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Language

Belarus remains the most authoritarian regime among the European ex-Soviet states, despite a significant dissident movement among intellectuals and young people who grouped round Charter 97, Zubr (Bison) – a group committed to nonviolence – and other organizations. Commemoration of Chernobyl in April 2005 resulted in large scale arrests. Since the March 2006 presidential election, where the opposition failed to overthrow President Lukashenko, a major (but not exclusive) focus has remained on electoral protest. The opposition tried again in the presidential election of December 2010, despite arrest and torture of activists and journalists, and held a 30,000 strong demonstration in Minsk on election night. But the President retained a strong grip on power and still had significant popular support.

### **The Nonviolent Uprising of 2020**

After the unsuccessful resistance to the rigged 2010 elections, many in Belarus focused on their private lives and abandoned political opposition. Therefore the scale of the popular resistance to the blatant rigging of the presidential election on 9 August 2020, in which Lukashenko was assigned 80 per cent of the vote, and the main opposition candidate 10 per cent, took outside observers and many in Belarus itself by surprise. Popular anger was in part a response to the regime's denial of the Covid-19 crisis (arresting doctors who tried to raise the alarm) as well as to the election results. The country-wide reaction was further fuelled by the regime's brutal handling of the initial mass popular protests, after the results were announced. Riot police physically assaulted demonstrators, as well as many reporters and passers by, used tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets, and smashed cars that hooted in sympathy with the protesters. Dead bodies were later found in the woods. An estimated 6,700 were imprisoned in the first four days and many were beaten or raped. Television cameras recorded families outside the prison being reunited with badly bruised demonstrators, and pictures of their wounds were circulated on social media.

Popular reaction also reflected the fact that by 2020 there was growing economic discontent. Lukashenko had retained support in the factories for many years (since coming to power in 1994) through his economic policies, which included maintaining state owned enterprises from the Soviet era and raising living standards with the help of Russian subsidies. But changing circumstances, including reduced subsidies and the impact of Covid-19, have undermined his strategy. Angry workers shouted Lukashenko down when he spoke at a factory after the election.

The Belarus protests have much in common, in terms of policy and tactics, with the Armenian revolution of 2018. Belarus is closely integrated into Russia's sphere of influence - Lukashenko was a former collective farm boss and adherent of the Soviet regime, who kept Soviet symbols and did not rename the Belorussian KGB. The opposition does not have a pro-EU agenda, and has not publicized a desire to move closer to the west, although it has received declarations of support from the EU, who promised to join the US, Canada and UK in sanctions against the regime at an emergency meeting on 19 August, 2020. The protests in Belarus have adopted (and adapted) the style and symbols used in Armenia: for example women clad in white to symbolize purity, and carrying flowers confronting the black-clad security forces. There has also been an emphasis on the red and white flag, originally adopted in 1918, when Belarus gained brief independence, and re-adopted in 1991. Lukashenko, however, is linked to a different, red and green national flag, which dates from the Soviet era, when Belarus was part of the Soviet Union, but gained nominal representation with a seat at the United Nations in 1951. Lukashenko reintroduced the Soviet era flag (without the hammer and sickle) in 1994 through a referendum. In 2020 the contrasting flags symbolize the 'pro' and 'anti' Lukashenko forces.

The Belarus protests have also followed the Armenian revolution in remaining strictly nonviolent, as symbolized by the women with flowers. When on August 17 angry demonstrators gathered outside the Minsk prison to demand the remaining protesters should be released, they were stopped from trying to storm the prison by about 150 activists, including priests, who formed a human chain around it. The focus has been on peaceful marches, continued every weekend since the results of the election were announced in early August. Journalists on state television walked out in protest against the regime violence against protesters in August. Workers in varied parts of the economy, including a state-owned fertilizer plant and the Minsk Metro, also launched strikes in protest, though threats of arrests and sackings meant that some strikes were not long lasting.



A major difference between the Belarus and Armenian mass protests is that the latter were focused round a central leading figure, who largely directed the protest strategy. The Belarus movement has no single figurehead and a much looser leadership structure, based after August 2020 largely on women. The leaders of three opposition parties came together ahead of the 2020 presidential elections. But Viktor Babaryko, a banker initially seen as the strongest opposition candidate, was barred from running and arrested in July. Another popular opposition leader, video blogger Sergie Tikhanovskiy, was also jailed with other candidates. His wife, school teacher Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, took his place and became the symbolic leader of the opposition, promising new free and fair elections. After the rigged poll she was detained by the regime. She then read out a prepared statement - clearly under duress - calling for protests to end, and was driven by security forces to Lithuania, whose government accepted her and also provided asylum for her two children. From exile she formed a coalition of opposition figures, including workers as well as intellectuals, to negotiate with the regime. As protests continued the regime seized several members of the leadership, including lawyer Maxim Znak, in early September. They also arrested the most prominent opposition figure, Maria Kolesnikova, a flautist who had campaigned with Tikhanovskaya during the election. Kolesnikova resisted an attempt to deport her forcibly to the Ukraine by tearing up her passport at the border, and was then kept in prison. The only prominent opposition figure still free by 9 September was the 72 year-old Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich - European diplomats in Minsk hurried to support her when she reported masked men trying to break into her apartment.

Lack of central leadership has not stopped the protests. From the beginning activists have also organized by coordinating through social media before and during demonstrations, for example regrouping to avoid barricades and riot police to reach the centre of Minsk. (The role of the messaging app Telegram is described by Shaun Walker, *Guardian Weekly*, 13 Nov. 2020 - see references below). Some strike committees were also formed.

### Prospects for Success

Lukashenko, who has always used force and fear to bolster his rule, stepped up repression in October 2020, arresting hundreds of protesters and using water cannon and batons and flare guns. The Interior Ministry announced on 12 October that 'if necessary' it would use combat weapons against demonstrators. The Belarus regime was backed by Vladimir Putin (even though Lukashenko had presented Russia as a threat to Belarus sovereignty over the previous two years) because a successful popular uprising in Belarus, which borders Russia, would send a dangerous political message to the Russian people. Russian media have provided a barrage of propaganda designed to discredit the Belarus protesters. But major Russian military - as opposed to media and diplomatic - involvement seemed very unlikely. Lukashenko also adopted the propaganda line used by Moscow against the Ukrainian EuroMaidan protests in 2013-14: that the protests were promoted by neo-Nazi groups. This claim, which was certainly exaggerated when made about the Ukraine (though there were active far right groups politically involved), is not in the view of western reporters at all true in Belarus.

The breadth of popular support for the protests is a key strength of the opposition. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists and other middle class professionals have been prominent, but (as already noted) many workers have also joined in. Natalia Kaliada, an artistic director of the Belarus Free Theatre (banned by the regime), singled out a miner who handcuffed himself 300 metres underground to his machinery to highlight Lukashenko's 'genocide of his own people'. ('Dreaming Together', *New Internationalist*, Nov.-Dec. 2020, pp.8-9) Young people have been at the forefront among the demonstrators, but at least some of the old (who are more likely to regret the end of the economic stability of the Soviet era) also became involved. There have been marches of pensioners. For example, a 'pensioners' march' of thousands waving red and white flags was held on Monday 12 October, after security forces used brutal methods against demonstrators over the weekend and detained over 700 of them. The opposition has not, however (unlike in Armenia in 2018) been able to claim there was any sign of security personnel (either at the top or at lower levels) defecting to them, although early on there were some reports of individuals refusing to obey orders to use violent intimidation. It was suggested in August that some mid-level civil servants might be willing to switch to the opposition, but there have been no further reports of such non-cooperation.

A possible sign of progress for the opposition, reported by the BBC, was Lukashenko's decision to hold a four and a half hour meeting with eleven imprisoned opposition figures, which he publicized on 11 October. However, the regime closed down some Minsk Metro stations and reduced mobile Internet coverage to undermine the tenth weekend of mass protests on October 17-18, and arrested over 200 demonstrators. At an international level Belarus accused the governments of Lithuania and Poland of meddling in its internal affairs by giving asylum to opposition figures, and on 9 October recalled its ambassadors to these countries and demanded a cut in the staff



at their embassies in Minsk. Both reacted by recalling their own ambassadors from Belarus; the UK, Germany and six other European countries followed suit in solidarity with Lithuania and Poland.

After over two months of major weekly protests, Tikhanovskaya called on Lukashenko to resign and then launched a nation-wide one day general strike on Monday, 26 October, which was observed by many students and workers. The regime retaliated by ordering universities to expel striking students, and closing down on 'health grounds' restaurants that had joined the strike.

During November the two sides continued to confront one another. Lukashenko urged violence against protesters, and security police fired live bullets into the air as warning shots. The regime also ordered banks in the country to seize funds raised (mostly from individual Belarus citizens) to pay fines for demonstrators or to compensate them for being beaten. The opposition continued with major demonstrations, fuelled by anger at further deaths due to police brutality. For example, 31 year-old Roman Bondarenko died in hospital of head injuries from a police beating on 13 November. An estimated 20,000 protesters had been detained by that date and many faced court appearances and long prison sentences. The resistance has also become decentralized, with local groups communicating via the Telegram app and organizing local protests and events.

There was international condemnation of the brutality of the Lukashenko regime in suppressing resistance by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. The UN Human Rights Council called in September 2020 for urgent monitoring of what was happening, and the EU refused to recognize the election results and imposed sanctions on Belarus officials responsible for suppressing protest. An investigation initiated by the OSCE condemned human rights violations before, during and after the elections. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also issued reports.

### **Resistance from Exile as Repression Increases**

By the beginning of 2021 Lukashenko backtracked from earlier conciliatory moves and increased repression of independent reporters and public protests. Protests that did still take place tended to be outside city centres, smaller and of shorter duration. Many prominent protesters and critics of the regime had already left the country to campaign from abroad. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who had been the figurehead of the resistance from exile in Lithuania, continued to issue calls for protest and to lobby EU governments to maintain pressure on Lukashenko. But in April 2021 Pavel Latushko, a former minister and diplomat in exile, announced in Warsaw the creation of a new political party which would in the future contribute to a new multi-party democracy. The banker Viktor Babaryko, who stood as a presidential candidate in 2020 and was imprisoned in advance of the election, also announced from prison the creation of a party. He was subsequently jailed for 14 years in July 2021 on fabricated charges of accepting bribes and money laundering.

Resistance to the Lukashenko regime became headline news again on 23 May 2021, when a Belarus fighter jet forced down a Ryan Air plane flying from Greece to Lithuania over Belarus airspace. The pretext was a bomb threat to the plane, but when the plane landed Belarus police boarded it and forcibly removed an activist in exile, Roman Protasevich, and his girlfriend. Protasevich, a journalist and co-founder of the Telegram channel Nexta, was well known for his blogs attacking the Lukashenko regime. He was subsequently coerced into making a televised 'confession' on 3 June clearly speaking under duress. The regime charged him with organizing 'mass disorder'. Other prominent Belarus opposition figures in exile expressed fears that they might also be targeted by the regime: the head of the KGB had promised to 'eliminate all traitors to the motherland'. These fears seemed to be confirmed when a prominent resistance activist in Kiev, who helped those escaping from Belarus, was found hanged at the beginning of August.

The regime also intensified internal repression in June. Activists who had already been arrested faced assault and possible death in detention. Human Rights Watch reported on 'unprecedented raids' on the offices of human rights defenders in at least 10 cities in July, when staff were assaulted and documents seized, with the apparent aim of destroying evidence of the regime's human rights violations.

The dangers of any kind of public criticism surfaced again at the Tokyo Olympics at the beginning of August 2021. Some athletes who had taken part in the 2020 resistance had been excluded from Olympic teams and from funding and detained; calls for Belarus to be excluded from the Tokyo games were unsuccessful. The regime was, however, able to field an apolitical team of athletes in Tokyo; the Belarus team was headed by Lukashenko's son. A political crisis nevertheless erupted, when sprinter Kristina Timonovskaya was taken by Belarus officials to Tokyo airport on 1 August, after she criticized her coaches on the internet for being ordered to take part in an event which



she had not trained for. She avoided forcible return to Belarus by appealing to Japanese officials at the airport and tweeting about her plight. She was then offered asylum by both the Polish and Czech governments, and given refuge in the Polish embassy in Tokyo. The resulting international publicity focused attention again on the Lukashenko regime, and Svetlana Tikhanovskaya met the British Prime Minister in London to urge further sanctions. The same week saw the opening of the trial of key opposition leaders already imprisoned in Belarus, including the defiantly irrepressible. Maria Kolesnikova, one of the leaders of the mass-street protests together with Veronica Tsepkalo and Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, is accused of plotting to seize power, a charge that could lead to 15 years in prison.

Buzgalin, AV ; Kolganov, AI, [The Protests in Belarus: Context, Causes and Lessons](#) [1], Critical Sociology, Vol. 47, issue 3, 2020, pp. 441-453

This article provides an analysis of the socio-economic background to the protests, the social and class composition of the protesters (and of those who did not take part) and the 'contradictions within the Belarusian "power elite"'. It was written whilst the protests were still taking place.

Forbrig, Joerg ; Marples, David R. ; Demes, Pavol, [Prospects for Democracy in Belarus](#) [2], Washington DC, German Marshall Fund of USA and Heinrich Boell Stiftung, 2006

Kascian, Karyl, [Lukashenka's Campaign against Nazism: One Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy](#) [3], New Eastern Europe, 24/05/2021,

Kascian explain how a new law to prevent the rehabilitation of Nazism is designed as part of the campaign to suppress Belarus civil society.

Kazharski, Aliaksei, [Belarus' new political nation? 2020 anti-authoritarian protests as identity building](#) [4], New Perspectives, Vol. 29, issue 1, 2021, pp. 69-79

Kazharski notes that the mass movement that arose to reject the rigged 2020 election had been interpreted as the creation of a new civil society or even a new political nation. His article focuses on the relevance of the symbolic politics of the movement in creating a new sense of identity.

Marples, David R., [Color revolutions: the Belarus case](#) [5], Communist and Post-Communist Studies, Vol. 39, issue 3 (Special Issue 'Democratic Revolutions in Post-Communist States', ed. Taras Kuzio), 2006, pp. 351-357

Examines why protesters failed to achieve regime change in the 2006 presidential election. Argues that the historical background of the regime, the popularity of the president, and electors' concern with economic rather than democratic issues were all important. Also considers role of Russia and its ambivalence towards the Belarus regime.

Mudrov, sergei, [Doomed to Fail? Why Success was almost not an Option in the 2020 Protests in Belarus](#) [6], Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, 2021

Mudrov, an academic working inside Belarus, argues that despite the initial impetus of the movement against Lukashenko from August 2020, there were four main reasons why it failed. The degree of support for Lukashenko was underestimated, some social classes such as industrial and agricultural workers were not well represented in the protests, government institutions consolidated behind the government and the police and military stayed loyal to the regime. Other factors were that protest symbols alienated many people, and many were deterred by the harshness of the repression. Mudrov also argues that the protests exacerbated divisions in Belarusian society, and increased hatred and distrust. But he concludes that there is also, especially amongst the young, increasing desire for change.



Ramirez, Loic, [Can the Belarus protests Topple Lukashenko?](#) [7], Le Monde diplomatique, 2020

Article assessing who the protesters in Belarus are and what they want.

See also: Richard, Helene, 'Russia's Watchful Eye on Minsk' in this issue <https://mondediplo.com/2020/10/07belarus> [8]

Richard discusses the aims of the protesters and draws comparisons with the Armenian uprising of 2018.

Sierokowski, Slawomir, [Belarus Uprising](#) [9], Journal of Democracy, Vol. 31, issue 4, 2020, pp. 5-16

A journalist's eyewitness account of the uprising in Belarus from 4 August to 2 September, covering major demonstrations, strikes and the brutal regime response in Minsk and other parts of the country.

See also: Way, Lucan Ahmad, 'Belarus Uprising: How a Dictator Became Vulnerable', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31 no. 4. (October 2020), pp.17-27.

The author examines the mass popular response to the fraudulent presidential election, and clarifies how the protests differ from earlier 'colour revolutions', with leaders stressing not changes in foreign policy but free and democratic elections and constitutional government. He suggests that even if the uprising fails it shows that Lukashenko is vulnerable to popular challenge.

Silitski, Vitali, [Belarus: Learning from defeat](#) [10], Journal of Democracy, Vol. 17, issue 4 (October), 2006, pp. 138-152

Examines presidential election of March 2006 and argues that, although the protests against abuses apparently failed, they created a 'network of solidarity' and a 'revolution of the spirit'. Two essays by Silitski focus on the effectiveness of the authoritarian regime and why it can contain protest are:

, [Pre-empting Democracy: The Case of Belarus](#) [11] Journal of Democracy, 2005, pp. 83-97 , and  
, [Contagion Deterred: Pre-emptive Authoritarianism in the Former Soviet Union \(the Case of Belarus\)](#) [12] In Bunce; McFaul; Stoner-Weiss, [Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World](#) [13] (D. II.1. [Comparative Assessments](#) [14])New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 274-299 .

Vock, Ido, [Newsmaker: Svetlana Tikhanovskya and the Battle for Belarus](#) [15], New Statesman, issue 26 November-2 December 2021, 2021, pp. 9-10

This article, incorporating an interview with Tikhanovskya, the leader of the opposition to the Lukashenko regime in exile, provides a useful summary of the resistance to the rigged election in 2020 and the subsequent repression. Vock notes the ruthlessness of Lukashenko against the opposition internally and those in exile in EU countries, and his unscrupulous use of refugees from the Middle East to challenge the Polish/EU borders. He also indicates that the Belarus opposition, which initially did not challenge ties to Russia, has become explicitly hostile to Putin's backing for Lukashenko and more dependent on EU and western support. Vok also reports that a leaked poll from inside Belarus indicates that although Tikhanovskya has significant support, two of the jailed opponents of the regime, Babaryko and Kolesnikova, are more highly regarded.

Walker, Shaun, [The Signal and the Noise](#) [16], Guardian Weekly, 13711/2020, pp. 34-39

Walker analyzes how the protesters in Belarus in 2020 used the 'Nexta Live' channel (run by a young Belarusian man in Warsaw) on the Telegram messaging app. The app combines easy availability of information and advice - allowing rapid dissemination of instructions to protesters and advance organizing - with privacy. Governments have great difficulty in blocking channels on the app. Whilst focusing on the Belarus context, Walker also notes that the app is used by protesters in Hong Kong, in Russia and by Extinction Rebellion. It has also been used by Isis fighters - though Telegram has begun to try to prevent this. The creator of the app is a Russian now living abroad.





Wilson, Andrew, [Belarus – The Last European Dictatorship](#) [17], New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2011, pp. 256

Covers earlier Belarusian history and search for identity, but gives weight to analysis of President Lukashenka's rise to power and how he maintained it effectively for so long, including his handling of the challenge in the 2010 presidential election.

See also:

Valerie J. Bunce; Sharon L. Wolchik, [Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Post-Communist Countries](#) [18], (D. II.1. Comparative Assessments [19]), pp. 198-211, including detailed references.

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