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Putin and the Belarusian Question

Putin will seek to do as much as possible, but as little as necessary, to suppress peaceful change in Belarus.

By Nigel Gould-Davies

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Alexei Druzhinin / Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / TASS

If there were any doubts about Russia's readiness to intervene in the Belarus crisis, Vladimir Putin has dispelled them. In what the Kremlin billed a 'big interview' on 27 August, the Russian president announced that he had created, at the request of his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko, a 'law enforcement reserve' for use if the situation got 'out of control' because of 'extremists elements hiding behind political slogans'. This escalation of Russia's position carries risks for itself and others.

Russia has watched the protests in Belarus closely since they erupted after the rigged presidential election on 9 August. Putin and Lukashenko have spoken by phone at least four times — more than in the whole of 2019. Russian TV journalists have replaced Belarusians on strike against the regime. Political consultants, and possibly security personnel, are active in

the country. On 21 August Russia's Security Council met to discuss Belarus.

A plane belonging to the FSB, Russia's security service, has twice flown to the capital, Minsk. But Putin had not made his views public until his interview.

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What the Putin interview tells us

Russia backs Lukashenko

This was not initially clear. Many newspapers and some politicians sympathized with brutally-beaten protesters and strongly criticized Lukashenko, even predicting his fall. But the media have begun to devise a false narrative of 'color revolution': Western powers are fomenting unrest; the protests are violent; and the police are — in Putin's words — 'restrained'. The Kremlin has concluded that its best option is to keep Lukashenko in power rather than to manage change.

Putin is ready to use force

Unlike in Ukraine, where he long kept up an implausible deniability of Russian involvement, he has signaled this in advance. He has done so after warning EU leaders that their interference in Belarus's internal affairs would be 'unacceptable'. By endorsing Lukashenko's outlawing of the opposition Coordinating Council, Putin has also ruled out any genuine dialogue with civil society.

Belarus is fundamentally important to Russia

Putin described Belarus as 'perhaps the country closest to us: ethnically the closest, and linguistically, culturally, spiritually'. This dashed any hope that he might allow a peaceful transfer of power to an opposition leader, as in Armenia in 2018. In truth, the touted 'Armenian model' was never plausible, for two reasons that cast light on Russia's underlying goals.

Belarus's important strategic position

The first reason is external. Belarus's strategic position incites the Kremlin's obsession with control of geopolitical space. Belarus is 90% of the size of the UK mainland and seven times larger than Armenia. While Armenia nestles in the Caucasus and lacks a common border with Russia, Belarus is a European neighbor that also shares a border with three EU and NATO member states, as well as with Ukraine. Belarus is an important piece of European territory.

In recent years, Putin has intensified efforts to subordinate Belarus by turning the largely paper project of a 'Union State' into reality. This would put Belarus's economy under effective Russian control, and likely grant Russia military basing rights as it has requested. Lukashenko has fought a long battle to resist this.

His dysfunctional relationship with Putin regularly breaks out into public squabbles — most recently two weeks before the election when Belarus arrested 33 mercenaries from the

Russian ‘private military company’ (in reality, state-linked) Wagner Group in Minsk and charged them with planning terrorist acts to destabilize the country.

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Lukashenko should be an ideal partner for Russia: he is a Slavic autocrat, full of Soviet nostalgia, who despises Western values. Yet Putin has contrived to develop poor relations even with him. No Belarusian leader, autocrat or democrat, who values the country’s independence would consent to Russian domination. In trying to undermine Belarus’s sovereignty, it is Russia, not the West, that has sought to change the geopolitical status quo.

The dangerous example of peaceful popular change

The second reason Belarus matters is internal to Russia. Lukashenko has ruled for 26 years. When Putin seeks re-election in 2024, as most expect him to, he will have been in power for 24. It would set an unwelcome precedent if Lukashenko — veteran authoritarian leader of an eastern Slavic neighbour facing economic stagnation — were swept away after a falsified election. The ethnic, linguistic and cultural affinities that Putin extolled in his interview are really his own vulnerabilities: if peaceful popular change can come to a country as similar to Russia as Belarus, then why not to Russia itself?

For this reason, how Belarus is governed is a security issue — not for the Russian state, but for the Putin regime. Lukashenko has played on this, warning Putin that if Belarus ‘can’t hold the line, this wave will roll there too’. Putin agrees. He sees a democratic Belarus as an intrinsic threat. This has alarming implications for both the Belarusian people and the West.

For Belarusians, it means that no assurance they can give Russia is likely to be enough. Their peaceful demands are focused only on domestic governance: questions of foreign policy and alignment play no role. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, de facto winner of the presidential election, and her team have made clear that, like almost all Belarusians, they are well disposed towards Russia. But this is irrelevant if the mere fact of being democratic sets an undesirable example. A free Belarus may want good relations with Russia, but it seems Russia cannot tolerate a free Belarus.

A Clash of Western values and Kremlin self-interest?

For the West, it means cooperation with Russia is unlikely. This is not primarily a matter of ‘spheres of influence’, as some observers think. If it were, then interests could be balanced through compromise, for example with a security guarantee that would satisfy legitimate Russian concerns. The Belarusian people might reasonably accept, say, a commitment not to join NATO — for which there is almost no support anyway — as the price of freedom. But if Russia finds the very prospect of such freedom threatening, then the West is unlikely to find a compromise acceptable to Russia without sacrificing its own values.

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The international politics of the Belarusian crisis, then, involve not only a possibly

manageable clash of Western and Russian interests, but a more intractable one of Western values and Kremlin self-interest. This conclusion is bleak but consistent with tradition. Tsarist Russia was the 'gendarme of Europe', suppressing liberal revolution in Central Europe. The Soviet Union imposed, and intervened to maintain, communist systems there. In short, Russia has long sought to decide how its neighbours govern themselves.

But while Russia's priorities for Belarus are now clear, it faces difficult choices. Overt intervention would trigger a new crisis with the West, and almost certainly fresh U.S. sanctions. It would also turn a well-disposed Belarusian population into one that associates Russia with oppression. Russia's worst relations would then be with its closest Slavic neighbors, Belarus and Ukraine.

Putin will, therefore, want to do as much as possible, but as little as necessary, to achieve his preferred outcome: a Belarus that has suppressed peaceful change under a leader so estranged from the West and his own people that he can no longer resist de facto integration into Russia. Putin will avoid using Russian force if he can. But he has made clear he is ready to do so.

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