



The Russian Perspective

August-September 2020

As part of its renewed Russia Program, the Institute for National Security Studies will publish a bimonthly newsletter, “The Russian Perspective,” which will cover the main developments in Russia and the post-Soviet arena and its policy in the international arena, including the Middle East and Israel.

The following individuals participated in preparing the publication: Zvi Magen, Dr. Sophie Kotzer, Dr. Nati Kantorovich, Daniel Rakov, and Daniela Tsurulnik. An article by Dr. Avinoam Idan is also included.

Highlights

The period surveyed was characterized by a series of marked crises in Russia’s internal arena due to the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of the constitutional referendum in Russia and the protests that occurred in its peripheral areas. A series of significant crises erupted in the post-Soviet arena, including serious riots in Belarus against the election results and Lukashenko’s government. A severe crisis also broke out in the Caucasus area following the flare up of a military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which could affect relations between Russia and Turkey as both are involved in the crisis. The Ukrainian issue also continues to affect regional stability. All these create a complex reality for Russia—in the middle of instability—both internally and all around its borders.



In the international arena, the crisis in the relations between the superpowers continues to deepen, partly following the Navalny affair and the growing information war in advance of the US elections. Regarding Middle East issues, Russia fought to isolate the United States in the UN Security Council with respect to extending the arms embargo and re-imposing the sanctions on Iran. However, it is unclear whether Russia will rush to sell arms to Teheran. Russia's increased involvement in the deconfliction arrangement in Syria aims to lay the groundwork for "last minute arrangements" with Trump, or for military steps to change the reality on the ground in the scenario of a change in administration in Washington.

Russia—the Internal Arena

Two main trends characterized the internal situation in Russia during the surveyed period: First, the constitutional referendum and changes in Russian internal politics; and second, the social protests and continued declining public support of the ruling elite. It should be noted that these trends are occurring in the context of the continuing coronavirus crisis and its political and social ramifications.

Contending with the spread of COVID-19

Russia is considered one of the hardest-hit countries by the COVID-19 virus. Overt criticism by the medical teams exposed the inability of the authorities to contend with the virus. At the same time, the authorities reported success in their efforts as well as a slow but consistent decrease in the number of infections or deaths.



The incompatibility between the facts and the government's position further eroded the level of public trust in the authorities. According to a public opinion polls conducted by Levada Center and the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), among Russian physicians, almost 50% do not trust the figures issued by the authorities and think that the actual coronavirus statistics are much worse. Serological surveys conducted in various places support this attitude. Thus, for example, the number of people with antibodies (i.e., who were sick and recovered) in Moscow is about a quarter of those tested.

In addition to the medical aspect, COVID-19 severely hit the country both economically and socially. This is most likely the main reason for the authorities' decision to quickly remove the restrictions imposed since April, including limitations on entering the country and air travel. Moreover, the battle against the coronavirus also has an international angle of positioning Russia at the forefront of this struggle. Removing the restrictions was intended primarily to to regain public trust in the government's ability to deal with the virus. The announcement regarding the development of Sputnik V, a vaccine for COVID-19, which stirred controversy in the international arena, apparently also serves the same political goal.

Amendments to the constitution

The national referendum to amend the Constitution of Russia did not yield many surprises: according to the Central Elections Committee, 77.92 % of all the voters supported the proposed changes. The main amendment enabled a reset of Vladimir Putin's tenure as president and granted him the legal legitimacy to extend his term until 2036, assuming he wins in the next two elections—in 2024 and 2030.



Moreover, besides strengthening the president and eliminating the issue of a successor, the proposed changes aim to adopt a more conservative constitution, compatible with the ideological approach guiding Russia since Putin's return to the president's office in 2012.

The spread of the coronavirus postponed the referendum date several times and affected its management: For the first time in Russian history advance voting and electronic voting were implemented (the latter was employed twice before in local elections in Moscow, in 2017 and 2019). Even though these voting modes were supposedly intended to prevent congregating and reduce the risk of infection, many opposition figures were critical of them, arguing that they enabled fraud and a lack of oversight. During the advance voting, spanning six days (July 25 to 30), there were reports of several double and even triple votes. The authorities, for their part, said that these were provocations and that criminal charges had been filed against those voters. Notwithstanding, the referendum's success enabled Russian authorities to adopt the continuous and electronic voting system for future elections as well, regardless of health considerations.

The success of the referendum strengthens the president's standing, mainly against his political rivals and accords him continued direct control over what is happening in the country from having the central position of power. The preparing of the political system for the succession battle that began in 2019 has been set aside and will most likely lead to continued covert battles between the political elites. In an effort to neutralize these conflicts, while exploiting the relative advantage after having achieved the desired result in the referendum, the president initiated a number of administrative procedures at home aimed at undermining the power equilibrium established over the past decade.



One of the main measures being considered is reinstating the investigation authority that had been removed from the Office of the Prosecutor General with the establishment of the Investigative Committee of Russia as an independent unit in 2011.

Social protests

In contrast to the political arena in which President Putin is seeking to reestablish his standing vis-à-vis the strengthening of his numerous rivals, in the public arena the popularity of the country's political elite in general, and of the president in particular, has not grown. The consistent decline in the president's popularity level, to the point of reaching an historical negative peak, indicates the public's dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. At the same time, official opposition forces, such as Alexei Navalny, have not succeeded in rallying the population. For the time being, intellectuals, journalists, and liberal businesspeople do not constitute a force that can bring people out into the streets. In contrast, the arrest of Sergei Furgal, the governor of the Khabarovsk Krai, on July 9, 2020 and his indictment on criminal charges succeeded in rallying the entire Russian Far East region, which has witnessed unprecedented protests not seen in recent years. Daily demonstrations over the past month have attracted large numbers of participants, and their number remains steady.

This has several possible explanations. Due to historic circumstances, very strong local patriotism, mainly toward the federal authorities, has always characterized the region on Siberia and the Russian Far East. The arrest of Furgal, considered "one of their own," and his replacement with a parliament member from Moscow was perceived by the local population as an attempt by the federal center to take control of the periphery.



Moreover, Furgal's case, which exposed the periphery's dissatisfaction with the center's growing power at its expense, also proved that party affiliation was not important compared to personal connections: Both Furgal and his replacement, Mikhail Degtyarev are members of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's party (LDPR — Liberal Democratic Party of Russia). This perception clearly points to the failure of the officially recognized political parties in Russia to establish their standing with the support of the population.

Concurrently, in the Republic of Bashkortostan', another social protest arena developed over the exploitation of natural resources and deforestation. In this case, as well, the protesters tried to avoid political affiliation, making only social demands and thus garnering widespread support from many public figures in the country. The non-political nature of this protest ultimately forced the authorities to stop cutting down forests.

With the exception of very few and unsuccessful attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the demonstrations, the federal government made little effort to quell them with force or alternately to taint their image on a broad scale. Nonetheless, the federal government did aggressively stop attempts to hold events in central regions and in large cities in support of the demonstrations in the Russian Far East. It is reasonable to assume that, at least for now, the authorities do not view the protests in the Far East as endangering their standing; however, it is possible that the protests are not forcibly stopped because the authorities fear that this may spur their uncontrolled spread to other regions as well.

Summary and forecast

In summary, the internal situation in Russia during the surveyed period can be characterized by growing power struggles in both the political and public arenas.



The relative advantage achieved in the constitutional referendum has not resulted in increased public support of the president, and without this, President Putin and his team will find it difficult to contend with internal rivals that threaten his continued sweeping control of Russia. The negative effect of the coronavirus adds to the severity of the situation. Therefore, it can be assumed that in the near future, the ruling elite in Russia will struggle to retain its power. As for President Putin, this is a real fight for his survival in the face of political and social stability issues in the country, at the helm of which he plans to stand for at least another decade and a half.

Russia in the International Arena

Superpower rivalry in the surveyed period was evident in two areas: public opinion (the battle waged in the cyber field); and the economy, where Western countries provide monetary support to post-Soviet bloc countries, mainly Ukraine, Moldova, and Central Asia and Caucasian countries, in order to enable them to contend with the coronavirus pandemic and to spur them to pursue an anti-Russian policy.

The cognitive warfare arena

One of the prominent trends in the struggle between the United States and Russia in July–August was evident in the cyber field. For Moscow, the coronavirus pandemic served as fertile ground for disseminating disinformation about how Western countries are contending with the pandemic.



This enabled Russian leadership to underscore the weakness of Western countries on this issue, while emphasizing the weakness of democratic government in general, and at the same time boasting of Russia's success in handling COVID-19 and its willingness to offer assistance to any country requesting such help.

A US Department of State report published on August 5, 2020, "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem," reveals the ecosystem for disseminating disinformation comprised of five main pillars: official government communications, Russian state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media and cyber-enabled disinformation. According to the report, the main websites used to disseminate disinformation include:

- Strategic Culture Foundation—an online journal of Russia's' external intelligence service, SVR. According to the report, the journal serves as a platform for Western entities to disseminate anti-American and anti-Western conspiracy theories.
- New Eastern Outlook website—a pseudo-academic publication tied to the Russian Academy of Science's Institute for Oriental Studies that promotes propaganda on issues in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.
- The report identified Global Research, a Canadian website, as the largest proxy website. According to information published on the website, the corona virus is a "Western conspiracy" initiated by the United States and developed so that the global elite can control the world.

Exposure of the report findings enabled the United States and the European Union to impose sanctions on Russian companies and businesspeople behind the dissemination of "fake news."



We can expect increased tension between the superpowers in this area, mainly due to the deteriorating economic and social situation in the Russian Federation, and considering that Moscow aspires to improve its standing in the international arena. Therefore, the imposition of such sanctions may be effective. Western cyberspace activity directed at Russia should also not be ruled out.

The economic arena

Parts of the former Soviet Republics, mainly Central Asia and the Caucasian countries, continued to constitute an area of conflict between the superpowers, while the Western countries and China are investing considerable efforts in the economic recovery of these countries and helping them fight the pandemic and restore the local economy. All this has been carried out in a marked and overt attempt to take advantage of the situation in order to advance political goals and deepen the power struggle between the superpowers in the Russia–United States–China triangle. This process began immediately with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. In July–August, this trend continued and is expected to persist in the coming months. At the same time, the financial aid granted by the European Union to the “Eastern Partnership” countries is noteworthy, as well as China’s investments in developing strategic infrastructures in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, such as the building of the new railroad from China to Europe. Furthermore, as part of the “Eastern Partnership”, the European Union assists government opponents in Belarus. Western countries and China are undoubtedly taking advantage of Russia’s economic weakness as a leverage to exert political and economic pressure.



The Post-Soviet Arena

The crisis in Belarus—on this issue, see the article dedicated to Belarus at the end of the newsletter.

The Caucasus area: The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia

The conflict between the two countries broke out in the context of the deteriorating epidemiological situation in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and given the lack of progress of the “Minsk Group,” of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), headed by France, Russia and the US, in finding a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It should be noted that both sides in recent months frequently reported violations of the ceasefire agreements in the Nagorno-Karabakh area. The current conflict erupted in the Tavush-Tavuz border area, far from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Several reasons for the outbreak of the conflict can be identified. First, Azerbaijan has an interest in creating an external crisis in order to establish President Ilham Aliyev’s standing while eliminating rival entities that are gaining strength in the country. Throughout the coronavirus crisis, President Aliyev projected an image of being in full control of the spread of the pandemic, while imposing a severe lockdown on almost the entire country, particularly the main cities. It should be noted that recently, despite the lockdown, the epidemiological situation in the country began to deteriorate. For Aliyev, uniting the country around an external crisis was very important, and it appears that the conflict with Armenia fulfilled this goal. The opposition parties presented a common front with the president and requests to join the Azeri army increased.



Second, Azerbaijan seeks to reinforce its standing in the international arena by encouraging positive public opinion regarding its position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while directly blaming Armenia's prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, for adopting an aggressive anti-Russian and anti-Western policy. To achieve this objective the Azeri foreign ministry instructed organizations of Azerbaijanis throughout the world to organize anti-Armenian demonstrations. The main message at these demonstrations is that "Armenia initiated the conflict and is not interested in a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict." The demonstrations led to violent clashes between the Azeri and Armenian sides in several cities. In Russia, the Azeri diaspora even ensured the boycott of Armenian goods in the main markets in Moscow—a step that caused economic damage to Armenian traders. Another objective of the Azerbaijanis abroad was to portray Armenia as a dangerous country that deploys terrorist organizations such as the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), a guerilla organization that operated from 1975 to the 1990s. The organizations' stated intent was to compel the Turkish government to publicly acknowledge its responsibility for the Armenian Genocide in 1915, pay reparations and cede territory for an Armenian homeland. As such, at the time the organization acted mainly against Turkish targets. The intent of a personal attack against the anti-Russian policy of Prime Minister Pashinyan was to taint his image and create a conflict between Armenia and its main and only ally—Russia. The aim was to do so by disseminating information that Armenia is willing to betray Russia, its main ally, while carrying out an anti-Russian policy that encourages cooperation with organizations such as the Soros Foundation, considered one of the main Western entities acting against Russia in the propaganda field.



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Third, Turkey's increased influence as a regional superpower and Azerbaijan's ally is expressed in Turkey's full-hearted political support of the Azari side during the conflict, as well as the growing military cooperation between the two countries, as reflected by large scale joint military exercises during the conflict.

Since the beginning of August 2020, the ceasefire in the conflict area has more or less been maintained. Russia is trying to lead all the parties to achieve a solution to the crisis. If President Aliyev's standing will not be undermined, and Azerbaijan succeeds in curbing the coronavirus pandemic and alleviating its attendant economic crisis, the military conflict between the countries in the Tavush-Tavuz border area will not escalate and it will be possible to proceed toward a ceasefire that will be accepted by both parties.

Crisis in Ukraine

Following a continued standstill on the issue of Ukraine, negotiations between the parties were renewed—with the participation of Russia, the Western countries, and Ukraine— after the Ukrainian side replaced its delegation head with the former president Karabchuk. At this stage the talks have resumed with the aim of achieving a breakthrough. This does not exclude the possibility that the events in Belarus will also have an indirect effect on the positions of the parties to the Ukrainian crisis.



Russia in the Middle East

While Middle East issues, with an emphasis on the future of the Iranian nuclear deal, a political arrangement in Syria, the situation in Libya and the Israeli-Arab relations, took the central stage in Russia's relations with the Western countries during the summer, the election crisis in Belarus and the attempted assassination of opposition leader Navalny removed most of them from the agenda. It appears that before these crises broke out, Putin sought to expand, by means of Middle East issues, the potential agenda of the summit meeting between the leaders of the five permanent members of the Security Council—an initiative he had advanced since January this year. However, the West's renewed political isolation of Russia in recent weeks led the Kremlin spokesperson, Peskov, to admit on September 9 that the summit would not take place in 2020.

Russia, together with China, vetoed on August 14 the US decision in the UN Security Council. The Council's isolation of Washington and the refusal of the temporary chairpersons to recognize the legality of the US position of activating the snapback provision (re-imposition of sanctions as part of the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA), according to which every superpower that is a party to the agreement can trigger re-imposition of Security Council sanctions, while the others cannot oppose this), was regarded as a political victory. Russia blamed the United States that its position on the issue threatens to seriously impair the legitimacy of Security Council decisions.

The Iranian defense minister visited Moscow at the end of August, and in this framework, the minister visited the ARMY-2020 Military Expo that took place in the city suburbs.



At the Expo, the minister was shown the S-400 advanced air defense system and additional systems, and he met with his Russian counterpart, Shoigu, who called for expanding cooperation with Iran in order to increase regional stability. From the Russian side, the intent of the visit was to signal its close ties with Iran and the supposed willingness of the two countries to sign arms deals after the lifting of the embargo in October. However, in the meantime, such deals have not been announced (they are prohibited as long as the embargo is in effect), and even after the embargo expires, Russia will face a dilemma of whether to rush and sign new arms deals with Iran or risk US sanctions. It is reasonable to assume that Russia will choose to wait until the results of the US elections are known, although it may also announce aerial defense deals, which in any case, as Russia interprets it, even now are not included in the embargo.

There has been increased Russian activity in the Syrian arena in recent months, perhaps as part of its efforts to reach “last minute agreements” with the Trump administration. Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Borisov (who heads the joint intergovernmental committee for the advancement of economic cooperation with Syria) and Foreign Minister, Lavrov visited Damascus on September 7. For Lavrov this was a rare visit—the first since 2012, and perhaps marked the gradual return of the Foreign Ministry to the arena, which up to now was controlled by the Ministry of Defense and the Kremlin. At least outwardly, none of the parties announced new initiatives: there was talk of the need to tighten economic cooperation as part of Syria’s restoration and the need to advance the political arrangement process in accordance with UN Security Council Decision 2254.

Prior to the Russian visit to Syria, at the end of the summer the Russians renewed the activity of the “Constitution Committee.”



While the meeting was declared a success, it was discontinued when all committee members were placed in quarantine at the end of August after three members were found to have been infected with coronavirus. Concurrently, the Russians claimed an achievement in their relations with the Kurds, after representatives of the political arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—the Kurdish forces who govern in northeast Syria—signed a joint declaration in Moscow on August 31 with Kadri Jamil, a moderate member of the opposition who identifies with Moscow. Russia announced the need to integrate the Kurdish forces into the Syrian army, to include the Kurds in negotiations about the political future of Syria, and to incorporate a reference to the decentralization as part of the new constitution.

All these were intended to show the international and regional arena that Russia holds different positions than the Assad regime on the subject of a political arrangement. Assad, rejects any international involvement on the topic, and is “dragging his feet” in his cooperation with initiatives on the issue.

In the background, increasing friction between US and Russian forces in eastern Syria has been reported and even required a telephone conversation on August 26 between the military chiefs of staff of the two countries.

Despite numerous reports about Israeli attacks in Syria in recent months, it appears that Russia has not changed its position regarding Israel’s war between the wars, and it continued to avoid addressing these attacks. However, on August 4 the Russian Foreign Ministry “condemned” Israel for its attacks and warned its leadership if they recur. Our assessment is that this condemnation is, first and foremost, lip service that Moscow pays for its partnership with Iran in Syria, and should be attributed to the fact that Israel, in a rare move, took official responsibility for the attack in Syria prior to the condemnation.



Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin held a telephone conversation at the end of August about the peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, the Syrian arena and Iran's establishment in this arena. Putin underscored Moscow's principle position in favor of a "just, comprehensive and stable solution to the Palestinian problem," and expressed his hope that the Israel-Emirates agreement will advance stability in the region. Putin, in fact, reiterated the announcement that the Russian Foreign Ministry had issued in response to the Israel-Emirates peace agreement and emphasized the need to ensure Palestinian rights. It appears that the Russian restraint stems from not wanting to acknowledge the significant role of the United States in the event.

In addition, Israel and Russia also continued to conduct discussions through telephone conversations between the heads of the National Security Council of the two countries, as well as a rare conversation between Minister of Defense, Gantz and his Russian counterpart, Shoigu. Not surprisingly, the latter channel, which expands the communication channels between Moscow and Jerusalem, focused on coordinating positions regarding the Iranian nuclear question and Iran's establishment in Syria.

Following the increased tension between Moscow and Ankara at the beginning of the summer regarding developments in Libya, it appears that stabilizing the contours of the conflict and joint efforts to reduce belligerence were productive. Russia backs the Cairo–Abu Dhabi axis that demands immediate imposition of a ceasefire and threatens to attack Turkey as well as the government in Tripoli if Libya tries to advance its forces eastward beyond the Sirte-Jufra line.

The Libyan issue is also on the agenda of the Russian-American and Russian-European discourse.



The US Africa Command (AFRICOM) revealed on September 11 that Russia is using “Wagner Group” mercenaries to conduct attacks with combat planes transferred to Libya at the beginning of the summer, and they had already downed two combat planes. However, reports that a Russian S-300 advanced long-range air defense system had been deployed in the Libyan Ras Lanuf oil terminal area has not yet been verified.

Russia did not clarify its position regarding the struggle for the allocation of exclusive economic zones in the eastern Mediterranean, and did not react to the economic water allocation agreement between Egypt and Greece, that currently creates tension between the two countries and Turkey. Nonetheless, Russia is clearly following the issue closely and does not take a favorable view of the idea of building the oil pipeline between Israel and Europe. At the same time, it took advantage of the situation in order to increase pressure on Cyprus—the tax haven for tens of billions of dollars of Russian investments, which are reinvested in Russia—in order to reach an improved agreement with Cyprus regarding double taxation. Concomitantly, figures published in recent weeks show that Turkey succeeded in extracting itself from its dependence on the supply of energy from Russia in recent years, which is now ranked only in third or fourth place among gas suppliers to Ankara.

Russia reacted quickly to the explosion in the Beirut Port. Putin sent condolences to his Lebanese counterpart while the Russian Office of Civil Defense and Emergency Situations deployed an airlift, which included a mobile hospital and teams of dog handlers to search for missing persons. This is part of a trend toward deepening relations between Russia and Lebanon in recent years.



Elections in Belarus—a Chess Game on the Global Field

Dr. Avinoam Idan

The current elections in Belarus are of global importance in the continued conflict between NATO and Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO and the United States have been implementing an expansion policy eastward, exerting pressure on Russia's eastern border. Concurrently, Russia, for its part, has sought to curb NATO's expansion toward its eastern border and has been establishing Russian influence in the barrier countries between it and the new independent countries, former Soviet countries that joined NATO as member states.

The public protests throughout Belarus and the stormy demonstrations that accompanied the presidential elections in Belarus on August 9 cast a heavy shadow on the standing of President Lukashenko, the incumbent president, who was elected in 1994 and has served since then. Lukashenko is an authoritarian leader with the longest tenure among European leaders. The wide-ranging protests and demonstrations erupted following the detainment and arrest of one of Lukashenko's main rivals in the elections and some of his supporters for financial crimes. In the days prior to and during the elections, the government arrested more than five thousand people. In the elections, Lukashenko received 80% of the votes in support of his continued tenure. About two days after the elections, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, one of the opposition leaders, left the country and found political refuge in neighboring Lithuania. The opposition leaders, Tikhanovskaya among them, have called on the public in Belarus not to accept the election results, which included fraud, and to continue the protests.

This appears to be an effort to undermine President Lukashenko's political stability and replacing the president and the government with a more liberal one that will adopt a pro-Western policy.





www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-NATO-members-and-non-members-surrounding-Belarus-28_fig1_312219934

The geo-strategic location of Belarus accords the country special importance on the international arena. Belarus does not have an outlet to the sea, is surrounded by three NATO states—Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia— and its longest border is in the east with Russia.¹ It also shares a long border with Ukraine, part of which was occupied by Russia in the “Ukraine crisis” in 2014. Belarus serves as a barrier state between Russia and the group of new independent countries that joined NATO since their establishment after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

¹ “Belarus,” World Factbook, September 10, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bo.html>.



A shift in the leadership in Belarus is expected to lead to a changing political orientation of the new government, which will have a far-reaching impact in exacerbating the direct friction between NATO and Russia.

Belarus is strategically important to Russia in part because it provides Russia with a vital access corridor to Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea. Kaliningrad is surrounded by two NATO members, Poland and Lithuania, and is cut off from the Russian mainland. Belarus is close to Kaliningrad, a distance of about a hundred kilometers. Access to Kaliningrad from the Russian border goes through the territory of Belarus and then through a short, orderly land corridor from Belarus, crossing Lithuanian territory to reach Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad is the only Russian warm water port on the Baltic Sea, the base of Russia's Baltic Fleet. The enclave also serves as a frontline Russian base in the conflict zone with NATO, including the placing of Russian nuclear missiles² in the enclave during times of tension. Changes in Belarus after the elections may impede Russia's free access by land to Kaliningrad.

In recent years, President Lukashenko tried a more balanced policy toward Russia and Europe. He rejected Russian policy of maintaining closer ties between the two countries, which included varied Russian assistance—military, political, and economic. Lukashenko also sought to achieve diversity in energy supply sources, in order to decrease Belarus's dependence on Russia in this area. Having learned its lesson from the Ukraine crisis Russia has avoided exerting massive pressure that could cause Belarus to distance itself.

² "Russia Deploys Iskander Nuclear-Capable Missiles to Kalinigrad: RIA," Reuters, February 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-missiles/russia-deploys-iskander-nuclear-capable-missiles-to-kaliningrad-ria-idUSKBN1FP21Y>.



The election crisis in Belarus did not end with the announcement of the election results.

The opposition questions the legitimacy of the elections and Lukashenko's rule, and the public protests against him are widespread, with huge demonstrations continuing.

Thus, the Belarus elections are important since they have a wide geopolitical implications. The current conflict during the elections, between the opposition and the masses that demonstrated in the streets, and the serving president plays a significant role in the continued conflict between Russia on the one hand and NATO and the US on the other, since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The extent of the opposition's persistence in opposing the president's rule and the scale of involvement and encouragement of external entities will determine the course of the events.

In its actions in Belarus, Russia will have to avoid risking the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, which is in its final stages. This strategic pipeline is an underwater pipeline that will connect Russia to Germany. It joins an already active pipeline, Nord Stream 1, and will significantly increase the volume of Russian gas export to Germany and to Western Europe. The United States is already taking action to thwart completion of the pipeline,³ and Russia's freedom to act under the current circumstances in Belarus is limited to a certain extent. Russia's overt severe means employed in Belarus may lead to sanctions imposed on Russia and on the laying of the pipeline that is a vital Russian interest. Added to this is what appears to be a poisoning attempt of Aleksey Navalny, Russian opposition leader, by Russian authorities.

³ Amy Mackinnon, "The U.S. is Close to Killing Russia's Nord Stream 2 Pipeline," *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/06/nord-stream-2-russia-pipeline-sanctions-gas/>.



The event requires President Putin to adopt more astute and “gentle” action in Belarus, in order to reduce Europe’s strong criticism against him on this matter, particularly in Germany where Navalny’s supporters brought him, at the approval of President Putin, for treatment that saved his life.

The election crisis in Belarus serves Russian interests. President Lukashenko’s unstable status and the need to withstand the organized public protest, apparently supported also by Western countries, requires Lukashenko to turn to Russia for support. This is something that he had tried to avoid before the elections. President Putin gave him a positive response in this matter. Belarus’s special importance to Russia will most likely deepen the Russian presence and involvement compared to recent years. Reports about the presence of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group in Belarus,⁴ even in the weeks prior to the elections, indicates Russia has prepared for involvement in Belarus already prior to the elections.

Russia recently announced its intention to conduct joint military exercises with Serbia and Belarus on the Belorussian territory. The exercises will be similar to a joint exercise conducted in the past. Serbia’s involvement in Belarus and its cooperation with Russian forces in the current instability in Minsk is not surprising, as it can serve as a means of contending with the West. This takes place in the context of a continuing conflict between Russia and the European Union and the United States, and Serbia’s part in this conflict. In the past, after Kosovo separated from Serbia in the bloody war with the

⁴ “Belarus Hands Over Alleged Wagner Mercenaries to Russia,” TRT World, August 14, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/europe/belarus-hands-over-alleged-wagner-mercenaries-to-russia-38908>.



support of NATO forces, the United States, together with the EU countries, recognized Kosovo as an independent country in February 2008.⁵

At the time, Russia severely opposed NATO involvement in the fighting in the Balkans and the West's recognition of Kosovo, and responded with its invasion of Georgia in August 2008.

Considering the special importance of Belarus to Russia, it would be expected that Russia's position would be determined and uncompromising in ensuring its influence and indirect control of Belarus, and in advancing its relations with the US and the NATO countries. President Putin certainly does not accept what George Kent, a senior official in the US State Department involved in US policy with Russia and in this Euro-Asian region, said recently.⁶ In his statements, Kent presented the US position according to which the events in Belarus constitute a crisis that does not pertain to relations between the superpowers. The United States views this as an event whose importance is in giving the public in Belarus the opportunity to make its voice heard and express its desire for fair elections. Kent also indicated that Belarus's neighbors see it as a natural member of the group of Baltic States, as "the fourth Baltic state."

In the Belarus crisis, Russia will most likely try to avoid following the overt war model, which it implemented when it invaded Georgia. Should it employ a hybrid warfare model in Belarus, it will be covert for longer than it was in its actions in Ukraine. We can expect Russia to help President Lukashenko reinforce his hold on power in the country in exchange for agreeing to conditions it will present to him.

⁵ Secretary Condoleezza Rice, "U.S. Recognizes Kosovo as Independent State," US Department of State Archive, February 18, 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/02/100973.htm>.

⁶ Lecture on "U.S. Engagement on Belarus: A Conversation with George Kent," September 2, 2020, German Marshall Fund of the United States, <https://www.gmfus.org/events/us-engagement-belarus-conversation-george-kent>.



If Russia reaches the conclusion that he is a lost cause, it will act to replace him with a more amenable president while deploying Russian forces overtly⁷ and covertly, perhaps even in an attempt to reach an understanding with entities in the opposition—or if needed by neutralizing opposition forces—and will act to stabilize the internal situation in Belarus. Russia will take action both within and outside Belarus, particularly in the Baltic States, against countries that threaten its interests in the area. It will do so using covert hybrid warfare, something that it found effective in the Ukraine crisis.

President Lukashenko met with President Putin in Sochi in Russia on September 14.⁸ The meeting was an expression of Russia's recognition of Lukashenko as the legitimately elected president of Belarus. Russia agreed to grant Belarus a loan in the amount of 1.5 billion dollars. Putin also stated the importance of cooperating on the defense issues between the two countries and in conducting joint military exercises, with such an exercise taking place these days in Belarus. At the meeting, President Putin indicated the readiness of Russian police forces to intervene in events in Belarus if they get out of control. Announcements in advance of the meeting between the two presidents noted that gas and oil issues would be discussed; however, these issues were not mentioned in the joint announcement after the meeting.

The mere fact that the meeting took place, as well as its results, clarify Russia's approach in maintaining its influence in Belarus and in the conflict with the United States and NATO in this arena. Russia plans to stabilize the situation in Belarus while taking advantage of Lukashenko's distress.

⁷ "Putini Says He Could Send Police to Belarus if Necessary, BBC News, August 27, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53930796>.

⁸ "Belarus Protests: Putin Pledges \$1.5bn Loan at Lukashenko Meeting," BBC News, September 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54144644>.



Russia will support him as long as it is able to bring the situation in the country under Lukashenko's control and through him keep Belarus under its sphere of influence. At the same time, Russia is tightening Lukashenko's dependence on it in defense and economic matters. It does so while establishing Russian military presence and involvement, overt and covert, in handling internal security challenges and in ensuring stability in the country "at the invitation" of the president of Belarus.

President Putin's meeting with Lukashenko demonstrates Russia's determination to ensure its standing in Belarus itself and vis-à-vis NATO and the United States in the Belarus arena and the Baltic region. This determination will shape President Putin's policy toward Belarus during the current circumstances. Under more challenging circumstances, Russia will most likely adopt a more assertive strategy and will act to ensure that its positions are maintained in Belarus with the means that are at its disposal, and if needed, more broadly, which will also include the Baltic arena.

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