



Belarus's risky coronavirus strategy

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For the past few weeks, the world's soccer fans have been left in the dark as the coronavirus pandemic forced a suspension of sports around the world. Europe's lone holdout has been Belarus; the former Soviet republic's leagues are still in operation, welcoming fans into stadiums with open arms and temperature checks when their season kicked off.

Belarus's break with global best practices is not limited to sports. The country's schools, businesses, and borders remain open as the rest of the world tries to wait out the storm. This move is significant for Belarus and its aging strongman leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, who is described in the West as "Europe's Last Dictator." In recent years, Lukashenko has worked diligently to thwart Russia's persistent attempts at annexation — and today, as disease ravages Europe, he is seizing the moment to assert Belarus' sovereignty, albeit in the worst possible way.

In a press conference on March 27, Lukashenko publicly laid out the reasons why he has declined to close his country in response to the coronavirus outbreak. His justification was economic in nature; simply put, the Belarusian leader said, the costs of the extreme measures being used to combat the virus in other parts of the world outweigh their benefits. He went on to emphasize the need to protect Belarus' elder generation, declaring that a school closure would mean children who are cared for by their grandparents would be stuck at home with the country's most vulnerable. The Belarussian president ended his address by reminding the audience of the country's history of resiliency in the face of overwhelming adversity, citing the staggering losses that had been sustained during World War II.

Lukashenko's directive stands in sharp contrast to developments taking place across the border in neighboring Russia. After weeks of relative nonchalance, Moscow's coronavirus response has taken on increased urgency as more and more of its citizens have tested positive for the virus. In response, the Kremlin has taken a series of decisive steps, from closing the border with China to banning all foreign nationals, a nationwide quarantine order, and the usage of surveillance and facial recognition technology to track the infected. Even the annual Victory Day Parade, which this year would commemorate the 75th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, is now on the chopping block.

Russian life has been turned upside down in other ways as well. Stores are reportedly selling out of hygiene and cleaning products as people stock up, and authorities are mulling a restriction on grain sales abroad as buckwheat is increasingly being hoarded as a quarantine staple.

Moscow's preoccupation, however, amounts to a reprieve for Minsk. The legal basis for integration stems from the Union State agreement signed between the two countries back in the 1990s, which allows Belarusians to live and work freely in Russia. In the years since, Moscow has kept Minsk close by offering subsidized energy prices and free trade. But in recent years, Russia's aggression in places like Ukraine appears to have prompted Belarus to rethink the prudence of its cozy historic partnership with the Kremlin.

Meanwhile, Russian pressure for unification has grown in recent months. In December 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Lukashenko in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi in an attempt to hammer out a deal unifying the two countries' parliamentary and taxation systems, as well as to renegotiate the price Belarus was paying for Russian oil and natural gas. The meeting prompted demonstrations in Minsk, where more and more Belarusians are now wary over what they see as a Russian play for soft annexation.

The Lukashenko-Putin meeting produced no real progress and flung bilateral relations into still-greater uncertainty.

In its wake, Belarus' government has read the political tea leaves — and as a result Lukashenko has stepped up his courtship of new geopolitical partners in an effort to dilute his country's historic dependency on Russia. To that end, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Minsk in February of 2020 and announced that the United States was in the final stages of appointing a new American ambassador to Belarus — the first since 2008. He was also there to tout U.S. energy capabilities, promising Lukashenko competitive oil pricing if he decided to enter an agreement with Washington for the commodity. Nor is America Belarus's only suitor; Lukashenko also has inquired about entering energy agreements with Norway and Kazakhstan as alternatives to the Russian-dominated status quo.

Today, as the coronavirus crisis grips the globe, Lukashenko is seeking to use it to carve out an independent path for his country. But Belarus's strategy is highly risky — and deeply hazardous to the national health. The country's infection rate will inevitably rise as testing becomes more widely available, and the government's failure to proactively adopt the necessary safeguards means that a crisis is likely in the offing.

If, like Italy, Belarus' healthcare system is overwhelmed due to a shortage of essential equipment and hospital beds, the country's doctors may find themselves forced to decide which patients live and die. And if it turns out that Minsk requires foreign assistance to weather the crisis, Russia will undoubtedly be there to lend a hand (as it already has for the U.S.) — but with all of the accompanying dependency that Lukashenko has been working so hard to avoid.

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