

New Strategy Center & CACDS

Roundtable

“The Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region and beyond”

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Security Challenges Caused by the Belarus Crisis

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Belarus on the Verge of Crucial Change

Further developments in Belarus, strategically located between Russia and the NATO/EU Eastern Flank, **could significantly change the security situation** throughout the region.

A paternalistic state with an authoritarian regime and a largely outdated economy can **either take a step towards democratization or be absorbed by Russia** in one way or another. Further stagnation of the current regime cannot last long for political and economic reasons.

Sixth months of unprecedented protests indicate the **emergence of civil society, but the majority of population still lives within the 'Soviet/Russian world' paradigm.** And this should be taken into account.

Lukashenka has lost legitimacy in the eyes of the Belarusians and the West, lost the Kremlin's trust, **but so far his regime is not going to give in**, relying on the loyalty of police, KGB and bureaucracy.

The West and its partners, including Ukraine, act reactively, not proactively. Sanctions are insufficient, and the West is traditionally **reluctant to take proactive measures to prevent Russia's meddling.**

Lack of a Western Strategy on Belarus

The EU has invited Belarus to join the Eastern Partnership policy, but **has never elaborated a clear strategy** for dealing with this country:

- *from time to time, the West responded with sanctions to severe human rights violations, but it was **not a comprehensive policy aimed at democratization**;*
- *there was **no serious attempt to reduce Belarus' economic dependence on Russia**.*

The **EU wanted to avoid a repetition of Ukrainian Maidan in Belarus**, an additional factor of tension with Russia, as well as additional responsibility.

Even now, the EU does not know how to deal with Belarus. **Limited sanctions** do not work, but stronger sanctions could make Minsk even more dependent on Russia.

Ukraine also had no clear long-term strategy on Belarus.

Even the post-Maidan authorities in Kyiv tried to maintain **so-called pragmatic relations** with the Lukashenka's regime, **not engaging with Belarusian society** and not having a proper information policy.

Russia's Plans for Belarus

Since 2018, with the appointment of Ambassador Mikhail Babich, Moscow **has considerably stepped-up pressure on Minsk** to force it to agree on actual absorption by Russia under the guise of the Union State.

Russia established influence on many **Belarusian media outlets** and created a network of new regional ones, established influence on several **Belarusian political parties**, and funded **civic movements** that advocated Belarus' accession to Russia.

Moscow has established contacts with some members of the 'old' Belarusian opposition, and provided media-support to some new ones.

Simultaneously with the propaganda of integration narratives, Moscow launched a **media campaign to weaken Lukashenka in order to make him even more dependent and prone to concessions.**

But the Kremlin did not expect such large-scale mass protests, nor the Tsikhanouskaya phenomenon.

Thus, Moscow has no choice but to **support Lukashenka as a temporary solution,** demanding that he carry out constitutional reform according to the Kremlin's vision.

Security Challenges for the Region

The Lukashenka's regime is unpredictable. **Further large-scale repression** could lead to the **radicalization** of protests and **possible flows of refugees** to neighboring countries. But without Russian support, Lukashenka will not be able to hold power for long.

Significant security challenges would arise in case of Russian absorption of Belarus in any possible form.

Belarus-Russia military cooperation is already strong:

- Belarus is a military ally of Russia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization;
- joint Regional Group of Forces of Belarus and Russia was established in 2000;
- Integrated Air Defense System has been operating since 2012;
- two Russian military facilities are located in Belarus:
 - 43rd *Communication Center of the Russian Navy in Vileika* (Minsk Region, about 250 Russian personnel);
 - 474th *Radio-Technical Center near Baranovichi* as a part of the missile attack warning system (Brest Region, agreement limits number of RU personnel to 1,200).

Possible Increase in Russian Presence (1)

Direct military intervention in Belarus would be **the least desirable option** for the Kremlin, although it cannot be completely ruled out.

Russia is also **unlikely to deploy a permanent military base** in Belarus in the near future, but it **may increase the military presence in less obvious ways**, such as:

- more active cooperation within the joint Regional Group of Forces of Belarus and Russia

(in December 2020, Lukashenka approved an updated plan for the use of the RGF);

- more frequent military exercises and the rotational presence of Russian troops in the territory of Belarus;

- existing Russian military facilities in Vileika and near Baranovichi could be technically and personnel reinforced

(in December 2020, near Baranovichi, a new Russian radar complex "Sopka-2" was put into combat duty, capable of monitoring the airspace within 450 kilometers and measuring the range and altitude of targets such as aircraft);

Possible Increase in Russian Presence (2)

- closer cooperation in protection of the common Union State's border
(it was reported that in December 2020, the Belarusian State Border Committee invited the Russian FSB Border Service to establish permanent joint electronic and technical intelligence points along the Belarus-Ukraine state border);
- closer cooperation between the National Guard of Russia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus
(in November 2020, an agreement was signed that provides, inter alia, cooperation in protection of important regime facilities, property of individuals and legal entities, etc.).

Thus, there are many ways to strengthen Russian military presence in Belarus even without the establishment of permanent military bases.

This could **increase the risk of provocations and incidents**, including on the Belarusian border with NATO and EU member states, **especially near the Suwalki Corridor**, as well as **along the Belarus-Ukraine border**.

How Should the West and Partners Act? (1)

Although the EU, the U.S. and their partners have **little direct leverages** over Belarus, **but they do have some** and should learn to use them effectively.

1. Support to the people of Belarus:

- constantly showing solidarity and maintaining interaction with the people of Belarus both at the political and at the civil society levels;
- providing Belarusian civil society actors with financial assistance and expertise;
- providing financial assistance and rehabilitation to victims of repressions;
- supporting Belarusian independent media and journalists;
- engaging with the middle and lower levels of the Belarusian bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies, who have not committed crimes;
- elaborating and presenting a kind of 'Marshall Plan' for Belarus that should help the post-Lukashenka democratic government to rebuild the Belarusian economy, make it more diversified and less dependent on Russia.

How Should the West and Partners Act? (2)

2. Putting pressure on Lukashenka's regime:

- keeping Belarus high on the international agenda, including in the UN and the OSCE;
- demanding from Minsk a genuine free election in accordance with the OSCE principles and under the OSCE monitoring;
- freezing financial & other aid to state institutions (except humanitarian);
- imposing sanctions against all those responsible for human rights violations.

3. Preventing Russia from meddling in Belarus:

- imposing sanctions on those responsible for meddling in Belarus;
- making it clear that any further interference will cost a lot, especially in cases of undermining Belarus' sovereignty and increasing Russian military presence;
- non-recognizing agreements signed by the Lukashenka's regime after the end of his powers in 2020, including on possible sales of Belarusian strategic enterprises.

Concluding

The West and its partners can succeed in their policy on Belarus and prevent the deterioration in security situation if they:

- become **proactive**;
- respond appropriately to the **Russian factor**;
- elaborate a **comprehensive strategy** and **maintain solidarity** in its implementation;
- are pragmatic in **promoting European values** and abandon attempts to exchange these values for illusory short-term benefits.

Thank You for Your Time!

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