

# Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Usurper of Power in Belarus

*Joerg Forbrig*

Belarus's already hot political summer turned hotter today. In a rushed and secretive ceremony, the embattled authoritarian Alyaksandr Lukashenka declared himself president for a sixth term. This brazen self-appointment is a slap in the face of the millions of Belarusians who clearly did not vote for him in last month's election. It scorns the hundreds of thousands who have peacefully gathered across the country for weeks, demanding the departure of the long-time ruler. And it mocks tens of thousands who have been terrorized by Lukashenka's police state through arbitrary arrest, torture, job loss, or forced exile. For all these courageous Belarusians, and for many who have remained silent so far, the key question is now how to respond to this obvious seizure of power. Just as importantly, the international community, from Lukashenka's sponsors in Russia to his critics in Europe and the West, will have to react to this usurpation of the presidency.

At first glance, it may seem as if, in swiftly and formally prolonging his reign, Lukashenka has once again outfoxed many in Belarus and abroad. Observers have been scratching their heads for weeks over when his term of office would come to an end; which responses this would elicit domestically and internationally; what consequences this may carry for his legitimacy, his conduct vis-à-vis protesters, and his interaction with foreign governments; and how this would shape the further course and outcome of the political crisis in Belarus. All these concerns have now been fast-forwarded.

Upon closer inspection, however, Lukashenka's self-appointment signals how rickety his rule and regime have become over the last weeks. Faced with widespread disdain among Belarusians, he staged a surprise and clandestine ceremony without prior announcement or live television broadcast as mandated by law. He bussed in a few hundred handpicked officials but refrained from inviting foreign diplomats or dignitaries. No loyalists were rallied in public support, likely owing to short notice, while main thoroughfares in downtown Minsk were closed and the internet switched off, clearly to prevent spontaneous protests. Only after the fact did official confirmation appear in the state media that Lukashenka had assumed the presidency again. Taken together, this hardly projects strength and legitimacy from a ruler who, according to his own official data, received 80 percent of the vote. If anything, it is the conduct of an impostor who knows that his public support is down to single digits.

This obvious weakness will be noted by all sides in the Belarusian crisis. Among citizens, the self-coronation will only recharge mobilization against the regime. News of the ceremony immediately triggered smaller protests at universities across the country and in some neighborhoods of Minsk, with large-scale protests expected for later in the day and week. Chances are that these will be met with the same police brutality and

14 September 2020

lawlessness that has become customary for Lukashenka's handling of the political crisis so far. This may, over time, suppress larger public protests, but it will hardly erase the broad-based opposition against an illegitimate government. Instead, discontent will continue to find new formats—from strikes and sabotage at state enterprises to growing civil disobedience, such as non-payment of taxes and utilities, and from neighborhood gatherings to partisan-type action against government websites, officials, and institutions. Lukashenka has just set the dial on further escalation.

The inauguration is also likely to have an effect among state officials. Many civil servants are already uneasy about how the government has acted on the election and ensuing protests. Although the leadership managed to stem an initial wave of defections from state institutions, including the security forces, cohesion within the regime apparatus remains precarious. Officials, including many doubters, will now have to decide whether or not to serve an illegitimate regime. To date, more critically minded officials may have been able to justify their loyalty with the argument that they were serving a legitimate and acknowledged government. With today's farcical retaking of office by Lukashenka, this is no longer the case. This may well induce fresh fissures among apparatchiks and prompt further departures. As a result, the functioning of state institutions will be undermined at a time of socioeconomic as well as political crisis.

Lukashenka's self-coronation also weakens Belarus from without. Russia, his key supporter, was unaware of the planned ceremony, according to the Kremlin spokesman. It has provided some help to the regime over the last weeks, effectively preventing it from implosion. Nonetheless, Moscow seemed to keep its options open, including on Lukashenka's own future. With his inauguration, Russian leeway has effectively shrunk. Moscow now faces a stark choice between either supporting the Belarusian ruler, come hell or high water, or axing him sooner or later. In the first case, the Kremlin is bound to alienate Belarusians; in the latter, it would act against its own instincts. This is the dilemma that was handed to the Kremlin by Lukashenka today.

By comparison, the EU and the West find themselves in a very clear position. The EU has already announced that it does not acknowledge the official result of last month's election. Logically, it should now declare Lukashenka's presidency fully illegitimate. Several member states, including Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states, did so immediately today upon news of the inauguration. Following on from that, the EU must now clarify the practical consequences of this non-recognition of Lukashenka.

One step should be to add him, and perhaps his entire government, to its emerging sanctions list, which needs to be enacted swiftly. Another must be to freeze all official contacts with the Belarusian government, illegitimate as it is given that it was installed by Lukashenka himself. A third must be to look at economic sanctions against key enterprises that provide the revenues to sustain Lukashenka's police state. And a fourth needs to be generous humanitarian and democracy assistance to Belarusian society. It will be the citizens of the country on whom Lukashenka, now officially the usurper of power, will exact revenge for their courageous opposition.

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