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Cover: Belarus opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya attends a demonstration to reject the presidential election results in Belarus, in Berlin, Germany, October 5, 2020. Credit: REUTERS/Hannibal Hanschke.

Executive Summary

- Belarus has reached a political impasse. Following the rigged August 9 presidential election and unprecedented violence against peaceful protesters, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has ruled the country for the past 26 years, has lost legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the West. He continues, however, to retain power through a high degree of repression and the loyalty of his security services.

- Why this matters. Belarus is a key ally of Russia. If, as a result of the unrest, it were to fall under the Kremlin’s control, this would transform the military balance in Europe. The 80-kilometer Suwałki Corridor on the Polish-Lithuanian front is vulnerable to attack from Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. If closed, it would cut off the Baltic states from the European Union (EU) and NATO. Instability in Belarus could spill over into the Nordic-Baltic region through refugees and economic disruption, and it could also affect other parts of Central Europe. Already, the crisis is proving to be a test of Western engagement, unity, and values.

- The revolution is “velvet” not “color.” Geopolitics barely features in the Belarusian opposition’s peaceful resistance against Lukashenka’s regime. Instead, civic consciousness is growing, marking an end to the passivity and disengagement that have largely characterized Belarusian society since independence in 1991. Besides the protests, which have at times included hundreds of thousands of participants, neighborhood groups and other forms of self-organization are mushrooming. This is a profound and probably irreversible change with long-term consequences. The paternalistic model underpinning the Lukashenka regime is outdated and unsustainable.
The ineffectiveness and divided opposition of previous years has given way to a new group of opposition leaders who are finding ways to coexist and build a flexible strategy to oust Lukashenka. These new politicians are, however, political ingénues. They need time, resources, and expertise to be able to translate their demands into effective political action.

Lukashenka’s regime is crumbling in places but has the potential to keep going for the short or medium term. Pervasive state control, both within public institutions and society, makes it difficult to bring it down speedily. For the most part, the ruling elite have not yet realized that Lukashenka’s policies are doomed and will ultimately ruin the country. Lukashenka is trying to engage in a phony dialogue by co-opting and dividing the opposition but has neither the willingness nor the capacity to negotiate seriously.

Russia is backing Lukashenka as it finds him the best guarantor of its interests in Belarus at the moment. Yet, the Kremlin is trying to increase Belarus’ dependency on Russia through a number of tactics. It also fears the domestic spillover effects of the Belarusian revolution and wants to reassert its “sphere of influence” to the West.

The West should prepare for a lengthy and painful transition in Belarus. It should continue exerting pressure on the regimes in Minsk and Moscow to recognize the Belarusian people as a political actor and to listen to their demands. It should increase the costs to Russia of its meddling. The West should invest in helping civil society build resilient democratic institutions to enable the political change that society desires. It should also build direct connections with Belarusians and involve them in its networks and institutions. This will keep the West faithful to its own principles and values and enhance its soft power abroad.

Introduction
Belarus, a strategically located country of 9.5 million people on the eastern border of the European Union, has long been considered a stagnant, authoritarian backwater and Russian client state. Protests against the rigged presidential election on August 9, 2020, demonstrate that behind the superficial stability of Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime, Belarusian society has been changing. Further radical change in the medium term is now likely, affecting not only Belarus but the wider region and East-West relations. What would this change look like?

Belarus is undergoing a pro-democracy velvet revolution of the type that swept across Central Europe in the late 1980s. The whole of Belarusian society has risen to fight for its rights and values against Lukashenka’s authoritarian policies. Belarus’ uprising is not a color revolution, like in Georgia (2003) or Ukraine (2004-5 and 2014), as it is not characterized by strong pro-Western or anti-Kremlin sentiments. As in the revolts against communist rule in 1989, the Belarusian opposition is not represented in any state structures, which suggests that Belarusians’ struggle for freedom may be long and agonizing.

Lukashenka’s authoritarian regime is personal and monolithic but hopes of its fragility in the face of public protests have been dashed. Lukashenka relies on the loyalty of the security services and a vast state apparatus, including judges and other public servants whom the government appoints. He is also backed by Russia, which fears the spillover effects of Belarus’ popular uprising. A successful democratic transition in Russia’s most important ally would set an inspiring example for the Russian opposition — and spell serious
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problems for the similarly stagnant and outdated regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The EU and the United States have little direct leverage over Belarus. Furthermore, Western engagement with the opposition could be used by Russia as a pretext to undermine Belarus’ sovereignty.

(Re)birth of the Nation

Belarusian society is undergoing a wide social transformation. It is outgrowing the paternalistic relationship that Lukashenka has imposed on it for years, whereby the government provided acceptable living standards and in exchange people stayed away from politics. Now, Belarusians want a government of their own choosing that is accountable to them. They want to be recognized as an equal partner by the state and have a say in the governance of their country. This desire runs across all the social strata.1

The social contract started to erode more than a decade ago as Russia began to reduce its energy subsidies while the reform-shy government in Minsk failed to modernize the economy. As a result, Belarus’ economy has stagnated while corruption and malpractice have grown. Lukashenka’s authoritarian, reform-blocking rule, enforced by repression and police violence, sparked public anger during the 2010 presidential elections, and — more recently than that — in 2017, when a wave of protests against taxing the unemployed rippled through several Belarusian cities.
Ahead of the August 9 presidential election, opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's campaign rallies drew unprecedented numbers across the country. The public's main complaints related to the absence of the rule of law, administrative mismanagement, the boorishness of Lukashenka and public officials and their disregard for people's views, and old-fashioned Soviet-era ideas on how to run an economy.

Recent polls also suggest a profound transformation in the public's views on the role of the state since the mid-2000s. For example, the number of respondents who share the principles of a market economy grew twofold since 2008 and reached 40% in 2018 (compared with 25% in favor of a planning economy and 25% undecided). Similarly, only 20% of respondents in 2018 preferred a job at a state-owned company while 40% preferred a state-guaranteed salary, compared with 60% in both cases in 2008. As Oksana Shelest, a sociologist, rightly put it: “People had been ready for much more in their personal development or the development of their business than the state had been allowing them. ... Sooner or later people had been arriving at the conclusion that the state in its current form was not doing anything useful, and that was prompting their desire for change.”

The protests that followed the August 9 election have been unprecedented in size and their geographical spread as well as in the ages and professions of the protesters. They spread across the whole of the country, including to small villages. Factory workers and doctors, businesspeople and sportspeople, students and pensioners are all marching together in protest against the lawlessness unleashed by the regime. At the core of their protest is the demand for dignity and respect for individual rights, namely being able to choose one's own government and to express opinions publicly without fear of violence and repression.

The driving force behind these protests are the generations that came of age during the 26 years of Lukashenka's rule — people in their 40s and younger. An opinion poll suggests that Tsikhanouskaya's core group of supporters are people in their 30s and 40s (and some between the ages of 18 and 29).

The opening of the borders following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the growth of the Internet pulled these younger generations into cultural and information globalization. Independent and social media have also grown over the past decade, breaking the information monopoly of state-owned media that strengthened the regime's grip. The promise of stability, highly welcome to the traumatized Soviet-era population, is no longer as compelling. People want a new, exciting vision of the future, in which they can play an active role. This aspiration will likely become stronger as the share of younger generations, further distanced from their country's Soviet past and more exposed to and attracted by neighboring Europe, grows larger.

The protesters have shown unprecedented levels of organization. The foundation of such organization was laid earlier in the year during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a strong volunteer movement emerged to help medical workers and save lives after the regime had downplayed the severity of the health crisis and failed to adequately prepare the health sector. The added value was new horizontal ties between people and the acquired skill of self-help. This process reached new heights during the August 9 presidential campaign and has manifested itself vividly in the solidarity and self-organization trends that have been visible in recent months. Examples include women's movements, students' groups, strike committees, various professional associations (such as Sportspeople for Honest Elections, Medical Workers against Violence, and University Teachers for Freedom of Expression), and widespread local community activism.
People get together in their neighborhoods to exchange news and discuss politics — experts lecture on a variety of sociopolitical and historical subjects, such as democratic reforms in Belarus before Lukashenka’s election as president in 1994.

In mid-September, Belarusians had raised more than $6 million to support the victims of repression and police brutality as well as those who were dismissed or decided to resign in disagreement over the regime’s policies. Solidarity has also been demonstrated in protests at universities, secondary schools, factories, and private companies.

These initiatives are grassroots, creative, and disciplined. They undermine the viability of the regime and lay down the social and cultural foundations for future concerted public action. This is building democracy bottom-up. Civil society is developing in leaps and bounds. There is a growing interest among Belarusians to learn how politics works and how they can influence decision-making. The emerging activism is trying to find legal ways to push its agenda. Its scale is large enough to resist suppression, even when taking into account the high level of repression that is traumatizing the nation. Surveys show that people are increasingly taking to the street because they are angry about state-sponsored violence and repression. Anger has replaced fear and protesters are willing to stay out in the streets for longer periods of time. This is fundamentally different from the public apathy that resulted from suppressed protests in the past.

These initiatives are, therefore, likely to continue to manifest themselves in the evolving political process and may become institutionalized. Society will continue to make its voice heard and seek to be the agent of its own fate. Such changes in Belarusian society appear irrevocable, as public anger at the stolen election and continued violence on the part of the state goes beyond politics and draws on strong cultural traditions of peaceable interaction and respect for human life. Belarusians qualify their protest as supporting the values of humanity. Society is uniting against state oppression and getting stronger in its unity. In short: this is the delayed (re)birth of a civic nation.

The Rise of the New Opposition

A new generation of more involved citizens is matched by a new generation of political leaders, quite unlike the marginalized, divided, and discredited traditional opposition, which was rooted in the nationalist dissident movement of the 1980s and 1990s. The traditional opposition, such as, for example, the Belarusian Popular Front and its offspring parties, stressed cultural, historical, and linguistic issues over economic problems, often with an explicit (and, to many, alienating) anti-Russia tone. More moderate, centrist, or left-wing opposition got caught up in criticizing Lukashenka and failed to promote an alternative political vision to win over voters. Since 2006, the opposition, penetrated by the regime and with some leading figures in exile, was unable to unite to mount an effective front against Lukashenka.

The new opposition includes professionals with diverse backgrounds and skills, which they have brought to politics. Viktar Babaryka, the jailed former banker, and his team are managers, lawyers, and public relations specialists who were behind Tsikhanouskaya’s election campaign, which rallied previously unrepresented strata of society. Valer Tsapkala and Paval Latushka are former government officials. Maria Kalesnikava is a musician and a cultural manager, while Vadzim Prakopieu is a restaurateur. These people better reflect the breadth of society, are less focused on ideology, and are united by the common goal of removing Lukashenka’s anachronistic regime. New political figures continue to appear as repression pushes existing ones
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into jail or exile. The wide spread of social media is also playing a crucial role in helping opposition leaders overcome their physical absence from Belarus, which might have proven a great weakness just a few years ago. There is the danger, however, that leaders in exile have fewer practical links to society and may eventually be perceived as being out of touch.

Tsikhanouskaya, the likely winner of the August 9 election, is providing the opposition moral leadership and inspiration, recognized both domestically and abroad. She has come a long way, from running in the election hoping to help her husband (jailed vlogger and political prisoner Syarhey Tsikhanouski) to becoming a real politician, influencing the political agenda in Belarus and meeting leading international figures (for example, she has met French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel). Tsikhanouskaya has formed a team of advisers whose goal is to work with the Coordination Council — an umbrella civil society organization that emerged after the August 9 election — to produce policy proposals for a new vision of Belarus and coordinate civil society initiatives aimed at eroding the foundations of the regime and building democratic institutions in Belarus.

Two months after the election, Latushka, a senior-government-minister-turned-opposition-leader, set up a new opposition body, Public Anti-Crisis Management. Its self-proclaimed goal is “ensuring the objectives of a dialogue and stability during the transit of power to democratic forces.” One of the tasks of the body is to mount international pressure on the regime. It seeks to do this by, for example, gathering evidence of the laundering of Lukashenka’s money overseas. Although the opposition has so far managed to avoid a clash of personalities by focusing on the common goal of removing Lukashenka, there are now too many competing bodies vying for influence and distracting from practical action.

Social media is also playing a crucial role in helping opposition leaders overcome their physical absence from Belarus

The new opposition also lacks real political experience and a longer-term strategic vision to overcome Lukashenka. Its current strategy focuses on the short term — to persuade the regime to hold a new presidential election. The opposition seeks to achieve this goal by putting pressure on the regime domestically and abroad, and hoping that an economic downturn will accelerate the process. Such political naivety is the consequence of Lukashenka’s personalized regime that eviscerated public institutions, for example, political parties or citizens’ lobbying groups. Lukashenka communicates directly with people, bypassing other political actors and reducing the parliament and government to instruments for rubber stamping and implementing his orders, rather than for legislating and managing. As a result, neither politicians nor civic groups ever learned the skills of political maneuvering and vying for real power. These political skills will inevitably be learned as the process unfolds further, but the pace of this learning may determine the duration of the current stalemate as well as its outcome.

The opposition also needs a strategy to splinter the ruling elite as well as the security services and the military. This will be decisive in ousting Lukashenka. The challenge for the opposition will also be maintaining a broad ideological front that unites people behind a common goal while engaging new political figures. Lastly, Tsikhanouskaya, the Coordination Council, and the Public Anti-Crisis Management body will need to retain society’s trust to keep it mobilized. They need to be more transparent in their work and find effective mechanisms for public debate and wider
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People gather to mourn the death of Belarusian anti-government protester Roman Bondarenko, who was allegedly beaten by the country’s security forces in Minsk, outside the Belarusian embassy in Kyiv, Ukraine November 13, 2020. A placard displays images depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Credit: REUTERS/Valentyn Ogirenko.

Social engagement with their programs. Tsikhanouskaya’s support is over 50%,9 while the Coordination Council had a 96% approval among more than 500,00010 Belarusians polled in September. At the same time, it is not clear to the public what precise tasks and activities the Coordination Council is undertaking.11

The Old Regime

Support for Lukashenka has steadily declined over the past decade. According to the last survey by a mainstream independent pollster, the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, in 2016,12 Lukashenka had a 29.5% electoral rating.13 In April, a poll by a state-run National Academy of Sciences put his approval rating in Minsk at 24%.14

According to the only nationwide study available to date, Lukashenka fails to receive strong support in any single social group, and his approval rating before the August 9 election was between 13% and 18%.15

Lukashenka lost legitimacy both from his defeat at the ballot box and the immoral, brutal behavior of his security forces. He relies on the loyalty of the “siloviki,” or security forces; the pervasive state apparatus, running from the Presidential Administration all the way down to the village level; as well as on the appointees of this state apparatus, such as top managers at state companies and public institutions, judges, and others. Total support from these quarters, beefed up by potential backing from some of the elderly population, mostly those living in
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the countryside, could not be more than 20% to 25%.16 Yet, both the rent from access to state resources and a certain complacency about the post-election terror is keeping top officials loyal. Support from middle and lower-level functionaries is ambiguous. Former government officials and journalists say in private that civil servants feel demotivated by the current political crisis and muddle through with their duties.

Despite some defections,17 there may be still many more reasons why most officials are not shifting their loyalty just yet. On the one hand, there is a lack of understanding that Lukashenka’s policies will ultimately do the country harm. These officials fail to comprehend the irrevocable processes that have taken hold in society and expect that the protests will be suppressed by repression and the jailing of activists. Large numbers of officials do not see themselves responsible for the election fraud and the atrocities committed by the regime. On the other hand, there are the material and status perks that officials gain from their position, for example, high and stable salaries or free housing and discounted mortgages. While for some, these are more important than moral considerations, others fear that they may not be able to secure an equally good job if the regime were to fall. Some officials might not support Lukashenka’s policies but want to reap the material benefits while they can. They believe that the time to jump off the regime’s ship has not yet come.

Many officials do not see Tsikhanouskaya and the opposition as a viable alternative. They would prefer a strong leader with a managerial background, a clear plan of action, and guarantees of their status under a new government. Without these factors, they believe, chaos might follow after Lukashenka’s departure.18 Some of the ruling elite hope that Russia will install a palatable successor to Lukashenka, who will retain their functions and status.19 Some hope that the regime will gradually start modernizing itself and that they may be at the forefront when this time comes. There are also those who believe the propaganda that the protests are instigated by the West.20

The security services — whose numbers are considered to be much higher than the EU average21 — enjoy similar perks attached to their jobs and some are complacent about the post-election crimes. Their thinking is manipulated by state propaganda and many likely lack the education to make an independent informed analysis. Similarly, managers at public institutions and state-owned companies, judges and some of budgetary employees feel compelled to fulfill the regime’s orders for fear of losing their jobs. The state exercises control over them through a system of short-term contracts, salary reductions, and increasingly politically motivated prosecution. Network pressure, as well as the opposition’s ability to establish contact with the moderate elements within the regime, the security services, and the military will be a decisive factor in the erosion of the state system.

Lukashenka is a ruthless dictator. It is not in his nature to make compromises. He has repeatedly vowed to defend his power until the bitter end. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to bring him to a genuine dialogue. That is why the regime’s main strategy is to repress, demoralize, and exhaust protesters as well as make them feel outnumbered and ineffective. Journalists are arrested for reporting on the demonstrations, doctors for speaking up against violence, lawyers for defending the rights of the victims, sportspeople for calling for fair rules, and members of the emergency services for saving demonstrators who jump into lakes to escape riot police. Lukashenka has appointed several top “siloviki” officials as inspectors to Minsk and the Brest and Hrodna regions, which have been most active in protesting.22 This is another step toward bringing Belarus closer to a military dictatorship, following the appointment
of the “siloviki” to top positions in the government and Presidential Administration earlier this year.\textsuperscript{23}

Yet, as protests have continued unabated, the regime is thinking of a more complex strategy to eschew reform. To win time and shift the focus away from the stolen election, Lukashenka is going through the motions of initiating constitutional reform, which he has been promising since 2018, lately under pressure from the Kremlin.\textsuperscript{24} This is, however, a sham. The process lacks transparency and does not involve consultation with wide civil society or the real opposition. The regime’s strategy is to engage pro-government NGOs, parties, and experts while co-opting and dividing the opposition to impose the approval of its constitutional reform.

The proposed amendments and the timeframe for their adoption remain unknown. The leaked draft, however, suggests further infringements on citizens’ rights, such as a ban on public organizations to “interfere into state affairs” and on individuals with a criminal record to hold state posts, as well as the ability of the state to restrict the right to strike.\textsuperscript{25} Lukashenka may try to endorse the amendments at the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly (a quasi-Soviet gathering of public officials and handpicked loyal representatives of society, which has been endorsing Lukashenka’s five-year policy plans) planned to be held next year. It is also possible Lukashenka may try to constitutionalize this organ, becoming the chair of its presidium, thereby solving the transition question while retaining the reins of power.\textsuperscript{26}

**Russia’s interests**

Russia is pursuing its own interests in Belarus by backing Lukashenka. Although Lukashenka is an enfant terrible for the Kremlin, with his constant attempts to play both sides in the broader geopolitics of Russia and the West, he is at the same time Belarus’ most pro-Russian politician. It is in Moscow’s interest to keep him in power and more dependent on Russian support. The Kremlin views the protesters as pro-Western. This paranoid and conspiracy-inspired thinking fails to accept that the revolution is a genuinely bottom-up affair. The Kremlin does not recognize Tsikhanouskaya as a legitimate player (Russia has put her on a “wanted” list) as it cannot accept a leader chosen by the people rather than by the nomenklatura behind closed doors. It fears that the Belarusian revolution may spill over into Russia.

Russia is putting pressure on Lukashenka to carry out constitutional reform that would devolve some of his powers to other state organs or introduce a party-based political system. In both cases, it would be easier for the Kremlin to exert influence on dispersed decision-making centers than on an unpredictable Lukashenka, with all the power in his hands. It is far from certain, however, that Russia will succeed in its effort. Lukashenka is a skillful manipulator and has managed to escape Russian pressure in the past. For years, Belarus has been receiving discounted energy from Russia as a partner in the Union State, a dormant and largely artificial confederation that has failed to advance due to Lukashenka’s unwillingness despite his many pledges to the contrary. Similarly, Lukashenka has refused to recognize Russian control over Crimea, or independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, despite substantial Kremlin pressure. Yet, lack of public support at home and severed ties with the West have diminished his room for maneuver. In the meantime, the Kremlin is looking for a
pliable successor. Belarusian officials might welcome a Kremlin-nominated successor if that person would guarantee their positions.

Plan B for the Kremlin would be to weaken Lukashenka’s regime politically and economically in order to de facto manage it from Moscow. This would give Russia a chance to flex its muscles to the West by turning Belarus into a “festerling wound” on the EU’s periphery, akin to Transnistria or the Donbas. Russia openly started its hybrid intervention in Belarus immediately after the August 9 election, when it deployed squadrons of disinformation and PR specialists to Belarus, while also threatening a direct intervention under the guise of reinstalling law and order. Top officials of Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) were spotted several times in Minsk, where they met the Belarusian leadership.

If the Kremlin continues to deny the recognition of the will of the Belarusian people, it may stir up an anti-Russia sentiment in Belarus, with potential long-term costs. For example, moving Belarus toward deeper integration with Russia in the Union State would likely increase the protests. In Belarus, public support for a geopolitical orientation toward Russia had already dipped nearly twofold over the course of less than three years — to 32% in June. On the other hand, support for closer relations with the EU had gone up by 10% to 29%. This trend has likely intensified since August 9.

Although direct military intervention by Russia in Belarus cannot be completely ruled out, it would be the least likely option for the Kremlin to pursue. Such a move would entail large financial, security-military, and reputational costs. It would be taken highly negatively both inside Belarus (less than 4% of Belarusians supported accession to Russia in June) and inside Russia (where such support was 13% in August), and might hurt Putin’s fragile ratings.

The Economy Matters

The economy will influence the protest dynamic, and it can also be exploited by Russia. A downturn might intensify the protests, leading to a national strike and a split in the elite, or even push Lukashenka into dialogue, but it might also make workers more cautious and mindful of protecting their income. For example, following Tsikhanouskaya’s call for a national strike on October 26, workers from only several large state-owned companies organized protests at their workplace. The government has much leverage over employees at state-owned companies and public institutions, such as through a short-term contract system, a ban in the labor legislation that prohibits strikes with political demands, and intimidation by the “siloviki.”

Belarus’ economy is in a dire state. It is experiencing severe structural, financial, monetary, and fiscal difficulties, which are bound to worsen as the political crisis deepens. Traditional weaknesses associated with the failure to carry out market reforms, such as large finance-draining state-owned enterprises (SOEs), obstructions to private business development, low productivity, energy dependency on Russia, and trade and fiscal imbalances, are compounded by the losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the crackdown on civil society. The economic forecast before the August 9 election was a slump of 4% to 6%. The regime is incapable of remedying the situation as the “siloviki” are in charge of the economy.

The risk of fiscal and financial crises is growing. In mid-September, the rating agency Standard and Poor’s changed the outlook for Belarus’ long-term credit rating from stable to negative. The country’s gross reserves were depleted in August by $1.4 billion after Belarusians rushed to withdraw their deposits from the banks and buy foreign currency following the post-election crackdown.
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This left the disposable share of reserves at a $2.9-billion low. The banking sector is experiencing serious liquidity shortages, exacerbated by a large number of nonperforming loans owed by the SOEs (15% of the total banks’ liabilities). The Belarusian ruble has depreciated by around 30% since the beginning of the year and the current account deficit has widened to $1.1 billion.40

Belarus has a rapidly growing foreign debt, largely denominated in hard currency, which further exacerbates pressure on the national currency. The publicly guaranteed external debt increased by nearly $1 billion from January to July and reached $17.8 billion on August 1.41 Over the next five years, Belarus has to pay back around $3 billion annually.42 For the small Belarusian economy, this is a significant challenge for which it will require external financing. International financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have not given Belarus any large loans since 2016 due to its failure to carry out the agreed reform agenda. Russia has not been generous over the last several years either.43 Belarus’ only remaining option was borrowing on international markets. Although it raised $1.25 billion via a Eurobond placement in June, at a high 6% interest rate, the election crackdown has now pushed the yield up to 10%, which no longer makes Eurobonds a viable option.

Financial support from Russia will be crucial for the Lukashenka regime’s survival. Putin had promised $1.5 billion during the September 14 meeting with Lukashenka in Sochi, but this money is unlikely to reach Belarus. It will likely be used to refinance Belarus’ foreign debt to Russia (two-thirds of Belarus’ total foreign public debt is owed to Russia) and pay its liability to the Russian energy giant.
Gazprom (more than $330 million). In exchange for continued financial assistance, Russia is likely to demand control of Belarus’ SOEs that are of strategic importance to Russia, such as Belaruskali, one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of potash fertilizer, the Naftan oil refinery, the Beltopgaz consumer gas distribution network, the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant, and other heavy truck and military production companies (some of which are important suppliers to the Russian army).

Belarus’ budgetary deficit may reach $2.1 billion by the end of the year. Apart from being hit by a decline in trade and a consumption slump as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Belarus is also losing significant revenue it received from refining Russian crude. For example, between January and June, it exported 42.6% less oil products than in 2019. Before the pandemic hit oil demand, Belarus’ losses from Russia phasing out discounts on its crude supplies to Belarus (as a result of domestic tax reform) were estimated to reach $9 billion by 2024. Labor migration, capital flight, decreased foreign investment, and a further productivity slump resulting from the deepening political crisis in Belarus may cause government losses between $2.5 billion and $5 billion. As of October 1, 2,000 IT specialists from a once-thriving industry that accounts for 5% of Belarusian exports, had left for Ukraine. Twelve IT companies had reportedly decided to move to Latvia and 85 to Lithuania.

What the West Can Do and How It Should Prepare

At the time of writing, the most likely scenario in Belarus is a long-term erosion of the regime through mounting social pressure. The absence of meaningful democratic structures and a system of pervasive state control, both within the public institutions and society at large, may suggest a lengthy and excruciating transition with more repression in the short term. A dialogue with Lukashenka’s highly personalized regime is unlikely, either in the short or in the long run, although a significant economic decline or the Kremlin’s tight squeeze might spur it to adopt a slightly more flexible position. The declining economy, repression, and the lack of prospects for the immediate future may push a significant proportion of the younger population to emigrate. Yet, it is clear that the changes that have taken hold in Belarusian society cannot be reversed. Society will continue to manifest its demands in one form or another until it achieves them.

The US, the EU and the UK should consider what Belarus means for its principles and values, as well as for regional security, and devise its strategy accordingly. It should retain a long-term perspective, bracing for potentially long-standing uncertainty and political instability in Belarus.

The response from the West should be three-pronged: pressure, solidarity, and support.

- The West should maintain pressure on the regime in Minsk and its backers in the Kremlin to stop repression against society and start a national dialogue. It should also make it more costly for the Kremlin to continue its hybrid intervention in Belarus. The West should, however, try and engage the middle and lower levels of the regime with a view to undermining it.

- The West should show solidarity and increase its engagement with the people of Belarus. Not recognizing Lukashenka’s legitimacy while receiving Tsikhanouskaya at the top international level is a good step. As pro-Western attitudes in Belarus are likely to grow, the West should use its
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The West should support the fledging civil society in Belarus through both immediate help to fight state repression and continuous financial assistance and expertise in building resilient democratic structures and political institutions.

- Offering funds for a Marshall Plan-type instrument ($3 billion to $5 billion) to help a new democratic government rebuild the Belarusian economy could encourage the elite to defect from the regime.

The West should consider the following concrete steps in the areas outlined above:

- Follow the example set by Belarus’ Baltic neighbors by adopting targeted, comprehensive, Magnitsky Act-type sanctions on those responsible for electoral fraud, post-election violence, and ongoing political repression in Belarus. The list should include not just top officials, but also members of the electoral authorities at all levels, riot police and other Interior Ministry troops dispersing peaceful demonstrations, investigators from the KGB and the Investigative Committee, as well as prosecutors responsible for arbitrary arrests and judges handling down politically motivated sentences. Sanctions on their family members should also be considered as often the children of these individuals study or work abroad, and such sanctions may serve as an effective deterrent. But if the West plumps for limited targeted sanctions it could do more harm than good as Belarusian authorities tend to retaliate to the detriment of the Belarusian people — consider, for example, the demand to cut back the number of staff at the embassies of two EU member states (Lithuania and Poland) in Minsk, which imperils the issuance of Schengen visas to Belarusians.

- Both Belarus and Russia should be warned that further sanctions would follow if the regime in Minsk continues to engage in violence and political repression. The costs of the Kremlin’s hybrid — or potentially direct — intervention should be increased. Stronger sanctions could, for example, target companies owned by oligarchs close to the regimes in Minsk or Moscow. They could also limit Belarus’, and further restrict Russia’s, borrowing on international markets — a measure that might be felt strongly, bearing in mind the current deficits in the countries’ budgets.

- Solidarity could be expressed in letters and short videos from professional associations, political parties, individual politicians, and businesses containing condemnation of the authorities’ actions and expressing support for the people of Belarus. Professional organizations could also carry out training and other pro bono educational activities to share information and boost the knowledge, skills, and morale of Belarusian counterparts in this difficult time.

- The West should freeze financial aid to state institutions. These funds should instead be redirected to civil society to offer financial assistance and rehabilitation to victims of repression and political persecution. Overall, financial assistance to nonstate actors should be significantly increased. For years, Belarus had been overlooked by international donors due to the lack of prospects to embark on reforms. This must change. Belarusian society has demonstrated that it is ready to be an agent of its own fate. But it needs help and expertise in building resilient democratic institutions, which will lay the groundwork for future political change. As the West
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Deals with new civil society actors, it should find untraditional ways to channel such support. Solidarity funds that Belarusians have set up to raise financial support, as well as student exchange programs and international trade union and political party networks, may prove effective.

• Other important programs to consider should support the access of citizens to information and debates on the current and future situation, as well as to counter Russian disinformation and state propaganda. Examples could include supporting independent media and social media channels, such as Telegram, which have become an important political voice and source of information for millions of Belarusians. Organizing cultural events in neighboring EU countries, through which Belarusians could learn about European historical and political heritage and get more involved with European networks, would also be helpful.

Conclusion

Belarus is undergoing a deep political crisis. It faces a prolonged period of uncertainty. Lukashenka’s regime has the potential to maintain control in the short run. However, in the long run it will be unable to suppress the wide-ranging social transformations that have taken hold. Civil society will continue to self-organize and demand to be the agent of its own fate. The autocratic state system that has held a tight grip on Belarus for the past 26 years has started to crumble. It will take time and considerable effort for the nascent civil society to build effective political institutions that can erode the regime and reflect the will of the people.

The West must come out strongly in support of Belarusian society. By doing so, it would not only stay faithful to its own values and principles but also help the people of Belarus build the kind of future that would benefit it — a future that would help strengthen peace and prosperity in Europe.
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Endnotes

1 Sociologist Oksana Shelest, who has been conducting interviews with anti-government protesters, says “protests and the movement for change have spread across all societal layers. [Protesters] are from different generations and different social strata — they are people working both in the state and private sector... Teachers, medical workers, IT specialists, actors, sportspeople...” In RFI. “Голос улиц’: социология белорусского протеста.” 19 октября. 2020https://www.rfi.fr/ru/%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B0/20201019-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%81-%D1%83%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%86-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%B0 ب нельзя.” In RFI. “The voice of the street’: the sociology of the Belarusian protests.”


3 RFI. “Голос улиц’: социология белорусского протеста.” 19 октября. https://www.rfi.fr/ru/%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B0/20201019-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%81-%D1%83%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%86-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%B0 ب нельзя.” In RFI. “The voice of the street’: the sociology of the Belarusian protests.”


6 Belsat TV. “‘Люди готовы выходить целый год.’ Андрей Вардоматский рассказал, что произойдет с протестом с наступлением холодов.” 1 ноября 2020. https://belsat.eu/ru/news/lyudi-gotovy-vyhodit-tselyj-god-andrej-vardomatskij-rasskazal-chto-proizojdet-s-protestom-s-nastupleniem-holodov/?fbclid=IwAR0R6n4m5itoIyLV1-OMBHM1s4ZMLDp_thkDB84jEJepR48jYxh42P69GQs. [Belsat TV. “‘People are ready to protest for the whole year.’ Andrey Vardomatsky says what will happen to protests when the cold weather arrives.” Belsat TV November 1, 2020.]

7 Although some of Tsikhanouskaya’s advisers have been drawn from the old opposition, their experience of dealing with the regime may prove helpful.


11 Based on the author’s private conversations with Belarusians in September and October.

12 The Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies closed down in 2016 following a crackdown on its surveyors by the state.
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Author’s own calculations, based on the following data: 300,000 (the approximate number of police and security forces, including internal troops and the army), 150,000 (the approximate number of civil servants, multiplied by two to account for spouses), 600,000 (the elderly population living in the countryside, who can be partially considered Lukashenka’s core electorate as per the survey quoted above), and 6.5 million voters.


22 On October 29, Lukashenka appointed former State Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus Valer Vakulchyk, former Interior Minister Yury Karayeu, and his deputy, Alyaksandr Barsukou, as inspectors to the Brest and Hrodna regions and to Minsk, respectively.

23 In January, Lukashenka appointed former KGB head Siarhey Serhiyenka as the head of the Presidential Administration. This was followed by the appointment of Raman Halouchanka, the former head of the military industry and former KGB and State Security Council member, asprime minister.


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28 For example, RT specialists came to Minsk to replace those members of the Belarusian National State TV and Radio Company who quit their jobs in protest against the partial and distorted coverage of the election and post-election protests.


30 Наша Ніва. “Вардомацый утверждает, что число сторонников союза с Россией за год обвалилось с 60% до 40%.” 5 февраля 2020. https://m.nashaniva.by/ru/articles/245616/. [Nasha Niva. “Vardomatsky argues that the number of supporters of a union with Russia has dropped from 60% to 40%.” Nasha Niva February 5, 2020.]


32 Ibid.

33 Наша Ніва. “Вардомацый утверждает, что число сторонников союза с Россией за год обвалилось с 60% до 40%.” 5 февраля 2020. https://m.nashaniva.by/ru/articles/245616/. [Nasha Niva. “Vardomatsky argues that the number of supporters of a union with Russia has dropped from 60% to 40%.” Nasha Niva February 5, 2020.]


39 Ibid.


43 Loans from China have been tied to Chinese investment projects in Belarus. The only Chinese credit that is not tied so such projects — $500 million — was granted in December 2019.
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47 Роменский, Владимир. “‘Отдавать пока есть чем, тем же Беларускалием.’ Как Лукашенко будет расплачиваться с Путним за помощь России.” TV Dozhd. 14 сентября 2020. https://tvrain.ru/teleshow/vechernee_shou/kredit-516025/. [Romensky, Vladimir. “There is yet something that the debt can be repaid with, for example, Belaruskali. How Lukashenko will pay to Putin for help.” TV Dozhd. September 14, 2020.]


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