

Belarus: The People's Fight Continues

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Since August 9, Belarus has been the scene of popular protests against what is perceived to be the fraudulent reelection of President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. The presidential election results gave him a victory with 80 percent of the votes, a figure far from the counts seen by election observers.

There are thousands of audio and video recordings of electoral fraud, showing the rewriting of results, the substitution of one ballot box for another, and multiple instances of pressure on voters, observers, and election officials. According to journalists and social scientists, based on admittedly partial data, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya, the opposition candidate, actually won the presidential election. Regardless of the figures put forward, which can vary considerably from one study to another, all observations agree that the totals for the two candidates were much closer than announced by the Belarusian Central Election Commission.

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets on election night to contest the results, which they considered a massive fraud. The rallies continued for days, regularly bringing out 100,000 to 300,000 people in Minsk alone, becoming the largest demonstrations in the history of the nation of eight million people. The protests quickly spread across the country. For four months now, Belarus has been shaken by an enormous popular protest movement.

What Explains the Unprecedented Mass Movement?

Despite the peaceful character of the movement, from the first day this summer it has been violently repressed by the riot police. The proof of the unjustified violence can be seen in the deliberate arrests of passersby, minors, and the elderly. A great many of those arrested have become sick in the crowded cells, without access to food or potable water. Prisoners who have been released have told how they were subjected to humiliation and to torture in the detention centers. There are allegations that penal authorities raped both women and men. The completely disproportionate police violence against the peaceful demonstrators and the mass arrests and torture to which the detainees were subjected fueled the mobilization, drawing in people who until recently considered themselves apolitical or even loyal to the regime.

Another issue adding to popular anger is the ineffective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by Belarusian authorities. Like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, Alexander Lukashenko was long in denial about the dangers of this disease, calling it a simple flu. In the midst of a pandemic, the

president advised Belarusians to wash their hands with vodka, go to the sauna, and drink alcohol to “poison the virus.” Lukashenko went so far as to openly deny the virus’s very existence, stating that he didn’t see it “flying around here.” The government decided to go on with celebrations, football and hockey matches, and other public events including the usual May 9 military parade, which annually celebrates the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazism.

On the one hand, such an irresponsible attitude on the part of the president has greatly contributed to his loss of credibility among the population. On the other hand, the authorities’ denial of the pandemic and their refusal to introduce public health measures have led the inhabitants of Belarus to build horizontal ties of solidarity that later proved very useful to the protest movement. Besides these immediate causes leading Belarusians to challenge the regime, other, less explicit reasons deserve to be analyzed. The creeping deterioration in the standard of living could indeed be considered one of the main factors inspiring such widespread popular discontent.

Despite the stereotypes that can be found in popular consciousness and sometimes even among leftist activists, Belarus is by no means a socialist country. Elected in 1994 after the fall of the Soviet Union, Lukashenko effectively put a stop to mass privatization. This partial return to state management of the economy proved popular among the Belarusians, who had witnessed the sad examples of the neighboring post-Soviet countries’ economies being ruined by the return of capitalism.

To this day, Belarus continues to preserve certain attributes of the Soviet socialist system, in large part thanks to sizeable subsidies from Russia. These Russian “donations” represent roughly a quarter of the Belarusian gross domestic product. Russia is seen as the main investor and also virtually the only market of the Belarusian economy. Ninety percent of Belarus’s production, especially in the agricultural sector, is exported to Russia. In addition, the country benefits from a big discount on the price of Russian hydrocarbons: Moscow allows Minsk to refine crude bought at low cost and to re-export it to Europe at market price. Russian gas is also sold to its neighbor at friendly prices. Thanks to this support from the Russian “big brother,” Lukashenko could indeed “buy” social peace in his country. In return, Putin demanded full economic and geopolitical loyalty from Belarus.

We should remember, however, that Moscow itself is in a very delicate economic and political situation, especially since its military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and the sanctions by Western countries that followed. Russia no longer has the same means to help its most loyal brother-country. To continue to benefit from Russian aid, Lukashenko resorted to blackmail, threatening Moscow with rapprochement with the West. This tension hardly helped to improve relations between Russia and the Belarusian regime.

The Belarusian economy, whose stability depends very much on its eastern neighbor, has been threatened. The Belarusian authorities thought to remedy this situation by introducing numerous austerity measures and by reducing social rights. Thus, we were witnessing the undermining of the very foundations of the Lukashenko regime. Until 2020, some sort of unspoken contract regulated relations between the government and the people—Belarusians were prepared to tolerate the absence of democratic freedoms in exchange for modest social security. Alexander Lukashenko, now incapable of fulfilling these obligations as the guarantor of economic stability, began gradually to lose his political legitimacy. A feeling of deep discontent slowly spread to large sectors of the population, both in the towns and in the countryside.

In short, large-scale electoral fraud and the refusal of Alexander Lukashenko to leave the presidency have led hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets. Police brutality further fuels the mobilization, drawing into it masses of previously apolitical people. The mismanagement of the

COVID-19 pandemic is also reinforcing popular anger. The impoverishment of the population coupled with the reinforcement of state violence also seems to contribute to the justification of the current revolt in the eyes of Belarusians.

Actors, Demands, and the Variety of Struggles

Egotistical and well known for his macho attitudes, Lukashenko obviously didn't take seriously the presidential candidacy of Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya, a homemaker who ran for office in place of her husband, a blogger who had been imprisoned for his criticism of the government. Without any previous political or public experience, she nevertheless became the symbol of this movement.

It's no secret that Lukashenko had systematically jailed rivals or driven them into exile. Since all potential presidential candidates were excluded from the Belarusian political sphere, they were never able to participate in the elections and make themselves known. As for Tsikhanovskaya, she publicly declared that her main promise was, once elected, to leave her post and to quickly organize free and transparent elections where all candidates can run. Her candidacy was therefore seen, by herself and by her supporters, as a means of carrying out the necessary measures for a democratic transition of power in this country, after a quarter century of sclerotic authoritarianism. Having thus publicly denied her own political ambitions, the candidate was able to gain wide support from a population wary of institutional politics. The crisis of confidence and mistrust of institutional elites is a general political trend, but it can take different forms. In Belarus it has found its expression in massive support for a female candidate whose lack of political experience is perceived as her main advantage and the main guarantee of her political "honesty."

The protests have not so far been accompanied by a precise political and economic program. Tsikhanovskaya sympathizers unite around a few simple demands: the release of political prisoners, the departure of Lukashenko, and the organization of new elections. The Belarusian political opposition, which has established itself as speaking for the whole movement, is made up of a small number of relatively well-known, but politically inexperienced, personalities. In their demands and their positions, they appear even less radical than the "ordinary" protesters. Few in number, they have become targets of repression, and thus they are unable to fully assume their role as leaders of the popular movement. Threatened by the Belarusian KGB the day after the election, Tsikhanovskaya took refuge in Lithuania. All the other members of the Opposition Coordinating Council presidium are in prison or forced exile. Therefore, the organized political opposition cannot play a significant role on the ground.

It should also be remembered that the opposition presidential campaign was led by three women. Two of them, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo are married to previously excluded presidential candidates. The third, Maria Kolesnikova is the ex-campaign manager of another candidate, himself in exile.

As already mentioned, the president seemed not to take seriously the candidacy of a woman. According to Lukashenko, Tsikhanovskaya, Tsepkalo, and Kolesnikova were just "three poor girls who understood nothing." During the campaign, he made several statements about a woman's inability to rule the country. According to Lukashenko, the Belarusian constitution "is not made for a woman," while society "is not ready to vote for a woman." But in 2020 that paternalistic and macho image cultivated by the president since 1994 finally backfired. Women, especially young people, saw it as an attack on their dignity.

Women are quite visible in the movement, including in the street protests. All-female protests often take place. Their main demand is to put an end to police violence. Photos of women of all ages, dressed in white, waving flowers, and holding hands, were published on the front pages of

international media. The “Belarusian Woman” thus became the symbol of the movement as a whole.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of this unprecedented female activism as the equivalent of the feminist movement as we often imagine it in the West. The marches that bring together thousands of women do not put forward especially feminist demands. This mobilization remains largely within the framework of the post-Soviet imagination, which attributes to the sexes particular “essential” characteristics. In this sense, women as “mothers” are seen as naturally protective and as endowed with the role of calming and supporting their men: friends, sons, husbands, fathers, and so on. Moreover, the demonstrators use the women’s symbolic status by putting them in front of the protests during clashes with the police. It seems that the Belarusian police don’t allow themselves to beat up women as violently as men. Such a strategy plays on sexist stereotypes that women reclaim in their favor. In any case, such participation of women in the social movement is a valuable experience of self-organization and collective action. It could certainly contribute to some awareness among women of their interests and strength.

The protest movement seemed to take a decisive turn with the announcement of a general strike on August 11. Large numbers of workers in industry, transport, commerce, and information technology joined the protesters. Doctors, retirees, teachers, and college and high school students are also at the forefront of this movement. The announced general strike, however, is still struggling to become a reality, despite an attempt to relaunch it on October 26. Production came to a complete halt only in a few factories.

After Putin’s public support, Lukashenko regained his self-confidence and launched a counterattack. Police were placed at the entrances of disloyal factories to intimidate the workers. The arrests of the leaders of strike committees and of trade unionists discouraged the undecided. And these are not just simple arrests. Many detainees have reported being beaten and tortured. Since August, at least ten people have been murdered by the police, including in custody.

The fear of layoffs is real. Dozens of workers have already become victims of “preventive” dismissals. In addition, workers are entitled to fixed-term employment contracts, which allow management to dismiss employees without any compensation but which do not allow employees to resign voluntarily since unemployment in Belarus is punishable by law.

We must also take into account the arsenal of sanctions at the disposal of factory management. Belarus has developed a whole system of control that makes a worker directly dependent on his or her workplace. Workers depend on social security that they can only get through their employers (this concerns housing, loans, vacation, and other items). Thus, material advantages can be obtained only by full subordination and loyalty. In a word, this organization of labor combines the worst of the Soviet and capitalist systems.

There is also the fear, among workers in state-owned enterprises in particular, of massive privatizations that would mean job losses if the pro-European and neoliberal opposition came to power. Such a prospect could also lead to the loss of the Russian market and the privatization of state enterprises, which represent a large majority of workplaces in the country.

Despite everything, this strike attempt constitutes an unprecedented event for Belarus, where during the last 25 years the Lukashenko regime has meticulously destroyed any mechanism of self-organization from below. The Belarusian left is working to introduce slogans with socio-economic content and to help workers defend their interests, while opposition leaders seem to be quite removed from working-class life. Made up above all of the intelligentsia, the hard core of the Belarusian opposition lacks experience, determination, and above all a critical perspective vis-a-vis the liberal discourse dominating the political and ideological field of post-Soviet countries. Its

inability to forge links with the structures of workers' self-organization, to take into account the interests of the employees, and to articulate demands for social justice are major obstacles to the success of the Belarusian protest movement.

However, the fact that the workers have not yet formulated their own economic demands and confine themselves to supporting democratic slogans cannot be explained only by the influence of the liberal discourse of the opposition. As Volodymyr Artiukh and Denys Gorbach have pointed out,* in the Belarus system of state capitalism, the economic exploiter is at the same time a state bureaucrat, which means that social demands cannot be separated from democratic slogans. Primarily, the workers see and feel the political violence of this bureaucratic class. The violence of economic exploitation remains in the shadow of the extreme physical violence of the regime that kills people with police batons right out on the streets of their cities.

At this stage, the very experience of uniting and confronting the authorities is essential for Belarusian workers. They must overcome the atomization and gain organizational experience. Those left activists who look upon the Belarusian protests with contempt must remember that class consciousness appears as a result of collective action, not the other way around.

International Context and the Role of Russia

Despite the strike and such massive and protracted demonstrations, Lukashenko still manages to stay in power. One of the main reasons for his regime's longevity is certainly the explicit support from Russia. Vladimir Putin has even declared that he would be ready to send forces to Belarus to maintain order if the protests escalate there. But why would Russia be interested in supporting an autocrat who has already lost all political legitimacy both in Belarusian eyes and internationally?

The reflex, in Moscow, is to come to the aid of its neighbor mainly for fear of the domino effect. More than anything, the Russian president fears that popular protest will spread to his country, where his popularity is currently declining. Putin may decide to support Lukashenko, this time in exchange for his complete subordination. However, even if Lukashenko managed to stay in power thanks to Russian intervention, his *raison d'être*—his model of political blackmail and economic bargaining—could no longer survive.

It would also be strange if the Kremlin's support for Lukashenko didn't provoke anti-Russian sentiments among Belarusians. Indeed, the question "for or against Russia" has been until now almost absent from the discourse of the protesters. People perceived the need for a change of power in Belarus simply as an internal affair of the country. Opposition spokespersons explicitly limit themselves to one demand: the removal of the president and the organization of free and fair elections. In each of her interventions, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya does everything possible to ensure that the movement does not appear to be anti-Russian. Yet in the event of Russian interference, the ongoing conflict between the government and Belarusian society would surely turn into a serious geopolitical crisis.

Moscow could also seek a "soft" solution, putting pressure on Lukashenko to convince him to leave his post by guaranteeing him personal security and a quiet retreat to a dacha somewhere in Russia. The post of Belarusian president would then be handed off to a person of confidence, loyal to Moscow. However, such a strategy involves a potential risk. Should Putin choose that option, he would unwittingly admit that mass mobilizations can, sooner or later, remove an autocratic president. In the current situation, when the Russian population has been demonstrating for months in Khabarovsk, openly defying Putin's power, this becomes an extremely dangerous message.

International Solidarity with a People in Struggle

The working class is the only force capable of resolving the question of power in the critical situation through which Belarus is currently passing. The self-organization of the workers has proven time and again to be the best way to challenge an authoritarian regime and ensure the success of the mass popular movement. This revolt of the Belarusian people is legitimate and deserves our full support. In Europe and throughout the world it is our duty to support the democratic slogans of the demonstrators and strikers and to show solidarity with the Belarusian left that is struggling to put forward demands with a social content.

More than ever, the organized popular classes in Belarus must take the initiative in favor of political and social change in order to prevent the frustration of this genuinely popular movement by forces opposed to their interests, whether pro-Russian or pro-Western. It is absolutely necessary to oppose any foreign interference in Belarusian affairs, whether from Moscow or other countries. Belarusians have the right to decide their future for themselves!

Note

* Volodymyr Artiukh & Denys Gorbach, "Workers' Struggles in Ukraine and Belarus," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, 11/4/20.