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BELARUS'S CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

LUKASHENKO HAS NO REASON FOR TRIUMPH

Alexander Lukashenko has secured victory in the constitutional referendum that was held to strengthen his power positions. However, repressions undermine his authority internally, while the international context is quickly becoming very challenging in both Western and Russian directions.

The referendum on a new constitution held in Belarus on 27 February brought no surprises. Alexander Lukashenko, the country's ruler since 1994, has now received a legal possibility to assume one more position in the rearranged power vertical of Belarus. If he so chooses, Lukashenko will now become the head of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, a quasi-parliamentary structure which will be placed above the impotent national parliament.

Citing the official results of the referendum would make no sense. They cannot be verified as there was no independent monitoring of the voting. Furthermore, unprecedented repressions have been implemented. At the moment, Belarus

is holding more than 1,000 political prisoners, which is five times more than the Soviet Union was holding when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power.

Repressions, along with the elimination of all media expressing alternative viewpoints, made any opposition strategy futile. During the referendum campaign, the opposition was looking for the least worst option and proposed invalidating the ballots by ticking both "Yes" and "No" boxes simultaneously. This could, however, signal moral disapproval at best, and is not an effective political tool.

Lukashenko set the stage so that, domestically, he was going to win in any case. He explicitly admitted that

if amendments were not adopted, he would be happy to continue his rule in accordance with the old constitution. But apparently, he also had another goal – namely, to demonstrate to the Kremlin, which in autumn 2020 suggested the constitutional reform as a way out of Belarus's political crisis, that this would not be the way for Moscow to increase its influence in the country's politics.

Consequently, no pro-Russian political forces have been allowed registration in Belarus since the 2020 revolution. A leading Russian newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, was banned in the country in September 2021, immediately after it published a story that the regime did not like.

A crucial domestic implication of the referendum is that it removes the last remaining hopes for dialogue between the regime and the opposition. Western politicians who until now have preserved illusions that such a dialogue was possible, or “forthcoming”, should finally face the harsh reality. Moreover, even Moscow would not be able to help with this, irrespective of whether it wanted to do so. It is no accident that Lukashenko said in November 2021 that he would only talk to the opposition after Vladimir Putin started talking to Alexei Navalny. Minsk seems ready to negotiate the release of individual political prisoners, but the price for that may turn out to be too high for the West.

All tactical victories notwithstanding, Lukashenko can hardly feel reassured, however, let alone triumphant. Strategically, the situation around him is changing for the worse and difficult times are coming, which can be seen in three different ways.

First, the West is finally adopting a Belarus policy, which is one of pressure, not appeasement. Western actors have finally come to realize that Lukashenko is not an independent player balancing between

the West and Russia, but rather Putin’s vassal. The direct involvement of the Belarusian military in an invasion of Ukraine would be a clear red line in this regard. Even without that, the use of the Belarusian territory by Russian troops for launching the aggression has sufficed to trigger a Western response. Economic sanctions are tightening, while the outcome of the refugee crisis on the EU borders with Belarus showed that the West is developing an appetite for tough and uncompromising responses.

Meanwhile, and second, Moscow’s assertiveness is growing as well. Russian subsidies have been kept to the bare minimum and, apparently, from now on extras will only be paid for real concessions, not for mere words. The verbal recognition of Russia’s annexation of Crimea may be noted with satisfaction, but not financially rewarded. The necessary legal procedures in Belarus have not been completed, while Lukashenko, despite his promise, has not visited the peninsula. For these reasons, Kyiv still finds it appropriate to keep its ambassador in Minsk. The same applies to the possible recognition by Lukashenko of the breakaway entities in Donbas.

A major “real thing” could be Russian military bases in Belarus, which, incidentally, the new constitution allows. This perspective can hardly be reassuring for Lukashenko.

Finally, but most importantly, the referendum does nothing to restore Lukashenko’s legitimacy in the eyes of those Belarusians who consider his stay in power illegal. For them, the new constitution is a meaningless document which can be declared null and void when circumstances change. The January 2022 events in Kazakhstan convincingly demonstrated how quickly a leader (in this case former President Nursultan Nazarbayev) can lose all legal protection when a popular uprising or a new constellation of forces within the elites dictates.

All in all, Lukashenko has little reason – and little time – to enjoy his victory. Repressions have their price in undermining his authority internally, the economic situation may soon become more challenging, while the international context does not promise any relief either. The odds that the aging autocrat will be capable of running in the presidential election in 2025, and extending his stay in power, do not seem to be in his favour. /