

Kremlin pressures Lukashenko to give up power in Belarus

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After almost four months of mass protests against his rule, Alexander Lukashenko, who claims to have won the August 9 presidential elections, indicated last Friday that he will step down early next year once the country adopts a new constitution.

The statement, which was quoted by Belarusian state media, was vague, however. Lukashenko said, “I am not making a new constitution for myself. With a new constitution, I will no longer work with you as president.” He then raged against “democracy” which, in his words, had earlier led to the ruin and collapse of the country.

On Sunday, the Belarusian police again violently cracked down on opposition protests and arrested at least 300 people. Maria Kolesnikova, one of the main opposition leaders who is jailed in Belarus, stated that the opposition would not enter into dialogue with Lukashenko until opposition leaders have been freed.

The statements by Lukashenko followed on the heels of a visit by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov to Minsk on Thursday in which he stressed the need for Minsk to make constitutional changes.

Lavrov pointed to the “hostile attitude” of the West—NATO and the EU—toward both Russia and Belarus and stated, “we are, of course, interested in a stable and calm situation in Belarus. In our view, a constitutional reform initiated by the leadership of the country would contribute to such a situation.” Lavrov described rumors that Moscow is in negotiations with the opposition as “lies.”

Media reports earlier suggested that Russia is working on the release of the ex-CEO of Belgprombank, a Belarusian subsidiary of the Russian state gas company Gazprom, Viktor Babariko, who has also been a leader of the opposition.

Russian media reported that Lukashenko and Putin

struck a deal in Sochi back in September. While the details of the agreement are unclear, it reportedly involves constitutional changes that limit the powers of the president, and the basis for a transition of power in Minsk. The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that political experts interpret Lukashenko’s latest statement as an attempt to “fool” the Kremlin yet again as to his intentions about actually fulfilling the agreement.

The EU has also been stepping up pressure on Lukashenko. Yet a new round of sanctions targeting officials of his government went into effect last week. According to Russian press reports, further sanctions might target not just Belarusian but also Russian officials and businesses.

Russia has been backing the Lukashenko regime amid the protests, largely in response to the aggressive intervention of the EU in the conflict and its support for the opposition.

However, relations between the Kremlin and the Lukashenko regime have been tense, both before and after the protests. Throughout his rule, Lukashenko has sought to balance between the EU and US, and Russia. In the year leading up to the August election, his government undertook significant steps toward closer relations with NATO, and Minsk welcomed US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last January, the first such visit of a high-ranking US official to the country in decades. Lukashenko has also maintained closed ties to the Ukrainian governments that followed the US- and German-backed coup in Kiev in 2014. Along with the EU, the Zelensky government turned on Lukashenko, however, over the protests.

Belarus is the last state on Russia’s western borders that is not directly integrated into NATO or the EU. The fact that the Kremlin is now stepping up pressure on Lukashenko is bound up with both geo-strategic and

domestic considerations.

Not least among them are the US elections and the announcement by president-elect Joseph Biden of his national security team. His appointees are an assembly of war criminals who were active in the Obama administration which orchestrated, among other things, the 2014 coup in Ukraine which triggered an ongoing civil war in the East of the country, as well as the almost decade-old civil war in Syria.

Unlike other foreign leaders, Putin has not congratulated Biden on his clear electoral victory. In a November 22 interview, Putin pointedly referred to Biden as a “presidential candidate.” He said, “We’ll work with anyone trusted by the American people. But who in particular is given this trust should be indicated either through the political custom of one side conceding the other’s victory, or the final election results should be released in a legitimate and legal manner. The president-elect should be named, the incumbent president should recognize the results of the election, and all legal actions should be completed.”

The refusal by the Kremlin to acknowledge Biden as the president-elect has less to do with sympathies for Trump, who, contrary to what the anti-Russia campaign by the Democratic Party has suggested, has in fact, stepped up the sanctions regime against Russia and delivered lethal weapons to Ukraine. Rather, there is enormous nervousness in the Kremlin about the political instability in the US itself, and fear of the consequences of both a potential coup by Trump, which would likely be preceded by a war against Iran, and a Biden presidency. The past few weeks have seen a series of major provocations by the US and Israel against Iran, most recently the assassination of Iran’s top nuclear scientist.

A war against Iran would directly threaten Russian interests in the Middle East, while a Biden presidency is expected to further ratchet up tensions in Russia and also increase direct US support for forces such as the Belarusian opposition.

Under these conditions of growing geopolitical uncertainty and tension, the Kremlin is trying to push for a resolution of the crisis in Belarus as rapidly as possible so as to avoid both a more direct conflict with the US, and secure a transition to a government that would allow it to maintain at least some influence over the country.

At the same time, the Kremlin is concerned about the ongoing social instability on its borders.

Just like the EU, the Russian oligarchy was initially above all concerned with the mass strikes that erupted in August and September against Lukashenko. These strikes also hit factories delivering manufacturing goods to Russian companies, including arms companies. While the strike movement was temporarily brought under control through a combination of violent repression by the regime and above all the political intervention of the opposition and affiliated trade unions, class tensions remain high.

Having lost all confidence in the ability of Lukashenko to control the mass protests, even through violent repression, the Russian oligarchy is fearing that a prolongation of his rule in the face of mass opposition threatens to provoke a strike movement that could well outstrip that of August-September, and spread to Russia and other countries.

The second wave of the coronavirus has hit Belarus hard. The Lukashenko government has pursued a policy of herd immunity from the very beginning of the pandemic. Now, the country of just under 9.5 million people has officially over 135,000 cases, no doubt a vast undercount of the real numbers as testing remains extremely limited. Over 37,000 of these occurred over the past month, and over 11,000 were added last week. The economic crisis is even more severe. As real wages continue to decline, the government is discussing raising the prices for several staple items, including bread, meat, dairy produce and sugar. In several regions, public transportation fares have already been raised.



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