

Belarus: preparing for the post-Lukashenka era?

Description

Since the beginning of Russia's massive invasion of Ukraine, the ability of Belarus to make its own choices has been questioned many times: will Belarus go to war alongside Russia? Faced with V. How much room for maneuver does President Aliaksandr Lukashenka have? What does he want? With speculation about his state of health running rife today, a new question is emerging: what path will Belarus take "post-Lukashenka"?

In office for 29 years and aged 68, the incumbent President of Belarus has always blown hot and cold in his relations with the West and Russia. In a weak position vis-à-vis Moscow since the [fraudulent election of August 2020](#), his choices about the massive war launched by Vladimir Putin on 24 February 2022, while not central to strategic thinking, are nevertheless being closely observed: Minsk has authorized Russian troops to use its territory and infrastructure to invade Ukraine, is probably supplying arms and munitions to the Russian armed forces and is contributing to the training of Russian soldiers on Belarusian military bases. At the same time, it has to be said that Alyaksandr Lukashenka did not allow the Belarusian armed forces to take an active part in Moscow's war against Ukraine.



This relative restraint is at odds with the acceleration in recent months of the process of creating the State of the Russian-Belarusian Union, which seems to confirm the loss of Belarusian sovereignty: Without bloodshed, step by step, and with relative discretion while international attention is focused elsewhere, is Vladimir Putin not in the process of achieving what he has failed to do for nearly eighteen months in Ukraine, namely to purely and absorb a state and wipe it off the map of Europe?

Lukashenka's state of health: rumors and speculation

Against this backdrop, rumors about the current Belarusian President's state of health have been multiplying, particularly over the past month. They are not new, but the images of the weakened leader at the 9 May ceremonies in Moscow have given rise to much comment. However unwell he may have appeared, A. Lukashenka could not fail to visit Moscow on this occasion. While only the presidents of the Central Asian countries and the Prime Minister of Armenia [had made the trip](#), the absence of the leader of Belarus, the country in the region with the closest political ties to Russia, would have seemed an anomaly, underlining Moscow's isolation and reflecting a difficulty for the Russian President. A. Lukashenka therefore came, but it cost him physically. Struggling to hide his bandaged hand and unable to walk the hundred meters or so separating Red Square from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier without a vehicle, the Belarussian gave his host the slip, forgoing the lunch offered by the Russian President; then, back in Minsk, he did not give his traditional Victory Day speech either, being replaced by his Defence Minister. He then only appeared in public for a few days. His absence on 14 May from the ceremony at which young recruits pledged their allegiance to the Belarusian flag was also noted (his Prime Minister replaced him). While some local media reported that he was hospitalized in a Minsk hospital, he was finally filmed on 15 May visiting an Air Force.

Then, on 26 May, at the Eurasian Economic Union summit in Moscow, A. Lukashenka announced the deployment of nuclear warheads in his country, in line with the message delivered in March by his Foreign Minister, who justified the move by unprecedented Western "pressure" and claimed that the deployment in no way contradicted the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. According to Lukashenka's former diplomat [Valery Tsepkalo](#), an invalidated candidate in the 2020

presidential election who has since gone into exile and is playing a significant role in spreading suspicions that the President-in-Office is failing after his one-to-one meeting with his Russian counterpart, A. Lukashenka suffered vomiting and hemorrhaging and was admitted to Moscow's central hospital. This fuelled rumors of poisoning... but not only. On 3 June, V. Tsepkalo once again [published information](#) about his rival's state of health: according to him, the best doctors at his bedside had diagnosed disseminated intravascular coagulation syndrome (DIC), the outcome of which could be fatal.

What scenarios should be considered?

Various scenarios for the evolution of Belarusian power are circulating, which reveal the situation's complexity but [need more time to be ready to confront the sudden disappearance of the President in office](#). If he were unable to lead, and if this became known, A. Lukashenka could come up against a new awakening of Belarusian society: currently prevented by the intense repression (today, [the number of political prisoners in Belarus is estimated at 1,496](#)), it could take advantage of the vacuum caused by the failure of the autocrat. At least, that's what the Belarusian opposition in exile is hoping for, betting that it will abandon the loyalty of the armed and security forces currently accompanying A. Lukashenka. Even if it wanted to, would Russia then be in a position to intervene in Belarus to "maintain" order (as [Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov](#) recently suggested), place a Kremlin puppet in power, and complete the integration/absorption process? A. Lukashenka has made no secret of his concern, even if his alarms are nothing new: on 1 June, at the meeting of the Council of Heads of Security Agencies and Special Services of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Minsk, [he accused the West of fomenting a violent scenario to overthrow the Belarusian government](#). However, [according to Mikhailo Podoliak](#), adviser to the Ukrainian President, most Belarusian power structures are oriented towards Moscow, leaving little room for the possibility of their reversal: Whether we are talking about Aliaksandr Valfovitch, the head of the Belarusian Security Council, or Natallia Katchanova, the chairwoman of the Upper House of Parliament who is supposed to temporarily take over the reins of power in the event of the President's incapacity or death, their loyalty to the leader (and therefore to Moscow?) seems to be the order of the day. A. Lukashenka is reportedly considering giving up the presidency to become the permanent head of the People's Assembly, which has been given extraordinary powers since the constitutional referendum of 2022: formerly a simple consultative body, the Assembly should soon be able to appoint magistrates, approve the results of the presidential election and initiate impeachment proceedings against the President...

According to V. Tsepkalo, the current President of Belarus has already drawn up a plan for the transition of power involving several of the country's ruling factions. Attesting to the prevailing feverishness, A. Lukashenka's eldest son, Viktor (47), reportedly traveled to China on 31 May, while two Russian FSB planes landed in Minsk on the same day, carrying the head of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrouchev, FSB Director Alexandre Bortnikov, and Foreign Intelligence Director Serguei Narychkine.

Belarus, one of the keys to resolving the war in Ukraine?

We remember [the massive and impressive mobilization of the Belarusian population following the fraudulent re-election of A. Lukashenka in August 2020](#), which revealed the vitality of this society whose aspirations are different from those enacted by the Lukashenka/Putin duo: *"It is for this vision that we fought in 2020, at the risk of our lives and our freedoms. This is the cause for which our heroes made the ultimate sacrifices. This is the future for which thousands of our compatriots held in Belarusian prisons continue to fight relentlessly"*, insists V. Tsepkalo.

For the opponent, even if A. Lukashenka were to remain in power for a few more months (or even years), the subject is crucial and urgent: the time may be approaching for Belarus to make a new start. The West must therefore be ready to adopt decisive measures to support the return of democracy to the country. Such a change would be beneficial to Belarus (and its people), to Europe (which could take a different view of how the war in Ukraine is developing), and to the world (particularly about the deployment of nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory). According to [Natalia Radina](#), editor-in-chief of the *Charter97* website, a free and democratic Belarus guarantees Ukraine's security in the event of A. Lukashenka's unexpected disappearance and a successful counter-offensive by the Ukrainian armed forces, the 2,000 or 3,000 Belarussians currently fighting alongside the Ukrainians could be quickly sent to Belarus to ensure its democratic transition and prevent interference from the Kremlin. For [General Waldemar Skrzypczak](#), former commander of the

Polish Land Forces, these fighters could spark an uprising in Belarus: *"We must be ready to support them!"* Ukrainian political scientist [Maxime Plechko](#) analyses these remarks from a distance, pointing out that the General is speaking more like a Polish politician than a former soldier and that the future of Belarus belongs to the Belarusians.

Believing that time is running out if a window of opportunity is to be noticed, V. Tsepalo invites Brussels and Washington to seize the opportunity of A. Lukashenka's weakening by organizing consultations dedicated to the country to define the criteria allowing the involvement of all parties wishing to work towards the reconstruction of a democratic Belarus. Lukashenka by organizing talks devoted to the government to explain, as of now, the criteria allowing the involvement of all the parties wishing to work towards the reconstruction of a democratic Belarus: on 29 May, the opponent directly called on the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and the President of the European Council Charles Michel to organize a summit dedicated to Belarus as a matter of urgency, and asked for the support of the German Chancellor and the French and Polish Presidents.

Exiled opponent Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya is no different, and she regularly reminds us that a free Belarus would benefit not only the country's inhabitants but also regional security: for her, Belarus is a de facto party to the war ravaging Ukraine. Still, it could also be [a key to the solution](#). To achieve this, we need to be able to count on the opposition and Belarusian civil society.

Thumbnail: The acting President of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, at the parade on 9 May 2023, Moscow (source: [kremlin.ru](#)).

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Translated from French by Assen SLIM ([Blog](#))



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