

What does Russia want from Belarus's election?

18 września 2020

Over the past month, Vladimir Putin has stepped up his effort to rescue fellow post-Soviet dictator Aleksandr Lukashenka. The Russian president has provided a limited lifeline to Lukashenka during their meeting in Sochi this Monday – despite the fact that Moscow has scaled back their support to Belarus in recent years.

There are a few reasons why Moscow is keen to keep the Belarusian strongman afloat.

In Lukashenka's opinion, it's happening because "Russia is afraid of losing us. After all, apart from us, it has no truly close allies left," he said while addressing the nation on Aug. 4. It might be partly true, however, Moscow largely wanted Minsk to integrate with Russia, pushing for tighter ties under a union state that was created in the 1990s but exists largely on paper. The exact nature of this partnership has remained open to interpretation. Experts believe that the Kremlin's plan is to eliminate all attributes of Belarusian sovereignty: By agreement with the Kremlin, Lukashenka plans to take up the post of president of the union state with nominal powers.

After the four-hour meeting in Sochi, Russia said Belarusian president has confirmed his plans to change the constitution, albeit little detail was provided. Lukashenka said he wants to hold a referendum on reforms, although he has not made clear what these would be. He also has suggested reducing the president's powers in appointing judges.

The experts, however, voiced concern over the fact that the new Constitution will likely suggest a formation of a single national authority within Belarus which would be easily

controlled from Moscow via the common parliament and judiciary. Through changes to the Constitution, the Kremlin wants to keep protest-torn Belarus in Moscow's orbit as securely as possible so that Russia will no longer have to worry about Belarus' leaning towards the West. It is thought the price of Russia's backing could also include some profitable privatisation deals in Belarus or progress on less controversial economic integration plans.

One thing is clear: this Constitutional reform is not planned as a step towards sharp democratization of Belarusian political life but it can be amended by the Russian scenario so that all previous presidential terms of Lukashenka would be "reset."

Another outcome of the Lukashenka-Putin talks included Russian \$1.5 billion loan for Belarus' struggling economy and reaffirmed Russia's existing security guarantees. Among them: Russian paratroopers will take part in joint exercises in Belarus starting this week. The money will go almost immediately to prevent default and provide short-term rescue of the financial system. Putin specifically emphasized that this money is not for Lukashenka, but for Belarus – in the framework of the obligations that Russia undertook in 1992-1994.

All these guarantees might play tricks with Lukashenka as Kremlin support for the unpopular president risks fuelling anti-Russian sentiment in one of the few remaining countries where a clear majority still favours close ties with Moscow.

Despite Belarus' typically friendly attitude towards Russia, there has never been much evidence of strong public support in Belarus for deeper union with Russia. And when the Kremlin began increasing its demands for further integration in 2019, Belarusians took to the streets to defend their independence in protests that "in many ways set the scene for the current nationwide pro-democracy movement," Hanna Liubakova wrote for

the Atlantic Council on Sept. 16.

Belarus may turn out to be an excellent springboard for destabilization of Europe in all directions. As Russian intervention has become more realistic, geopolitics started to play a more prominent role in the protest movement even though the protests initially were about democracy, not about a Westward geopolitical course.

Amid talk of a creeping Russian takeover, Belarus protesters finally might have started to realize the Putin's goal is a complete absorption of Belarus in addition to Crimea. It won't be done in 2014 style as it was in Ukraine because the Russian Federation intends to make this annexation as "legal" as possible, so as not to expose itself to the risk of another wave of sanctions by the West.

Autorship: Political Ecological Economics

Source: WolneMedia.net