The Eurasia Center's International Security Program

Belarus on a Knife's Edge - Its Future is Uncertain?

Belarusian Dictator Alexander Lukashenko speaks to journalists at joint Russia-Belarus military drills near Osipovichi on Feb 17, 2022, totally denies invasion plans. Photo Credit: AP Alexander Zemlianichenko Jr/AP

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August 16, 2020, pro-democracy protesters wave the white-red-white flag in Minsk, Belarus. Wikimedia Commons, Photo Credit: Максим Шикунец (Maxim Shikunets)

One hundred years ago, Belarus was at a crossroads. The aftermath of the first World War was a chaotic time in Eastern Europe as old empires fell and new nations scrambled for territory and to define themselves as people. From the fires of war emerged the nations of Poland, the Baltic States, Finland, Czechoslovakia - and the constituent nations of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. Today, these nations also find themselves at a crossroads: Ukraine pulling the West to align with the European Union and Russia isolating itself from the international system. Belarus, however, faces an uncertain future.

The Nation of Belarus

Belarus, as a nation, emerged in 1918 and has been tied to Russia ever since. Historically, Belarusians have always been oppressed by others. From the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Polish Commonwealth and the Russian Empire, the people of Belarus have been dominated by foreign nobility. It was not until the 19th century that a sense of a distinct "Belarusian" culture and language were developed in contrast to the Russification program of the Russian Tsars. The belief that Belarusians and Ukrainians were just uneducated Russians was widespread at the time and continues to this day in various forms, most visibly in Putin's claims about Ukraine justifying his military invasion.

Belarusian independence in 1918, waving the white-red-white flag, came amidst a political dynamic where the various nation-states of Eastern Europe scrambled to claim the remnants of the Austrian, German and Russian empires. Within the context of Russia, Belarus was recognized as an independent nation by the Soviet Government. Lenin officially declared and recognized the right to sovereignty for the various peoples of the former Russian Empire. In practice however, Belarus wound up being governed as the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, a founding (but not equal) member of the USSR. Because of the unclear boundaries between peoples, part of what would become Belarus became part of Poland, an area that would be added to Belarus after the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939. The Soviet Union continued policies encouraging the use of the Russian language over the Belarusian language and the suppression of Belarusian nationalism until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The 20th Century was not kind to Belarus, as shown by how it suffered from a series of various invasions. The Germans invaded in World War I, followed by the White Russian the Bolshevik Red Army during the Russian Civil War. Nazi Germany invaded in 1941, followed by the Soviet Red Army again in 1944. At the end of World War II, Belarus had suffered a larger population loss than any other combatant nation during the war. In fact, over one in four of all Belarusians and over 90% of its Jewish population were killed. This event was a significant part of Belarusian cultural memory and its legacy is divisive to this day. In both Belarus and Ukraine, there is a divide between the prevailing attitude of pride in their efforts to defeat fascism and the ultra-nationalist support of Nazi collaborators; the latter of which is what Putin refers to when wishing to "de-Nazify" Ukraine. There is a strand of right-wing nationalist support for neo-Nazism and antisemitism in smaller groups, as in Ukraine and Russia, yet the overwhelming majority of both Belarus and Ukraine are deeply opposed to fascism. Nazi Germany was a defeated invader that destroyed millions of lives during the Great Patriotic War.

The legacy of the Soviet Union is stronger in Belarus than perhaps anywhere else. Nostalgia for the USSR was a key component of Lukashenko's early political support. He promised a continuation of the state-run economy, close ties to Russia, and opposition to the capitalist "shock therapy" that was mismanaged in Russia to such an extent that life expectancy decreased by an astonishing five years in the early 1990s. As someone who promoted his every-man persona, patriarchal attitude and history as a manager of a collective farm, Lukashenko offered continuity and stability. When talking to a friend in Minsk a year after the 2014 Euro-Maidan revolution in Ukraine, I was told "Lukashenko is not a good President but at least we're not like Ukraine." Within the context of the former USSR, Lukashenko offered stability and continuity in tumultuous times (sentence is repetitive about what was said earlier- "offered continuity and stability." However, for years he has eliminated any type of opposition party contenders and their supporters by brutally cracking down on their political rallies and demonstrations. Lukashenko's political opponents have often served years in prison under his President for life regime.

Map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including attacking through Belarus. Wikimedia Commons

The Future of Belarus

Today, President Lukashenko rules the country through electoral fraud and an oppressive state apparatus, presiding over an economy split between the old system of USSR-like state run factories and the new system of using a modern tech industry. Prior to the massive wave of protests that nearly toppled the government in 2020, Belarus leveraged the interests of Russia and Europe. Lukashenko traditionally balanced Belarus's economic dependence on subsidized Russian oil which propped up its economy and improved relations with Europe which allowed it access to the world economy. The protests of the 2020 election changed everything. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya ran and won in the 2020 Belarusian presidential election as the main opposition candidate after her husband Sergei Tikhanovsky was arrested in Hrodna by Belarusian authorities in 2020. Faced with an existential threat to his regime, Lukashenko turned to Russia for support as he declared himself the winner of the election. Despite massive protests by its people, with 100's of thousands of Belarussians taking to the street and protesting, Lukashenko and his repressive internal security forces brutally repressed all protestors and crippled the opposition party. Many members of the opposition party were arrested and others were forced to flee the country, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the true President of Belarus, who continues her efforts to liberate Belarus in exile. Many protestors were tortured, abused, and are serving long prison sentences in Belarus. Cut off by Western sanctions and air travel, after a major opposition activist was kidnapped on an international flight, Lukashenko could no longer balance relations between East and West, and found himself solidly dependent on Putin's regime and its generous loans to prop up his failed nation state.

Belarusian Dictator Alexander Lukashenko speaks to journalists at joint Russia-Belarus military drills near Osipovichi on Feb 17, 2022, totally denies invasion plans. Photo Credit: AP Alexander Zemlianichenko Jr/AP

In the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Belarus has played a key role in the Russian military operation. It participated in large war games with Putin's forces. It hosted Russian troops during the buildup, allowed Russian troops and supplies to pass through on the path to Kyiv, and diplomatically supported Russia in justifying their invasion. However, Lukashenko had been hesitant to fully commit to the war and send Belarusian troops to fight in Ukraine. In fact, on March 4, Lukashenko announced that Belarus would not be sending its own troops to Ukraine, a claim that has remained true so far. Dissidents within Belarus have reportedly attempted to sabotage Russian supply operations and railways used to ferry troops and supplies to the northern front in Ukraine. Despite the dangerous conditions, Belarusians have also openly protested the war.

The future of Belarus will be determined by the actions of its people. Hundreds of thousands of people turned out to protest for democracy less than two years ago and estimates for Lukashenko's approval are at an all-time low. Faith in the regime within the civil service has also declined considerably. Economically, the idea of state-owned industries is losing support due to the decreased export market as a result of Western sanctions. As a result, Lukashenko's only remaining pillar of support is the military and internal security forces which have the power to inflict violence on his own people to keep them in line. This is the fundamental reason Lukashenko resists joining the war directly - his need for the support of the internal security apparatus and the Armed Forces of Belarus. As demonstrated by the (lack of) progress Russia has made in Ukraine, the war is massively demoralizing for the soldiers on the ground. Lukashenko is unaffected when Russian troops abandon their tanks on the side of their road, however support of the rank-and-file soldier in participating in the invasion of Ukraine is extremely low. Many have made it known to their commanding officers that they will not participate. However, if Russian demands grow

overwhelming, Lukashenko could be forced to send troops anyway, as he has become a "puppet of Putin."

Belarus has a media landscape different from Russia, one that would make the acceptance of war propaganda by the Belarusian people more difficult to achieve for the regime. All independent media operations were brutally suppressed during the 2020 protests and the widespread use of alternative media sources during and after the mass protests left the population much more skeptical of state news sources and more media literate towards online sources. Combined with the fact that the war has already been going on for a long time, there is almost no potential to convince a sufficient number of Belarusians to support the war in Ukraine if they were forced by Putin to join.

This leaves Lukashenko in a bind and the future of Belarus uncertain. On the one hand, he faces the internal threat of a popular uprising overthrowing his regime from within. This would set Belarus on a path towards resembling the democratic nations of Europe, joining Ukraine in drifting away from the Russian sphere of influence. This scenario is what Lukashenko narrowly avoided in 2020 thanks to Putin's financial support and support from Russian internal security forces. On the other hand, Putin has reintroduced the denunciation of Ukrainian (and by extension, Belarusian) nationhood as a concept. The Russian/Belarusian "Union State" theoretically binds the two countries in a political union, but looms like a Sword of Damocles over the very idea of an independent Belarus with Lukashenko as its leader. Putin's ever-increasing demands towards integration - militarily, economically and culturally - threaten to return Belarus back under the thumb of Russian domination. His recent defeat at the gates of Kyiv and subsequent retreat back to Belarus is strategic blow to his effort to conquer Ukraine. Russian troops are regrouping and developing a new strategy to capture Ukraine. Regardless, Lukashenko is essentially balancing on a knife edge between Europe and Russia and compared to just five years ago, his room to maneuver has shrunk significantly. His days may be numbered, like his puppet master Vladimir Putin.

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