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Belarus Uprising

HOW A DICTATOR BECAME VULNERABLE

Lucan Ahmad Way

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In August 2020, Belarus—a country known for its persistent autocracy and popular quiescence—exploded in mass prodemocracy protests. Following a fraudulent presidential election on August 9, hundreds of thousands took to the streets. The demonstrations posed an unprecedented threat to Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has ruled Belarus for more than a quarter-century. At the same time, protest leaders have explicitly distinguished their new movement from the “color revolutions” that have taken place in other postcommunist countries. Rather than calling for major changes in geopolitical orientation, as in Ukraine’s 2013–14 EuroMaidan, they have focused their demands on free and democratic elections together with a return to the constitutional status quo that existed before Lukashenka. While seeking to overturn a personalist dictatorship, opposition leaders have sought to portray themselves as essentially antirevolutionary.

This democratic uprising was the product of both growing popular discontent and Lukashenka’s own miscalculations. Lukashenka himself came out of nowhere to win the 1994 presidential election thanks in part to the fact that he was underestimated by the establishment as a country bumpkin. In 2020, he in turn gave a critical opening to his main challenger, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, because he did not take women seriously. Indeed, the first serious challenge to Lukashenka’s rule in two decades was directly enabled by misogyny.

The emergence of a powerful prodemocratic movement came as a shock. Belarus, which became independent in 1991, has long been considered a pro-Soviet bastion. Its neighbors on three sides are countries—Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine—that hosted powerful anticommunist movements when the Soviet bloc began crumbling in the

late 1980s. In these cases, oppositions mobilized strong traditions of nationalism to challenge Soviet power. National salvation and democracy became intimately linked.¹

Belarusians, by contrast, gave overwhelming support to the Soviet Union. More than 80 percent of citizens of what was then the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic supported preserving the Soviet Union in a March 1991 referendum. Such attitudes were rooted in long-term cultural ties to Russia. Belarusian identity was created in the twentieth century under Russian tutelage, and in contrast to their Ukrainian, Baltic, and Polish neighbors, Belarusians did not gain majority literacy until after the area was incorporated into the USSR. Partly as a result, Belarusian nationalism was extraordinarily weak.² After the Second World War, Belarus was transformed under Soviet rule from an overwhelmingly peasant society into an advanced industrial society. Use of the Belarusian language declined and the population became increasingly Russified. The most salient national myths, grounded in Belarusian partisan activity against the Nazis during World War II, are intimately tied to Soviet history.

While cultural identity is never set in stone, recent Belarusian history has not given much for anti-Soviet nationalists to work with. Indeed, the anti-Soviet Belarusian Popular Front that was founded in 1989, on the model of similar organizations in the Baltic republics, received little popular support and had mostly disappeared from mainstream politics by the mid-1990s. Whereas in the Baltic republics a new generation of nationalist leaders took charge after 1989, Belarus remained under the rule of an elite drawn from the old Soviet *nomenklatura*. This elite supported independence only after the USSR and the Soviet Communist Party disintegrated around it in 1991. Reluctantly, officials replaced the green-and-red Belarusian Soviet-era flag with the national white-red-white flag that had been introduced when the country was briefly independent in 1918. But little else changed. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, “Belarus’s political landscape remained stable to the point of immobility.”³

The Rise of Lukashenka

Against this backdrop, Lukashenka emerged virtually out of nowhere. The former head of a small state farm, he was elected to the Belarusian legislature in 1990. He was an erratic deputy, constantly switching sides between Communist and nationalist factions. Barely recognized outside his district, Lukashenka was best known for authoring an ironically prescient 1991 article that warned about the threat of a new Belarusian dictatorship. Lukashenka’s big break came in 1993 when he was appointed to head an anticorruption committee in parliament. He was selected for this role because the Belarusian establish-

ment did not see Lukashenka as a serious threat. Despite his repeated support for opposition, he was viewed as an inexperienced provincial who lacked the stature to become president.⁴ But the government badly miscalculated. Lukashenka became a household name after giving a speech denouncing high-level corruption on national radio. Buoyed by popular disgust with the existing elite, Lukashenka defeated Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich with an astounding 81 percent of the vote in the 1994 presidential election.

After taking power, Lukashenka immediately imposed autocratic rule. He aggressively censored state media and closed Belarus's only independent radio station and several independent newspapers. In 1995, he oversaw a referendum to change the country's white-red-white flag back to the old Soviet-era green-and-red version. Then, facing calls for his impeachment, Lukashenka shut down parliament in 1996 and replaced it with a rubber-stamp legislature. He imposed a new constitution that gave overwhelming powers to the president.

Lukashenka constructed a big and efficient electoral-falsification machine that allowed him to win presidential elections in 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2015 with between 77 and 84 percent of the official vote. Opposition candidates garnered no more than 16 percent. The number of opposition parliamentary deputies allowed to win could be counted on one hand. Electoral rigging appeared to be designed less to create believable victories than to demonstrate Lukashenka's total domination of the political sphere. What emerged was a well-oiled police state. When, in the mid-2000s, I interviewed long-retired political figures from the previous decade, I was regularly followed—in one case by men in a white sedan slowly driving alongside me as I walked along the street.

At the same time, critical slivers of openness existed within Lukashenka's regime. For many years, opposition parties were allowed offices in the center of the capital. One could openly criticize Lukashenka in outdoor cafes. All presidential elections until the most recent one were monitored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In 2006, I was given wide freedom as an OSCE election monitor to travel around Belarus and grill poll workers about fraud.

Most strikingly, and in contrast to many post-Soviet autocracies, real opposition figures have been allowed to run in presidential contests. Autocratic leaders in Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere typically allow only members of the so-called systemic opposition to run in elections. Such "opposition" forces consist of politicians and political parties that run against the ruling party but refrain from serious criticism and often support the incumbent autocrat. Russian examples include the Communist Party under Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's woefully misnamed Liberal Democratic Party, both of which avoid attacks on President Vladimir Putin. Similarly, the

People's Democratic Party in Uzbekistan and the Communist Party of Tajikistan field their own candidates in elections but support incumbent power. In Kazakhstan, those allowed to run are either unknowns with a proven inability to mobilize support or figures and parties that effectively support the regime.⁵ Such "competitors" typically receive support in the single digits, but their presence allows regimes to present themselves as democratic. At the same time, countries operating on this model systematically exclude genuine opposition forces seen as serious threats to incumbent power. Thus in Russia, the Communists are given free reign, but real opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny are systematically attacked.

By contrast, Lukashenka has frequently permitted real opposition candidates to run in elections. In 2006, for example, presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich openly attacked the regime and was backed by previous supporters of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front. Similarly, Andrei Sannikau, a former diplomat and cofounder of the human-rights group Charter 97, was permitted to challenge Lukashenka in 2010. Sannikau had been well known for organizing a series of antigovernment demonstrations in the 1990s.

To be clear, elections in Belarus have been purely authoritarian exercises. Not only has electoral fraud eliminated real competition, but the regime has prevented opposition forces from carrying out anything resembling a national campaign. The media have either ignored these forces or portrayed them in an overwhelmingly negative light. Activists attempting to canvass for opposition candidates have regularly been picked up by police for a few hours and released late in the night. Such "nuisance" harassment effectively made campaigning impossible.

At the same time, official candidacy has offered one concrete advantage: free airtime. During each presidential election held since Lukashenka came to power, officially registered candidates have been given up to half an hour on national television or radio to present their electoral programs. In many cases, these appeals were broadcast at hours when few people were watching television. Nonetheless, in a context in which opposition is otherwise shut out, such exposure is meaningful. During the 2020 campaign season, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was allowed to make two harshly critical speeches between fifteen and twenty minutes long on state television.

Lukashenka has provided such opportunities because, until very recently, opposition forces in Belarus have been extraordinarily weak. No serious threats to Lukashenka's power emerged after the late 1990s. Until the 2020 campaign, the most visible regime opponents have generally been highly marginalized Belarusian nationalists. While nationalism motivated a slice of activists, it also alienated large numbers of Belarusians. As a result, the opposition has had the flavor of a fringe movement reminiscent of Soviet-era dissent, rather than a political force that

might realistically be expected to take power. Andrew Wilson referred to the Belarusian opposition as a “minority counterculture.”⁶

Such marginalization was reinforced by Lukashenka’s extraordinary control over the economy. In contrast to many of his post-Soviet counterparts, Belarus’s dictator chose not to privatize large-scale enterprises in the mid-1990s. More than two decades after the collapse of communism, the private sector in Belarus accounted for about a third of GDP—far lower than in most post-Soviet countries. Partly as a result, Belarus has lacked the type of rich oligarchs who have periodically challenged incumbent power in countries such as Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, in 1999 Lukashenka introduced a system of short-term employment contracts that quickly spread through the workforce. This system greatly enhanced his capacity to target and punish individual activists, and threats not to prolong work contracts dramatically raised the costs of opposing the regime. In the 2000s, it was estimated that a thousand people had been fired for engaging in opposition political activity.⁷ The dominance of state employment and the contract system forced many activists to work outside the formal sector. Activists suffered enormously for their decision to oppose the regime.

Ironically, some activists have felt that the opposition’s best hope lay in authoritarian Russia. Lukashenka has maintained close ties to Russia and received an array of Russian subsidies totaling billions of dollars in the 1990s and 2000s.⁸ In particular, the Belarusian president has raised significant sums by buying Russian oil at subsidized prices and reselling it on the global market. Nonetheless, relations between Lukashenka and Putin have been tense. The Russian president has chafed under his Belarusian counterpart’s constant demand for more resources, and by 2005 the Russian government was widely rumored to have considered replacements for Lukashenka.⁹ Russia has periodically given modest support to elements of the Belarusian opposition. Most recently, in late August, independent newspapers were able to turn to Russian publishers after Belarusian printers refused to publish their papers.¹⁰

The near-total marginalization of opposition has until recently made Lukashenka less vulnerable to crises. For example, in the late 2000s, the president suffered critical setbacks after tensions with Russia forced him to cut social benefits in ways that affected a large majority of Belarusians. Real wages fell by about 50 percent in 2011 amid inflation and currency devaluations, and available surveys suggest that a vast major-

Lukashenka’s failure to take seriously the covid-19 pandemic undermined his popular support. The president suggested that Belarusians could protect themselves from illness by riding tractors and drinking vodka.

ity felt the economy was in crisis. According to one independent poll, Lukashenka's approval rating dropped from 53 percent in December 2010 to 21 percent in September 2011. Yet this did not seem to produce any corresponding increase in approval for opposition leaders.¹¹ The relegation of opposition to the status of minority counterculture partly immunized Lukashenka from such downturns, since no rival politicians or groups were in a position to take advantage of his misfortune.

In mid-2020, however, opposition came crashing into the mainstream. Economic growth has declined, partly as a result of the worldwide drop in energy prices and a reduction of Russian energy subsidies early in the year. In addition, Lukashenka's failure to take seriously the covid-19 pandemic undermined his popular support. The president suggested that Belarusians could protect themselves from illness by riding tractors and drinking vodka. According to available statistics, on the day of the August presidential election, there were nearly four times more total covid-19 cases per capita in Belarus than in neighboring Ukraine.¹²

In the runup to the election, there was a palpable sense that people had had enough. It quickly became clear that this was going to be a much more serious contest than Lukashenka had faced in the past. A number of opposition candidates emerged whose appeal extended well beyond the minority counterculture discussed above. Viktor Babaryka, a major banker and philanthropist with close Kremlin ties, resigned from the Russian-owned Belgazprombank in order to run for president. This came as a shock because Babaryka was long considered a Lukashenka loyalist. Next, the well-known videoblogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski decided to run. Tsikhanouski hosted a YouTube channel, "Country for Life," on which he interviewed a wide variety of regular people in Belarusian provinces who faced problems with government red tape and corruption. He denounced Lukashenka as a "cockroach" and drove around with a large slipper (to kill the cockroach) tied to the top of his car. Finally, Valery Tsapkala, a former diplomat and tech entrepreneur who worked on Lukashenka's first electoral campaign in 1994, announced his intention to run.

The Opposition Emboldened

While the absence of independent polls in Belarus now makes it impossible to know the exact levels of popular support for the opposition, these candidates all received unusually enthusiastic responses when collecting the signatures required for registration. Babaryka gathered four times the necessary number of signatures. When he was later barred from running, thousands protested by creating a human chain across Minsk. Opposition became increasingly bold. In response to a private poll that claimed to show Lukashenka's support at 3 percent, entrepre-

neurs began selling items with the slogan “Sasha 3 percent” (Sasha is short for Alyaksandr), and activists carried large slippers to swat the “cockroach.”¹³ All this clearly riled Lukashenka, who publicly complained that the opposition was insulting the president. Such irreverent treatment of the dictator suggested that the fear which once held the populace in check had dissipated.

At the same time, the appearance of three major candidates threatened to divide opposition support. Lukashenka inadvertently came to the rescue by barring all three contenders but permitting Tsikhanouski’s wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, to run. Tsikhanouskaya was an English teacher and translator with little activist experience who had shown no prior signs of political ambition. The government allowed her to register even though she failed to include a house owned by her husband on the tax declaration in her application—an oversight that created easy grounds for exclusion.¹⁴ Sexism seems to have clouded Lukashenka’s judgement: The president simply assumed that a female candidate could not pose a serious threat. A satirical Telegram channel mocked this attitude with a widely circulated story about an administration representative claiming that Tsikhanouskaya could not be president because there were no female facilities in the presidential-administration building. Lukashenka himself asserted that Belarus was not ready for a female president. Like Lukashenka in 1993–94, Tsikhanouskaya benefited from being underestimated by the ruling elite.

Tsikhanouskaya quickly took advantage of this opening to unite Belarus’s opposition forces. She was openly backed by two female representatives of the other challengers: Valery Tsapkala’s wife Veranika Tsapkala, and Barbaryka’s chief of staff Marya Kalesnikava. The campaign was very much a collective effort, using a tripartite symbol consisting of a heart, a fist, and a victory sign. The women campaigned together and were frequently photographed holding hands. Tsikhanouskaya repeatedly emphasized her cooperation with Tsapkala and Kalesnikava.

In her two television appearances, Tsikhanouskaya used female stereotypes to her advantage. She made a highly personal appeal, emphasizing her own experience with repression, the arrest of her husband, and threats to her children. Coming from a candidate without political experience or visible political ambition, her calm, quiet presentation and simple language conveyed a raw moral energy that likely appealed to many.

While they have drawn on some tactics used in recent Hong Kong protests, leaders of the amorphous prodemocracy movement in Belarus have framed their efforts as explicitly antirevolutionary. When making her case on television, Tsikhanouskaya emphasized that she was not a revolutionary or a politician but a regular citizen pursuing peaceful, lawful change. She was not the one seeking to create a “Maidan” (central square), a word that refers to the Ukrainian uprisings of 2004 and 2013–14. Instead, Lukashenka was the one who was driving the situa-

tion toward revolution through his disregard for the law. Lukashenka was the one provoking violence, not her.¹⁵

Of course, promoting free and fair elections in a personalist dictatorship *is* revolutionary. However, in contrast to their counterparts in Ukraine in 2004 or 2013–2014, Tsikhanouskaya and her fellow leaders have not linked the idea of democracy to any calls for a broader socio-cultural pivot toward Europe. In Ukraine, activists were more regionally concentrated and motivated as much if not more by cultural and geopolitical concerns than by concern for democracy. By contrast, the Belarusians have made no demands other than for democratic change. The movement has repeatedly emphasized its continued commitment to a pro-Russian orientation for Belarus. The main call of Tsikhanouskaya and others has been for a return to the constitutional order that existed before Lukashenka came to power, entailing a relatively equal balance between presidential and legislative powers. Tsikhanouskaya has framed herself as an interim leader who would usher democracy into Belarus.

Tsikhanouskaya's campaign was met with unprecedented enthusiasm. An opposition rally on July 30 attracted an estimated sixty-thousand people despite having been relegated by the authorities to the outskirts of Minsk. Lukashenka responded to this evidence of opposition support erratically, with claims that Russian mercenaries were attempting to destabilize Belarus and orchestrate a terrorist attack.¹⁶

As in previous contests, the official results (released on August 9) appeared to be divorced from reality. The government's numbers showed Lukashenka beating Tsikhanouskaya 80 to 10 percent. In the hours after the election results were released, thousands protested in different parts of the capital. Participants blocked several Minsk Metro stations and adopted tactics from the Hong Kong protests such as "be water" (frequently switching the location of protests from one part of the city to another) in order to avoid capture by the authorities. But it was not clear that Belarusians beyond a committed core of opposition activists were ready to get involved. While the official results were clearly fabricated, the opposition had no concrete evidence that Tsikhanouskaya had won. After apparently being threatened by the authorities, Tsikhanouskaya escaped to neighboring Lithuania—but not before she was filmed, clearly under duress, reading from a statement that called for her supporters to halt the protests. To many, including this author, the protests seemed doomed.

Yet Lukashenka overplayed his hand, opting for widespread repression that backfired and sparked a dramatic increase in the size and intensity of protests. Riot police hidden in ambulances attacked protesters.¹⁷ Close to seven-thousand people had reportedly been arrested by August 13.¹⁸ Photographs quickly emerged of the bruised bodies of protesters tortured while in confinement.¹⁹ A picture of a five-year-old girl reportedly attacked by police in the city of Grodno appeared on the internet.²⁰

Such reports provoked public anger in a way that electoral fraud alone

did not. On August 16, roughly a hundred-thousand Belarusians came out on the streets to demand that Lukashenka leave office. The next

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day, in a scene reminiscent of Nicolae Ceaușescu's final days in power in Romania in 1989, a disconcerted Lukashenka was greeted with shouts of "Go away!" when he gave a speech at a tractor factory. Policemen posted videos of themselves throwing away their uniforms in disgust. Expressing shock at stories of torture of peaceful protesters, the Belarusian ambassador to Slovakia resigned in protest. High-profile supporters of the regime—employees at state television, the Minsk symphony orchestra, and several state factories—openly sided with the protesters.

The following Sundays saw protests about a hundred-thousand strong in the center of Minsk.

In opting for severe repression, Lukashenka made a miscalculation that has backfired on numerous autocrats before him. Authoritarian crackdowns often spark moral outrage that fuels even more intense opposition activity.²¹ For example, in Ukraine in late November 2013, government harassment of protesters contributed to a dramatic increase in protest activity that eventually brought down the regime of President Viktor Yanukovich. Indeed, while the protests initially focused on the Ukrainian government's rejection of a planned EU partnership agreement, government abuses against peaceful protesters ultimately were more important than concern over Ukraine's geopolitical orientation in unifying ordinary citizens who joined the movement. The Yanukovich government disintegrated in February 2014, hours after government troops openly fired on protesters in Kyiv's main square.

Perhaps with this lesson in mind, the government in Belarus backed away from openly violent attacks on protesters. On August 14, the interior minister apologized for arresting too many "random people."²² Yet lower-intensity coercion has continued apace. Lukashenka brought in the Belarusian KGB to target opposition leaders. Several activists, including Olga Kavalkova, Ivan Kravtsov, and Anton Rodnenkov, have been forcibly removed from the country. Maria Kalesnikava, one of the movement's three leaders, thwarted the regime's attempt to force her out of the country by tearing up her passport at the Ukrainian border. Other opposition leaders, among them Lilia Vlasova and Maxim Znak, were detained. Foreign journalists have been deported.

How Russia responds will almost certainly be a major factor in determining Lukashenka's fate. Vladimir Putin faces a dilemma. On the

one hand, he clearly does not want a successful democratic uprising in Belarus that might provide a model for opposition within Russia. In late August, Putin expressed willingness to provide military support to Lukashenka, and his government apparently advised Belarusian authorities on tactics for repression. Russian personnel replaced striking workers at Belarusian state television. At the same time, overt intervention is risky for Moscow and threatens to alienate a Belarusian population that has long been supportive of Russia. Notably, Putin refrained from interfering in Armenia, another country Moscow sees as within its sphere of interest, when a peaceful uprising in 2018 overthrew President Serzh Sarkisian. In Armenia as in Belarus, the opposition avoided linking its demands to any plans for departing the Russian geopolitical orbit. Given popular sympathy for Russia, Putin can be fairly confident that any new government in Belarus will retain the country's longstanding pro-Russian geopolitical orientation.

As of this writing in September 2020, Lukashenka's fate remains unclear. On the one hand, large-scale protests continue despite the regime's decapitation of the opposition leadership. At the same time, major defections from the regime have largely ceased. Absent a strong push from Russia, Lukashenka is in a strong position to hang on. But even if Belarus's antirevolutionary uprising fails to oust Lukashenka, it has destroyed the perception that he is invulnerable to opposition challenge. Belarusian democracy may well be on the horizon.

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