

Embattled Lukashenko Loses Friends in East and West

Instead of its status as a peacekeeper between East and West, Belarus may soon find that it lacks a good relationship with either side.

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July 06, 2020



Tatyana Zenkovich / EPA / TASS

Something very unusual is unfolding in the run-up to Belarus's presidential election on August 9. President Alexander Lukashenko has accused Russian puppet masters of interference, and has in turn been criticized by the EU and United States for arresting those "puppets." Consequently, the election threatens to ruin Minsk's relationship with both Moscow and the West, just at a time when the dire state of the country's economy means it is in serious need of external support.

Lukashenko has said since the start of the election campaign (though without offering proof)

that the opposition was being bankrolled by Russian oligarchs. One rival candidate, the banker [Viktor Babariko](#), has been arrested on suspicion of money laundering and tax evasion. Explaining his arrest, a senior Belarusian official said that “bosses at [Russia’s state gas giant] Gazprom, and maybe people higher still” were behind the banker’s campaign.

In previous elections, Lukashenko has also made allegations of foreign interference — but always from the West. This is the first time Russia has been accused of meddling in this particular neighbor’s elections.

There are two reasons for this. First, Minsk has been embroiled in a slow-burning [conflict](#) with Moscow for the past few years, rather than with Brussels or Washington for a change. Second, none of Lukashenko’s prominent rivals can be accused of being pro-Western, but they are in favor of preserving good relations with Russia.

Blaming Russia is also the best possible justification to Western ears for the latest repressions in Belarus. The argument being put to European and U.S. diplomats is that Minsk has to be tough right now in order to combat agents of Russian influence: after all, what’s at stake is Belarusian independence.

Related article: [Belarus President Accuses Russia, Poland of Election Interference](#)

Unfortunately for Minsk, these arguments are unconvincing. Western diplomats on the ground can see quite clearly that Belarusian society is becoming politicized from below. Hundreds of people have been arrested at protests against Lukashenko since the end of May. Western diplomats — and governments — are not prepared to turn a blind eye to the harshest repression by the Belarusian authorities in a decade simply because it is accompanied by anti-Russian rhetoric.

Washington and European capitals have so far expressed their concern and called for political prisoners to be released. It’s already clear that Minsk’s relationship with the West will deteriorate following the elections; just not yet how badly.

No one doubts that Lukashenko will do [whatever it takes](#) to cling onto power. When he is inevitably declared to have won a traditional 80 percent of the vote on election day, already disgruntled Belarusians are unlikely to take that lying down. That means there will likely be more protests, and more repression.

It’s hard to say whether the EU and United States might bring back sanctions against Minsk. The West is reluctant to do anything that will push Lukashenko into Russia’s embrace. But it looks less likely that a U.S. ambassador will return to Minsk after an eleven-year absence, as agreed by the two sides last year.

The current modest cooperation with European banks may also be put on hold if the repression continues. The West won’t cut Minsk off completely: there will still be cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as oil supplies to reduce Belarus’s dependence on Russia. But with such a chill in the air, it would be naive to expect that Minsk will get the money it recently asked for (a loan from the International Monetary Fund and macrofinancial assistance from the EU).

Lukashenko has no intention, however, of toning down his behavior to soothe the fears of his Western partners. The survival of the system is more important to him than being invited to EU Eastern Partnership summits, or getting loans that were far from certain anyway.

It might seem, then, that after the election Lukashenko will be forced into Russia's waiting arms and will have to give its president, Vladimir Putin, everything he asks for. But it's unlikely that that's possible now: their relationship has hit a [dead end](#).

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Minsk believes that the current level of integration between the two countries should guarantee Belarusian consumers the same terms as Russian consumers when purchasing energy commodities. Moscow considers this a discount that must be earned through a far closer union.

At a recent video summit of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), of which both Russia and Belarus are members, Putin said that a single gas transport tariff (a key factor in the end price) would require EEU member nations to create a unified tax system and budget. Moscow had previously laid down the same condition to Belarus for [oil supplies](#). But the Belarusian government won't give up any of its sovereignty in exchange for volatile trade incentives, and Moscow isn't prepared to erode its own in favor of its junior partners.

The Belarusian economy is in need of external support due to its high foreign debt and the drastic drop in budget revenues resulting from the collapse of oil prices and the new coronavirus-induced recession. But the plank being set by Moscow in exchange for aid is too high. For Lukashenko, sovereignty — i.e., the absoluteness of his authority — is everything.

All this is pushing Belarus toward a new geopolitical identity. Instead of its status as a peacekeeper between East and West, Minsk may soon find that it lacks a good relationship with either side.

There's always China, which the Belarusian government would like to be able to rely on in times of need, but that requires reciprocal interest, and in this relationship, feelings have always been stronger in Minsk than Beijing.

A balancing act is a hard act to pull off for small countries wedged between rival blocs. Minsk's attempts to do so look set to fail. What will follow is not necessarily a sudden break with one center of power, or absorption by the other. Belarus may stumble on in geopolitical isolation and poverty for years. Until, that is, there are no longer enough resources to fuel the section of society responsible for holding back the resentment of everyone else.

This article was first [published](#) by the Carnegie Moscow Center.

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