

AFTER VOTING:
PANEL DISCUSSION ON BELARUS¹

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Editors: *Who are the people protesting against election fraud and against Lukashenko's rule? Is it possible to indicate the protesters social-structural, political and generational differentiation, their relative strengths and various roles found in the protest movement?*

PIOTR RUDKOUSKI

Narodny Opros, a non-institutionalized survey initiative launched in August 2020, reveals the following picture of Lukashenka's and Tsikhanouskaya's electorate: Lukashenka's electorate was predominantly female, over-50-year-olds, people whose education was no higher than secondary, and those living in Mahylou and Homel regions. Tsikhanouskaya was most popular among male citizens, under-40-year-olds, people with higher or university education, and those living in Minsk.

1 The panel was organized virtually per E-mail in February 2021.



There were not, however, radical differences between society's segments. I mean it is not possible to say that, for example, old ladies living in Homel region unanimously supported Lukashenka and constituted an anti-pole for young educated people in Minsk who unanimously supported Tsikhanouskaya. There was hardly any segment of society among whom Lukashenka had a real chance of gaining the majority of their vote. Even among the 'most faithful' Lukashenka's support was estimated – on the basis of both internet and street surveys – in the range of 37-47% and was comparable to the support of Tsikhanouskaya, which was within the same range.

In other words, by August 2020 there was no significant polarization in the society along geographical, educational, gender, denominational, age, or any other lines. There could be differences about how to assess the 26 years of Lukashenka's rule – the percentage of those having positive opinion about his presidency was certainly higher than electoral support – but there was wide consensus concerning the need for Lukashenka to retire.

As the post-electoral protests erupted, the consensus turned into a society-wide solidarity: old and young, business people and workers, male and female, Minsk citizens and those in regions outside the capital became united in protest against electoral fraud and riot police violence. So, the main tasks of the regime, which chose to restore the status quo at all costs, was to destroy the spirit of solidarity. The whole propaganda machine is working on spreading hatred and playing different segments of society off against each other. So far, it has not succeeded so much in this respect as it has in stifling the protests.

TATIANA SHCHYTTSOVA

The protest movement is marked by a unique political consolidation of very different social groups. People of all sexes, generations, classes, and professional groups, and from very different places took part in the protests. Civil society has become consolidated in all its heterogeneity so that participation of each social group appears equally valuable due to the irreplaceable contribution to the social representativeness of the protest movement.

The encouraging solidarity of the protesters was built originally not on discursive hegemony of this or that political institution but on the ethico-political indignation they shared and felt necessary to publicly express. It is noteworthy that, until the presidential elections 2020, the majority of the future protesters were a-political and kept their distance from any engagements in political issues. Therefore the Belarusian revolution was a democratic manifestation that while having concrete political demands has been performing a *constitution* of a genuine political community of responsible citizens.

It was the civil society's self-manifestation and self-assertion as an autonomous *political* force that turned out to be unacceptable for

Lukashenko's rule. No wonder that being a democratic *polity in statu nascendi* this political community has to learn and – what is more difficult – has to invent what is joint political activity and how to cooperatively achieve political purposes.

The basic social-structural differentiation among the political constituencies of the protest movement correlates with the two social groups represented initially by Sergei Tsikhanousky and Viktor Babaryko respectively: those who, for a relatively long time, hoped to build their lives using opportunities offered by the socially-oriented state and those who sought to build their lives using opportunities offered by economical and cultural globalization. The former work mostly in the state sector throughout the country, have middle-low income, and essentially differ from the latter in that they used to have strong paternalistic expectations. The latter are mainly highly educated urban residents who work in the private sector and various NGOs and constitute a new social class (remarkably represented by – albeit not limited to it – IT workers). These two 'classes' have appeared as *complementary* political constituencies of the protest movement as Lukashenko's regime arose from the characteristic double dynamics: for decades, the authoritarian state apparatus on the one hand has been reproducing Soviet institutional patterns of total control under the slogan of social care, and on the other hand it has been seeking to profit from market economy and globalization. Over the past ten years, the double dynamics have yielded a paternalistic capitalism that has deeply frustrated both groups at issue since it implied neither social care nor perspectives for development (IT-specialists seem to be the only exclusion here. However, their values and world-view came into sharp conflict with these of the official authorities after August 9–11).

It is primarily members of the second ('new middle') class who demonstrated remarkable organizational skills and social creativity by launching different campaigns and establishing various foundations in support of the protest movement.

The crucial symbolic meaning of women's actions as well as marches of pensioners and people with disabilities should be noted. These are social groups that are traditionally coded as "weak". Their appearing at the forefront of the political struggle against terror had a *subversive* meaning i.e. it was aimed at overthrowing a social-political order built on physical violence.

Furthermore, the prominent role of women as politically active citizens should be mentioned separately. The "second sex" has become a key symbol of a political alternative to Lukashenko's authoritarian Belarus, of the political emancipation of the entire nation. What is crucial here is that the new positioning of woman as a political subject in Belarusian society did not occur due to promoting a special feminist agenda. The female subject got a very particular symbolic hegemony not through a feminist discursive struggle, but due to a historical

contingency. The female political subject (personified by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and the leaders of the joint campaign headquarters – Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo) has become a particularity that represents universality (a new Belarus). It implies that along with the assertion of a new Belarus, a new political subjecthood of woman is being asserted. The incipient revolution can be defined neither as ‘feminist’ nor as ‘female’ *per se*. Yet the historical contingency under concern is a unique condition of possibility for substantial re-consideration of gender issues in our society.

ANDREI YAHORAU

Various opinion polls show that the protests are supported by the majority of the Belarusian population. In this group, residents of large cities are more common than residents of small cities and rural areas; more educated people than people with a lower level of education; more often people employed in the private sector and the budgetary public sector than workers in state-owned industrial enterprises; more men than women. Nevertheless, from my point of view, such a socio-demographic description offers little for understanding the driving forces of the Belarusian revolution.

Rather, we can say that the Belarusian revolution was supported by people who “want more” from all social groups and strata of Belarusian society. Over the past ten years, according to the World Values Survey, the proportion of people in Belarus which professes self-expression values rather than survival values has grown significantly. There is a growing gap between people’s desire for greater freedom of expression, participation in decision-making, and greater economic freedom, on the one hand, and conservative state policies aimed at maintaining a minimum level of aspirations, on the other. The previous social contract between the population and the state, expressed in the exchange of political loyalty to the regime for the maintenance of social guarantees, turned out to be invalid.

But the gap between society and the state occurred not only due to the growth of social claims and the state’s inability to satisfy them. For a long time, Belarusian society saw no other political alternative than the current political regime. Dissatisfied with state policy, society pinned all hopes for change on the state. This vicious circle of codependency was broken only during the COVID-19 crisis, when, against the background of the state’s inadequate response, society saw another actor -- itself. For a long time, the structures of solidarity that have matured within Belarusian society have shown themselves in active public action.

A wave of pre-election political mobilization and, then, a wave of protests against election fraud and police violence reinforced the image of society as an active actor in the public consciousness. Moreover, this new actor appeared to be politically, ethically and aesthetically

different from the authoritarian state. In an act of rebellion against violence and injustice, society has committed a political action, realized itself to be performing such an action and recognized itself as a reflective and conscious force, thus becoming a political nation.

It is difficult to name any social and professional groups of the Belarusian society that did not manifest their political position, in a bright parade of collective petitions, video messages, public performances and street marches. For six months, different groups have been at the forefront of the general protest movement: women and workers in August and September, pensioners and people with disabilities in October, students and the academic community in late October and November.

Editors: *What are the political views of the public opposition, what is their understanding of political participation?*

PIOTR RUDKOUSKI

I would speak of the protest movement, not of 'the opposition'. Well, they are diverse: representatives of different denominations, worldviews, geopolitical preferences have participated in the protests. *Narodny Opros* did not survey protesters for all the possible views and opinions, but judging by what they did ask we can conclude that protesters' views reflect the opinions of the society in general. For example, the vast majority of protesters are Russian-speakers as is the society as a whole; there are no particular pro-Western or anti-Russian sentiments among protesters just as there are no such sentiments in the society as a whole; there is a strong belief that protests should be peaceful, which also reflects attitudes of society at large. One of the few discrepancies is the proportion of those who hold a positive view of Lukashenka: of course, there are almost no such people among protesters, while amongst the general population the percentage of those who hold a positive opinion about Lukashenka is between 35% and 40%.

TATIANA SHCHYTTSOVA

The public opposition (if one uses this word to define all people actively engaged in the protests) is very heterogeneous. The political views of these people may differ significantly. At the same time, many of them have a pretty vague understanding of political issues including political participation. However, they are united by a general – antiauthoritarian – demand of liberalization and a basic intuition of their ability to build a new democratic society on the principles of dialogue and justice. The ability is being cultivated in the course of the creation and development of various joint initiatives (e.g. foundations),

horizontal networks of local communities (neighborhoods), and independent trade unions. Correspondingly, the public discourse of the protest movement's political leaders appears as a characteristic mixture of liberal-humanistic values, social-democratic concerns, and the state sovereignty principle.

ANDREI YAHORAU

At the center of the opposition's political demands are the issues of restoration of justice (to stop violence, to investigate cases of violence against protesters) and insistence on the normal functioning of democratic institutions (new, free and fair elections, the peaceful turnover of power, separation of powers). There is a process of *de-etatisation* of public spheres, where new self-organized groups challenge the state monopoly. For example, in education, teachers and parents demand the de-ideologization of the school and participation in the school's governing; university teachers and students, voicing their political demands, demand the academy's independence from state political control. The total domination of the state has been established not only in politics but in most social areas: education, medicine, science, sports, labor relations, local politics, etc. New communities, acting on their own initiative, seek to reclaim their autonomy from the state.

But the depth of this process is not as great as it might seem. With a large number of new horizontal communities, they bring a relatively small number of people (1-2% of their respective constituencies) into the orbit of their active political actions. However, these new groups and communities today form the basis of the democratic movement and the prospect of the victory of democracy will depend on their development and their ability to sustain themselves despite the state's pressure.

Editors: *Unlike the protest movement in Ukraine in 2014, the protests in Belarus are not concentrated in the capital city, but are geographically and spatially more dispersed. They are allocated over the whole country, over different regions, over different sectors of public life, and they have a presence in neighboring countries. What is the role of these different sites as reference frames for the protests? What are the protest repertoires used for attaining mobilization and the survival of the protest movement?*

PIOTR RUDKOUSKI

I don't quite understand the expression 'different sites as reference frames'. When it comes to the repertoire, well, we witnessed incredible creativity: from classical marches and demonstrations, through actions in court yards to messages written on snow, under ice, on trees,

and upon riot police shields. If the variety of slogans are considered, it would require a book to describe them all.

Of course, methods guaranteeing the sustainability of protests over months or even years do not exist. So, despite such a rich repertoire of self-expression and self-mobilization, street protests have gradually subsided. However, the experience gained in 2020 will be a mighty source of inspiration for further actions, which most probably will be taken in the nearest future.

TATIANA SHCHYTTSOVA

Such a dispersed character of the protest movement indicates and induces the emergence of a new political imagination in Belarusian society. It gives a vivid feeling of national solidarity built on an essentially new experience of mutual relatedness and supportiveness between the capital and the regions, between the different sectors of public life, between Belarusians inside and outside the country. The protest repertoires are incredibly diverse and creative (one needs a book to describe them). As for aesthetical forms, the protest movement has been evolving as a continuing creative performance combining various mediums (bodies, sounds, images, language).

ANDREI YAHORAU

The Belarusian protests were and remain decentralized, encompassing the entire Belarusian nation, regardless of social status, place of residence, and even state borders. In the beginning, the protests were mostly spontaneous actions of citizens, they were rather crowds of strangers, sometimes taking up to 10% of the city's population to the streets. In September, the structuring of the protest begins. Typologically, we can talk about three basic types of new structures: protest communities (local, courtyard, professional, gender, etc.); communities of support and solidarity (material, legal, psychological, etc. support); hubs linking different groups to each other.

The technological basis of the Belarusian revolution is the Telegram messenger, through which the main communication is organized and which has become the main instrument of political mobilization and self-organization. A huge role is played by a system of peer-to-peer mutual support and solidarity, as well as crowdfunding and crowdsourcing campaigns.

Editors: *What is the role of international reference frames for the protests and their political orientation? How do the relationships to neighboring countries, their governments and political and societal constituencies inform the protests?*

PIOTR RUDKOUSKI

I am not sure I understand the question correctly, but if the role of the international community is concerned, I would say that humanitarian solidarity is of the highest importance here. By which I mean, support for those who were repressed and their families are of great importance. It is very difficult to make mistakes by offering such support and it is very easy to achieve palpable goals (such as giving safe space for people in danger or providing them a psychological relief after months of strain).

When it comes to other instruments: informational support, sanctions against the regime, diplomatic pressure – they also are of importance, but there are more chances of mistakes and effects are always probabilistic. However, a consistent and long-term strategy of action would be very welcome. Of course, we can only speak here of Western countries. When it comes to Russia or China we can think how to use their political fears or economic ambitions to drive them away from supporting the Belarusian autocrat.

TATIANA SHCHYTTSOVA

The political logic of the protest movement has been initially determined by the internal situation, not by making a geopolitical choice between East (Russia) and West. However, while the protest's leaders stress that the Belarusian revolution does not have a geopolitical agenda, Lukashenko counts on Putin's support and insists on the geopolitical explanation of the causes of the current political crisis in Belarus, instilling the idea of the aggressive plans of the West.

In a similar way, it is significant diplomatic-judicial and humanitarian support of the protesting civil society by the Western and the neighboring (Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine) countries that make it sympathize with them. Thus the protest's leaders' intensive international communication in the Western direction and their failure to contact Russian authorities create an appearance of a certain geopolitical choice albeit their basic presuppositions in this regard are rather more balanced.

ANDREI YAHORAU

The Belarusian revolution does not have clear geopolitical orientations, the protests do not have explicit pro-European or pro-Russian messages. At the same time, the reaction of neighboring countries and the assessment of this reaction on the part of Belarusians significantly affects their geopolitical sympathies. Russia's support for the Lukashenka regime has significantly reduced the level of sympathy for Russia. The positive attitude of the Belarusian society is evoked by international solidarity in dozens of countries around the world,

expressed in various forms: from mass street marches and chains of solidarity with Belarusians, participation in volunteer initiatives, solidarity with and assistance to the victims of repressions.

Editors: *Belarus is often viewed as a peripheral site, for instance, as a spatial corridor between East and West or as a historical periphery of empires. How can the protest movement help to re-center Belarus and its society? And how can it advocate a view on Belarus that does not reduce it to a geographical or historical appendix of its neighbors?*

PIOTR RUDKOUSKI

The protest movement has so far been a spontaneous solidarity movement against autocracy and violence. It is not an organization, not a structure, nor even a permanently working network. So it would be wrong to expect that such a leaderless movement would engage in advocacy or agenda setting on issues that require strategic planning and organization to make an impact. However, we can rephrase the question in this way: whether the fact of eruption of such protests have influenced the perception of Belarus? The answer is: Yes. It did influence the perception both inside and outside the country, and it did it toward perceiving Belarus as a country with a high potential for independence, with a consciousness of its own interests and readiness to pursue its own goals. Surely, in this respect the role of the protest movement has been important.

TATIANA SHCHYTTSOVA

The protest movement has led to a fundamental change in perception of Belarus from abroad. And in this way, it has opened a perspective for redefining the symbolic place of Belarus in the international context. What is crucial here is that the political agenda of the incipient Belarusian revolution mirrors on the one hand the global political moment, which is the crisis of Western neoliberal democracies and the emergence of right-wing populist governments in the EU. On the other hand, the political agenda of the emerging Belarusian revolution shares the regional agenda connected with the long-lasting painful process of de-Sovietization of the post-Soviet societies. What is thus at stake in the Belarusian protest is not just some kind of 'reputation' of Belarus as viewed by foreign actors, but some ultimate problems of modern Western/Eastern societies. To speak more generally, the Belarusian case seems to be highly important for the question of the future of democracy. Therefore I would say that the above-mentioned redefining of the symbolic place of Belarus in the international context might be a significant part of today's debates on the prospects of development of democratic societies and, in this respect, on perspectives

of development of Europe as a cultural space that gave birth to the idea of democracy as such.

ANDREI YAHORAU

Last year Belarus has temporarily returned to the agenda of the international community, but I'm afraid this is a temporary effect of a bright social upsurge and the shocking brutality of the authoritarian political regime against the protesters. The general structure of perception and international political response has not changed, even as it was larger in scope. The problem here lies deeper and is associated with the incompleteness of the intellectual conceptualization of the problem of Eastern Europe. And this is, first of all, the problem of collaborative thinking of European intellectuals and intellectuals of Eastern Europe on our region. Back in 2008, analyzing the place of Belarus in the post-communist transformations, we talked about Belarus as a place where the third wave of democratization stopped, and a place where authoritarian revenge began. Belarus was the place where the first modern authoritarian regime in Europe was built. Its basic features can be easily found today not only in Russia and in the authoritarian practices of the Eastern Partnership countries, but also in European political populism in Hungary or Poland. Without the return of the region, and Belarus in particular, to the center of Western intellectual attention one should hardly expect that the peripheral position of Belarus in political practice will change.

THOMAS M. BOHN

The White-Red-White Revolution – a Historian's View from Abroad

The peaceful mass protests against the 2020 Belarusian presidential election finally brought “the Last Dictatorship in Europe” to the attention of the world public – at least for a while. Because of the Corona epidemic, interference in internal affairs by sympathizers from outside could not take place. On the contrary, the regime maintained its self-isolation by expelling foreign journalists from the country. Through the repressive use of security forces, state control over streets and squares was restored, but the creativity of society continues to reveal itself in forums such as backyards or Internet platforms.

Regardless of this, the reactions from abroad shed light on the specifics of the historical and cultural development of Belarus. In Germany, for example, the Belarusian-German Historical Commission initiated a debate about whether to speak of “Weißrussland” (i.e. Whiterussia) out of old habit or – owing to the political realities of an independent state – of “Belarus”. In the end, the Foreign Office announced an action plan for civil society in Belarus as a matter of course. If we trace back

German traditions, then the contrasting use of terms in the Third Reich and in the GDR make clear what the explosive nature of the matter is. For terms like “Weißruthenien (White Ruthenia)” or “Belorußland (Byelorussia)” imply distance or proximity to “Sowjetrußland (Soviet Russia).” Against the background of the latent East-West conflict, the current Ukraine crisis or permanent historical wars, it is necessary to carefully examine the terminology if one wants to understand Belarus. With regard to the successor states of the Soviet Union, the country directory of the German Foreign Office still distinguishes between “Belarus ... in official intergovernmental correspondence” and “Weißrussland ... for domestic correspondence and the inscription of maps”. The Republic of Belarus is unique in this respect. Because the noun “Belarus”, transcribed from Cyrillic, is genderless due to the lack of a soft sign, word formations such as “die Kiewer Rus (the Kievan Rus)” or “die Ukraine (the Ukraine)” have not yet been able to establish themselves in German.

When Franz-Walter Steinmeier became the first German President to visit the Republic of Belarus on June 29, 2018, he pleaded in an interview for the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* for the country to emerge from the shadow of the Soviet Union. Following the opening of the Holocaust memorial *Malyj Trostenets*, he suggested the establishment of a commission of historians for this purpose during a panel discussion at the International Educational and Meeting Center (IBB Minsk). In German research on Eastern Europe, the country of Belarus is indeed still a “white spot” that needs to be filled with color. Up to now, topics such as the “war against the Soviet Union” or the “fate of Russian Jews” have attracted most interest. The Academy of Sciences in Minsk is officially commissioned to write a “History of Belarusian Statehood”, which is subject to the dictum of a continuity of 1,000 years and therefore makes use of archaeology as an auxiliary science. At the end of the year, almost a dozen historians had to leave the Academy of Sciences: the majority were experts on the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. If the white-red-white revolution in the Republic of Belarus is to ensure the overcoming of dictatorship and the revival of the nation’s culture based on a real rather than mythological understanding of its history, then the centuries long, entire early modern period with the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania should be included just as much as the short 20th century with the Soviet Union.

Until Belarus gained state independence in 1991, it represented a historical landscape and a national idea that had first taken political shape in the People’s Republic of 1918. A historical perspective that refers to 400 years of belonging to Poland-Lithuania and 200 years of annexation to Russia and the Soviet Union sounds fascinating in terms of emphasis, but falls short in terms of content. In fact, the communities that came together on the territory of today’s Republic of Belarus had to reinvent themselves again and again. To put it bluntly, the development from an aristocratic republic to a workers’ and peasants’

state to a nation state can be described in three stages: White Rus, Belarusian Soviet Republic and Republic of Belarus.

In the long period of pre-modernity, the White or Western Rus was overshadowed by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the tsarist empire. The life worlds of Polish landowners, Jewish merchants, Belarusian peasants and Russian officials formed its essence. After the dissolution of peasant subsistence economies through Stalinist forced collectivization, the eradication of Jewish culture through the Nazi Holocaust, and the population exchange with Poland in the course of the westward shift of the Soviet Union, the “Belarusian” Soviet Republic inevitably had to take on a new shape.

The second stage, under the sign of a „Byelorussian“ Soviet Republic, marked a phase-shifted connection to modernity. Against the background of territorial consolidation, the Soviet republic experienced an industrial revolution after World War II, which fundamentally changed the character of the agrarian country. In the ideal world of Soviet planners, a metamorphosis encompassing all spheres of life took place, in the course of which the “locals” (*tutěshyja*) concerned about their farms disappeared and instead the “Soviet people” (*Homo Sovieticus*) committed to communist morality appeared on the scene. There could no longer be any question of a nation of peasants in a world of urban progress. Where the Soviet Union came up short, on the other hand, was in its provision of a life of comfort and well-being to its citizens – at least when that life was compared to the bourgeoisie life style found in Western Europe.

In the third phase currently underway, the inhabitants of the Republic of Belarus are inevitably asking questions about their identity. They articulate their displeasure with the white-red-white flag of opposition. Throughout history, from the development of the Polish noble nation to the formation of the Soviet party *nomenklatura*, it has always been the elites who have called the shots. For most families, the 20th century in particular consisted of an experience of catastrophe and trauma, but also of advancement and progress. How should a new, rebellious generation position itself that has literally experienced the violent nature of Lukashenko’s dictatorship firsthand? If it wants to learn lessons from history, there can only be one simple solution. “Byelorussia” has always been a transit zone for foreign armies and a transit country for foreign goods. “Belarus” must be a contact zone of different peoples and cultures or a transitional region between Eastern and Western Europe or a mediator between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Still almost unnoticed by the world public, the regime has begun to strike back in a perfidious manner after the organization of a sixth national assembly. It has censured the symbols of the revolution as fascist. At the same time, the regime is taking active measures against the people who took to the streets for democracy: they are oppressed, i.e. imprisoned or banned from their professions. Enlightenment in the

form of a flood of information in the media and journalism is necessary. International solidarity is needed! If this continues, Belarus will be sucked into Putin's "Russian world". We should take the Belarusian language seriously. We need Belarusian teachers at all western universities.