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Cliff-hangers

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IS THE KREMLIN'S TAKEOVER OF BELARUS COMPLETE?

Maria Avdeeva
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After rallies swept across Belarus amid public resistance to the election rigging that the Belarussians put up against the Lukashenko regime, there was a moment when it seemed that the protest was just an inch from victory. It was at this moment that Russian President Putin offered Belarus President Lukashenko a helping hand. However, Russia's support wasn't free of charge. Since August 2020, Lukashenko has been gradually swapping what's left of Belarussian sovereignty for Moscow's assistance. Now the Kremlin controls the neighbouring country's economic, military, and information spheres. Since then, Russia has beefed up its military presence in Belarus, turning it into a military foothold. To this end, propaganda tools were widely applied.

The presidential elections in Belarus on 9 August 2020, in which Alexander Lukashenko sought his sixth term in office were not recognized as free and fair and were followed by an unprecedented wave of protests across the country. The protests quickly grew into a nationwide pro-democracy movement, threatening to destabilize the Belarus ruler's regime. Russian President Vladimir Putin could not accept the overthrow of a close post-Soviet ally at the hands of a democratic uprising. Instead, Putin sent planeloads of propagandists to Minsk, gave Lukashenko a financial lifeline, and openly stated his willingness to send Russian troops into

Belarus if things got "out of hand". Since that time, Lukashenko's dependence on Putin's support has only strengthened. On 4 November 2021, Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko signed a package of integration agreements following three years of talks¹. The framework of this package, the "28 Union Programs" became the legal basis for the Russian absorption of Belarus². Moscow does not see Belarus as an independent state, and step by step has increased the dependence of Belarus on Russian support. Kremlin influence has aimed at pulling Belarus deeper into the Russian orbit³. The Kremlin is exploiting Lukashenko's massive need for political

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- 1 Совместное заявление Председателя Правительства Российской Федерации и Премьер-министра Республики Беларусь о текущем развитии и дальнейших шагах по углублению интеграционных процессов в рамках Союзного государства [Joint statement by the Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus on the current development and further steps to deepen integration processes within the Union State], The Russian Government, 2021, [<http://government.ru/news/43234/>].
 - 2 A. Shraibman, *Is Russia the future of Belarus?*, "Foreign and Security Policy", 19 November 2021, [<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/is-russia-the-future-of-belarus-5555/>].
 - 3 A. Yeliseyev, *Not-so-good neighbours. Russian Influence in Belarus*, "U.S. Helsinki Commission", 20 November 2019, [<https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/not-so-good-neighbors>].

and economic support, systematically increasing Belarus' dependence on Russia. At the same time, Moscow has been running disinformation operations to further worsen and prevent any thaw in Lukashenko's relations with the West.

The Objective of Putin's Support for Lukashenko

For the past 26 years, President Lukashenko's legitimacy has been based on public trust. After the fraudulent elections of August 2020, followed by the political repressions, he lost this element of trust. And now his main goal is to retain power at any cost by unleashing terror against the Belarussian people and civil society, while blackmailing and threatening EU countries and the «collective West». It seems as if he does not take into consideration the political and economic consequences for Belarus, and he deliberately exacerbates tensions.

Playing along with Lukashenko in his attempts to shift public focus from the protests to the alleged external threats, Moscow is trying to cement a pro-Russian vector of Belarus' development. By not recognizing his nation as a political actor and seeking to retain power at the cost of making humiliating concessions to the Kremlin, Lukashenko poses a direct threat to Belarus' sovereignty. The harshness of Lukashenko's repressions is beneficial to Russian propaganda, based on the principle "the worse, the better". There are no "red lines" that Moscow would not allow Lukashenko to cross when carrying out internal repressions. The Kremlin will not hinder Lukashenko as long as his actions do not directly threaten Russia.

In turn, the Kremlin has become a partner in crime to Lukashenko. It has taken over the reputational costs associated with him, caused by internal repressions, the hijacking of the Ryanair flight in May 2021⁴, and the hybrid attack on the EU by using migrants⁵. Russia is trying to get as much benefit as possible, so as to create the maximum dependence of Belarus on Russia.

 ***For the past 26 years, President Lukashenko's legitimacy has been based on public trust. After the fraudulent elections of August 2020, followed by the political repressions, he lost this element of trust. And now his main goal is to retain power at any cost by unleashing terror against the Belarussian people and civil society, while blackmailing and threatening EU countries and the «collective West»***

By and large, it does not matter for Russia whether it is Lukashenko who will be in power in the future. The main goal is a compliant leader, who does not allow the western vector of Belarus' development. Stopping Belarus from defecting to the West is a priority for the Kremlin.

Moreover, the Russian Federation is using Belarus in escalating the conflict with the West. It is becoming an instrument of Russia's hybrid war against the West, and at the same time a point of trade. The Kremlin is playing a role in multiple simultaneous

4 A. Troianovski, I. Nechepurenko, *EU imposes sanctions on Belarus over 'hijacked' Ryanair flight*, "The New York Times", 23 May 2021, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/23/world/europe/ryanair-belarus.html>].

5 B. Hall, S. Fleming, J. Shotter, *How migration became a weapon in a 'hybrid war'*, "Financial Times", 5 December 2021, [<https://www.ft.com/content/83ece7e4-cc71-45b5-8db7-766066215612>].

destabilizing crises. Putin is willing to take ever-greater risks to force the West to listen to Russian demands⁶.

Soft Annexation of Belarus

To prevent the development of the Ukrainian scenario, when Putin decided that the only way to hold Ukraine in Russia's orbit was the illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the takeover of Belarus has not been carried out in the form of its annexation by "little green men" or a hybrid operation. In relations with Belarus, Putin does not want to repeat the "Ukrainian mistake"⁷. Vladimir Putin made a mistake by invading Crimea, escalating a crisis for Russia that had been brewing for many months. Putin's move into Crimea appeared to spring from a deeper misjudgement about the reversibility of the process that led to the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. The further Russia wades into this revanchist strategy, the worse its troubles will become⁸.

To prevent Ukraine from moving geopolitically westward, the Kremlin invaded and occupied Ukrainian territory. But in doing so, neoimperialists planted deep roots of resistance to the Russian occupation of Ukraine, and intensified popular support for Euro-Atlantic integration⁹. After the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas,

Ukraine rejected Vladimir Putin's "Russian World". At the same time, Russian influence over Ukraine has plummeted to new lows. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the events of the past seven years have led to Ukraine's decisive departure from Russia's sphere of influence. Evidence of this historic shift can be seen throughout Ukrainian society¹⁰.



By and large, it does not matter for Russia whether it is Lukashenko who will be in power in the future. The main goal is a compliant leader, who does not allow the western vector of Belarus' development

With this in mind, in Belarus the Russian takeover is being done in a form of soft annexation. It is coined as a slow, stealthy, and methodical operation¹¹. The main thing is not to let the protest in Belarus become national. As with most Kremlin operations, there are a lot of moving parts to the Russian takeover of Belarus, including economic, military, and political elements, but the direction of the motion is unmistakable.

6 A. Troianovski, *On Putin's Strategic Chessboard, a Series of Destabilizing Moves*, "The New York Times", 19 November 2021, [https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/19/world/europe/russia-putin-belarus-ukraine.html].

7 K. Marten, *Putin's Biggest Mistake the Real Stakes of Intervening in Ukraine*, "Foreign Affairs", 1 March 2014, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2014-03-01/putins-biggest-mistake].

8 D. Ignatius, *Putin's error in Ukraine is the kind that leads to catastrophe*, "The Washington Post", 2 March 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-putins-error-in-ukraine-is-the-kind-that-leads-to-catastrophe/2014/03/02/d376603e-a249-11e3-a5fa-55f0c77bf39c_story.html].

9 M. Carpenter, V. Kobets, *What Russia Really Has in Mind for Belarus And Why Western Leaders Must Act*, "Foreign Affairs", 8 September 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2020-09-08/what-russia-really-has-mind-belarus].

10 T. Kuzio, *Five reasons why Ukraine rejected Vladimir Putin's "Russian World"*, Atlantic Council, 26 March 2021, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/five-reasons-why-ukraine-rejected-vladimir-putins-russian-world].

11 B. Whitmore, *Soft annexation: Inside the Russian takeover of Belarus*, Atlantic Council, 31 March 2021, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/soft-annexation-inside-the-russian-takeover-of-belarus/].

It should be noted that Lukashenko has never truly defended the national interests of Belarus, since for him the independence of the state is a bargaining chip and an instrument for preserving his security and power. Russia benefits from Lukashenko as he is now: weak, isolated from the international community. Although Lukashenko is well aware that in exchange for the Kremlin's support he will have to give up both Belarus' sovereignty and his power (at least part of it), he has less and less room for maneuver.

Kremlin Footprint in Media Coverage

Starting from August 2020, Russia has been able to gain almost full control over the media in Belarus. In September 2020, Moscow deployed its top-tier media supervisors to Minsk to oversee the process of "synchronizing" the way news reports were presented, setting the 2014-2020 coverage of Ukraine as an example¹². Now the Kremlin has unlimited possibilities to advance its agenda in Belarus.

Among the peculiar features of Russia's information operations in Belarus is sowing chaos in the media, compromising the truth, and employing a large number of different channels through which either half-truths or outright lies are fed to the target audiences¹³. In Belarus, Russia often uses the same media, channels, and personalities that operated in disinformation activities

targeting Ukraine.¹⁴ Most often, the targets of information attacks are not only Belarus' western neighbours but also Ukraine. And here there is a clear connection, and often a direct repetition of the narratives put forth by the Kremlin propaganda.



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The survey of Belarussian media space conducted in September-October 2021¹⁵ showed that the main topics Moscow circulated, targeting the country's audience, covered expanding Russia's military presence in the country, deepening integration within the Union State of Russia and Belarus, and Lukashenko's aggressive acts against Poland and the EU using the illegal migrants. They supported the main propaganda vector, too: "Russia and its allies, including Belarus, are surrounded by enemies who must be repelled. And the main war domain arena is the information field". Through Kremlin-controlled platforms, a similar perspective is being imposed on Belarussians. Russian information operations in Belarus are accompanied by military sabre-rattling and

12 *Это очень дорогого стоит. Что делают в Беларуси сотрудники российских государственных СМИ — и как благодаря им риторика местного ТВ стала более агрессивной (It's worth a lot. What are the employees of the Russian state-owned media doing in Belarus – and how, thanks to them, the rhetoric of local TV has become more aggressive)*, "Meduza", 11 September 2020, [https://meduza.io/feature/2020/09/11/eto-ochen-dorogogo-stoit].

13 M. Avdeeva, *Kremlin's Influence Operations: Working Out Countering Mechanisms for Eastern Partnership Member States*, ISANS, 14 June 2020, [https://isans.org/articles-en/kremlins-influence-operations-working-out-countering-mechanisms-for-eastern-partnership-member-states.html].

14 C. Paul, M. Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model. Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It?*, RAND corporation, 2016, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html].

15 M. Avdeeva, *Justifying the militarization of Belarus and integration with Russia. Monitoring of pro-Russian media in Ukraine for September-October 2021*, ISANS, 02 November 2021, [https://isans.org/analysis-en/monitoring-en/justifying-the-militarization-of-belarus-and-integration-with-russia-part-1.html].

the pursuit of an escalating domination strategy – massive army drills, provocations at the border, cyberattacks, sabotage, and intelligence operations.

Lost Neutrality of Belarus in Relations with Ukraine

A year into masterminding a fraudulent election in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko has renounced what he previously claimed was the neutral status of relations with Ukraine. He lost “information sovereignty” and is shifting toward Russian propaganda¹⁶, starting to threaten Kyiv. This is part of the price the Belarussian dictator is paying for the Kremlin’s help in retaining power in Belarus. It is expected that the further information confrontation between Lukashenko and Kyiv will unfold on Moscow’s instructions, risking turning shortly into actual provocations at the border. Belarus is also poised to take Russia’s side in the ongoing information war with Ukraine regarding energy issues.

Lukashenko’s information parries are not always noticed. But their analysis allows us to recognize the direction they take, which is what one should expect of provocations or actions aimed at the Belarussian regime’s aggravation of the situation. Lukashenko’s rhetoric over the months since the election fraud has become increasingly intertwined with the Kremlin’s information campaigns. Lukashenko began talking about the supposed danger coming from Ukraine almost immediately after the pseudo-elections in August 2020 and the large-scale protests that followed. The impetus for this was given by the Kremlin, which actively

disseminated the topic of the “Ukrainian trace” in the Belarussian events of July-August 2020 through controlled media channels.

To help build the image of Ukraine as an enemy of Belarus, the Kremlin media conducted several disinformation campaigns in which they actively quoted Russian foreign minister Lavrov and the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Naryshkin.

In his rhetoric, Lukashenko portrays Ukraine as an enemy, and regularly tries to accuse Kyiv of radicalizing the Belarussian protest movement and of external interference, blames his own mistakes on his neighbours, or simply threatens Ukraine. He articulates attacks both directly – threatening, for example, to cut off fuel supplies to Ukraine¹⁷ – and by merely discussing the possibility or impossibility of some action, as, for example, with his constant exaggeration of the subject of recognizing Crimea as Russian¹⁸.

In information campaigns in Belarus designed in such a way as to turn the image of Ukraine into that of an enemy, the theme of the strengthening of NATO’s presence in Ukraine is a constant. It is used to substantiate the need for organizing military countermeasures to threats stemming from Ukraine, and for increased military cooperation with Russia.

Militarization of Belarus

Instead of relying on roadmaps signed in November 2021, which Lukashenko will almost certainly attempt to suspend,

16 M. Avdeeva, *In the wake of Russian propaganda: How and with what Lukashenko threatened Ukraine*, iSANS, 23 August 2021, [<https://isans.org/articles-en/in-the-wake-of-russian-propaganda-how-and-with-what-lukashenko-threatened-ukraine.html>].

17 Лукашенко заявил, что мог бы вместе с Путиным поставить Украину “на колени” (*Lukashenko said he could, together with Putin, bring Ukraine “to its knees”*), *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 09 August 2021, [<https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2021/08/9/7303259/>].

18 A. Shraibman, *Why Lukashenko Has Recognized Crimea as Russian Territory*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 8 December 2021, [<https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85944>].

the Kremlin is using more tangible and dependable mechanisms of binding Belarus to Russia. The military presence in Belarus is one of the most important aspects here. From a defence point of view, Belarus is now part of the defence sphere of Russia. The Kremlin is increasing its military presence in Belarus, specifically combat-ready aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

« In the period that has passed since the fraudulent elections in Belarus, Lukashenko has renounced his neutral status in relations with Ukraine. He also lost his “information sovereignty” and was forced to follow in the wake of Russian propaganda, voicing threats against Kyiv

Russia has opened a joint “military training centre” for the air force and aerial defence near the Belarussian-Polish border¹⁹. “Iskander” units were put on the border with Ukraine, and Lukashenko declared his readiness to jointly defend the Union State against the “hostile West”²⁰. He is going as far in his rhetoric as toying with the idea of the possible deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus.

All this means that the risk of Belarus turning into a new springboard for Russia’s military aggression remains acute. The fact that such

a threat is real is evidenced by Lukashenko himself, who on 5 August 2021, meeting with Belarussian security officials on the border situation said, «... *but the Ukrainian leadership, pursuing an anti-popular course, took a confrontational stance... And for us this is an additional threat, which we did not have before... These actions of our neighbour, if this happens, will threaten us with conflict...*»²¹,

Lukashenko instructs Belarussians to think about the need for a Russian military presence and regularly repeats statements similar to the following: «*If it is necessary for the security of the Union State that we are building, for the security of Belarus and Russia, to deploy all armed forces here with all types of weapons, they will be deployed here immediately*»²².

The rhetoric of Minsk forces Ukraine to assess the veracity of threats of expanding Belarussian-Russian military cooperation and possible provocations on the Belarussian border. The Kremlin is also imposing on both Ukraine and Europe the need to view Belarus as an adversary and expect a military invasion from there. The same purpose was served by the holding of the Zapad-2021 joint military exercises in September.

In the period that has passed since the fraudulent elections in Belarus, Lukashenko has renounced his neutral status in relations with Ukraine. He also lost his “information sovereignty” and was forced to follow in the wake of Russian propaganda, voicing threats

19 A. Shraibman, *Is Russia the future of Belarus?*, “Foreign and Security Policy”, 19 November 2021,

[<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/is-russia-the-future-of-belarus-5555/>].

20 M. Avdeeva, *Migrants at the border: how long will the blackmail last? The hybrid attacks prove to be effective*, iSANS, 15 December 2021, [<https://isans.org/columns-en/migrants-at-the-border-how-long-will-the-blackmail-last.html>].

21 *Совещание по вопросам ситуации на границе* [Meeting on the Situation at the Border], President of the Republic of Belarus, 5 August 2021, [<https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosam-situacii-na-granice>].

22 *Встреча с активом местной вертикали по актуальным вопросам общественно-политической обстановки* [Meeting with the Activists of the Local Vertical on Topical Issues of the Socio-Political Situation], President of the Republic of Belarus, 30 July 2021, [<https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-aktivom-mestnoy-vertikali-po-aktualnym-voprosam-obshchestvenno-politicheskoy-obstanovki>].

against Kyiv. All this was the price that Lukashenko paid the Kremlin for helping to maintain his power in Belarus.

The further confrontation between Minsk and Kyiv will take place at Moscow's behest, which in the short-term risks turning into real provocations with the military build-up upon Ukrainian borders, and the information war on the side of Russia in its confrontation with Ukraine and the West.

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