



*Europe's last dictatorship is standing on the brink of regained democracy, after six months of protests following the stolen election in August. Europe and the free world have steadily supported the peaceful protests against the dictatorship of Lukashenko. It is time to look beyond the ongoing protests and determine what a free Belarus could be post-Lukashenko.*



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## Introduction

It is an honour for me to introduce this timely report “Belarus post-Lukashenko”, published by the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation. The reason why I was offered this task is probably connected to my background as a Swedish diplomat who lived in Minsk from 2005 to 2012; the last four years serving as Sweden’s Ambassador to Belarus.

My appointment as Ambassador by the Swedish government was originally valid until 2013, but after a unilateral decision by the Belarusian authorities in August 2012, my accreditation was not prolonged, and I had to leave the country. All in all, I spent seven years in Belarus, and I have continued to keep contact with a country that lies close to my heart and where many people have become my close friends.

It would sound convincing to say that I could foresee the developments that we have been witnessing this autumn in Belarus. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As most observers, I did not see the Belarusian popular uprising against falsified elections and authoritarian rule coming.

The reasons why this happened now can only be explained in depth by the Belarusians themselves, but my humble conclusion is that a series of coincidences probably paved the way for the Belarusian popular revolt: exhaustion in society after a one-man rule for 26 years, crucial policy mistakes during the pandemic that led to general distrust in the authorities, mishandling of the elections – including blatant election fraud exposed through clever self-organisation by the Belarusians, and excessive violence against peaceful demonstrators.

To some extent, the fact that the elections took place in late summer helped to mobilise the Belarusians in unprecedented numbers to the streets. It is not a coincidence that the previous presidential elections were always organised during winter, when it is usually very cold in Belarus. This time, the Belarusian constitution hindered the authorities from arranging the elections in winter, and probably the plan was that Belarusian would spend their time harvesting fruits and vegetables at their summer houses or picking berries and mushrooms in the woods and wetlands.

This turned out to be a large miscalculation. The summer of 2020 showed that Belarusians are not different from other nations. Discontent in society reached such a level that hundreds of thousands of people saw no other means of protest than taking to the streets of Minsk and other cities in Belarus. Not even the pandemic could stop the Belarusians from expressing their aspirations for a free and democratic country.

Still, it would be wrong to say that I was totally taken aback by the events before and after the elections of August 2020. During my time in Belarus, I tried to learn as much as possible about the history, the culture, and the language of this fascinating country, situated on the borderland between East and West, but also North and South. As I was speaking Russian already, it did not require too much effort to learn Belarusian, an Eastern Slavic language whose vocabulary is closer to Ukrainian than Russian and which also has several similarities

with Polish. Even if some people initially may have been surprised by my endeavours, in particular since Russian is spoken widely in Belarus, the reactions I received were almost overwhelmingly positive, also from those Belarusians who do not use their native language in daily life themselves.

Among the representatives of the Belarusian culture sphere, where the Belarusian language is predominantly used, it goes without saying that my efforts were greatly appreciated. This encouraged me to indulge further into the Belarusian culture, trying to understand why a nation – seemingly voluntarily – was abandoning its language and forgetting its history. The reasons for the precarious situation of the Belarusian language, which is classified as vulnerable by UNESCO's Atlas of the World's languages in Danger, can be found in history, when political and social pressure from foreign rulers were not conducive to a natural development of the Belarusian language.

It could be said that the Belarusian nation is one of Europe's unredeemed nations, whose national aspirations have never been allowed to flourish. The role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in European history has largely been forgotten, and today few Europeans are aware of the fact that the Belarusians were one of the peoples living in this multi-ethnic state formation, that as its zenith stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. An old version of the Belarusian language was actually the administrative language in the Grand Duchy for some period.

The Belarusians did aspire to statehood during the chaotic aftermath of World War I and the Russian revolutions, but in the end, Belarus became a Soviet republic, where the Belarusian national identity was allowed to develop relatively freely during the first years of the fairly permissive policy towards the national republics. This radically changed at the end of the 1920's, and during the Stalinist repressions in the 1930's, the emerging Belarusian cultural intelligentsia suffered heavily. During the night of October 29, 1937, which is remembered as the "night of the executed poets", hundreds of Belarusians – many of them writers – were executed in the Kurapaty forest on the outskirts of Minsk.

These are important elements of the Belarusians' tragic history, and in my view, what we have observed in Belarus during the autumn of 2020 is the belated rebirth or return of the Belarusian nation to the map of Europe. The prevailing view that the Belarusians lack national consciousness may previously have been correct to some extent, but the recent events on the streets of Belarus have clearly shown that something has changed dramatically within the Belarusians themselves. The protests did not initially have a pronounced national character, but during the course of the autumn, issues of national identity have become an essential part of the protests, and it is now evident that the majority of Belarusians see themselves as a nation.

At this moment, no one can predict the short-term outcome of the protests, but it is certain that Belarus will never return to the situation as it was prior to the elections. Belarusians themselves are not the same people as they were before. There may be certain persons still clinging to power with violence and force, but I am convinced that Belarusians – who often consider themselves patient and tolerant, even excessively so – now have reached a point where they will no longer accept the return to status quo.

What we have seen is not a political fight – the word “opposition” is not relevant in the Belarusian context – but a popular uprising of dignity and national identity that is developing and deepening every week. Too many people have been exposed to the brutality and absurdity of the current authoritarian regime, and it is only a matter of time when the situation will have to change. The sooner the better for the Belarusian people first and foremost, but also for Europe.

The texts in this report manifest an engagement in the fate of Belarus by prominent European politicians, diplomats and economists.

Now is the time to not only think about how to react to the atrocities and crimes against peaceful Belarusian protesters, but also to start reflecting on how a new, different Belarus can find its place in the North European region and in Europe as a whole. The future of Belarus is important to all of us, and Belarusians – well aware that their future is in their own hands – still expect Europe, and in particular their neighbouring countries, to do their utmost in supporting and promoting the reappearance of a democratic Belarus on the map of Europe.

Too many times Belarus has disappeared from the European political agenda, due to other more immediate foreign policy crises and challenges. This should not be allowed to happen again – a failure of the Belarusian peaceful white-red-white revolution would also be a hard blow against our own values and beliefs in freedom, democracy and justice.

The Belarusian national poet Yanka Kupala wrote the poem “And, say, who goes there?” at the beginning of the 20th century, and it has not lost its relevance up till this very day. It rather precisely describes the Belarusian state of mind more than one hundred years ago but could just as well be applicable today.

As if by coincidence, the Belarusian state film company had planned to launch a new film this year about the tragic life of Yanka Kupala, who survived the repressions of the 1930’s but fell to death from a hotel staircase in Moscow on June 28, 1942, under unclear circumstances. The premiere of the film has not yet taken place, no doubt because the authorities are afraid of the consequences. The similarities with the events happening today in Belarus are just too obvious.

*And, say, who goes there?  
And, say, who goes there? And, say, who goes there?  
In such a mighty throng assembled, O declare?  
Belarusians!*

*And what do those lean shoulders bear as load,  
Those hands stained dark with blood, those feet bast-sandal shod?  
All their grievance!*

*And to what place do they this grievance bear,  
And whither do they take it to declare?  
To the whole world!*

*And who schooled them thus, many million strong,  
Bear their grievance forth, roused them from slumbers long?  
Want and suffering!*

*And what is it, then, for which so long they pined,  
Scorned throughout the years, they, the deaf, the blind?  
To be called human!*

Yanka Kupala (1905-07), translation by Vera Rich (the word Byelorussians changed to Belarusians by this author).

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## **Quo vadis, Belarus? And what can Europe do?**

Sunday, August 9, 2020, was a sunny summer's day. In the usually quiet southern Warsaw district of Wilanów, thousands of Belarusian voters had lined up in a long queue in front of the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus. They wanted to make use of their democratic right to elect the next president of their home country.

As a sign of their hopes, they carried hundreds of flags and posters in the white-red-white colours of the Belarusian national movement. Mainly young people, students, who made it clear: We want freedom and democracy in our lives as we know it from our host country Poland and the other nations of the European Union. And we want it now. Under our own steam.

### **Belarus's neighbours and the European Union**

The freedom movement in Belarus is, of course, of considerable importance for Europe as a whole: in the European Union, it is time for an active foreign and regional policy, especially guided by Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Belarus's neighbours. They can and should take the lead in the EU opinion on the future shape of relations, backed by countries that have always been active advocates of the Eastern Partnership, like Sweden – and in close cooperation with the German Presidency of the European Council – and coordinate ideas for the shape of the European partnership with a free Belarus – and also with Ukraine.

Ukraine could be involved here for the first time and very constructively in the development of a pan-European policy. Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians and Ukrainians know their neighbour, who is still so little known in the West. They are part of the same historical area. That is why Belarus receives a great deal of attention and solidarity in Vilnius and Warsaw, which is not so much the case elsewhere: For example, the "European Humanities University" has for years been working as a Belarusian university in exile in Vilnius; since 2004 supported by the European Union and many of its member states.

In the current crisis Poland, for instance, is reacting with a very flexible approach to people who have left Belarus because the situation there has become unbearable. The official number of Belarusian citizens living in Poland is 44,000, but the actual number is likely to be much higher.

The only independent television station in the Belarusian language (Belsat), as well as the radio stations Radyjo Rayzja and European Radio, have been broadcasting from Poland for years and are co-financed by the Polish Government. The influential telegraph channel NEXTA also operates out of Poland with great success. In terms of content, NEXTA is much more than a news portal. The channel is also used to exchange information and coordinate protest actions.

But even more crucial now is the political leadership by the European Union, driven by Poland, the Baltic and Central European states and backed by Sweden and like-minded countries. The idea of a "Marshall Plan for Belarus", initiated by Poland and the Visegrad

partners, was endorsed at the EU Special Summit on October 2 and is considered a concept for long-term support of a free and democratic Belarus. Short-term measures ought to include restriction on certain areas of previous cooperation, support of Belarusian civil society and initial proposals for intensifying relations following democratic change.

In the long run, there will be no economic stability and success in Belarus, unless the EU opens up its markets even more than today to goods from Belarus, thereby reducing, at least to some extent, its heavy dependence on Russia for its foreign trade. The approach of Commissioner Varhelyi, who – as a consequence of the initiatives from Vilnius and Warsaw – has announced a comprehensive EU economic plan for Belarus to be presented in December, is a step in the right direction.

If a "peaceful transition agreement" is reached in Belarus in the course of a national dialogue, the EU must quickly offer financial assistance and technical expertise. The concepts and preparations for such a situation must be realised – already now – and made ready for take-off. The "EU reform plan for Belarus" of 2011 should also be revisited.

### **Visa exemption**

A further step would be easy to implement and would have an enormous symbolic value – namely the granting of visa-free travel. As a political sign: "We are open to you. Just as we are open to any other democratic country in Europe. You decide on your own way. Whatever you decide, we are your partners and neighbours. With borders that connect and no longer separate." The EU has already done that successfully with the Eastern Partnership countries of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine.

### **Prepare indictments**

But first of all, of course, the people of Belarus must be free to decide on their head of state and parliament. And to hold accountable those who today harass and torture political prisoners. An example from the time of the communist dictatorship in the GDR shows that the Belarusian opposition is on the right track when it documents crimes committed by those in charge of the Lukashenko regime and officials at all levels, i.e. from the torturer in the prison cellar to the minister responsible for orders, so that they can be tried in independent courts after the democratic change.

Of course, contacts with those in the state apparatus who will likely stay on after the fall of Lukashenko, are still needed. But everyone should be aware that whoever is actually complicit today will be indicted tomorrow.

That is how it was done in Germany at the time. Register torturers by name! In GDR times, there was a special public prosecutor's office in Salzgitter in Western Germany, which recorded the names and deeds of torturers and henchmen of the SED regime in detail. After their release, political prisoners from the GDR reported that the mere knowledge of a possible indictment had repeatedly slowed down the torturers in their evil activities.



## **European perspective?**

But we should not overload the democratic transformation process in Belarus with too grand concepts. Of course, everyone knows that the question of a potential membership perspective in the EU is always on the horizon. Article 49 of the EU Treaty is fully applicable to Belarus: "Any European State which respects European values (...) may apply to become a member of the Union" – if this is the will of its people.

But this issue is not on the agenda of the people struggling for freedom, democracy and justice on the streets of Minsk, Grodno, Gomel, Brest and many other places. It is not only for tactical reasons that EU flags are not or only rarely seen. Both the young and the old protesters know that a majority of their compatriots do not reject or hate, but in fact sympathise with Russia. This should not be antagonised by bold concepts at the wrong time.

The situation today is, at this point, completely different from that in Ukraine: Ukraine and Russia are engaged in a more or less indirect war in the Donbass, and Putin's policy has managed to turn many in Ukraine against Russia who were previously friendly towards their Eastern neighbour. This is not the case in Belarus – whether a "yet" has to be added here remains to be seen.

More and more people in Belarus are also realising that the country's economic future will be more complex than just reducing it to cheap energy sources from Russia for resale by their own companies.

Russia is losing in Belarus in the long term, because it cannot offer its Belarusian partner in the Union state, which has existed since 1998 but mainly on paper, any prospects. And worse: the Russian leadership has given Lukashenko its support in word and deed. An example is the dispatch of "volunteer journalist helpers" to the Belarusian state media, as well as the indication from the highest Russian government representatives that there is a police reserve available for deployment in Belarus, should the need arise.

In this way, Russia has waived political leeway to accommodate those in Belarus who believe that the time has come for Lukashenko to step down, but who have no negative feelings about Russia.

## **Social media and radio**

What is important in all this is a smart information policy, not to get caught up in Russia's disinformation machinery. The EU should inform openly and intensely about its Belarus policy, coordinated with the member states that are particularly active in this area, through all modern media channels, but also the indestructible classic one: radio, which has high credibility and much less possibility of manipulation, compared with all the pictures and videos in social media.

## **The new generation**

In any case, the defining power over their relationship with the EU must remain with the Belarusians. We should listen carefully to what the representatives of the freedom and democracy movement expect from us.

The new generations that have grown up after the collapse of the Soviet Union will shape the future of their country. This is what the waiting student voters in Wilanów on this sunny election Sunday in early August made clear. It was a beautiful picture: wrapped in their white, red and white national flags. And with hope for a free Belarus in their hearts.

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## **Belarus: The problems and cures of the Belarusian economy**

During World War II, Belarus was part of what Yale historian Timothy Snyder calls the Bloodlands, devastated by both the Nazis and the Soviets. Minsk was completely destroyed. It was rebuilt as a Stalinist city with broad boulevards, lined with big buildings in the typical Stalin classical style.

Belarus is the last state-dominated Soviet economy with two scores of big state companies, mainly in heavy industry. They are still producing Soviet products with soft budget constraints. The agriculture remains collectivized. A significant private sector exists, but the big companies are state-owned.

Although this is an old-fashioned Soviet economy, it functions surprisingly well. I visited Belarus for the first time in 1986, and I was struck by how clean and orderly Minsk was. Within the Soviet Union, Belarus always stood out as one of the most well-functioning and least corrupt republics, and that remains true. The state-owned companies are old-fashioned and overstaffed, but they manufacture the best Soviet products ever.

The key problem of the Belarusian economy is that its products still are Soviet. It exports its manufactured goods to Russia, since they hardly are of a quality sufficient to find any buyers in the West, and Belarus imports cheap oil and natural gas from Russia to produce petroleum and fertilizers, being highly dependent on trade with Russia. In 2018, 58 percent of its imports (mainly crude oil and gas) came from Russia, while Russia accounted for 38 percent of Belarusian exports (mainly manufactures), because refined oil and fertilizers comprise two-thirds of its exports to the West.

For many years, Russia subsidized the Belarusian economy to the tune of about one-tenth of Belarus's GDP through its sales of oil and gas. As the personal relations between presidents Vladimir Putin and Aleksandr Lukashenko deteriorated, the Kremlin has gradually eliminated these subsidies, squeezing Belarus economically.

Because of Lukashenko's irresponsible economic policy, the Belarusian economy has been stagnant since 2012. Lukashenko's only goal seems to be to stay in power, and he applies as much repression as he considers necessary, while his family and a close circle of cronies enrich themselves. Belarusians have good reasons to revolt against this authoritarian kleptocracy.

Absurdly, Lukashenko has presented himself as the protector of the blue-collar workers of the big state-owned companies. For unknown reasons, he has harboured the fixed idea that his workers should be entitled to an average wage of \$500 per month. That is not much, but more than Lukashenko's old-style economic policies can achieve.

Therefore, Belarus has suffered from periodic currency crises, when running out of international currency reserves. The most severe crisis occurred in 2011, when Lukashenko was forced to carry out a drastic devaluation, which led to a skyrocketing inflation of 109 percent.

In the foreign exchange crisis in 2009–10, Belarus was bailed out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but Lukashenko immediately violated its conditions, and after that Belarus has received no more IMF funding.

In the next crisis, in 2011, Lukashenko appealed to both Russia and the West for financial support, but his refusal to comply with market economic conditions left him with one single protector, Russia. Putin enjoyed his monopoly power and waited for long letting the crisis evolve, thus weakening Lukashenko. As Belarus approached default, Putin finally bailed out the country.

Putin did so in a manner indicating what he will do this time as well. He provided only limited Russian state credits. For the rest, he demanded that Russian state-owned and oligarchic companies be allowed to take over the biggest Belarusian companies.

Lukashenko conceded, but in the end most of these big Belarusian companies remained owned by the Belarusian state. Putin is not likely to allow himself to be tricked like that again by a much-weakened Lukashenko.

Today the Belarusian people have woken up, rendering a completely different political situation, but the economic conundrum is surprisingly similar. Once again, a balance of payment crisis is developing.

Belarus's international currency reserves in cash cover just about one month of imports, and the country would need about \$6 billion in international financing during the next year to cover both the current account deficit and a net debt service next year of \$3 billion. The Belarusian ruble's exchange rate is floating, and it has depreciated by 20 percent in relation to the US dollar in 2020.

Yet, the economic problems of Belarus should not be exaggerated. Officially, it has a minimal budget deficit, though the IMF claims that it does not include substantial hidden subsidies to the big state enterprises. Inflation is under control at about 5 percent.

Since Lukashenko could never attract much international financing, the country's total public debt amounts to only \$18 billion or 35 percent of GDP, according to the Ministry of Finance. After a political thaw in 2016, all the international financial institutions returned to Belarus and are plugged in. Amazingly, in late June Belarus even raised \$1.25 billion in Eurobonds.

Belarus has many assets. It has maintained the best of the Soviet educational system with excellent education in mathematics and natural sciences. In spite of the authoritarian rule, a substantial private software industry has developed.

Belarus has a strong diaspora, many of whom are ready to return. With a normal regime and economic policy, Belarus should be able to attract sufficient international funding to be able to maintain macroeconomic stability. There is no reason why the well-educated and disciplined Belarusians should live in stagnation and poverty.

Somewhat simplified, Belarus faces two big economic issues. The first is to receive sufficient international financing to avoid excessive depreciation of its currency. The other task is to privatize its large enterprises, so that the economy can become more efficient.

Realistically, there are only two alternative sources of international financing: the IMF and Russia. Under a normal political regime, it should be easy to form an ordinary IMF standby program. The IMF assesses that about one-fifth of consumer prices are still regulated.

The liberalization of the Belarusian prices and domestic trade should be relatively easy. If they are liberalized and subsidies to state enterprise curbed, some inflationary pressures will arise, but Belarus has strong macroeconomic institutions to control such pressures.

As long as Lukashenko controls the state institutions, the only option is Russian financial support, and it is rather stingy. On September 14, Lukashenko went begging to Putin in his summer residence in Sochi, but Putin promised only \$1.5 billion of credits. For the rest, he suggested that Lukashenko had to look for private Russian money, hinting that 2,500 Belarusian enterprises had Russian capital.

In many ways, Belarus's economic prospect might be reminiscent of Armenia. Armenia is completely dominated by Russian companies, primarily state-owned ones.

In October 2019, I went there to figure out how it functioned. Under its prior oligarchic regime, well-connected Armenian operators had gained ownership of the big state companies through debt-equity swaps for a fraction of their market value. A few years later, they sold them to Russian state companies, leading to a far-reaching Russian monopolization of the tiny Armenian economy.

The Kremlin appears to be plotting something similar in Belarus. The biggest and most valuable company in Belarus is Belarus Kalii, which produces one-fifth of all potash in the world. Belarus has also a big nitrate fertilizer company, Hrodno Azot.

The big Russian potash producer Ural Kalii wants to take over Belarus Kalii and the Russian fertilizer company Ural Khem wants to seize Hrodno Azot. Accidentally, both Ural Khem and Ural Kalii have been taken over by Dmitry Mazepin, a Belarusian with close links to the Kremlin and billions of dollars of debt to Russia's two biggest state banks.

Something similar appears plotted to happen with Belarus's two big oil refineries. In 2011, a Russian state oil company, Slavneft, became the dominant owner of the Naftan oil refinery. Now the Russian state oil companies are circling around the other big Belarusian oil refinery, Mozyr. If they succeed in these maneuvers, four Russian companies will control two-thirds of Belarus's exports to the West.

These observations show why privatization will be so difficult in Belarus. Privatization of the bulk of the state enterprises is necessary for the successful development of the Belarusian economy, but Belarus has no big private enterprises. If the big state-owned companies are sold on the market, risk-loving Russian businessmen will presumably buy everything for a song.

The best solution would be that Lukashenko is forced to resign so that a new democratic Belarusian government can conclude a normal IMF agreement. Any cheap or privileged privatization to the benefit of the Russian state or Russian oligarchs must be resisted.

In the present Belarusian circumstances, privatization of large state-owned enterprises should have at least three major objectives. First, the Belarusian state should aspire to get real value out of the truly valuable Belarusian companies. Second, many Belarusians should be personally involved so that they do not feel alienated by the privatization. Third, the privatization process should help to integrate Belarus with Europe.

The whole former Soviet Union is now discredited with regard to the rule of law and corporate governance. Therefore, after Lukashenko the new Belarusian government should do whatever it can to develop a good judicial system with a decent rule of law. The European Union knows how to do that. Belarus should adopt good laws on corporate governance before strong owner interests might distort them, but even so governance will presumably be poor for some time.

That means that Belarus should not hold high hopes for early foreign direct investment (FDI), as Western investors tend to be cautious and risk-averse. The only businessmen likely to be interested would be Russian oligarchs, who love risk and know how to manage under difficult circumstances, but they would have to obey the Kremlin.

For a few big companies of high value, typically in energy and transportation, Initial Public Offerings would be possible, but only after several years and after corporate governance has been sorted out.

The post-communist transition bears out that privatization is vital, but it has to be done in a fashion that is politically acceptable. The best option for most medium-sized enterprises of limited value is probably to give them away in the form of individual shares to their current employees.

Fortunately, the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development are already well established in Belarus and they should be able to assist with all the necessary legislation for privatization and corporate governance.

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## Kremlin's response to Belarus

Belarus is a unique “centaur” state that demonstrates a striking mix of the Soviet legacy in the mentality of the elite and longing for freedom among the society. On the one hand, Belarus has been economically dependent and even integrated into Russia. Russia's assistance “in exchange for loyalty” varied between 11 and 27 per cent of the Belarusian GDP, and 40 percent of the Belarusian export goes to Russia. On the other, Belarus has acquired its national identity with strong independent sentiments.

Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko allowed himself spats with Vladimir Putin, blackmailing him and rejecting the Kremlin's demands for tighter integration of Belarus with Russia. Lukashenko even dumped Putin's plan of retaining power through moving to the “Union State” under Putin's leadership - an offence that the Kremlin will not forgive.

For the Kremlin still following the traditional Russian security axioms, Belarus is part of the one “people” with Russia and the frontier region defending Russia from the hostile civilization under NATO umbrella. After Ukraine's escape from the Kremlin embraces, losing Belarus would be an unbearable humiliation for the Russian system and the lethal blow to the Eurasian galaxy that the Kremlin cannot afford.

Today the Kremlin policy toward the protesting Belarusians should be viewed in the context of the current Putin agenda: Putin wants to return to the Club of Great Powers using the Western disorientation and the U.S. retrenching. This means that the Kremlin will try to keep Belarus on its orbit without military intervention.

Besides, Russia's conflict with Ukraine, unstable situation in the South Caucasus with Turkey introducing itself as an arbiter and Russia's weakening role in Central Asia as result of the Chinese expansion, do not allow Russia any new confrontation with the West. True, strong influence of the revanchist group in the Kremlin, demanding more assertiveness should not be totally discarded.

Overall, the conflict in Belarus still remains political and addresses the issue of power. It has not become the geopolitical conflict that would mean a Belarusian shift toward Europe. Hence, the Kremlin still could refrain from using its “little green men”.

The Kremlin's posture on Belarus during August to December has undergone a certain evolution. In August, as the protests against the fraudulent elections started, the Kremlin took a neutral position, hoping that Lukashenko would retain his power but be weakened by popular discontent – that this would force him to follow the Russian plan without usual grudges.

The Kremlin did not want Lukashenko to collapse and even assembled the police reserve at the border, ready to help him if needed. At the same time, the Russian official media were describing protests against Lukashenko with unusual sympathy. It looked like Putin was deliberating on his reaction to Belarus.

When the Belarusian standoff persisted, and it started to look like Lukashenko was losing and the popular uprising gained in strength, the Kremlin chose an option which could be described as: “We want Lukashenko to make a transition to a new leader, loyal to Russia”.

The Kremlin’s motivation is clear. On the one hand, the Kremlin could not bear the victory of the mass protest and the demise of the leader Putin has been dealing with (this would be a bad example for Russia). On the other hand, the Kremlin is fed up with Lukashenko, his unpredictability and doubtful loyalty.

Putin gave Lukashenko a meagre financial support of \$1,5 bn, which is not enough to refinance the Belarusian international debt, and subsequently demanded that Lukashenko follows the Kremlin scenario.

According to this scenario, Lukashenko has to endorse the new Constitution, which will demonopolize the presidential power, and to hold new presidential elections, allowing the ascendancy of the new leader. Moscow has made clear it is ready for Lukashenko to bow himself out from the scene.

The Kremlin, having had too much headache in dealing with the Belarusian dictator, now prefers pluralism of power centres in Belarus, trusting its ability to control the diffused political resources. Lukashenko must manage his own exit and transition to the new construct and the new leader.

One would expect that the Kremlin has several other demands for Lukashenko. Firstly, he has to allow the Russian oligarchs to participate in the privatization of the lucrative Belarusian enterprises (like oil refinery and Belarus Kalii enterprise). Secondly, Moscow expects Minsk to support the Russian foreign policy gambits (for example, the illegal annexation of Crimea) and stop wooing the West. Thirdly, the Russian military would love to have an airbase base in Belarus.

The Kremlin has its list of candidates for leadership in Belarus. One would guess that the oppositional leaders Viktor Babaryka and Valerii Tsepkalo are among them. This is the key reason why Lukashenko is keeping Babaryka in jail.

One would doubt that the Kremlin at the moment is ready to pursue the idea of a tight Union State with Belarus. The Russian side has to understand the obvious: not only will Lukashenko refuse to follow this script, but also may the Belarusians revolt. Moreover, *the Anschluss* with Minsk and even common currency will be a too heavy burden for Russia’s shrinking state budget. The idea of the integration is not buried, but it is being put on the back burner.

However, the Kremlin has to see through Lukashenko’s “*ruletka*” game: Lukashenko is not ready to voluntarily step down and will drag his feet with the constitutional reform and the new elections. Now when he has avoided the worst – the all national strike of big enterprises – he will try to maneuver in delaying his Exit Moment. He is still controlling the power structures and the elites are not fragmenting, as many expected.



Today, Moscow appears to be confused as to its next steps. There is an understanding among Russian authorities that a more active and open support of Lukashenko will provoke a rise of the anti-Russia and anti-Putin moods among Belarusians, who still are mostly loyal to Russia. Besides, Lukashenko has become too toxic and unreliable. He hardly could pacify his country and regain control over the society.

But with *the siloviki*<sup>1</sup> and the elite still loyal to Lukashenko, Moscow is not ready to force him to move ahead with the Kremlin plan. The Russian officials are torn by the dilemma – or cognitive dissonance: they hate to see the Lukashenko regime collapse and they hate to see him any longer.

True, Moscow could tighten the economic garrotte and force Lukashenko to prepare his exit. But what then – how secure the favourable for the Kremlin option? The Kremlin is indecisive. Actually, Putin is known to delay decisions and for wait-and-see-behaviour. In any case, the Kremlin does not want to turn the Belarusian protests into a fight for independence.

While Moscow is hesitant to take risky steps, Lukashenko tries to turn his fight for survival into a geopolitical battle between the West and Russia, with himself defending the Russian borders. The Kremlin pragmatists can identify his game. But no one knows how strong their pragmatism is.

A bitter irony is that the Russian public opinion has been favorable for Lukashenko – at least in the beginning. Thus, in August 2020, 57 percent of Russian respondents supported him staying in power, while 17 percent supported the oppositional candidate. Around 39 percent said that protests are the result of the interference of the “foreign forces”, while about 56 percent approved the actions of the *siloviki*.<sup>2</sup>

In October 2020, 38 percent of the Russian respondents expressed their sympathy toward the Belarusian leader (in September 43 percent expressed this attitude), while 21 percent were sympathetic toward the protesters (in September this number was 18 percent). About 38 percent of the respondents did not have a sympathy for any side (in September, this figure was 36 percent)<sup>3</sup>.

These moods mean that a significant segment of the Russian population might support the Russian intervention to keep Lukashenko in power.

Irrespective of who is going to be president of Belarus and what political system emerges there in the nearest future, this country will remain dependent on Russia, which will limit possibilities for any new leader. Withdrawing Russia’s economic help will mean unravelling the Belarusian economy. The question is: who will support the country on the brink of abyss? This dependency keeps the Belarusian economy in its post-Soviet decay.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Russian political lexicon, a *silovik* is a politician who came into politics from the security, military, or similar services, often the officers of the former KGB, GRU, FSB, SVR, FSO, the Federal Drug Control Service, or other armed services who came into power. A similar term is “securocrat”. (Wikipedia)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bfm.ru/news/451831>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2020/11/05/protesty-v-habarovskom-krae-i-bel>

The Armenian option for Belarus (popular in the West), which means a democratically elected president and the ousting of Lukashenko while the country preserves its loyalty to Russia, could be seen as the solution. At least, it could help to get rid of the Belarusian Butcher.

But this option is pregnant with a future conflict. The new leader and the new ruling group in Belarus will be forced to deal with the economic crisis and long delayed structural problems, including the dependency on Russia. How solve them if Russia demands loyalty and priority for the Russian oligarchic interests?

Any real reform in Belarus will mean dumping of the Union State paradigm and pivot to Europe. The domestic change will inevitably bring on the geopolitical conflict.

Thus, Belarusian transition has to include two interconnected challenges: the change of power and the building of the foreign policy trajectory that will address the national interests. The response to the first challenge has, sooner or later, to be followed by the second response. The question is when the Belarusian society and Europe will be ready for this response. No doubt such transformation would be an uphill battle. Dumping Lukashenko could be the first step in this battle.

Paradoxically, the Belarusian transformation could be easier than the Ukrainian or Russian one due to one reason: so far Belarus has escaped the emergence of the oligarchic class and has no merger between power and property that (as the Ukrainian example has demonstrated) could become a serious obstacle in the post-Communist transition.

Moscow continues to concentrate on tactics demonstrating lack of interest in getting Lukashenko too strong and trying to prevent his collapse. This means paralysis in building the policy that would help to pursue the Russian script of the transit.

Besides, there are too many other challenges that demand Putin's attention. Recently he has been distracted by the crisis in the South Caucasus. The Russian policy machine waits for Putin to decide on any serious action regarding Belarus.

Anyway, the Russian president could hardly keep Belarus on his radar permanently. This means that Moscow could be late with its response to the Belarusian situation or respond neither adequately nor coherently. The interests of certain groups of interests – oligarchic or *siloviki* – could push the Kremlin toward more aggressive Russian interference. Moscow has been astute in provoking conflicts but not in solving them.

The revolutionary Belarus that in Russia is viewed as part of "one people" and the Russian security area create consternation and suspense in the Kremlin. There is a justified fear that Lukashenko could provoke conflict with the West, trying to involve Russia and making himself an indispensable warrior against the Western "aggression". In any case, he is a loose cannon on board of the ship. He is a headache and he is becoming a threat. This is the mood in the political Moscow.

At the same time, the Kremlin does not want to be associated with the Belarusian protests. The Kremlin has not yet decided which is the middle way. To balance the domestic change with the geopolitical status quo is a challenge. In this situation, we cannot exclude a dramatic turn of events if the Kremlin acts emotionally and follows tactical considerations or vested interests that could have powerful repercussions for the region.

**Lilia Shevtsova**

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## Russia and the protests in Belarus

Following the civil society awakening in Belarus, how may Russia react? Although a few outside observers have feared the repeat of a potential military scenario on the 2014 Ukrainian model, Moscow has at its disposal several political, diplomatic, and economic tools to shape a post-Lukashenko transition. There are, however, limits and threats to Russia's influence in Belarus.

Belarus occupies a key strategic position for Russian military planners as an axis between Russia and NATO/the EU. Politically and economically, the two countries remain highly intertwined. The main concern for Russia's political leadership is predictability, avoiding abrupt changes to the status quo detrimental to Russian security interests. Within these broad parameters, however, Moscow may act with a degree of flexibility towards Belarus not on display in Ukraine in 2014.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's telegram to Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko on August 10, appearing on the website of the Kremlin one day after fraudulent elections confirming the dictator's re-election, succinctly and dryly reconfirmed Russian interests.

"I expect that your statesmanship will facilitate the further development of mutually beneficial Russian-Belarusian relations in all spheres," the telegram noted, "as well as the further deepening of cooperation within the Union State, the strengthening of integration processes within the Eurasian Economic Union and the CIS, and of military-political ties within the Collective Security Treaty Organization."

The stated ambitions of Russia's political leadership are unlikely to change anytime soon, regardless of Lukashenko's course of action. As was made overtly clear in recent weeks and months by Russian state officials, Moscow has decided to support Lukashenko as a transitional figure head, someone who will prevent a "colour revolution scenario" in Belarus while also guaranteeing a transition of power, preceded by constitutional amendments.

On November 26, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, repeated accusations against the West previously voiced during the 2013–14 Maidan Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine.

The West, he said, is "using dirty methods of so-called colour revolutions, including manipulating public opinion, supporting forces that are openly anti-government and promoting their radicalization." This, alas, is the same predictable anti-Western rhetoric adopted, after some hesitation earlier this year, by Lukashenko. In Belarus, the Kremlin aims to keep the EU out, Lukashenko down, and Russia in.

Lukashenko, who can no longer be regarded a guarantor of neither stability nor political predictability, has for tactical reasons aligned himself more closely with Moscow. He has lost a significant portion of his own population, and the previous legitimacy he could draw from an economic system devoid of oligarchs and mass unemployment.

His space to engage in dialogue with Brussels or Washington has vanished; he is now dependent on the loyalty of the law enforcement agencies, and the tacit approval of the Kremlin, for political survival. Lukashenko, for the remainder of his rule, will rule as a despot.

The ongoing decline in the GDP of Belarus, driven by a steady and sharp drop in the profitability of key sectors such as agriculture, construction, and manufacturing, will have implications for the country's sovereignty and foreign policy orientation. One of the country's silver linings, the ICT sector, began to relocate its operations abroad in the wake of political repression and curtailment of access to the internet and communications to the outside world. They may never return, depending on the evolution of the domestic situation.

As the country's fiscal situation deteriorates, revenues from taxes decline, and the Central Bank increases its interest rate to preserve the exchange rate of the Belarusian ruble, Lukashenko's freedom of maneuverability will be further curtailed. Western sanctions, even the threat thereof, will close most if not all access to non-Russian sources of financing and investment.

The country needs outside support of about 3–5 billion dollars per year. On top of this, its corporate sector is increasingly indebted in a situation with increasing financial losses. No outside financing promises have been forthcoming.

Russia's 1.5 billion dollars loan in September was certainly important, but only helped Minsk to refinance its current debt – most of which was anyhow owed to Russian entities such as Gazprom. If future loans from Russia would not be forthcoming, Minsk would have few outside options to replace that source of financing.

The only chance of an economic revival in Belarus involves the exit of Lukashenko. The main risks are political. Moscow has several potential downsides, and very few upsides, in a bargain involving Lukashenko retaining indefinite power.

This latter scenario, of course, cannot be excluded. The relation between Moscow and Minsk is a classical principal-agent-dilemma; there is no guarantee that Lukashenko will act in a way that suits anyone's interests but his own.

In this respect, Lukashenko's regime is a toxic asset. Albeit one which is hard to dispense with. Lukashenko may offer certain strategic economic assets, such as oil refineries or defense industries, in exchange for financial and political support.

There can also be renegotiations regarding transit of natural gas through Belarus, and the insistence by Moscow that Belarusian exports are sent through Russian Baltic Sea ports. A more drastic step would involve an arrangement handing over an airbase on the territory of Belarus to Russia, something which has been debated for already several years.

Lukashenko has made statements to the effect that he will support a new constitution, devolving power from the president to parliament, followed by new elections and a transition power. Moscow has tentatively supported this plan.

Limits on the powers of the president suit Russian interests, simplifying the establishment of more direct linkages of influence also through political parties, media, business lobbies, and financial flows. Nominally, it would give Belarus a more democratic façade, making it easier for the country to reestablish contacts with the West.

To what extent constitutional amendments will involve other gifts to Russia remains to be seen. For example, whether a future constitution will firmly define the geostrategic orientation of Belarus (regarding the further integration with Russia), or continue to define the country's orientation as "neutral".

The Kremlin may prefer a cautious bargain, in order not to antagonize Belarusian civil society, which has already been turning more pro-EU since August 9 elections. Creating a Belarusian protectorate, heavily sanctioned by the West, would also be a costly enterprise for the already financially constrained Russian state budget.

The crux of the matter is that the awakening of a Belarusian civil society is a contagious virus. The experience of peaceful protest amid state perpetrated violence against ordinary citizens is already contributing to the formation of a new national identity, one that embraces a move away from the country's post-Soviet lethargy. Containing this virus inside the borders of Belarus will be Lukashenko's last and most precious gift to Putin. One that is much more valuable than any (costly and marginally popular) integration between the two countries.

The relatively small-scale protests in Moscow in 2019, in which 5,000–20,000 people participated in the summer months, were followed by 3,000 arrests and dozens of high-profile jail sentences for protest participants. Protests in Belarus, it should be noted, have been larger by an order of magnitude. Should large-scale anti-Kremlin protests therefore appear, inspired by the events in Belarus, a repressive state reaction is not in doubt – the question is how severe the reaction would be.

The insistence of Putin, Lavrov and Lukashenko that the protests in Belarus are managed by the West is an important rhetorical device. The awakening of a previously dormant civil society, with few if any apparent influences from abroad (for example the EU) to help sustain it, is an exceptional blow to the illusion that the public cannot have a say in the future of their country. This myth, however, needs to be sustained. Therefore, Belarus cannot be allowed to transform itself. If Putin despises Lukashenko, it is because he sees in him a weaker version of himself.

### **Martin Kragh**

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## **The EU must have an ambitious strategy for Democratic Belarus**

The democratic revolution in Belarus has recently overpassed 100 days and is entering a next hundred. This revolution is a new type of 'coloured revolutions', as it is constantly changing its colours, faces and strategies. At the beginning, there was an electoral, led-by-brave-women revolution. Then it became massive and gathered hundreds of thousands at the Independence Square in Minsk.

After that, it has evolved into Sunday marches of dignity and a national strike or ultimatum revolution. Now, with unprecedented repressions from an illegitimate Lukashenko regime, we observe a revolution of courtyards and districts. And this is not the end, by far.

The Belarus Revolution has, though, one common feature – a peaceful nature of a protest, which reveals the consolidation and maturity of Belarusian civil society, which wants to live freely in a democracy.

The people of Democratic Belarus have clearly demonstrated that they are ready for change. They do not want anymore to live in a post-soviet type of authoritarian regime. This is a revolution for change towards democracy. The authoritarian regime of Lukashenko tries to survive with an assistance of another authoritarian regime in Kremlin, which is exactly the reason why the people of Belarus are suffering from brutal persecutions.

Now, it is a challenge for the EU and the international community to be determined to do everything in their power to protect the people, urgently have free and democratic elections and help building a new Belarus.

The EU has to move away from the painful lessons of waiting-and-seeing, and to take determined actions. The toll of repressions in Belarus has already surpassed 30,000 people since the forged elections of August 9, 2020. The number of political prisoners is steadily increasing by hundreds, as well as the number of innocent casualties.

These atrocities are taking place in the middle of our continent, at the heart of Europe, and must therefore be dealt with urgently.

**First: The EU commitment and ability to defend the values of democracy is being tested. Now, it is time to prove that the EU is able and determined to play a global role in defence of the values of human dignity and freedom, locally and globally.**

The EU, European governments, together with Western and international partners, must hold an international conference, a summit of global democratic leaders, in order to elaborate new ways of defending democracy at our borders.

**Second: The EU must do everything in its power, through mediation and assistance, to support new institutions of Democratic Belarus – The Svetlana Tichanovskaja Team and The Coordination Council of Democratic Belarus.**

The EU must, at its highest level, take the lead in reaching out to the international leaders and have a structured dialogue with all stakeholders to defend the legitimate interests of Democratic Belarus. This can be done by a special High-Level EU mission of prominent political personalities. Ending of repressions, freeing political prisoners and all detained during the protests, and immediately arranging new, free and democratic elections should be clear demands from the EU.

The EU should be deploying without due delay its capacity in building a toolbox to the new institutions of Democratic Belarus. The EU ought to start its work immediately and collaborate with the key agents in building a Democratic Belarus. For this purpose the EU must, as soon as possible, open a Democratic Belarus Representations Office in Brussels which would have full credentials and financial support from the EU. This office could become a leading example for the EU Member States to engage directly with Democratic Belarus by means of a political dialogue.

**Third: The EU must actively contribute to an international investigation of crimes committed by the Lukashenko regime and to ending its impunity.**

The EU must establish a Belarus Justice Hub, which would include the evidence collection centre and an international panel of law experts, which could offer help and support to the numerous legal cases regarding the torture inflicted upon Belarusians by the regime of Lukashenko.

One key element in bringing this forward is the application of a universal jurisdiction by the national courts. The Hub will cooperate with international organisations, such as ICC, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, OSCE Moscow mechanism or the Council of Europe Convention against Torture.

**Fourth: The EU must, together with international partners, develop a reform and investment support plan for Democratic Belarus.**

The economy of Belarus is suffering and may collapse soon, because the regime is using all the resources available to maintain its power at any expense and to keep repressing the people in order to completely destroy the civil society in Belarus. Thus, all of the intellectual potential in Belarus (IT start-ups, digital hubs, etc.) may soon be wasted. In order to avoid this, the EU must show a clear ambition to assist Democratic Belarus financially and to stand ready to immediately deploy all necessary reform and investment support instruments on day one after the Lukashenko regime is gone.

The EU should start its work on the economic support architecture of this plan immediately, which must involve a reform task-force, an EU investment platform to work with IFIs and national promotional banks, as well as organise international pledges to be made at the Donor Conference for Democratic Belarus, which could be called back-to-back or in relation to the Democracy Summit for Belarus.



In addition to that, the EU must immediately deploy direct social payments to the families of victims of repressions, as well as to the families of workers who have participated in the national strike.

The EU has to substantially increase its support to numerous human rights organisations, student unions, independent trade unions and independent media outlets in Belarus and in exile. The EU must immediately engage and actively support Belarusian diasporas globally, including via Belarus World Congress.

**Fifth: The EU must immediately adopt a non-recognition policy for the Lukashenko regime.**

The EU, and in particular the European Commission and the European External Action Service, should keep pressing on immediate arranging of new free and democratic elections, and, to this aim, urgently work out a blueprint strategy in order to politically, culturally, economically, legally and institutionally isolate the regime of Lukashenko, beginning with an inner circle and chief commanders, who are following Lukashenko's orders.

Targeted sectoral economic sanctions can play a crucial role in cutting the financial flows, which are directly feeding the regime. In addition, this policy should aim at domestic and international legal measures applied to anyone cooperating with or having any kind of contractual engagement with the regime authorities.

These measures should also include the EU and national means of political sanctions, including a ban on international cultural or sports events, which should be transferable to other countries, should they support the regime of Lukashenko.

Finally, the EU should develop a consular coordination mechanism between the member states to ban the entry into the EU for families of all functionaries who have participated in electoral manipulations or repressions, torture and intimidation of the people in Belarus.

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## **The beginning of the end for Europe's last dictator**

Since 1989, developments in Central and Eastern Europe have been characterized by democratization, freedom and prosperity. The citizens of the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania are now natural parts of our European family.

Still, one exception exists. Since 1994, President Aleksandr Lukashenko has ruled Belarus with an iron fist. The people of Belarus were denied the freedom they so well deserved after decades of communist rule. Instead, one oppressor was replaced by another. Today, after more than twenty-five years, it finally seems as if Lukashenko is on the ropes.

The widespread democratic protests have been going on since the illegitimate election in August and are likely to continue as long as Lukashenko clings to power. In one way or other, the public uprising and strength and determination by the Belarusian people marks the beginning of the end for Europe's last dictator.

Still, there is much at stake. Moscow regards Belarus as its own exclusive sphere of influence, and President Putin is unlikely to sit quiet while a democratic revolution unfolds. Similar to the Russian warfare in eastern Ukraine, a worst-case scenario would be "little green men" appearing on the streets of Minsk, seizing control of key state functions.

The European Union has a moral obligation to act in support of the democratic movement in Belarus. And based on strict geopolitical self-interest, a peaceful democratization of the country would be absolutely best from an EU-point of view.

EU governments and elected Members of the European Parliament have a responsibility to secure adequate political and financial support to the opposition. In addition, the regime must be put under harsh and long-lasting sanctions, pressing Lukashenko from two directions.

So far, the Union's response has been fairly well-balanced, yet with signs of indecisiveness and lack of speed. After a slow start, which highlights the need to re-initiate the discussion on how to reform the decision-making process in EU foreign affairs, the decision to implement sanctions finally came through in the Council.

From the European Parliament's side the spotlight has, on numerous occasions, focused on the opposition's struggle and need of support. Next week, I will be happy to welcome representatives of the democratic opposition to the parliament, where they will be awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

As a Swede and Chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Development, I am also pleased that Sweden is one of the EU countries that has withdrawn aid for several projects in the country with links to the regime. However, the different approach among Member States yet again highlights the need for a more coherent EU policy response on these matters.

The Union is the world's largest donor for aid and thus has great opportunities to use the development policy as a means of putting pressure on regimes world-wide. Furthermore, while supporting a democratic regime change in Belarus, the EU also needs to start preparing for what might happen when Lukashenko is no longer in power. Hopefully, the change of power will take place in a peaceful manner, without Russian interference or aggression.

However, the EU must not act naively. The Union should hope for the best and plan for the worst. Remembering the Arab Spring, the EU must be prepared to act, if developments in Belarus take unexpected turns in the wrong direction.

There are historical examples to draw lessons from, many of which in current EU Member States. The fall of the Berlin Wall did not lead to the collapse of Central and Eastern Europe, sending the region into a turmoil.

As such, the EU must act decisively and be prepared for using the muscles of both our economic and our security policy toolbox. Potentially, one approach could be for the EU to deal with a free Belarus in the same way that West Germany dealt with the GDR during the reunification; namely, investing significant political and economic resources to help get a free Belarus back on its feet.

We know from our own history that legitimate institutions, transparency, good governance, and a functioning economy are necessary for a successful transition to democracy. Surely, the EU has both the financial means and the instruments necessary to support such efforts.

I myself am involved in the negotiations on the EU's future aid policy and see a great need for us to increase our focus on Europe's neighbouring countries in terms of aid.

However, it is unlikely that the Kremlin will refrain from interfering during a change of power in Belarus. It is well known that Putin has for a long time been deeply dissatisfied with Lukashenko. I consider it highly unlikely, though, that Putin will accept a democratic revolution in a neighbouring country. What is more likely is that Moscow will go quite far in its efforts to guarantee a regime in Minsk that is loyal to Russia. That has happened before and may very well happen again.

Thus, the question is: how much violence is Putin prepared to use to get what he wants and what can the EU do to stop him? There is no obvious answer. However, with a new American administration soon, the expectations from the international community is that the United States will once again assume its responsibilities for freedom and democracy in the world. This means, in a best-case scenario, that President-elect Biden will choose to set an early example by shielding the democratic opposition in Belarus from Russian interference and aggression.

In any future scenario, the EU will probably not play a key role when it comes to military security policy in Belarus. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing. The US and NATO military strengths can act as a deterrent to Russia, while the EU is using its economic muscles to ensure that the situation develops in the right direction.

Somewhere in this, Sweden's role also comes into play. Belarus is in our immediate vicinity and thus affects our security and the security in the region of the Baltic Sea. Potentially, Sweden's role during a possible regime change in Minsk would be similar to the one we had after the Baltic States became independent from the Soviet Union; namely, to support a rapid democratic development, civil society participation and integration into the community of values and economics of the European Union.

However, all of this is to anticipate the events. Peaceful and astonishingly brave democratic protesters are still facing violence and abuse in the streets of Minsk. Lukashenko still clings to power, despite the opposition's tireless efforts.

While August 2020 will go down in history as the beginning of the end for Lukashenko's regime, there is much work to be done before Europe's last dictator falls.

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