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Lukashenka's blues: What the Belarusian regime is afraid of

By

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Introduction

At first glance, Belarusian leader Aliaksandr Lukashenka ought to be feeling somewhat relaxed. In recent months, his regime has navigated through a number of major challenges, both perceived and real. His re-anointment – it would be difficult to call the February ritual “an election” – went smoothly. Conceivably, it even slightly soothed the trauma of 2020. Any potential dissent as regards the electoral procedure was prevented – apparently for the first time in the Lukashenka regime’s history. On the “Western front”, the arrival of the Trump administration eased pressure on Minsk – at least for a while. The end of US foreign aid programmes has further lowered the potency of the regime’s opponents. On the “Eastern front”, Moscow seems to have re-affirmed its commitment to maintaining a political and economic lifeline for the Lukashenka. A three-day state visit to Russia just before his seventh “presidential inauguration” on March 25 was a well-deserved pat on Lukashenka’s head.

Against this backdrop, however, Lukashenka’s behaviour is increasingly odd. The most important evidence in this regard is his moving forward the date of the “election” by half a year. Lukashenka conducted three major government reshuffles over the past nine months, which *inter alia* brought back previously demoted personnel such as Yuri Karaev, who had been the Minister of Interior during the 2020 protests. Also of importance are Minsk’s efforts to explore possibilities to overhaul its relations with the West – its own warmongering rhetoric notwithstanding. Lukashenka’s erratic statements, such as his confession that he was not consulted about Russia’s invasion of Ukraineⁱ, are in strong contrast with his earlier boasting about his “co-aggressor” status, and this must be a signal to the West that he wants to distance himself from Russia. The releases of some political prisoners were supposed to both indicate a readiness to bargain and demonstrate Minsk’s offer in return for a modicum of normalisation, or even, eventually, a rapprochement-lite. Lukashenka’s propaganda vehemently circulates any hint that the Donald Trump administration might remove some of the economic sanctions. Altogether, all this reveals that Lukashenka feels far less confident and secure than he tries to show.

This paper will try to reconstruct the key drivers of Lukashenka’s anxiety. We suggest that his perception of his current vulnerability primarily stems from uncertainties that surround his regime and his own future. Consistent failures to find sustainable medium-to-long-term solutions to the domestic and external issues Minsk is now facing can no longer be concealed.



What should not worry Lukashenka in the near future

Post-2020, Lukashenka does not have many reasons to draw accolades, even from his own supporters. Yet, since 2020, the regime has been continuously showing its durability. Furthermore, some of the regime's long-standing worries have been diluted.

To begin with, the regime is no longer facing a risk of a popular revolution or any large-scale public expression of dissent. If prior to 2020 a scenario of a looming massive popular protest ("Ploshcha") – following Ukraine's model, for example – was one key issue on the regime's agenda, then after 2020, the counter-revolutionary wave eliminated this threat. The repressions have been meticulous and totalitarian in scaleⁱⁱ. This may not have been Lukashenka's preferred choice – when dealing with protests in 2006, 2010 and 2017, he knew how to limit the scale of his revenge – but this time the choice was made in favour of repressions as opposed to buying support, as the fear and panic of 2020 were too big to be forgotten. From 2020 onwards, any self-organised groups were immediately cracked down upon. The civil society, non-state mass media and any independent voices have been successfully demolished. An unprecedentedly massive wave of emigration, which included not only the regime's committed opponents but also previously neutral societal groups that now, nevertheless, were no longer willing to stay in a country facing isolation from the West, changed the internal balance in the regime's favour.

The risk of a split within the elites is also absent. The path of least resistance for the *nomenklatura* is to consolidate around Lukashenka, as these people are both beneficiaries of the regime and possible targets of repressions. Being backstabbed by Russia must have always worried Lukashenka, which explains his enormous efforts to isolate his elite from direct ties with their "senior brother". But after 2022, Moscow has less interest and less resources to nurture Lukashenka's political opponents in Belarus, which it had previously used as leverage on the regime. The fate of both pro-Western and pro-Russian regime opponents clearly showed the Belarusian elite that neither the West nor Russia would help if Lukashenka decides to put someone through a show-trial to remind others about the virtues of full loyalty.

The opposition in exile is not effective. It is mired in self-made controversies, lacks unity and vision, and ultimately no longer poses a threat to the regime. Multiple scandals surrounding core representatives – such as the disappearance in March 2025 of Anzhalika Melnikava, the speaker of the Coordination Council, a kind of a proto-parliament in exile, which is the latest of them – underline the competence issue within the opposition structures. In general, the opposition groups have lost their connection to Belarusian society. Their main efforts are directed at Western

donors, while their key interlocutors remain in the West and not inside the country. The war in Ukraine provided the opposition an opportunity – maybe the last one – to maintain some legitimacy and appeal in Belarusian society. The opposition, however, missed the chance to become a champion of anti-war feelings in society and instead permitted Lukashenka to exploit this sentiment to his benefit. Lukashenka himself has sensed the change. His rhetoric towards the exiled opposition lately has turned from belligerent – treating them as a threat and worthy opponents – to ridiculing.

Relations with Moscow are manageable and, arguably, have entered their most stable phase during Putin-Lukashenka era. Despite being the longstanding main source of the regime's volatility, political relations with Moscow are currently predictable for Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Even if Moscow does not provide all that Lukashenka wants, and does not cover his financial needs in full, he knows that he won't be left to his own devices. As long as Lukashenka remains a key instrument of Russia's control over Belarus, his political status will remain relatively well-protected vis-à-vis internal risks and risks coming from the West. The new treaty on security guarantees of the Union State of Russia and Belarus, which came into force in March 2025ⁱⁱⁱ, only solidified the regime's bonds with Vladimir Putin.

The West is pursuing a wait-and-see approach towards Belarus. It does not wish to challenge the regime outright and largely accepts the current status quo. Belarus is perceived as a strategic extension of Russia, which means that change inside Belarus is not viewed as possible without Moscow's acceptance of it. Such a perspective is partially correct in the sense that the West will no longer be misled by the overtures of the Minsk regime, let alone consider Minsk as a possible intermediary in any conflict or as a stabilising element of regional security. At the same time, it means that the West not only isn't ready to embark on a policy of democracy promotion in Belarus at this time but also will likely refrain from making a big strategic offer to the people of Belarus if the situation changes. This strategic indecisiveness helps Lukashenka to stay in power and allows Moscow to tighten its grip on the country.

In this context, the EU has suffered greatly from reputational losses inside Belarus. The refusal to admit that Europe's rapprochement with Minsk from 2015–2020 was a mistake, one that was aggravated by the slow and inadequate reaction to the 2020 crisis and the unravelling repressions. When the sanctions regime was finally imposed, the EU was not able to explain to the Belarusian people, through opposition media or directly, why the sanctions are necessary and just, or how in practice they should work for the benefit of the people inside the country. As a result, the Belarusian society, which suffered the most from the counter-revolutionary zeal of Lukashenka's repressive machinery, also became the major victim of the Western sanctions. Why Polish authorities enforced a severe limitation on the movement of people across the border, while at the same time trade flows with the Belarusian regime are growing, deserves an explanation.

Why Lukashenka feels unhinged: Annexation, ineptitude, succession

The key reason why Aliaksandr Lukashenka behaves oddly is uncertainty. The regime is stuck in limbo, with no way either forwards or backwards. Not only does the regime not know how to get out of this predicament, but it also realises that the direction of that change is not in Lukashenka's hands.

The major worry is that Belarus's annexation by Russia is becoming a plausible scenario of breaking the status quo, once the war in Ukraine ends or is frozen. If Ukraine loses the war and the West accepts its capitulation – and by extension their own capitulation – then Belarus will top the list of possible next targets. For Moscow, this would finalise the completion of the dream of the “re-unification” of core Slavic states under Russia's dominance. Paradoxically, this scenario may also proceed if Ukraine wins, as in that case the Kremlin would be seeking a foreign policy success elsewhere to offset the costs of the war. Earlier on, the authors did not see this option as probable, but a failure to achieve victory in Ukraine after so much sacrifice and effort may change the thinking in Moscow.

The latter hypothesis becomes realistic given the Western propensity not to deepen its geopolitical stand-off with Russia any further. In this case, the West will not intervene, and not only because after it would have lost in Ukraine. Western mobilisation to protect Belarus – or Moldova or Georgia, for that matter – is not possible to imagine. As mentioned above, the West used to see Belarus as a geopolitical part of Russia, and, in order to justify their own inaction, as was the case in Crimea, there will be no shortage of narratives that Belarus is predominantly Russian-speaking and Russia-friendly and it's only logical that it joins Russia. The uncertainty and damage that the Trump administration brings to international relations and international law in general, and its approach to the Russia-Ukraine war in particular, strongly feeds into this fear of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. All this makes China the only actor which might theoretically intervene on Minsk's behalf, yet such a probability is very low. Given the current state of Putin-Xi personal rapport and the general state of the partnership between Russia and China, Moscow seems to have a very good chance to persuade China to stay out. The damage that Belarus's annexation would do to European and Western security architecture will also feed into Chinese calculations.

If this scenario materialises, Lukashenka, who dreams of going down in history as the founder of the modern Belarusian state, will fall into oblivion like Ukraine's former President Victor Yanukovich. Lukashenka's own political future will be in jeopardy, too. As the example of Ukraine-occupied territories attests to, Lukashenka's services will not be required any longer. Moscow will be quick to finalise the matter with a *coup de grace* in the form of a dispatch of Russia-born bureaucrats.

Lukashenka cannot hedge against this. Belarusian society is overwhelmingly pro-

independence, yet the regime's lack of legitimacy and Lukashenka's mistrust of Belarusian society prevents any attempts to find a common ground on this matter. Proactive societal groups who could sacrifice their political principles and join forces with Lukashenka for the sake of protecting statehood, as happened in 2015–2016, are now exiled or imprisoned. In general, the forced emigration of younger and/or the most creative people not only weakens the country and its economy but also antagonises their relatives. All in all, the repressions *de facto* replaced the old social contract – relative prosperity for political loyalty – as the main mechanism of managing state–society relations.

For society, the regime is progressively looking like an anachronism. Lukashenka's policies and especially rhetoric and slogans have all been used before and are not likely to bring him any new supporters or solutions. His decrees on the ideology of the Belarusian state and orders to improve discipline, to lower prices and to eliminate corruption cannot be taken seriously any longer. This also highlights the regime's impotence in terms of policy. It has been unable to advance any of its policy goals domestically. None of the instruments deployed have brought the expected results, except for repressions. Attempts to break out of foreign policy isolation have failed. His administrative elites are aging, and reshuffles cannot bring up people with new ideas.

The economic challenges will become particularly acute. The economic bonanza that came with restructuring towards the Russian market after the Western sanctions were imposed, which boosted the volumes of Belarusian exports in 2022–2023, is over. Russia's own economic challenges limit both the extent of Russia's economic support and the export capabilities of the Belarusian economy. No alternative to financial dependence on Moscow exists. China shows no interest in providing any loans to Belarus, and Western financial instruments are closed for Minsk under the current sanction regime. This forces Minsk to search for new schemes to extract money from a reluctant Moscow, such as the proposed construction of the second nuclear power plant, which is redundant for the Belarusian economy.

The successor problem is becoming more and more urgent. The fact that Belarusian propaganda actively underlines Lukashenka's active lifestyle habits, such as his training sessions with a professional hockey team, indicates that Lukashenka is cognizant of the fact that he is aging and that his health is becoming a political issue. Meanwhile, finding a successor who would guarantee the safety of Lukashenka himself, and his family, is an enormously difficult task, as recent examples of such regime changes show (the case of Kazakhstan in particular). Moscow might help, yet it is not at all guaranteed that Lukashenka will be even consulted as regards the name of the next Belarusian president – or governor.

Conclusion

Lukashenka and his advisors have strong reasons to feel anxious. We cannot be certain that he realises the problem in its entirety, but he may – and even must – sense that nothing is working as he would wish. Lukashenka remains in the driver's seat, but the machine no longer reacts to his command. The repressive dictatorship, totally dependent on economic assistance and political protection from Moscow, does not and cannot have a good strategy of perpetuating its stay in power. None of the policy instruments that previously served this regime domestically or externally still work. Most crucially, any movement westward – which would require the total and unconditional release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners as well as bringing to justice all those who have unlawfully prosecuted and tortured them and is, therefore, almost impossible to imagine – is very likely to provoke a reaction of Moscow that Lukashenka personally and his regime may not be able to stand. Left with no options, Lukashenka has not much else left but to play for time and hope for the best.



ENDNOTES

ⁱSteve Rosenberg, “North Korea troops in Ukraine would escalate conflict, Lukashenko tells BBC”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62938gl6q1o>

ⁱⁱ See for instance: “The list of political prisoners”, Viasna, at <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en#list>

ⁱⁱⁱ Aleksandr Lukashenko signs Belarus-Russia security treaty into law <https://president.gov.by/en/events/belarus-ratificirovala-dogovor-s-rossiej-o-garantiah-bezopasnosti-1741168850>

