

Dispatches from the Belarus Uprising

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Following the presidential election on August 9, 2020 and the “re-election” of Aleksandr Lukashenko, a popular uprising is taking place in Belarus. The brutal reaction by the repressive apparatus has incited terror on the streets as well as a firm rebuke from the population. Street battles on the first three nights after the election - during which thousands of protestors and passersby have been arrested, beaten, and tortured - have been followed by days of unprecedented mass actions of solidarity from civil society, strikes in major factories, walk-outs of medical and other workers, and resignations from government officials. What is at stake is not only the future of a small Eastern European nation, but the fate of the post-Soviet bloc as a whole, where the neighboring peoples and their governments are attentively watching and learning lessons.

Aleksandr Lukashenko has been in power as president of Belarus since 1994. Over the course of the past 26 years, each presidential election has more or less followed a familiar schema: falsification of official results, followed first by a call from opposition leaders for mass protests in the center of Minsk, the capital of Belarus, and then by brutal police repression of the protests over the course of several days or weeks; like in a proven ritual, the protests would eventually subside, lying dormant for years, until the next election cycle. This time things are different.

The current popular uprising has neither centralized leaders nor centralized strategy. This circumstance is all the more paradoxical, since for the first time since 1994, an opposition candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, has gained widespread popular support. The official tally of 2020 mirrors the results of previous years, anywhere between 80 and 90% for Lukashenko. However, while it is the case that the results of previous elections were falsified, Lukashenko nonetheless enjoyed popular support. This time, we know with certainty that this is not the case, as evidenced by popular mobilization and unofficial exit-polls. Tikhanovskaya, who is not a professional politician, ran on a platform comprising a single demand: free and fair elections. Tikhanovskaya's candidacy itself arose as a result of several contingencies. Three main opposition candidates, all men, were either jailed or left the country ahead of the elections; their candidacies were refused official registration. Instead, two of their wives, Veranika Tsepkalo and Tikhanovskaya, as well as Maria Kolesnikova, the campaign chief of the arguably most popular unregistered candidate (Viktar Babaryka), spearheaded the opposition campaign. The three women ran an inspiring and innovative campaign, drawing the biggest crowds since the days of the early 1990s, not only in major cities, but in smaller towns and villages across the country. Tikhanovskaya's candidacy was registered by the authorities as a formality, to give a semblance of democratic element to the elections, since she was not viewed as a serious candidate or a threat. Against these expectations, and although at the moment this election must be deemed illegitimate, she may be legitimately considered as the second democratically elected president, and the first woman president, of Belarus.

Following the election day, neither Tikhanovskaya nor the representatives of her campaign called for protests or strikes. She was transported to Lithuania, evidently under threat to her and her family from the authorities, where she remained largely silent as the strength of the protests grew; after eight days of resistance, she expressed willingness to assume a leadership role in the transfer of

power and organization of new elections. While national sovereignty – under perpetual threat from Russia – remains an acute issue, the opposition leadership borne out of the nationalist protests and politics of the late 1980s and early '90s, which dominated the resistance of previous years, now is a non-factor. As a result, heretofore “apolitical” parts of the population with an aversion to nationalist politics joined the struggle. The lack of leadership during the current protests has been not so much a hindrance to resistance, but its condition of possibility. The decentralized fronts of struggle and heterogeneous forms of protest speak to the emergence of “civil society” – a term widely used in Belarus to designate unofficial networks of grassroots organizations and initiatives of mutual help – as the decisive political factor in the coming struggle. The kind of politics that will take shape in Belarus hinges on this emergent force.

The incompetence of the current government and the popular distrust in the authorities run side by side with the strengthening solidarity among the population. Lukashenko famously downplayed the danger of COVID-19 and the official statistics were fabricated. The response to the pandemic in Belarus was spearheaded by a mass mobilization of different communities and civil society took it upon itself to provide PPE and resources for the overworked medical staff. These days medical workers are engaged around the clock in the hospitals, where severely injured people poured in from the streets and police torture chambers.

The new forms of organization of civil society manifested themselves also during the electoral campaign: for example, the initiative “Honest People” prepared a significant number of independent observers. Though they were ultimately kicked out from the poll sites, they provided significant evidence of voting fraud. Most importantly, this and other networks of citizens remain in effect in initiatives for further political action. The strength of the organization of civil society, devoid of centralized leadership, will prove necessary not only when striking workers lose their jobs or when families of prisoners need assistance, but also in the process of any peaceful transfer of power. As during the pandemic response, the solidarity of civil society, and its effectiveness, will be decisive to the success of the current uprising.

Decentralized strategies of resistance manifested themselves also in the geographical decentralization of protests. In Minsk, where the center of the city was blockaded by OMON – the special unit of riot police – people gathered in popular places in their own neighborhoods. Because the government practically shut off all internet access throughout the country for most of the three days following the election, any coordinated effort was difficult to achieve. Yet virtually all major cities saw popular gatherings, and many of the smaller cities and villages joined in. In response to this innovative strategy, OMON unleashed an unprecedented wave of terror. Throughout the country, the riot police would corner and catch people on a one-to-one basis, often incidental passersby, beat them publicly, and transport them to jails, where reports of inhumane conditions and torture proliferate. The three nights after the election saw major street battles in Minsk: only not in the center of the city, but in different neighborhoods, often on the edges of the city. For the first time, echoing tactics seen in Minneapolis, New York, and Paris, police used sound grenades, rubber bullets, and teargas, while the authorities blamed anarchists, instigators, and foreign agents. With the difference that OMON was prepared not only to wage war, but to commit war crimes, evidently having been trained in and ready to apply widespread torture and abuse to demoralize the population. The strategy of the protestors: tire out the police by running away when possible and reassembling when it's safe; the strategy of the repressive apparatus: instill as much pain and terror as possible. While the police know how to attack the center and the weakest link, protesters, at first inadvertently and then strategically, distributed the points of resistance and pressure.

Many other forms of resistance followed. People who were afraid or unwilling to go on the streets shouted from their windows, flickered their lights, and blasted protest songs; police shot at people's windows in response. Cities were filled with the constant sound of honking cars, an expression of

protest and solidarity; police tried to damage the honking cars. More than seven thousand have been arrested. Two official deaths were recorded. Hospital reports of severe injuries continue. Jails were overcrowded; the people released from jails due to overcrowding reported torture.

The result: popular indignation and actions of solidarity. Most significantly, women across the country created human chains demanding the release of their loved ones and fair elections. In an unprecedented showing of solidarity, people opened their houses to shelter the protesters fleeing the police; during the nights of street fights, people left medical supplies in their buildings for the hiding out and injured protestors. Medical workers staged walk-outs, expressing distress at the many severely injured people as well as continued disrespect to their own work from the authorities. Anchors of official television resigned. The population made an impromptu memorial at the sight of a fallen protestor.

August 13th may prove to be the turning point. Workers in numerous major factories started striking and organized walk-outs. Autoworkers, chemical plant workers, oil refinery plant workers, potash miners, railroad workers, among others, joined the strike. The following days, dozens of other major factories across Belarus followed, while workers led popular marches in their respective cities. The smaller cities of Zhodzina and Salihorst, spearheaded by striking workers, became witnesses of direct democracy: city officials were summoned in public squares to assure accountability – against the official voting results in their districts, workers and citizens voted publically on the city streets. On Friday, August 14, the striking workers from “Minsk Tractor Works” led a march to the center of Minsk, drawing a massive crowd of supporters with the demand for a fair election and the immediate release of prisoners. Police vanished from the cities across the country. Sunday, August 17th, saw a historic mass mobilization across the country, culminating in a peaceful demonstration of hundreds of thousands in Minsk, by far the most popular event in Belarusian history. By Monday, August 17, most major factories across the country joined the general strike. Under this pressure, the authorities began the release of political prisoners, though hundreds still remain in jails, and dozens are missing. Under the pressure of popular indignation, the police retreated, and, at least temporarily, were forced to halt their terror. It is lost on nobody that the end to police brutality is the result of a plurality of concrete actions of popular resistance, rather than a command “from above.” The country is witnessing a mass transformation of private individuals into political subjects.

Unity of resistance, however, does not entail unity of political vision. In fact, other than the simple demand for the removal of current authorities and immediate halt to police terror, no political program is hegemonic among protesters. This lack of unified political vision among the protestors can be both an immense opportunity and the greatest danger for the future of the country and the post-Soviet sphere. It may, for example, open the door to external interference (either from the EU or Russia), which must be resisted at all costs. Technocrats, who are interested in factory workers only to the extent that they are capable of striking for regime change, are waiting at bay to fill this lack of political vision. Yet, precisely because the forms of representative democracy in place in Belarus have been discredited and disassembled, new forms of organization and politics are emerging out of the struggle.

The current uprising in Belarus must be starkly differentiated from other “color revolutions” in the Eastern bloc, and in particular from the recent Ukrainian “Maidan” that led to Russian intervention and civil war. Unlike the “color revolutions,” striking workers proved to be the central part of the resistance in Belarus. These workers, historically a major bastion of support for Lukashenko, oppose initiatives such as pension reform and privatization of factories, espoused by the mainstream opposition candidates and pro-European technocrats. That these factory workers today emerge as a major political force is due to the fact that Belarus has undergone a much lesser degree of neoliberalization and privatization in the post-Soviet period than its other Eastern European neighbors. While, generally, leftist politics in Belarus have been discredited by the self-styling of the

Lukashenko regime as “socialist-oriented” – a regime that was, nonetheless, more than capable of pushing through neoliberal reforms – the interests of the striking workers occupy center-stage in the uncertain future of the country. Whether the authority vacuum created by the refusal of Lukashenko’s regime may be filled by alternative left-wing forces, Lukashenko loyalists that may retain some power, or whether these interests will find expression through new grassroots mobilizations, such as widely emerging local strike committees, remains to be seen. What is certain, however, should the transfer of power take place, the newfound leaders will not have a carte blanche for radical neoliberalization of the Belarusian economy and society. This will be all the more important for setting a precedent in the Eastern bloc for alternative routes of democratic social developments, away from now all too expected and unpopular “shock therapy.”

The future of the current uprising in Belarus, with all its ramifications for the post-Soviet sphere, will be decided in the days, weeks, and months ahead. What is beyond doubt today is that the political body of this country has been once and for all transformed. Whether Lukashenko manages to hold onto power at the cost of unprecedented violence is an open question. Should this happen, however, it will be power propped solely by the repressive apparatus without ideological hegemony – that is, power without authority. Power without authority effectively means that sovereignty has already been displaced from the “Presidential Palace.” Without any leaders to usurp this vacuum of authority, at least for now, sovereignty is distributed in the public squares, factories, neighborhoods, towns, and villages.

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