

Kremlin Needs Plan B To Oust Lukashenko

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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It is hard to discern the strategy behind the Kremlin's decision to initiate a character assassination campaign against Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko.

While Moscow's wrath over Lukashenko's efforts to resist Kremlin pressure to join Russia and Kazakhstan in the customs union is understandable, a strategy that seeks to humiliate Lukashenko and weaken his regime is a road to nowhere.

Moscow is encountering strong resistance from Minsk in its campaign to advance political and economic integration in post-Soviet space. Lukashenko views Russian integrationist efforts and the end of Moscow's economic subsidies to Belarus as a direct threat to his authoritarian rule, precisely at the moment when he seeks his fourth presidential term in early 2011.

It is clear that Russia would prefer a Belarus without Lukashenko, but it has done nothing to

prepare the ground for a transition in Minsk that Moscow could control. There is no one among the Belarussian opposition whom Moscow can endorse as its candidate. They are all calling for joining the European Union and are largely unknown outside Minsk or Brussels. A bet on Belarussian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky without Lukashenko's endorsement would be doomed to failure.

With his popularity ratings at about 50 percent and all opposition candidates polling under 10 percent, Lukashenko is the clear favorite to win the presidential vote next year.

Thus, Moscow tried to intimidate Lukashenko through media attacks. The idea was that he would, in turn, be more deferential to the Kremlin's wishes. But this tactic has its limits and is difficult to reverse without losing face. It also leaves Lukashenko free to throw the mud back.

Once you accuse a foreign leader of ordering political killings, you had better be able to back it up with facts. You also need to put your money where your mouth is by dragging him before a court of law, as the United States did to with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The least risky strategy is to keep building economic pressure on Lukashenko in the run-up to the Belarussian presidential election, while offering him a fat retirement package to step down peacefully.

A less palatable option is to not recognize the results of the vote in Belarus, something that would require careful coordination with Washington and Brussels.

Simply calling Lukashenko names, however, is not a strategy.

Vladimir Frolov is president of LEFF Group, a government-relations and PR company.

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