

The dynamics of mass protests in Belarus

Monday 9 November 2020, by [BIAREISHYK Siarhei](#) (Date first published: 3 November 2020).

Though overshadowed by the U.S. elections, mass protests against Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko are entering their fourth month. The dictator is playing for time, while international powers who care little for democracy are attempting to position themselves as the movement's friends. Amidst these competing forces, one thing is clear, the people of Belarus intend to fight for their own freedom.

Belarus pre-weekend update October 23, 2020

The ultimatum: the Coordination Council set October 25 as an ultimatum for Lukashenko to fulfill their demands: the release of political prisoners, an end to police repression, and his resignation. Should the demands not be met, an anticipated general strike will commence on Oct 26, including road blockages, etc.

Massive Sunday protests continue, although last Sunday was perhaps less numerous; Mondays see marches of seniors and pensioners; Tuesdays (for the second week now) feature marches of people with disabilities. There was a decrease in police brutality – arrests continue, but they are less brutal. Several political prisoners were released from jail and placed under house arrest.

A pro-government demonstration was planned in Minsk for Sunday Oct 25, the same day as the ultimatum. People with state jobs (teachers, medics, state factories, etc. etc.) were summoned under threat of losing their positions; people from the provinces were to be brought by train and bus to Minsk. However, it appears that the authorities are cancelling the event as they cannot pull it off because there is too much dissent, and being outnumbered by anti-government protesters seemed a near certainty.

Analysis:

The ultimatum is an extremely risky move. It creates a puncture in the otherwise seeming continuous flow of peaceful protests and self-organization. It is risky because I do not see indications for a successful, massive, and powerful general strike. Anything short of mass mobilization on Oct 26 will be perceived as a defeat and would discredit the Coordination Council's strategy. Moreover, it will provide an occasion for mass repression and intensified police violence.

Nonetheless, the ultimatum became a point around which strike initiatives could renew their organizational efforts. Also, sustaining a protest for two and a half months with few gains (and a lot of losses and days in jail) and with no end in sight is difficult without coalescing around certain "events," a rallying point which the ultimatum provides. It is clear that the government is losing its power, resources, patience, and legitimacy by the day, the question is whether they have reached a breaking point, a point which the ultimatum could exploit. However, even in the case of a "defeat" on Oct 26, it does not appear that Lukashenko can regain any authority nor would the Coordination Council lose any. In that sense, it is a reasonably justified strategy.

And, the forced pro-government demonstration would have been a certain kind of mistake that could have provided a catalyst for the ultimatum's success. The government was wise to cancel it, even if they were unwise to organize it in the first place and are now looking defeated.

Belarus update November 2

The Coordination Council and [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia](#) [presidential candidate now living in exile] called for general strike commencing on October 26. This call for renewed mobilization triggered the most massive Sunday protest on November 1 since August. In terms of the strike, however, [Azot](#), a chemical factory in Grodna, was almost the sole protagonist of the strike, which barely spread to other governmental factories. In other factories, a so-called "Italian strike," in which the production process is slowed down without complete stoppages, is continuing. The Sunday, November 1 march was called to commemorate the victims of the Stalinist terror of 1937, what is known as the night of murdered poets. Although it was massive, this march was less numerous than many of the previous weeks.

The government responded with mass repression: pressuring, jailing, and firing workers who joined the strike. For now, these measures have proved relatively successful, though solidarity actions in reaction to the firing of colleagues will likely follow.

The most pronounced effect of the call for a general strike was felt in the universities. Students led walk-outs and strikes in most major universities. Faculty who supported them are losing their jobs. Most active students are being expelled. While medical workers have widely expressed solidarity with the striking students.

Greater pressure from law enforcement then followed. Jail time for participation in peaceful protests has been increased from 15 to 30 days. In the past two weeks, riot police have increased their use of flash-bang grenades, rubber bullets, and teargas, among other devices used to disperse protesters.

For now, the established marches of seniors and pensioners, as well as the march of persons with disabilities, will continue. The same goes for neighborhood self-organization.

Analysis:

Sustained peaceful and leaderless protest continues now for almost three months. This is awe inspiring; countries in the West, embarking on anti-fascist struggle, should look to the example of Belarus in this respect.

The call for general strike allows for several conclusions. The level of strike organization at governmental factories remains low, and Tsikhanouskaia cannot be said to have any kind of control over the protests. In the end, the strike was largely unsuccessful. Still, the call for general strike, perhaps, came to have a different impact than what had been planned from the beginning, that is, it may trigger another wave of mobilizations in whatever heterogeneous forms, even if it does not necessarily take hold in government factories. In fact, in the mobilizations that followed, the strike call introduced a greater dynamism and tension into the relation between protests and law enforcement, which were followed by repression. It remains to be seen if the reaction from the civil society will be equally as stern.

The strike was called in the name of "dignity" and "freedom." In some ways, this kind of call is a misunderstanding of what a strike is: one can strike for better working conditions, for better wages, against corrupt governing bodies of the factory, against political pressure put on the workers, but it is impossible to strike merely for "freedom" and "dignity." Consequently, this call was not widely heeded. One speculative conclusion is that the government factories are being treated as sacrificial

lambs in the struggle – as just another means of building larger protests, which is the ultimate goal – and not as its agents; after all, most opposition leaders ultimately support privatization of said factories. For this reason, while the majority of the workers oppose the Lukashenko regime, police violence, and lawlessness taking place in Belarus right now, there remains a latent disjunction in the means and goals of the current struggle – a disjunction that will likely resurface at a later point.

In my view, the Sunday, November 1 march was another misstep by the opposition forces. It coupled the traditional Sunday march with the annual commemoration of the victims of Stalinist terror and the celebration of the holiday “Dziady” (something like the Day of the Dead in other countries). While both occasions are important, the march aimed to concentrate at the Kurapaty mass grave, thus hearkening back to the opposition of the 1990s. Kurapaty has occupied a central place in the memory of the old opposition. Commemoration of Stalinist terror and raising the awareness of this past among newly radicalized population is important. However, anything that relates the current struggle to the struggles and places that past opposition movements have memorialized appears to me as a mistake. In a certain sense, it immobilizes the energy of the present, and confuses the goals and ends of different, equally legitimate, struggles.

The weather is worsening, which makes it more difficult to keep sustained pressure on the streets. Nonetheless, it is hard to see how the popular discontent with the Lukashenko regime will wane. The regime itself, it appears, is running out of resources and energy, opting for greater levels of violence and repressions. The latter aspect is a tactical mistake in otherwise hopeless situation for the government. If they continue the suppression, in my analysis, they will accelerate their own downfall because it is the violence and repression that can ultimately provoke the strike’s expansion and a more more powerful popular rebuke.

No Borders

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF 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.

No Borders

<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/11/03/siarhei-biareishyk-assessing-the-dynamics-of-mass-protests-in-belarus/>

Siarhei Biareishyk is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, working in the materialist tradition of Spinoza and Marx. His writing on the going Belarusian protests appeared in [Viewpoint Magazine](#) and [RS21](#). His regular [updates on the mass movement](#) in Belarus since the protests began in August provide a unique insight into the dynamics of the struggle.