

## Belarus: on the wrong side of history

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July 2022

Belarus has unfortunately joined Russia on the current conflict with Ukraine. The country run by Lukashenko, dubbed the “Last Dictator in Europe”, has gone all in with his support for Vladimir Putin’s war on Ukraine, something which even China and India have refused to do fully. But it should come as no surprise that Belarus has acted in this way. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lukashenko (the



country’s only President) has been the most pro-Putin leader in Europe and has ruled Belarus with a draconian hand for the last 28 years, with no interruption in power. And now, Lukashenko is supporting the Kremlin’s war, reciprocating Putin’s recent help in maintaining his own political power. As a result, Belarus accompanies Russia as a pariah state.

Not only has Belarus outright supported Russia in its invasion, but there are now fears that they will also invade Ukraine, opening a second front. Experts have assessed the possibility of Belarus entering the war against Ukraine as small. Allegedly, there has been no actual proof of pressure from Moscow Lukashenko, to join the war – and rather that it is a bargaining tool for the Belarusian president to improve his damaged relations with the West by demonstrating that he can resist Putin’s pressure. However, as we know there is always that possibility Lukashenko could invade despite it not being the best course of action for him and his country. As we know from the past couple of years, he is quite the erratic leader

Arguably, the most erratic of Lukashenko’s actions was hijacking a commercial flight in order to capture and imprison a journalist. Ryanair Flight 4978 from Athens to Vilnius was redirected to Minsk on the pretence that there was a bomb onboard. It turns out Lukashenko gave the order to have the flight redirected to Minsk to arrest opposition activist and journalist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega. This was met with much outrage from the international community with sanctions imposed on Belarus from the EU and some Belarusian airlines being banned from some international airports.

In 2021, when the UK levied sanctions on state-owned entities in Belarus to cripple and apply pressure on Lukashenko’s regime, the President’s fiery response leaves nothing to the imagination on how he feels. “You can choke on your sanctions” was the main comment taken away from Lukashenko’s rant, as well as “you [the UK] are America’s lapdogs.” Clearly, Lukashenko did not look favourably on those sanctions

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and his response resembled a movie villain, shaking their fist and vowing revenge. This came around the same time Belarusian Olympian, Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, refused to board a plane from Tokyo back to Belarus as she feared she would face jail time for complaining about her coaches. Ms. Tsimanouskaya was granted asylum in Poland much to the dismay of Lukashenko, who claimed she was manipulated by her Polish “buddies”.

Of course, Lukashenko must have his reasons for thinking in this way, wouldn't anyone? In his mind, the problem cannot be him so it must be someone else, the Poles in this case. However, in defence of Ms. Tsimanouskaya, the fear of her safety was not unjustified. In the same week as the Belarusian sprinter sought asylum, Vitaly Shishov, the head of an organisation that helps Belarusians fleeing persecution, was found hanged in a park in Kiev. People close to Shishov believe that he was targeted by Lukashenko as the dictator has launched a campaign to hunt down opponents abroad. Under Lukashenko, Belarus has emulated its Russian neighbours in terms of its authoritarian rule, suppression of opposition and freedom of press and has isolated itself from the Western world. Overall, an undesirable place to do business.

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