Commentary
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Political Crisis in Belarus: Reasons and perspectives

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Summary

On August 9, presidential elections were held in Belarus. According to official data voiced by the Central Election Commission, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the incumbent president, won with a sweeping 80.1% majority. Ensuing protests became unprecedented in the history of independent Belarus in terms of both the number of people involved and violence used against protesters. Nevertheless, more than three weeks into street protests, it looks like the 'margin of strength' of the Belarusian political regime has turned out to be somewhat greater than the opposition and many analysts had anticipated.

Contents

1 Developments
2 Challenges for the Authorities
3 Challenges for Protesters
4 The Russia Factor
5 Relations with the West

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Ample evidence of large-scale violations of election procedures, and especially the official vote result in favour of Aliaksandr Lukashenka became the main triggers behind the street protest in Belarus. In addition to the direct trigger that brought about rallies, there were other reasons that caused mounting discontent with the incumbent government and personally with president Lukashenka.

First, the election campaign itself was an extremely tense one. Even during the early phase when potential candidates were collecting signatures, two popular alternative contenders were arrested and thereby eliminated from the race: Viktar Babaryka, the former head of the Belarusian subsidiary of Gazprombank, and Siarhiej Cichanoŭski, a popular YouTube blogger. Later, another strong challenger, former advisor to

Lukashenka and diplomat Valery Cepkala, was denied registration as a candidate. Those moves by the authorities caused discontent of the masses, which resulted in street protests even prior to the election day, but their scale was insignificant.

> The politicization of the previously passive (absenteeism) liberal electorate can be attributed to the appearance of brand new figures in Belarusian politics (in contrast to the traditional pro-Western opposition), with significant managerial experience and a clear understanding of the Belarusian power pattern, which gave the urban middle class and young people faith that change was a real option.

Moreover, in their campaigns all of those candidates meticulously avoided the issues that could divide Belarusian society (language, geopolitical focus, any specific details of proposed reforms) and instead centered on the general matters of rotation in office, justice and human rights. Their campaigns actively used social networks and the overall capacity of Internet communication, where the state is traditionally weak.

The second factor shaping the negative attitude of a portion of Belarusian society to Lukashenka was the official anti-COVID-19 policy, which originally manifested in the denial of the gravity of the virus and reluctance to impose general lockdown measures. However, the liberal public was even more infuriated about Lukashenka's disrespectful rhetoric about victims of the coronavirus. According to sociological surveys, 65% of citizens did not support the official policy on the pandemic and wanted more social distancing.

Third, it is likely that the prolonged crisis in Belarus's relationship with Russia, which affected numerous aspects of the bilateral relations, also contributed to the drop in the popularity of the authorities and personally Lukashenka. Considering the significance of Russia as a trade and economic partner, as well as cultural and historical proximity of the two nations, generally positive attitude of Belarusians to Russia and the idea of economic integration, the media warfare between the two countries that unfolded on the eve of the new election cycle could not but affect the approval rating of the incumbent president.

The fourth driver comprises people's exhaustion from the 26 years of Lukashenka's rule and diverse implications of changing generations in society against the backdrop of evolving information technologies and social networks.

Fifth, the Belarusian authorities have always had issues with public feedback, but these problems seem to have aggravated recently. One aspect of this challenge is the lack of objective and, most importantly, independent data on public sentiment. Some 18 months before the presidential election, the Information and Analytical Center under the Presidential Administration, which provided, *inter alia*, sociological data, was dissolved. Shortly before that, the last independent sociological institute, which conducted polls with a focus on political topics (the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)), was liquidated. Due to the lack of open public data on Lukashenka's real approval rating it was a lot easier for alternative candidates to make voters believe in the Internet meme of 3% Lukashenka's rating. The incompetence of state propaganda and its propensity to sidestep facts and ignore alternative opinions only enhanced mistrust.

Developments

The rallies staged during the first day quickly lost their peaceful nature and led to clashes with police and mass arrests of street protesters. According to the Interior Ministry, during the first night of the protests, some 3,000 people were detained for participation in unauthorized mass events all over Belarus. Mass protests and clashes with police continued up until August 13. As a result, over 6,000 people were detained; at least three protesters died. The Interior Ministry also reported 121 injured policemen.

Despite the fact that the forceful dispersal of the protesters enabled the authorities to prevent the creation of a compact permanent resistance hub like Maidan in the capital city, excessive violence used by riot police against protesters provoked a wave of public outrage. Protests began to escalate. Acts of solidarity supporting the victims were organized across the country. Workers of major state-owned enterprises started joining the protests, demanding that violence be halted, riot police be removed from the streets and all political prisoners be released. It was probably the threat of workers' protest and strikes that forced the authorities to stop brutal dispersals of rallies by riot police and start releasing those detained during the first few days of the protests.

Challenges for the Authorities

For the first time in many years (if not since Lukashenka came to power), the protest, unprecedented in terms of the number of people involved and degree of violence, jeopardized the existing political system of Belarus. During the first two weeks after the elections the country was *de facto* on the verge of a revolution. At that time, the incumbent was faced with three main challenges, and whether the political regime

would persist or collapse depended on his efficiency in handling the situation. First, it was critical to maintain the loyalty of the state machine, including the security agencies. Second, it was essential to prevent a nationwide strike, which could serve as the most powerful tool to influence the authorities. And third, it was imperative that Russia abstain from any intervention on the side of the protesters.

Whereas at the crucial point the ruling elite turned out to be generally loyal (not a single truly influential official or law enforcement officer resigned) and Russia's Putin voiced his country's support for Lukashenka, the threat of strikes became a more complicated matter to deal with. The disproportionate indiscriminate violence by riot police forced the workers of Belarusian industry giants — MAZ, MZKT, MTZ, BelAZ, Naftan, Belaruskali and others — to join the street protests.

> The danger of workers' joining the protest movement lies in the fact that they constitute the traditional electorate backing Lukashenka, and street protests involving workers implied that the very foundation of the regime would be destroyed.

As noted previously, the protest engaging workers of state-owned enterprises and the prospect of a general strike became one of the decisive arguments for the authorities to mitigate reprisals against protesters, as well as an incentive for Lukashenka to come back as a street politician. The president first organized a rally of his supporters in Minsk (August 16) and then visited MZKT where he spoke to disgruntled workers (August 17).

Two factors discouraged the nationwide strike in addition to workers' dialogue with the authorities and the management of their enterprises. According to the Belarusian law, organizing a strike is an intricate issue. It must be initiated either by an official trade union, which normally sides with the state. In this case, strikers cannot put out any political demands. Or a strike can be initiated by a decision of two-thirds of the total workforce, while in reality only a small portion of all workers was involved in the protests. Consequently, a general strike could only be organized beyond the legal framework, something that would imply legitimate dismissals of its participants. The second factor partly stemmed from the first one. The workers did not voice any economic demands during the protests, their welfare (especially at Belaruskali and in oil refining) being quite far from deplorable by Belarusian standards. The threat of dismissal amid the mitigation of reprisals by the authorities encouraged workers to get back to work. The main instrument to change the political balance of power in the country was therefore neutralized.

Challenges for Protesters

Despite the involvement of broad masses in the protest movement both in Minsk and across Belarus, it failed to be converted into a real political force capable of impacting the authorities. The most important problem for protesters is the lack of a leader and a political center. Sviatlana Cichanoŭskaja, who became a presidential candidate by chance after her husband was arrested, is more of a symbol of the protest rather than its leader. Furthermore, she was forced to leave Belarus shortly after the elections. Having settled in Vilnius, she has mostly engaged in diplomatic work, seeking to communicate the goals and objectives of the protest to the international community.

The Coordination Council (CC), formed in Belarus at the initiative of Cichanoŭskaja, has not become a real center of political decision-making and coordinating body for the protest movement. It includes functionaries of Viktar Babaryka's and Sviatlana Cichanoŭskaja's election headquarters, representatives of opposition organizations and many well-known Belarusians. At the same time, the legitimacy of this body remains questionable, as its members were not elected; it does not offer any strategic or tactical solutions for street protests and does not make attempts to manage rallies, which are still coordinated by the Nexta Telegram channel, operated from Poland.

> The passiveness of the Coordination Council is due both to the utter dissimilarity of its members and fear of reprisals initiated by the authorities for leading unsanctioned protests.

Moreover, a schism has already become visible within the CC. On August 31, a new party, Vmeste (Together), was announced at the Babaryka headquarters, which immediately incited a flurry of criticism among supporters of change.

The CC's attempts to establish communication with the Presidential Administration have been unsuccessful. The authorities do not view the Council as a negotiator, because on the one hand, it does not consider it a mouthpiece for all pro-opposition citizens, while on the other hand, it does not see the need for negotiations at all, having secured the Kremlin's support and eliminated the threat of a general strike.

One month after the election day, the protests have been modified. Daily rallies and marches all over the country have been transformed into a single big rally, which takes place in Minsk on Sundays, gathering up to 100,000-150,000 participants according to various estimates. On other days of the week and in other parts of Belarus, the heat of protests is rapidly going down, although they still remain. This is especially conspicuous

in the east of the country. The authorities do not prevent these activities altogether, but strongly oppose any attempts to counteract law enforcers and change the format of rallies. The central squares are once again blocked by police and interior troops.

The prolonged peaceful protest with no clear strategy and leaders causes frustration and fatigue. It is likely that the protest will be stratified as the numbers of participants decline. Discontent with unsuccessful rallies will inevitably bring about the radicalization of some protesters, which may lead to future outbreaks of violence.

The Russia Factor

A series of telephone conversations between Putin and Lukashenka during the first week after the onset of the protests resulted in a statement on Russia's support for the incumbent authorities in case of need. These agreements became one of the turning points in the post-election protest process. Support from Russia (even though verbal) became a deterrent for at least part of pro-opposition citizens, who feared Russia's possible intervention and loss of Belarus's sovereignty, and consolidated support for Lukashenka from those who advocated an alliance with Russia but were dissatisfied with the constant spats between Minsk and Moscow, which have become particularly acute in recent years. Further, Moscow's stance sent a strong signal to the West that Russia's intervention with all the consequences that come with it, including Russian military bases in Belarus, redeployment of troops, etc., would not be impossible in case of sanctions and other pressures.

It is noteworthy how fast and dramatically the official position of the Belarusian leadership with regard to foreign policy threats changed after the commencement of mass protests. Before the elections, Lukashenka famously 'milked' the Russian threat to Belarusian sovereignty, including interference in the elections and forcing political integration, while seeking improved relations with the West (including in the military sphere), whereas after the bloody clashes in Minsk and numerous telephone conversations with Putin the Belarusian head of state accused NATO and the EU neighbors — Poland and Lithuania — of attempts to stir up a color revolution. In addition, Lukashenka asked Putin for help in stabilizing the situation. In response, the Russian president confirmed the legitimacy of the Belarusian presidential elections, said that Russia had established a reserve of law enforcement agencies, which could be used to help the Belarusian authorities and warned Western leaders against interfering in Belarus's internal affairs.

Such a sharp turn in foreign policy and perception of threats by the Belarusian president makes one think about the true role of Russia in the election campaign in Belarus and the events that followed the election day. A number of facts suggest Russia's possible influence on the alternative candidates' campaigns (all of whom were affiliated with Russia one way or another), as well as the extremely fast escalation of violence in Minsk streets right after the elections. One remarkable fact in this context is that following the contacts with the Russian leadership and the decision to extradite the Wagner Group contractors that had been detained in Belarus to Russia, the protests have been emphatically peaceful.

Although the assumption about Russia's influence on the political crisis in Belarus needs to be corroborated, as of today it is obvious that Russia is the main beneficiary of the current developments.

> The Western vector of Belarus's foreign policy is again in crisis, which rules out the "situational neutrality" of Belarus and status of Minsk as a neutral negotiating ground.

The annihilation of foreign policy 'wiggle room' critically affects the bargaining position of the Belarusian leadership in any discussions with the Kremlin and therefore enhances its dependence on Russia. Appealing to Moscow for help (or help imposed by Moscow) forces the Belarusian authorities to generate a completely new vision of its foreign policy that is much closer to Russia than it used to be just a few weeks ago. In addition to that, Russia can now legitimately claim the role of an arbiter in the resolution of the Belarusian crisis, which makes it a crucial actor in Belarus's political field.

In an effort to weaken Lukashenka and enjoy more control of its western ally, Russia is not interested in a catastrophic scenario or chaos in Belarus, which would threaten its interests and would subsequently require more resources and efforts to stabilize the situation in this strategically important area. Therefore, the Kremlin will most likely support the scenario of a controlled constitutional reform in which it will seek a decisive role. At the same time, the Russian leadership will hardly call for deeper integration between the two countries in the near future, as in a politicized and divided society this could lead to a surge of anti-Russian protests and further complicate Russia's relationship with the West.

Relations with the West

The response of the European Union and the United States to the developments in Belarus was more restrained than many observers had expected, given the scale of violence in the first days after the elections and numerous violations of electoral legislation. Neither the EU nor the U.S. recognized the official results of the elections and more than once condemned the treatment of protesters by law enforcers. However, Sviatlana Cichanoŭskaja was not named president-elect, either; the European Union continues bilateral cooperation programs with the Belarusian government. At its meeting on 19 August, the European Council agreed on the need to impose personal sanctions against officials responsible for electoral fraud and disproportionate violence against protesters.

But even such symbolic sanctions have not yet been introduced, and Lukashenka remains for Brussels someone who really controls the situation in the country. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, was unequivocal in this regard: "the EU has no intention of turning Belarus into a second Ukraine. We have to promote political reform, but avoid appearing as a distorting factor, which is how we could be perceived on the Russian side [...] Maduro and Lukashenka are in exactly the same situation. We do not acknowledge that they have been legitimately chosen. However, whether we like it or not, they control the government and we have to continue dealing with them, despite not recognizing their democratic legitimacy".

The above words of the head of European diplomacy serve as an explanation of the reason why the EU is keeping a low profile when it comes to real support for the protest movement in Belarus, as well as its policy of sanctions. The example of Ukraine and concerns over Russia's possible invasion of Belarus compel Brussels to put security above the promotion of democracy and European values.

In spite of the fact that Belarus's balancing act is over and its relations with the West are spoilt for years, Lukashenka is still interested in keeping the door open as deeper integration that Russia pushes jeopardizes his power, not less than domestic political crisis.

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