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**THE KREMLIN AND THE
PROTESTS IN BELARUS:
WHAT'S RUSSIA'S NEXT
MOVE?**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Massive and persistent, protests in the usually quiet country of Belarus have taken the world by surprise and suddenly brought the country to the centre of Europe's attention. A rigged presidential election and a violent crackdown on the opposition unleashed deep-rooted popular discontent, which had grown mostly undetected over President Alexander Lukashenko's 26 uninterrupted years in office. Unprecedentedly, 200,000 Belarusians took to the streets in Minsk and other cities to protest police abuses and demand Lukashenko's immediate resignation.

Unlike in the past, many erstwhile supporters of the regime from the ranks of teachers, doctors, and state factory employees, apparently disenchanted with the country's long-serving leader, joined the protests. The gravity of the situation has led many observers to question Lukashenko's ability to survive the turmoil absent a rescue operation by Belarus's main ally, Russia. However, there is little love left in the Kremlin for the Belarusian leader, and Moscow is in no hurry to reveal its strategy for handling the unfolding crisis.

II. THE PROTESTS

In contrast to neighbouring Ukraine, Belarus has experienced little social unrest since attaining independence in 1991. For decades, the majority of Belarusians appeared to be content with the country's first, and so far only, president. Lukashenko's crude and folksy manners endeared him to ordinary folks, while Minsk's good relations with the Kremlin meant that Belarusian state coffers were regularly replenished with generous Russian subsidies.

Thanks to Russia's provision of cheap energy imports and a guaranteed export market, the Belarusian economy largely eluded the painful market reform introduced in other parts of the former Soviet Union. It remained the most Soviet of the post-Soviet states, being devoid of oligarchs, severe income inequality, and mass unemployment. Many appreciated the socio-economic stability Lukashenko's regime offered and were prepared to tolerate his repression of political opponents, open rigging of elections, and censorship of the press.

The Belarusian system seemed so entrenched that few saw the storm coming when Lukashenko announced his plan to run for a sixth consecutive presidential term and scheduled the presidential election for the sleepy days of early August. However, the Belarus of 2020 turned out to be a different place from the one that brought Lukashenko his past electoral triumphs.

Struggling with the global oil slump, Russia became reluctant to subsidize Belarus through cheap energy imports, making the Belarusian economic model unsustainable. But Lukashenko refused to adjust to the changing reality and clung to the status quo, dooming even moderate reforms proposed by his own government.

In the meantime, an ever-greater share of Belarusians became educated, extensively travelled abroad, and ventured into private business. If in the 1990s Belarusians genuinely feared the uncertainties of the market economy, in 2019 polls revealed that the majority of those surveyed preferred the opportunities of the private sector to the stagnant salaries offered at state factories. With the chasm between Belarus's modernizing society and Lukashenko's obsolete governing methods widening, it was only a matter of time before the diverging paths resulted in a political standoff.

The election campaign made it glaringly clear that the president had no intention of satisfying society's longing for change. Lukashenko proved incapable of offering Belarusians any vision of the future, opting to celebrate his past achievements instead. Moreover, he barred from running and jailed on dubious charges all noteworthy opponents. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the wife of the imprisoned blogger and would-be presidential candidate Sergei Tikhanovskiy, was the only oppositionist permitted to run in the election. An ardent male chauvinist, Lukashenko could hardly imagine that a significant number of Belarusians might choose to elect a little-known housewife to the presidency instead of him.

In the end, the absence of real opponents transformed the August 9th vote into a referendum on Lukashenko's rule. Tikhanovskaya was spared the need to elaborate a campaign platform and allowed to avoid alienating potential voters with specific reform plans. She limited herself to a single campaign pledge: to hold a new, free and fair election in the event of her victory.

The promise was vague enough to resonate with disparate parts of society and forced the authorities to resort to blatant vote-rigging to guarantee Lukashenko's victory. Few gave credence to the official results, which implausibly gave Lukashenko over 80 per cent of the vote. His real share of the vote is difficult to determine and most likely fell between 40 and

60 per cent, but the important thing was that a sizable number of Belarusians strongly believed that it was Tikhanovskaya who won the majority of votes.

The authorities' violent crackdown on those who dared to protest the fraudulent vote further undermined the legitimacy of the president. Even former supporters of Lukashenko turned against him, incensed by the cruelty with which the state repressed the president's critics.

The protests' general humanist agenda helped to mobilize hundreds of thousands of Belarusians from various walks of life, from pro-Western liberals to traditionalist state factory workers. The appeal of the movement was bolstered by the absence of slogans about foreign policy, the economy, or national identity, subjects that had proved to be divisive during revolutions in other post-Soviet states like Ukraine and Georgia. The few demands issued by protesters were confined to Lukashenko's removal from power and the country's democratization. Now, this course appears to command the support of the majority of Belarusians.

III. THE RESPONSE

The scope and diversity of the Belarusian protests have made many believe that Lukashenko's days in power are numbered. However, his regime has demonstrated striking resilience. Despite mounting public pressure, the Belarusian leader has managed to retain the loyalty of the state, especially the security apparatus, and prevent the defection of ruling elites, the latter a development that has brought down many post-Soviet leaders.

A few rank-and-file policemen and diplomats have issued public statements in support of the protesters, but their actions have hardly affected the overall situation in the country. All state institutions continue to take orders from Lukashenko. So far, the former Minister of Culture Pavel Latushko is the highest-ranking official to have switched sides and joined the opposition.

The absence of experienced politicians and statesmen at the helm of the opposition has made the protests loose knit and difficult to sustain. Tikhanovskaya and others have tried to compensate by establishing a so-called Coordination Council, but it lacks popular credibility, has little presence on the ground, and is hardly representative of all stripes of protesters.

In the meantime, Lukashenko has recovered from the initial shock and changed his strategy. His efforts to counteract the protests have become far more sophisticated. He has dusted off his skills as a public politician, boldly addressing hostile crowds at state factories to demonstrate that he is not afraid of facing the people. He assembles and addresses pro-regime rallies at which he claims that he is eager to meet the fair demands of ordinary

Belarusians and even to alter the constitution but stresses that the treacherous opposition must be excluded from such a process.

Mass protests now encounter less resistance from the police, who mostly avoid acts of brutality lest they provoke more public outrage. Instead, Belarus's siloviki have begun to pressure protesters individually by detaining them selectively, summoning the most active ones for interrogation, and opening criminal proceedings against them. The message is easy to grasp: you may feel safe at a mass rally, but be prepared to face the consequences later when you find yourself alone with the repressive state apparatus.

The spectre of a nationwide strike — the greatest danger facing the regime — has failed to materialize. Some members of the striking committees were pre-emptively arrested, while others backed down in the face of offers of pay increases and improved social assistance.

The U.S. and the EU have not minced words in condemning electoral fraud and repression in Belarus. Western governments have refused to recognize Lukashenko's victory and called on him to engage his opponents in dialogue, preferably with international mediation.

However, the West has so far entertained few practical steps beyond introducing targeted sanctions against the most notorious members of Lukashenko's inner circle. It has also stopped short of recognizing Tikhanovskaya as Belarus's legitimate president-elect. Traumatized by the events of 2014 in Ukraine, the West has handled Belarus's post-election tumult with the utmost caution to avert a similar crisis. Besides, it is unlikely to invest much in the country's democratization. Taking into account Lukashenko's extensive experience with standoffs with Europe and the U.S., the current level of international pressure is insufficient to make him budge.

Now, Minsk and other cities are brimming with almost daily protests, which are especially large on weekends. Protesters compete with each other in terms of creativity, sparing no effort in inventing new ways of expressing fatigue with Lukashenko's rule. Still, it is difficult to conceive how public frustration with the regime can be converted into meaningful political change, let alone regime change. Examples of similar mass movements in Russia (2011-2012), Turkey (2013) and Serbia (2019) suggest that such protests can sustain momentum for months yet achieve little in the end, dissipating after securing token concessions from the authorities.

IV. THE KREMLIN STEPS IN

The survival of Lukashenko's regime during the protests' first and most tumultuous days owes much to his personal charisma, tight control over the ruling elite, and clear determination to fight to the end, which discouraged potential defectors from siding with the opposition. Another crucial factor behind him holding on to power was his newfound love for his Slavic brethren in Russia.

In the several years preceding the post-election crisis, Lukashenko sought to diversify Belarus's international ties by distancing himself from the Kremlin and mending his country's relations with the U.S. and the EU. There was no breakthrough, but his efforts were not entirely futile: The West lifted most of the sanctions it had introduced against the Belarusian regime over the years and abandoned its perception of Belarus as nothing more than a Kremlin satellite.

Hoping to build on this success, Lukashenko ran his presidential campaign with clear anti-Russian undertones and even arrested several dozen Russian nationals shortly before the vote, claiming that they belonged to the notorious Wagner mercenary outfit and had been dispatched by his ill-wishers in Moscow with the goal of destabilizing the country. The affair was widely seen as an all-time low in bilateral relations after a years-long effort to conceal the animosity between Minsk and Moscow behind a facade of fraternal friendship.

Yet, when the post-election protests jeopardized the very existence of the Belarusian regime, Lukashenko did not hesitate to reverse all the progress he had made in Belarus's relations with the West by turning to the Kremlin for support. Abandoning his campaign rhetoric, he bashed hostile Western powers for trying to organize a colour revolution in Belarus and

forewarned Moscow that the conspiracy's ultimate goal was regime change in none other than Russia. Although the Kremlin initially remained silent and declined to publicly assure the Belarusian leader of its unconditional support, Lukashenko's claims that he could count on Russia's vast security and financial resources went far in ensuring the loyalty of the state apparatus at the crisis's height.

At the moment, the Russian leadership sees the situation in and around Belarus as uniquely favourable. For decades, the Kremlin's priority has been to bind this country to Russia as tightly as possible to preclude its integration with NATO and the EU. Now, this long-coveted prize seems to be within reach. The U.S., living through the final months of Donald Trump's chaotic presidency, is mired in crisis, the EU is divided by the pandemic and its economic repercussions with few resources to spare for its neighbours to the east, and Lukashenko is discredited and his ruling elite disoriented while the Belarusian opposition lacks functioning structures and universal credibility. Only the Kremlin is mobilized and resourceful, always ready to leverage its vast experience with overseas interventions.

That is not to say that the Kremlin is preparing to intervene militarily in Belarus or annex the entire country. Such a move would be costly and provoke an anti-Russian backlash in and beyond Belarus. Rather, the Kremlin would prefer to keep its profile in the country as low as possible, quietly cooperating with — and penetrating — the Belarusian state apparatus to deepen its dependence on Russia.

Currently, the Kremlin's main priority is to lock the West out, prevent any form of Western mediation, and make it so that Minsk's foreign contacts are all run through Moscow. Russian officials maintain that the protests are an internal affair and that foreign meddling is unacceptable. That rule apparently concerns Western activities only, not Moscow's assistance to the regime, which Russia frames as a legitimate obligation under the accords

of its Union State with Belarus and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, of which both states are part.

Lukashenko, as obsessed as ever with staying in power, appears to be ready to trade his autonomy in foreign affairs for Russia's backing. He flatly rejects all Western offers to facilitate dialogue with the opposition. He has also severed all contacts with Western leaders. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel tried to reach out to the Belarusian leadership, she had to do it through the Kremlin as no one was answering the phone in Minsk. There is little doubt that Moscow would prefer to preserve this state of affairs for as long as possible.

At the same time, the Kremlin has deepened its penetration of Belarusian state structures, dispatching its own people to replace those Belarusians who have sided with protesters and to advise those who have remained loyal to the regime. In the short term, Lukashenko's propaganda has become more sophisticated and his response to the protests more efficient. In the long run, Russia's aid will consolidate the personal and intellectual ties between the Kremlin and key institutions of the Belarusian regime, which will become even more reliant on the former than before.

V. THE PROSPECTS

Increasingly, it seems that the Kremlin has thrown its weight behind Lukashenko. Putin recently announced Russia's formation of a reserve police unit to assist the Belarusian authorities should opposition activists cross the line by resorting to "brigandage" or letting the unrest spill over into Russia. He criticized the West for applying double standards in its response to the protests and invited Lukashenko, whose election victory Russia has officially recognized, to visit Moscow. Russian state media now portrays the Belarusian protests as chaotic and anti-Russian, while Lukashenko optimistically touts Moscow's willingness to consider restructuring Belarus's debt, with up to one billion dollars in potential savings for Minsk.

Although the leaders of the Belarusian opposition have tried to respect the Kremlin's sensitivities and refrained from criticizing Russia, their hopes of repeating the Armenia scenario in Belarus look far-fetched. In Armenia, Moscow steered clear of the protests and did not prevent a democratic revolution from toppling a corrupt pro-Russian autocrat in 2018. The Kremlin's calculation was that Armenia's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and hostile relations with neighbouring Azerbaijan and Turkey guaranteed that Yerevan would remain a close ally of Russia under any regime. However, in Belarus, it is Lukashenko, with his dire reputation in the West, who offers Moscow the best guarantee available of Minsk's geopolitical loyalty.

Still, Russia's current support for Lukashenko does not mean that the Kremlin is allergic to the idea of political change in Belarus. On the contrary, Russia's criticism of foreign meddling in the crisis always comes with the caveat that the protests are partly justified and

that some kind of change is necessary. Constitutional reform seems to be the most realistic and universally palatable option.

Lukashenko himself has promised to amend the Constitution, saying so even before the election. It will allow him to play for time and placate some of the protesters by creating an illusion of change. The West will welcome any steps towards political liberalization in Belarus. Finally, the Kremlin can use the revision of the Belarusian constitution to disperse Lukashenko's powers and bolster the influence of other state institutions. It will consequently become less dependent on the long-serving Belarusian leader and will no longer be forced to negotiate with him and him only.

Moscow sees not Lukashenko but Belarus's security and other government officials as its main allies in the current crisis. These people run the country's cumbersome, but relatively efficient bureaucratic machine. For decades, Lukashenko was unquestionably their boss and the guarantor of a stable and prosperous future. Now, however, he is in deep trouble and his promises are worth little.

Thus, the Belarusian bureaucracy, frightened by the opposition's calls for lustration, is searching for a way out, and the Kremlin is the only player to whom it is realistic to look. Just a few weeks ago, before the election, abandoning Lukashenko for the Kremlin was a highly risky undertaking for any Belarusian official. Now, such a switch is seen as the easiest way to survive in the new Belarus. Few care that the Kremlin will extend his patronage only to those who agree to outsource Belarus's foreign and security policy to Russia.

In this setting, the redistribution of presidential powers to other state institutions may sideline Lukashenko and turn the Kremlin into the supreme arbiter in Belarusian politics. Moscow would be able to exploit internal divisions within the Belarusian elite and support those officials who are ready to meet Moscow's demands on foreign policy and security

issues. Collective leadership is also likely to be a more compliant partner in negotiations on furthering Russo-Belarusian integration.

The Kremlin has little interest in running Belarus's domestic affairs. Rather, it would prefer to turn the country into a sort of Abkhazia on steroids. Georgia's breakaway province, which is recognized only by Russia and a few other states, boasts contentious political life with highly contested elections, never-ending protests and frequent personnel changes at the top. But the Kremlin cares little about these excesses of democracy so long as Abkhazia's foreign policy remains firmly under Russia's control. A similar state of affairs in Belarus would ensure that the Kremlin sees and treats it as a reliable ally.

To be sure, Russia can hardly implement such a project in full. The West's refusal to recognize Lukashenko's victory is a far cry from the almost universal non-recognition of Abkhazia's independence. Lukashenko, a survivor, will cling to power with little willingness to hand it over to the Kremlin. He is bound to become a far less malleable partner for Moscow as soon as the peak of the crisis passes. Finally, Belarusians with their newfound passion for political activism may raise their voices to promote their own vision of the country's future. Still, the Kremlin's course is unlikely to encounter major obstacles in the short term, tempting it to undertake another geopolitical adventure.