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## Belarus and Russia – a Fraternal Iron Grip

**On September 14, 2020 in Sochi, Vladimir Putin met with Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and the meeting, as expected, did not bring about any crucial changes. It was supposed to be a symbolic message – Russia has confirmed that Belarus would remain in the sphere of its influence and in the “Russian world” the West should not interfere. Humiliated and put in a spot, Alyaksandr Lukashenka admitted that he had to cooperate with his “older brother”. At least in the short and medium term, it can be expected, that Belarus’ economic dependence on Russia will deepen, the military cooperation of both states will intensify, and Russia’s influence on Belarus’ foreign policy will increase.**

**A symbolic visit.** Apart from the promise of a Russian loan to Belarus and the ‘calling Lukashenka to order’, who had been troubling Russia for a long time, the meeting in Sochi, probably only sealed the earlier decisions. At the beginning of September, Belarus was visited by Russia’s Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, with a delegation of various deputy prime ministers and ministers, which suggests that talks were held regarding specific solutions connected to the integration of Belarus and Russia, under Russian conditions, in exchange for Russia’s help to maintain power by the Lukashenka regime. The defense ministers of both countries also paid mutual visits. Deepening the political, economic, and military integration of Russia and Belarus is, however, a strategic goal, the implementation of which will probably be postponed as Russia’s priority is now to stabilize the situation in Belarus – understood as suppressing protests, keeping Belarus in its sphere of influence, and preventing, at least for a while, the overthrow of Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

**Surprise and counteroffensive.** Like Lukashenka himself, Russia was initially surprised by both the scale of the protests and the demonstrators’ determination. Observing the developments, the Russian authorities quickly realized that the events in Belarus, most likely irreversibly delegitimizing the system of power created by Lukashenka, could also pose a threat to them. Also, the Russian Government’s social legitimacy is weakening and, in the opinion of the Russian authorities, who are constantly afraid of any grassroots democratic movements, the protests of Belarusians could inspire and mobilize Russian society. Russia was also faced with a difficult choice: failure to react could bring a geopolitical defeat and a risk of “infecting” Belarus with democracy, possibly “exporting” similar sentiments to Russia. On the other hand, open intervention would further worsen the relations with the West and antagonize the Belarusian society, which is thus far favorable to Russia. However, the stakes turned out to be so high and the fear of another “color revolution” so strong, that the Kremlin had decided to take adamant steps – the poisoning of Alexei Navalny was probably meant as a warning to both the Russian and Belarusian opposition.

**“The Russian world”.** On August 27, President Putin made an unequivocal statement that he would not allow “the country closest to Russia” to drift towards the West and its institutions and leave Russian’s sphere of influence. Thus, he signaled that Russia would not accept a government that would not maintain an anti-Western and pro-Russian course in Belarus. At the same time, he warned the West against any interference in the internal affairs of Belarus, hinting also at the preparation of troops of the Russian law enforcement forces, which could be used on the territory of Belarus if necessary. The forces of the Russian National Guard, the so-called Rosguard, may be used outside Russia upon the president’s decision. From a formal point of view, there are legal bases that allow Russia to provide military assistance to Belarus which derive from both states’ membership to the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Union State. However, such a solution would be too costly for Russia for political, financial, and reputational reasons.

**Hybrid activities.** There are many indications that in order to prevent the emancipation of Belarus, but also not to jeopardize the relations with the West and the Belarusian society, Russia has chosen the already proven variant of hybrid actions, traditionally adapting its scope and instruments to the specific situation and trying to shift responsibility for the “hybrid warfare” to the West.

As early as August, Russian specialists in the field of propaganda began to help the Belarusian state media construct information narratives, the axis of which is to blame an external enemy, i.e., Western states and institutions, for the destabilization of the country. In the external dimension, this is supposed to discourage the West from taking more decisive actions towards Belarus. It can be noted that pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda activities, and discrediting the Belarusian protests, have also recently intensified in the Polish information space.

Compared to those used so far, based on brutality and arrogant rhetoric, which did not bring any results, actions against the opposition have become more multifaceted and sophisticated, which suggests the use of external help. The law enforcement forces have modified their tactics and the protesters' arrests by the militia and OMON are ongoing. However, masked officers in uniforms without markings have also appeared, fueling tension in the atmosphere and risking provocations, especially since there are rumors among the protesters that it is Russians who are under the masks. There are visible actions aimed at taking full control over the flow of information: blocking the Internet and independent media, getting rid of foreign journalists, by withdrawing their accreditations or not allowing them to enter the country. At the same time, official Belarusian media outlets echo the Russian ones, initially appearing rather neutral towards the events in Belarus, but now shifted towards advancing the idea that Russians and Belarusians constitute one nation, and that Russia has not exerted and does not exert any pressure on Belarus, and that the protests are inspired by the West (including Poland). One by one, the groups of protesters are consistently intimidated, students, teachers, factory workers on strike etc., while the opposition Coordination Council is broken up by arresting its members or forcing them to leave the country.

Another typical instrument of hybrid activities is the polarization of society: not only pointing out the enemy, which in this case includes the Polish minority in Belarus and, from Poland's point of view, is a disturbing signal, but also in line with the *divide et impera* principle, dividing the opposition. For example, the creation of a new opposition party (“Together”) was announced, which, however, declares support for the idea of constitutional changes instead of repeating the election. While the latter is one of the protesters' main demands, the idea of constitutional changes is being pushed by both the Belarusian authorities and Russia. Although this did not have a major impact on the development of the situation or the balance of forces, it caused some confusion in the ranks of the opposition, especially since this concept was supported by one of Lukashenka's most popular opponents in Belarus, namely Viktor Babaryka, whom Russia would probably be willing to accept as President of Belarus.

**The twilight of Lukashenka.** The rigging of the elections and the brutal pacification of peaceful protests definitely prevented Lukashenka from cooperating with the West at an exceptionally unfavorable moment, taking into account the condition of the Belarusian economy. Thus, he was forced to turn to Russia – since August 9, he spoke with Vladimir Putin more often than he had in the entire previous year. However, he is in a very weak negotiating position: the people of Belarus, most European countries, and international institutions, are against him, and his power is based solely on the loyalty of the government departments of force. However, this loyalty has its limits and may turn out to be shaky; if the constitution was changed and the president's omnipotence was limited, this group would gain even more importance. Considering that almost all members of the Belarusian *siloviki* elite were educated in Russian (or Soviet) military universities and are well known in Russia, it should be assumed that this would suit Russia's interests.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka, with Russian support, is likely to remain in power. His position, however, will be weakened; Russia will not forget him the anti-Russian rhetoric during the election campaign and the delay and blocking of the process of Belarus' integration with Russia. It will also be inconvenient for Kremlin for utilitarian reasons, for example, it will be difficult for Lukashenka to rule without social legitimacy and under conditions of

international ostracism, and this will backfire on Russia as well. Hence, the price of support provided to Lukashenka will be high. Perhaps he will be forced to accept the so-called Medvedev's plan and the "road maps", and possibly to transfer control over key enterprises (armaments, refineries, fertilizer producers) to Russia. The economic dependence of Belarus on Russia will deepen, and the Russian military presence is likely to increase as well. For example, it is possible that the Russian armed forces will be permanently present in Belarus.

**Conclusions.** Belarus will not change its geopolitical vector; it will not become anti-Russian; it will not seek integration with the West – Russia will not allow it, the West will not strive for it, and it is not what the Belarusian people fight for. For Russia, however, Belarus may turn out to be a big problem: if Lukashenka makes far-reaching concessions to Russia in exchange for support, the pro-Russian attitude of Belarusians may change dramatically – symptoms of such a change are already visible. At the same time, if Lukashenka does not have the support of Russia, its own nomenclature can turn against him which could only deepen the crisis. Russia, therefore, for its own interest, will not allow Lukashenka to be overthrown, but in the long run it will seek to replace him with someone "more comfortable" (e.g., as a result of early presidential elections – the sooner the better). It would also eliminate the protests and turn around Belarusians' indignation, as well as appease the tense international situation.

By taking up this game, however, Russia has taken responsibility for the actions of the Belarusian regime which may cost it not only a further deterioration of relations with the West, but also the loss of trust of the Belarusian society, which, despite being favorable to Russia, has never wanted Belarus to be absorbed by it.