

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

---

## **Belarus: New Arena for Russia-West Discord**

*By Christopher Cheang*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The opposition to Belarussian President Lukashenko's electoral victory on 9 August 2020 over allegations of fraud, has introduced another destabilising element into Russia's already tense relations with the EU and the West. Yet, his political future as well as his country's will depend more on Russian than Western actions.*

### **COMMENTARY**

THE UNEXPECTEDLY large and spontaneous domestic opposition to President Alexander Lukashenko's electoral victory over allegations of fraud, initially led some observers to prematurely conclude that his days are numbered.

The European Union and the United States have questioned the conduct of the election, labelling it as not fair or free, while Russia and China congratulated President Lukashenko. He has been in power since 1994. The EU has threatened to introduce sanctions on the country's officials whom it holds responsible for the conduct of the election. President Vladimir Putin predictably warned EU leaders against foreign interference and pressure on Belarus, in a number of telephone calls with them.

### **Struggle for Post-Soviet Space**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has expressed concern about the EU's motives in questioning the election's outcome. In an interview with state TV, Rossia 24, Lavrov was quoted as saying:

"What is happening in Belarus is a struggle for the post-Soviet space, which began after the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and the latest example of which were the events

in Ukraine.” He added that “the statements from the Western capitals show their interests lie behind the election”.

While President Putin is said not to be particularly enamoured of Lukashenko, Russia has compelling reasons not to upset the political apple-cart in Belarus. Moreover, Russia itself is cognisant that its actions will be decisive in shaping his and Belarus’ political future.

### **Russia’s Keen Interest in Belarus**

Russia’s keen interest is driven by its stakes in Belarus, which was a Soviet republic.

First, both enjoy close relations in the Union Treaty, Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The Union Treaty, concluded in 1999, commits both countries to integration. However, the process has been delayed all these years due to Lukashenko’s cunctatory tactics.

Evidently, they were meant to extract as many economic concessions from Russia (mainly energy subsidies); they were also a manifestation of his fear of becoming a vassal of Russia and losing his political status. Russia has become tired of his moves; his recent pre-election arrest of alleged Russian mercenaries has only made him more unpopular with members of the Russian elite.

Yet Belarus’ strategic position between the EU/NATO states and Russia means that Moscow has had little choice but to support President Lukashenko. Moreover, the CSTO and EAEU are key elements of Russia’s security and economic policies in the former Soviet states and Belarus’ role in it cannot be dispensed with.

Third, Russia cannot afford to lose its current high level of influence over Belarus in its current geopolitical struggle with the West over Ukraine. Were Belarus to follow the route of Ukraine or Georgia, Russia’s strategic position and prestige as a great power in Europe and in the former Soviet space would be dealt a huge blow.

### **Domestic Considerations**

Fourth, Russia’s leaders must ensure that their own domestic opponents do not take a leaf from or become inspired by the Belarussian opposition to Lukashenko. The last few weeks, Putin has had to face demonstrations in Khabarovsk and other cities in that Russian Far Eastern region over Moscow’s decision to remove its popular governor and charge him with criminal acts.

Thus far, the Belarussian opposition and its leaders have assured Russia that their movement is not directed at Moscow but only at Lukashenko.

This gesture not only assuages Russia but is also a reflection of the Belarussian opposition’s realistic assessment that Moscow will not look askance at any anti-Russian and/or pro-EU/Western political movement which has a chance at removing Lukashenko from power.

### **Russia’s Options**

President Lukashenko is determined to hang on to power. He has activated the military and placed it on alert on the country's borders with Poland and Lithuania, claiming that NATO was interfering in his country's affairs. By using this strategy of alleged foreign interference, he is warning the opposition that the military might be used against it, if further pressure on him to step down, does not cease.

Speculation therefore of a possible Russian military intervention is baseless, for now. The Belarussian military appears to be ready to play this role; Belarus Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin has stressed to demonstrators that "if peace and order were violated," they would "have to deal not with the police but with the army".

However, if the military were to desert Lukashenko should demonstrations continue unabated, and it loses control over its troops, Russia might consider military intervention, but only reluctantly.

Putin is aware that military intervention would alienate the Belarussian people, and worsen Moscow's already tense relationship with the West. The recent apparent poisoning of Russian political opponent, Alexei Navalny, who was hastily sent to Germany for treatment, has become another complication in Russia's relationship with the West. Navalny has been a thorn in the side of the Russian establishment.

Ultimately, whoever is in charge in Belarus needs continued massive Russian economic support to run the country. Western aid on the same scale cannot be reckoned with, given the COVID-19 pandemic's severe damage on the EU and US economies.

Moreover, the EU is already Ukraine's largest donor; under these circumstances, it is questionable whether the EU would be able to summon the political will to garner the required economic resources for a post-Lukashenko Belarus. Russia can therefore afford to play a waiting game.

---

*Christopher Cheang is a Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore where his focus is on Russia and Eurasia.*

---