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COMMENTARY

Russia's Role in Relation to the Political Protests in Belarus

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Aleksander Lukashenko may have withstood the first wave of protests, but the writing on the wall does not bode well for him.

When the demonstrations against fraud in the August 9 presidential elections started, Lukashenko was caught by surprise, showing how much he had lost touch with Belarusian society. The apparatus of repression may not have changed much since the 1999 disappearance of opposition members Viktor Hanchar, Anatol Krasouski, Yury Zakharanka, and Dzmitry Zavadski, but Belarusian society had. When, eight days after the beginning of the protests, he made a point of visiting the flagship Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) factory, hoping for a boost of support by provoking the audience, he was shocked by the loud boos and chants of “ukhodi!” (meaning: “leave!”). Since then, he has redoubled on repression and also on attempts to secure the loyalty of the security apparatus, such as through bestowing, a day later, official state awards on 200 security officials related to post-election operations. Since that visit to the MTZ, Lukashenko has been unable to avoid the reality of how tenuous his control over the country (and also over the country's nomenklatura) is. With pressure from below, local majors are quietly facing the choice of the extent to which they should enforce repressive measures ordered from above. Lukashenko's September 24 inauguration to a new presidential term, conducted in secrecy and without previous public announcement, is an example of his growing awareness of the tenuousness of his power.

Another significant development visible already from the first days after the elections has been the strikes at important export-oriented factories, such as the Byelorussian Steel Works (BMZ) in Zhlobin, home to 80%

of Belarus's steel production and nearly \$1bn exports per year, or top nitrogen fertilizers producer Hrodno Azot. Both of these factories depend directly or indirectly on the energy rents accrued by Belarus as a result of its unique energy relationship with Russia—BMZ on low energy prices needed for the energy-intensive foundry process, and Hrodno Azot on nitrogen produced on the basis of natural gas (production of nitrogen fertilizers not only depends heavily on gas as a source of energy, but also as a raw material, as it constitutes 80% of the material needed for its production). These rents—and their clever management—have been highly significant for the stability of the Belarusian regime since the early 2000s (see my 2014 book *Living the High Life in Minsk*), but have been substantially reduced in the last years as a result of changes in international energy markets. With less rents making their way to the nomenklatura and trickling down to the population as a whole, the legitimacy and appeal of the Lukashenko regime has gone down significantly, and, conversely, the need for raw repression has gone up. The levels of violence used by the security apparatus in the last weeks are unprecedented. They may hold the regime in place in the short term, perhaps even for a few years, but the entire edifice of Lukashenko's power is becoming increasingly feeble, hence the need for increased repression. Next time around, it may give up right away. Within this background of increased repression, Lukashenko's agreement meeting with jailed opposition leaders, including former presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka on October 10, is an example of how tenuous the situation is, and how desperately he is holding on to power.

About the Author

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