

# All Over Again: The Way to Minsk Lies Through Moscow

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More than two weeks ago, a little-known country of Belarus was catapulted to the forefront of world attention. Suddenly all news media outlets found it imperative to write about that country. And because these outlets vastly outnumber available Belarus-watchers, the ensuing assortment of writings acquired a peculiar quality: shaky background knowledge amidst righteous indignation. To be sure, there is definitely something to be indignant about. Long referred to as the last dictator of Europe, President Alexander Lukashenko who has stayed in his capacity since 1994, falsified the results of his sixth presidential elections of August 9 declaring that the improbable 80% of the vote was cast in his favor, and when residents of the capital city of Minsk and of other regional centers rallied in protest, he unleashed the full force of riot police. The apprehended participants of those rallies and oftentimes just bystanders were severely beaten and tortured in detention centers. Three most widely reported outcomes of this treatment have been traumatic brain injury, shoulder dislocation, and liver rupture.

Much less reported and reflected upon is geopolitical, cultural, and socioeconomic context of these dreadful events that justly come across to many observers as being out of place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's Europe. Perhaps it is especially hard to invoke what does not quite align with what happened since August 9. And yet it is worth a try. By the standards of the post-Soviet area, Belarus is not exactly a basket case. Unlike in adjacent regions of Russia and Ukraine, Belarus's countryside is manicured, with little abandoned land, its small towns, not to mention regional capitals and the city of Minsk enjoy a decent upkeep, it has good quality roads, and its social welfare and support system is decent, too, with reasonably reliable health care facilities and a network of sanatoria (a cross between recreation and health care facilities), a leftover from Soviet times much improved since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and last but not least, incomparably lower level of corruption than in any other successor state of the Soviet Union except the Baltic States. Wages and salaries are twice as high as in Ukraine but lower than in

Russia, let alone Poland. Yet, thousands of Belarusians routinely signing up for work in both Russia and Poland routinely come back and are not willing to leave for good. The country has been quite open and its citizens have long been receiving more Schengen visas per 1000 people from the European Union than any other country in the world whose citizens require visas to enter the EU. When COVID-19 pandemics struck, Belarus did not rush to close its borders, all its neighbors did it unilaterally anyway. Maxim Samorukov from the Moscow Carnegie Center, an American-funded research unit, recently pointed out that the Belarusian society has outgrown Lukashenko, but “suffice it to take him away and what is left is a smallish, orderly and relatively well-to-do country which shows more readiness to enter either the European Union or NATO than any other post-Soviet state.” The real-life irony of this supremely accurate observation is that Belarus has become orderly and well-to-do under the very same leader it has outgrown.

Crucially dependent on Russia economically, almost entirely Russian-speaking and belonging to Moscow-centered information space (i.e., watching Russian TV channels and importing a large portion of its domestic internet content from Russia, too), Belarus has lately achieved a breakthrough in its contacts with both the European Union and the United States. The relationships with Russia, on the other hand, worsened, particularly after in 2014 Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. Since 2014, with ever-increasing frequency Lukashenko accused the Kremlin of encroaching on Belarus’s sovereignty and pledged to diversify its economic ties thus reducing dependency on Russia. Just in late July, a group of 33 Russian mercenaries was apprehended in Minsk, and Lukashenko openly accused the Kremlin of sending saboteurs to help Belarusian opposition assault Belarusian law enforcement and thus stir up clashes during and after the elections of August 9 and effectively depose the president. Moreover, Minsk accused Russia of promoting and funding his three major competitors in the presidential race, the banker Victor Babariko, the former diplomat and founder of the Minsk high-tech center Valery Tsepka, and the vlogger Sergei Tikhanovsky. The Western governments watched what looked like steady geopolitical reorientation of Belarus approvingly. Especially considering that following the 2008 war in Georgia and especially the 2014 events in Ukraine the West was ready to replace its tired democracy promotion policy, ineffectual anyway, by propping up Belarus’s sovereignty as a bastion against Russian interventionism, and that implied embracing Lukashenko as the actual head of state.

In a matter of two days in August, Lukashenko squandered the entire political capital he was amassing painstakingly since 2014. Suddenly we are back to square one, i.e., to 1996-2015, when Belarus was under Western sanctions while Russia was overwhelmingly in command. How did Lukashenko manage to destroy the fruits of his own policy of maneuvering between two geopolitical flanks, Russia and the West? His August 5 interview to the Ukrainian journalist Dmitry Gordon gives a clue. In it, Lukashenko betrayed unease about the very idea of retirement. “How is that, not being president!” he exclaimed. “Since I was 38, I have had no other life style. What am I going to do in the morning and during the day?” To wit, the man has been at the helm of power so long that his acclaimed vigilance weakened and his inborn political instinct dulled.

Also, sycophants “helped” by filtering crucial information reaching him so he miscalculated big-time. He might have easily announced winning the elections with just 51-55% of the vote which would be so much more believable than 80%. And he did not grasp the scale of public discontent when he ordered riot police to intimidate the participants of the rallies when it was too late which is why his move only provoked more public indignation. In a matter of days, Lukashenka reversed his rhetoric blaming Russia and is now blaming the ploys of his western neighbors, especially Poland and Lithuania. Just a couple of days ago, he gave vent to his anger over somebody waving a Polish flag in the city of Grodno where Poles account for a quarter of the population and Catholics outnumber the Orthodox. Since August 9, he has talked to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin five times but did not pick up the phone to speak with Angela Merkel.

What does this outcome mean for the West? What can it possibly do under circumstances? Not much. And because the West suddenly lost much of its leverage with Minsk, whereas Russia reclaimed whatever leverage it did have prior to 2014, clear realization of this fact should come first. That would help understand what the West should **not** do. For example, sending the US ambassador to Minsk should not be postponed. Washington has not had its ambassador in Minsk since March 2008, when the State Department miscalculated imposing sanctions on Belarusian oil processing conglomerate as a penalty for mistreating the opposition. Minsk reacted by recommending that the American ambassador Karen Stuart leave for consultations, and when she did not budge warned that she would be declared non grata. Ever since she grudgingly left, both countries have been represented by charge d’affaires with very limited embassy personnel. Ms. Julie Fisher, an experienced diplomat, was recently confirmed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as the first ambassador to Minsk since 2008 but the full Senate has not voted yet. Her counterpart, Oleg Kravchenko, a truly talented diplomat, too, is waiting in Minsk. Appointed as the new Belarusian ambassador to Washington, he apparently can only arrive when Ms. Fisher arrives in Minsk. Delaying this exchange because of righteous indignation over events in Minsk would be as counterproductive as was the American move back in 2008 that had deprived Washington even of modicum of influence on those wielding power in Minsk. Obviously, no economic sanctions should be re-imposed as they would only make it worse for ordinary Belarusians and make Moscow’s decision-makers even more powerful. Russia is now in position to affect the course of events in Minsk as never before.

Behind the façade of stern warnings by foreign minister Sergei Lavrov accusing the West of playing geopolitical games under the guise of democracy promotion, Moscow’s emissaries are not losing time. They did learn from the events in Kyiv back in 2013-14 and so did the West. Nobody wants a replay of what happened in Ukraine. A week ago, the head of Russia’s Federal Security Service, FSB Alexander Bortnikov visited Minsk, and Moscow-based TV crews are now assisting clumsy and provincial Minsk TV channels. Many more actions are hidden from view. And yet, in what seems to be a surprising move, Vladimir Putin welcomed the OSCE umbrella over potential negotiations between Lukashenka and the Coordination Council acting

on behalf of the protesters. Moscow's gambit may be threefold. The Kremlin knows that though not defeated Lukashenka is wounded and keeping him at the helm of power for too long may infuriate too many Belarusians who are no foes of Russia at all. At the same time, Moscow realizes that Belarus's economic dependency on Russia leaves little freedom of maneuver to whoever replaces Lukashenka.

Back in 2019, Lukashenka declined signing the infamous 31 roadmaps for integration with Russia. Now, he has little choice and that can jeopardize Belarus's sovereignty or whatever is left of it. After Lukashenka commits Belarus to tighter integration with Russia (up to common currency and a supranational but effectively Russian authority over both countries), Moscow may determine Lukashenko's successor who would not strive to undermine subordination to the Kremlin and yet be amenable to the opposition at the same time. There is no shortage of volunteers. Even the now jailed banker Victor Babariko could be considered. After all, it is he, not Ms. Tikhonovskaya or her jailed husband who was just recently (until he was arrested on July 18) the most serious electoral rival of Mr. Lukashenka. Having worked as head of a Minsk-based Gazprom structure for 20 years, Mr. Babariko is well-connected in the Moscow's corridors of power and is popular in Belarus. How else could he collect 460,000 signatures in his support as a presidential hopeful within just a couple of weeks! And that is the country with only 6.8 million eligible voters. But Moscow's gambit probably extends further. It may try to use Belarus as a vehicle for a potential deal with the West that still holds on to its not very effective but humiliating sanctions it imposed on Russia in 2014 in the wake of Crimea's annexation. If this deal is indeed a part of the design, the West may consider taking the bait. Mutual reconciliation is in everybody's strategic interest while moral indignation is a shaky ground for a truly productive foreign policy. Strategic patience and creativity are vastly more advantageous. Only after reclaiming a position of an influential actor in Russia, will the West reinstate its influence on Belarus. However absurd geographically, the shortest way to Minsk now lies through Moscow.