

Lukashenko's Gamble on Thuggishness

Like a gambler who knows he has bet all he has and cannot afford to lose, the Belarusian strongman has doubled down.

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Alexander Lukashenko has thrown the dice. **Natalia Fedosenko / TASS**

The thing about the crackdown in Belarus is not just how violent it is – but how gratuitously so. Stacking detainees on top of each other, beating passers-by doing no more than walking the dog, specifically going after journalists, even knocking wing mirrors off random cars. This is not a sign of security forces out of control, though, but of a deliberate — and very high-risk — strategy of terror, of pacification through intimidation.

Alexander Lukashenko seems belatedly to have realized the challenge he faced. Having relied on his usual electoral tactics — excluding and arresting opposition candidates, denying them airtime, promising jam tomorrow and warning of sinister foreign interference today — he kicked his efforts into high gear right before the election.

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His decision to award himself a gratuitously excessive 80% of the vote appears to have been a last-minute course correction, with leaked guidance from the Central Election Committee seemingly preparing for a 67% victory. The intention was presumably to try and communicate not just a silent majority in favor of ‘Batka’ but also a direct challenge to the opposition, a statement that he was so powerful, he could do whatever he wanted, and with impunity.

This is, after all, a classic move from the dictator’s playbook. However, it is in a pretty late chapter, given that, if the autocrat can pull it off — which will often require the use of force — then they win continued control, but at the cost of public legitimacy. It is difficult to step back into being a “hybrid dictator” whose rule is based on both a degree of social capital as well as coercion and control.

Of course, this gamble depends on winning, on being able to demonstrate that one is strong enough, ruthless enough and has enough control over the security apparatus and the elite to weather any immediate protests.

Lukashenko and Euromaidan

Belarusian street protesters haven’t given up quickly. This was another crucial decision moment for Lukashenko. Dictators who make concessions rarely prosper, and the irony is that by systematically preventing any coherent opposition from forming and by forcing his rival Svetlana Tikhanovskaya into exile in Lithuania, he has also ensured that he has no one to negotiate with.

He probably wouldn’t have tried anyway. Although Belarus is not Ukraine, the shadow of the Euromaidan must darken Lukashenko’s thoughts. Would the kind of reforms the street would likely demand not almost certainly catalyze into something that would implicitly, even if not overtly, tilt the country towards the West? After all, concessions create their own momentum.

And if so, however little enthusiasm Vladimir Putin likely has for any kind of involvement in Belarus, from political pressure to “little green men,” would he feel able to stand by and “lose” yet another post-Soviet nation, especially one in a Union State with Russia, however little that means in practice?

Lukashenko and Solidarity

Lukashenko could have hoped to outlast the protests, hoping they would burn themselves out, but his security forces began to look over extended and a new flank opened as political dissatisfaction started to manifest in the industrial enterprises which still dominate the economy. If one neighbor, Ukraine, provides a cautionary tale for despots in the form of the Euromaidan, another, Poland, provides another in the rise of Solidarity in the 1980s.

Warsaw Pact Poland managed to forestall Soviet intervention — but at the price of martial law, eventual systemic collapse, and the replacement of head of state Stanisław Kania by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Belarus is not Poland, either, but the resonances as economic dissatisfaction, political protest, industrial organization and Muscovite concerns intersect

must be alarming.

And so Lukashenko, like a gambler who knows he has already bet everything he has and cannot afford to lose, has doubled down. He has unleashed his security forces — especially the OMON riot police and SOBR police commandos — with a clear mandate not to be as violent as they need to be, but as violent as they can be.

With an extravagant inhumanity that appears to sit uncomfortably with other elements of the security forces and leaves even their Russian counterparts looking askance, their goal is simply to terrorize. To make being near protests, let alone actually joining one, look like foolhardiness. To induce drivers who value their wing mirrors and windscreens to avoid trouble spots rather than express their horn-honking approval. To encourage spouses and parents to try and talk potential demonstrators out of anything dangerous.

Lukashenko and the August Coup

In its own terms, this strategy could work. However, it depends not only on enough of the population being able to be cowed, shrinking the crowd to a small enough number to be picked off and packed away, but also on the security forces' willingness to keep up a campaign of inhumanity and brutality.

For some, this is why they put on a uniform. For others, it is not, but they fear the consequences of disobedience, be that disciplining by the state or a tribunal somewhere down the line if the regime falls.

But for many, it is a step too far. There is a growing tide of security officers publicly submitting their resignations, throwing away their uniforms in protest. The Interior Troops — separate from the OMON and less prepared for such operations — appear less willing to engage. Some of the times the regular police have fled from protesters have probably not been because they were scared but because they simply did not want to crack skulls for a president they may no longer support.

Much depends on the higher echelons of the security apparatus, on whether there are senior officers sufficiently uncomfortable with the situation to be willing to act. No doubt Lukashenko's KGB is busy trying to ascertain that very thing.

But above all, this is a matter of momentum. If the crowds continue to thin, if the strikes peter out, then although the regime will be dying inside, having squandered whatever legitimacy it had, Lukashenko will have won his bet and live to gamble another day.

On the other hand, if we start to see open divisions, defections and disaffection within the security forces, then the situation could change very quickly. The failure of the 1991 August Coup in the U.S.S.R. showed how, once a regime begins to look weak, everyone will hurriedly join the other side. Lukashenko has thrown the dice and we'll all just have to see.

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