



## **Belarus Warning Update: Forced Integration with Russia—Not the Protest Movement—Is Lukashenko’s Biggest Threat**

February 19, 2021 2:00 pm EDT

By George Barros

**Key Takeaway:** *The Kremlin’s ongoing campaign to increase Russian control over Belarus poses a larger risk to self-declared Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko than the diminishing Belarusian protest movement in 2021. Lukashenko presented a new strategy to end the crisis in Belarus on February 11–12; he announced plans for a referendum on a new constitution in 2022 and promised economic incentives to placate protesters. Lukashenko seeks to both balance against Kremlin pressure to integrate Belarus into Russian-dominated structures and defuse protester sentiment over the next several years. Lukashenko will likely avoid police crackdowns and instead seek to deescalate protests through the promise of minor concessions without fundamentally relinquishing his dictatorship. The Kremlin will likely intensify pressure against Lukashenko in 2021 to formalize Belarus’ integration into the Union State before Lukashenko can defuse the protests with his promised concessions.*

**Self-declared Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko outlined his strategy to defuse protests and stabilize his rule in 2021 in a speech on February 11.** Lukashenko delivered a keynote speech outlining his strategy for 2021 at the Sixth All-Belarusian National Assembly (BNA) on February 11–12.<sup>1</sup> The Belarusian government holds the BNA every five years to coordinate Belarus’ strategic planning.

**Lukashenko claimed NATO’s “blitzkrieg” color revolution against Belarus failed but acknowledged that the protest movement is not over yet.** Lukashenko said 2021 is as decisive a moment for Belarus as was the Soviet Union’s fall. Lukashenko is framing the current situation as a deep generational turning point for the country. Lukashenko admitted opposition to his rule is more widespread than he previously recognized, claiming approximately 55 percent of Belarusians support his government.<sup>2</sup> Lukashenko had previously framed opposition protesters as marginal, claiming 80 percent of Belarusians voted for him in August 2020.<sup>3</sup> Lukashenko continued to frame his opposition as agents of a NATO-backed hybrid war.

**Lukashenko pledged to hold a national referendum on a new constitution in 2022 and promised several economic and political incentives in a likely attempt to defuse protests.** Lukashenko promised that a new constitution will be ready by the end of 2021. Lukashenko will likely include a promised referendum on the constitution in Belarus’ January 2022 local elections. He promised to strengthen self-governance, provide free COVID-19 vaccines, expand pensions, and offer other economic incentives.

These concessions are unlikely to meaningfully reduce Lukashenko’s centralized control of Belarus. Lukashenko did not provide details on how the constitution would change, other than stating Belarus should remain a presidential republic, rendering serious institutional reform unlikely.<sup>4</sup> Lukashenko did not reiterate his previous promise to not seek reelection when his current term expires in 2025.<sup>5</sup> Lukashenko rejected the opposition’s proposals to reform the security services.<sup>6</sup> Lukashenko likely seeks to placate most protesters and degrade protest strength through the promise of minor political concessions and economic incentives.

**Lukashenko’s efforts to defuse the protests will likely overcome the opposition’s push to renew protests and force negotiations with Lukashenko in spring 2021.** Lithuania-based Belarusian opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanouskaya seeks to renew protests in spring 2021 and regain momentum through an ambitious timeline to force negotiations with Lukashenko. Tikhanouskaya released a “new strategy” on February 9 that maintains the

opposition's existing objectives but defines new timelines for further action in spring 2021.<sup>7</sup> Tikhanouskaya called on the opposition to resume street protests in March 2021 to force Lukashenko to negotiate with the opposition in May 2021.

Lukashenko's strategy to defuse the protests will likely impair Tikhanouskaya's efforts to force negotiations. Lukashenko does not need to pacify every protester, as Tikhanouskaya claims, to overcome the opposition. Lukashenko will likely ignore demands for negotiations in May 2021 and the opposition is unlikely to force him into negotiations before that date. Tikhanouskaya has previously set deadlines to force negotiations with Lukashenko, all of which failed.<sup>8</sup> Protests will likely intensify slightly as the weather improves in spring 2021, but they will likely not achieve the same scale they did in fall 2020. Lukashenko likely assesses he can outlast the protests by eroding protester will through the promise of changes in early 2022, avoiding the need for a violent crackdown.

**Lukashenko announced plans for a new national security concept, which he likely seeks to use to position himself as Russian President Vladimir Putin's equal partner in defense of Russia and Belarus by explicitly orienting Belarus as the target of a Western hybrid war.** Lukashenko said Belarus will update its national security concept to defend against potential NATO information operations and cyberattacks.<sup>9</sup> He also drew parallels between protests in Belarus and recent anti-Putin protests in Russia.<sup>10</sup> Lukashenko likely seeks to appeal to Putin to pursue their joint interests and halt Kremlin pressure on Belarus by linking the protests against both leaders under the rubric of Western hybrid wars. Lukashenko's embrace of this false Kremlin framing will likely increase opportunities for Putin to pressure Lukashenko for integration concessions, however.

**Lukashenko likely seeks to limit the Kremlin's ability to pressure Belarus into Russian-dominated structures by framing Belarus and Russia as equal partners in the Union State.** Lukashenko seeks to prevent Belarus' further integration into the Union State—a Kremlin-dominated supranational organization between Russia and Belarus with the stated goal of federally integrating both states under a joint structure.<sup>11</sup> The Kremlin has exploited Lukashenko's vulnerability to expand Belarus' integration with Russia and gained leverage over Belarus since protests began in August 2020.

Lukashenko stated that Union State integration “presupposes the full preservation of the sovereignty of both Russia and Belarus without the formation of any new supranational bodies.”<sup>12</sup> Lukashenko additionally framed integration as already complete and stated that the Russian and Belarusian peoples would have to agree to pursue further measures.<sup>13</sup> Lukashenko likely seeks to slow Kremlin pressure by framing additional integration as dependent on additional political consultations.

**Lukashenko will likely increase his outreach to China to hedge against Russian integration pressure, although the prospects of success in this effort are unclear.** Lukashenko expressed support to expand China's economic presence in Belarus, claimed Beijing would provide Belarus with COVID-19 vaccines, and expressed support for coordinating Eurasian Economic Union activities in Central Asia with the Chinese Belt and Road initiative—a Chinese economic initiative that undermines Russian influence in Central Asia.<sup>14</sup> Lukashenko has supported developing the Belt and Road initiative since at least 2016.<sup>15</sup> Although China delivered 100,000 COVID-19 vaccines to Belarus on February 19, Beijing has not publicly reciprocated Lukashenko's recent calls for intensified economic cooperation.<sup>16</sup> Chinese investment in Belarus decreased by 77 percent in 2020 and China's ambassador to Belarus reportedly did not attend the BNA.<sup>17</sup> China's ambassador to Belarus gave a speech at the fifth BNA in 2016.<sup>18</sup> Lukashenko is unlikely to succeed in replacing Russian patronage with Chinese support; however, Lukashenko's turn to China could give him additional leverage with Moscow—if Beijing reciprocates it.

**The Kremlin will likely intensify pressure against Lukashenko to formalize Belarus' integration in the Union State before Lukashenko can defuse the protests, which have granted Putin leverage over Lukashenko.** Putin will likely pressure Lukashenko for more political and military integration concessions during their upcoming meeting on February 22, 2021—their first meeting since September 2020.<sup>19</sup> Putin will likely pressure Lukashenko to expand Russia's military basing in Belarus when they renew existing basing agreements this year. The 25-year basing agreement for Russia's two existing radar/radio bases in Belarus expires on June 6, 2021, and Moscow and

Minsk are negotiating an extension.<sup>20</sup> The Kremlin will likely reject Lukashenko's framing of Belarus and Russia as equal partners and frame even deeper integration as necessary for Lukashenko to overcome the crisis.

Belarus' forced integration with Russia will remain Lukashenko's greatest threat in 2021. Belarus' protests are unlikely to escalate. Lukashenko will likely avoid police crackdowns and instead attempt a long-term approach to deescalate protests and reduce Russian leverage. However, the Kremlin's interests are served by maintaining pressure against Lukashenko through a prolonged crisis. Kremlin pressure will likely lead to further protests if only by provoking renewed public opposition to Russian influence. The Kremlin's previous involvement in the crisis briefly shifted the protests' central focus away from Lukashenko and toward the Kremlin, for example.<sup>21</sup> Putin may attempt to prolong the protests and prevent Lukashenko's efforts to defuse the protests.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/shestoe-vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie>; <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/uchastie-vo-vtorom-dne-vi-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobraniya>

<sup>2</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/shestoe-vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nikakogo-vranija-na-vyborah-ne-bylo-nelzja-falsifitsirovat-80-407220-2020/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10677735>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely-disrupts-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-plan-defusing-protests>; <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/10/20/lukashenko/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://nashkraj.by/news/obshchestvo/doklad-prezidenta-belarusi-na-vi-vsebelorusskom-narodnom-sobranii/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://belarusvision.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-promised-major-opposition-protest-march-fizzles>;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-will-likely-outlast-ultimatum-protests>;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/prezident-belarusi-schitaet-neobhodimym-obnovit-kontseptsiju-natsionalnoj-bezopasnosti-428177-2021>

<sup>10</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/shestoe-vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-belarus-update-lukashenko-uses-oil-tariffs-delay-integration-russia>

<sup>12</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/shestoe-vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie>; [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/02/12\\_a\\_13476920.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/02/12_a_13476920.shtml); <https://souzveche.ru/articles/politics/56066/>; [https://primepress.by/news/ekonomika/dalneyshaya\\_integratsiya\\_s\\_rossiej\\_predpolagaet\\_polnoe\\_sokhranenie\\_suvereniteta\\_obeikh\\_stran\\_lukashe-29587/](https://primepress.by/news/ekonomika/dalneyshaya_integratsiya_s_rossiej_predpolagaet_polnoe_sokhranenie_suvereniteta_obeikh_stran_lukashe-29587/); <https://www.ng.ru/news/702199.html>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/shestoe-vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie>; [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/02/12\\_a\\_13476920.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/02/12_a_13476920.shtml); <https://souzveche.ru/articles/politics/56066/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/shestoe-vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie>; [https://lenta.ru/news/2021/02/11/bel\\_luka\\_vac/](https://lenta.ru/news/2021/02/11/bel_luka_vac/)

<sup>15</sup> Lukashenko and Chinese president Xi Jinping have cooperated on the Belt and Road initiative since at least 2016. <https://news.tut.by/economics/514287.html>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/belarus-i-kitaj-zakljuchili-paket-soglashenij-i-memorandumov-o-sotrudnichestve-v-raznyh-sferah-212427-2016/>;

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.belta.by/society/view/proizvodstvo-kitajskoj-vaktsiny-protiv-koronavirusa-mogut-lokalizovat-v-belarusi-429509-2021/>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/leaders-of-belarus-china-discuss-political-cooperation-trade-vaccine-in-phone-conversation\\_i\\_124556.html](https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/leaders-of-belarus-china-discuss-political-cooperation-trade-vaccine-in-phone-conversation_i_124556.html); <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/leaders-of-belarus-china-discuss-political-cooperation-trade-vaccine-in-phone-conversation-136904-2021/>; [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-01/26/content\\_5582810.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-01/26/content_5582810.htm); <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=268325>; [https://en.belapan.by/archive/2021/02/15/en\\_\\_16120215n](https://en.belapan.by/archive/2021/02/15/en__16120215n); <https://www.economy.gov.by/ru/pezzultat-ru/>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.belarus.by/by/press-center/all-belarusian-peoples-congress/tsuj-tsymn-uns---vazhnaja-pljatsoka-dlja-dzelnaroda--paltychnym-zhytsts-kranij\\_i\\_0000125687.html](https://www.belarus.by/by/press-center/all-belarusian-peoples-congress/tsuj-tsymn-uns---vazhnaja-pljatsoka-dlja-dzelnaroda--paltychnym-zhytsts-kranij_i_0000125687.html)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-softens-his-opposition-protests-seeking-leverage>; <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/kremlin-lukashenko-putin-will-meet-on-22-february-137571-2021/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://sputnik.by/defense\\_safety/20210216/1046924978/Pravitelstvo-RF-khochet-prodlit-dogovory-o-voennykh-bazakh-v-Belarusi.html](https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20210216/1046924978/Pravitelstvo-RF-khochet-prodlit-dogovory-o-voennykh-bazakh-v-Belarusi.html)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-belarusian-opposition-begins-first-anti-kremlin-shift-after>