



Something is stirring in Belarus

by Charles Grant

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As Belarus's presidential election approaches on August 9th, opposition to Alyaksandr Lukashenka is growing. The EU needs a strategy for the country.

Now that the Belarusian authorities are locking up the president's opponents, the EU faces a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, it wants to stay true to its principles of promoting democracy and the rule of law. That means putting pressure on the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in the hope that it will change its behaviour. Yet on the other hand the EU wants Belarus to retain its sovereignty and independence, which means preventing Russian domination of the country. If the EU applies strong sanctions, and spurns Lukashenka, it could create a space for Russia to move into.

Since he won power – in a free-ish election in 1994 – Lukashenka's regime has been quite stable. Every five years he has triumphed in presidential elections, often locking up rivals. The president appeared fairly popular, having struck an informal social contract with the people: in return for rising prosperity and security, many Belarusians were willing to tolerate authoritarian rule.

Lukashenka cannily played off the West and Russia against each other. Belarus belongs to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, pale Russian-led imitations of the EU and NATO, respectively. Yet Lukashenka has periodically flirted with the EU and the US, particularly when resisting Russian pressure for still closer ties to Moscow; then his abuse of human rights would lead to a chill in relations with Western countries, and he would veer back towards Russia. In the past few years this cycle had seemed to repeat itself, as an EU-Belarus rapprochement gathered momentum.

Yet in the run-up to the August 9th presidential election, it is becoming clear that Belarus is less stable than it looks. The signs of discontent stretch far beyond the Minsk intelligentsia. Unofficial opinion polls give the president a rating of less than 10 per cent – and his leading opponent, Viktor Babaryka, a former banker, over 50 per cent. Citizens have queued for many kilometres to give their signatures in support of opposition candidates (in order to be registered by the Central Election Commission, a candidate needs 100,000 signatures). There has been talk of a 'signature revolution'.

Several factors explain the unrest. The biggest long-term problem for the regime is the economy; living standards have declined over the past five years. Russia is phasing out the subsidies on the oil that it exports to Belarus – which is then refined, turned into oil products and sold to Western Europe. By 2025 the Russian subsidies will have gone altogether, at great cost to the country's export earnings, government finances and energy-intensive industries.

Successive governments have failed to diversify the economy away from heavy industry and Soviet-era specialisations such as fridges and tractors (the exception being a quite successful IT industry). In recent years Belarusian governments have included reformist ministers who sought to modernise the economy. But Lukashenka stymied their efforts, fearing that market reforms would erode the social base of his support. Then in June he sacked Prime Minister Syarhey Rumas, installing a new government hostile to reform and dominated by *siloviki* (men with links to the security services).

The problems are not only economic: people have become fed up with the corruption and boorishness of some of those close to power. But it was the regime's inept response to COVID-19 that triggered the current unrest. Like his fellow strongmen Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, Lukashenka dismissed the coronavirus as nothing to worry about. But in Belarus, unlike in Brazil and the US, there was no lockdown at all. The president said that if you drank vodka and drove a tractor you would stay healthy. He allowed both league football and a military parade to continue as normal.

The official figures suggest that, compared with many other countries, Belarus has so far suffered few deaths from COVID-19 – just under 400. But these figures are almost certainly false. Scared citizens have voluntarily practised social distancing. Meanwhile the pandemic has pushed the economy into a steep recession and the currency downwards. The informal social contract has begun to disintegrate.

And now Lukashenka faces potentially credible opponents. Siarhey Tsikhanouski, an anti-corruption campaigner who has been compared to Russia's Alexei Navalny, has been detained since May and barred from standing. Valery Tsapkala, a businessman who helped to build the country's IT industry, remains free but has had his candidacy declared invalid.

The most credible candidate of all, Babaryka, was a free man until June 18th. For many years he ran one of the country's most successful banks, Belgazprombank, using his position to promote Belarusian art and literature (for example, by repatriating the paintings of Belarusian artists such as Chagall and Soutine). Babaryka's track record as an effective manager, his down-to-earth manner, his inspiring use of language and his skilful presence on social media have appealed to the middle classes, and probably other social groups as well. His nomination papers were signed by 450,000 citizens. When he was detained on trumped up charges of money laundering, and held in the KGB prison, drivers filled the main thoroughfare near the prison and honked their horns. Many friends and supporters of Babaryka, including his son, have also been gaoled.

Civil society started to become more active during the pandemic. Because the government did very little to help people or companies stricken by the coronavirus and the consequent slump, grass-roots volunteer groups stepped in to help, for example by making protective equipment and delivering food to the vulnerable. The detentions have given civil society a further boost, provoking prominent people, such as sportsmen and musicians, to speak out against them. In many provincial cities, people reacted to Babaryka's arrest by forming chains of solidarity in the streets.

The president appears rattled, which may explain why his security services have arrested so many people before the election, rather than – as is their normal practice – afterwards. Their methods have been heavy-handed: prominent women in the opposition have received anonymous threats of rape and been told that they will lose their children. About 680 people were detained in May and June, though most of them were subsequently released. All this has only served to boost support for opposition candidates.

Will Brussels step in?

The EU has condemned the repression but not yet worked out a coherent strategy for dealing with Belarus. It has spent the last several years engaging the country, in a bid to diminish Russia's influence, with some success. In 2016, in return for Lukashenka releasing political prisoners, the EU lifted most of its sanctions (those remaining are an arms embargo, plus visa bans and asset freezes on four individuals linked to disappearance of four opponents of the regime 20 years ago).

What has been missing is an agreement facilitating trade. Belarus is a member of the EU's Eastern Partnership, and takes part in some partnership programmes. But because Belarus is in the EEU and its customs union, a free trade agreement with the EU is technically impossible (unless negotiated in tandem with the other EEU members). Since 2016 it has been negotiating 'partnership priorities' with the EU, which would create a framework for more co-operation on economic and other issues. But Lithuania has blocked agreement because it objects to Belarus building a nuclear power station near their common border.

Last October Lukashenka paid a state visit to Austria, a country that has invested heavily in Belarus, while this June he hosted another strongman, Viktor Orbán, in Minsk. The Hungarian prime minister called for the EU to remove all sanctions on Belarus and to give it large amounts of aid with no strings attached.

But the Brussels-Minsk *rapprochement* is now over. Assuming that the repression continues, the questions for the EU are when to punish the regime and how severe the punishment should be. One problem for the EU is that its leverage is limited – it only gives about €30 million of direct aid a year. When COVID-19 struck the country, the government asked the EU for substantial balance of payments support. The EU said no, since its rules only allow such support when an IMF programme is in place, and the IMF would not agree to one because Belarus was breaching most World Health Organisation recommendations on how to handle the pandemic.

EU officials worry that stringent sanctions would lead to a breach with Lukashenka. They think that since he is – in their view – likely to stay in power for the medium term, they need to maintain channels of communication with him.

The EU also frets about the Russian dimension. Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin have a notoriously spikey relationship. Putin has long tried to persuade Lukashenka to accept closer political and economic ties than those that come with the EEU, including a currency union. The Belarusian president has spent many years wriggling and squirming to avoid signing up to Russia's demands.

But what if EU-Belarus relations become frozen, and the Belarusian economy tips into a downward spiral? Belarus would then have little alternative but to turn to Russia. And Russia would extract a price for loans and subsidies. One cannot know Putin's intentions, but while he may be reluctant for Russia to swallow Belarus whole, he would probably be happy to install a puppet regime in Minsk.

The EU is right to think carefully about the consequences of its policies on Belarus. Like any foreign policy actor, it has to strike a balance between its interests and its values. But an EU that ignored its commitment to human rights and the rule of law would see its soft power diminish. If it reached an accommodation with a repressive regime in Belarus, whatever the geopolitical justifications, it would soon lose the respect of many people, and not only in that country.

EU leaders know that the incarceration of opposition politicians – human rights groups count 17 political prisoners – means they will have to take measures against the regime. But they will move gingerly and not apply strong sanctions in the near future, in the hope that Lukashenka will listen to the advice that they are giving him via back channels.

Officials in Brussels say that they will calibrate their response according to how the regime behaves in the period before the election. The next deadline is July 14th, when the Central Election Commission has to rule on which candidates are qualified to run. It is likely to find a pretext for disqualifying Babaryka – but if he was allowed to run, the EU would probably moderate the punitive measures that it is preparing.

The EU needs to co-ordinate closely with the US on Belarus, to maximise its leverage. The US has stronger sanctions in place than the EU, but also emphasises the geopolitical dimension more than human rights. It plans to upgrade its embassy in Minsk to an ambassador-level representation and earlier this year supplied oil to the country, when Russia briefly cut off supplies.

What of the danger that an economic crisis could trigger a Russian intervention? The fact that Putin stepped back from intervening during Armenia's quasi-democratic transition in 2018 does not mean he would do the same for Belarus – most Russians care more about ties to Belarus than they do about Armenia. Nevertheless efforts by Russia to increase its sway over Belarus would not be cost-free. Most Belarusians do not want to live in Russia, or even in a semi-detached annex of their giant neighbour, and at least some of them would resist such a fate.

If the EU wants to be a pole of attraction to Belarusians, it must stand by its values. Nobody can be sure of the outcome of the current discontents. In the short term, a president willing to use force against opponents will probably remain in power. But in the longer term it is at least possible that people power will change the country for the better.

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