

Staying the Course on Belarus Is Not an Option for the United States

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The presidential “election” in Belarus on Sunday saw another clear manipulation by the entrenched authoritarian Alexander Lukashenka to preserve his presidential power and hold back democratic change. The marred and falsified contest, one of the most contentious of his reign, saw significant support for opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Moreover, polling and historic mass rallies prior to voting point to a political sea of change in Belarus. It is quite possible that the true results would show that Tsikhanouskaya won, despite Lukashenka not allowing a free, peaceful, and fair election.

Nevertheless, the fake election is less significant compared to what has taken place on the ground and what could happen next. Lukashenka sought to brutally prevent political change by jailing opposition figures, activists, and others, as well as by clamping down on the media and free assembly. On the day of election the regime shut down the internet and turned the security forces violently on peaceful protesters. And now, just two days after the election, Tsikhanouskaya has had to flee to Lithuania. But Lukashenka’s appalling and continued crackdown should not distract observers from appreciating that this is a turning point for the country.

The Belarusian people’s strong desire for peaceful change, stronger national identity, and better governance—particularly given Lukashenka’s failed response to the coronavirus pandemic and poor economic stewardship—is unlikely to be extinguished by the regime’s actions. Citizens are showing impressive fortitude in demanding change through ongoing mass protests. One has to admire the strength and determination of Belarusians and political newcomers like Tsikhanouskaya, under threat to their well-being and families, to push for fair elections and change.

Senior leaders in the United States and in Europe, who have opened the door to expanded political and economic relations with Belarus in recent years, need to recognize the permanent changes on the ground. They must make clear to Lukashenka that violating human rights and rigging elections are unacceptable, have consequences, and will cause a serious step backward in bilateral relations.

Lukashenka should not be given the impression that the United States is willing to turn a blind eye. When Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Minsk in February, he emphasized improvement on democracy and human rights as a key component of strengthening relations. It is time for him and the rest of the administration to live up to that statement and demonstrate (as prior Republican and Democratic administrations have done) that the United States values democracy, human rights, and free and fair elections. This is not, as

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Lukashenka told Pompeo in February, a position formulated by previous U.S. administrations from “baseless misunderstandings.”

Washington Must Act

The administration and Congress must immediately and strongly rebuke Lukashenka and signal to Belarusians that the United States acknowledges the changes on the ground and seeks to re-calibrate its engagement with Minsk. The administration should also be crystal clear that it will not remove human-rights-related sanctions on Belarusians, including those targeting Lukashenka under the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act, the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006, and the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011. The United States should implement additional sanctions if Lukashenka continues to use violence.

Condemnation must only be the beginning. The United States, the EU, and European countries should additionally make clear that the path for normalization of political and economic relations with Belarus will be directly connected to how Lukashenka and his government meet the democratic aspirations of Belarusian people. This must include the release of all political prisoners and ending violence against opposition figures, civil society, the media, and activists.

They should also condition diplomatic engagement on Lukashenka fulfilling the demand of the opposition that a free, fair, and transparent election be held within three to six months. In that case, the highest international standards should then be upheld, including allowing the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to deploy election observers. This is not just critical to the future of the country, but also in the economic and security interests of the transatlantic community, as the experience of other transforming democracies across central and eastern Europe has shown.

In addition to a firm diplomatic response, the United States—which is soon to have its first ambassador in Minsk in over a decade, Julie Fisher—should double down on its efforts to engage Belarusian citizens. It should continue to support continued economic changes, democratic progress, and civil society. The United States and its partners in Europe should also prioritize additional coronavirus assistance in the near term. Along with the IMF and other international financial institutions, they should also condition economic support on the fulfillment of electoral changes, end of violence, release of prisoners, and other demands. Lukashenka’s poor stewardship of the economy and unwillingness to take the pandemic seriously should be signals that macroeconomic assistance should not be wasted by being given to the government without conditionality.

The Russia Factor

Another significant reason for the United States to rebuke Lukashenka and reform its dealings with Belarus is the significance this will have for helping the country remain independent vis-à-vis Russia. President Vladimir Putin moved quickly to congratulate Lukashenka. Strong support for the sovereignty of Belarus should continue to be a U.S. priority. The potential for the Kremlin to meddle in the country—as it has in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere—increases as Lukashenka grows weaker domestically. The detention in Belarus of 30 fighters from the Russian mercenary Wagner Group and accusations by Lukashenka of Russian election interference have created a new source of friction. This has led to threats of a harsh response from Russia and loss of trust between Minsk and Moscow.

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Other factors contributing to the concerns about Moscow's intentions include Putin's growing weakness in polls at home, a failing Russian economy and coronavirus response, and the protests in Khabarovsk. The Kremlin could decide to target Lukashenko and Belarus to shift the attention of an unhappy Russian public or to achieve the consolidation of the Russia-Belarus Union State.

Based on his past actions, Putin is unlikely to accept a democratic Belarus that seeks to move further from Russia's orbit. In Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin failed to keep its proxy Viktor Yanukovich in power as the country pivoted toward the West, and a frustrated Putin doubled down with political pressure and territorial aggression to expand Russia's influence in the country. Now the Kremlin is likely to do whatever is necessary to prevent Belarus from becoming democratic and weaken its ties to Russia. There is plenty of evidence that it has invested significant resources over the last several years to prevent a more independent Belarus and to play down Belarusian self-identity. Interestingly, Lukashenka has also used the threat of a Ukrainian-style liberal uprising as justification to crack down on opposition.

The United States and its European partners need to be clear with Russia about the consequences of intervening in Belarus. It is essential that the U.S. administration lay down a marker with Putin that goes beyond expressing support for Belarus's sovereignty and territory. Raising the prospect of punitive actions, including sanctions like those that followed Russia's illegal actions in Ukraine, would be a strong signal.

This is a dangerous moment for Belarusians. It also has security ramifications for the United States and Europe, especially in the Baltic countries, Poland, and Ukraine, where Russia is working hard to consolidate its influence. A tepid Western reaction to Lukashenka's repression will not just be a tremendous disappointment to the Belarussian people, it will also be a major blow to fragile states looking to established democracies for support at a time of rising authoritarian threats.

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