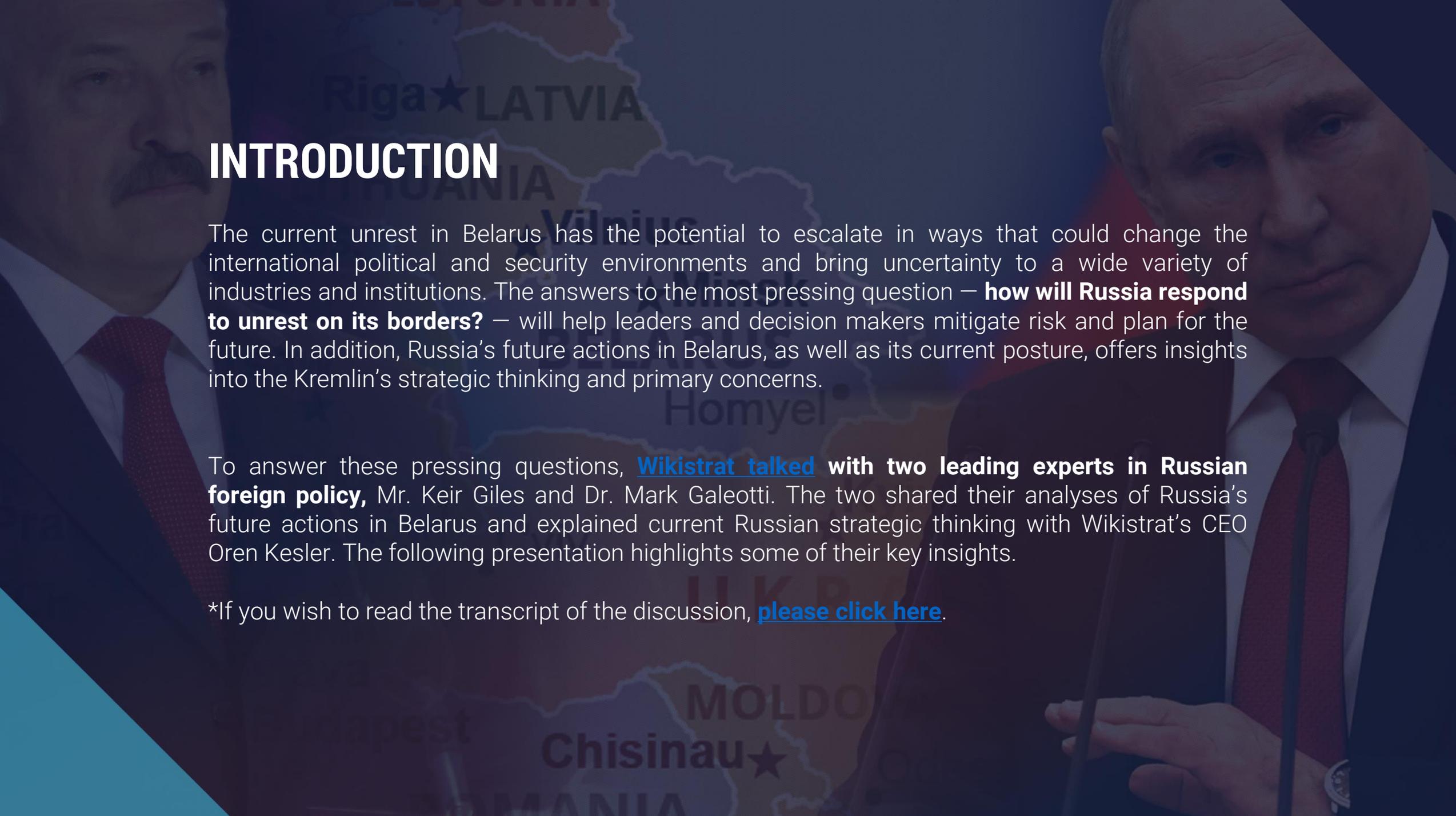




RUSSIA'S DILEMMA IN BELARUS

INSIGHTS FROM A WIKISTRAT PODCAST

August 2020



INTRODUCTION

The current unrest in Belarus has the potential to escalate in ways that could change the international political and security environments and bring uncertainty to a wide variety of industries and institutions. The answers to the most pressing question – **how will Russia respond to unrest on its borders?** – will help leaders and decision makers mitigate risk and plan for the future. In addition, Russia's future actions in Belarus, as well as its current posture, offers insights into the Kremlin's strategic thinking and primary concerns.

To answer these pressing questions, [Wikistrat talked with two leading experts in Russian foreign policy](#), Mr. Keir Giles and Dr. Mark Galeotti. The two shared their analyses of Russia's future actions in Belarus and explained current Russian strategic thinking with Wikistrat's CEO Oren Kesler. The following presentation highlights some of their key insights.

*If you wish to read the transcript of the discussion, [please click here](#).



Mr. Keir Giles

Keir Giles is a Senior Consulting Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. He is an expert on cyber and information security, military transformation in Russia, and Russia's foreign and domestic security policy.



Dr. Mark Galeotti

Mark Galeotti is a Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. He is an expert in modern Russia, especially its security politics, intelligence services, and criminality.



THE LONELIEST DICTATOR IN EUROPE

Lukashenko has lost any last shreds of political legitimacy he had and is completely dependent on the Belarussian security apparatus for his position of power.

If Lukashenko falls, it will most likely to happen from a domino-reaction of defections among the Belarussian security apparatus, of which he is completely dependent on for his position of power. **Without his army to enforce his rule, Lukashenko cannot remain in power.** In face of widespread popular support for the protesters, as well as calls for security forces to defect, there are serious doubts that forces will follow through on orders to shoot into crowds. One individual action could spark a chain reaction, as no one wants to be on the “losing side.”

Yet, despite losing nearly all popular support, Lukashenko still has a powerful security apparatus at the moment. Additionally, he has not taken the drastic actions that one would expect from a leader losing their nerve or cracking. In fact, his latest promise of reforms shows that he is still confident he can diffuse the situation and outlast the protesters.



“What is more alarming to the Kremlin than actually genuinely motivating for the Russian population, is the surprise that everybody has felt at the extent of the discontent in Belarus itself. I think even the protestors were taken aback at just how much popular support there was for what they were doing, and how many people we’ve seen changing sides from the security forces, the armed forces staying out of it all together”.

Keir Giles



RUSSIA WILL NOT BE LUKASHENKO'S LAST FRIEND

Notably, the demonstrations do not have an anti-Russia dimension and are mainly focused on holding free and fair elections. As long as this is true, the Kremlin can distance itself from Lukashenko and let him fall, knowing that his successor would not have an aggressively anti-Russian stance.

Russia will not invade Belarus if the protesters do not demand a pro-European leader who wants to join the European Union. **Russia can live with increased democratization domestically in Belarus**, such as open elections, but it will be forced to invade if the future leader expresses pro-European sentiment and wishes to join the European Union. The Kremlin strongly believes that Belarus must remain in Russia's rightful sphere of influence.

In the long term, Belarus will naturally gravitate toward the economically more promising West. However, any future leader will have to play a delicate balancing game in seeking greater economic ties with Europe without letting the Kremlin take notice. Belarus may grow more democratic at home, but will still cautiously remain in Russia's sphere of influence internationally.



"In this current circumstance, Moscow, in my opinion, would regard any kind of intervention as the second worst option at its disposal, the worst option being precisely seeing Belarus become pro-European country, who wish to join the European Union, Ukraine-style emerging. From their point of view, they are really hoping that the new situation that will emerge with something that they can live with, and that they are not forced into a corner."

Mark Galeotti



ARE “LITTLE GREEN MEN” COMING?

The Kremlin strongly believes that Belarus must remain in Russia’s rightful sphere of influence. As such, it may be tempted to send commandos to remove Lukashenko from power and bring in follow-up forces to “stabilize” the country during its period of transition. This would spare it from public scorn, by removing Lukashenko, but would likely be very unpopular. Experts believe this is a high-risk strategy, but is definitely being considered in Russian contingency plans.

If Russia takes military action, a proportion of the Belarussian forces will resist. There is a significant independent Belarussian identity that is common among security forces.

Although this is a possibility, it is currently of low likelihood. Observers must watch out for false alarms of Russian military intervention in Belarus, as this is currently the Russian annual military exercise season, meaning that lots of Russian military units are on the move. Outside observers may mistake this for Russian invasion preparations, causing panic.

Little Green Men



Russian soldiers in unmarked green army uniforms in a photo taken during the invasion of Crimea in 2014



ARE WE FACING A RUSSIAN SPRING SCENARIO?



"We've heard a lot of people in the West talk about the possibility of the situation in Belarus spilling over into Russia. I suspect, though, that's really wishful thinking more than anything else. We have seen protestors in Khabarovsk in the Russian far east, who have their own reasons to be protesting, nonetheless also saying they stand in solidarity with Belarus and so forth. But, one of the, quite unfortunately, depressing successes of Putin's propaganda machine has been to present that these kinds of mass expressions of people-power can be very disruptive and problematic for the people themselves."

Mark Galeotti



"If there were a change of government in Belarus that came about as a result of a mass uprising, as a result of people-power, this would be a terrible precedent and a terrible example, which would have Russia, would have the Kremlin quite worried. But of course, it depends on a number of factors which simply are not present in Russia at the moment. There isn't that level of discontent, there isn't that total lack of legitimacy as there is in Belarus."

Keir Giles



BELARUS COULD BECOME ANOTHER AFGHANISTAN



"We tend to draw a parallel, obviously, with Ukraine because it's looming in our minds and it's still going on, but the differences are huge. There is no equivalent of the Crimea or the Donbass, where people might be at all sympathetic to Russian forces. There hasn't been a collapse of the Belarus chain of command, or at least, not yet. And generally, there's much less penetration of the Belarus military and, above all, security structures than had happened in Ukraine by 2014.

If we're going to draw a parallel, and it's not a particularly comfortable parallel for the Russians, I think the best parallel would be Afghanistan 1979, when they intervened to stop what they saw as the potential collapse of one of their proxy states. And in the same time, the same operation, to remove a head of state that they thought was counterproductive and unfriendly, and impose a new one whom they thought was going to be rather more congenial and rather more effective. Because, after all, Afghanistan's just going to be a six-month operation. Remove the old head of state, install a new one, overawe the country with a quick show of force, and then in six months you're out. Of course, it didn't quite work out that way."

Mark Galeotti



RUSSIA HAS A HISTORY OF MISCALCULATING INTERNATIONAL REACTION.



“One of the questions we have to ask is: how would Russia assess what the reaction would be if they were to move into Belarus? It wouldn't be inconceivable for them to get that answer spectacularly wrong, as they did in Afghanistan, as they did in Ukraine, through underestimating the resilience of statehood and ideas of sovereignty and the resistance to them from the Belarusian population.”

Because, if you do genuinely subscribe to the idea that all of these are basically Russia, and that convening in Belarus would be an internal affair because it's not a proper country, which is a sentiment that President Putin has expressed about Ukraine several times, then you are bound to get wrong your assessment of the human terrain into which you are moving. So, let's not underestimate the capacity of Russia to miscalculate what the reaction to a military move would be.”

Keir Giles



RUSSIA'S RESPONSE IS A WINDOW INTO THE KREMLIN'S RISK APPETITE



"[What] we really don't know is how good a vision of the world Putin has. How much is he being briefed, simply to flatter his prejudices and to please him? And how much is he being told hard truths by the intelligence and security services who are the ones who are meant to be giving him the ground truth of the world, but whom unfortunately too often become courtiers? So, I think it's going to give us a pretty good sense of both the appetite for risk within the Kremlin, but also the understanding of the realities of the world around the Kremlin.

And that, for me, is the biggest danger. Not just as it relates to Belarus but as it relates to a whole series of other crises, current and prospective that may well be in the future. The Russians are not fools or zealots, but fairly pragmatic. However, they can also operate from a total misunderstanding of the realities on the ground, particularly as it relates to the West. Total sense that precisely the West is motivated by a pathological dislike of Russia and will use every opportunity, every crisis to bring it down. We will have to see if that becomes the determining factor in their response to Belarus, and if it does, it's going to be bad for Belarus, it's going to be bad for Russia, and it's going to be bad for us."

Mark Galeotti

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