

Will Re-Elected Lukashenko Turn East or West?

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Alexander Lukashenko was re-elected for a five-year term with 83 percent of the votes cast in Sunday's presidential election in Belarus. The outcome was never in doubt due to his entrenched political control and the weakness of the opposition. Lukashenko, the consummate political survivor, reinvented himself yet again as the staunch defender of Belarussian independence and territorial integrity following the events in Ukraine, but his room for maneuver between Russia and the West is now threatened by a Russian request for a new air base in Belarus.

Lukashenko — then an obscure member of parliament — was first elected president in 1994 on an anti-corruption program in what was generally viewed as a free and fair election. Initially, there was cautious optimism in the West that it would be possible to work with him on economic and political reforms. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Soon after taking office, Lukashenko created a vertical power structure of loyalists that ensured political controls similar to the former Communist Party. Punitive measures were

taken against the free press and broadcast media. They were not completely choked off, allowing Lukashenko to claim an opposition still existed as he also took control of the judicial system, security forces and the military.

It took a little longer, but he tamed the last institution that contained opposition figures, the parliament, by replacing it with his chosen representatives. The most extreme step was the disappearance and presumed execution of several key opposition figures. In the economy, market reforms were slowed but subsidies from Russia kept the economy afloat and assured the payment of wages and pensions. This centralized, authoritarian political structure essentially remains in place today.

In those formative years, Lukashenko showed disdain for Belarussian nationalism and the Belarussian language. He publicly bemoaned the fall of the Soviet Union and pushed for the union of Belarus and Russia.

For Russia, dealing with the Belarussian president was and is a challenge. Russian President Boris Yeltsin apparently viewed him as a wayward son who had to be mentored into political maturity whereas Putin is less tolerant of Lukashenko. Still, Russia has stuck with him as the best way to secure a "buffer zone" between NATO states and Russia's borders. The bilateral relationship has had its ups and downs over trade and economic issues as well as Lukashenko's lack of support for Russia's militant steps in the neighborhood such as the "independence" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

Lukashenko earned wide criticism from the European Union and the United States over the 2010 presidential election. Like its predecessors, the election was non-transparent and unfair and was greeted by mass demonstrations in Minsk. Lukashenko responded in the usual way — with force and jailing opposition presidential candidates. This led to sanctions from both the U.S. and EU.

In the period since, Lukashenko has pushed to restore relations with the West. His major asset is the strategic geographic location of Belarus between Russia, Poland, the Baltic states and Ukraine. While being careful to follow Russia in opposing NATO, maintaining strong defense ties and condemning "color revolutions," he hints at turning more to the West when Russia pressures him on trade issues or to accept deeper integration in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

Russian actions in Ukraine have been a golden opportunity for Lukashenko to enhance his image. Recognizing the possible threat to Belarus, he has not formally endorsed the Russian annexation of Crimea and has dealt with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's government in Kiev, a reflection also of Ukraine's importance to Belarus as a trading partner. He has publicly warned Russia that Belarus will fight if invaded and took on the peacemaker role by hosting the Minsk peace process over Ukraine.

The EU and U.S. have lauded Belarus for hosting the peace process and noted its more nuanced stance toward Russia. With the Belarussian economy in a bad way and future Russian assistance in question given Russia's major economic downturn, Lukashenko has welcomed these gestures and the possibility of ending sanctions and new economic assistance. As a sweetener, he released several political prisoners just before the election.

And now what? Sunday's election was condemned by the opposition but this dispirited and splintered group could not agree beforehand on a credible candidate to oppose Lukashenko and mounted only small protests afterwards. EU countries welcomed the release of political prisoners and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated that he and colleagues from other EU countries would discuss the "conditions and time frame" for easing sanctions on Belarus once the international community has evaluated the elections.

But even if the election should somehow be evaluated as a small step forward, Lukashenko's 20-year domination of the media, electoral system and political life in Belarus which makes any free and fair election impossible, should not be overlooked. Likewise, his release of political prisoners should be recognized as part of the old game of arresting opposition figures and later releasing them as a goodwill gesture for which compensation is expected.

Lukashenko has been masterful at playing his cards but the Russians may have put a hammer over his head in the form of a request for a new air base. He has responded by questioning why this is necessary and postponing a decision. The recent Russian action in Syria may also take some of the pressure off him to respond.

The question remains, however, how he will use his new electoral mandate. Will he say no to the Russian request and cast his lot with the West or give in to the inevitable pressure? Lukashenko would welcome Western economic assistance and diplomatic support but not the accompanying ideas of Western democracy and human rights.

Maintaining the system he has built up over 20 years remains his key objective and Russia certainly will not make demands on him for democratization. He will twist and turn to avoid a decision on the base but if left no alternative, his choice is clear.

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