



Slow Stagnation, Sudden Revolution? Post-Covid-19 Prospects for Political Change in Russia and Belarus

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Covid-19 pandemic and the impending economic crisis may exacerbate instability in Belarus and Russia. To reduce the risks of regional instability and help to prepare for a possible transition of power, the international community should continue its support for democratic initiatives in the region.
- To better understand and predict future political development, close and nuanced knowledge of Russian and Belarusian societies is necessary. Monitoring and academic research should therefore be encouraged.
- In the case of a transition, the international community should demand free and fair elections. It should also issue strong and clear statements against foreign interference and consistently react to any violations of sovereignty.

Since the end of the Cold War, the political climate in Eastern Europe has been volatile. Countries have been hit by waves of public protest, have undergone difficult economic transitions and financial crises, and living standards have fluctuated dramatically. With the EU and NATO gradually expanding into the region, political, economic and cultural influence has gravitated towards the West – to which the Russian leadership has become increasingly opposed. Further, the rivalry between the two economic blocs, the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, has contributed to mounting regional instability. On top of all this, the second Ukrainian revolution in less than a decade sparked Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its military involvement in the Donbas War, adding turbulence to the region and chilling the climate between Russia and the Western powers.

Despite having experienced many of the same economic and societal problems as their neighbouring states, the ruling elites of Russia and Belarus have managed to avoid being notably affected by discontent. Seeing themselves as islands of stability in an unruly ocean of liberal democracy, the vertical and highly centralized forms of governments in both countries have remained intact, and the political leaders, Vladimir Putin and Aliaksandr Lukashenka, have until recently enjoyed high levels of popular support. However, as the Covid-19 situation has shown, and for reasons discussed in this policy brief, Russia and Belarus are not as stable as they might seem on the surface.

Instability in Russia

Today's Russia is faced with three simultaneous crises: economic, social and political.

Most imminent is the economic crisis. With an economy based largely on the export of fossil fuel, Russia is vulnerable to fluctuations in international oil and gas prices. As of 2019, its military budget was the fourth largest in the world. This includes expenses related to military operations in Syria and in Eastern Ukraine, frequent large-scale military exercises and the development of new weaponry. At the same time, Russia is still paying the price for its annexation of Crimea six years ago in terms of punitive sanctions, capital flight and the international isolation of the peninsula – once a popular tourist destination. The leadership remains keen to defend Russia's position as a world power: investing resources in supporting Kremlin-friendly regimes, as in Venezuela; and seeking to improve its international image. Efforts here include massive expenditures on prestigious international sporting events, such as the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi (estimated cost: almost USD 55 billion), and providing medical resources and personnel to Italy for free, when the Covid-19 situation there was at its worst.

Thus, the current pandemic and the recent dispute with Saudi Arabia over oil production came at a particularly bad time for Russia. The two events have created a situation where oil supplies exceed demand by far, drastically reducing Russian revenues. It remains to be seen just how severe the economic crisis of 2020 will become, how long it will last, and whether the Russian National Welfare Fund will manage to keep the economy afloat. Although Russia has managed to weather economic crises in the past, as in 2008 and 2015, the pandemic is expected to create a severe economic downturn – probably even worse than the 2008 global financial crisis.

The economic downturn will seriously affect the mounting social crisis in Russia as well. The country is struggling to reverse long-term tendencies of

population decline and brain drain, aggravated by low wages, crime and corruption – tendencies likely to be exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Already prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, poor social conditions had triggered widespread discontent, as shown by numerous protests – in favour of political reforms, against the higher retirement age, against Internet censorship, and against the creation of numerous polluting open-air landfills. Increasingly, much of the anger has been directed at the president himself.

This latter fact constitutes a particularly delicate problem, as the stability of the political system – the third crisis now facing Russia – is based on Vladimir Putin, whose final term as president is set to expire in 2024. Under Putin, political opposition has been discouraged, while his role as the country's only possible ruler has been cultivated in the media, by religious organizations, even by members of the parliamentary opposition. As the political elite has not identified a successor, there is a real risk of political crisis, should Putin suddenly disappear from the political stage.

Acutely aware of this potential source of instability, the Russian government has initiated a series of amendments to the constitution, which include allowing Putin to extend his presidency to 2036. Since the pandemic reached Russia, however, Putin's image as an effective leader has been tainted. He is increasingly blamed for inadequate responses to the mounting health emergency and for the lack of measures to offset the economic costs for ordinary Russians to deal with the pandemic. According to the polling agency VCIOM, in April 2020 trust in Putin fell to 27% – the lowest since polling began in 2006.

Due to the pandemic, the constitutional referendum has now been postponed until 1 July. Once the referendum is held, it is expected to trigger new mass protests. These are likely to be brutally suppressed – out of concern for the national health – a reaction that would only generate further discontent, thus worsening the social crisis.

Instability in Belarus

Of all the new states that appeared in Eastern Europe in 1991, Belarus has undergone the least significant changes. The main reasons are threefold: The figure of the president and his particular style of political leadership, social stability and Russian economic support.

Although Belarus still struggles with high levels of corruption and economic problems, the combination of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's highly centralized and authoritarian leadership (president since 1994), the country's well-developed health and education sectors, and a minimum of economic growth have



Photo: NTB Scanpix

ensured a stable level of support for the authorities. Together with the absence of viable political alternatives and the mass media's unquestioned backing of the president, this has created a political order reliant on having Lukashenka in charge.

The lack of a broad opposition against the president can also be explained by the relative social stability within Belarus compared to that of other countries in the region. In recent decades, neighbouring countries like Poland and Lithuania have experienced social upheaval and economic hardship to a much greater extent than Belarus, and Lukashenka has increasingly cited the case of Ukraine to show what mass opposition might bring. A stable autocracy at peace, he argues, is better than a democracy at war.

Notably, however, the ability to maintain such a political order is contingent on the continued support of Russia. In the past, Russia has supplied Belarus with heavily subsidised gas and oil (resold by Belarus at a higher price), and has provided monetary support in times of financial crisis, as in 2011. This support comes at a cost, though: gas deliveries and imports from Belarus are used as leverage to maintain Belarus' status as Russia's loyal ally and buffer zone towards the EU.

Now, at the onset of a health and an economic crisis, also Belarus is likely to be faced with growing social, economic and political instability.

Whilst Russia has made belated efforts to contain the

spread of the Covid-19-virus, Belarus has decided simply to ignore it, holding major sporting events and the annual 9 May Victory Day celebrations as scheduled. Further, Lukashenka has declared that the coronavirus is a 'psychosis' – and one of his proposed cures is to go to the countryside and work in the fields. A look at the Belarusian economy may help to explain this refusal to take action against the virus. In 2019, Belarus experienced stagnation in GDP growth: the economy might collapse if a large number of people should stop working. The country must also prepare for the impending global financial crisis, as it will be hard hit by weaker demand for Belarusian goods and the loss of tax revenues from Russian oil and gas transit through Belarusian territory. Following recent disputes with Russia over trade and energy pricing, the Belarusian signalling of a reorientation towards the West and disagreement on how (or whether) to deal with the current pandemic, relations between Minsk and Moscow are at their chilliest since 1991.

In August this year, Lukashenka is up for re-election. In the past, such events have become rallying points for the national extra-parliamentary opposition, spurring thousands to demonstrate in Minsk against the president. Without the continued stable support of Russia, much of Lukashenka's safety net could disappear – and, in the midst of financial crisis, the year 2020 might well challenge the political stability of the Lukashenka regime.

Two scenarios for Russia and Belarus

In the current political environment, there are basically two directions Russian and Belarusian politics might take. First, as long as the countries' political and economic elites are dependent on the current system and the two presidents are there to maintain the status quo, society could gradually stagnate until Putin and Lukashenka retire and a change of power becomes inevitable. Second, an outside factor, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis, might trigger a more sudden transition.

During the waves of anti-Communist revolutions of the 1980s and 1990s, and again during the colour revolutions of the early 2000s, achieving freedom and democracy by peaceful means was a prominent idea in Eastern Europe, and thus obtainable. But, although revolutions have been catalysts for regional democratization in the past, the situation in Russia and Belarus in 2020 is quite different.

In Russia, militarization, international warfare and government propagation of Russia's greatness and geopolitical importance have given rise to several decidedly anti-democratic forces in the country. A political upheaval might result in an even more authoritarian regime. And even if a person like the current leader of the Russian extra-parliamentary opposition, Aleksei Navalnyi, should come to power (however unlikely that may seem), he would have a hard time battling not only the oligarchs, but also

the power ministries that are deeply embedded in the political system. Combined with the high number of ethnic and religious minorities, and the great powers with geopolitical interests in Russia (including the USA, the EU, and China), a sudden and uncontrolled transition of power might rapidly escalate into a military conflict, becoming a source of global instability.

In Belarus, the whole system – from politics and economy to culture and religion, as well as the military and security services – is tightly interwoven with Russia. Moreover, nearly 75% of the population speak Russian as their first language; and Russia places Belarus firmly inside its own sphere of influence. If Lukashenka should be toppled in a popular revolt, Moscow could be expected to exert its influence on the country to ensure that a transition of power would be advantageous to Russian interests. The use of military power in such a scenario is a likely option, which in turn might trigger yet another crisis, to the detriment of regional as well as global stability.

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