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The Case of Belarus: Russia's Fear of Popular Revolutions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Belarus is the last remaining state on Russia's western border not to have experienced a popular revolution since the 1990s, but revolutionary fervor is growing there. Events in Minsk have great geopolitical import, as one would expect from a state located between Russia and Europe.

For Russia, the crisis in Belarus caused by the August presidential election result is of a geopolitical nature. Moscow might not be openly stating its geopolitical calculus, but in its eyes, the Belarus problem resembles the uprisings in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan and represents a similar problem in the long run.

Whatever the arguments propounded by world analysts that protests in Belarus are not about geopolitics and more about popular grievances against President Alexander Lukashenko, the issue will ultimately transform into serious geopolitical game.

For Moscow, the Belarus problem has been about geopolitics from the very beginning, though it was only on August 27 of this year that Vladimir Putin announced the creation of a special "law enforcement reserve" for use in Belarus should the situation get "out of control."

The Russians understand that an "Armenia-style" revolution in Belarus could theoretically take place, but it would open the country more to Europe and thereby create geopolitical dilemmas similar to those created in Ukraine before 2014. The Russians further grasp that in Ukraine, the situation was out of control even before the Maidan Revolution. Moscow's influence was not

sufficient to stop Ukraine's gradual shift toward closer ties with the collective West.

For the Russian leadership, events in Belarus are a continuation of the "revolutionary" fervor that has been spreading across the former Soviet space since the early 2000s. What is troubling is whether or not the Russians see this process as an expression of the popular will that is largely independent of the West. Several indicators point to an ingrained belief within the Russian political elite that in fact the West has orchestrated the popular upheaval in Belarus.

Russian history might be of help here. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire fought the spread of European revolutionary thought along and inside its borders. It built alliances to confront it and fought wars to forestall its progress. But in the end, the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent policies of the Communist Party were largely based on European thought, though many western ideas were changed or entirely refashioned.

Similar developments took place during the late Soviet period. By the 1980s, popular disapproval of the Soviet system had grown exponentially. A revolutionary fervor for independence ran amok in the Baltic states, Ukraine, and elsewhere. True reforms would have served as a cure, but half-hearted economic and social measures only deepened the crisis. Military power was used in a number of capitals of Soviet republics, but again only half-heartedly. Thus was the entire Soviet edifice brought down.

Modern Russian leadership should see that there is essentially no cure for popular grievances and mass movements along its borders. Russian history gives multiple examples of how military intervention against revolutionary fervor can bring immediate results but leave long-term prospects bleak. The defeat of revolutionary passions can only take place by minimizing those economic, social, and state-system problems that usually generate popular upheaval. This is the dilemma now facing modern Russia. The revolutions that occurred over the past 20 years, and the situation today in Belarus, all fit into this pattern.

For the moment, Lukashenko has won this round of strife with the protesters, and his rule is highly likely to continue. But what is equally certain is that the protests gave birth to a massive popular movement in a country that was once famous for the quiescence of its population.

Russia fears that eventually, this revolutionary tide will close in on Russian society. Lukashenko has stressed this idea, saying in an interview that mass disturbances will one day reach Moscow. Many rightly believed this was a

ploy by Lukashenko to scare the Russians into supporting him—after all, Belarus is far smaller than Russia and much less important than Ukraine. Still, Lukashenko was right insofar as he pinpointed possible long-term problems Russia could face as it moves closer to 2036.

Much depends on the West as well. It faces a dilemma in which it ought to pursue a policy of vocal condemnation and perhaps even impose heavy sanctions—but from a balance of power perspective, moves like those would distance Minsk and push it closer to the Russian orbit. This dilemma of morality versus geopolitical calculus will haunt the West in the years to come.

Belarus exports 10.5 million tons of oil products per year, including about six million tons through the ports of the Baltic states to world markets and another 3–3.5 million tons to Ukraine. Redirecting flows from the Baltic ports to Russian ones has been discussed, but this option is less attractive to Minsk because of the longer distances involved. This comes at a time when the Baltic states imposed sanctions on high-ranking Belarussian officials and the EU is pondering serious measures.

With each such move from the West, Russia gets another opportunity. Russia has professed interest in encouraging Belarus to redirect its oil exports to Russian ports and has agreed to refinance a \$1 billion debt to Russia.

A broader picture might help put the events in Belarus in context. In the South Caucasus, the Russians appear to have reached the limit of their influence. They more or less firmly control the overall geopolitical picture, but have nevertheless failed to derail Western resolve to compete in this region. In Central Asia, Russia has more secure positions, but the region in general is less important to the Kremlin than the western borderlands.

It is thus the western front—Belarus and Ukraine—that is a major theater for Moscow. Since 2015, many have believed that Syria is Russia's top geopolitical theater, but this assumption is based simply on the intensity of the immediate processes that are transpiring in the Middle East. With or without Syria, Moscow's global standing will not be fundamentally damaged. Belarus is a different matter entirely. Changes there, and by extension a potentially anti-Russian state, would constitute a direct threat to Moscow.

For Russia, Belarus is the last safe buffer zone on its western border. Ukraine is lost, as is Moldova, and the Baltic states have long been under NATO protection. Only Belarus serves as a bridge for Russia to move militarily into the heart of Europe. To lose it would be tantamount to a complete “encirclement” of Russia by the West, as argued by Russian politicians.

This geopolitical reality also means that Belarus is the country that will remain most susceptible to Russian geopolitical influence. No wonder Russia is pushing to station its air base on Belarussian soil, reinvigorate the Union state, and intensify Minsk's economic dependence on Moscow. As was the case with Ukraine, the upheaval in Belarus is about regional geopolitics.

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