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Can Moscow Manage a Power Transition in Belarus?

Lukashenko's loss of legitimacy has become problematic for the Kremlin — but can it manage Minsk's leadership change?

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Natalia Fedosenko / TASS

Last month's presidential election in Belarus was expected to end with one clear victor: Russia. As Belarusian society grew sharply politicized over the summer, President Alexander Lukashenko ramped up the repression. This culminated in the brutal breakup of protests immediately after the vote, setting back Lukashenko's budding relationship with the West many years.

This turn of events should have, according to all the forecasts, pushed Minsk into the Kremlin's arms and given Moscow free rein in Belarus, and at first, this seemed to be more or less what had happened. But the Belarusian political crisis has turned out to be far more

serious than even the boldest forecasts had anticipated. Lukashenko's international and domestic legitimacy have been too fiercely subverted for the comfort of any of his remaining foreign partners.

Having burned all of his bridges with the West, ending his long-running balancing act between it and Russia, Lukashenko spent several weeks preparing for his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on Sept. 14. Once again, the West was designated Belarus's archenemy, and the Belarusian opposition was labeled Russophobic and accused of working for the United States, even though just last month, that same opposition was supposedly being managed by Russian puppet masters.

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Lukashenko wanted to arrive in Sochi as a leader who had already vanquished an uprising at home. Hundreds of people were once again arrested, violence was used against female protesters, and water cannons and stun grenades were deployed. But it didn't work. There may be fewer protests in the regions than a month ago, but 100,000–150,000 people regularly turn out for Sunday marches in the capital Minsk.

The two presidents talked for more than four hours, but the only concrete outcome had already been agreed before the talks, when Putin promised Lukashenko a loan of $1.5 billion. Since Belarus owes other creditors more than $1 billion, and Russia's Gazprom more than $300 million, it's doubtful whether any hard cash will actually reach Minsk.

Putin began the meeting by saying that he supported Lukashenko's plan for constitutional reform. Everyone understands that this is a prelude to a transition of power. Lukashenko himself told Russian journalists that early presidential elections could be held in the next couple of years after a new constitution becomes law.

Yet just because the doors of the West may be closed to Lukashenko forever, that's not to say that he will now do everything he is told by Moscow. Nor is there much point in requiring Lukashenko to make all the concessions once asked of him now. By forcing him to sign the road maps on integration with Russia that Moscow has long been pushing for, Putin will create more problems than benefits. If Lukashenko manages to consolidate his grip on power, he will swiftly forget ever having signed anything, while if his position weakens further, he may not be around for long enough to implement the ambitious integration plans.

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In any case, if the Belarusian protesters see that Lukashenko is signing away their country's sovereignty, the pro-democracy protests will morph into a fight for independence, and then Russia can forget about the stable pro-Russian majority among Belarusians. And in protecting a ruler that most Belarusians are, it seems, heartily sick of, Moscow will ruin its own image in the eyes of Belarusians.

Then there's the problem of international legitimacy. Any deals that notably limit Belarus's sovereignty are unlikely to be accepted by the West. For that reason, a Belarusian protectorate

risks becoming one big Crimea, isolated by economic sanctions. That would make it a far bigger drain on Russia's budget than all the years of providing Minsk with subsidies.

If Moscow wants something tangible in exchange for its support for Lukashenko, therefore, a more likely option could be the privatization of Belarusian assets, such as oil-refining or defense plants, or the gigantic Belaruskali potash plant. Moscow could again ask Lukashenko to host a Russian air base in Belarus, but that could have the same mobilizing effect on Belarusians as forced integration.

For Moscow, the ideal scenario that it will work toward would be if Lukashenko himself manages to stabilize the situation without any bloodshed, followed by a smooth transition of power — agreed with the Kremlin — toward a more horizontal model.

That way, Moscow won't have to be reliant on Lukashenko alone, or on his successor. It can put in place clear schemes for influencing Belarusian politics: through loyal parties, individual officials and politicians, and control over sectors of the Belarusian economy and finance flows, without an all-powerful president having a veto right.

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But the devil is in the details, and no one knows what Lukashenko thinks of this plan. Does he want to make a swift exit, or is talk of a new constitution and early elections merely an attempt to buy time and divide his opponents? How will his plans change if the protests fizzle out? Is he prepared to consult Moscow on the delicate issue of the transition of power, given that he still doesn't trust the Kremlin?

It looks like the two sides will have it out on their usual turf: the economy. New Western sanctions will slash the investment potential of the Belarusian economy, and there can be no economic growth under Lukashenko without large and regular injections from abroad. Just as it did before, the country needs an external top-up of $3–5 billion a year, but global credit markets are closed to Lukashenko. His only hope is Russia.

Yet even backed into his current corner, Lukashenko will attempt to drive a bargain with the Kremlin. Instead of promising to make concessions to Moscow, he will try to show that he is thwarting an anti-Russian uprising and the prospect of NATO tanks on Russia's border, and that he should be compensated for these services. In response, he will continue to hear unwelcome hints that it is time for him to gradually step down.

Moscow will have to conduct this dialogue with caution. If the Belarusian nomenclature or public gets the sense that Lukashenko has lost Russia's support, that could swiftly finish off his regime. But the Kremlin doesn't want a sudden implosion either, at least not until it has other reliable partners in the Belarusian ruling elite or opposition.

Lukashenko understands perfectly the importance of retaining his monopoly on contact with Moscow, and will continue to block separate talks by the nomenclature with Moscow, demolish any structures he sees as a threat, and imprison any possible opposition leaders to ensure that Russia can't find another point of contact in Belarus, even if it wants to.

From an overripe apple that looked sure to drop into Moscow's lap all on its own, the Belarusian regime is increasingly coming to resemble a toxic asset that's as difficult to engage with as it is to get rid of.

If Lukashenko manages to hold on to his seat until the protests subside somewhat, Moscow will have to carefully choose and measure out its carrots and sticks to get the Belarusian leader where it needs him to be, without allowing his position to drastically weaken or strengthen. This will require constant attention and understanding of the Belarusian situation from the Russian regime.

But the Kremlin's policies in the post-Soviet space are hardly bursting with examples of such intricate craftsmanship. Creating and freezing conflicts is one thing; it's quite another to manage an orderly transition of power in a country where, despite their shared language, Moscow does not have any reliable footholds.

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