Belarus President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has reportedly agreed to meet with Vladimir Putin in September to discuss a new integration package which may pose a threat to Belarusian sovereignty.

The Kremlin is facing deeply uncomfortable choices: either to provide Lukashenka with life-saving support and push him into integrating more deeply with Russia, thereby causing inevitable damage to Russia’s image within Belarus, or to avoid providing political support to Lukashenka at all, which could endanger any future bilateral relationship with the new Belarusian leadership.

A plummeting in approval

Over the past years, circumstantial evidence has suggested growing public mistrust toward the Belarusian authorities and towards Alyaksandr Lukashenka personally. This has manifested itself for example in Belarusian citizens’ absenteeism at the 2nd European Games events in 2019, a completely “politically sterile” 2019 Belarusian parliament, growing censorship on the internet and propaganda within the state-owned media.

The presidential administration’s expectation of non-reactionary elections, such as those of 2015, has failed to materialise due to increased political mobilisation among Belarus’ citizens. This increase in engagement was caused by economic grievances and has also been exacerbated by the
state’s inadequate response to the coronavirus pandemic which was clearly attributable to Lukashenka and his ruling coalition. The coronavirus pandemic began developing in Belarus in early March, exactly when the more active phase of Lukashenka’s election campaign began to unfold.

Instead of making quick adjustments to his campaign, the leader has repeatedly spoken out against extreme “corona-psychosis” and downplayed the risks of the epidemic. Lukashenka did not pay a single visit to a hospital or other medical institution and made a number of controversial statements, provoking public anger.

By June, Belarus was among the 15 most-affected countries per capita. At the same time, Belarus maintained one of the lowest infection fatality rates in the world. However, a number of observations (e.g. a very high share of coronavirus-related deaths among medical workers) suggest that the actual number of coronavirus-related deaths may be underestimated in official Belarusian statistics by a factor of ten or more. Moreover, in early May, Lukashenka for a split second presented a graph that was believed to contain alternative coronavirus-related statistics, with a higher number of identified cases than previously reported by the Ministry of Health.

A representative poll of Minsk residents conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences throughout March and early April 2020 showed that Lukashenka’s trust rating amounted to 24%, while the Central Election Commission enjoyed an even lower rating of 11%. Taking into account the effect of social desirability and the deterioration in the epidemiological and economic situation since that time, by August 2020 Lukashenka’s trust rating among Minsk residents barely reached 15–20%.

The high level of attendance at Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s rallies across smaller cities has indicated that the people’s
trust in government and Lukashenka in regional cities and smaller towns is unlikely to differ greatly from the capital region.

Despite various ruses by the Belarusian authorities to convince the population otherwise, during the 2020 election campaign an increasingly large part of Belarusian society began to realise that Lukashenka’s opponents were in the majority. Belarus is numbered among the ten most censored countries in the world, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists 2019 report. This, combined with a large staff of state ideologists and a well-functioning system of electoral fraud, has made the Belarusian authorities quite successful at creating the myth of Lukashenka’s electoral majority. However, due to the growing popularity of new media and messengers like Telegram, access to information among Belarusians has greatly improved in recent years.

By late April 2020, Lukashenka faced a stark new political reality after the high level of electoral support of his main political opponents became very clear. Amid unprecedented political mobilisation, Lukashenka’s election campaign became vague and reactive. His only proactive action was to carry out the regime’s repressive actions.

**Evolution of the political regime**

While a number of factors, primarily a historical low in public trust, have made Lukashenka’s 2020 election campaign the most challenging yet, he has continued benefitting from the highest degree of centralisation of power in Belarusian sovereign state history and from the unprecedented strength of the Belarusian security apparatus.

To forestall a growing political mobilisation of the
population, since April the Belarusian ruler has prioritised a campaign of repression and discrediting of his most popular political opponents, intimidation of the civilian population, and actions to ensure a larger control over information flows, including through reprisals against popular bloggers.

Belarus’s political regime has often been categorised as a classic personalist type. For two decades the capacity of all state institutions in Belarus was kept very low so as not to give rise to organisational centres of opposition. Based on Lukashenka’s more recent approach, that differs from the classic typology of autocratic regimes, Belarus’ political regime since late 2019 could be viewed in terms of the classification of a personalist military type.

Not only the army, but also security bodies and other law-enforcement agencies may be viewed as part of the military. The appointment of KGB Major General Ihar Siarheyenka as the head of the presidential administration in December 2019 was an important milestone in the transformation of the Belarusian authoritarian regime towards personalist military rule. The influence of persons specialising in the use of force in Belarus’s ruling coalition increased even more after the June 2020 government reshuffle. The ‘civilian’ component of Lukashenka’s ruling coalition has never been as sidelined from decision-making processes as it is now.

Dilemmas and Future Scenarios

A growing political mobilisation and heightened levels of repression in Belarus, and hence worsening relations with the West, have increased the probability of Lukashenka’s willingness to accept a new integration package with Russia in exchange for the Kremlin’s political and economic support.

Over the last two decades, Lukashenka has skilfully traded geopolitical loyalty and military cooperation for Russia’s
generosity. The Kremlin, however, has indicated a change in the bilateral relationship model, declining the long-standing “oil and gas in exchange for kisses” scheme and demanding a share of Belarus’s sovereignty instead. After a series of public squabbles between Belarusian and Russian officials over the response to the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020, the dialogue over deeper integration intensified in June.

During the online discussion “Russia and Belarus: The post-pandemic future” on 4 June, the Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Uladzimir Siamashka (Vladimir Semashko) stated, “Minsk is ready at any time to sit down at the negotiating table [to discuss integration roadmaps] if we have the goodwill of our Russian partners and friends.” The moment for the continuation of negotiations may come in September or October, he added.

Due to the dramatic delegitimisation of Lukashenka among Belarusians, the Kremlin is therefore facing deeply uncomfortable choices: either to provide Lukashenka with life-saving support; to push him into integrating more deeply with Russia, thereby causing inevitable damage to Russia’s image within Belarus, or to avoid providing political support to Lukashenka at all, which could endanger any future bilateral relationship with the new Belarusian leadership.

The first option entails a combination of heightened repression within Belarus, possibly with Russia’s direct or indirect support in one form or another, and buying loyalties thanks to greater economic support from Moscow. This would result in the coercion of the Belarusian population towards a new reality of deeper integration with Russia under the continuous rule of a very unpopular Lukashenka.

Due to a minimal ‘civilian’ component in the current Belarusian ruling coalition, the probability of its split over the issue of a new integration package with Russia is very low. However, one cannot rule out a repeated or an even larger
The mobilisation of opposition towards a linked integration deal. The majority of Belarusians would not consider it legitimate and the West should not and would likely not recognise it either.

The other option, Moscow’s deliberate lack of political support to Lukashenka amid continuous massive civil disobedience in Belarus, is rather improbable. The Kremlin would view the replacement of a regime in Russia’s vicinity, particularly in neighbouring Belarus, as a highly undesirable precedent. Moscow is unlikely to play such a risky game and to bet on any alternative political force in Belarus unless Lukashenka’s position becomes extremely desperate.

This development, however, would most likely prompt Moscow to force him into a new integration deal on Russia’s terms. The pro-Kremlin political actors in Belarus have recently been intensifying their activities, pointing towards Moscow’s alternative plan for keeping political control over Belarus through parliamentary action.

- This article is a shorted and slightly modified version of July’s report titled, *Belarus at a Crossroads: Political Regime Transformation and Future Scenarios*

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