



PERSPECTIVES

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Kabul in 1979, Minsk in 2020?

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,705, August 23, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Alexander Lukashenko's days as the autocratic president of Belarus are clearly numbered, and Russia will likely play a key role in his exit. What is less clear is just how that exit will come about and what role the neighbor to the East will play. Recent history provides us with a few possible scenarios.

Most observers agree that the autocratic president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, is on his way out, and that Russia will play a key role in both his departure and the country's future. But how is Lukashenko likely to depart the scene?

One possible historical analogy is that of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Syrian president Bashar Assad, who had very warm relations up to the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. At that time, the "Sultan" — who was counting on a quick conclusion of hostilities given the rapidly deteriorating positions of the Syrian regime at the start of the uprising — turned on his former friend. In Erdoğan's view, it was in Turkey's strategic interest to abandon Assad and forge relations with the friendlier, Sunni-majority-controlled government that was soon to take charge in Damascus. This was, of course, a serious miscalculation, as the Assad regime was resuscitated by Russia's entry into the fray in 2015. Nine years after the start of the war, Assad remains at the helm.

Vladimir Putin might choose to adopt a similar policy by presenting himself not as a friend of Lukashenko's but as a savior of the people of Belarus. But as Erdoğan's Syrian debacle shows, that is a risky strategy, as it leaves the initiative in the hands of the adversary. It can create a long-term stalemate, which goes against current Russian strategic thinking.

There is, however, a different precedent that might be more relevant. In 1979, the Soviet government decided to depose Hafizullah Amin, the radical leader of Afghanistan, as he had stopped following Soviet advice. The Kremlin's object was to oust Amin and install Babrak Karmal in his place, an individual who could be counted on to remain subordinate to Moscow's authority.

In many ways, the current situation in Belarus resembles the Afghanistan of 1979. The ruler of a friendly neighboring country has gotten a little full of himself and lost touch with reality. The Putin government, like the Soviet government of four decades ago, has two choices: either let the situation deteriorate even further and lose all control, or play the charade that Moscow is the defender of the rights of the people of Belarus, remove the despot, install a more pliant one, and keep Belarus within the Russian sphere of influence. (This approach proved far easier said than done in 1979, as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan led to nine years of conflict and the deaths of 2,000,000 civilians.)

The West had neither the time nor the desire to prevent the Soviet aggression against Afghanistan back in 1979. Today, the West is even less willing to engage its adversary. It might issue proclamations and declare a few individuals *persona non grata*, but that will be the extent of its actions.

For the people of Belarus to finally gain real independence, it is of paramount importance that the crisis be shortened and that Lukashenko be replaced with a transitional government before the "liberators" from the East arrive. Time is not on their side.

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