

From Ukraine with Comparison: Emerging Notes on Belarus

Monday 24 August 2020, by [ISHCHENKO Volodymyr](#) (Date first published: 21 August 2020).

We share here notes by LeftEast contributing editor Volodymyr Ishchenko on Belarus from August 10th (Part 1) and 19th (Part 2), 2020.

Part 1: SOME QUICK COMPARATIVE NOTES ON BELARUS (August 10, 2020)

1. Both Lukashenka and Tsikhanouskaia claim 80% voters. The official results look suspicious as they are improbably stable. Lukashenka gets 80% of the voters in the fifth elections in a row despite all ups and downs, particularly, the COVID crisis. But 70-80% that Tsikhanouskaia claims may be even further from the real support. It is extremely hard to believe that a person who was virtually unknown just a few months ago could get the overwhelming majority in the tightly controlled elections without support of any popular media besides the oppositional web-sites and Telegram-channels. This is not a case of Volodymyr Zelenskyi, Donald Trump or Beppe Grillo who, while political outsiders, were nevertheless also popular media-stars before they turned into politicians.

An important Machiavellian lesson for other authoritarian leaders who do not disband elections completely: some regular credible independent polls are vital for maintaining rule because otherwise the elections stop being a tool for political legitimacy even if the leader in reality is not that unpopular. It's better to manipulate the public opinion, as Putin does more or less successfully, rather than silence it completely and let the opposition claim a landslide victory in the vacuum of credible data and provoke the uprising that must be dealt with violently.

2. Now the real voters' preferences are not that important, as forces on the streets rule. But the protesters have problems with use of efficient, strategic and coordinated violence. Actually what we have seen at night in Belarus is what Ukrainian Maidan radicalization could have been if it had indeed been just "regular people" who "spontaneously" turned to violence in response to the governmental repressions as, unfortunately, too many journalists, researchers, and simply propagandists claimed in 2014 regarding, for example, the role of the radical nationalists irrelevant. In Belarus (and in Ukraine until very recent years) the "repertoire of contention" - widespread cultural expectations about the appropriate forms of political contention including forms of protest - has not included protest violence. Two consecutive generations of Soviet and post-Soviet people born after 1950s saw large-scale protest violence only in TV broadcasts about events in other countries but never experienced it directly in their countries, unlike citizens of Western democracies where the "gilets jaunes" and "George Floyd protests" are rare events but not that extraordinary. So, when "regular people" here turn to violence really spontaneously, these are chaotic, dispersed, uncoordinated clashes without the use of any tools of violence and largely harmless for the riot police. When organized radical groups, who had been training for their "national revolution" for years, were the drivers behind the violent escalation, they immediately brought Molotov cocktails, cobblestones, sticks. At the later stages, they used firearms. They organized stable paramilitary units. They strategically took the loci of power in the capital and in the regions. One can read how it happened in Ukraine and why exactly the radical nationalists were able to play such a key role in the

Maidan radicalization in [my recently published article](#).

But this scenario seems unlikely to be repeated in Belarus right now. The riot police have actually showed some signs of over-extension at night. Concentrated in Minsk, it did not appear too efficient in the provincial cities. However, in order to take power in the regions, the opposition would need efficient nationwide structures that could coordinate assaults on the regional offices by organized violent groups. It does not seem like Tsikhanouskaia's team has anything like this. There are not even loose opposition party structures like in Ukraine which, by the way, had majorities in many regional and city councils in 2014 that openly disobeyed Yanukovich.

3. Some are expressing hopes for political strikes. However, an efficient nonviolence also does not happen spontaneously. It requires its own coordinating and mobilizing structures and resources. For efficient political strikes, for example, strong labor organizations are essential. As in other post-Soviet countries, Belarusian labor organizations are loyal to the government. The last large-scale strikes were in the 1990s. Independent labor is very weak. I detail how a political strike failed for the same reasons during Ukrainian Maidan [here](#).

Moreover, in the case of Ukraine, the fact that the Maidan protests started nonviolently and had a largely nonviolent two month-long phase was important for legitimating the turn to violence later, and also, for attrition in the underfinanced police. In Belarus, the violent clashes of unprecedented scale started immediately. They won't attract Lukashenka supporters on the side of the protesters, and won't help to win over hesitating citizens or gain the sympathies of police officers. In contrast to the cheerleaders of the Ukrainian "Revolution of Dignity", "Maidan" turned into a swear-word for many people in Russia and Belarus, for whom it now means a violent political disaster. The very same people who claimed that "Maidan is a spontaneous, peaceful, democratic protest" in 2014, need to claim now that "this is nothing like Maidan in Belarus". The violent clashes last night only increase the fears of those who valued Lukashenka's stability in contrast to the "vibrant democracy" in the southern neighbor.

4. Some noted that the police actions in Belarus do not really exceed the "policing repertoire" of the Western democracies in relation to the "gilets jaunes" or "BLM" protests in the US. However, in the Belarusian context, with large-scale street violence absent in the past, they were unprecedented, likewise the use of police force during Maidan in Ukraine. However, unlike the Ukrainian oligarchy who feared for their Western bank accounts and property, Lukashenka is ready to go until the very end in the case of the violent escalation, and will likely not hesitate to order the use of the army were the riot police to reach the limits of its capacity in dealing with provincial unrest.

Lukashenka also cannot rely on anything else except for force. He is not Maduro who could withstand very strong pressure both inside the country and internationally. Unlike Maduro, Lukashenka cannot claim the legacy of the popular revolution; he does not have any party or movement to mobilize supporters. While Lukashenka's legitimacy has been based on restoring stability in the midst of the 1990s collapse, and preserving Soviet industry and some welfare, this is not enough to inspire enthusiastic support for his continuous rule.

5. Basically this means that Lukashenka's rule now resides exclusively on the loyalty of the enforcement institutions. Unless it cracks, Lukashenka will withstand the inefficient violent and nonviolent protests which will fade away gradually. The split among the enforcers is most likely in the case that some generals get serious promises and guarantees from abroad. However, Russia and China have already recognized Lukashenka. It is not clear that the EU and US would go further than expressing "deep concerns" and that there is a consensus among the Western elites that they really need another point of conflict with Russia (and China).

6. In the case that Lukashenka withstands the protests, his regime is going to be even more repressive, even though he will be forced to think hard about how to pass power to a loyal successor. If he can't find the solution for this problem, he may likely end up like Qaddafi. In the less likely event of an opposition victory, it is going to happen after considerable bloodshed. It will leave Belarus highly polarized. The very weak civil and political society of Belarus does not have any other alternative ideas for national development except the Western-oriented neoliberalism in nationalistic colors that is even less popular in Belarus than in Ukraine.

In either case, Belarus is likely to become a worse country to live in.

Part 2: FURTHER COMPARATIVE NOTES ON BELARUS (August 19, 2020)

1. Probably we will never know how Belarusians voted on August 9. Nobody doubts that the results of the elections were falsified, but nobody has proved that Lukashenka actually lost them either. Attempts to extrapolate votes based on non-random samples of protocols from the precincts gave estimates in the range from 30% to 60% for Tsikhanouskaia. It means that the available results, including the official results, do not allow us to establish the winner. However, Lukashenka won't go for any recount or revote because it would trigger defection from the regime. If he agrees on anything like this, it means that he has conceded his defeat like Yanukovich did as a result of Ukrainian "Orange revolution" in 2004. Lukashenka's position so far is adamant and he allows only a distant possibility of new elections after changes to the Constitution, and a weakening of the powers of the next president. This would give Lukashenka time and allow him to secure some guarantees. However, protesters are united around the demand for Lukashenka's immediate resignation. The violent radicalization ended last week but the intransigence increases the chances of another round.

2. As I predicted, decentralized, loosely coordinated violence by young people on the first nights after the elections failed and has not developed into anything comparable to the armed uprising in Ukraine in 2014. For that, one needs not only outraged people but also stronger organizations with skills in violence and violent strategy. In Belarus, the use of Molotov cocktails or any other tools of violence has been very rare, attempted barricades were very shaky, and no paramilitary formations have emerged. The riot police was well prepared, and where it was outnumbered, it seems like some army units were deployed too. The reported number of injured police officers is by the magnitude of order less than during Ukrainian Maidan and the number of detained protesters in Belarus is by the magnitude of order higher. The protesters could not occupy and barricade any specific space and establish even a small "autonomous zone" disruptive for the state order that could serve as a focal point for mobilizing activities.

The clashes appeared to be on the decline already on the third night. Then, in the middle of the week, protest activities shifted to a nonviolent repertoire with women in white clothes standing in chains with flowers and calling to stop the violence. The marches and rallies that were emphatically nondisruptive, usually not even disrupting the road traffic even by large crowds, and thus met with little repression. The nonviolent rallies culminated on Sunday in the largest in post-Soviet Belarus numbers. The reported interviews with the participants show the stolen elections, police violence, massive arrests and tortures as the major motivations for people to go to the protests. It looks like the excessive police violence on the first night backlashed, as it has happened in many other protest campaigns, and scaled up the mobilization of Lukashenka's opponents. However, it also does not look like the protesters were able to bridge the cleavage to attract a significant number of Lukashenka's supporters or hesitating citizens to their side.

3. The labor unrest at large and significant Belarusian factories has been a major development and something truly unprecedented in the context of post-Soviet anti-governmental protests and revolutions, in which strikes of the atomized post-Soviet workers have not played any significant

role. In case of the Belarusian large public sector, sustained strikes of the key state-owned enterprises could be a major blow to the government. It has already become an innovation in the political protest repertoire in this region that the government was not prepared to deal with (unlike with the violence) and it probably contributed to the shift towards de-escalation last week.

However, the scale of labor unrest is yet miles away from a “general strike”. Frankly speaking, most of these activities do not even qualify as strikes in the strict sense. They have been mostly petitions, meetings with the management, and rallies in the plant yards and at the entrances. Sometimes large groups of workers joined the opposition rallies in an organized way. There are only contradictory reports that production has actually stopped, even if partially, and, if so, only on a few plants. It is possible that this labor unrest will grow in scale. However, it is not yet clear how sustained and truly disruptive it is going to be if coordinated only by spontaneously emerging strike committees and likewise inexperienced middle-class and elite opposition, which is quite distant from the workers’ lives (see below). As expected, the official trade unions are pro-government and even mobilized people for pro-Lukashenka rallies. In principle, there are many ways to divide the workers and break the strikes. The crowdfunded money from business people and the diaspora reported by the opposition Telegram-channels and the solidarity committee are not even close to being able to support thousands of workers during a sufficiently long-lasting strike and may only discredit the strikes, if perceived as corrupt. One issue of concern is also the lack of any socio-economic demands in most of the strike petitions, most focused exclusively on the general political demands of the opposition. In this case many workers who did not vote for Tsikhanouskaia would unlikely feel ashamed to not join the strikes. The workers enter Belarusian politics not as a class conscious of its distinct interests but as anti-Lukashenka citizens that just happened to be located at the strategic positions of economic production.

This still raises the question of why even such limited labor unrest has not happened in other post-Soviet revolutions, particularly, during the Ukrainian Maidan. There, the opposition called for strikes from “day zero”, however, what actually materialized during three months of campaign were non-disruptive rallies organized by pro-opposition local authorities in the Western regions or by some university administrations. One explanation could be that, unlike other post-Soviet leaders, Lukashenka preserved more of the Soviet industry and its specifics. Concentrated in mono-industrial towns or industrial neighborhoods, the workers bring the community problems with police violence to their workplaces and spontaneously discover the power that forces the management to start a dialogue with them. One should recall significant and disruptive Soviet workers’ strikes during perestroika and immediately after that failed to be repeated later after the industrial collapse. The decentralized and leaderless start of the Belarusian protests may point to another part of the explanation. In Ukraine, the opposition party leaders – millionaires representing billionaires – as well as the middle-class pro-Western NGO activists, were not exactly the people one would expect to inspire workers’ strikes, especially because the remaining large Soviet industries were concentrated in the south-eastern, predominantly pro-Russian regions. Last but not least, and this may explain why even Western Ukrainian workers did not join the protests in an organized way, the Ukrainian opposition, it seems, bet quite early on the increasing pressure on Yanukovich by the West and a violent takeover of power that may not be an option for the Belarusian opposition.

4. The initially decentralized protest is in the process of developing structures. Various media, medical, solidarity initiatives, and striking committees are emerging. Yet, if anyone at all can claim leadership at this moment, this is still Tsikhanouskaia and her electoral team. This raises a question about how adequate they are for the changing protests and who actually is going to take power after Lukashenka, and what their interests and ideas are. The aspirations of the rank and file protesters are a bad predictor of the consequences of the protest. What is much more important is who will actually be able to contest for the power at the potential new elections and who will be able to push

for those “real changes” after the change of power. In this context it is worrisome that Tsikhanouskaia’s “Coordination council for the transfer of power” is formed mostly from the national-democratic intelligentsia, businessmen, and activists of marginal opposition parties and NGOs with freaky neoliberal and nationalist programs looking like a copy/paste from Ukraine’s post-2014 development. Now, the opposition is trying to distance from the program of the “Reanimation package of reforms for Belarus” that has been actually supported by some of the NGOs and parties in the Council. Every revolution forms a demand for a truly “revolutionary” change and the question of who will have enough authority and resources to fill it in, and with what ideas, is important.

5. Despite some low-rank and low-scale defection among the police officers, journalists of pro-governmental media, and a few officials, there are no signs of top-level defection of the elite or police/military. In the cases of other revolutions, we often received evidence about the cracks behind the curtains only weeks, or even months, later from the reports of some investigative journalists. However, the less confrontational and “dialogical” style of some local authorities and management may reflect not their change of loyalty but a general de-escalation, talking-away strategy that buys time for Lukashenka.

Also, it is noteworthy that quite significant rallies are being mobilized in support of Lukashenka around the country. The participants of the pro-Lukashenka rallies look also poorer and older on average than the participants of the opposition rallies. Even according to the oppositional journalists, the pro-government rally in Minsk gathered 30,000 people. It was smaller than the opposition rally the same day, and transportation to Minsk or other cities was organized by pro-governmental structures. However, the participants looked genuine and enthusiastic in their support for Lukashenka and voiced rational fears of loss of jobs, industry, and stability, and fears about violence. This is in sharp contrast with pro-Yanukovych rallies in Ukraine that it appears only strengthened the illusion of the Maidan protesters, i.e.: that every conscious citizen supports Maidan and those who do not support are sell-outs, the marginals, and/or traitors. Lukashenka is intensively exploiting patriotic rhetoric of “Motherland in danger”, while the opposition still needs to find a way to speak about Belarusian identity and nation and not to repeat unpopular national-democratic ideas and rhetoric.

6. The opposite forecasts about the Russian invasion of Belarus to save Lukashenka, or, alternatively, that Russia will accept any result of the crisis in Belarus because its economy is so dependent on Russia are based on two, in this case, misleading comparisons with Ukraine and Armenia. Russia actually abstained from full-scale invasion of south-eastern Ukraine. The costs of annexing Crimea – a peninsula with a sympathetic population fearing the recent violent change of power in the capital – are incomparably less than occupying Belarus – a much larger country with large opposition rallies already going on. On the other hand, Armenia is a tiny country squeezed between two more powerful and hostile states (Azerbaijan and Turkey) blocking most of its borders. Much more than a Russia-dependent economy determined Putin’s tolerance of the Armenian revolution two years ago. The consequences of breaking economic links with Russia did not prevent the USSR’s collapse and did not prevent the push for Ukraine’s association with the EU. There is also the fact of too frequent revolutions in Russia’s neighborhood in the recent years that give a direct example to and inspire the Russian opposition. It does not motivate Putin to accept any result in Belarus. On the other hand, the weakness of the national identity split in Belarus, unlike in Ukraine, makes it more difficult to legitimate support for repression. If in Ukraine, it was legitimate to “save” “our” “Russian-speaking population” from alien “Banderovites” from the Western regions, in Belarus the whole people is “ours”, not just a part of it. It is not that legitimate in the eyes of the Russian population to support the government that beats “our” people. It means that Russian support is likely to be limited and covert and in case Lukashenka eventually loses control, Russia will

likely impose itself as a mediator to secure its interests in a negotiated compromise. A change of power in Belarus should be actually “led” by Russia so as not to be perceived as a loss for Putin. And for this, any serious candidate to replace Lukashenka will need to do more for Russia than just hide its geopolitical preferences in the way the opposition is doing now.

7. At last, specifically regarding references to Ukraine in the current discussions about Belarus: Firstly, claims like “this is Maidan” and “this is nothing like Maidan” by the government or the opposition supporters are of the same nature as the quite typical legitimization/delegitimation claims such as “this is a pogrom, not a revolution”, “we are partisans, not terrorists”, “we are not fascists, just patriots”. If our goal is to not play in this game but rather to understand and illuminate what is going on in Belarus, a careful comparison, necessary in the place of labelling. Secondly, comparison to Ukraine can not only help to understand Belarus, but also the other way around. Now, we can see better what a really “spontaneous”, “all-national”, “leaderless” protest looks like, and that it looks very different than the Ukrainian Maidan. Also, the negative impression of the allegedly successful progressive “Revolution of Dignity” results in shame and denial of any similarities. Thirdly, the tendency to refer to Ukraine only in the context of radical nationalists, regional split, and geopolitical rivalry – therefore, “nothing like this in Belarus” – starts to look as if the person finally came to appreciate the reporting about Maidan by *Russia Today*. There were many other serious problems with Maidan – vagueness of claims, incapacity for institution-building, polarization of subaltern classes, and civic exclusivity (more on this [in our study with Oleg Zhuravlev](#)) – that are very relevant for Belarus. It looks like the rosy enthusiasm about Belarus because “there are workers” is of the same nature as the cynical scepticism about Ukraine earlier because “there were fascists”.

Volodymyr Ishchenko is a research fellow at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Technical University of Dresden. His research focuses on protests and social movements, revolutions, right and left politics, nationalism, civil society. He has authored a number of articles and interviews on contemporary Ukrainian politics, the Maidan uprising and the following war in 2013-14 for various publications including *The Guardian*, *New Left Review*, and *Jacobin*. He is currently working on a collective monograph “The Maidan Uprising: Mobilization, Radicalization, and Revolution in Ukraine, 2013-14”. He used to be a member of various new left initiatives in Ukraine and a founding editor of left-wing intellectual publication *Commons: Journal of Social Criticism*.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Left East

<https://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/ukraine-comparison-notes-on-belorus/>