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## **THE PROTESTS IN BELARUS:** INSIGHTS FROM MINSK AND THE WESTERN VIEW

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## ANDREI YAHORAU

Senior analyst of the Centre for European transformation. Master of Political Science. A. Yahorau graduated from Belarusian State University, department of political science, and holds a master's degree in political science. He has been working in the political research area since 2001. Andrei Yahorau is one of the founders of the only specialized political science magazine in Belarus "Political sphere" (Palitychnaja Sfera) and he is the magazine's deputy editor. Since 2005 he has been an expert and the head of analytical group of the Humanitarian Techniques Agency.

Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, established as a result of a constitutional coup in 1996, is currently facing the most serious political crisis in all the years of its existence. After the cynically rigged election on 9 August 2020, masses of people took to the streets of their cities to protest. The officially announced results of the election in which Lukashenko won 80.1 % of the vote, while his main rival, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, received just 10.1 %, radically diverged from the views of the majority of Belarusians. The gap between the apparent number of supporters of change and the election results triggered mass protests. In the entire history of the country's independence, the authorities have not encountered anything similar, neither in terms of the number of protesters, in terms of geography, nor in terms of the duration of the protests.

On the evening of the first day of the protests, that is, on the evening of 9 August, the authorities responded with unprecedented violence against the protesters. For the first time, rubber bullets, stun grenades, and water cannons were used against them. Protesters were de-

tained and severely beaten, and the beatings and torture continued at places of detention. The authorities' goal was to quickly suppress the protests; their tactics, however, produced effects opposite to those intended. People on the streets began to respond to the violence by confronting the police. On the second day of protests, that is, on 10 August, protesters began erecting barricades in the streets of Minsk; in some cases, the confrontation between police and protesters lasted for several hours. The violence continued over the next two days; the number of detainees exceeded 7 thousand people, and two people died.

Large industrial enterprises (BelAZ, Grodno Azot, BMZ, MTZ, and others) joining protests on 11–13 August, as well as protests expanding in geography to almost 50–60 cities forced the authorities into temporary retreat. On 13 August, Natalya Kochanova, chairperson of the upper house of the parliament (until 2019, she had been the head of the President Administration), announced the release of some of the detainees (and they began to release them) and called for de-escala-

tion. Street violence temporarily stopped, but protesters organised mass flash mobs and formed solidarity chains. The symbolic actions of women in white, lining up along the streets in many cities, were particularly striking. It was noteworthy that street protests began to spread to residential areas of large cities, visually present everywhere. This reduced the effect of state propaganda, which sought to represent the protests as protests of a small number of people, to nothing.

By the sixth and the seventh day of the protests, the number of enterprises on strike had grown to two dozen enterprises, including major industrial giants. A partial erosion of the vertical power structure began. Belarus state TV workers joined the strike; heads of some state institutions, Belarusian ambassadors to Switzerland and Slovakia expressed their support for protesters. On Sunday, 16 August, mass rallies were held in Minsk and most cities of Belarus. After eight days of protests, the number of protesters grew from tens of thousands to about 500,000 people in the capital and, probably, to 1 million people in the whole country. The geography of the protests expanded to almost all cities.

What is happening in Belarus can surely be called a democratic revolution. However, a radical change in the situation in favour of protesters has not yet come. Lukashenko continues to control central and local authorities, as well as national security, defence, and law enforcement agencies. Not a single high-ranking official has yet sided with protesters, and no cases of law enforcement officers refusing to carry out orders have been recorded. Lukashenko's appeal to Russia and Vladimir Putin with a request to refer to the CSTO mandate and to provide security assistance to Belarus in suppressing protests

in the event of increased instability indicates the instability of his position. This situation creates enormous risks for the independence of Belarus. At the same time, the provision of such assistance by Russia will critically undermine the existing pro-Russian sympathies of Belarusians. The protests do not have any pronounced geopolitical orientation: they cannot be called pro-Western or anti-Russian. The masses of people only take to the streets to demand Lukashenko's resignation and the appointment of new elections.

Until now, the issue of political representation of protesters remains a significant problem. The symbolic trio, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Veronika Tsepkalo, and Maria Kolesnikova, who actually represented the united forces of change during the election campaign, fell apart after the departure of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo. The political leadership vacuum created problems with regard to the political representation of protesters, who had no established demands for several days. It was only on the fifth day of the protests that the headquarters of Maria Kolesnikova, as well as Svetlana Tikhanovskaya herself publicly announced their demands to the authorities, which, in short, were as follows: an end to the violence, the release of all political prisoners, the resignation of Lukashenko and the appointment of new elections. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya stated the need to create a Coordination Council, which had to include representatives of citizens' organisations and associations. Such a Coordination Council could become a representative body of protesters and a potential group capable of negotiating with Lukashenko on his resignation.

On 14 August, an extraordinary meeting of EU foreign ministers, convened at the initia-

tive of Poland and Lithuania, stated that the presidential election in Belarus was not free and fair; however, it did not call the sitting president illegitimate. Ministers also agreed on the need to sanction those responsible for the violence, repression and falsification of election results. Taking into account the understandable EU desire to increase pressure on the Lukashenko regime, it should be recognised that there are controversial aspects with regard to a sanctions decision as well. Sanctions cannot have immediate effects on the development of the current political crisis, and they are only of symbolic importance. More decisive EU involvement in the current situation is necessary, including the following: extensive measures of diplomatic pressure on sector ministries in cooperation with the EU; temporary suspension of assistance programmes, including programmes of international financial institutions (WB, EIB, EBRD) and international organisations (UNDP, WHO); creation of a working group on the current situation in Belarus, including representatives of EU institutions, ministries of foreign affairs of EU countries, international organisations (CoE, OSCE), as well as Belarusian civil society representatives and representatives of expert organisations. The proposals of Lithuania and Poland to mediate in crisis set-

tlement are positive initiatives, although the acceptability of such a scenario for the Belarusian authorities remains unclear.

The forced stay of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in Lithuania creates opportunities for the Lithuanian government to establish direct contacts with her. Taking into account the absolute necessity to support Tikhanovskaya in Lithuania, as well as the necessity of humanitarian support for victims of repression and symbolic solidarity with protesters, official Lithuania, nevertheless, should avoid public alliances with Tikhanovskaya. Such actions will have a negative effect on the development of the situation in Belarus, as they could provide Belarusian and Russian propaganda with an additional reason to present the events in Belarus as inspired by the West.

Now, for the first time in a quarter of a century, the situation in Belarus is in the hands of the Belarusian people. The victory of the democratic forces has never been so close; however, it is too early to write off the Lukashenko regime. Today, two choices remain for Lukashenko: negotiations with protesters or the announcement of a state of emergency. In the second case, the consequences will be unpredictable for the country.



## EDWARD LUCAS

Edward Lucas is a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). He was formerly a senior editor at *The Economist*. Lucas has covered Central and Eastern European affairs since 1986, writing, broadcasting, and speaking on the politics, economics, and security of the region. A graduate of the London School of Economics and long-serving foreign correspondent in Berlin, Vienna, Moscow, and the Baltic states, he is an internationally recognized expert on espionage, subversion, the use and abuse of history, energy security and information warfare.

Belarus is not just a black hole in human rights terms: a country where torture, abductions, forced confessions and grotesque election-rigging are commonplace. It is also a black hole in terms of the outside world's policy. In the years since independence, and particularly since Alyaksandr Lukashenka won the last free presidential election in 1994, Western countries have tried many approaches, ranging from friendly engagement with the authorities in Minsk to vehement condemnation and sanctions, and lavish support for the opposition and independent media. In between come long periods of neglect. These attempts to deal with Belarus are sometimes pursued with determination and in unison but more often dilatorily and raggedly.

The level of knowledge about Belarus in most Western capitals – Vilnius is a big exception – is stunningly low. Lurid scenarios attract the most attention, regardless of their plausibility. One mistake is to overestimate the significance of the linguistic divide. The difference between Belarusian and Russian is for most people not a matter of political principle (as,

say in Estonia or Latvia in the early 1990s). Nor is it “like Ukraine” or “like Moldova”. It is like Belarus.

Nothing tried by any country has really amounted to a policy. The objectives are unclear. Are we actively backing the opposition, or just trying to constrain the regime? Do we really want a democratic political upheaval in Minsk? Is the main priority to keep Belarus from being annexed by Russia? What level of risk are we prepared to take? What political and economic resources are we willing to devote to achieve success? These questions have lacked answers for thirty years.

In the meantime, Belarus itself has changed. Traumas, whether of the Second World War, or the intense Sovietisation of the 1960s and 1970s, are part of folk memory, but no longer of people's lived experience. Public expectations are higher: the stability and paternalism that once chimed with the popular mood now chafes. Belarusians want dignity, respect, truth and justice. They also want their well-educated, industrialised country to aim higher.

Much of that could be said about Russia too, which is why the events of the past days in Belarus are so terrifying for the Kremlin. The opposition in Belarus cannot be dismissed as Soros-financed fanatics, waving foreign flags at the behest of foreign paymasters. The political conflict does not pit a “western” orientated slice of the country against an “eastern” one, which is how many Russians viewed the revolution in Ukraine in 2014. This is the bottom against the top. A whole country is in revolt against arrogance, brutality, lies, humiliation and waste.

Outsiders can show their support for the strikers, demonstrators and detainees. The proposal by Lithuanian journalist Andrius Tapinas to recreate the “Baltic Way” human chain of August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1989, but from Vilnius to the Belarusian border, is a particularly commendable one. We can offer asylum to the

persecuted and do everything possible to circumvent the regime’s censorship. We can place the perpetrators of repression on sanction lists. We should take time too to reflect on our past mistakes.

That should bring us to the immediate focus of our policy: Russia. The real reason why the West’s Belarus policy is so ineffective is that it has to accommodate the Kremlin’s imperial pretensions. Since the unification of Germany and first expansion of NATO and EU membership in the 1990s we have chipped away at this ghostly aftermath of the Soviet empire. Belarus is now the only country in which the outside world accepts that Russia has some kind of special, privileged status. Only when that changes and the Kremlin understands that any interference in Belarus will bring an immediate and costly penalty, can the Belarusians win their freedom, at home and abroad.



## CHRIS MILLER

Chris Miller is the Director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program. He is also Assistant Professor of International History at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. His research examines Russian politics, foreign policy, and economics. His most recent book is *Putinomics: Power and Money in Resurgent Russia* which has been reviewed in publications such as *The Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The National Interest* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

After Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stole his country's presidential election on August 9 and violently cracked down on citizens who protested, the U.S. government declared that it was "deeply concerned." But what is the U.S. prepared to do? Washington is in a bind. Since Lukashenko earned his reputation as Europe's last dictator, the U.S. has been torn between two often contradictory goals. On the one hand, Washington condemns Lukashenko's government for suppressing its opponents and abusing its populace. On the other, the U.S. wants to support Minsk as it tries to maximize its room for maneuver vis-à-vis Moscow, which continues to see Belarus as within Russia's rightful sphere of influence. The uncomfortable reality for Washington is that past efforts to support Belarusian democracy have often risked pushing Lukashenko further into Moscow's arms.

During the years after 1991, U.S. policy toward Belarus has prioritized democracy and human rights. The U.S. has condemned Lukashenko's sham elections, supported civil society groups seeking to build democratic institutions, and imposed sanctions on Belarusian leaders complicit in abuses. Minsk

responded by slashing U.S. diplomatic representation in Belarus and restricting many other ties. With Minsk suffering Western sanctions and condemnation, Russia saw an opportunity for greater 'integration' via institutions like the customs union and the Eurasian Economic Union. In Moscow these institutions were openly discussed as tools to bolster Russian influence. Lukashenko realized Russia's intentions, but isolated from the West he had little choice but to sign up.

Belarus nevertheless sought to limit its reliance on Moscow by welcoming Chinese investment in industries from railroads to technology. He signed an agreement allowing visa-free travel between the countries and welcomed Chinese People's Liberation Army troops to march in Belarus' 2018 Independence Day Parade. China has lent Belarus hundreds of millions of dollars and cooperated with Minsk on missile development. Huawei has built up its presence in Belarus, too. Minsk no doubt hoped that its burgeoning friendship with Beijing would let it push back against some of Russia's more intrusive demands. China, meanwhile, was keen to expand its influence in Eastern Europe.

For many years the U.S. mostly ignored other great powers' growing influence in Belarus. Lukashenko's abuses made it almost impossible for American diplomats to do business with him. Even Russia's annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas prompted only a partial rethink in Washington. The State Department quietly explored improving ties and began to rethink sanctions after the war broke out. Yet little actually changed after 2014.

When the Trump Administration came to power, it declared that competition with Russia and China would be America's primary foreign policy goal, implicitly relegating questions of democratization to a secondary position. In February 2020—a time when Russian discussion of forcibly integrating Belarus had grown louder—Secretary of State Pompeo visited Minsk, offering to supply oil to Belarus. "Your nation should not be forced to be dependent on any one partner for your prosperity or your security," Pompeo told Lukashenko.

Fast forward half a year, and the door that Pompeo had cautiously opened for Lukashenko has slammed shut. The Belarusian dictator has visibly lost whatever popular support he once enjoyed. Yet it is not yet clear that Lukashenko is leaving. His "victory" in the August 9 presidential vote has already been recognized by Russia and China. And neither of the world's two authoritarian great powers has any interest in watching a movement for

free elections oust a dictator that they consider a friend. If Lukashenko manages to hold on to power, he will be more dependent on Russian (and China) than ever before. The fact that the EU is preparing new sanctions on Minsk only intensifies Lukashenko's dependence.

For a Secretary of State focused on great power competition, Belarus poses a dilemma. Pompeo has "strongly condemned" the violence police used against protestors and declared the election "not free and fair." Some in Congress are demanding that the U.S. cancel plans to send an ambassador to Minsk. Yet having been all but absent from Minsk for over a decade the U.S. lacks the deep understanding of Belarusian politics that is present in neighboring countries such as Lithuania and Poland. Unlike in Ukraine 2014, when it comes to Belarus the EU looks likely to play the leading role in forging the transatlantic response.

The U.S. finds it impossible to ignore the types of abuses that Lukashenko has made standard features of Belarusian politics. But the impulse to focus on great power politics at a time of heightened concern about Russian and Chinese power is deeply rooted in Washington. The risk is that by trying simultaneously to support democracy while opposing Russian and Chinese influence, the U.S. could end up accomplishing neither.



