



The House That Lukashenko Built

The Foundation, Evolution, and Future of the Belarusian Regime

Artyom Shraibman



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Carnegie Moscow Center
16/2 Tverskaya
Moscow, 125009, Russia
Tel.: +7 495 935 8904
Fax: +7 495 935 8906
info@Carnegie.ru

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About the Author

Artyom Shraibman is a journalist and political commentator for the Belarusian portal Tut.by, as well as a contributor to Carnegie.ru and a columnist for the *Belarus Digest*. He specializes in Belarusian foreign and domestic politics, and he has a degree in international law from Belarus State University. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in politics and communication at the London School of Economics.

Summary

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has built a highly consolidated, adaptive authoritarian regime. Examining how the Belarusian political system is structured and how its relationships with its citizens, Russia, and the West have evolved may help shed light on possible paths that Minsk could take as Lukashenko ages and economic challenges continue to mount.

The Consolidation and Evolution of the Belarusian Regime

Since taking office, Lukashenko has maintained tight control over Belarusian politics.

- Lukashenko's authoritarianism has been rooted in respect for Belarus's Soviet past, weak state institutions (besides the presidency), state dominance of the economy, paternalism, close relations with Russia, and a heavy emphasis on political stability.
- To mitigate threats to the political system, Lukashenko carefully vets bureaucrats for loyalty, prevents the emergence of alternative centers of power, and heavily restricts organized mass protests.

Yet, in recent years, Belarusian politics has evolved in important respects:

- The Belarusian regime has noticeably broadened the country's self-identity by increasingly stressing its independence; pursuing a balanced, multivector foreign policy; cultivating a Belarusian national identity; and projecting a neutral peacekeeping role in the region.
- Minsk's foreign policy has become more pragmatic over the last decade. Belarus seeks to balance its ties with Russia and the West, while contending with declining material support from Moscow. The Belarusian government's enthusiasm for Eurasian integration has declined, but Minsk realizes that Europe offers no mid-term alternative.
- Belarusian society remains largely pro-Russian, with a stable, sizable pro-European minority. Although many Belarusians lean toward Moscow in principle, they will not sacrifice their sovereignty and share the costs of Russian foreign policy.

Forks in the Road to Minsk

- Belarusian elites remain united around Lukashenko. The political system is likely consolidated enough to allow him to grow old in his post, though if he were to pass away unexpectedly, a chaotic power struggle could ensue in the absence of a chosen successor.
- In recent years, a group of progressive senior economic bureaucrats has emerged and is attempting to convince Lukashenko to at least undertake market reforms. If pursued, this course could eventually empower autonomous oligarchs and cause Belarus to transition to a softer form of authoritarianism.
- Some have speculated that Lukashenko could eventually use a constitutional referendum to shift from personalized rule to a ruling party that could rally support around a designated successor.
- Unlike Ukraine, Belarus is highly unlikely to experience revolutionary regime change or a sharply different foreign policy. Even if such changes happened in Minsk, Moscow would likely find it more effective and less risky to respond with economic statecraft than with military force.

Introduction

Belarus is the most Russianized of the post-Soviet countries, yet its relations with Russia have become more complex in recent years. On the one hand, Minsk is a military ally of Moscow, is linked to neighboring Russia by five integration-based agreements,¹ and is almost entirely dependent on Russia for economic resources. Belarus and Russia also enjoy robust linguistic and cultural ties.

On the other hand, over time, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has demonstrated that he highly values his country's independence and sovereignty. He has managed to build one of the most consolidated, adaptive authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space, and perhaps in the world. Natural political intuition has helped him construct—despite Belarus's lack of any special natural or strategic resources—a governing system that suits his methods of dealing with the Belarusian people as well as with external forces. When economic disputes and other disagreements between Moscow and Minsk have unfolded, Lukashenko has shown an independent streak and has courted European support to gain leverage when doing so suits him.

Despite Lukashenko's longevity and success at maintaining his rule over Belarus, there are signs that his Soviet-era approach of state-driven economics and political repression will not last indefinitely. There are multiple political paths that Belarus could take in the coming years, and the country's fate will depend largely on the short-term decisionmaking of Lukashenko and other political elites. The trajectory that Minsk follows could help analysts understand the complex ways leaders in the post-Soviet space navigate their relationships with Russia and the West to preserve their own political power, maintain domestic stability, and safeguard their countries' sovereignty.

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Consolidating the Belarusian Regime

The early years after Belarus achieved independence were a time of sluggish market reforms, low standards of living, growing corruption and criminality, and nostalgia among the bulk of the population for the stable years of the Soviet Union. Belarus had a weak national identity and lacked a tradition of democratic governance. Belarusian society exhibited pro-Russian sympathies and weariness about a Communist Party *nomenklatura* that continued to rule the now independent republic. All of these factors combined to create demand for what Lukashenko embodied; he was a young, energetic populist who could bring order, restore links with Russia, and replace all the crooks in power.

Lukashenko's charisma, and the style and legitimacy of his rule, was and largely remains a grassroots phenomenon. For him, the institutions of formal democracy were a burden. Once elected, he almost immediately came into conflict with the parliament and the constitutional court. It took only two years for him to establish and consolidate a regime of personal power. The constitutional referendum of 1996 and the political decisions that accompanied it gave Lukashenko control of the executive and judicial authorities, the Central Election Commission, the local executive committees, the unions, the military and law enforcement structures, television channels, and the largest newspapers. The parliament lost its powers and any ability to oppose the president, whose decrees were set above the law.

Further attempts at consolidation followed. In 2004, after another constitutional referendum, presidential term limits were abolished. In the power vertical he has established, Lukashenko makes all key personnel and economic decisions, including the appointment and dismissal of heads of cities and districts, lower-court judges, and directors of major factories. Furthermore, the country has no ruling party through which elites can be rotated. Those appointed to senior posts must show personal loyalty to the president, share his views, and have the management experience that he deems appropriate.

Lukashenko's consolidation of power went hand in hand with the marginalization of the opposition and the gradual narrowing of space for civil society and nonstate media to operate. That was the case until 2008, after which Lukashenko periodically would loosen the screws whenever he deemed it useful for geopolitical maneuvering and rapprochement with the West. Only the regime's behavior was modified in such cases, however; the laws and institutions remained untouched or even became stricter, allowing for a quick return to the required level of repression at any moment.

Soon after Lukashenko came to power, the state reinforced its governing role with respect to the economy and rolled back the privatization that had begun. Influential security and supervisory authorities, heavy state regulation, subservient courts, and the ease with which any property could be nationalized all ensured the political loyalty of the business class. The economic model

that Lukashenko has preserved from the Soviet era involves a great deal of government regulation, state monopolies, and income redistribution. Loss-making state-owned enterprises are supported through subsidies and favorable loans. Until recently, the state produced about 60 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and provided jobs for about the same proportion of the country's working population.² In recent years, the country has grappled with an economic crisis that has affected certain elements of the welfare state—the pension age was raised, and moderate unemployment was permitted—but the system remains aimed at evening out disparities between the rich and the poor. Belarus has usually had a better Gini coefficient—a measurement of inequality—than most other countries in the region.³

Over time, one of the mainstays of Belarus's authoritarianism has been the country's relationship with Russia. Skillfully playing on Moscow's imperial ambitions, and on its reluctance to lose an ally or risk political instability in an important transit country for Russian hydrocarbon exports to Europe, Lukashenko has managed to get consistent, if not entirely uninterrupted, economic and political support from Russia. This pattern has repeated itself often over the course of Lukashenko's reign.

The regime has several tools to minimize the likelihood of mass protests that might escalate to the point of threatening its survival.

Maintaining the Belarusian Regime

Lukashenko has not limited himself to establishing institutional control over the country. He also has created a system to protect his authoritarian regime, with mechanisms to mitigate the three basic potential threats to its stability: mass protests, a schism or plot among the country's elites, and external pressures.

Discouraging Protests

The regime has several tools to minimize the likelihood of mass protests that might escalate to the point of threatening its survival. First, a significant proportion of Belarusians are excluded from politics as a consequence of the state sector's economic dominance. The country has a widely used system whereby employers are not obliged to extend labor contracts when they run out (usually after one year), so the authorities have a powerful lever for influencing the majority of the working population. Similarly, students risk being expelled from institutions of higher education, the majority of which are state-run, if they express political dissatisfaction.

Second, there are major bureaucratic obstacles to organizing protests. To carry out any mass activity, one must obtain permission from the local authorities. The sheer number of reasons for possible refusal is so large that appropriate grounds can be found for absolutely any occasion. Gathering thousands of

people for an unsanctioned protest is difficult not just because a successful outcome is unlikely but also because potential participants clearly understand the risk of being arrested. The security forces routinely prevent opposition leaders and activists from reaching protest sites under various pretexts, such as drawn-out procedures for checking their documents or vehicle registration plates, preventative arrests ahead of possible mass protests, or subsequent detention for disorderly conduct after such demonstrations.

The authorities did not shy away from these practices until a brief *détente* that lasted from August 2015 to February 2017, during which people were merely fined for taking part in activities that had not received official approval. During this period of temporary liberalization, citizens displayed greater willingness to protest, as seen in the lessened public fears of taking part in protests against a deeply unpopular 2015 decree mandating tax payments by unemployed so-called social parasites. When this happened, the security services were ordered to renew their usual repressive practices.

The authorities are adaptable; they are prepared to use carrots as well as sticks to quell public discontent. Carrots are not used in the event of opposition activities such as protesting vote falsification during elections, when the discontented are simply treated harshly as enemies of the system. If, however, the authorities—and Lukashenko personally—sense that there is widespread societal unease behind particular protests, they may grant concessions to the main body of protesters. For example, in 2011, drivers, indignant at a sharp rise in petrol prices, blocked Minsk's central thoroughfare, claiming that their vehicles had broken down. Several were detained and fined but, on the same day, the president personally lowered the fuel price.⁴ (That said, the higher price was eventually reinstated anyway though subsequent gradual hikes.) More recently, while the social parasite protests in the spring of 2017 were suppressed brutally with many detentions and arrests, Lukashenko delayed the enforcement of the decree and promised to strike its most unpopular provisions.⁵

Even as the regime makes concessions, it punishes the leaders of protests, thereby cutting them off from their followers and sending the majority a signal that there are limits that cannot be transgressed. Six months after the drivers' protests, for example, the workers of one Belarusian mining company left an official union *en masse* and applied to join an independent union, while protesting over delays in wage payments. The workers' leaders and the heads of the new union were fired, while the rest were paid their wages and received a pay increase of 50 percent.⁶

A third method of protecting the regime from the threat of protests is to employ propaganda to discredit the idea of protesting in and of itself, as well as to exploit a historical fear among Belarusians of social upheaval. This technique is a common characteristic of authoritarian regimes: they claim they are not violating human rights or constraining the opposition but merely protecting the people and domestic stability. Even the country's national anthem

begins with the words “We, Belarusians, are [a] peaceful people.” State media cultivates this image using stories about violent foreign revolutions and the wars and chaos that follow them as cautionary examples to deter protests.

Guarding Against Coups

Another serious risk for any authoritarian regime, especially a personalized one, is a plot, coup, or schism within the ruling elite. To prevent such machinations, Lukashenko uses staffing decisions to cultivate the idea that there is no feasible alternative to his leadership. As a rule, the president does not appoint to important posts charismatic or ambitious people who demonstrate too much initiative or who are too publicly active—especially to the position of prime minister. Those who occupy senior posts know this and try not to stand out, give too many interviews, or develop public profiles. Lukashenko’s aim is to ensure that neither elites nor ordinary citizens get the impression that someone has a stable hold on the number two position in the power vertical. There is no clear heir or favorite in the eyes of the elite, and one should not be allowed to appear. Moreover, to prevent officials from thinking that they are becoming untouchable and to keep them in line, Lukashenko regularly initiates criminal cases (usually on charges of corruption) against some of them. The rare cases, ten to fifteen years ago, in which high-profile officials went over to the opposition ended with various criminal charges being brought against them to make sure others got the message. In this system, betraying the president’s trust is the greatest sin.

The security structures—the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Security Council, the Investigative Committee, the Prosecutor General’s Office, the Operations and Analysis Center, and the Ministry of Defense—balance one another out, and they sometimes compete with each other. The president’s security service stands out for its virtually unlimited powers. To forestall the formation of factions within the security services, and to prevent the personnel within one service from developing greater loyalty to their direct boss than to the president, Lukashenko regularly reshuffles their rosters. If he suspects that members of the security services are not as loyal to him as they once were, he immediately transfers them to positions without security powers or he forces them to retire.

Notably, there is no dynastic tradition of inheriting power in Belarus; being part of Lukashenko’s family does not furnish a potential successor with any added legitimacy in the eyes of the people or the elites. The president himself has stressed publicly that his children do not want to follow in his footsteps and that he does not see them as heirs.⁷ At present, his stance appears to be sincere. Of his three sons, the youngest, Nikolai, is still too young for the role of heir. His middle son, Dmitry, is not involved in politics in any way. The eldest, Viktor, though, appears to have at least some of the attributes required

Lukashenko uses staffing decisions to cultivate the idea that there is no feasible alternative to his leadership.

to be an heir, given that he is the president's assistant on national security matters—and, in essence, serves as an overseer of the security services.

Managing External Pressure

The third potential threat to the survival of the Lukashenko regime is external factors, particularly those related to Russia. High economic dependence on Russia, the broad penetration of Belarus by Russian media, and the two countries' military integration demonstrate the extent of Moscow's potential ability to influence Belarusian politics. With this in mind, since the first years of his rule, Lukashenko has positioned himself so effectively as the only possible guarantor of Belarusian-Russian friendship that three successive Russian

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presidents, when faced with the choice of whether or not to continue propping him up during disputes, have always done so. Russian leaders have consistently viewed the cost of supporting Lukashenko as less than the price of keeping Belarus in Russia's orbit if Moscow were to end support for Lukashenko, prompting uncontrolled regime change and internal disturbances.

To prevent Russia from getting any ideas about regime change, Lukashenko does not allow any pro-Russian opposition to form, and his security services shut down any attempts to create one. For example, a few years ago, the security services blocked an attempt by the Belarusian Slavic Committee to register as a party. Only a pro-European opposition is tolerated. There was not even political space for a pro-Russian opposition during the many years when Lukashenko was unequivocally pro-Russian. Those suspected of having overly close ties to Moscow are not allowed to occupy senior posts. In Lukashenko's mind, Russia must not be allowed to develop a backup plan, and he must retain a monopoly on the pro-Russian wing of Belarusian politics.

A Marginalized Opposition

Despite Belarus's reputation as the last dictatorship in Europe, several opposition parties function legally, as do dozens of nongovernmental organizations that are critical of the authorities. The regime allows them to exist as they fulfill three functions: legitimizing the political system, offering channels for citizens to let off steam, and keeping the discontented out in the open rather than underground.

The opposition represents the classic spectrum of European political leanings, including nationalists, Christian Democrats, free-market liberals, Greens, and Social Democrats. There is even a leftist party of former Communists who did not want to support Lukashenko twenty years ago called A Just World.

By law, parties must have at least 1,000 members to be registered; although exact numbers are difficult to confirm, the best available estimates suggest that few existing parties meet this threshold.⁸ Some political campaigns and movements have been formed to support a specific candidate in the run-up to presidential elections. Their ideologies tend to be vaguer. Some of these movements last as long as their leaders, while others outlast their founders. All of these entities occupy positions against Lukashenko along four dimensions: (1) democracy or authoritarianism; (2) movement toward the European Union (EU) or integration with Russia; (3) cultivation or rejection of a Belarusian identity; and (4) a market or command economy. Each party emphasizes different policy issues. A Just World stands out for accusing the president and his government of undertaking unnecessary austerity measures. This leftist party does not insist that the country should move toward the EU; it is less noticeable and active than the pro-European forces.

Notably, opposition parties and candidates have never posed a serious challenge to Lukashenko's rule. Public support for formal opposition parties has never really been high enough to have a discernable political impact, even during times when the regime's popularity has been lower than usual.⁹ The main reason is that even discontented citizens have been disappointed by the inability of opposition parties to unite and present a consolidated agenda for the country's development if they were to gain power. Continual internal disputes have exacerbated the opposition's negative image.

This lack of a strong, unified opposition has been evident in the presidential candidates that have run against Lukashenko. In the 2001 presidential election, union leader Vladimir Goncharik was put forward as the single opposition candidate. In 2006, there were two: the leading opposition candidate, Alexander Milinkevich, and Alexander Kozulin, who was supported by those not satisfied with Milinkevich. In 2010, Lukashenko faced nine other candidates; the authorities registered them despite considerable doubts that many of them had collected the 100,000 signatures required to be eligible. In 2015, there was just one democratic opposition candidate—Tatyana Korotkevich—but other opposition figures deemed her criticism of the regime insufficiently vehement.

There are two reasons that the Belarusian opposition is so fragmented. First, it has a severe lack of qualified candidates and new faces. Some leaders have headed their respective parties for as long as Lukashenko has been in power. Just as the regime lacks a channel for societal feedback (given the absence of competitive elections), the opposition lacks a means of receiving popular feedback and attributes all failures to the regime's actions rather than any of its own shortcomings.

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Second, the opposition does not have the motivation to unite because even a broad coalition would not have any electoral success, since the votes are counted by people selected by the authorities and observers are prevented from monitoring the process. After years of unsuccessfully struggling against the regime without any hope of victory or success for the foreseeable future, opposition politicians see no point in sacrificing leadership positions in their small party structures to play second fiddle in a larger coalition.

The nonstate media, protests, and election campaigns remain the only communication channels between the opposition and the people.¹⁰ These channels are not enough to overcome the apathy of voters and dispel their mistrust. Most Belarusians do not regard the regime as something that can be changed; rather, they accept it as inevitable. They may complain about it when they are dissatisfied, but most people do not believe that uniting with an anti-regime coalition or going out into the streets to protest is worth the time and effort.

But even this weak opposition has some potential. Any protest requires political representation and coordination, even if it is apolitical at the outset. The only people who have at least some organizational experience and who can handle the basics of such activism are the representatives of the opposition parties. For example, given the lack of other parties to articulate public dissatisfaction, the opposition was swiftly able to take the lead on the 2017 social protests across the whole country against the social parasites decree.

An Upsurge of Belarusian Identity

When he was rising to power, Lukashenko had his own vision of Belarus and Belarusian identity. He drew a great deal on his own childhood experiences in a Soviet village, management of a collective farm, and political struggle with the *nomenklatura* of the day. The foundation of his ideology is the preservation and development of what he perceives to be the finest aspects of the Soviet past. The national democratic project of Belarus, proposed in the early 1990s, was not only alien to Lukashenko but was also alien to most of Belarusian society at large. About 83 percent of Belarusians voted to preserve the Soviet Union in a 1991 referendum.¹¹

There was, therefore, fertile ground for someone with Lukashenko's views to come to power and take the first steps toward renewed Sovietization. A year after first being elected, he held a referendum that adopted slightly amended Soviet national symbols, made Russian a state language, and endorsed economic integration with Russia. In just a few years, *subbotniks* (the Soviet tradition of doing unpaid volunteer work on Saturdays), the cult-like commemoration of the Soviet victory in World War II, and the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (a revamped version of the Communist-era youth movement) all returned, along with the celebration of the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution and other Soviet-era practices.

Over time, however, the country's identity changed. As the people and elites got used to life in a separate state, arguments with Russia increased and enthusiasm for deeper, post-Soviet integration died out. Increasingly, and with ever greater sincerity, the authorities have spoken of sovereignty as the highest value. The term independent Belarus first appeared in Lukashenko's main election slogan in 2015. Integration with Russia ceased to be the guiding lodestar of policy and was instead put forward merely as an economic necessity. The Belarusian regime now promises to follow that path only as long as it does not threaten the country's sovereignty. In 2016, Lukashenko described the goal of integration as living in the same building as Russia but in a separate apartment.¹² This is not a new rhetorical device for the country's leadership, but its usage has grown over the last two to three years.

The regime has promoted Belarus as an Eastern European version of Switzerland—a neutral party with respect to regional conflicts, particularly the one taking place in Ukraine. This stance led to a Belarusian aversion to taking sides in disputes between Russia and the rest of the world, whether with Turkey, Ukraine, or the United States. In this way, Belarus attempts to gloss over the fact that it is part of a union state with Russia and a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. The image of Belarus as a regional peacemaker is fed by the prevailing narrative that the most important thing for the country is stability. The joint Belarusian-Russian military exercise Zapad, which took place at both countries' training facilities in September 2017, became the most recent example of the allies' diverging security strategies. While Moscow menaced the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with adversarial rhetoric and concealed the numbers of troops participating in the drills, Minsk demonstrated quite a high degree of transparency, allowing dozens of NATO monitors into the country, moving the locations of the exercises away from the borders with Lithuania and Poland. The intention was to present Belarus as a constructive, reliable, and predictable partner, in contrast to the Russian Federation.

Following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, the Belarusian regime began to introduce elements of a nationalistic agenda. Light efforts to make the country more distinctively Belarusian began with a very gradual broadening of the use of the Belarusian language and the popularization of the country's pre-Soviet history and national symbols. In 2014, Lukashenko gave a speech in Belarusian for the first time since the mid-1990s. The number of hours devoted to teaching Belarusian in schools has been increased. The authorities have become less aggressive about discouraging the use of national symbols; as one example, a fad for traditional embroidery has taken off, with distinctive embroidered patterns even appearing on the kit of

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the Belarusian national football team. In March 2018, the authorities allowed the opposition to hold one of the largest rallies it had in a decade, so as to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic's (BPR) proclamation of independence from Russia in the center of Minsk. Back in 1918, the BPR was the first (and an explicitly anti-Bolshevist) attempt to create a Belarusian state. In 2018, the authorities have switched their rhetoric toward the BPR from negative to either neutral or positive.

This upsurge in Belarusian identity is intermittent; the authorities are no longer obstructing it, although they have not demonstrated any particular enthusiasm for it. The security services have stopped focusing solely on their traditional target, the alleged fifth column of domestic nationalist pro-Western sympathizers. Several people have been fined for insulting the Belarusian language on social media, and three Belarusian contributors for the Russian news agency Regnum were arrested in December 2016 for inciting nationalist hatred after they strongly criticized Belarusian identity and sovereignty. They spent fourteen months in jail and were then sentenced to five-year suspended prison terms.¹³ It was the first time Reporters Without Borders has demanded that the Belarusian government release pro-Russian commentators.

At the same time, the regime is not rejecting its Soviet heritage. Lukashenko remains nostalgic for his youth. Every year, he performs *subbotnik* by volunteering with builders. He expresses his congratulations on the anniversary of the October Revolution, which he sees as the precursor to the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic that in turn was the forerunner of independent Belarus. For Lukashenko, participation in Soviet rituals is not a demonstration of ideological enthusiasm; rather, such activities serve as something of an homage that must be paid to political traditions.

To some extent, this reluctance to bid farewell to the Soviet past can be explained as a psychological unreadiness on the part of Lukashenko and some elites to privatize large but ineffective industrial giants, such as MAZ and BelAZ automobile plants or the Minsk Tractor Works factory. The president has called these enterprises Belarusian brands, although many of them run chronic losses and produce products that are permanently warehoused. One major reason for not privatizing these firms is to avoid a surge in unemployment that could be perceived by elites and the public as a breach of the existing social contract.

Although power has been concentrated in Lukashenko's hands since 1994, there is no personality cult in Belarus in the Soviet or the modern Central Asian sense of the term. There are no streets named after him, there are no busts or monuments dedicated to him, and his portrait is not featured on coins or billboards, even during elections. The personalized nature of Belarusian authoritarianism lies in the details, such as the article in the Criminal Code covering insults to the president or the existence of Lukashenko-themed museum exhibits at the Mogilev State A. Kuleshov University, where he studied. The

propaganda efforts that do take place seek to cultivate an image of Lukashenko as an experienced, reliable leader who brought the country out of the chaos of the 1990s. The result is a functional rather than a personality-driven cult; this is partly why the prospect of transferring power to the president's sons is less realistic than it might appear to outside observers.

A Society With Divergent Opinions

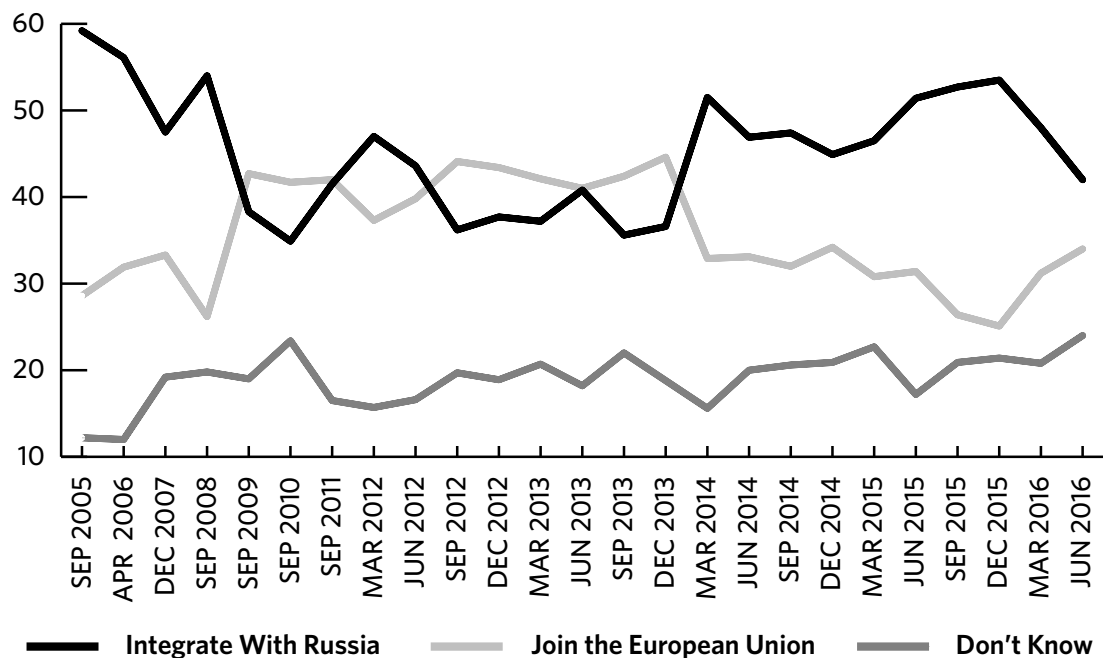
Little independent public opinion polling exists in Belarus. Surveys on political topics are strictly regulated and effectively monopolized by the state. The results of research carried out by entities close to the government are either not published or propagandistic, like election data from the Central Election Commission. One nonstate center, the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (IISEPS), carried out and published quarterly surveys on social and public issues from 1992 until mid-2016, when the institute stopped conducting surveys due to pressure from the security services.¹⁴

Notably, Belarusian society seems to have fairly homogeneous views insofar as the eastern and central parts of the country (traditionally dominated by the Orthodox faith) and the western part of the country (which contains many Catholics) display few discernable differences in terms of survey indicators. On the whole, people from eastern and western Belarus tend to have similar takes on a host of political topics, including Russia, Europe, Lukashenko and the opposition, and the need for reforms.

In recent years, Belarusians have often voiced a preference for close ties with Russia over Europe, although geopolitical circumstances have sometimes changed this trend (see figure 1). According to IISEPS polls conducted between 2014 and 2016, when Belarusians were asked to choose between being unified with Russia or joining the EU, 40–50 percent chose Russia and 25–35 percent picked the EU, although support for Russia was sometimes lower and support for the EU higher in prior years.¹⁵ These figures can be attributed not only to propaganda or the historical kinship between the Russian and Belarusian people but also to a fairly pragmatic understanding among Belarusians that their economy is dependent on Russia and that the EU is offering no clear alternative. In 2009–2010, Belarus and Russia attacked each other in a series of highly critical and hostile television shows and documentaries; simultaneously, there was a thaw in Belarusian relations with the West. It was only during this period that pro-European feelings reached parity with pro-Russian ones (about 35–45 percent), or even took the lead in certain months. Although brief, this period demonstrated that the geopolitical orientation of Belarusians to a sizable extent is dependent on the country's information space. The conflict in Ukraine and the accompanying Russian propaganda temporarily made pro-Russia sentiment in Belarus twice as prevalent as pro-European sympathies, but toward the middle of 2016 this gap began to close again.

Figure 1: Belarusian Views on Russia and Europe

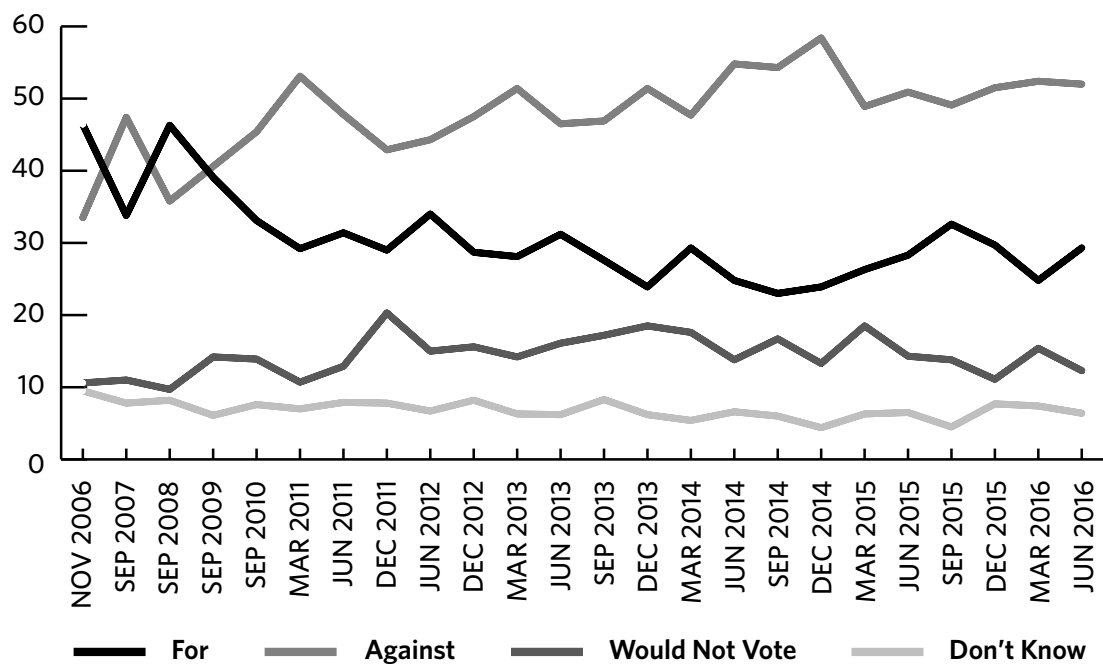
Survey Question: If you had to choose between integration with Russia and joining the European Union, which would you choose?



Source: IISEPS

Figure 2: Belarusian Views on Unifying With Russia

Survey Question: If today a referendum with the question of whether Belarus should join Russia would take place, how would you vote?



Source: IISEPS

Notably, however, other poll figures seem to indicate that Belarusians have gotten used to independence and have begun to value it (see figures 2 and 3). Some IISEPS poll questions gave respondents a choice between the status quo or accession to the Russian Federation, or between the status quo or entry into the EU. In both cases, since around 2014, the status quo has generally won out with substantially more support than either alternative (Russian accession or EU entry); about 50 percent tend to back the status quo compared to 20–30 percent who favor a change, while the remaining 20–25 percent would abstain in a hypothetical referendum on Russian accession or EU entry.

Further evidence of this burgeoning support for Belarusian independence can be seen in polls on the prospect of restoring the Soviet Union (see figure 4). During the 1990s, the majority of Belarusians felt nostalgic for the Soviet era, but since 2002 those opposed to a Soviet restoration have taken the lead. Between 2006 and 2015, about 60 percent opposed a return to the Soviet era, while roughly 20–25 percent supported a retreat into the past. This shift is likely due at least in part to demographic changes, as the number of Belarusians with actual experience of the Soviet Union gradually falls.

At the same time, though, public support for Eurasian integration remains stable at 60–65 percent.¹⁶ The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—a single market that includes Belarus, Russia, and other former Soviet states—is

Figure 3: Belarusian Views on EU Accession

Survey Question: If today a referendum with the question of whether Belarus should join the European Union would be held, what would be your choice?

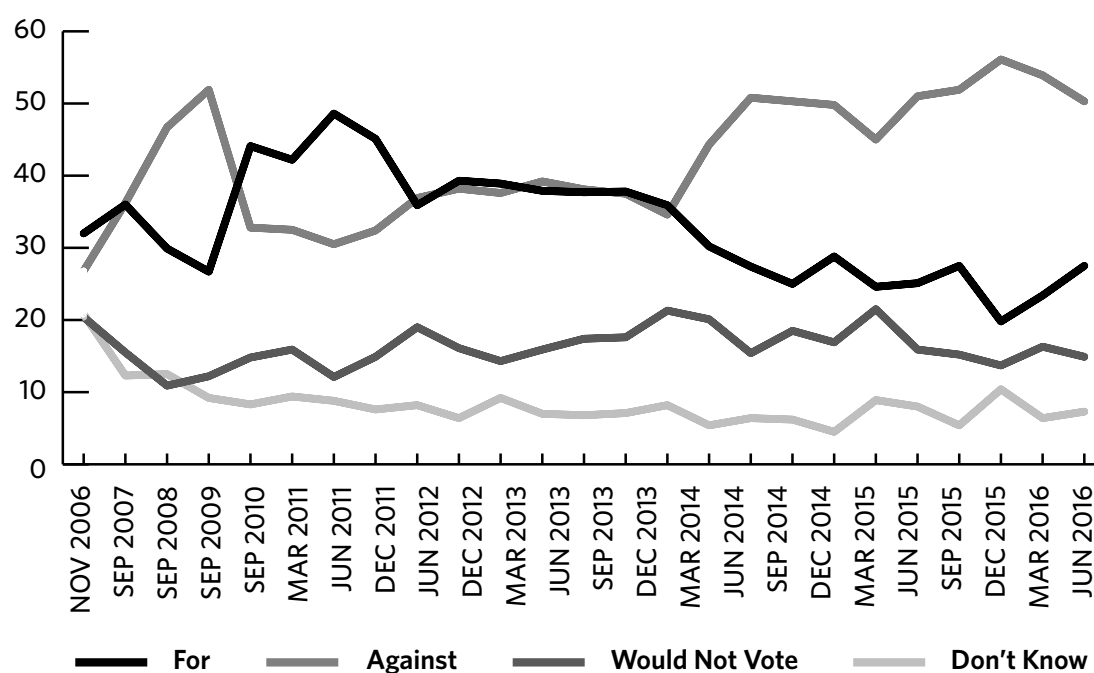
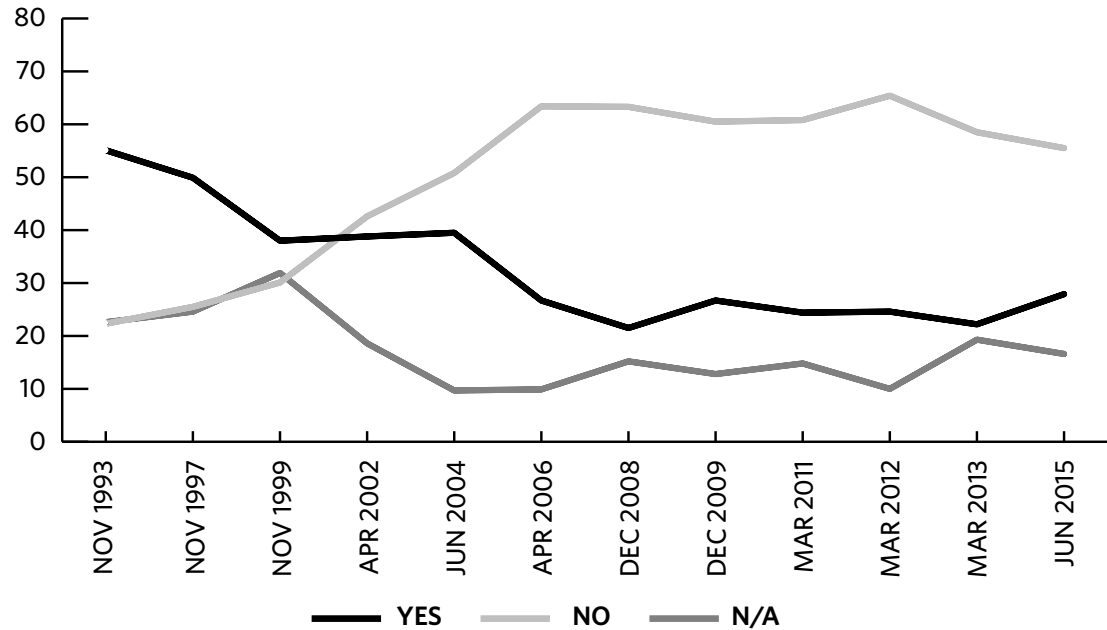


Figure 4: Belarusian Views on the Soviet Union

Survey Question: Would you like the Soviet Union to be restored?



Source: IISEPS

not seen as a threat to the country's independence thanks to the official discourse, according to which a limited economic union with Russia could not be expanded into a broader political arrangement.

On the whole, Russian propaganda has been successful in encouraging a positive attitude toward Russia among Belarusians, but it has proven unable to mobilize Belarusians in defense of Moscow's interests. Since independence, Belarusians have learned to distinguish between their own country's interests and Russia's. They feel that they are with their Russian brothers in spirit, but

they are not going to get into any disputes or suffer any losses as a result of the latter's conflicts.

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Belarus's new foreign policy stance of neutrality and nonintervention in conflicts involving neighbors (first and foremost Russia) has fallen into step perfectly with the mood of the general public. While 55–65 percent support Russia's position in the Ukrainian conflict—that Crimea is Russian, that a coup had taken place in Kiev,

and that a civil war is being fought in Ukraine—three-quarters do not approve of Belarusians taking part in the fighting on either side and are against allowing Russia to send military forces into Ukraine through Belarusian territory.¹⁷

This perspective informs Belarusian views on other Russian foreign policy disputes as well. After Turkey shot down a Russian bomber plane near its border with Syria in 2015, only one in six Belarusians were in favor of offering

complete support for Russian sanctions against Turkey. More than 50 percent said Belarus should not get involved in the dispute.¹⁸ The issue of Belarus hosting a Russian airbase prompted similar results: 43 percent were against, 22 percent for, and the rest were indifferent or did not reply.

Between 2011 and 2016, Lukashenko generally enjoyed a 10–20 percentage point lead over opposition figures, although on a few occasions this gap fell sharply or diminished altogether.¹⁹ Survey data from June 2016 indicated that the president's electoral support had slipped below 30 percent. Since then, GDP growth has stagnated, and a wave of economic protests surged across the country in 2017; as a result, at present probably between one-quarter and one-third of Belarusians are ready to vote for Lukashenko. But the proportion of citizens in this category has always been quite volatile, usually fluctuating between 25 and 45 percent. Support for the president is higher among female voters, who tend to like his emphasis on stability. He also has more supporters among less educated and rural voters, like many populist leaders around the world.

Despite Lukashenko's lengthy reign and his preference for Soviet-style economic and governance practices, according to various surveys, 65–85 percent of Belarusians want reforms of some sort.²⁰ The question is what kind of reforms. The limited research that has been done in this area shows that about half of this majority wants an increase in the state's economic role, rather than the reduction that is recommended by all of Belarus's external lenders, ranging from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to its Eurasian counterpart, the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development. This is a product of many years of state paternalism; as a result, Lukashenko is caught in the trap of his own ideology. Belarusians have gotten used to the idea that only the authorities can look after them. Paradoxically, being pushed by economic pressures to change the system leads to popular discontent that, in turn, lowers the regime's already limited readiness to undertake market reforms.

Belarus's foreign policy, like public opinion, has gone through a process of emancipation and become more driven by pragmatism.

Signs of a More Diversified, Pragmatic Foreign Policy

Belarus's foreign policy, like public opinion, has gone through a process of emancipation and become more driven by pragmatism. Minsk's diplomacy in the late 1990s could hardly be more different from that of today. Anyone who thinks that Lukashenko is emotional in his dealings with other countries now should recall how he behaved twenty years ago. Back then, he did not restrain himself at all in terms of domestic politics or foreign affairs.

In those days, the Belarusian president portrayed himself as the vanguard of resistance to Western imperialism. In 1998, amid tense relations with the EU

and the United States, and the expulsion of the Belarusian delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Lukashenko forced Western ambassadors in Minsk from their residences on the pretext of needed plumbing work. The scandal peaked when the ambassadors were recalled from Minsk. In the same year, Belarus joined the anti-Western Nonaligned Movement, and today it is the only European country still in this group. In 1999, Lukashenko traveled to Belgrade to support then Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milošević during the NATO air strikes. He also gave vehement support to Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

All this was possible while Belarus enjoyed Russian protection, until the pragmatist Vladimir Putin came to power in Moscow. Lukashenko's mantras about the common enemy and Slavic brotherhood did not work as well on Putin as they had on former Russian president Boris Yeltsin. The Kremlin began presenting its bills to Lukashenko, and Russia's new leader made allusions to Belarus's unclear level of readiness to integrate with Russia. By the second half of the 2000s, energy disputes between Belarus and Russia had become an almost annual occurrence.

Belarusian foreign policy over the last ten years or so has done away with Lukashenko's emotionality and its ideological burden; instead, it has become more pragmatic and calculating.

A little more than a decade ago, Belarusian diplomacy began to mature and Lukashenko started to experiment with overtures to the West as a result of the turbulence in relations with Russia. In late 2006, a serious dispute unfolded over the price of natural gas imported from Russia, and in 2007 Moscow introduced excise duties on Belarus-bound oil shipments. In 2008, Lukashenko turned toward the West for the first time, and Belarus was accepted into the EU's Eastern Partnership. The reason for this flirtation was the Russian-Georgian War, which showed that Russia was ready to use military force in a dispute with a neighbor. Minsk's conflict with Moscow peaked in the summer of 2010 when the Russian television channel NTV broadcast a multipart documentary entitled *Krestny Batka*, which depicted the Belarusian president as a criminal tyrant.²¹ As part of his temporary turn toward the West, Lukashenko freed political prisoners and loosened his grip on the media and the opposition to earn points with the EU. Brussels, in turn, lifted sanctions against Belarus, and European heads of state and foreign ministers began to visit Minsk regularly after a decade-long break.

On the eve of his reelection in 2010, Lukashenko reached an agreement with Dmitry Medvedev, who by then had temporarily succeeded Putin, on an excise-free supply of oil in exchange for Belarus signing agreements on a Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan. Belarus found itself under Russian protection again. After two years of domestic liberalization, when a crowd of 40,000 protesters surged on the day of the election, Lukashenko was no longer overly concerned about the Western element of his foreign policy.

His efforts to break up the protest and prosecute its leaders sent Belarusian relations with the West into reverse.

That first easing in Belarus's relations with the EU and the United States was purely a reaction to Russian behavior, and Lukashenko used this temporary opening with the West as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Moscow. The rapprochement was inherently unstable because the enthusiasm with which Minsk strove for friendship with the West was dependent on tensions in Belarus's relations with Russia. In addition, Brussels and Minsk had many illusions about one another: the EU believed that Belarus could be democratized through better relations with Europe, while Lukashenko thought that the West to some extent would compensate Belarus for the losses resulting from his dispute with Russia. Both sides were mistaken.

This pattern has repeated itself in recent years, as a new round of Belarusian rapprochement with the West began in 2015 and is still ongoing. This time, efforts to improve ties have been more sensible, unhurried, and focused on a real agenda: simplifying visa requirements, discussing human rights, bringing European banks into Belarus, and substantially increasing EU technical assistance.²² Belarus, of course, would like financial matters to be discussed more frequently, and the EU never misses a chance to remind the regime about human rights, but these dynamics have not hampered an intensive dialogue. Progress has slowed noticeably since the crackdown on the 2017 protests. Brussels and Minsk in recent years seem to have reached a certain ceiling in relations, and they lack both the political will and the institutional freedom to break through this impasse, as the EU cannot close its eyes on Belarus's poor human rights record and Lukashenko cannot allow political and profound economic reforms or a more abrupt distancing from Russia. The search for a further agenda for EU-Belarus relations continues.

The trigger for this second Belarusian-Western rapprochement was again a conflict between Russia and one of its neighbors—this time, Ukraine. Belarus realized that orienting the country toward Russia alone—economically and politically—is disadvantageous. Belarusian diplomats admitted in private that it was difficult to talk to their Russian colleagues immediately after Crimea was annexed.²³ According to them, like the Belarusians themselves fifteen years earlier, the Russians after the annexation of Crimea thought they were besieged and in a battle against collective Western evil. But Belarus no longer needed or desired such a conflict; on the contrary, it was striving to create a full-fledged Western component of its foreign policy platform.

Consequently, Belarus has distanced itself diplomatically from Russia in all the latter's disputes with the outside world, though Lukashenko has not openly embraced the West either. Minsk has only recognized the annexation of Crimea in *de facto* terms, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommends that companies continue to print maps and atlases showing Crimea as part of Ukraine.²⁴ Belarusian diplomats stress that they are standing up for

the integrity of Ukraine, though they do not specify within which borders, so as not to vex Russia. At the same time, Belarus pointedly refers to the military activity and expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe as a military challenge rather than as a threat.²⁵ When Turkey shot down a Russian bomber in November 2015, Belarus called on both sides to show restraint and pursue de-escalation.²⁶ Similarly, in its statement following the U.S. missile strike against a Syrian airbase in April 2017, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not even mention the United States, a sharp contrast to Russian condemnation of supposed U.S. aggression.²⁷

The Belarusian government no longer demonstrates its former enthusiasm for integration in the post-Soviet space. Originally, Lukashenko seemed to assume that a new format for multilateral talks would arise from within the EAEU framework, eliminating the need for Belarus to reach separate agreements regularly with Russia on sensitive economic issues such as oil, gas, and access to the Russian market for Belarusian goods. However, the unification of EAEU members' oil and gas markets has been pushed back to 2025, and Belarus's conflicts with the Kremlin still have to be resolved one-on-one. Trouble-free access to the Russian market has not materialized either, for a couple of reasons. First, demand in Russia slumped heavily as a result of the economic crisis that lasted from 2014 to 2017. Second, the wares of Belarusian manufacturers were often regarded as foreign and hence excluded from Russia's import substitution programs. Furthermore, as soon as Belarusian-Russian relations hit a roadblock, the Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance issues reports describing Belarusian milk and meat as contaminated, which further impeded Belarusian exports.²⁸

In short, Eurasian integration has been a disappointment for Lukashenko, but there is no alternative and there is no way to abandon this course, so Belarus is trying to at least get something out of the current situation. To push Russia into making concessions in the latest oil and gas dispute, Lukashenko boycotted a December 2016 EAEU summit held in St. Petersburg, prevaricated over the signing of the EAEU Customs Code, and threatened to withdraw Belarus's representatives from the union's structures. Belarus also continues to insist on the need for a rapprochement between the EAEU and the EU. Minsk does this not only to strengthen its new image as a regional peacemaker but also to avoid isolation, even if only rhetorically, within the stuffy confines of the crude Eurasian structure.

The shift toward a more pragmatic brand of Belarusian foreign policy is not simply a matter of Minsk's need to balance, under conditions of continual conflict, between Russia and its neighbors and the West—this change also results from a painful contraction in Russian support. As disputes have unfolded over the years, Belarus and Russia have lost many illusions about each other. Conflicts continue to be resolved using the old model under which low-level problems eventually build up until they reach the presidential level, resulting

in high-stakes haggling or even blackmail, meetings between Lukashenko and Putin, and compromises of some kind. The centralized nature of both states requires that important issues be solved at the highest level. But over time, Russia, as the stronger party, has begun to drag out the process of resolving disputes more and more, enabling Moscow to get away with offering Belarus fewer concessions. The latest oil and gas dispute, for example, lasted for almost a year and only concluded in 2017. Belarus periodically reported that a compromise had been reached as early as the fall of 2016, but again and again that compromise fell through. Minsk ultimately suffered huge losses as a result of an insufficient supply of oil during the dispute, and Belarus was forced to repay the gas debt it owed Russia. In the end, Moscow merely restored oil supplies to former levels and provided a discount of less than 20 percent on gas.²⁹

In light of these sometimes prolonged conflicts, Russia's leadership has accepted the idea that Lukashenko is not prepared to sacrifice his country's sovereignty. It remains important for Russia to retain Belarus within its orbit from an image standpoint, from a military point of view, and for the stable transit of hydrocarbon fuels to Europe. But the Kremlin's task has changed. Previously, Moscow sought to buy Lukashenko's loyalty and to support the prosperity of the system he presides over; however, Russia now seeks only to prevent the system's collapse, a task that does not require such excessive expenditures.

The State Monolith Shows Signs of Future Cracks

Belarus's state bureaucracy has changed in recent years, along with the country's domestic and foreign policy. Officials are still firmly in Lukashenko's corner; many of them do not see an alternative to his rule that would guarantee their positions and national stability. But, despite the regime's strict loyalty requirements, in recent years they have gained limited freedom to publicly state positions that may not match the regime's policy line.

Lukashenko long relied on the old *nomenklatura*, which consisted of disciplined members of his own and older generations. It turned out, however, that these officials were incapable of successful management and unable to contradict the president. Such ineffective but ideologically sound officials could be retained during the fat years of uninterrupted Russian subsidization and high oil prices, but professionals had to be brought in when this period of largesse came to an end.

Following multiple devaluations of the Belarusian ruble in 2009, 2011, and 2014 necessitated by external factors and by the mistakes of the authorities, key posts in the national bank, other economics-related government offices, and the presidential administration were given to relatively young technocrats with free-market views. One aide to the president, Kirill Rudy, went as far as

to write books and articles that criticized the country's economic model. He was essentially the voice of the reformers until he was made ambassador to China in July 2016. This change in job title, however, did not stop him. In November 2016, Rudy spoke at a forum in Minsk where he again criticized the use of coercive force against businesses and Belarus's entire prevailing economic model, calling on his colleagues to not fear doing the same.³⁰

Other liberals in the government operate differently. They try to convince Lukashenko, out of the public eye, to undertake the market reforms

[Liberals in the government] try to convince Lukashenko . . . to undertake the market reforms that the country needs.

that the country needs or to implement individual liberalizing measures without attracting attention. Due to their efforts, a restrained monetary policy has been in place since 2015, and the ruble has been allowed to float freely and has stabilized without any new large-scale fluctuations. The pension age has been raised, and the prices of housing and utilities have begun to reach levels that actually cover their costs. In January 2017, following sustained lobbying of the government, Lukashenko intro-

duced a five-day visa-free regime for citizens of eighty countries (including EU members and the United States) to boost tourism and investment. Further steps to free up the business environment—by reducing the scope of regulatory oversight and simplifying administrative procedures—were introduced in late 2017.³¹ In early 2018, Lukashenko adopted another decree effectively creating a tax haven for information-technology businesses. As of 2018, Belarus has risen to the rank of thirty-eight in the World Bank's Doing Business index.³²

Some of these changes are not taking place without resistance from the anti-reform lobby in the Belarusian government. Neither the security service apparatchiks nor the management of state-run compaines have an interest in liberalization because they could lose their power and assets. Lukashenko himself often comes across as the main conservative. His reluctance to adopt such reforms is not simply a product of not wanting to lose control over the economy for political reasons but is also a matter of deep conviction. He does not trust the market, and he fears the emergence of large, independent businesses and oligarchs, uncontrolled unemployment, and the dying off of Soviet-era industrial giants. This is why Lukashenko has not agreed to widespread privatization, the main demand of the IMF and Belarusian proponents of a market economy.

Since 2016, the president has regularly argued with his own government, which he openly accuses of harboring free marketers who are prone to what he characterizes as radical ideas. He does not remove these irritants from the summit of the state's power vertical, however, because the bench of potential substitutes is too thin. Members of the old guard are already far into pension-drawing age, and among the country's young professionals it is hard to find people who are not convinced of the necessity of structural market reforms.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by Vladimir Makei, also contains a less reactionary subsection of the Belarusian elite. As far as foreign policy is concerned, he and the country's key diplomats are pragmatic people who call for an end to dependence on Russia, a further thawing of ties with the EU, the introduction of more European management methods, and the development of Belarusian national identity. According to private conversations with sources within these institutions, the ministry's leadership has pushed quite boldly against the political screw-tightening of 2017 because this crackdown complicated Makei's efforts to engage with the West.³³

Yet even the more liberal bureaucrats, like other Belarusian political elites, ultimately maintain their loyalty to the president and are not developing any independent political plans. They are trying to patch up the system from within, and they try to come up with arguments that will convince Lukashenko to make necessary changes. For now, they are not thinking beyond the framework of the existing political order. In the event of an unexpected power transfer, they would undoubtedly aim for prominent positions in any new political configuration, but they will not undertake any steps to make that scenario more likely to occur. In terms of overarching political loyalty, the *nomenklatura* remains largely monolithic. Still, the appearance of officials who think more progressively is evidence that cracks will likely appear in this monolithic power vertical when the regime begins to weaken.

Where Belarus May Be Headed Next

Predicting the future of any personalized regime is a thankless task, because that future is too dependent on the leader, his or her physical well-being, and unforeseeable potential black swan events.³⁴ If an autocracy has nothing akin to a collective leadership or a politburo, the identity of the next leader and the nature of power transfers are much more likely to be unpredictable. Yet it is worth noting that Lukashenko is sixty-three years old, two years younger than Putin. He seems to lead a healthy lifestyle and the finest doctors in the country are looking after him, so, for the time being, analysts are not seriously considering the possibility of a sudden, health-related resignation, even though this cannot be ruled out entirely. For now, it is very difficult to forecast the specifics of how a transfer of power in Belarus would take place.

But a few general medium- and long-term scenarios seem possible: a strengthened group of elites could successfully pressure Lukashenko to relinquish power, the Lukashenko-led regime could gradually weaken (but not collapse) as he ages and eventually produce a softer form of authoritarian rule, or Lukashenko could recognize the destabilizing risks that a sudden departure could engender and hold a referendum to introduce political changes.

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An Unforeseen, Chaotic Transfer of Power

If a transition were to take place with the *nomenklatura* in its present state—lacking factions, a consolidated bloc in the security forces, and (most importantly) an heir—there would probably be a chaotic redistribution of power. In such a scenario, if dependence on Russia and majority support for this dependence among elites and the general public were maintained, Kremlin-backed political forces would probably have at least some legitimacy in the eyes of the *nomenklatura* and society at large. The West would have neither the political will nor the resources to significantly influence developments in what remains, for Western interests, a peripheral country.

A sudden and unexpected transfer of power in the near term would most likely empower another constitutional “super-presidential” regime, but one led by someone with less charisma than Lukashenko.³⁵ The *nomenklatura* has been purposefully cleansed of any standout individuals for many years, though a potential successor could conceivably develop into a charismatic figure once in office, as Putin did in Russia.

A Gradual Shift Toward Softer Authoritarianism

But, as of now, another scenario appears more likely: a gradual weakening of Lukashenko’s power vertical as he ages. The grounds for such a gradual transition would probably be economics. Nervousness over the country’s chronic economic crisis is already leading to mistakes by the president, such as the tax on so-called social parasites. That decision resulted in mass protests, a new crackdown, and temporary tensions in Belarusian relations with the West. Eventually, the regime retreated and stopped enforcing the decree. Such mistakes will occur more regularly as economic conditions (and popular unrest) worsen, injecting added turbulence into the political system.

The depletion of the external and internal resources that prop up Belarus’s current economic model will likely push Lukashenko toward privatization. A growing proportion of the country’s GDP will be produced by the private sector, from which major business leaders and aspiring oligarchs will likely emerge. They will naturally wish to convert their economic influence into political influence. In parallel, the generational changes under way in the *nomenklatura* will continue, and the number and influence of officials with more market-based views than the president will keep growing. A tactical coalition between such officials and the representatives of a new, larger business sector could organically arise.

This scenario could become a reality within the next five to fifteen years, as Lukashenko ages and the issue of an heir becomes more pressing. Openly or not, the changing *nomenklatura* will begin to pose that question. Eventually, the country will probably shift toward a softer or more oligarchic form of

authoritarianism along the lines of that of Armenia today or that of Moldova during the presidency of Vladimir Voronin.

A Constitutional Referendum

A third scenario is also possible. Lukashenko apparently has been thinking about the transition issue, and over the last year he has hinted several times about holding a referendum to amend the constitution. The head of the Central Election Commission, Lidia Ermoshina, said in early 2017 that the president had discussed with her the possibility of switching to a mixed electoral system, which would mean an increase in the role of political parties.³⁶ In recent months, Lukashenko has spoken twice about the possibility of a constitutional review to transfer some powers to parliament and other government entities and to expand the role of political parties. However, he has not specified when and what exactly he wants changed in the constitution.

Experiments with the constitution do not come naturally to Lukashenko. If he embarks on one, it would be with a serious, long-term strategy in mind, specifically to prepare the system for an approaching transition. Most likely, this eventuality would come about through the creation of a ruling party aimed at rallying the elite around a future heir and making the latter's position more stable.

To some extent, whichever scenario plays out in Belarus will reflect the economy's dependence on Russia at the time of the transition. That said, this factor should not be overestimated. Looking back, the Russian-backed front runner of the Belarusian elites in the country's first presidential election in 1994 initially was not Lukashenko but then prime minister Vyacheslav Kebich, who had an extremely pro-Russian platform and long-standing links with Moscow. Lukashenko's charisma and swift political ascent quickly changed everything, and the Belarusian *nomenklatura* and Russian officials reoriented themselves accordingly.

And while it is true that Russia wants more control over its neighbors now than it did in the mid-1990s, it is unlikely that Moscow would interfere directly or try to push its own candidate in Belarus without the support of local elites or Belarusian society at large—as long as basic Russian interests are accounted for during any transition. In any case, there is no way that Belarusian politicians who want to break off relations with Russia would receive strong domestic support for the foreseeable future.

All these hypotheses could, of course, turn out be unfounded if unforeseen circumstances intervene. Lukashenko could suddenly appoint an heir, ensuring a rapid, controlled transition, or he could cling to power and make so many economic blunders that a protest movement takes the lead in driving a transition to a new regime.

Why Belarus Is Not Ukraine

As important as it is to predict how Belarus's political system may shift, it is also vital to recognize the ways that it is unlikely to change. Some foreign journalists, often without immersing themselves too deeply in the subject, love to mistakenly present Belarus as another version of Ukraine. Any protests in Belarus are seen as the beginning of a Euromaidan-like uprising, any dispute with Russia is seen as a precursor to annexation, and any modest initiative undertaken by the Belarusian regime to develop a national identity is seen as a

flirtation with nationalistic extremism. Realistically, however, whichever transition scenario eventually unfolds in Belarus, it will almost certainly not repeat the recent history of Ukraine, either in terms of the country's domestic politics or its relations with Russia.

[Belarus] will almost certainly not repeat the recent history of Ukraine, either in terms of the country's domestic politics or its relations with Russia.

For protests to result in regime change, they must take place on such a massive, persistent scale that the risk of suppressing them, in the minds of the country's rulers and elites, exceeds the risk of making concessions or stepping down. In addition, a subgroup of the ruling elite

would have to switch to the side of the protesters. This subgroup of elites and the protesters would need to have effective communication channels with each other and ideally with the general public too.

However, in Belarus, the cards are stacked against a forced transfer of power. There is no schism or alternative center of power in the regime, and the security forces have repeatedly proven their loyalty to Lukashenko. But, even discounting these reasons, the likelihood of a Euromaidan-style demonstration in Belarus is almost zero, due to the critical imbalance in the power and resources at the disposal of the country's various political actors. Unlike in Ukraine, there are no social or political structures in Belarus that are capable of organizing mass protests or coordinating them for a prolonged period. There are no universally available independent television channels, no influential oligarchs, and no members of parliament or regions of the country capable of openly supporting a revolution.³⁷

Moreover, the Belarusian opposition has no human capital or material resources to defend itself against a powerful security apparatus that has fifteen to twenty years of experience in putting down protests. In the event of a threat to the regime, the security forces are capable of preventatively neutralizing all of the potential protest leaders, turning off the internet and other means of communications at public assembly points, blocking social media and other online networks, physically preventing people from gathering in public places, and harshly detaining those who manage to gather.

In some places around the world, protests do sometimes spring up spontaneously and without strong leaders, if, for example, the authorities do something

particularly outrageous. But the Belarusian people have seen on many occasions the full arsenal of repressive countermeasures that the security forces have at their disposal to deter protesters. The consistent punishment meted out for protesting has been an effective preventative way of demotivating potential participants.

Even if, as the result of a revolution or revolt within the *nomenklatura*, the regime were to unexpectedly change, and a newly emergent leadership were to fail to recognize the extent of Belarusian dependence on Russia and therefore risk turning Belarus more toward the West, there is no guarantee that the Kremlin would respond exactly as it did in Ukraine in 2014. By no means would every conceivable forced change in power in post-Soviet countries elicit from Russia the same reaction as Ukraine did. Another Russian military operation and the attempted seizure of another portion of a neighboring country and support for separatism in such a country would entail huge risks and material and military costs for Moscow. For such a step to be worthwhile, any potential revolutionary change in a neighboring country would have to pose a genuine risk in Russia's eyes.

In this sense, Ukraine was very different from Belarus. In Ukraine, the pro-European western part of the country supported turning to Europe, while the pro-Russian eastern part (to varying degrees) did not accept such a move. In addition, Crimea was a somewhat autonomous territory with close historical ties to Russia, and thousands of Russian soldiers were already based there. Before and after the revolution in Ukraine, there were weak institutions of power and no security forces that were ready for combat; far more importantly, loyalty to the central authorities was very weak or entirely absent in Donbas and Crimea. All of these factors made fertile ground for Russia's intervention and exploitation of Ukraine's internal contradictions.

No such factors are present in Belarus. The country does not even have areas where ethnic Russians (who made up just 8.3 percent of the country's population in a 2009 census) are densely concentrated enough that Moscow could use them as bridgeheads in a hybrid war.³⁸ It would be difficult for Russia to play the card of an oppressed Russian-speaking minority in Belarus, as the latter country itself is predominantly Russian-speaking. It is by no means clear that the leadership and troops in the Belarusian armed forces would capitulate and desert as readily as many in the Ukrainian military in Crimea (and in the police in Donetsk) did. It is widely believed that the Belarusian military has pro-Russian leanings (although no research has been carried out on the matter), but this is not enough to assume that the Belarusian armed forces would be ready to change their allegiance. Such a prospect might be easier to imagine for inhabitants of a region or representatives of a minority that feel rejected by elites in Minsk, but there are no such stark divisions, either geographical or social, in Belarus.

Lukashenko is sensitive to threats to his power, and he reacted swiftly when he saw what was happening in Ukraine. Between 2014 and 2015, he appointed a new defense minister, Andrei Ravkov, and a new state secretary of the Security Council, Stanislav Zas. Both are relatively young (in their early fifties) and have publicly stated that the lesson to be learned from the Ukrainian experience is that the border must be reinforced and the army must be modernized. In 2016, Belarus adopted a new military doctrine; as it was being developed, according to Ravkov, the risks of a hybrid war were taken into consideration and special-forces operations were emphasized.³⁹

All of these factors indicate that, even in the event of an unlikely shift in Belarus toward the West, any attempt by Russia to return the country to its orbit militarily could be costlier and riskier than Moscow's operations in Crimea and Donbas. All of Belarus, along with its relatively effective army,

would have to be taken over. Furthermore, none of the current disputes between Lukashenko and Russian leaders are close to reaching the point where the latter might even consider a military option. Even at the peak of heated conflicts, Belarus remains Russia's closest (and likely most economically dependent) military and political ally.

As a result, it would likely be more reasonable and effective for Russia to use economic and energy tools to influence developments in Belarus. By some metrics, Belarus would be more susceptible to economic pressure than Ukraine has been.

In the last years of Viktor Yanukovych's rule in Ukraine, about one-quarter of Ukrainian exports went to Russia; by contrast, about half of Belarus's exports do.⁴⁰ In addition, Minsk is completely dependent on Russian natural gas, and its oil refineries are equally dependent on Russian oil supplies.

The characteristics of Belarusian society that have made [Lukashenko's] brand of authoritarianism possible and stable would require many years . . . to change.

Conclusion

It is possible that this current phase in Belarusian history—characterized by an alliance with Russia and coinciding with parallel state institutions aimed at asserting Belarusian sovereignty—will one day be seen as one of the few realistic options for preserving the independence of a young country with a weak national identity, a Soviet-style economy, and a Soviet-era mentality among the bulk of its population and elites. Ultimately, such an evaluation will be largely dependent on how peaceful the eventual transfer of power from Lukashenko turns out to be. In the meantime, the cost of Belarus's pro-Russian orientation and how severely it will impede the country's economic and political transformation remains to be seen. So far, Russian support has provided the regime with stability but has also weakened its motivation to democratize and build a competitive economy.

The emergence of an independent Belarus went hand in hand with Lukashenko's regime. The regime's institutional stability, its monolithic nature, and Lukashenko's control over it is inextricably tied to the system's dependence on Lukashenko's character and worldview, especially his desire for power, his conservatism, his nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and his leftist views. Even if the Belarusian political system were to collapse unexpectedly and suddenly—freeing the country from the foundations of Lukashenko's authoritarianism—the characteristics of Belarusian society that have made this brand of authoritarianism possible and stable would require many years, and perhaps even decades, to change.

Notes

- 1 In addition to the Union State arrangement that Belarus and Russia signed in 1996, these agreements include the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
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- 13 “Contributors to Russian News Agency Convicted of Inciting Hate in Belarus,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 2, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-regnum-news-agency-russia-convicted-inciting-hatred/29014830.html>.
- 14 In the summer of 2016, unable to withstand the pressure from the state security services, the director of IISEPS decided to stop working. Apart from IISEPS, there were and still are other centers that carry out sociological surveys, but either they do so irregularly, meaning that the dynamics cannot be tracked, or they do so for private customers and are afraid of making their political data public. Nevertheless, the rare publication of such data has at least made it possible to verify the IISEPS data relied on here.
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