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RUSSIA'S ASSETS AND LIABILITIES IN BELARUS

Mathieu Boulègue

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mathieu Boulègue is a research fellow at the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, in London.

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Cover: Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin to participate in the state council of the Union State of Russia and Belarus in Minsk, Belarus, June 19, 2018. *Credit*: REUTERS/ Vasily Fedosenko.

The current political upheaval in Belarus does not center on geopolitics, but whatever the outcome of the protest movement, Moscow will have a say, and a stake, in the looming transition of power. The Kremlin's negative drivers of influence are heavily undermining state cohesion and societal stability through a well-known set of tools.[1]

This paper explores Russian influence through the prism of recent developments in the aftermath of the August presidential election in Belarus. It identifies and assesses the main levers of influence in the political, societal, economic, and security spheres in order to understand the Kremlin's current assets and liabilities. Together with relevant case studies and policy recommendations, it analyzes what Moscow can — and cannot — hope to achieve, how, and with whom.

The politics of influence

Russia and Belarus have grown politically estranged.[2] In Minsk, acts of defiance started following Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, when Belarus refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka also did not overtly recognize the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or give any agency to the Kremlin's other "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World) endeavors.[3] Belarusian elite circles acknowledged that the Kremlin's aggressive policy toward its "near abroad" was becoming detrimental to their interests.

The Kremlin understood these as acts of disloyalty that could lead Belarus to drift away from Russia's "sphere of influence."[4] This partly explains Russia's attempts in 2018 to further integrate Belarus through the Union State and other economic bullying. Belarusian disloyalty gradually forced Moscow to reassess its tactics

regarding political influence there — although such influence remains rather limited to this day.

The Kremlin does not possess strong political and elite linkages in Belarus. Pro-Kremlin political parties have always been marginal in terms of influence and impact — not least because they would face severe countermeasures. Furthermore, openly campaigning on a pro-Russian platform has never been politically appealing. In Moscow, Belarus can always count on the informal sympathies of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Sergey Naryshkin, who is overtly supporting the Union State.[5]

Nor does Russia have many "agents of influence." Father and son duo Sergey and Oleg Gaydukevich are the leaders of the explicitly pro-Russian Liberal Democratic Party but their influence is marginal.[6] Russia would also be using a range of individuals as pro-Kremlin opinion makers.[7] However, such allegiances are specific to a group of people and not the symptom of a wider trend in Belarusian society.

Russia has not "infiltrated" Belarusian state structures or political life to the extent that is often portrayed in the West. The Kremlin, therefore, needs to rebuild its power networks ahead of a potential presidential transition.[8] This will take time and discretion. Keeping Lukashenka in place, at least for now, buys time to build political connections with disenfranchised parts of the elite.

Case Study: Russia is seeking a 'managed transition' in Minsk

Though Russia's political influence in Minsk is more limited than meets the eye, the Kremlin can still influence preparations for a potential regime change in Belarus. Its absolute priority is stability — Russian President Vladimir Putin mentioned this several times after the contested presidential election. In this sense, Moscow is pro-stability, but not necessarily pro-Lukashenka.

Russia's strategic outlook seems set on the following steps.

First, at least for the time being, keep Lukashenka in place. This was the essence of the Putin-Lukashenka meeting in Sochi on September 14. Russia pledged economic assistance and supported constitutional reform[9] — a "neutral" agenda that even the opposition can support. Russia thus signaled support for Belarus, but not directly for its embattled president. Backing Lukashenka too overtly risks antagonizing the opposition, and thus stoking anti-Russian sentiment. Any paper agreements between Putin and Lukashenka would be deemed illegitimate[10] — which is why Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted that no joint documents would be signed during the Sochi meeting.[11]

Second, extort concessions from a weakened Lukashenka. While further Union State integration may be impossible, Russia can still work in the shadows and obtain political, economic, and security dividends.

Finally, set terms and conditions for the post-Lukashenka era and a controlled transition of power. This would happen once the de facto president exhausts his usefulness, engages in harsher repression, or if the opposition threatens to overthrow

him. Russia needs to ensure a stable transition to a new leadership that would be equally, if not more, considerate to Moscow and accommodating to Russian interests. The new team in Minsk would not have to be explicitly pro-Kremlin, just sufficiently sympathetic (and not pro-Western).

Though the Kremlin cannot hope to place a puppet in power, it can hope for a weak caretaker.[12] The Russian leadership might prefer competing elite groups instead of key opposition figures — from exiled Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, jailed Viktar Babaryka, or Valery Tsepkalo — who have contacts with the West.

Whether Russia would accept a leadership change through constitutional reform and new rounds of elections is another critical issue, especially because working with the Coordination Council, which was founded by Tsikhanouskaya, would entail legitimizing the opposition protest movement. Furthermore, the Russian leadership cannot be seen as siding overtly with Coordination Council members, who are depicted as "agents of the West" in Russian media.[13]

Belarus and Russia have been formally bound by a Union State since 1999. Yet, despite advanced economic and military integration, both have irreconcilable views of this community of interests.[14] Lukashenka always pushed back against Russian attempts at political integration. The latest discussions on this topic in late 2019 brought no tangible results. Further integration will have to wait until after Lukashenka's exit, but the Kremlin will have to work with the fact that a majority of young Belarusians now oppose political integration into one state.[15]

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Political outreach to the Belarusian opposition by the United States risks being denounced as "Western interference" or attempted "regime change," which would be counterproductive. In this constrained environment, Western policymakers must avoid presenting events in Belarus as a geopolitical conflict with Russia. The Kremlin indeed plays a role, but the future of Belarus belongs to its citizens.

Russian influence in Belarusian society and in the information space

Russia does not own the hearts and minds of Belarusian citizens. It does, however, exert considerable influence in the information space. The media sphere is saturated with Russian content: it is estimated that some 60% of the content of TV channels is Russian or produced in Russia,[16] notably news and political debates.[17] Russian media — especially popular TV channels[18] — are, therefore, an influential tool of interference in Belarus. They also benefit from higher levels of trust than Belarusian media sources.[19]

Russian-based social media networks like VK (formerly Vkontakte) and Odnoklassniki are popular in Belarus and are used to disseminate pro-Kremlin, anti-Western propaganda.[20] Likewise, Yandex and Telegram are commonly used for daily news consumption.

Case Study: Russian informational influence during the protests

In the early days of the protests, Russian media reported the "bloodshed" wanted by protesters in Minsk[21] as well as the "foreign" nature of the movement, financed and driven by the West to destabilize Russia.[22] These narratives were received with contempt and anger by the Belarusian public, especially the protesters,[23] which led Russian media outlets to tone down this rhetoric to avoid antagonism.[24] Recent comments by SVR head Naryshkin that the West was "staging" a color revolution in Belarus[25] prove how divided political messaging is within the Kremlin.

Moscow dispatched "consultants" and "technical advisers" from MIA Rossiya Segodnya — Russia's leading propaganda tool in the information space — to Belarus national TV stations.[26] Their aim is to assert greater control over the narrative around the protest movement[27] and "unify" information streams.[28] Although trust in national Belarusian media has been severely dented by the political crisis, it is now increasingly under Russia's control. Russian journalists were also sent to replace protest sympathizers at the main broadcaster, Belteleradiokompania.[29] It is important to note that these agents are working to support the Kremlin's narrative, and not necessarily to support Lukashenka. This gives Moscow the option of swiftly changing content to an anti-regime stance if required.

Russian channels on Telegram have also been active in support of the pro-Kremlin narrative. Several well-identified channels such as *Bulba of Thrones* or *BeloRusski Dialog* have been used so far.[30] Although these channels are relayed by national media, they remain marginally influential and lack followers. Often relegated to conspiracy theories, Russian Telegram channels on Belarus have failed to gather popular traction.[31]

Russia is counting on a number of GONGOs — fake, government-organized NGOs — and influence groups permeating Belarusian society with the aim of fostering a Russia-friendly agenda and worldview. Prominent organizations include the Russian federal agency Rossotrudnichestvo — in charge of supporting "compatriots politics" — and Young Russia, in charge of promoting "Russkiy Mir." The Russian Orthodox Church, through the Belarusian Orthodox Church's canonical ties to the Moscow Patriarchate, is another important tool.

Pro-Russian GONGOs have a similar mandate but mainly attract ultranationalist fringes. Violent culture and sports clubs organized by Russian Cossacks have been successful in Belarus over the past years, despite the historical absence of Cossack groups in the country. "Military-patriotic" clubs have been multiplying[32] in an attempt to promote "Russkiy Mir" values through sport and paramilitary activities. These groups only exert a marginal influence over Belarusian society and are closely monitored by Minsk authorities.

All of this helps shape a Russia-focused identity, culture, and worldview. Yet identity and language are crucial points of discord. Belarusian authorities have been facilitating the spread of the "soft Belarusianization" movement, originating from civil society, to promote Belarusian language, symbols, and identity.[33]

This also explains why anti-Russian sentiment has been slowly rising since Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, and why a majority of Belarusian youth

are now looking toward Europe and not Russia for their future.[34] Furthermore, the share of ethnic Russians in Belarus has been decreasing since the 1990s, leaving the Kremlin with a smaller potential "fifth column" of compatriots to reach out to.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Western influence in the Belarusian information space is severely constrained by Russia's grip. A wider policy and donor-based approach is necessary in the West in order to support independent media, strengthen media quality, and increase media awareness about Russian propaganda.[35]

The economic and energy sectors

Belarus is economically subordinate to Russia, which trades economic subsidies for loyalty and stability.[36] Russia's strategy has always been to control, rather than integrate, while exploiting Belarusian comparative advantages. The Russian leadership unhesitatingly uses economic influence in the energy, agricultural, and industrial sectors.

Russia is Belarus' main trade partner, representing about 50% of total foreign trade and 56% of total imports.[37] Since Belarus has only limited external growth outlets, it mostly trades with Russia or under the aegis of the Eurasian Economic Union, where Moscow dictates customs tariffs. Russia is also the main creditor of Belarus, with some 45% of the country's foreign lending[38] as well as its largest source of foreign direct investment.[39] It is interesting to note that since 2015, Belarus has transformed into a hub for the reexport to Russia of European and Western products covered by Kremlin counter-sanctions.[40]

Belarus' energy dependence is a critical vulnerability. Moscow supplies discounted oil and gas to Belarus, and can, therefore, easily suspend supplies and bargain for energy prices.[41] Belarus receives crude oil from Russia with discounted customs duties, refines it, and exports it to other trade partners at market price. This scheme allows Belarus to sustain its economy.[42] In 2018, Lukashenka tried to bargain for additional discounts; the Kremlin responded by cutting oil deliveries, which severely damaged the national oil industry,[43] and used a "tax maneuver" to reduce the discount on export duties.[44]

Case Study: Russian moves to privatize Belarusian 'crown jewels'

During the September 14 meeting between Putin and Lukashenka, Russia announced it would "offer" Minsk a $1.5 billion loan in order to repay earlier loans. This followed the announcement that Moscow would refinance Belarus' $1 billion debt.[45]

It is suspected that the Kremlin bargained over controlling shares of long-sought state-owned "crown jewels," including the potash fertilizer producer Belaruskali, Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ), the Minsk Tractor Wheel Plant (MZKT), and several oil refineries. A similar move occurred in 2011 when the Russian energy giant Gazprom acquired controlling shares in Belarus' energy sector.[46]

Using Lukashenka's weak position now would be an opportunity for Russian oligarchs to prepare the ground for future privatizations.[47] Powerful Russian banks such as Sberbank are ideally positioned to start "raiding" such assets.[48]

In January 2020, Russia imposed and quickly removed a new oil embargo after failed negotiations over export duties.[49]

Belarus is also highly dependent on Russian gas, not least because it imports virtually all its gas from Russia and has no viable alternative supplies. In 2011, Gazprom took over the Belarusian gas pipeline operator Beltransgaz. Despite repeated claims that as a member of the Union State it should be entitled to buy Russian gas at domestic prices, Belarus has never succeeded in this.[50] This in turn leaves Minsk with few incentives for further economic integration with Russia under such conditions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While Western economic sanctions are a useful tool against the Lukashenka regime,[51] putting too much pressure on the current leadership would only benefit Russia. Squeezing the country economically would also antagonize the protest movement. Any economic sanctions should, therefore, target the regime, not the citizens.

They should also target Russia's cost-benefit calculations concerning potential takeovers. This could entail sanctions, or the threat of sanctions, in the nuclear industry (with regards to the construction of the Astravets nuclear power plant) and the military industry (toward Russian entities seeking to absorb Belarusian companies). The United States should push back against any attempts by Russia to force the privatization of coveted Belarusian state-owned enterprises.

Russia's security and military clout

Belarus is partly integrated in Russia's military and security orbit, but has not been completely absorbed. It is bound to Russia's security architecture through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), as well as through the Union State. Talks about military cooperation continue.[52] So too do military exercises. In September, Belarus participated

Case Study: The Astravets nuclear power plant

After decades of discussions, Russia and Belarus in 2011 finally agreed on the construction of two nuclear reactors at the Astravets nuclear power plant, on the Lithuanian border, located some 30 miles from Vilnius. The first reactor is supposed to go online by the end of the year, and nuclear fuel was loaded over the summer.[53]

Beyond the publicity stunt for Russia's largest electricity producer, Rosatom, which is in charge of the (deeply flawed) construction,[54] the Astravets project does not make commercial sense for Belarus, which already produces enough electricity, and would not need the extra 40% generated by the two new units. The Baltic states and Poland are boycotting the plant, which Lithuania calls a national security threat.[55]

It is unclear what Belarus will do with the excess electricity — unless Russia buys it at discount price. Claims that the reactors will allow Belarus to reduce its imports of Russian gas by a quarter ignore the fact that it would replace one dependence with another. According to the contract, Belarus can only buy nuclear fuel from Russia. The projects make sense, however, from Russia's perspective. Construction of the Astravets units is supported by a $10 billion Russian state loan.[56]

Putin and Lukashenko meet in Sochi, 14 September 2020. *Credit*: President of Belarus.

in the Russian strategic exercise Kavkaz-2020 and hosted the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 joint military drills.[57] Bilateral military exercises are likely to increase in the coming months, not least to keep the Minsk authorities under control.

The Union State of Russia and Belarus includes several aspects of bilateral military cooperation, and notably the presence of two Russian military bases on the territory of Belarus. These are the 43rd Communication Center of the Russian Navy at Vileyka, in charge of sending secure very low frequency communication to Russian naval forces, and the Volga-type early-warning radar station in Hantsavichy, in charge of tracking the launches of intercontinental ballistic missiles from the North Atlantic. Stationing permanent combat units is precluded by the Belarusian Constitution. The 1995 leasing agreement is up for renewal in 2020. Its renegotiation will probably lead to intense political discussions in the coming weeks — and is likely part of Russia's calculations regarding Lukashenka's future as well as potential discussions around the establishment of a permanent Russian military air base. This has always been a major point of bilateral discord, but increased leverage over Lukashenka could be an opportunity to prepare the ground for new negotiations.

Both countries form the Regional Group of Forces, a joint military formation.[58] In 2016, Russia and Belarus started operating the Joint Air Defence System (JADS), an integrated anti-aircraft system. The creation of the JADS is understood as compensation for Minsk refusing to host a permanent Russian military base,[59] and especially given that Belarus' air defense capabilities already exclusively rely on Russia. Finally, Belarusian armed forces still heavily depend on Russian (and Soviet) military hardware as well as procurement from Russia's military industry — a dependency welcomed by Russia.[60]

Cooperation between Russian and Belarusian security and military services is an important part of the equation. In Belarus' armed forces, there seems to be a generational split between older, Soviet-trained officers and the younger generation, who would be more distant from Russia's military mindset and critical of the aggression against Ukraine. Efforts have also been made in Belarus to limit ties with Russian military academies and exchange programs.

Among security services, the Belarusian KGB (BKGB) works closely with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the SVR.[61] Relations between the BKGB and the FSB deteriorated in the 2000s, which led the SVR to step in as an alternative player. The depth of Russian linkages inside the BKGB and fears of internal disloyalty pushed Lukashenka to carry out purges in the 2000s.[62] These purges intensified in the mid-2010s in the upper echelons of the internal security apparatus and many "pro-Russian elements" were removed.

Despite extensive penetration in Belarusian force structures, Russia does not have eyes and ears everywhere. The Kremlin is now seeking to rebuild its influence and connections inside the Belarusian security sector, not least to ensure the recreation of a solid cohort of loyal agents ahead of a post-Lukashenka era.

Even though the survival of his regime now hinges almost entirely on the loyalty of the security apparatus, Lukashenka was forced to carry out a major reshuffle in the security sector in early September. Ivan Tertel replaced longtime head of the BKGB, Valery Vakulchik, who was appointed state secretary of the Security Council.[63] The move was reportedly done under pressure from Moscow since Vakulchik was considered less prone to the Kremlin's influence and Tertel more accommodating.[64]

Case Study: 'Little green men' in Belarus?

Putin's pledge in mid-August to send "special units" of the Russian National Guard to help maintain order in the streets of Belarus if the protest movement turned violent[65] was interpreted as code for a potential military intervention across the border from Kaliningrad.[66] Ukrainian intelligence also picked up the signal that proxy forces in Donbas were recruiting "volunteers" for Belarus,[67] although this remains unsubstantiated. But Putin is not planning a Crimea-style intervention, at least not now. Highly symbolically, right after the September 14 Putin-Lukashenka meeting, Russian National Guard on standby at the Belarusian border were withdrawn and sent back to their bases.[68]

Ahead of the presidential election, Lukashenka announced the arrest of Russian Wagner Group mercenaries in Belarus for purportedly attempting to undermine the election.[69] This was merely a publicity stunt aimed at playing an anti-Russia card ahead of the election and scaring the opposition. Nevertheless, this increased the rift between the security services of both countries.[70]

If violence flares in Belarus, there is a risk that Russia might intervene on "humanitarian" grounds by sending disguised law enforcement forces,[71] claiming the need to "protect" the protesters, but in truth to effect the transition of power.

Another long-suspected pathway of potential Russian military intervention in Belarus is through the infamous Suwalki Gap. Stretching between Polish and Lithuanian territories, this corridor is technically the shortest distance from mainland Russia to Kaliningrad through Belarusian territory.[72] Creating a land corridor with Kaliningrad would de facto mean invading Belarus in order to transit through it, launching a conventional attack against Poland and Lithuania to reach the Suwalki Gap, and potential parallel operations against Estonia and Latvia to interdict access and keep NATO at bay.[73]

Such an operation would place NATO in a difficult position as it would potentially cut off the Baltic states from Alliance reinforcements by land[74] as well as force NATO troops inside a highly contested environment.[75] This daunting challenge cannot be completely discarded but does not seem realistic under the current circumstances.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Russian military activity around Belarus is cause for concern. It does not mean, however, that the Kremlin will conduct military operations there. As troop movements and military drills continuously occur in the Russian Western Military District[76] as well as with Belarus, closer attention should be paid to Russian military preparedness in the region, not least to prevent the risk of miscalculation and tactical errors between Russia and NATO and its allies in the region.

Conclusion

Benefiting from many well-identified drivers of influence and control over Belarus, Russia now seems poised to keep a weakened Lukashenka in place, at least until he no longer serves his new purpose of allowing the Kremlin to (re) position Russian networks and prepare for an eventual managed transition of power. Russia seeks to ensure that whatever comes next, the future Belarusian leadership will still think in terms of geopolitical loyalty toward its "big brother."

Tolerable outcomes for the Kremlin range from an "Abkhazia on steroids"[77] model with managed foreign policy but free internal political life, to an Armenian model with constitutional changes accommodating Russia,[78] or a "democratic Moldova"[79] variant with Russia's grip over internal affairs. Whatever the option, the "disguised absorption"[80] of Belarus into Russia's orbit is still underway.

Belarus also represents a testing ground for Putin and the Kremlin elite ahead of the 2024 presidential elections, if not a potentially dangerous harbinger of things to come.

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Center for European Policy Analysis
1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20004
info@cepa.org | www.cepa.org