



Belarus Becomes A Bellwether

August 18, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Europe; Russia

Suddenly, a revolution seems to be brewing in Belarus. On August 9th, Belarusians went to the polls to decide whether the country's long-serving strongman, Alexander Lukashenko, deserved a sixth term in office. The election was supposed to be a *pro-forma* affair – one that would provide another five years in power for the repressive authoritarian regime that has governed the country since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

It hasn't turned out that way. The August 9th vote, which authorities say Lukashenko won by a decisive margin, has been followed by widespread grassroots protests in the former Soviet republic over what was widely seen as a fraudulent election. That unrest has now persisted for more than two weeks, swelling to encompass marches, union rallies and public demonstrations despite widespread regime repression and mass arrests.

Indeed, it is by now abundantly clear that the Belarusian opposition – outraged over the country's rigged, unrepresentative system – is increasingly seeking a clean political break for the country. Svetlana Alexievich, a Nobel Prize-winning author and one of the country's leading intellectuals, spoke for many last week when she publicly declared that "the authorities have declared war on the people" and called upon Lukashenko to cede power in order to avoid a civil war.

The operative question is: what will the regime do in response? So far, Lukashenko has responded predictably – with a massive official clampdown that has entailed widespread instances of torture and regime brutality. The response has been so severe that the European Union has already approved plans for new sanctions against regime officials in Belarus in response.

But the persistence of the opposition has led Lukashenko to pivot internationally as well. In the face of mounting unrest, he has reached out to Russia anew for assistance in preserving the political *status quo*.

That's a significant development, because relations between Moscow and Minsk have been on the rocks in recent months. Over the past year, stepped up Russian efforts to annex Belarus (which has technically been in a confederation with Russia since 1996, but has remained independent), as well as disagreements over energy, led Lukashenko to carve a more independent path and expand his government's contacts with the West. His maneuvers profoundly soured ties with the Kremlin – so much so that Moscow reportedly sent mercenaries into Belarus ahead of the August 9th election in an attempt to destabilize the country. But now, with his grip on power in jeopardy, Belarus' president has abandoned his attempts to balance between East and West, and turned back to Moscow for protection.

For its part, the Kremlin can be counted on to lend a helping hand. Over the past two decades, the Russian government has watched nervously as so-called "color revolutions" swept over the territory of the former USSR, loosening its grip on its weaker neighbors in the process. Indeed, the 2014 invasion of Ukraine and occupation of Crimea (which persists to this day) was a clear attempt by Moscow to alter the pro-Western trajectory of that country in the wake of the December 2013 "Maidan Revolution."

Russian president Vladimir Putin is also facing growing opposition at home. A deteriorating economy, deepening domestic hardship, and a botched national response to the coronavirus have all led to a marked decline in popularity for Putin himself – and new signs of resistance to his political leadership.

The Kremlin therefore doubtless agrees with what Lukashenko told an emergency cabinet meeting over the weekend: that "defense of Belarus represents no less than the protection of the entire post-Soviet space." That is the reason why Russia's government has already indicated it is prepared to provide military assistance to Minsk – and Moscow will likely find a pretext to do so.

Putin and his supporters, it seems, have come to realize what the Belarusian opposition already understands. Belarus has unexpectedly become the latest test of whether meaningful political change can take place along Russia's periphery (and even, perhaps, within Russia itself).