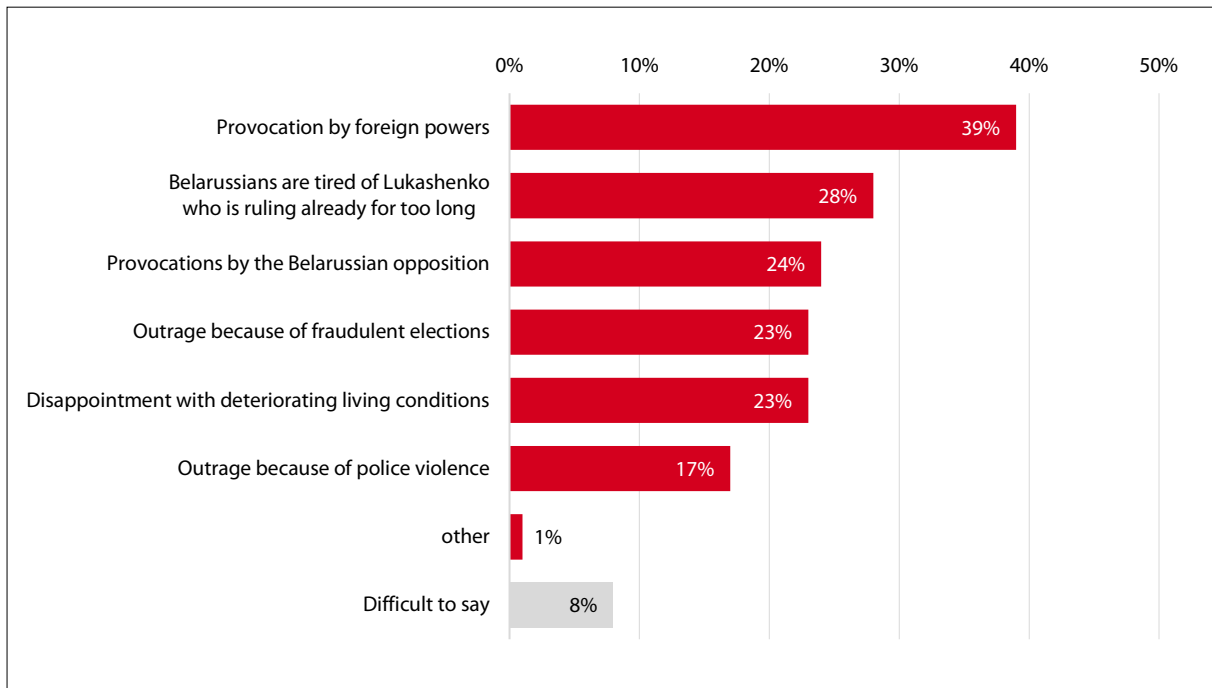


Source: representative poll of the Russian population by the Levada Center, last week of August 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/08/27/vybory-i-protesty-v-belarusi/>

Figure 3: Protesters Think That Lukashenko in Fact Lost the Elections and Demand His Resignation. What Is Your Attitude towards People Who Participate in These Protests?



Source: representative poll of the Russian population by the Levada Center, last week of August 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/08/27/vybory-i-protesty-v-belarusi/>

Figure 4: In Your Opinion, What Are the Reasons for the Protests in Belarus? (multiple answers possible)

Source: representative poll of the Russian population by the Levada Center, last week of August 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/08/27/vybory-i-protesty-v-belarusi/>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Center for Eastern European Studies at the University of Zurich (<http://www.cees.uzh.ch>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University (<https://ieres.elliott.gwu.edu>), and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), and the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html). The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

To subscribe or unsubscribe to the Russian Analytical Digest, please visit our web page at <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to the interdisciplinary analysis of socialist and post-socialist developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The major focus is on the role of dissent, opposition and civil society in their historic, political, sociological and cultural dimensions.

With a unique archive on dissident culture under socialism and with an extensive collection of publications on Central and Eastern Europe, the Research Centre regularly hosts visiting scholars from all over the world.

One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular e-mail newsletters covering current developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

The CSS combines research and policy consultancy and, as such, functions as a bridge between academia and practice. It trains highly qualified junior researchers and serves as a point of contact and information for the interested public.

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies is home to a Master's program in European and Eurasian Studies, faculty members from political science, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, and other fields, visiting scholars from around the world, research associates, graduate student fellows, and a rich assortment of brown bag lunches, seminars, public lectures, and conferences.

The Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich

The Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich is a center of excellence for Russian, Eastern European and Eurasian studies. It offers expertise in research, teaching and consultancy. The CEES is the University's hub for interdisciplinary and contemporary studies of a vast region, comprising the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the countries of the post-Soviet space. As an independent academic institution, the CEES provides expertise for decision makers in politics and in the field of the economy. It serves as a link between academia and practitioners and as a point of contact and reference for the media and the wider public.

Any opinions expressed in the Russian Analytical Digest are exclusively those of the authors.

Reprint possible with permission by the editors.

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2020 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de • Internet: www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html