

Puzzled by Belarus, Russia Struggles to Respond

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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 nearly two weeks 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 is suddenly a real prospect. Nowhere, apart from the inner circles of power in Minsk, is the headache bigger now than in Moscow.

Surprise and confusion have been 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 Kremlin, 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.

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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 last weekend, 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 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 this stage.

That said, Russian politics and media have partly adopted the narrative of a Western hand in Belarus. State-media reporting highlights alleged links between the opposition and EU countries and the United States. A concerted social-media campaign has been launched to discredit the opposition and protesters as Russophobe puppets of the West. Senior Kremlin officials have repeatedly slammed foreign—read: Western—meddling in the 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 could 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.

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 all 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.

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