

What Is the Kremlin up to in Belarus?

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Against the background of ongoing mass protests in Belarus, a critical meeting will take place this Monday in the Russian Black Sea city of Sochi. Alexander Lukashenka, the Belarusian strongman struggling to hold on to power, meets with Vladimir Putin, his key supporter. This first personal meeting since a popular uprising began against Lukashenka's massively falsified reelection is an important indicator of where the political crisis in Belarus is headed. The fate of Lukashenka is at stake, as is that of the democratic movement in Belarus and the continued existence of an independent Belarusian state. Russia undoubtedly plays a central role in all these respects. However, the EU can and must bring to bear its influence more decisively than before.

The Belarusian summer surprised Russia no less than most in Europe and even in Belarus itself. The Kremlin had assumed that Lukashenka would assert his power but would be weakened, given rising discontent in Belarusian society. Moscow reckoned that this would finally force Minsk to make concessions in the direction of closer political integration between the two countries, which Putin had long called for, but which Lukashenka had so far rejected to preserve his own power. The fact that the continued existence of the Lukashenka regime would be seriously questioned by a popular uprising was unexpected for the Russian leadership. Mirroring that, Russian reactions to the events in Belarus were contradictory. Putin's congratulations on Lukashenka's election victory were accompanied by clear criticism from high-ranking Moscow politicians of the Belarusian ruler's actions, and the Russian state media reported unusually openly on election fraud, mass protests, and police violence.

It was not until about a week after election day that a Russian policy crystallized that, at least for the time being, aims at supporting the Lukashenka regime. Moscow dispatched dozens of its propagandists to the Belarusian state media, which had been weakened by strikes. Putin announced the formation of a police reserve to support Lukashenka in case of need. Pro-Russia executives were installed at the top of the Belarusian security apparatus, likely at Moscow's insistence. An urgently needed refinancing of Belarusian debts to Russia was promised, and the Kremlin urged Russian banks to ensure the liquidity of Belarusian financial institutions. In addition, there is clear political backing of Minsk by Moscow, not least in form of a rejection of the Coordination Council, the platform for the many Lukashenka opponents in Belarus, or through accusations of alleged Western interference in the country.

It is this Russian positioning that has clearly prolonged the Belarus crisis in recent weeks. A standoff persists between the majority of society that demands a peaceful change of power and new elections, and a regime that is clinging to power more and more ruthlessly. Moscow may have, in supporting Lukashenka, gained time

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to overcome its initial surprise. Nevertheless, the current Kremlin help does not mean that Russia's further course of action in Belarus is already charted. Instead, at least four scenarios are still conceivable.

First, Moscow may want to extract concrete and immediate concessions from Minsk. Apart from the deeper integration of the two states, the Kremlin has long been calling for the privatization of lucrative Belarusian state-owned companies to Russian capital, the stationing of Russian military bases in Belarus, or the clear recognition of Moscow's conquests of recent years, including of the Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia or the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. Putin may now want to see Lukashenka settle these long-standing bills. This would, of course, further strengthen the already complex and close Belarusian dependence on Russia.

Second, it cannot be ruled out that the Kremlin will now formally advance the long-term integration of Belarus and Russia. The common union state has long existed on paper only but has been the subject of heated disputes between Minsk and Moscow for the last two years. The latter could now, since Lukashenka's future is in Putin's hand, demand a final agreement on the remaining unsettled questions of common institutions and currency. This would basically seal the Anschluss of the smaller to the larger neighbor.

Third, it is possible that Russia is aiming for a reform of the political-institutional system in Belarus. Lukashenka himself has brought a constitutional reform and later new elections for parliament and president into play in recent weeks, albeit under his control. This proposal plays into Moscow's hands. Its influence on Belarus has long been limited by the fact that political processes, the security apparatus, the state media, economic revenues, and social redistribution were all controlled by Lukashenka directly. Effective Russian influence and, if necessary, destabilization in Belarus would benefit in the long term if this presidential monopoly were broken up as well as a more influential parliament and multiparty system were constitutionally installed and, with help from Russia, formed and elected.

Each of these scenarios aims to cement Russia's influence over its smaller neighbor in the long run. In the short term, Lukashenka is still needed for this, but already in the medium term he is dispensable. More problematically, however, none of these scenarios resolves the fundamental conflict between society and the state in Belarus. Instability will prevail. Moreover, Russia risks turning Belarusian society against it through its one-sided support for the hated dictator. That said, there is a fourth scenario that avoids such a mood change, takes into account the legitimate demand of Belarusian society for change, and leaves Moscow's influence on Minsk intact.

Viewed soberly, Moscow can look forward to a change of power in Minsk with ease. Belarus has long been economically, politically, institutionally, and financially, in the media field and through societal ties, dependent on Russia. Every new head of state and every new government in Belarus will inherit this dependency, through which Russia can set narrow limits to its political orientation and actions. The Kremlin could easily afford its smaller neighbor free and fair elections without losing its hegemonic position. To do this, Moscow would have to distance itself from the Lukashenka regime and terminate its support, recognize the will of the majority of the Belarusian population and its representation, the Coordination Council, and work toward a negotiated change of power with early elections for president and parliament. As an added bonus, the Russian leadership would gain an image boost, in Belarus as well in Europe.

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All of this also means that the EU can still exert influence on the dynamics of events in and around Belarus, instead of resigning itself to the seemingly overpowering Russian influence there.

For this, the EU must make it clear to Lukashenka that he is no longer the legitimate president of Belarus. Should he actually seek inauguration again, he should immediately be placed on the EU sanctions list. At the same time, any cooperation with his equally illegitimate government must be frozen from this point on. Conversely, the Coordination Council should be recognized as the rightful representative of the people of Belarus and should be involved in all international contacts and deliberations on Belarus.

At the same time, the EU must make it clear to Russia that any agreements it is currently negotiating with the Lukashenka regime will not be internationally recognized, whether on the integration of the two countries in the union state or on the Russian takeover of Belarusian companies. Moreover, the EU should urge Russia to cease its interference in favor of the hitherto ruler in Belarus, and to recognize that its own interests remain unaffected by political change and new elections in the country. To emphasize this demand and to open up a corresponding time window, a two-year moratorium on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project would be quite suitable.

Today's meeting between Lukashenka and his sponsor Putin is likely to predetermine the further course and outcome of the Belarus crisis. Belarusians themselves have made it clear once again at nationwide protests yesterday that they will only accept the departure of their dictator. The EU should reinforce this demand in its own response to the Sochi meeting.

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