

# Growing Chaos in 'Last Soviet Republic'

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A train passing by the place where a bomb blast killed 13 last week in Minsk's Oktyabrskaya subway station. **Sergei Grits**

MINSK — Of all the former republics of the Soviet Union, Belarus has changed the least since the collapse of communism. Its economy remains almost entirely in state hands, the government shows zero tolerance for dissent and the main domestic spy agency is still called KGB.

President Alexander Lukashenko has offered a degree of economic stability during 17 years in power, however, thanks to generous subsidies from his main sponsor, Russia.

But a spiraling currency crisis, an increasingly severe crackdown on the opposition, and a mysterious subway bombing last week have spawned a sense of rising panic and disorder in this nation of 10 million, often labeled the last dictatorship in Europe.

A long-standing social contract that asked Belarussians to give up political freedoms in exchange for safety and a reliable if modest standard of living now appears to be fraying.

The April 11 explosion in the capital's busiest subway station during an evening rush hour killed 13 and wounded more than 200 — the first deadly bombing in a nation where the opposition has been largely peaceful and militant groups have been unheard of.

Authorities quickly arrested a man accused of placing the bomb and four suspected accomplices, but haven't said who ordered the attack. Lukashenko responded to the subway blast by ordering prosecutors to interrogate opposition activists.

That made some bloggers speculate that authorities may have staged the attack in order to flush out the few remaining leftovers of pluralism and to distract Belarussians from the country's rapidly worsening economic situation.

Lukashenko responded to rumors of official culpability with characteristic bluntness.

"Only idiots and scoundrels can allege that, only the scum can do that," he said, arguing that Belarus' economic troubles and the explosion had been staged by unspecified forces seeking to subdue the nation.

"Belarus has always been known for its stability and order, but the explosion has filled me with fear and anguish," 46-year-old Dr. Zhanna Pankratova said as she walked past the explosion site. "Whom can we trust now?"

Minsk, a city of drab suburban apartment blocks and broad central avenues lined with monumental Stalin-era buildings, looks tense, with police and military patrols deployed on the streets and the subway. Leaflets urging vigilance have been placed all around the capital, adding to a feeling of a city under siege.

"Tension is felt everywhere: on public transport, in the stores, at work," said Olga Ryabovich, 43, an accountant. "People are trying to protect themselves from chaos. I stocked up on staples and banned my children from walking around."

Opposition leader Anatoly Lebedko said he expects the government to intensify its crackdown on dissent.

"If they announce a decision tomorrow to brand all members of the opposition with a hot iron, I will not be surprised," said Lebedko, who was released from a KGB prison earlier this month after 3 1/2 months in custody.

The government has already issued reprimands to two main independent newspapers, and the prosecutor general has threatened to "bring order" to the Internet, the last haven of uncensored speech in Belarus.

"Lukashenko's plan is clear: to prevent the opposition from forming the core of potential protests," said Belarus' first post-Soviet leader, Stanislav Shushkevich. "That's why he keeps talking about internal and external enemies day and night, using the entire propaganda arsenal."

Meanwhile, the economy is going quickly downhill, with hard currency reserves running critically low and people lining up at currency exchange booths to buy dwindling amounts of foreign currency.

The Belarussian Central Bank said Tuesday that it has allowed a free float of the national currency, effectively permitting its devaluation, as has been recommended by international financial institutions. Banks will be able to buy and sell the Belarussian ruble at a rate they will determine in open trading, deputy chief Nikolai Luzgin said.

For most of his tenure, Lukashenko has relied on cheap energy resources from Belarus' main sponsor and ally, Russia, to maintain a quasi-Soviet economy complete with a sprawling social safety net that helped boost his popularity among the working class and the elderly.

The Russian subsidies have dwindled recently as Moscow has pushed for control over Belarus' most prized economic assets, such as oil refineries and chemical plants, in exchange for more loans.

Even as state coffers were drying up, Lukashenko raised public sector salaries by 30 percent ahead of December's presidential vote in a bid to secure his re-election.

"Belarus was living beyond its means, and it was the president who made it do that," said Leonid Zayiko, head of the independent Strategia think tank. "All the problems emerged because he wanted to remain president and raised salaries."

The government's hard currency reserves plunged by 20 percent in the first two months of the year to less than \$4 billion, prompting fears and pushing people to wait in daylong lines to buy dollars or euros.

Foreign food and alcohol brands have begun to disappear from store shelves as imports are suspended. Even such staples as vegetable oil and sugar started vanishing from stores as people were stocking up in anticipation of price hikes.

"Lukashenko is trying to retain control over the situation, but he finds it increasingly difficult to gather public support at a time when people's salaries are dwindling and food is disappearing from shelves," Shushkevich said.

Lukashenko's approval ratings dropped from 53 percent in December to 43 percent last month, according to a nationwide poll of 1,524 conducted by the independent Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research. The survey had a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

The rapidly worsening economic situation and the toughening of Lukashenko's rhetoric is making some Belarussians think about fleeing the country.

"My short-term plan is to emigrate to Poland," said Pavel Korchevsky, 37, a businessman. "It's impossible to do business in a country where the president personally determines the dollar rate. I don't want my children to live under communism and listen to songs about enemies."

Shushkevich said Lukashenko's political survival now hinges entirely on another Russian loan.

"He will be able to ease social tensions if the Kremlin gives him another loan," Shushkevich said. "Otherwise people will start protesting. What we are seeing now begins to resemble

the collapse of the Soviet system."

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