

At a Loss: The Kremlin Has No Winning Belarus Strategy

Moshes, Arkady

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Moshes, A. (2020). At a Loss: The Kremlin Has No Winning Belarus Strategy. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 257, 7-8.
<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000446834>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Assembly). Together with former Constitutional Court judge Mikhail Pastukhou, they have been active in the *Public Constitutional Commission* since 2019. One project of the *Coordination Council* and the election monitoring platform *Golos* is to collect verified electronic votes for the strategy “free and fair elections first, constitutional reform later” (<https://golos2020.org/constitution>). The campaign *Svezhy Vetser*, promoted by *Coordination Council* core member Andrey Yahorau, also petitions to boycott any constitutional change as it perceives Belarusian sovereignty as endangered (<https://канстытуцыя.бел/>). Russia might not only be interested in keeping Lukashenka in power or in negotiating a power transfer, but also in fundamentally undermining Belarusian sovereignty by sneaking in a provision on the priority of the Union State over the Belarusian constitution. Indeed, according to Art. 61 of the Union State Treaty, in the course of deeper integration, the basic laws of both member countries would need to be amended.

What sets the ‘new’ opposition apart from the ‘old’ is that it has managed to stay surprisingly united despite unprecedented pressure by the authorities. Ideational and personal continuity with the ‘old’ opposition, as well as their united position of non-recognition of the August presidential election and of Lukashenka’s constitutional

reform plans, explain why Lukashenka forced presidium members of the *Coordination Council* abroad or arrested them. It also explains why the opposition’s *People’s Ultimatum*, which demands Lukashenka step down before a national strike is announced, set 25 October as the date for the fulfillment of its demands: this is the deadline Lukashenka set for citizen suggestions to his constitutional reform plan.

The stakes are high, and the EU and Russia find themselves on opposite sides of the barricades. Calls upon the OSCE to become a neutral mediator in the conflict between Lukashenka and the opposition are naive at best. Russia (in the person of prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin) already once mediated in a constitutional crisis in 1996. The result: it was only Russia that recognized the 1996 constitutional referendum, while the EU and US rejected it as a *coup d’état*. The effect the 1998–2002 Advisory and Monitoring Group of the OSCE (<https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/99/Wieck.pdf>) had on Lukashenka and the future trajectory of the regime is visible to this day. Whether history will repeat itself this time will largely depend on the courageous Belarusian people themselves.

About the Author

Dr Fabian Burkhardt is a research fellow at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg. His research focuses on executive politics and elites in authoritarian regimes, with a regional focus on Russia and Belarus. He contributed a country study on Belarus for an edited volume on constitutional politics in Central and Eastern Europe (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-658-13762-5_19) and published on concepts of the Belarusian nation among regime, opposition, and civil society actors (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137489449_7).

At a Loss: The Kremlin Has No Winning Belarus Strategy

By Arkady Moshes (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000446834

Well in advance of the Belarusian presidential elections, it was quite clear that Moscow would make an unequivocal choice in favor of the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko. This forecast could be safely made from two arguments.

First, the Kremlin cannot be expected to agree to resolve the question of who should be in power in Belarus through free and fair elections, let alone through popular protest. That could create a precedent for Russia itself, and therefore, ought to be ruled out from the outset. Second, despite his ability to occasionally frustrate

Russia, Lukashenko is generally a partner with whom Moscow can confidently engage. So long as he stays in control in Belarus, the country will not build a trust-based relationship with the West and will not start the economic and political reforms necessary to make Belarus more resilient and less structurally dependent on Russia for economic assistance.

For these reasons it should not have come as a surprise that Moscow placed its diplomatic, economic and information resources behind the self-declared “winner” and even promised to provide police reinforcements if

the situation so required. In view of this, many observers have rushed to the conclusion that Russia is strengthening its grip over its neighbor.

However, this conclusion may well be premature. In reality, preferring the continued incumbency of Lukashenko to the opportunity of resetting relations with Belarus does not create a new situation but simply brings Russia back to the old dilemmas that the Kremlin has not been able to solve for decades.

One crucial problem is that Moscow is very reluctant to take on the risk inherent in replacing Lukashenko with somebody more to its liking. Without Lukashenko in the center and in charge, the system in place, which is based on personal loyalty to the leader, would most likely collapse. Infighting would start among the various groups, and control over the situation could be lost.

After the events of 2020, a hypothetical “replacement” has only become more difficult. On the one hand, Moscow has not been able to protect those opposition figures, such as banker Viktor Babaryko, whom the analytical community has viewed as potentially representing Moscow in Belarusian presidential races. That makes Belarusian elites much more cautious than before when considering whether to play along with Moscow, given how personally unsafe such a position currently is. On the other hand, a departure by Lukashenko *after* the protests—whatever the real reason might be—would inevitably be seen inside the country *as a result* of the protests. This would return political competition to Belarus and make any future ruler more attentive to Belarusian public opinion and elite interests regardless of, and possibly to the detriment of, Moscow’s preferences. In this scenario, instead of dealing with an autocrat with clear interests and understandable instincts, the Kremlin would be facing a figure with divided loyalties who would be much less predictable.

However, sticking with Lukashenko is not a winning strategy either. In the case where Lukashenko becomes so weak that Moscow can impose deep political integration upon him that borders on the loss of the formal sovereignty or territorial integrity of Belarus, the transfer of economic assets under the control of Russian

companies, or the deployment of new Russian military bases in Belarus, a new, and this time national-democratic, uprising may take place. If successful, it would nullify all of Lukashenko’s commitments and all of Russia’s gains. To prevent this, a Russian military intervention might be required, which would be costly both economically and politically and would not necessarily be popular inside Russia. A new crisis could be provoked rather than prevented.

But if Lukashenko is instead able to once again consolidate his regime, the situation will return to the status quo ante: Moscow will keep burning resources to propel the regime in Minsk, whereas the latter will continue to drag its feet and feel in no way obliged to deliver on its promises of integration. At best, Russia will be able to cut the level of the subsidies it provides, as it intended to do before the 2020 elections. However, this cannot be taken for granted, as an inefficient Belarusian economy will need more support for the regime to fund its social contract with the remaining power base. Furthermore, the Kremlin is simply not able to preclude the possibility that several years from now, yet another attempt to achieve normalization with the West will be launched as occurred in 2008 and 2014. The geopolitical motivation for such rapprochement remains intact on both sides, whereas normative factors in the behavior of the West should not be exaggerated. With such motivations in place, a diplomatic algorithm could no doubt be found.

Yet, it is also plausible that even if Moscow massively supports Minsk while respecting the sentiment of the Belarusian people for sovereignty, the Lukashenko regime will nevertheless not be able to stay in power as many dictatorships have done in the past. The gap between the modernizing Belarusian nation and its archaic ruler is widening, and the 2020 protests have reached an unprecedented scale that does not augur well for the regime’s future. The later that Moscow starts to prepare itself for a post-Lukashenko Belarus, the higher the chance is that Russia’s relations with the new Belarus will be very problematic.

About the Author

Dr. Arkady Moshes is Programme Director of the Research Programme on the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in Helsinki. His research focuses on EU–Russian relations as well as the foreign and domestic policies of Ukraine and Belarus. He recently coedited “What has remained of the USSR: Exploring the erosion of the post-Soviet space”, FIIA Report 58, 2019, and coauthored “Belarus in search of a new foreign policy: why is it so difficult?” in *Danish Foreign Policy Review* 2020, Copenhagen, 2020.