The Opposition in Belarus Is Not All on the Same Side

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The strikes in Belarus last week showed that the protests against Alexander Lukashenko aren't just a "hipster rebellion." But while citizens are joining the protests for all manner of different reasons, there are well-organized neoliberal forces well-placed to assert their own control.

We will probably never know how Belarusians voted on August 9. Nobody doubts that the results of the elections were falsified, but nobody has proved that Alexander Lukashenko actually lost them either. Attempts to extrapolate votes based on nonrandom samples from the precincts gave estimates in the range from about 30 percent to 60 percent for Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. So, the available results, including the official results, do not allow us to establish who won.

However, Lukashenko won't go for any recount or revote, for this would trigger defections from the regime. Indeed, if he agreed to anything like this, it would mean that he had conceded his own defeat, like Viktor Yanukovych did as a result of Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004.

Lukashenko's position so far is adamant — he allows only a distant possibility of new elections, after changes to the Constitution, weakening the powers of the next president. This would give him time and allow him to secure some guarantees. However, protesters are united around the demand for Lukashenko's immediate resignation. The violent radicalization ended last week — but the intransigence increases the chances of another round.

Nonviolent Protests

As I predicted, the decentralized, loosely coordinated violence by young people on the first night after the elections failed 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 an order of magnitude less than during Ukraine's Maidan — and the number of detained protesters in Belarus is an order of magnitude higher. The protesters could not occupy and barricade any specific space and establish even a small "autonomous zone" disrupting the state order, such as one 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 were emphatically nondisruptive, usually not even disrupting the road traffic even when there were large crowds, and

thus met with little repression. The nonviolent rallies culminated on Sunday, August 16, the largest in post-Soviet Belarus.

Reported interviews with participants show that the stolen elections, police violence, and mass arrests and torture are the major motivations for people to go to the protests. It looks like the excessive police violence on the first night backfired — as has also happened with many other protests — and fueled the mobilization of Lukashenko's opponents. However, it doesn't look like the protesters were able to bridge the divide and attract a significant number of Lukashenko supporters or hesitating citizens onto their side.

Disruptive Strikes?

The labor unrest at important Belarusian factories has been a major development. It is truly unprecedented in the context of post-Soviet anti-governmental protests and revolutions, in which strikes by the region's atomized workers have not played any significant role.

In the case of Belarus's 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 repertoire of political protest in this region. Unlike the violence, this is something that the government was not prepared to deal with — and it probably contributed to the shift toward de-escalation last week.

However, the scale of labor unrest is still 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 management, and rallies in the yards outside workplaces and at their entrances. Sometimes, large groups of workers did join the opposition rallies in an organized way. There are only contradictory reports that production has actually stopped, even if partially, and, if so, only at 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 a likewise inexperienced middle-class and elite opposition, which is quite distant from the workers' lives.

As expected, the official trade unions are pro-government and even mobilized people for pro-Lukashenko rallies. In principle, there are many ways to divide the workers and break the strikes. The crowdfunded money from businesspeople 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.

Another issue of concern is the lack of any socioeconomic demands in most of the strike petitions, most of which are focused exclusively on the general political demands of the opposition. In this case, many workers who did not vote for Tikhanovskaya would be unlikely to feel ashamed not to join the strikes. Workers are entering politics not as a class conscious of its distinct interests, but as anti-Lukashenko citizens who just happen to be located at the strategic positions of economic production.

This still raises the question of why even such limited labor unrest didn't happen in other post-Soviet revolutions, particularly during Ukraine's Maidan. There, the opposition called for strikes from "day zero"; however, what actually materialized during three months of the campaign were nondisruptive 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, Lukashenko preserved more of the Soviet industry and its specific characteristics. 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. We should also remember the significant and disruptive Soviet workers' strikes during the late 1980s Perestroika era — which then failed to be repeated immediately afterward, following 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 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 southeastern, 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 Yanukovych by the West and a violent takeover of power that may not be an option for the Belarusian opposition.

Informal Leadership

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 Tikhanovskaya 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 Lukashenko, 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 Tikhanovskaya's "Coordination Council for the transfer of power" is formed mostly from the national-democratic intelligentsia, businessmen, and activists from marginal opposition parties and NGOs with wild neoliberal and nationalist programs, looking like a copy/paste from Ukraine's post-2014 development.

Now, the opposition is trying to distance itself from the program of the "Reanimation package of reforms for Belarus" that has been supported by some of the NGOs and parties in the Council. Every revolution forms a demand for a truly "revolutionary" change. The question of who will have enough authority and resources to fill in this vacuum, and with what ideas, is important.

Splits in the State

Despite some low-rank and low-scale defection among police officers, journalists for pro-governmental media, and a few officials, there are no signs of top-level defection among the elite or the police and military. In revolutions, we often got evidence about the cracks taking place behind the scenes only weeks or even months later, thanks to reports by investigative journalists. However, the less confrontational and "dialogue-focused" style of some local authorities and managers may reflect not a change of loyalty on their part but a general de-escalation strategy — talk that buys time for Lukashenko.

It is also noteworthy that quite significant rallies are being mobilized in support of Lukashenko around the country. The participants in pro-Lukashenko rallies look poorer and older, on average, than participants in the opposition rallies. Even according to opposition journalists, the pro-

government rally in Minsk gathered around thirty thousand people. It was smaller than the opposition rally the same day, and transportation to Minsk or other cities was organized by pro-government structures. However, the participants looked genuine and enthusiastic in their support for Lukashenko 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, which appeared only to strengthen the illusion of the Maidan protesters, that every conscious citizen supports Maidan and those who do not support it are sellouts, marginal, and/or traitors. Lukashenko is intensively exploiting patriotic rhetoric of "the motherland in danger," while the opposition still needs to find a way to speak about Belarusian identity and not repeat unpopular national-democratic ideas and rhetoric.

Specters of Russia

The two opposed forecasts of (1) a Russian invasion of Belarus to save Lukashenko or (2) Russia accepting any result of the crisis in Belarus, because its economy is so dependent on Russia, are based on two misleading comparisons with Ukraine and Armenia.

Russia actually abstained from any full-scale invasion of southeastern 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 those that would come with 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. What determined Vladimir Putin's tolerance of the Armenian revolution two years ago was much more than its Russia-dependent economy. 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.

On the other hand, the weakness of any national-identitarian split in Belarus, unlike in Ukraine, makes it more difficult to legitimize support for repression. If in Ukraine, Putin could claim the legitimacy of "saving" "our" "Russian-speaking population" from alien "Banderites" from the Western regions, in Belarus the whole people is "ours," not just a part of it.

Nor is it "legitimate" in the eyes of the Russian population to support the government that beats "our" people. This means that Russian support is likely to be limited and covert. In the case that Lukashenko does eventually lose control, Russia will likely impose itself as a mediator to secure its interests in a negotiated compromise. A change of power in Belarus would have to be actually "led" by Russia, so as not to be perceived as a loss for Putin. To this end, any serious candidate to replace Lukashenko would need to do more for Russia than just hide their geopolitical preferences, in the way the opposition is doing now.

Minsk Maidan?

A last point, 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 by opposition supporters are of the same nature as the quite typical legitimation/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 not to play such games, but rather to understand and illuminate what is going on in Belarus, a careful comparison is necessary, rather than just labeling.

A 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. The negative impression left by the allegedly successful 2014 Ukrainian uprising leads to the denial of any similarities.

Moreover, the tendency to refer to Ukraine only in the context of radical nationalists, regional splits, and geopolitical rivalry — and therefore conclude that "nothing like this is going on in Belarus" — starts to look as if the person thus distancing the one situation from the other has come to appreciate the sharply negative reporting about Maidan typical of *Russia Today*.

There were many other serious problems with Maidan — the vagueness of its demands, incapacity for institution-building, the polarization of subaltern classes, and the exclusiveness of its civic nationalism (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 involved" is of the same nature as the cynical skepticism about Ukraine because "there were fascists, there."

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P.S.

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