

# Belarus in Upheaval: Three Scenarios

As Alexander Lukashenko has become a toxic figure at home and abroad, three scenarios for the regime's future are perceptible. Each has important foreign policy implications, and Russia is key in all of them.

By Benno Zogg

**T**riggered by outrageous election fraud and wanton violence by government forces, Belarus has seen months of protests and civic activism against the regime. Alexander Lukashenko has lost legitimacy among a majority of Belarusians, and his rhetoric has gotten increasingly martial and erratic. The West is appalled by the blatant violation of liberal values in a country located at a critical geopolitical fault line with Russia. As such, the past months have reversed years of Belarusian rapprochement with the West following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Most Western states have enacted sanctions against members and supporters of the regime. This appears to leave Lukashenko with only one influential partner: Russia. However, the Kremlin's support cannot be taken for granted and comes with many conditions.

Three scenarios are perceptible within the next five years and imply different fates for Lukashenko himself, who concentrates power in his hands. While the protests in Belarus do not revolve around geopolitics, they have considerable implications for Belarus' foreign policy and its role in Eastern European security, which is the focus of this analysis. Russia has a pivotal role to play in all scenarios. Already, the Kremlin appears to be working towards managing a transition. Observers wonder what degree of integration Russia may seek, how much sovereignty Belarus will be left with, and whether Lukashenko may prevail as the key political figure. As the situation re-

mains volatile and forecasting is difficult, observers and policymakers will need to consider all options.

## Between Partner and Pariah

Due to its geographic location between Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltics, Belarus is of strategic importance in defense planning and as an energy transit route for the West and Russia alike. Since Lukashenko was elected president in 1994, Russia has been Belarus' closest ally. For Russia, keeping Belarus in its sphere of influence is an

### Key Points

- ▮ Despite widespread protests, Lukashenko violently holds on to power – with Russian support. Yet political change is inevitable, and all eyes are on the Kremlin.
- ▮ Three scenarios are foreseeable: a managed revolution removing Lukashenko, a dictatorship following the current trajectory, and a managed transition as a most likely long-term scenario.
- ▮ Even within the managed transition scenario, different degrees of pluralism and dependence on Russia are possible, with varied implications for stability in Eastern Europe.
- ▮ In the long run, the West may come to terms with a new Belarusian government. This means finding a delicate balance between targeted sanctions and support for civil society, while avoiding East-West polarization.

imperative. The bilateral relationship has seen regular irritation, though. Most delicately, Belarus has not recognized the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Minsk started hosting talks on Ukraine and increasingly flirted with the West instead, partially to decrease its economic dependence on Russia (see [CSS Analysis No. 231](#)).

As a result, the EU lifted virtually all sanctions against the regime in 2016. It did so largely for geopolitical reasons: Lukashenko's rule remained authoritarian, but he had become more willing to alienate the Kremlin. The West valued an independent Belarus and Lukashenko's efforts to foster security and transparency in Eastern Europe, as seen, for example, in his invitation of foreign observers to military exercises. Albeit hesitantly, Western states and the EU re-initiated several technical cooperation projects, and the EU eased its visa regime. High European officials, ministers, and heads of governments met with Lukashenko. In January 2020, Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis met Lukashenko and opened a full-fledged Swiss Embassy in Minsk.

Not long after becoming the West's partner, however, Belarus once again became a pariah. Since August 2020, Belarusians have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers to demand fair elections and an end to violence. Lukashenko offered only violence, no genuine dialogue. He has tried to paint the protests as a "color revolution" instigated by foreign powers. He cancelled all accreditations of journalists working for Western media and expelled several diplomats. Furthermore, Belarus mobilized troops to counter an imaginary NATO invasion.

The EU, the US, Switzerland, Ukraine, and others have imposed asset freezes and travel bans on dozens of members of the regime and businesspeople. Financial support for the Belarusian regime, apart from non-political purposes such as pandemic relief, will cease. Belarus was also stripped of co-hosting the 2021 Ice Hockey World Cup. Investments by Western companies and development banks in Belarus will drastically decrease. Furthermore, several Western states and the EU have started supporting Belarusian civil society organizations and free media, many of which operate in exile. Dozens of Western governments have received opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya.

Accordingly, the West has sent strong signals to disapprove of the regime and to display solidarity with the protest movement. However, absent strong political and economic ties to Belarus, the West has few levers to influence developments. It fears that broad sanctions would only aggravate Belarus' economic crisis and increase the country's dependence on Russia. Lukashenko's personality



In Sochi in September 2020, Vladimir Putin granted Belarus a loan of USD 1,5 billion that was widely considered a gesture of support for Lukashenko's repression of protests. [kremlin.ru](#)

makes him unlikely to bow to Western pressure anyway, nor would members of the elite – who owe Lukashenko their positions – easily turn against him. Russia is the only outside actor with enough leverage to change calculations in Belarus to that end.

#### Pivot to Russia

Regular Russian-Belarusian disputes have occurred within a generally very close bilateral relationship. The two countries form a vague Union State, which entails elements such as the free movement of people and close military cooperation. Belarus is a member of all Russian-led integration projects. The state-led model of the Belarusian economy has heavily relied on subsidized energy from its larger neighbor and on the Russian market. As Belarusians predominantly speak Russian, Russia's influence in the spheres of culture and media is also considerable. Recent events only increased its leverage in the short term. Lukashenko's requests to "older brother Russia" were outright pleas for help. After some hesitation, the Kremlin provided loans to Belarus, promised that a reserve of security forces would be ready to step in at Lukashenko's request, and agreed with Belarus on the terms of Russian energy deliveries.

These steps were a signal that the Kremlin's bets are on Lukashenko for the time being, for geopolitical and domestic political reasons. Even though his opponents have declared their commitment to maintaining good relations with Russia, Lukashenko guarantees this more reliably. Successful protests in Belarus (literally "White Russia") would also set a terrible precedent for the Putin regime, which is already confronted with domestic protests from the Far East to the ones around Alexei Navalny.

Currently, this reliance on Russia's grace severely restricts Belarus' room for maneuver in domestic and foreign policymaking. However, it appears that the Kremlin is

not yet exploiting the situation to demand far-reaching concessions, such as further economic integration or a Russian military base on Belarusian territory. Such demands – or, even more so, an outright intervention – would stir anti-Russian sentiment among Belarusians, which is already slowly on the rise as Russia is propping up the unpopular regime.<sup>1</sup> A Belarusian population that is alienated by the Kremlin would be detrimental to Russian influence in the country.

### Three Scenarios for Belarus

While events in Belarus are still in flux, three scenarios and their differing foreign policy implications are perceptible within the next five years: the *managed revolution*, the *dictatorship*, and a middle way of a *managed transition* as the foreseeable long-term scenario.

A *managed revolution* – almost an oxymoron in name – would see the protest movement’s major demand realized: Lukashenko would be pushed out of office and, most likely, the country. Events leading up to that would have unfolded as follows: Instability, reinvigorated protests, strikes, and further economic decline would become untenable for the regime. Large parts of the current political and economic elites and the security forces would shift allegiance. Such a move may appear sudden but would be preceded by lengthy deliberations to overcome the power pyramid that Lukashenko established. Russia would need to endorse toppling Lukashenko – the “managed” part of this scenario. One version of the “revolution” would resemble a coup by the security forces. Another would include proponents of the protest movement and progressive members of the current elites. Such a government would maintain friendly ties with Russia but would also improve relations with other actors. If it is democratically legitimized, the EU would intensify its engagement and might offer a stabilization fund for a democratic Belarus. In the

long term, this would risk Russia’s unique standing in the country.

Accordingly, Russia is hesitant to endorse any revolutionary developments in Belarus. A *dictatorship* scenario would be more predictable and would follow the current trajectory. Given ongoing protests, the Belarusian regime is already escalating repression. It may also start employing lethal violence to intimidate opponents. Trade with and investments from the West would decrease, for which Russia and China could inadequately compensate. An economic downturn and rising poverty would be inevitable. Eventually, the Lukashenko regime would entrench a police state. Belarus would be perceived as fully a Russian satellite and a pariah on the international stage.

The current *dictatorship* trajectory appears unstable and unsustainable to many actors and observers, though. Only 20–30 per cent of the population supports Lukashenko. Frustration among the Belarusian elite is also said to be high.<sup>2</sup> The Kremlin was never fond of Lukashenko as a person, either. Relying on Lukashenko amounts to betting on a dead horse. Consequently, the Kremlin increasingly appears to prefer a *managed transition* to increase the number of political actors in the medium to long term. Since 2018, Lukashenko himself has hinted at constitutional reform, but his promises change like the weather. The fundamental difference between the two actors lies in the fact that Lukashenko drags his feet while the Kremlin attempts to accelerate reform.

Most likely, a new constitution would foresee a stronger role for the currently negligible parliament and political parties. The “new” elite would likely rely on a few political actors: current regime insiders, security forces, oligarchs, and some pro-Russian figures more acceptable to the opposition.

As opposed to the *managed revolution* scenario, pressure on Lukashenko to ease his grip on power would mount more slowly, but steadily. In the medium term, Lukashenko may hold on to a gradually less omnipotent presidency or assume the leadership of another body, such as the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly (which gathered in mid-February 2021) or a National Security Council (following Kazakhstan’s model). Everyone, including Lukashenko, is keen that the next president will not be as powerful as the current one. If needed, Lukashenko will eventually be offered a face-saving exit or exile.

While street protests or popular opinion have some impact, intra-elite deliberations and consultations with the Kremlin are decisive. The lifeline that the Kremlin has extended to Lukashenko will be its instrument to demand change. As protests are likely to decrease, such a

#### Further Reading

Minsk Dialogue, *The Belarus Crisis: Mapping Uncertainty in Regional Security*, Virtual Forum 2020 Non-Paper, 2020.  
Compiles analyses on Belarus’ future and its external context.

Katia Glod, *The Future of Belarus* (Washington DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2020).  
Characterizes the ongoing protests, the regime’s reactions, and potential, albeit limited ways for the West to engage.

Artyom Shraibman, *The House that Lukashenko Built: The Foundation, Evolution, and Future of the Belarusian Regime* (Moscow: Carnegie, 2018).  
Comprehensively traces the history and structure of the Lukashenko regime as well as its relations with society and the outside world.

Belarusian regime – even including Lukashenko – may gradually ease the level of repression. However, the population will only be incorporated to a limited extent. International mediation by a third-party state or an organization like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) appears unlikely.

Elements of the *managed transition* are already visible now. Many other elements are likely to be ongoing behind closed doors, as leaked Kremlin documents indicate.<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin is working on creating more decentralized political forces, specifically a political party that can win the next elections. To boost these actors, the Kremlin will employ its political and cultural influence – including through social and traditional media, NGOs, and direct funding.

### The Road Ahead

The foreign policy consequences of all three scenarios are considerable. A democratic *managed revolution* remains a possibility, albeit an unlikely one. Currently, the Belarusian *dictatorship* is hardening, which leaves the country wholly dependent on Russia. This is likely to be a transitional phase during which the Kremlin is preparing a *managed transition* towards a post-Lukashenko order. In all three scenarios, any Belarusian government will need to take steps towards economic diversification and liberalization to halt economic decline and avoid a debt crisis. This would entail the partial privatization of state-owned companies and key infrastructure, through which Russian companies and oligarchs could secure Belarusian assets and lasting Russian influence.

A transition phase may well be lengthy, messy, and painful, however “managed” it appears overall. Eventually, Belarus is likely to exhibit a more pluralist and parliamentary political system, albeit hardly democratic by Western standards. Lukashenko may even still hold a formal position. For the Kremlin, it is not an option to lose Belarus as its closest ally and a buffer towards the West. In the long run, Belarus may still undertake efforts to deviate from Moscow’s foreign policy line and resist its demands for integration. Such a “multi-vector” foreign policy is integral to Belarusian sovereignty and in line with increasing national consciousness. The Kremlin may underestimate the possibility that Belarus will never be as unequivocally pro-Russian as before 2014.

In Eastern Europe, and with respect to Ukraine and the Baltics in particular, Belarus currently adds instability instead of easing it. Repairing pragmatic neighborly relations will take any Belarusian leadership considerable time and energy. The West’s engagement on issues of common concern that has characterized its approach to Belarus since 2014 needs to continue. This includes engaging with the Belarusian bureaucracy on technical issues. Meanwhile, the West will and should maintain sanctions against individuals of the regime, continue to endorse democratic elements in society, and offer support for media, civil society, and victims of repression. Much of their activity will remain in exile, and the societal trauma from this period of upheaval will take much time and effort to heal.

Although few Western politicians would consider or admit this possibility now, the West, too, may accept a Belarusian regime emerging from such a transition. Such a regime would not be fully democratic but ideally would refrain from using violence against its citizens, restore personal liberties, and uphold Belarus as an independent state close to Russia but without Russian troops on its soil. This would reflect the eagerness of both the protest movement and the broader Belarusian society to avoid polarization and conflict. In the absence of a realistic prospect of Belarus joining the EU or NATO or desiring such a step, there may be a tacit agreement between the West and Russia to tolerate this next Belarusian regime, albeit grudgingly. Overall, the foreign policy of Belarus five years from now may not be too different from that of five years ago. In the meantime, as developments and their foreign policy implications are difficult to foresee, all eyes will be on the Kremlin.

### Selected sources

- 1 Artyom Shraibman, *Why Belarusians are Turning Against Russia* (Moscow: Carnegie, 2020).
- 2 Katia Glod, *The Future of Belarus* (Washington DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2020), p. 9.
- 3 The Insider, *План Б. Кремль создает в Белоруссии свою партию: против Лукашенко, но за интеграцию с РФ* [Plan B: The Kremlin creates its own party in Belarus: against Lukashenko, but for integration with Russia], 25.12.2020.

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