

THE BELARUSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE KREMLIN

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Moscow is increasingly alone in eastern Europe. A revolution is underway in Belarus and the legitimacy of Russian hegemony is crumbling as its true nature becomes ever clearer: domination disguised as integration.



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Belarus has already changed. The bastion of post-Soviet immobility, the country that seemed allergic to change, has finally awakened. In spite of brutal repression, unprecedented numbers of people have taken to the streets across the country to say enough is enough. The protesters make up a cross-section of society, coming not only from the urban elites but from the factories and the countryside as well. These are not the first manifestations of discontent, but the magnitude and depth is new. In recent years, there have been signs that unease was growing and that, despite its reputation for conformity, Belarusian society wanted change.

But after 26 years of tacit acceptance, nobody expected this reaction to the crude but habitual electoral manipulation. Lukashenka, accustomed to his well-oiled machinery returning him the 80% of the vote everyone knew he preferred, has been slow to react. He just wasn't ready for it. Neither was the opposition, which has found itself having to improvise in order to lead and channel a mass movement of this magnitude. The limit of the people's resistance is a key question now. It is hard to imagine what the opposition can do to withstand the blanketing repression and intimidation Lukashenka is spreading. Gun in hand, he has made it very clear that he will accept neither dialogue nor new elections – the only concrete item on the opposition programme and the only peaceful, democratic way out of the current impasse.

The Kremlin was caught on the hop too. Used to looking down on Belarusians with the superiority complex that characterises its dealings with all its former Soviet neighbours, Russia initially adopted a surprisingly low profile. Several Russian media outlets, including those closest to the Kremlin, at first expressed sympathy towards the protesters and criticised Lukashenka rather than going for the demonstrators' jugular and calling them fascists and coup plotters as they had with the Ukrainians in Maidan Square. But after a few days similar accusations began to emerge. And although they have no basis in fact, some in Europe and too many

in Spain repeat them, ignorant of their own ignorance but seduced by the mirage. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's supporters and loyal Russian media have made them a mantra.

Moscow has been slow to decide which path to take, except for on Lukashenka, who serves no purpose any more. The journalist Pilar Bonet has compared him to a "broken toy" that, unable to regain control, no longer works and only gets in the way. But while searching for a replacement who will serve its interests – someone able to project the slightest illusion of legitimacy (perhaps even someone from the opposition) – the Kremlin has begun preparing the ground to exert greater pressure on Minsk and, if it becomes necessary, more forceful coercion.

But does Russia need to invade Belarus if it is already inside the country? The Kremlin has subsidised – and thus controlled – the Belarusian economy for years with favourable prices, particularly on energy. It also exerts major influence due to the use of the Russian language, the widespread following of its media and the continuing weight of the Soviet mentality. Moscow is also able to deploy one of its most effective weapons without the need to conceal it: disinformation is being disseminated in the Belarusian public media, which are now run by "Kremlin specialists" and Russian "journalists" that still-President Lukashenka claims to have invited.

Gone are the timid attempts at independence from Russia that Lukashenka deployed after the annexation of Crimea to show his fellow citizens that the country's sovereignty was neither in danger nor up for negotiation. At that time, according to Arseny Sivitsky, director of the Minsk-based Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, which has good relations with the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, "various forms of military, political, economic and even information pressure exerted by the Kremlin on Belarus" were stepped up in order to "force the Belorussian authorities to make strategic concessions that guarantee Russian interests and undermine Belorussian national sovereignty and independence". In that period, a 2016 survey by a sociological institute in Minsk showed the importance of independence to Belarusians: while in 2009, a comfortable 42% supported a union with Russia, at the end of 2014 up to 54% of those surveyed declared themselves to be against it.

For the time being, the European Union has little room for manoeuvre beyond a policy of selective sanctions and providing support to civil society and the opposition through solidarity funds, and so on. Moscow takes for granted that the EU has no say in what might happen inside Belarus. Brussels should not accept that. The mere idea that the EU may help Belarusians achieve the necessary conditions to decide freely for themselves already constitutes interference, according to Russia: but the EU must decide whether to accept the Kremlin's conditions or tarnish the values it is meant to defend – all the more so with a country at the heart of continental Europe. A symbolic but important first step would be to stop calling the country by its Russified name. Not in vain do the media now controlled by Russian "journalists" use the variant linked to Russian rule during the Tsarist and Soviet periods. Belarus is not "White Russia", an appendage of Great Russia, as this name suggests, but the "White Rus" – the Rus being the cradle of the eastern Slavs (Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians). It is time the country was given back the name it adopted upon independence in 1991 and has maintained until now: Belarus.

No revolutionary process – and that is what is taking place in Belarus – is linear and it remains too early to predict which side will prevail in the short run. But the Kremlin’s problem is that it has mounting internal difficulties too: citizen protest movements in Siberia and other territories, imminent regional elections to win and opponents to poison, the bottomless money pits of once glorious conquests (the illegal annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbass) that no longer mobilise the masses around the great leader, all aggravated by a less than buoyant economy. But it also faces a growing external challenge that will not be explained away by playing the wildcard called “the West”. The Kremlin is being left alone in eastern Europe: after Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and now Belarus, the legitimacy of its hegemonic role in the region is crumbling because its true nature – domination disguised as integration – has become increasingly clear. Each one of these national struggles advances the decolonisation that began when the Soviet system collapsed (under its own weight), but which remains far from over.