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Eastern Europe Studies Centre

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**A. LUKASHENKO'S
REGIME AND PUBLIC
RESISTANCE:
SCENARIOS FOR
SHORT-TERM EVENTS
IN BELARUS**

EASTERN EUROPE STUDIES CENTRE

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Summary of the current situation

Mass protests against the governance of Alexander Lukashenko ongoing from 9 August in Belarus, have brought together many people all over the country who are eager for change. Protests take many different forms – from rallies, marches, live human chains on the streets to strikes in companies or publicly announced resignations from service or occupations. The biggest protests took place in Minsk on 16 August and 23 August – according to different calculations, from 100 to 300 thousand people could have participated in them.

In the early days of the protests, Belarusian force structures (first of all, the forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, OMON) tried to suppress the protests by force – protestors or their supporters were injured and massively arrested. Later, the use of direct force was replaced by tactics not to engage in fighting in places of mass gatherings, but to arrest individual organizers of protests and strikes, to prevent the most active participants in the protests from organizing marches or rallies. A massive campaign intended to intimidate Lukashenko's opponents and threaten them with violence, by arresting, prosecuting or threatening of dismissal and other punishments, continued.

The protesters still do not have a clear action coordination center. Sviatlana Cichanouskaya, who went to Lithuania, encouraged the establishment of the Coordinating Council, which consists of representatives of the election staffs of the opposition presidential candidates, well-known people from cultural, educational and business spheres. The Coordinating Council is currently the main political center for protesters, but it lacks practical resources, a clear program of action and its coordination, as well as control over information channels. The spontaneous protests are to this day mostly coordinated on the channels of the "Telegram" platform, where there are the most fol-

lowers and the opposition media channel NEXTA has the greatest influence. The regime's law enforcement authority filed a criminal case against members of the Presidium of the Coordinating Council, accusing them of coup d'état. The members of Coordinating Council and company strike committees are affected by psychological violence and are legally prosecuted.

A. Lukashenko is trying to give a decisive response: organizing rallies for his supporters, meeting with officials from the force structures, and introducing increased operational readiness in the army units. He periodically communicates with V. Putin by telephone, but does not want any contact with EU leaders. He accuses the US and the EU of interfering in Belarus' internal affairs by encouraging and funding protests, even talking about possible military intervention by NATO. Accordingly, he presents himself as a defender of Belarus from external and internal threats.

Russia's role is not yet clearly defined. On the one hand, the Kremlin representatives criticize the protests and the establishment of the Coordinating Council, calls on any foreign country to refrain from the interference, and talks about the need to maintain stability. More signs appeared in recent days that Lukashenko will be supported. On the other hand, considerable criticism towards Lukashenko is noticed in the official media, acknowledging that the elections were not transparent and democratic, and that Lukashenko himself failed to properly assess and manage the situation. It was reported that "information support" specialists may have arrived in Minsk from Moscow, who could replace Belarusian journalists who joined the protesters, or help Lukashenko manage the crisis with hybrid means. It was also mentioned that additional Security Assistance Units (OMON) could be sent to Belarus if needed. However, there are no clear signs of preparations to send official forces or any other "rough force" to Belarus.

Representatives of the US and the EU are trying to be cautious and are talking to Moscow about the crisis in Belarus. Stephen Biegun, US Deputy Secretary of State, visited Vilnius on 24 August, and met with S. Cichanouskaya, later went on a visit to Moscow, where the crisis in Belarus was also to be discussed. Although the EU agreed that sanctions should be

imposed on representatives of Lukashenko regime who contributed to the falsification of election results and violence against protesters, no decisive action has yet been taken, such as refuse to recognize Lukashenko as Belarus' leader or holding the Coordinating Council legitimate representative of society in Belarus.

Key variables

Intensity and extent of protests – one of the most frequently used variables in trying to assess the likelihood of success of an authoritarian regime change/revolution. For example, US researchers E. Chenoweth and K. L. Wallach, summarizing violent and non-violent protests held in 1900–2006, argue that if at least 3.5% of the public begins to protest, there is a very high probability that the ruling regimes will collapse or be forced to enter into negotiations with the protesters. It is difficult to estimate exactly how many people are actively participating in the protests in Belarus, but about 300-500 thousand people (or 3.15-5.2% of the total population of Belarus) could have participated in the mass protests taking place in different cities on 16 August, 23 August and 30 August. However, important factors are not only the number of protesters, but also the forms of protests, the ability to sustain mobilization, the duration of protests and other aspects.

Genesis and functioning of the opposition center. So far, the protests in Belarus have been quite spontaneous, stemming from the general outrage of the people. There was a lack of action coordination between one clear leader and the different political and information centres of the opposition. Although S. Cichanouskaya, having arrived in Vilnius, took re-

sponsibility for being a leader of the resistance, initiated the establishment of the Coordinating Council, it is not yet clear whether these efforts will be enough to create a center of effective political resistance. It is crucial whether there will be opportunities for the resistance center to mobilize information, financial and human resources to ensure the autonomy and security of the resistance center leaders from the regime's repression, and to support other participants in the resistance. However, there are also opposite trends of possible split: on 1 September there were reports that Viktor Babaryka's headquarters intended to establish an independent political party to seek constitutional reforms.

Support of force structures for A. Lukashenko. Very often the survival of authoritarian regimes depends on the loyalty of force structures (army, internal affairs divisions, and security structures) to the dictator or to the entire authoritarian regime system. The shift of units or heads of force structures to protesters' side (or at least disobedience to orders to take violence against protesters) often means a loss of basic power support.

Support of political administration and bureaucracy for A. Lukashenko. The loyalty of the participants of the

political system to the authoritarian leader – one of the most important resources in trying to support the functioning of the system during the crisis. Law enforcement institutions (Public Prosecutor's Office, courts), heads of ministries, city and district self-government institutions, state media, state-owned enterprises, trade unions and the entire bureaucracy play a key role here.

Functioning of economic and financial system. In Belarus, protests spread quite quickly to individual state-owned enterprises, strike committees were set up and various protests began. There are also calls for the public to increase pressure on the public financial system (withdrawing deposits, buying more currency, reducing taxes, etc.) so that it could not finance its force structures. Both direct protests (strikes) and indirect forms of protests can significantly affect the functioning of the state economy and financial system. This in return, would reduce legitimacy of Lukashenko. He would no longer be the leader who can provide economic stability and income for citizens.

Use of force. Exaggerated use of force against protesters and increased levels of violence (on one or both sides) may further escalate the crisis and involve more people in the protests. On the other hand, research shows that nonviolent protests are more likely to force authoritarian regimes to withdraw or accept protesters' demands. According to E. Chenoweth, 53 percent of nonviolent protests led to political change, and only 26 percent of violent protests ended successfully.

Russia's involvement in the crisis. Russia is currently the most important external player in the current situation in Belarus. The Kremlin's decision to strengthen or weaken Lukashenko's position, to use its influence in Belarus' military and security structures, and the options chosen for the information narrative may have a significant impact on the course of events. Western leaders also see Russia as a key player in the Belarusian crisis and tend to respect Russia's interests and coordinate with Putin their decisions.

The results of the survey carried out by EESC of Lithuanian experts show that it is these factors that are

considered to be most likely to have the greatest impact, although their importance may vary.

Internal factors, affecting the political process in Belarus in the near future (during the period of 3–6 months)	Average score
Support of Belarusian force structures for A. Lukashenko	4.7
Prevalence and duration of strikes in state companies	4.0
Support of civil servants, officials (bureaucracy) for A. Lukashenko	3.8
Organizational actions and coordination of actions of protesters	3.7
Extent and duration of street protests	3.7
Repression, arrest and other criminal law measures against protesters	3.5
Difficulties of the country's financial system, problems of securing state obligations	3.5
Spread and extent of the COVID-19 epidemic	2.4

Source: 27/08/2020 – 01/09/2020 online expert survey conducted by EESC

External factors, affecting the political process in Belarus in the near future (during the period of 3–6 months)	Average score
Kremlin's decision to support A. Lukashenko or look for other solutions	4.8
Position and actions of US	2.6
Common position and actions of EU	2.5
Position and actions of Poland	2.5
Position and actions of China	2.4
Position and actions of Lithuania	2.1
Position and actions of other countries of the region (e.g. Ukraine)	1.7

Source: 27/08/2020 – 01/09/2020 online expert survey conducted by EESC

Possible Scenarios

Senario A. Persistence of the regime and enhanced repression

The scale of the protests will gradually decrease, the protesters will begin to experience physical and psychological fatigue and will become increasingly difficult for them to maintain motivation to rally. This motivation will be further suppressed by the means of intensively detaining most active protesters, starting court cases against them, making them redundant as well as using direct or psychological pressure and violence against them. The leaders of society will begin to notice that the ratio between the potential benefits of changing the regime and the potential damage if Lukashenko's government remains is becoming worse, i.e. the potential damage or risk is increasing, while the likelihood of change is decreasing.

The scale of the strikes will remain unchanged or will diminish while the opposition measures in companies will usually be short-lived and will not cause lasting economic discrepancies. The financial system may face some liquidity problems, however, this will not jeopardise the economy as a whole, but rather increase the country's lasting debt to external creditors (in particular Russia, China).

The Coordinating Council will be unable to gain sufficient resources and become a universally recognised, legitimate political institution representing the pro-

testing public. Information sources will remain decentralised and without a certain organisational base.

Lukashenko will manage to maintain the loyalty of force and security structures. He will not recognise the legitimacy of the Coordinating Council and will not respond to the request to negotiate their requirements. He will reject the possibility of amending the Constitution, holding a new presidential election or otherwise changing the current political system. An extensive systematic repression of the the most active protesters and members of the strike committees will take place.

Moscow in all likelihood will be providing combined support to Lukashenko, but, in return, it will demand greater Lukashenko's submission to Kremlin's demands: faster integration of the allied state, the common financial system (and, potentially, common currency), the final integration of troops or even the deployment of Russian troops in Belarus. At the same time, Russia will be able to publicly maintain a rather moderate tone towards Lukashenko and even partially recognise the Belarusian opposition, its right to exist and have its own formations. This will support Moscow's authority over Lukashenko in case the Belarusian dictator decides to bluff and disobey Moscow's demands. Belarus' economy and financial system will become even more dependent on Russian support (in terms of loans, financial relief, mutual trade).

The reaction of the western countries to increasingly more authoritarian Belarus will be inert. Individual sanctions will be imposed, Lukashenko will be politically isolated, but this will only demonstrate how the Belarusian dictator is forced to rely on the Kremlin's support.

However, the newly formed Belarusian society will not forget its grievances. Underground organizations as well as silent resistance groups will be established while disobedience campaigns will periodically be

	Genesis of the opposition centre	Development of the protests	Force structures' support for the regime	Bureaucracy's support for the regime	Economic and financial systems	Use of force	Russia's support for the regime
Scenario A	-	-	+	+	=	-	+

held in various cities. The opposition will be looking for ways of better organisation. The general public will no longer trust Lukashenko and will be looking for new leaders as well as new opportunities to express their resentment.

Scenario B. Long-term resistance and disablement of the regime

Protests on the streets and squares of Minsk and other larger Belarusian cities have reached their peak on 16-23 August. Subsequently, the number of protesters did not increase significantly (although there was no apparent decrease). The rallies themselves cannot force the regime to change unless there is a radical escalation, i.e. no change is possible if there is no massive, violent crackdown on protesters or if protesters do not employ aggression against OMON or other force structures. However, forms of protest can take a strategic form in order to mobilise the public for long-term resistance and disablement of the regime.

A prerequisite for this is the strengthening of the Coordinating Council (or other center of opposition forces) and strategic planning with at least some of the following features: the establishment of a clear political center and its executive institutions or functional units (i.e. the creation of a de facto "shadow" government); consistent and efficient pooling and allocation of resources to resistance participants and activities; creating of opportunities to financially support active protesters and participants in strikes; providing physical protection for key resistance leaders; the possibility of supporting the continuous dissemination of alternative information through channels accessible to the general public; a clear political and action programme that is not too radical in the eyes

of the majority of society; the ability for the regime to accept programme requirements, the expenses for which would be lesser than those of a long-term resistance.

Under this scenario, forms of resistance would escalate into economic and social disruption of the regime, which could include broader scale of strikes (not only in manufacturing, but also in education, social services, business), increasing problems in collecting taxes as well as paying pensions and salaries to civil servants, power structures etc. It would not be possible to neutralize such resistance by force, but the weakening of the regime system could take months before the essential links in the system (e.g. the payment of pensions or wages) begin to rupture.

Russia's intervention (in terms of financial and economic assistance) could be a very important factor in maintaining the regime's survival and A. Lukashenko's credibility in the eyes of his supporters. However, Russia's support may also be limited and restricted in time - if profound resistance develops and continues for a long time, Russia may simply not have the resources to fund A. Lukashenko's regime for a long time. This may lead the Kremlin to consider an option to "reload" the Belarusian system by replacing A. Lukashenko.

A. Lukashenko, seeing the rising costs and the growing risk of economic collapse, may try to negotiate some proposals of the proposition (such as a constitutional amendment and referendum or holding a new election). Balancing between the demands of Russia (in exchange for financial aid) and the opposition could be a major challenge for Lukashenko, and the process itself could take quite some time.

	Genesis of the opposition centre	Development of the protests	Force structures' support for the regime	Bureaucracy's support for the regime	Economic and financial systems	Use of force	Russia's support for the regime
Scenario B	+	+	+	+/-	-	-	+

Scenario C. Sudden escalation and major upheaval

In the first 2-3 weeks after the presidential election in Belarus, there was no major breakthrough, which would mean that Mr Lukashenko lost control of power and would be forced to step down (this could take place in various forms, ranging from voluntary consent in exchange for immunity to physical escape). One of the main reasons for this is the force structures' strong support for the regime and attempts to keep direct violence against protesters to a minimum (i.e. attempts not to shed blood in open rallies, except in isolated cases during the first days of the protests). However, this does not mean that various provocations or unplanned escalations cannot take place, which could abruptly change the status quo (the most significant precedent was the protests in Ukraine in 2013-2014, when two months of peaceful protests were followed by outbreaks of violence on 18-23 February 2014).

Even with protests of a small scale (ranging from a few to several thousand people), there is a risk that firearms will be used against protesters or that the protesters will provoke a violent response. In the event of a bloody escalation or an order to use firearms against peaceful protesters, the attitude of the representatives of power structures towards the protests and the legitimacy of A. Lukashenko and the leaders of power structures may change. In the event of disobedience within the internal affairs or military institutions (such as a public refusal to use violence against protesters, siding with protesters, internal dissemination of scandalous reports from the authorities, etc.), A. Lukashenko could quickly lose his essential support base. Even the withdrawal of one or more units (along with their commanders) from the coercive structure may become an impetus (for

example, during the August 1991 coup of in Moscow, the decision of the tank battalion commander, Major Sergei Yevdokimov, to side with the supporters of the Russian parliament was of the essence).

In the event of a major upheaval and A. Lukashenko's loss of control over power resources, he may be forced to enter into actual negotiations with protesters or seek abrupt ways to withdraw. Another possible alternative is an inadequate assessment of the situation leading to attempts to rely on forces completely loyal to the dictator in an effort to quell the "rebellion" of some power structures or to physically protect A. Lukashenko himself.

However, the likelihood of such a scenario is low. It should be in Russia's interest to prevent events from escalating to a point where Russia can no longer intervene. The ties between Belarusian military and security forces are tight and their dependence on Russian influence is extremely high, making it difficult to expect Belarusian force leaders to be able to make independent crucial decisions without Moscow's knowledge. As long as the Kremlin chooses to maintain Lukashenko's regime, the support of the power structures for the dictator can be expected. This scenario could be difficult to achieve because of the mid level executives' detachment from the dominant line as well.

Additional scenario features

These additional features could intervene in any of the base scenarios and enhance, pause, or change their course.

The Kremlin's choice. Moscow may choose to replace A. Lukashenko if supporting him (also in terms of his reputational expenses) becomes too expensive. A. Lukashenko's removal can be carried out in a number of ways, from persuading him to withdraw himself

	Genesis of the opposition centre	Development of the protests	Force structures' support for the regime	Bureaucracy's support for the regime	Economic and financial systems	Use of force	Russia's support for the regime
Scenario C	-	+	+/-	+/-	=	+	+/-

to a military coup (eg through the use of Russian or Belarusian special forces, through employment of a section of the Belarusian military structures, etc.). In that case, however, Moscow should have a clear plan on how to replace Lukashenko during the transition period and how to create the conditions for a new Belarusian leader to become a pro-Russian leader.

An imitation of reforms. With the country's economic situation deteriorating and the resistance to the regime stifling, Lukashenko can propose various fabricated solutions in response to negotiations, such as launching a constitutional amendment process, initiating a reduction in the president's power, proposing various referendums or even a new election. Perhaps he would even partially agree to meet some of the opposition's demands (e.g., gradually release the arrested protesters). The aim of such proposals would be to lull the protesting society and create the illusion that he is committed to making some changes. However, such proposals are most likely to be intended only to simulate change. It is possible that some formal amendments (such as the Constitution) would be adopted under the pressure from Russia, which would expect clear evidence that Mr Lukashenko is living up to his commitments.

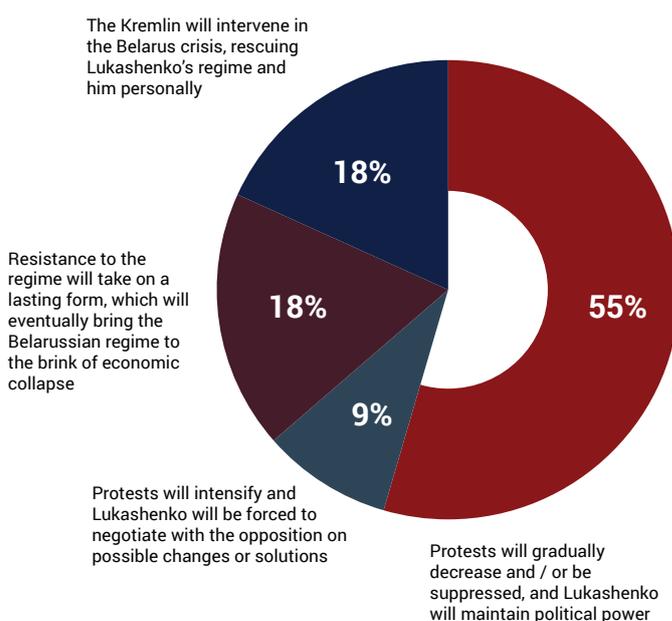
Internal upheaval. If Lukashenko's response to increasing pressure from protesters as well as growing tensions over the country's economic and financial situation and Moscow's demands was completely inadequate, there could be a consensus in his environment (political as well as security structures) that a change in leadership needs to be implemented. A group of revolutionaries from within such structures may act in the interest of self-defense and seek contacts with both members of the opposition and Moscow. However, the likelihood of this sequence of events is very low, as so far A. Lukashenko has managed to neutralize any potential competitors or capable leaders in a timely manner, and the leaders of political or security structures have been directly dependent on and loyal to A. Lukashenko.

The results of a survey conducted with experts on this topic has revealed that Lithuanian experts have

identified the option that "Protests will gradually decrease and / or be suppressed, and Lukashenko will maintain political power" as the most probable scenario. There was much less support from the expert's side for the options that "Resistance to the regime will take on a lasting form, which will eventually bring the Belarussian regime to the brink of economic collapse" and that "The Kremlin will intervene in the Belarus crisis, rescuing Lukashenko's regime and him personally." One expert chose the option that "Protests will intensify and Lukashenko will be forced to negotiate with the opposition on possible changes or solutions" as the most likely scenario.

No expert has chosen the option that "the protests will take a radical form and Lukashenko will be forced to withdraw" or the option that "the Kremlin will intervene in the crisis in Belarus to replace Lukashenko with a leader who is more pro-Russian."

The most likely scenarios for the situation in Belarus, as identified by experts



Source: 27/08/2020 – 01/09/2020 online expert survey conducted by EESC