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– *What is your overall take on the objective prerequisites and key incentives for the mass protests against the authoritarian regime that have taken place in Belarus from 2020?*

There were two main demands voiced during the mass protests: fair elections (democracy), and Lukashenka's resignation. I learnt that the most frequent slogan was: "Lukashenka ukhodi" (Lukashenka, go away/ leave (office)). These two are also closely related to a third, as formulated by the opposition as the protests were unfolding and as police and/or military violence was escalating, namely, the need to establish the rule of law. There were other incentives, as for instance a desire for EU-integration linked to anti-Russian sentiments, and discontent with decreasing social welfare, but the by far most important incentive is discontent with abuse of power on the part of the state and Lukashenka.

When it comes to the prerequisites, there are two sides of the coin. Firstly, the ability of the opposition to join behind the face and person of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and secondly – the phrase I mostly hear: *on dostal*, which can be understood as people having had enough, or/ and as Lukashenka having gone too far. Whatever he represents cannot be had or tolerated any more. Where and why that line was crossed is very interesting, and one could also reverse it by asking – why was it crossed only now?

What struck me as particularly interesting in this situation is the lack of party politics or ideological distinctions on all sides, at least as we know them in many Western European countries, for instance, in Sweden, my country of birth. Lukashenka himself, being simply the "last dictator of Europe", does not represent a clear political or ideological programme, and the opposition do not seem to have other political demands than fair elections. The very word "opposition" is typical of this non-ideological distinction between people in power (a regime if you wish) and those who manifest their discontent. The "opposition" is based primarily on being opposed. That this is



the case of Belarus is in fact not very surprising. In fact, it seems difficult to apply ideological distinctions across a left-right divide in many countries in the former Soviet Union and in other countries in Eastern Europe. In Ukraine, what united the opposition was rather nationalist and anti-Russian issues, than visions for the future basing on distinctions between conservative, liberal and socialist ideas. In other words, the lack of ideological distinctions seems to be a feature of politics in the post-Communist space. This is not to say that there are no political distinctions to be made, but that ideological distinctions have not been made prominent in public debates nor in political programmes that could distinguish between the State and the protest movements. One can therefore wonder, is this because the opposition is not united or cannot rally support around a political programme, and if so why? Is it related to the fact that Lukashenka himself is an autocratic ruler with a clear political ideology? Or is this a question of strategy? It is unlikely that the Belarusian people would become pro-liberal in the sense of favouring market reforms and privatization on a large scale, since this has been so devastating for neighbouring countries in the post-Soviet sphere. Further, if this is so, how do then the protest movements translate into political parties, what and how could a democracy form itself after possible fair elections – what would be the possible political distinctions, and what are the visions for the future of Belarus? More so, can a democracy emerge without ideological oppositions (i.e. parties)? This seems to have presented a problem in other former Soviet countries, what would happen in Belarus?

– What was the most surprising and striking for you in the Belarusian events throughout the last year?

The most surprising was that people joined on the larger scale through solidarity, and that it spread to the people on the countryside. I guess that there are several reasons why the people have not joined protest movements before. Lukashenka stood for stability against the experience of 1991, and the consequent destruction of social welfare in many countries. Considering Belarus' precarious geographical location as a buffer state between the East and West, he also for a long time seemed to manouver well between Europe and Russia. Adding to this the lack of a clear political alternative (and this concerns the post-Soviet space in general), and previous stolen revolutions, the president could stay in spite of growing discontent. So what happened now? Why this time? Either people were so tired of the present regime that they were ready to join the protests be what may, or they felt that there was a political alternative. Perhaps a bit of both? This being said, before the protests actually were a fact and showed that it could rally such great support, I was not aware that they were in the making.

– *How do you see the prospects for the Belarusian protest movement against the unprecedented scale of repression by the authorities on the one hand, and the lasting international support for the Belarusian democratic forces on the other hand?*

Currently there seems to be a kind of stalemate between Belarus (with Russia) on the one hand, and the opposition and EU on the other, with the migrants become captives as bricks in a conflict zone. Although Tsikhanouskaya has called for a second wave of protests, it appears that the terrible repression seems to have killed the protests for now. I am not enough familiar with the situation in the country to understand how people could again gain confidence enough to take to the streets and dare the police, but it seems unlikely. More so, most opposition leaders are either abroad or imprisoned. As concerns international support, there is no reason to doubt that the EU will continue to take sides with the protest movements and support it in different ways, but can they do more than use economic and diplomatic pressure? Also, it is likely that the question how pro-active the EU will be can also be dependent on a variety of factors as economy, security etc.

– *How do you place the Belarusian authoritarian regime and the internal democratic struggle against it in the pan-European social-political context?*

I find it very difficult to answer this question, precisely because of the previous point – namely the question how to translate not only Belarusian politics, but also politics in the post-Soviet sphere generally to a Western European socio-political context. I understand Lukashenka as a corrupt pragmatist with Fascist tendencies, who is less successful in the reforms than in the preservation of institutions (many in need of reform). In the lack of a clear political alternative with visions for change – how can this be different? Therefore, when it comes to the protest movements, there is a kind of negative translation. They are protests, they are in opposition, but where are the visions? Ivan Krastev described it in his book *After Europe* from 2017 about the condition of politics in Europe today, as following: “The protesting citizen wants change, but resents any form of political representation. Basing his theory of social change on ad copy from Silicon Valley, he values disruption and scoffs at political blueprints. He longs for political community, but refuses to be led by others. He will not risk clashing with the police but is afraid of trusting any party or politician.” The point of distinction between Belarus and Europe is then rather the presence or absence of democratic institutions.

– *What argument does the Belarusian case provide for the future of democracy vs the future of autocracy? What evidence does it give on the political use of (digital) media?*

It is interesting that Lukashenka defines himself as “the last dictator”. If we take him on his words, he does not really see a future for his form of governing. He only wants to stay as long as possible, presumably until he dies. This also seems to belong to a sickness of our times — exploit as long and as much as you can, without perspectives for the future. In Lukashenka’s statement, the lack of future is put in very crude terms, but the sense of living as the last, at the end, before imminent catastrophes and without visions for the future also prevails in European politics and culture. Can there be any visions in the face of climate change? Could environmental issue rally more support in Belarus?

When it comes to the political use of digital media, I am not convinced about its positive effects. It seems to imbue people with a sense that change is possible no matter what and no matter how. Still, although digital media in Belarus has been important in the mobilization of pro-democratic protest movements, in other places, it has proven a fertile soil for radical anti-democratic movements. Today, there is much critique of the way that social media atomizes and polarizes public opinion.

– *The crisis of democracy is ubiquitous these days, even if with various underpinnings in different (e.g. Western and East European) settings. From your perspective, is there anything Belarusians should learn from Westerners and vice versa for the sake of a viable democratic society?*

The anatomy of the Belarusian protest movement is certainly interesting, but what it can teach us about the crisis of democracy? Is it not also a part of this crisis? This is not to say that there not many things to learn from each other, and especially from the different experiences of politics, democracy and authoritarianism that countries in the West and the East have gone through, also in order to distinguish between these experiences. What became clear after 1989/1991 is that democracy will not just come about if you set people free to vote, and if some would argue that you need the right institutions, to my view, it must be added that you need a politics that can bring about such institutions. This being said, the Belarusian protest movement reminds us of the possibility and necessity to protest and resist current political orders and abuse of power, and perhaps we really need to do so no matter what, especially when power today despite of all talk of transparency is so good at hiding how it works. Protest ultimately also uncovers the anatomy of power of national and supra-national institutions and means of governing.