

THE HOUSE THAT LUKASHENKO BUILT: THE FOUNDATION, EVOLUTION, AND FUTURE OF THE BELARUSIAN REGIME

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Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has built a highly consolidated, adaptive authoritarian regime. Examining how the Belarusian political system is structured and how its relationships with its citizens, Russia, and the West have evolved may help shed light on possible paths that Minsk could take as Lukashenko ages and economic challenges continue to mount.

The Consolidation and Evolution of the Belarusian Regime

Since taking office, Lukashenko has maintained tight control over Belarusian politics.

- Lukashenko's authoritarianism has been rooted in respect for Belarus's Soviet past, weak state institutions (besides the presidency), state dominance of the economy, paternalism, close relations with Russia, and a heavy emphasis on political stability.
- To mitigate threats to the political system, Lukashenko carefully vets bureaucrats for loyalty, prevents the emergence of alternative centers of power, and heavily restricts organized mass protests.

Yet, in recent years, Belarusian politics has evolved in important respects:

- The Belarusian regime has noticeably broadened the country's self-identity by increasingly stressing its independence; pursuing a balanced, multivector foreign policy; cultivating a Belarusian national identity; and projecting a neutral peacekeeping role in the region.
- Minsk's foreign policy has become more pragmatic over the last decade. Belarus seeks to balance its ties with Russia and the West, while contending with declining material support from Moscow. The Belarusian government's enthusiasm for Eurasian integration has declined, but Minsk realizes that Europe offers no mid-term alternative.
- Belarusian society remains largely pro-Russian, with a stable, sizable pro-European minority. Although many Belarusians lean toward Moscow in principle, they will not sacrifice their sovereignty and share the costs of Russian foreign policy.

Forks in the Road to Minsk

- Belarusian elites remain united around Lukashenko. The political system is likely consolidated enough to allow him to grow old in his post, though if he were to pass away unexpectedly, a chaotic power struggle could ensue in the absence of a chosen successor.
- In recent years, a group of progressive senior economic bureaucrats has emerged and is attempting to convince Lukashenko to at least undertake market reforms. If pursued, this course could eventually empower autonomous oligarchs and cause Belarus to transition to a softer form of authoritarianism.
- Some have speculated that Lukashenko could eventually use a constitutional referendum to shift from personalized rule to a ruling party that could rally support around a designated successor.
- Unlike Ukraine, Belarus is highly unlikely to experience revolutionary regime change or a sharply different foreign policy. Even if such changes happened in Minsk, Moscow would likely find it more effective and less risky to respond with economic statecraft than with military force.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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