

Редколлегия журнала *Топос* обратилась к ряду иностранных ученых с просьбой ответить на вопросы, касающиеся нового протестного движения в Беларуси. Мы благодарны всем, кто откликнулся на наше приглашение. В данной рубрике мы публикуем полученные реакции. Некоторые из них придерживаются формы интервью, другие представляют собой мини-эссе, затрагивающие отдельные вопросы из предложенного редколлегией списка.

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The Impact of the 2020 Elections in Belarus

Introduction

The Belarusian election campaign of 2020 was an unprecedented event in the history of the independent state. The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka had lost much of its popularity and dissatisfaction had spread from the traditional opposition to workers, and also to the ruling elite. To some extent, the disaffection was a result of the president's longevity. But it was also a result of his inertia in the face of economic decline and a world pandemic.

Previously, election campaigns could be carefully managed and Lukashenka was flexible enough to adopt different roles: as a protector of his people, ensuring reasonable wages and pensions as well as job security; as a guarantor of peace and stability; and as a leader who would continue to promote good relations with Russia, its main partner and the provider of valuable energy supplies, both for domestic use and for re-export to countries of Europe.

Belarus' Problems

In 2020, Belarus faced problems on several fronts. The first issue was its relations with Russia, which had been difficult for some time, as Moscow began to place limits on its largesse, demanding that Belarus



pay world prices for oil and gas, as well as an export tax. Vladimir Putin tried on several occasions to push Belarus to integrate more deeply with Russia. Earlier, he had tried with limited success to coax Lukashenka into taking a more active part in several Russian-led bodies such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community. Latterly, the agency on which he focused was the hitherto dormant Russia-Belarus Union. Its revival allowed Russia more scope to pursue questions such as a common currency, borders, and joint military maneuvers. The question of a Russian air base on Belarusian territory had been broached and avoided by Lukashenka.

On the other hand, the European Union sought better relations with Belarus, perceiving in Lukashenka a leader who was prepared at times to resist the encroachments of Moscow and work more closely with the EU as a partner. In the background to the situation in Belarus was the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that began in 2014 after the Euromaidan uprising resulted in the departure of President Viktor Yanukovich, the Russian invasion of Crimea, and a Russian-fomented war in the Donbas. Lukashenka had in fact offered his services not as an ally of Russia, but as an intermediary in the war. He had been reticent in supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea, seemingly unwilling to jettison the good relations with Ukraine that had been maintained throughout the independence period.

Secondly, Lukashenka opted to ignore the Covid-19 pandemic, treating it almost as a common cold or something that could be cured by visits to the countryside or to a sauna. The anger this attitude elicited is evident. In addition, his response to significant challenges from candidates who were part of the ruling structures – banning them from running and arresting two of them on the flimsiest of pretexts – further added to the general dissatisfaction. The unification of the elite campaigns under Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, while enforced by the official measures, served to revitalize the election and offer a clear alternative to Lukashenka. Crowds turned out for her rallies in thousands and tens of thousands, despite restrictions on location and other inconveniences.

A third factor that brought mass protests to the streets in the post-election period was the announcement of official election results that did not correspond with reality, i.e. over 80% to Lukashenka and only 10% to his main challenger. That elicited widespread outrage. Most protesters believed that Tsikhanouskaya had won the election. The poll results obtained by the Golos organization indicated that she had won the city of Minsk (about 22% of the total population of the republic) by a landslide. Though ascertaining the precise results may be impossible it is very clear that the official totals were fabricated.

The protests were sustained by social and digital media. The main coordinating site was NEXTA-Telegram, which proved impossible for the authorities to stop. They were deliberately leaderless and

non-violent, a factor that made them difficult to predict other than the announcement of the protest date and name, but also of significance in their failure to unseat Lukashenka.

Why Lukashenka Survived

The regime managed to preserve itself through the use of mass violence and repressions, the incarceration of thousands of people, and the threat of job losses and other pressures on those who participated. The large-scale student involvement also was halted through the threat of expulsion and for the most part, the regime support of some higher-placed personnel.

Likewise, Lukashenka retained the loyalty of his security forces and most of his Cabinet, refused to negotiate at any level with Tsikhanouskaia and the Coordination Council, all members of which were arrested if they remained in the country. The crackdown has continued without a pause and widened to include even minor transgressions such as wearing red and white clothing. The leaders of the unified opposition election campaign likewise are either imprisoned and serving lengthy sentences or else they are operating outside the country.

International support came belatedly. The most severe sanctions were imposed by the EU, the UK, United States, and Canada only after the hijacking of the Athens-Vilnius RyanAir flight in May 2021 in order to detain passenger Raman Pratsevich, one of the founders of the NEXTA-Telegram site. In other words, the Western powers reacted strongly to an act of international terrorism rather than the constant domestic repressions.

But within the pan-European sphere, it is the actions of Russia that have been most decisive. Lukashenka and the security forces sought the backing of Russia despite the fact that Belarusian-Russian relations had reached an impasse for several years previously on the question of oil and gas prices, a proposed Russian air base on Belarusian territory, and other issues. At the start of the election campaign, Belarusian authorities arrested several members of the Wagner Group who were staying in Minsk before taking a flight to Africa.

In turn, though Vladimir Putin hesitated to get involved in the election campaign, and although at least two of the candidates in the early stages were perceived as pro-Russian and possibly Russia's choices (Valery Tsapkala and Viktor Babaryka), the Russian leader opted to support Lukashenka over the opposition. His commitment contrasted with the position of Belarus' southern neighbor, Ukraine, which offered support to the protesters. Within the context of Europe, Tsikhanouskaia's visits to various EU capitals and interaction with European leaders rendered the struggle one of Russia versus the West. Lukashenka's rhetoric became manifestly anti-Western, while its media outlets were largely subordinated to Russian ones and spouted Russian propaganda.

The Pan-European Perspective

Ironically, while the Western countries had played no role in the election campaign, and the policies of the unified opposition were carefully neutral with regard to both Russia and the West, by November 2020, the forces were divided along the lines familiar in the Cold War period. Lukashenka now maintained that Western interference was behind the mass demonstrations against his leadership. Together with Putin, he “uncovered” an assassination attempt.

At the time of writing, the future of democracy in Belarus looks bleak. However, there are some lessons for the West in terms of democracy building. First of all, protests cannot survive without outside assistance if the authorities resort to violence. Second, if the West is committed to supporting the democratic movement in Belarus, assurances need to be provided that those protesting have some financial support should they lose their employment. There can be no half-measures.

Conversely, though the 2020 election and the hopes it brought are now a fading memory, the impact has been broader than simply a struggle for power. For the first time during the independence period, Belarusians took to the streets en masse to express themselves. Psychologically, a change has occurred within society. Belarus cannot go back to the pre-election period because the people’s mentality has changed. Lukashenka is widely regarded as a usurper outside the country, but also by a large contingent of the public within it.

The Russian Barrier

At the same time, the quest for democracy, as in Ukraine, came up against the barrier of Putin’s Russia. Putin’s support for Lukashenka and his followers is conditional: it requires the gradual assimilation of Belarus into the Russian sphere, both economically and politically. Today, the problem of Belarusian intransigence for Russia is resolved: Lukashenka has become a vassal of Moscow. He has made seven visits to the Russian capital over the past year. Putin, symbolically, never travels to Minsk. He is the provider rather than the supplicant. Even Lukashenka’s language has changed to one of servility and reverence when speaking to Putin.

Only Moscow has benefited from the power struggle in Belarus but even Putin and his Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recognize that Lukashenka is a short-term phenomenon. That is why Russia seeks to nurture new political parties and constitutional change in Belarus to ensure that the successor to Lukashenka provides stability and a pro-Russian outlook but also comes with significant popular support.

Western powers in analyzing the Belarusian impasse need to keep in mind that most residents are sympathetic to or supportive of Russia

and its interests. Belarusians are very different in this regard from Ukrainians. Their perspective on politics has been framed largely by Russian and pro-Russian media and social media. Thus, the importance of the latter in swaying the views of Belarusians can hardly be overstated. During the Cold War, RFE/RL, the BBC, the Voice of America, and other outlets provided a clandestine but much-needed alternative voice to Soviet propaganda. In the era of social media, this need is accentuated today.