

Belarus Near a Tipping Point: A Conflict Diagnostic of the post-Election Crisis

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International Mediation and Conflict Resolution – INAF 5203

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Submitted to: David Carment

March 13th, 2021

Executive Summary

In August 2020, a seemingly fraudulent election led to a wave of protests in Belarus. While the autocratic president—Lukashenko—claimed to have received 80% of the vote, this was contested by the opposition and viewed skeptically by most of the international community. Given Belarus’ strong ties with Russia and newer relationship with the European Union (EU), this crisis has important international dimensions. Furthermore, poor governance and political instability, economic pressures, and militarization increase its potential for conflict. This conflict diagnostic analyzes the ongoing crisis in Belarus and presents the best, worst, and most likely scenarios for its future. At best, this crisis could foster democracy in Belarus; at worst, a violent conflict could end in Russian domination. A more likely outcome is that protests are repressed and a pro-Russian successor ultimately replaces Lukashenko.

Background

Belarus became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. The president, Alexander Lukashenko, was first elected in 1994 and remains in power today. Known as “Europe’s last dictator,” Lukashenko has done little to transition Belarus to a functioning market economy. Instead, he maintains stringent price controls, runs current account deficits, and relies on Russian loans to maintain revenue flows (Dabrowski, 2016; World Bank, 2020c). This has made it harder for Belarus to build new and deeper international linkages, but Russia’s increasing pressure on Belarus has made it more willing to cooperate with the EU and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (BTI, 2020; Rácz, Gherasimov & Nič, 2020). To maintain power, Lukashenko has relied on an authoritarian regime. He has been accused of falsifying election results, claiming 80% of the vote in the August 2020 election. This resulted in the largest protest Belarus has seen (Victor, 2020). The deployment of government forces led to riots and violence against civilians, claiming two fatalities (ACLED, 2021). The leader of the opposition, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, fled the country after purportedly being threatened for challenging the vote (Specia, 2020). While Lukashenko has promised to introduce constitutional reforms and call for a re-election, he has not done so yet and the crisis appears far from over (BBC, 2020).

Indicator Analysis

Primary Drivers of Conflict Potential

Governance and Political Instability - High Risk, Stable Trend: Belarus is an autocracy in which citizens are unable to effectively exercise their political rights and, to a lesser extent, civil liberties. This trend remains unchanged over five years (Center for Systemic Peace, 2019; Freedom House, 2020a; World Bank, 2020d). Press freedom is constrained, though internet controls are less developed (Freedom House, 2020b; Reporters without Borders, 2020). These are the most relevant indicators, as they show why citizens resort to protest as the most effective means to express their needs and interests. Corruption and governmental effectiveness have improved over the last five years, but remain at a moderate level (Transparency International, 2020; World Bank, 2020d). However, given low public trust in Lukashenko, arrests and violence against protestors, and the contested election, the risk level remains stable (Neuman, 2020; Roache, 2020).

Economic Performance - Medium Risk, Increasing Trend: Belarus is at risk of economic instability—an increasing trend over the last ten years. While its GDP has improved over the last five years, GDP forecasts show a 4% contraction in 2020 and a deepening recession going into 2021 due to the pandemic and the current crisis (World Bank, 2020a). Furthermore, a significant underground economy, comparatively high inflation rate, and ongoing political unrest increase the potential for economic destabilization compared to the region (BTI 2020; National Bank of Belarus, 2021; OECD, 2020). Coupled with the opposition’s calls for organized strikes and protest against Lukashenko, the economic situation will likely continue to deteriorate (GardiaWorld, 2021). This would further add to the potential for unrest.

Secondary Drivers of Conflict Potential

International Linkages - Medium Risk, Stable Trend: Belarus attempts to balance the West and Moscow to secure beneficial terms for itself (BTI, 2020). In reality, Belarus' geopolitical loyalty to Moscow is the regime's greatest asset. Being an outcast in Europe, Lukashenko relies on Russian support both militarily and economically (Kryvoi & Wilson, 2015). Belarus is the only country in the region that is not a member of the WTO or the Council of Europe, but it consistently participates in Russian-led organizations (Kryvoi & Wilson, 2015). Nevertheless, Belarus fears Russia's economic dominance and foreign policy interests for its survival. This fuels a desire to further integrate into the rules-based order, the EU, and the West as leverage against the Kremlin (BTI, 2020; Rácz, Gherasimov & Nič, 2020; European Council, 2021). Belarus' absence from key economic and regional institutions is the greatest contributor to the indicator being labelled as medium risk.

Militarization - Medium Risk, Decreasing Trend: Despite relying on a strong internal security apparatus domestically, Minsk's historical ties with Russia have granted it a level of comfort regarding its external security (BTI, 2020). Belarus spends relatively little on defence due to its membership in the Russian-led CSTO, a collective defence alliance that works similarly to NATO (CSTO, 2002). Its geographical proximity to Russia and its landlocked territory make Belarus relatively safe from non-Russian threats. By most measures, Belarussian militarization is declining. This is likely a symptom of the 2014-16 economic recession, and a consistently low level of international disputes (BTI, 2020; CIA, 2020). Nevertheless, this trend is suggestive of Belarus' shifting policy given the dominance of NATO West and North of its borders. The fraction of regional military expenditures, which pales in comparison to other neighbouring countries such as Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, is the greatest contributor to the indicator being labelled as medium risk.

Pacifying Indicators

History of Armed Conflict - Low Risk, Decreasing Trend: Belarus does not have a recent history of armed conflict, and the current crisis is in a de-escalatory phase. Most importantly, both riots and instances of violence against civilians have been on a decreasing trend since their peak in August 2020 and there have been few fatalities (ACLED, 2021). Although Belarus has a moderate, increasing number of stateless persons and a low, increasing number of refugees (UNHCR, 2020), these are relatively less important factors in this crisis, which is characterized by popular opposition to an oppressive regime.

Population Heterogeneity - Low Risk, Stable Trend: The relatively homogenous society and acceptance of the Russian minority—the largest, at 7.5% of the population—indicate a low risk of ethnic violence. The Belarussian majority and Russian and Ukrainian minorities share the Christian Orthodox religion (United States Department of State, 2018), and no regions have a high concentration of non-Belarusians (Belsat TV, 2020). Moreover, given Lukashenko's close ties to Russia, and the population's preference for referendums over violence, further mitigates that risk. (Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 2015).

Demographic Stress - Low Risk, Stable Trend: Population density remains low, including in urban areas (WorldBank Development Indicators, 2020). However, the urban population is heavily concentrated in the capital Minsk, with approximately 21% of the total population—a modestly increasing trend in the last five years. The rural population has declined since 2009 (Republic of Belarus, 2020), but the modest increase in suburbanization around Minsk has avoided stress on urban areas (Kanat Makhanov, n.d.). These factors display a low risk for the demographic stress indicator, which is further strengthened by data showing that Belarus remains among the most urbanized post-Soviet countries (Makhanov, n.d.).

Environmental Stress - Low Risk, Decreasing Trend: There is no indication of environmental stress in Belarus. A reforestation trend in the last ten years, a moderate stock of renewable water sources, and the very low and stable rate of 167 people per square kilometer of arable land reduce the risk of conflict over resources (World Bank, 2020c).

Human Development - Low Risk, Stable Trend: HDI scores are not a destabilizing factor in Belarus. Over 96% of the population has access to drinking water. Over 95% of school-age children are enrolled in primary or secondary school and the infant mortality rate is low and decreasing (World Bank, 2020c.) Life expectancy is a reasonable 71 years, only 4 years lower than the Baltic average of 75 (World Bank, 2020c.) There is concern regarding the population's access to reasonable levels of sanitation, which stands around 10% lower than its Baltic neighbors at 80%. However, overall HDI scores in Belarus are more of a stabilizing factor than not.

Stakeholder Analysis

Alexander Lukashenko is Belarus' current president. Lukashenko has managed to make a name for himself by achieving his political agenda: the restoration of the old Soviet economic system with only marginal market economic reforms, gradually increasing political repression, and close political relations with Russia, (Åslund, 2020). Named "Europe's last standing dictator" by G. W. Bush, Lukashenko was elected in 1994 through what was then deemed a fair election. Since then, he is believed to be rigging elections to remain in power (Roache, 2020). Government polls are kept secret, opposition leaders jailed, and opinion polls suppressed (Åslund, 2020). While Lukashenko recently hinted that he welcomes constitutional reform, a new election, and his departure from the role of president, he remains in power. Continued arrests of journalists and lack of reform paint a different picture—Lukashenko remains unpredictable and prepared to protect the status quo (BBC, 2020). But he is constrained as both the West and Russia have continuously pressed him for reforms. On the one hand, the EU and the WTO have pushed for human rights and market reforms. On the other hand, Lukashenko has distanced his regime from Russia following the annexation of Crimea, largely in part to draw more support from the EU—a move that resulted in Russian pressure for reform, which is unprecedented (Kryvoi & Wilson, 2015; BBC, 2020). Lukashenko appears ambivalent towards Russia following the arrest of 33 Russian mercenaries, which he claimed were helping the opposition contrarily to Russia's claims, but has since asked for Russian assistance in the crisis (Roache, 2020).

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is the leader of the opposition and a primary stakeholder in the crisis. She ran against Lukashenko for President, holding popular campaign rallies throughout Belarus. After the official election results gave her 10% of the vote to Lukashenko's 80%, she contested the vote count. A major part of her agenda is to contest the election results, hold free and fair elections and achieve the release of all political prisoners, which guarantees an adversarial relationship with Lukashenko (Browne 2020; Specia, 2020). She was endorsed by the broader democracy movement in Belarus and has a positive relationship with protestors, who view her as a leader (Nechepurenko & Troianovski, 2020; Specia, 2020). Despite this popular support, Tikhanovskaya faces a significant power disparity. This became evident when Lukashenko was apparently able to threaten her using the security apparatus (Specia, 2020). In response, she fled to Lithuania, where she continued to encourage peaceful demonstrations and criticize the government's treatment of protestors (Specia, 2020). In late August, she created the Coordination Council to communicate with the government, rally international support, and, ultimately, facilitate a transfer of power from Lukashenko. The government responded with a criminal investigation, detainments, intimidation, and propaganda ("EU Agrees", 2020). This further demonstrates the power disparity the opposition faces, though the EU has offered rhetorical support, endorsed the activities of the Coordination Council, and imposed sanctions targeting Lukashenko's regime ("EU Agrees", 2020). In early January, Tikhanovskaya requested Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) support for her safe return to Belarus and called for negotiation between Lukashenka, the opposition, and the EU (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Other Opposition Members have moved between the primary and secondary stakeholder categories during the crisis, though they were often primary stakeholders in previous, smaller disputes. For example, many opposition figures were involved in smaller-scale protests after the 2010 presidential election and the 2019 parliamentary elections. They had popular support, but past protests have not affected serious change (OSCE 2016; OSCE 2020). Key figures include former head of the United Civil Party Anatol Lyabedzka and ex-presidential candidates Andréi Sánnikov and Alexander Milinkevich. They have a real stake in the outcome of the crisis and support

Tikhanovskaya, but it has been difficult for them to act directly. They were mainly jailed, forced into exile, or otherwise rendered unable to directly impact the 2020-2021 crisis, making their relationship with the Lukashenko regime conflictual (Nechepurenko & Troianovski, 2020). Although many opposition members joined the Coordination Council and were able to take on more of a primary stakeholder role there, they were again harassed, intimidated, or made to leave Belarus (“EU Agrees”, 2020). The policy agendas of the opposition vary, but they generally advocate for the removal of Lukashenko and the establishment of meaningful democracy. Their most pressing need is to be released from prison or allowed to safely return to Belarus, to participate in free and fair elections, and to be protected through increased rule of law (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, 2020). Like Tikhanovskaya, they would likely benefit from international support.

Russia is a secondary stakeholder that is highly invested in Belarus. While both states are formally in a Union State established in 1996, the ‘Union State’ only exists on paper, due to Lukashenko’s desire to retain a hold on power (Walker, 2020). While Russia previously was content to have Belarus support Russian led initiatives such as the EAEU in return for financial/economic aid (EAEUS, 2016; Kryvoi, Wilson, 2020), it has more expressed a renewed interest in pursuing further integration in the last 5 years to the potential detriment of Belarusian sovereignty (BTI, 2020). Russia has the potential to become a primary stakeholder if the conflict escalates. Geographical, economic, and energy-related concerns give Russia immense leverage over Belarus (BTI 2020). The Russian agenda is to ‘secure’ its eastern borders through the existence of pro-Russian ‘buffer’ states that also provide it with a route to transport natural gas and oil into the EU. (CNBC, 2020; Steil, 2018) Russia conducts joint military drills with Belarus and has indicated they will increase in size and frequency as the situation continues (Valenta, 2021). Russia’s relationship with Belarus had been declining between 2015 and 2018 due to Belarus’ openness strategy with the EU, resulting in tariffs and trade conflicts, and culminating in the issuance of an “integration ultimatum” by Russia in 2018 during a dispute over oil and gas prices (BTI 2020). Despite Belarus’ accusations of Russian interference in its domestic affairs, such as the arrest of 33 ‘mercenaries’ supposedly aligned with Russia during the Belarusian 2020 election (Guardian, 29 July 2020), Lukashenko once again appeared to return to Russia for support as a result of the protests. Russia thus promised more support for Lukashenko and the Belarussian government with financial and military aid (Foy, 2020).

The European Union’s relationship with Belarus operates within a balancing dynamic, where Minsk seeks to leverage the West and Russia against one another to pursue its goals (BTI, 2020; Rácz, Gherasimov & Nič, 2020). The EU and Belarus have been working to strengthen bilateral ties over the last decade through the Eastern Partnership (European Council, 2021). The 2014-16 recession and growing Russian assertiveness pressured Belarus to diversify its relations, particularly with the EU. Belarus is not a candidate for EU membership, but Brussels seeks to prevent it from becoming a Russian proxy (BTI, 2020). Despite its ambivalence towards Lukashenko, the conflict in Donbas showed that the EU should engage with Russia’s neighbours to constrain Russian influence in Europe (Kryvoi & Wilson, 2015). In reaction to the crisis, the EU imposed 3 rounds of sanctions against 88 Belarusian state officials and 7 entities which were answered by similar sanctions against EU officials from Minsk (European Council, 2021). An arms embargo, a ban on the exports of goods for internal repression, asset freezes, and travel bans dating back to 2004 are also in place (European Council, 2021). The EU does not recognize the results of the 2020 presidential elections, condemning them as neither free nor fair. It also condemns violent acts of repression, arbitrary arrest, intimidation, and detention by the government against peaceful protesters and the opposition (European Council, 2021). So far, the sanctions have failed to foster a transition to liberal democracy.

Scenarios

Best Case: Warmer weather and continued frustration cause peaceful protests to ramp up again. While the recession hurts citizens, it also encourages participation by the under- and unemployed and gives the regime fewer ways to respond to the crisis. Footage is featured in international media, where it competes with fewer events than in August 2020, and goes viral online (Freedom House, 2020b). This prompts the EU and the Biden administration to support the Coordination Council, which seeks dialogue with Russia (Kimmage et. al., 2020). There, the Council expresses

that the protests are against Lukashenko, not Russia, and that supporting the unpopular Lukashenko is damaging Russia's image. Combined with Lukashenko's increasingly erratic behaviour under immense pressure, this convinces Putin that supporting the autocrat would be counterproductive to the goal of maintaining Russian influence in Belarus. With few allies, Lukashenko is eventually forced to release political prisoners and agree to a rerun of the election monitored by the OSCE. The election is free and fair, and the crisis is resolved with the establishment of meaningful democracy in Belarus.

Worst Case: Increasingly frustrated with the government's refusal to either step down or re-run an election, demonstrations become larger and increasingly violent. In addition, the deepening recession resulting from the pandemic has worsened the already destabilized Belarussian economy and the country is now facing high levels of inflation. Crackdowns cause many casualties, further angering Belarussian society and turning the crisis into a full-blown civil war. The bloodshed creates a rift between Lukashenko and Moscow, who realizes that continued support for the regime will only drive Belarussian society towards the EU and the West. Russia also understands that the power vacuum following Lukashenko's inevitable demise will leave significant room for Russian influence. The EU is unwilling to directly intervene in the conflict, instead offering humanitarian assistance and asylum for refugees. Despite its modest efforts to support a democratic transition, the EU stands idly by as Moscow grooms a more amenable replacement to Lukashenko, who is now imprisoned. The new pro-Russian government, weakened by the conflict, gives in to many of the Kremlin's economic and military demands. Belarus is now further away from the rules-based order than it was during the Lukashenko era.

Most Likely: Despite criticisms of Lukashenko's rule over Belarus by local opposition, the EU, and Russian stakeholders, the protests and their perceived support by Western powers has forced a detente in relations between Russia and Belarus (Foy, 2021). Russian security concerns regarding its Eastern European borders mean that it continues to shore up Lukashenko's rule with aid in the form of security training, financial aid and energy subsidies (BTI, 2020; CNBC, 2020), conditional on a gradual transfer of power from Lukashenko to an individual who is equally or more amenable to Russian interests (Barros, 2020; Foy, 2021). The number of protesters, which resulted from the economic decline caused by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, will decline as economic stability resumes thanks to Russian assistance. Those remaining will be eventually repressed by the combination of Belarus's state security forces and Russian assistance. As a result, Belarus is forced into a closer relationship with Russia.

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