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BELARUS WITHOUT LUKASHENKO

HOW IT BECAME A REALISTIC SCENARIO

Alexander Lukashenko's "victory" in the election cannot bridge the gap between the president and the modern part of Belarusian society. Turbulent times may lie ahead for Belarus. This will require the West to revise its current approach and invest more in supporting forces that want reforms and the country's Europeanization.

Six months ago, yet another presidential term for Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power in Belarus for 26 years, appeared to be a done deal. Internally, everything seemed under control. Political opposition had been marginalized and grossly weakened due to its chronic inability to unite. Economic protests that shook the country in 2017 had been quashed. The governing elite had been consolidated and showed no sign of potential dissent.

The West was expected to give its blessing to the incumbent's victory. Both the EU and the US, for geopolitical reasons, had invested so much in the reset of relations with Minsk that re-imposing sanctions had been

ruled out in practice. "Serious concerns" about electoral irregularities were to be duly expressed, but could be totally ignored by the regime.

In turn, for Moscow, Lukashenko, while not an ideal partner, was still a safe bet as well. As long as he stayed in power in the country, Belarus would not go the way of Ukraine, either in terms of building democracy within or in terms of establishing a trust-based partnership with the West. The lack of economic reforms, taken for granted under Lukashenko, were expected to keep Belarus critically dependent on Russian subsidies, cheap energy and markets.

But as the campaign unfolded, it became clear that the calculus

was not working. People with no prior political experience, like banker Viktor Babaryko or blogger Sergei Tikhanovskiy and later his wife Svetlana, gained hundreds of thousands of supporters across the country, giving their signatures in favour of the nomination of candidates and gathering for huge rallies. The 2020 election has turned out to be the most challenging for Lukashenko, and this requires some explaining.

The fundamental reason is the widening gap between a modernizing, educated and increasingly open Belarusian society and the leader, who professes archaic views and values and rejects the very concept of change; who continues governing

through personally loyal, but not necessarily efficient administrators and security officers, and who cannot guarantee a decent level of welfare.

Lukashenko's attitude to the Covid-19 pandemic was the trigger for the protest movement. The president's stubborn refusal to recognize the danger, to introduce quarantine and to help people and enterprises in economic need, let alone the insulting victim-blaming which laced his pronouncements, ran against Belarusian cultural conventions and turned even his traditional supporters against him.

Lukashenko's campaign as such was a chain of mistakes, which again may show that he is out of sync with the nation and that his instincts are finally failing him. One major blunder was the underestimation of the potential of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who became his main opponent. As far as Lukashenko was concerned, she and other leading female figures of her campaign were just "girls" and, as such, apparently not worth much attention.

Another big mistake was a fixation on the perceived Russian interference, which culminated in the arrest of Russian fighters in Belarus. The problem is that for a significant part of the Belarusian

electorate and, arguably, for the majority of Lukashenko's voters, this was unconvincing as they generally do not regard Russia as a threat. The notion of the Russian-Belarusian brotherhood has been impressed upon them for decades and they believe that the annexation of Crimea was provoked by Ukraine itself. In turn, many of those Belarusians who do see Russia as a security problem do not think that Lukashenko, with his lack of respect for the Belarusian language and the country's historical symbols, is a solution. He has done too little to persuade the electorate to the contrary.

Where arguments fail, falsifications and repressions are used. As a consequence, several strong candidates were put in jail and one had to flee the country. The 2020 election in Belarus has blatantly been neither fair nor free. Peaceful protests could not withstand the pressure of the well-trained security machinery.

Still, Lukashenko's victory in 2020 gives him only temporary relief. The Belarusian leader is now politically much weaker than before. Nothing he promises has credibility and he will be wary of inflicting massive repressions because this will only serve to provoke a more widespread negative reaction among the people. The gap between society and

president will deepen, and sooner or later the protests will prevail, as was the case in Ukraine and Armenia. In other words, the scenario of a Belarus without Lukashenko has become a reality.

But this may also signify turbulent times ahead for both Belarus and the West. The latter, which, like Lukashenko, has come to appreciate Belarusian "stability", should be prepared to meet the challenge. The West should draw lessons from its mistakes in Ukraine, where it did not anticipate the coming crisis and where, amid the Revolution of Dignity, EU mediators were negotiating the extension of Viktor Yanukovich's stay in power, which was unacceptable to the people. It would already be worth concentrating less on endless and pointless "dialogues" with the regime, and helping instead to build the resilience of those forces in Belarusian society that want change, reforms, and national development, and that envisage Belarus's future as a modern European country.

Unlike during the campaign of 2010, the Belarusian protesters no longer wave EU flags, which means that for them Europe is no longer a source of hope. This is as regrettable as it is logical in view of recent Western policies towards Belarus – policies that should clearly change./