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*The 39th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by **John Everard**, a British diplomat from 1979 to 2006. He opened the British Embassy in Minsk in 1993 and as the UK's first ambassador to Belarus, observed at first hand Lukashenko's rise to power. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

Belarus: The Forgotten Country Awakes

Belarus is one of the forgotten nations of Europe. Although the Belarusian people have lived in or near their current land for as far back as ethnologists can trace, and although Belarus has existed as a political unit for over 1000 years (sometimes independently, sometimes as part of a larger state) most people in the west know hardly anything of either the country or its people. Indeed, whenever I came back to London on leave during my time as ambassador there I used to have to carry a small map of Europe so that I could show people where Belarus was.

When they think of them at all westerners tend to imagine that Belarusians are simply a variant on Russians, or perhaps on Poles. In fact they are culturally and temperamentally quite different from both. They tend to be taciturn and shy, and are deeply conservative.

Belarusians joke that political change is difficult in a country where people never even rearrange their furniture.

It was largely this deep conservatism that brought Alexander Lukashenko to power. In the 1994 election he stood against the ruling Prime Minister, Vyacheslav Kebich, who was trying to move Belarus closer to a changing and reforming Russia. Lukashenko in contrast promised a return to the stability and security of the old Soviet Union - no privatisations, no currency reform, no attempt to transform agriculture. Belarusians loved his message and swept him to power in a landslide. It was the first and only free election that Belarus has known.

Paradoxically it was this same conservatism that originally fuelled the angry protests that we are witnessing. Lukashenko, the president who had promised to keep things going as they always had gone, found that he was



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unable to do so. Over time Belarus' fragile and mostly unreformed economy started to slide. People started to lose their jobs and found that their pay packets bought less and less. Life became difficult and uncertain and Lukashenko's political support fell away. Faced with an ever more disillusioned electorate he has had to cheat heavily in order to 'win' all recent elections. In 2015 this produced protests that were brutally repressed and eventually died down. But in 2020, with people angry both at continued economic decay and at their government's failure to take coronavirus seriously, the country erupted. We have now seen almost continual protests against Lukashenko ever since the 9 August elections.

At first few of these protesters seemed interested in big issues like democracy, sovereignty or independence. Although some of the more intellectual (and English-speaking) among them talked to western media about such things, many more of the non-English speaking majority told independent Russian radio that they were protesting because 'we simply want to live normally'. These protests started simply as a wave of anger against a president whose failures had prevented Belarusians from quietly getting on with their lives and who therefore, in their eyes, should go. They were driven by quite different motives than the protests in Ukraine in 2013-14 that eventually forced political change there. There was little or no hostility to Russia. Indeed, at the beginning many of the protesters waved

the red-green national flag that Lukashenko introduced in 1995, which was a reworking of the old Soviet-era flag of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. This was not surprising. For hundreds of years Belarusians have been quite content to live in states dominated by other peoples – Lithuanians, then Poles, then Russians (first the Tsar's empire and then the USSR). Few Belarusians objected to this provided that in general they were left to get on with their lives in peace.

But over time interviews with protesters have shown a growing resentment of Russia. Mainly this seems to be because Putin is supporting the hated Lukashenko, but partly it seems to be because of rumours (are they true?) that many of the masked men who beat up protesters are Russians – a suspicion fuelled by the reluctance of these men to speak (if they are Russian, their accent would give them away immediately). The red-green flags have now disappeared and it is the white-red-white flag of the short-lived independent Republic of Belarus of 1919, that a newly independent Belarus adopted when the USSR collapsed and used until 1995, that now flies over the protests. In the beginning protesters used to sing songs in Russian with a thick Belarusian accent, the street language of Belarus, but now they sing songs in Belarusian. Over the last eight weeks, almost as a by-product of the protests, national consciousness and animosity to Russia have both grown.

The situation was already challenging enough for Lukashenko. Although he retains



the levers of power and there are no signs of fissures in his army or police, it is not clear how loyal the civilian administration remains to him, and his best efforts at intimidation have failed to stop the protests. Indeed, brutal police repression seems to have enraged rather than cowed Belarusians.

The growth in national sentiment makes the situation even more difficult for him. For decades he has posed as the guarantor of Belarusian sovereignty, but now that he has been seen to be willing to, in effect, sell out to Russia while the protesters are becoming more and more nationalistic that final shred to his political legitimacy has gone. The fact that his attempts to speak Belarusian have attracted ridicule has not helped.

But it makes handling the situation even more difficult for the Kremlin too. Faced with an economy in steep decline, raging coronavirus and unrest in the Russian far east, the Kremlin will not have welcomed the emergence of yet another knotty problem across its border in Belarus. Although the uprising there presents opportunities – Putin would love to have a more pliant government in Minsk than the spiky, truculent Lukashenko – the threats it presents are much greater. The Kremlin does not welcome worked examples of unpopular governments being overthrown by mass protests. Moreover, if Lukashenko falls and is replaced by someone not of Putin's choosing this would embolden his opponents. Also Putin, like Lukashenko, insists in public – and seems genuinely to believe – that the

protests are being stirred up by the west. He has invested considerable time in warning western leaders off intervention. His fear of 'losing' Belarus, however misplaced, seems to be real.

He has held back from major intervention so far probably both because he does not wish to provoke the west and because he wanted to see how matters developed – an opening might have arisen to replace Lukashenko with a pro-Kremlin leader. But the growth of nationalism that has accompanied the protests narrows his options. In August a swift Russian-inspired putsch, replacing Lukashenko with a Kremlin stooge who promptly promised to re-open factories and protect jobs, might have been a possibility, but in October it would be met by fury and Belarus might become ungovernable. Moreover, overt intervention by Russians now would be inflammatory. When, weeks ago, Belarusian television presenters who refused to broadcast Lukashenko's version of news were replaced by Russians, Belarusians responded simply by turning their televisions off. But if Putin were to attempt anything similar now the popular reaction would probably be much more vigorous.

So for the time being there is a three-way stalemate. Lukashenko cannot stop the protesters. Although he is safe in the Presidential complex moving outside it is problematic – he has to travel by helicopter, and was forced to swear his oath of office on 23 September in the Palace of Independence



at an unannounced ceremony conducted in front only of a carefully selected audience of loyalists. Putin does not want Belarus to slide further away from Russia but his options for preventing this are probably shrinking. Meanwhile the protesters are strong enough to keep going, but not yet to disrupt Belarus sufficiently to force Lukashenko from office.

It is far too early to say how this will end. It is most unlikely that Lukashenko will voluntarily leave office soon – he is stubborn, and may in any case not fully understand the extent of the hostility to him. It is possible that he will simply hang on, reigning but perhaps not really ruling. But it is possible too that one of his entourage loses patience and removes Lukashenko in order to grab power for himself (there are however no obvious candidates for this among senior Belarusians) or that Putin finds a way, despite the odds, of replacing Lukashenko with his own man.

But it is unlikely in any case that time is on Lukashenko's side. He is broke. (Almost all of the US\$1.5bn that Russia lent him in September will go straight back to Russia in loan repayments). If the protesters can keep

going then eventually, with his resources depleted from the ravages both of coronavirus and the unrest, he will be unable to pay the men in uniform on whom he depends. At that point he is doomed, and the prospect that he might do a deal with the protesters, get in his helicopter and go, becomes real.

Can the protests keep going that long? The protests in Ukraine lasted three months, from November 2013 to the fall of Yanukovich in February 2014. The protesters in Belarus are showing every bit as much determination to fight to the finish as the Ukrainians did. But two months into these protests there is no sign of a resolution. It is quite possible that this uprising will take much longer than that in Ukraine to come to a conclusion – that it has, in fact, only just begun.

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