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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?

Key incentives were similar to those observed in the mass protests of 2010 or 2006, namely: deep dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime, hope for a political change, desire for freedom and economic reforms. Yet in my opinion the people's motives that accompanied the protests in 2020 were rooted much deeper than during the previous demonstrations. They exemplified the existential social desire to live human dignified life. This desire has apparently become a collective national emotion and thus led to the appearance of different forms of social solidarity, that was a novelty for an atomized Belarusian society. Korosteleva & Petrova (2021) call this solidarity phenomenon a rising of Belarusian peoplehood which initiated a bottom-up process of democratic change in Belarus. Even if due to the unprecedented level of repressions observed after August 2020, social solidarity cannot be freely developed in Belarus, we can notice unprecedented level of social and political mobilization among Belarusians diaspora in Poland and Lithuania.

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

I would say the scale of the demonstrations that in fact covered whole country, even if not for long, and what was mentioned earlier the level of determination/deepness of the protests moods that was observed among so many Belarusians there weren't politically engaged before.

– 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?



The recent court judgments in the so-called Tikhanousky case where Mr Siarhei Tsikhanousky was sentenced to 18 years in prison following the July 14-year verdict against Viktor Babryko, another candidate in 2020 presidential elections and many other opposition politicians including 'iron' Mikola Statkevich who was also sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment) are absolutely unprecedented. Polish experts as a whole agree that during martial law times, in the gloomy 80s, the representatives of Polish Solidarity had never been punished with such high sentences. This is really bad as this brings little hope that Lukashenka will come back on the path of 'popular authoritarianism' or 'sultanism' where he would build his popularity also on his autocratic 'charisma' and social popularity, not only on repressions. Therefore it is very difficult, mainly from the moral point of view, for the opposition to start negotiations with the regime. I can observe now vivid discussions whether such a possibility could be taken into account, as some Belarusian intellectuals have suggested so. I have no easy answer to that, and I also believe it is up to the Belarusians to forge an agreement. Yet what literature on democratic transformation clearly shows is that it is much more difficult to peacefully change the authoritarian regimes built mainly on coercion and repressions. Thus different forms of round table are the most efficient ways to lead to the transformation, even if this form of transition brings many adverse effects for the future political regime. At the same time, I think that no matter which tactics Belarusian civil society will choose, they may rely on the international support mainly thanks to their credibility, enthusiasm, political creativity, but of course political opposition should not rest on their laurels. An important factor for the political opposition to strengthen its capacities (not such much on the international scene, but rather internally) would be to actively engage the representatives of trade unions, employers' organization etc.

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

Well, some experts are suggesting that 2020 events in Belarus sort of close the wave of democratic transitions that occurred in Central Europe in early 90s. I hope this is the case, however Belarusians should more closely look at the recent history of Ukraine which in my opinion is a more relevant case of constant struggle of the civil society for democratic principles and institutions. As a whole, also the example of Central Europe indicates in my opinion, that there is no point of no return in democracies and much more important than formal institutions are social resilience and bottom-up activism.