

The Belarus Dichotomy: 'The Marshall Plan for Belarus' or 'Putin's Plan'?

The Kremlin is inciting conflict in Belarus and luring the West into negotiations trap

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Belarus has come to a crucial bifurcation point. Now the country has two principal scenarios for the future.

The first scenario is a real dialogue between the old and the new government (with or without the participation of the first president Lukashenka). To keep internal peace and stability, this scenario is acceptable for everyone – except for the old government chief executives and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In the event of successful peaceful transit and the restoration of independent judicial system in Belarus, these two groups will lose everything, including freedom. If the events will unfold this way, the flight or arrest of Lukashenka is a matter of several weeks.

The second option can be defined by an old government rejecting any form of dialogue with the absolute majority of the citizens of Belarus (synonym to the supporters of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who de-facto won the elections). This scenario means critical deterioration of internal political stability to a degree of a civil conflict. Shockingly enough, the Belarusian Defense Minister [for the time being] Viktor Khrenin has already announced (with a certain bravado) that he is ready for the events to unfold this way.

So far, we are observing a rapid development of the situation in line with the second scenario. Over the span of just a few weeks, this may become an irreversible process that will lead to the actual disappearance of Belarus as an independent state. The window of opportunity is closing rapidly. And now, there are only three groups of people inside the old government who are still able to stop these processes, and put them on the course for a dialogue instead of the violence. For that, in the upcoming two months before the inauguration, Belarusian regional elites, mid-level officials, and special service officers should openly refuse to consider Lukashenka a legitimately elected president and declare disagreement with the officially announced results of August 9 elections.

On August 18, Russia openly intervened in the internal political affairs of Belarus at the invitation of Lukashenka himself when five groups of Russian advisers (AP RF, Government of the RF, FSB, RF army, and MIA Rossiya Segodnya) landed to Minsk. This is the date at which undercover Russian hybrid operation experts and Lukashenka launched a joint operation to 'donbasize' Belarus. The first president of Belarus who, beyond any doubt, lost the elections, is now purportedly inciting civil conflict in the middle of Europe under the guidance of advisers from Moscow. Lukashenka came to understanding that the overwhelming majority of the Belarusians have united in a desire to get rid of the usurper. Therefore, all of his activity towards Belarus as a state is now guided by a principle 'If I can't have you, no one can!'

The 'donbasization' of Belarus by the forces of Lukashenka clan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus and Russian advisers are now showing themselves in three dimensions:

1. Radicalization of propaganda within Belarusian state media. In fact, all state media now functions as a nationwide multidimensional news holding of oligarch Lukashenka. The programming includes outright fake news, dehumanization of the elections-winning side, hate speech, the promotion of narratives promoting the confrontation between the inhabitants of eastern and western regions of Belarus, as well as spreading non-existent programmatic theses of Tsikhanouskaya (such as the 'prohibition of the Russian language', etc.).

2. Using the administrative resource to create a public image of mass support for Lukashenka within the 'anti-Maidan' format. This includes automobile 'parades' with the use of cars without the license plates, rallies of state employees (foremost - school education workers) who are forced to participate in these rallies at the threat of dismissal, and promotion of social media groups and online advertising that dehumanizes Tsikhanouskaya and her supporters.

3. Provocation of a direct clash between the participants of the rallies for Lukashenka's resignation and the #Yabatka ('I am the Old Man') rallies, which are being coordinated by the security forces and the staff of the presidential administration of Belarus (Lukashenka's press secretary Natalya Eismant was spotted in Telegram public group 'Auto rally MINSK. FOR THE PRESIDENT !!!! ! For Belarus!'. During one of their events, online activists spotted the participant cars that belong to the special services, state organizations, and even a 'Bentley Brooklands', which presumably is confiscated property that belongs to the Belarusian businessman Vitaly Arbuzau).

In the absence of support within the country, Lukashenka can only rely on the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There is now serious condemnation of police violence and lawlessness within other internal security agencies, and Lukashenka risks to completely lose control inside the country before his inauguration.

At the same time, a new consensus is now being formed among the Western countries to not acknowledge Lukashenka as the country's legitimate leader after the reset of his presidential term during 2020 inauguration should it happen at all. In this situation, the country's dichotomy between a dialogue of the old and the new government and a civil conflict can be defined in a different way - 'The Marshall Plan for Belarus' or 'Putin's Plan'.

'The Marshall Plan for Belarus' is a situation in which the dialogue and the process of power transition will be taking place free of the Kremlin control. During and after the transit, Belarus would be receiving economic and institutional support from global democratic community to sustain rapid transit. This should make the reforms of the political, economic and social spheres as painless as possible, especially for vulnerable groups and sectors of society.

At the same time, it would be Belarus's own decision to decide what blocs and treaty formations it would or would not join.

This format of peaceful transition remains possible since the Kremlin's advisers have not yet settled in solidly and done considerable harm. Since the process of 'donbasiation' of Belarus has not reached the point where the democratic world is ready to accept any agreements with the Kremlin regarding Belarus just to stop the bloodshed, the situation could be reversed. While in the case of Ukraine the stakes were put on the Eastern part of the country only, in the case of Belarus we speak about the whole country. That is why it is now important for the Kremlin to delay any dialogue between the old and newly-elected authorities and unleash (or at least simulate) a civil conflict on Belarusian soil to secure favorable positions to further bargain and take control over the transit.

This needs to be understood by the Belarusian elites since they may soon be drawn into the process of colonial appropriation by the Kremlin. This also need to be understood by the global West, who may find itself drawn into another trap of 'the Normandy format talks' – this time, on the future of Belarus.

This is exactly why there are now signals from the Kremlin to the West about its readiness to conduct political transit in Belarus. Simultaneously Lukashenka speaks out about various 'threats' coming from Lithuania and Poland that may require an intervention within the CSTO format. All

this is supposed to scare the West with a military intervention into Belarus and persuade Western countries to negotiate the fate of Belarus without Belarusians themselves.