

BELARUSIAN POLITICAL CRISIS:  
A COLLAPSE OF PREEMPTIVE  
AUTHORITARIANISM

A review of the book:  
*Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*  
by Andrew Wilson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. 499 p.

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After pivotal events witnessed in Belarus during August 2020, British historian and political scientist Andrew Wilson published a new revised edition of his book “Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship”. The study, first published in 2011, is one of the most exhaustive English-language publications that gives a detailed account of Belarus’ historical formation as a nation and its political path after declaring independence in 1991. The reasons why the author returned to the analysis of the Belarusian regime are clear. Lukashenka’s brand of adaptive authoritarianism with its mix of managed pluralism, performance legitimacy, false opposition and faux elections no longer deceives large swaths of the Belarusian people. Following his apparent landslide reelection victory in 2020, thousands of people poured into the streets to denounce the president’s vote as a fraud.

Andrew Wilson, a professor in Ukrainian studies at University College London and a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, dubbed these massive nationwide actions “the revolution without name”. The protests lasted more than six months and have not yet led to any concrete results. The situation in Belarus is still



characterized as a political crisis, which means it is too early to predict the end result. Under such conditions, Wilson's book has become particularly relevant. It is based on deep academic study and helps to form a comprehensive view of the Belarusian nation and state through the centuries.

The two mutually complementary parts of the new edition are divided into 14 chapters. The writing charts the path of an unstable development and the growing up and strengthening of the Belarusian national movement in the context of linguistic, religious, territorial and political contradictions.

The final new chapters, "The 2010s: Lukashenka's Juggling Act" and "The Revolution Without a Name", are particularly significant for understanding the situation in contemporary Belarus. These sections were published in the new edition of the book in 2021. According to the author, Belarus had no real attempted revolution before 2020, but protests were common. "First were the "Denim protests" in 2006. Then there were protests in 2010, in 2011 and later in 2017. 2020 didn't come out of nowhere" (p. 347), he said. Andrew Wilson analyzes the political circumstances that helped Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who was unknown in political circles, to win the elections in 1994 and hold on to power for more than two decades.

Despite the fact that Lukashenka was labeled an "accidental president" after Pavel Sheremet's book with the same name<sup>1</sup>, Wilson concludes that his victory in the 1994 elections was quite natural and fair enough. Aliaksandr Lukashenka's political image and program corresponded to the social circumstances and matched with the cultural code of villages and small towns' residents with a low level of education.

The author quotes A. Martynaw's point, that Lukashenka "found just the right way to side-step the tired four-year-old psychodrama between the nomenklatura and the BNF" (p. 224). On the one hand, the BNF (Belarusian People's Front was the leading opposition party of Belarus) wasn't strong enough to take power. Its political program was too far from ordinary people who felt nostalgia for the Soviet past. On the other hand, the former chairman of a pig farm was underestimated in ruling circles. Due to the Soviet mentality, only representatives of the nomenclature and intelligentsia could be part of the political elite. Meanwhile, the ambitious populist and opportunist Lukashenka managed to clearly meet the expectations of the target audience. The slogan of his election campaign "Neither with the left nor with the right, but with the people" resonated in the hearts of Belarusians, especially the working class and pensioners. Anti-corruption intentions and a pro-Russian position also were tactical and beneficial.

1 Шеремет П. Г., Калинкина С. М. (2003) Случайный президент : [Полит. портрет А. Лукашенко]. Москва : Ньюанс, 2003. 236 с.

The second myth that Wilson dispels is regarding the “Belarusian economic miracle”. The researcher concludes: “Economic recovery in the late 1990s was not due to some unique “Belarusian model”, but to a generous subsidy regime from Russia and to the restoration of the Russian export market under the cover of the “Union State” (p. 324). The author also highlights that Belarus started to take advantage of the Russian crude subsidy and high global oil tariffs to become an “off-shore oil state” in late 2003.

Wilson writes, “before 2010 Belarus outperformed its neighbours economically, after 2010 the opposite was true” (p. 347). As a former reporter for the state TV-channel STV, I can attest that the problems of a planned economy already began to manifest themselves during the so-called “golden period”. Between 2007 and the middle of 2010, some bosses of agricultural companies told me in personal conversations that they had to get rid of unused and unsold grain. According to one of the leaders of a farm I won’t name, rotting sacks of grain were secretly burned in the forest at night. He explained to me of a need to free up warehouses as the annual “battle for the harvest” was elevated to the rank of a key national task. Exceeding government directed production quotas offered appealing financial incentives. Belarusians in the countryside were quite satisfied during that time. The support of the traditional electorate for Lukashenka felt real. Retired people were relatively pleased with their pensions, and farmers with the size of their incomes.

Andrew Wilson explains the situation like this: “Lukashenka’s first big mistake was to stoke the economic fires before the 2010 election – almost as if were actually facing a real competition – which was too soon after Belarus’ weak recovery from the 2007-9 global economic crisis. Public sector wages were increased by 35 per cent: the economy grew by 10.2 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2010. Low productivity in the still-dominant state economy meant a ballooning balance of trade deficit, which reached a massive 16 per cent of GDP by 2010. Servicing the gap meant an annual hard cash bill upwards of \$3 billion, often substantially more, as Belarus has no real domestic capital market. The government’s reserves drained away, falling below \$4 billion in the first half of 2011, but were effectively almost zero, their true level hidden by complex swap schemes with local state banks” (p.348).

Meanwhile, by fulfilling the “social contract” and gaining control over the state’s media apparatus, *bats’ka*’s<sup>2</sup> thirst for retention of power was not particularly obvious to ordinary people, as the author notes. From the very beginning, when Lukashenka became president, he gradually began to increase authoritarianism by promoting his ideas through referendums. Amendments to the Constitution were

2 Due to his style of rule, Lukashenka is often informally referred to as *бацька* (*bats’ka*, “daddy”).

approved and thus extended Lukashenka's powers and provided ample opportunity to increase his grip on power. The approval of national symbols in the Soviet style and a ban on the Pahonia (Belarus' first national emblem), elevated Russian language to the level of Belarusian. The latter was both a slap in the face of the opposition and an elegant opportunist's curtsy towards Russia.

Among Aliaksandr Lukashenka's other methods for establishing and maintaining authoritarianism the author mentions, are: "faking" opposition (i.e. financially supporting his preferred candidates), closing most NGOs and exercising absolute ideological control over state media and the nation's purse strings. Even at the dawn of his popularity, Lukashenka sought to eliminate any threat to his presidency. Andrew Wilson recalls the term coined by political scientist Vitali Silitski, who called such behavior "preemptive authoritarianism" in his book "Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus"<sup>3</sup>. In 2019, the scholar Matthew Frear named it "adaptive authoritarianism", as "...the regime was able to mix various strategies at different times: facade elections, performance legitimacy, patrimonialism and managed pluralism"<sup>4</sup> (p. 405). In fact, both scholars describe the same style of dictator.

Despite the obvious depth of Wilson's multi-vector research, his writing style is emotional and far from academic. The position of the book's author is entirely unambiguous. He does not hesitate to "reward" Aliaksandr Lukashenka with harsh epithets: "bastard", "neophyte populist", "scourge of corruption", "lord of war", "great survivor", "chameleon", "serial election stealer" and "neo-Soviet nostalgist". Such a collection of "nicknames" succinctly presents not only Wilson's own attitudes to the Belarusian politician as a person, but also the conclusions of his research findings. To some extent, this may lead readers away from forming their own opinions, but it makes it easier to assimilate the information.

So, what exactly led to the biggest civil protests in the history of Belarus in 2020? It was certainly a complex set of reasons. First, the author provides a statistic: according to the IMF, Belarus' public debt was \$25 billion in 2019. The economic crisis was not the main cause of Belarusians' discontent however, with Wilson identifying two key factors that determined Lukashenka's image as a provider of social goods. With five weeks of protests in 2017 against the so-called "social parasite" tax (whereby young mothers and other economically "inactive" people had to pay the state treasury about \$250) and absolute disregard for the pandemic in early 2020, Belarusians no longer felt protected by *bats'ka* and the "social contract" was broken. Not expecting

3 Vitalii Silitski (2009). *Sotsial'nye kontrakty v sovremennoi Belarusi*. St Petersburg: Nevskii prostor, p. 224.

4 Matthew Frear (2019). *Belarus under Lukashenka: Adaptive Authoritarianism*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 202.

help from the government, people demonstrated a high level of social cooperation and unity – first, to crowdfund money for public hospitals unequipped to deal with COVID-19, and then to express their attitude toward the dictator and the ill-treatment of detainees. The official results of the 2020 election, which the author calls “egregious fraud”, was the very last straw for the Belarusian people.

The authorities claimed a “traditional” result of the last two decades of presidential elections in Belarus: Aliaksandr Lukashenka was awarded over 80 per cent of the vote. According to official data, Lukashenka’s main opponent, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, won 10.1 per cent of the vote. That figure differs massively from the results of exit polls and independent surveys, Wilson notes. The author also says, that “we will never know the exact, true result, because there wasn’t one. Votes were miscounted, and in many cases not counted at all. There was massive evidence of fraud, given how crudely it was done” (p. 384).

Wilson’s analysis of the events of 2020 shows that Lukashenka in fact stumbled upon the same thing that once brought him to power – he underestimated a threat to his “own self-appointed role as president for life” in the candidacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. At that time, this mother and housewife dared to replace her arrested husband Siarhei Tsikhanousky in the struggle for the presidency. Lukashenka suggested she return to the kitchen to “fry cutlets”. He stated that “our constitution is not [right to be placed] under a woman. And our society is not ripe to vote for a woman” (p. 382). In almost the same way, in the 1994 elections, the former agricultural manager Aliaksandr Lukashenka was not taken seriously by the overconfident first prime minister of independent Belarus, Viachaslau Kebich, who eventually lost the election.

Considering that 53.5 per cent of the population of Belarus was female in 2020, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was well placed to reach the target audience. This is especially true after “the feminisation of the campaign”, as the author calls it. Tsikhanouskaya combined resources with female representatives of other participants in the 2020 presidential race – Tsapkala’s wife Veranika Tsapkala and Babaryka’s campaign manager Maria Kalesnikava. Andrew Wilson notes that “the three women ran a powerful campaign. They attracted huge crowds with warm and simple, positive messaging. There was no detailed manifesto, just the demand for a free and fair election – not this one but the next” (p. 382),

The brutality of the authorities against the demonstrators following the announcement of the election results on Aug. 9, Wilson dubbed the “three nights of terror”. Under threats against her children, Tsikhanowskaya was forced to leave for Lithuania, where she announced the Coordination Council (for the Transfer of Power) on Aug. 14. However, the regime refused to engage in negotiations with the Council, treating its very establishment as a criminal act. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian parliament recognized her as the only elected leader of

Belarus on Sept. 10. And so, the struggle continued. The author is sure: a new civic nation was born, and there is no way back.

Exploring the long-term triggers of the 2020 protests, Wilson concludes that it was Lukashenka who laid the foundation for the awakening of the national spirit as a result of his “soft Belarusianisation” policy in 2014, after the war against Ukraine. According to the author, in those years, an attempt to distance the country from Russia and turn towards the West, China and the Middle East was a manipulation of the regime “not for real dialogue, but as an “attempt to change the geo-political supplier of rents” (p. 412). The old east Slavic unity formula was indirectly marginalized, which made a significant contribution to the new formation of Belarusian national identity.