



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Belarus Needs Peaceful US Engagement

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Peaceful revolution has finally come to the last dictatorship on Russia's Eastern European periphery. President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus has become an illegitimate leader due to a rigged election. Facing weeks-long massive public demonstrations, he has appealed to Vladimir Putin for help—but what happens next might be up to Donald Trump.

A CIA assessment of Vladimir Putin's views and policies concluded that he and his Kremlin apparatus clearly favor Donald Trump over Joe Biden in the 2020 US presidential election. Trump's caution in remarking on the democratic movement in Belarus stands in contrast to Biden's more hawkish posture. If he wins, Biden is likely to adopt more assertive policies toward Russia and to vocally support peaceful revolution in Belarus.

Mass protests erupted in that country in the wake of the rigged presidential election of Alexander Lukashenko, who conducted a secret ceremony in which he was sworn in for a new five-year term. Considered "Europe's last dictator," Lukashenko has been in power in Minsk for over 25 years.

The huge protests in Minsk, largely organized by women, have shown police brutally trying to control masses of chanting women of all ages. Both men and women have been beaten, arrested, and hauled to jail. Whatever happens with the ongoing massive protests, the country's society is growing increasingly less governable for a dictator.

Peaceful revolution in Belarus is a key national security issue for Putin. After the 1991 geopolitical dismemberment of Russia, when it lost its non-Russian republics in the Baltics and the Caucasus, Russia's periphery moved dramatically inward. A

small country with only 9 million people, Belarus is on the new Russian periphery, along with Moldova, Georgia, some of the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

To Putin, the Belarus demonstrations must evoke other peaceful revolutions that occurred at the Soviet periphery in the past, such as the 1968 Czechoslovak Prague Spring and Poland's Gdansk Solidarity movement in 1980. In those cases, the potential for spillover to Russia was a key reason for Soviet intervention. Endless popular attempts at peaceful revolution and ensuing chaos in Belarus would put that country into question as a reliable geopolitical buffer for Russia against NATO countries.

It might also jeopardize Belarus's standing as Russia's economic partner in maintaining the Druzhba oil pipeline for supplies to Central Europe. Oil contamination has already halted the westbound supply at a cost of billions to Russia in US dollar terms.

As in the past, there is still the threat of potential spillover of revolt into Russia. There have already been small demonstrations inside Russia in support of freedom for Belarus. Tolerance of freedom in Minsk might encourage demonstrations and demands by Russian dissidents in Moscow, as occurred in 1968 and 1980.

But as in those earlier Soviet interventions, Russian military interference in Belarus could have incalculable negative consequences for Russia: above all, the possible pullout by Germany from the NordStream 2 gas pipeline project.

Although the US, along with Canada, Britain, and the EU, backs sanctions against Lukashenko and his associates, there has been no strong support for peaceful revolution in Belarus by the US State Department and no formal statement from the White House. Trump's muteness is reminiscent of President Lyndon Johnson's silence during the 1968 Prague Spring, and it may be similarly motivated by fears of antagonizing Russian leaders amid strategic arms reduction negotiations. Putin is certainly aware that under Trump (again as in 1968), the US and its NATO allies are not fully coordinated. Trump has neither voiced support for democratic values nor rejected the possibility of a violent solution by Lukashenko and Putin.

Putin has stated that he has designated a police force for a possible intervention in Belarus—but only [“if protests there turn violent.”](#) In an interview, he said, “There is no such need at the moment,” and voiced his hope that the situation in Belarus would “stabilize.” The latest news indicates that not just a Russian police force but also Russian military troops, including paratroopers, have participated in joint exercises in Belarus, but it appears that Putin has not yet decided what to do.

Lukashenko can be considered an incarnation of Romania's late dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. The Belarus dictator has skillfully played the West and Moscow against

each other for decades, buttering up one to entice concessions from the other. In following the Ceaușescu model, which severely antagonized Brezhnev and Gorbachev, Lukashenko has not endeared himself to Putin, but he is likely warning the Russian president that if the Minsk protests aren't contained, the spirit of revolution will one day reach Moscow.

Putin is suspected of supporting if not ordering criminal tactics against democratic-minded opposition figures who appeared to be developing close ties with other democrats in Eastern Europe. On August 20, 2020, in the midst of the Belarus crisis, Russian opposition figure and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, a man with many contacts in Belarus, was poisoned by a nerve agent and hospitalized in serious condition in Germany. The nerve agent had been tested by Russian agents earlier. It was used to neutralize a less prominent dissident in Russia, as well as former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Great Britain. The “advantage” of the nerve agent is that it does not kill but inflicts a long and difficult psychological and physical recovery.

Ordinarily Trump would have—and indeed should have—expressed his dismay at the poisoning of Navalny. Though he disavows Russian meddling in US elections, his silence on Lukashenko has the appearance of being tied to his belief that Putin has ordered Russian propaganda and media outlets to support him against Biden in the 2020 elections, as he did in 2016 against Clinton.

No matter how full Trump's plate may be, upholding the sanctioning of Lukashenko and his associates is not enough. Trump needs to speak out on behalf of the people of Belarus and to express support for democratic values. Biden has already slammed Trump for not doing so.

Putin may even realize that any Russian intervention in Belarus prior to the November US election will negatively affect Trump, who would be accused of, if not colluding with Russia, at least making it easy for the Kremlin to suppress the peaceful revolution in Minsk.

Moreover, Trump should remember that in 1968, President Johnson, a Democrat, ignored a peaceful revolution in Prague in favor of arms negotiation with Russia. His closing his eyes to the Soviet intervention not only led to the postponement of arms negotiations but was detrimental to the election of his VP, Hubert Humphrey. The enduring lesson for US presidents is not to be indifferent to large peaceful revolutions at Russia's periphery.

The Russian president has had mixed experiences trying to support political tyrants. It did not work out in Ukraine, where dictator Viktor Yanukovich had to run for his life to Russia in 2014. Putin's rescue of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad a year later could only be accomplished through a direct and very expensive military

intervention. But what was possible in the conflict-ridden Middle East would be much more difficult in an Eastern European country bordering NATO members Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

Indeed, Putin's latest moves—inviting Lukashenko to Moscow, providing him with a \$1.5 billion loan, and holding joint Belarus-Russia military exercises—seem to suggest that the Russian president is still on the fence. Putin might choose to wait until it becomes clear who has won the US election before cutting the Gordian knot in Belarus.

With the EU having rejected Lukashenko's election as president of Belarus as illegitimate, there is an opportunity for Trump to broker an alternative solution to the Belarus crisis that does not involve force.

Putin may be the “[biggest liar in the world](#),” as Trump's former National Security Adviser Gen. H.R. McMaster put it. World leaders tend to lie, and Putin, who was schooled in KGB techniques of deception, is a master. Yet as suggested by Henry Kissinger, he is also a staunch defender of Russia's national interests. Instead of using forceful suppression, Putin might accept help from his opposite number, whom he views as a cunning and basically friendly leader.

A negotiated settlement involving economics, geopolitics, and politics could work in Belarus, a nation that has traditionally had close cultural, linguistic, political, and economic ties with Russia. High-level negotiations with Putin leading to the retirement of the Belarus dictator and support for democratic elections could have benefits for Russia. A negotiated settlement could preserve Russia's strategic as well as economic interests. It could guarantee Belarus's rejection of NATO membership, as well as economic agreements in which the US reduces burdensome sanctions on Russia. It might also provide aid to economically strapped Belarus from Western Europe and America.

One hopeful sign was a surprising statement by Putin in which he essentially proposed that Russia and America stop meddling in each other elections by agreeing on “... a comprehensive program of practical measures to reboot our relations in the field of security, in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).” He proposed the “exchange, in a mutually acceptable format, [of] guarantees of non-intervention into internal affairs of each other, including [into electoral processes](#).”

This might be a step in the right direction toward recognizing the need for new and bold initiatives in the complex US-Russian relationship, no matter who wins the US election. The time has come for Trump to respond with initiatives of his own on the explosive situation in Belarus, with a possible role for the US as mediator.

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