Commentary
September 15, 2020

Political Crisis in Belarus: Sources, evolution, and international implications

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

In recent years, Belarus seemed to be coming in from the cold internationally. After about two decades as a European outcast Minsk started to emerge as an important regional security actor and as a place that had a lot more to offer than had been thought previously. In an attempt to normalise relations with the West and diversify its foreign and economic policies, the country gradually began to open up. While its political system remained authoritarian, Belarus still compared favourably with other East European nations, especially after the war in Donbass shook the continent. Belarus's stability seemed to look attractive for both its own population and foreign partners. Given the country's critical geopolitical position, its stability was seen increasingly as an international asset.

Contents

1 Sources of the crisis
2 Evolution and prospects of the crisis
3 International dimension
4 Conclusion

Originally published by the Institute for Security Policy

Since the presidential election on 9 August Belarus has entered the most dramatic political crisis in its history. For more than a month now, mass protests against the official election results and post-election police brutality have been taking place across the whole country, while the capital city of Minsk has seen opposition rallies of unprecedented scales. The crisis appears to be far from over and numerous uncertainties lie ahead. However, ongoing developments have already undermined many of Belarus's achievements of recent years and might well have serious international implications.

Sources of the crisis

While only several months ago few analysts expected that the 2020 presidential race in Belarus would lead to the most dramatic political crisis in the country's history, the sources of the current crisis have been accumulating for a long time. The process has resulted in a visible disconnect between the ruling elite and the most socially active parts of the population (primarily, the middle class and the younger generation), which has been aggravated by several critical political mistakes by the Belarusian government.

A key background factor that sets the overall societal context for today's developments is Belarus's economic performance throughout the last decade. According to the World Bank, in 2001-2010 the average annual GDP growth amounted to 7.5%, but in 2011-2019 it dropped to 1.2%. Needless to say, such a deterioration undermined the government's ability to sustain vast socio-economic obligations, which Aliaksandr Lukashenka made his trademark policy since his first presidential bid in 1994. For example, the authorities had to limit various social benefits and increase the retirement age for both men and women by three years. As a result, the informal "social contract" that for a long time seemed to regulate the relationship between the government and society – whereby the former would provide consistent economic growth in return for the latter's political passivity – started to gradually fall apart.

The disintegration of the "social contract" appears to have had a double political effect. First of all, it likely turned a sizeable part of President Lukashenka's traditionally core electorate against him, as many of its representatives concluded that he was no longer able to govern effectively and ensure an uninterrupted flow of social and economic benefits. According to the last national opinion poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in June 2016 [1], 53.5% of the respondents opined that "our stability is closer to stagnation, and there is no development in the country," 55.5% thought that there was nothing good for the country in the fact that almost all of the state power was concentrated in Lukashenka's hands, and 47.1% stated that the Belarusian state under Lukashenka was "only partially" their state, as it "doesn't protect my interests enough."

Secondly, the government's weakening capacity to uphold social standards stimulated people to look for new opportunities beyond the dominating state-run sector of the economy: either abroad or in the private sector. In a sense, Lukashenka's economic policies additionally prompted that process, as he vehemently opposed the very idea of large-scale privatisation but supported all sorts of greenfield activity. As a result, two parts of the economy – state-owned enterprises and new private businesses – started to live almost parallel lives. Not that they did not interact or work together at all, but their

professional environment and management cultures differed increasingly: unlike grand state hierarchical systems, private businesses by default promoted a decentralised way of thinking. Moreover, the generally more successful private sector seemed to offer better opportunities for personal development and financial well-being, which naturally attracted the most ambitious and active Belarusians. It is telling that operating profit per worker at state-owned enterprises was only about half of private companies in 2013-16. The booming Belarusian IT sector is the most illustrative case in point, as the highly deregulated legal regime the government established for it turned it into an oasis (in terms of financial well-being, internationalisation, and predominantly non-vertical management culture) compared to the state-owned sector.

> Politically speaking, the core problem was that the achievements of the non-state part of the economy did not get projected onto Belarus's political scene.

In other words, the increasingly prosperous and ambitious segment of Belarusian society did not have any proper representation in the country's political system. Until a few years ago, the problem was hardly visible at all, but it was only a matter of time that the increasingly successful non-state sector would start demanding political rights and representation. This trend was stimulated additionally by the relative domestic liberalisation in Belarus, which started around 2014-2015 as Minsk was seeking rapprochement with the West. The period saw increased opportunities and expanded space for civic activities in the country, including the emergence of crowdfunding platforms, which became an important source for financing non-governmental initiatives.

Thus, the gradual disintegration of the state-society relationship based on the "social contract" appears to have produced two major political consequences: the worsening of the well-being of Lukashenka's traditional support base in the state sector and the emergence of an economically successful part of society not dependent on the government, which had no political representation. Instead of recognising those consequences and trying to capitalise on them, the authorities preferred to ignore them.

Moreover, the government made several grave mistakes that only further aggravated the situation. To name just a few examples: the so-called parasite tax, which was meant to incentivise higher official employment, turned out to infuriate thousands of people and provoked first mass protests in 2017; and the 2019 parliamentary elections, which produced two chambers of the parliament fully sterile from the opposition, sent a very clear signal that the authorities were not going to allow political representation for the

non-state sector. By the way, the latter pre-determined that any future political conflicts would take the form of street protests rather than stay within the parliament's walls. Finally, just before the 2020 presidential race began, the COVID-19 crisis dealt the Belarusian authorities another serious blow.

> The way Lukashenka communicated with the public on his government's response to the pandemic likely became the biggest PR failure of his career and apparently turned into an additional trigger for future mass protests.

Evolution and prospects of the crisis

From its initial stages, the 2020 presidential campaign looked strikingly different to all previous elections held under Lukashenka's rule. Firstly, the traditional opposition (established political structures and their leaders) found themselves fully marginalised, whereas several political new-comers immediately took leading roles as opponents of the incumbent. Secondly, the unprecedentedly high numbers of the signatures that the political new-comers were able to collect in support of their candidacies indicated that Belarusian society was getting unusually politicised. Thirdly, and remarkably, after the authorities either arrested or disqualified from running the most favoured figures among the potential candidates, their places were taken by other somewhat random people. In the end, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a housewife who accidentally entered the race instead of her husband – a popular vlogger whom the police prevented from running – became Lukashenka's main rival. In other words, the presidential election quickly turned into a de-facto plebiscite: you are either in favour or against the incumbent. Hence, it did not really matter who actually ran against him, as the most popular opposition candidate was automatically seen by many in society as a collective anti-Lukashenka.

Since August 9, when Belarusians cast their ballots, the country has seen unprecedentedly large opposition protests across the whole country. Initially, thousands of people poured into the streets to object to what was widely seen as the rigged election. According to the official results, the incumbent celebrated a landslide victory with 80.1% of the votes.

> As independent public opinion surveys are banned in Belarus, it is literally impossible to estimate what the real result was. However, extensive evidence exists that Lukashenko could hardly received so many votes.

For example, numerous precinct election commissions announced numbers, which, when put together, make the official 80.1% mathematically unattainable.

Yet, the protests began even before the official results were announced, as many people wanted to express their disagreement with the overall course of the presidential campaign. The authorities did not register three most popular opposition candidates, having arrested two of them, and made the vote count completely non-transparent by refusing to include opposition representatives into election commissions and not allowing independent observation. Thus, people had reasons to protest even before the election day and the announcement of the official results only strengthened the opposition moods. The protest gained real momentum three days after its beginning, when the whole country learnt about the extreme brutalities committed by law enforcement officers against the demonstrators in different parts of Belarus. The authorities must have expected that excessive police violence would prevent the protest from growing but the actual outcome turned out exactly the opposite. The public outcry against violence was so big that numerous commentators even started jumping into conclusions that Lukashenko's days in power were numbered.

However, those predictions were premature. The opposition failed to translate the massive grassroots protest into a political strategy to force the incumbent to either leave office or agree to a new election. The key reason for that is the leadership vacuum on the side of the protest. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya fled to Lithuania just a few days after the election. As she became a presidential hopeful due to a sheer coincidence and ran on a single promise to hold a new free and fair election, she in any way was the symbol but not the leader of the protest. Now that she is abroad and lacks political experience whatsoever, Tikhanovskaya simply could not assume the real leadership role.

With that in mind, several days after the election she announced the establishment of the Coordination Council, which was initially tasked with facilitating the transfer of power in Belarus. The government reacted immediately by proclaiming the Coordination Council illegal and opening criminal cases against its members. All members of the Council's Presidium, except for one, were later either arrested or left the country. As a result, the body remains unfunctional and, instead of the initially declared goal of power transfer, started to talk more vaguely about the need to "organise the process of overcoming the political crisis and ensure social cohesion."

Thus, after more than a month of the Belarusian political crisis we have a somewhat dead-locked situation, in which Lukashenka has been weakened politically to an unprecedented degree but still enjoys support among some segments of society (primarily those in rural areas and smaller towns and among the older generation). Importantly, he also preserves the loyalty of the governing elites and, in particular, the law enforcement apparatus. The opposition to Lukashenka is as strong and spread

across the country as never before; yet, it remains largely beheaded and seems to have lost the post-election momentum. Indicative of that was the opposition's failure to organise a national strike, which, if successful, would have likely led to the collapse of the Lukashenka government.

All this suggests that Belarus is set for a long-term political crisis. Most probably its overall scale and intensity will decrease over time and it will manifest itself in more sporadic and localised conflicts, as well as in an overall legitimacy deficit of the Lukashenka government. However, a real danger remains that a hypothetical radicalisation turn on the protest side might give the crisis a new impetus and might lead to an unpredictable escalation.

International dimension

> Even though the political crisis in Belarus has been driven exclusively by domestic issues – and primarily by the growing disconnect between the authoritarian government and large societal groups – given Belarus's geopolitical position between the East and the West, it is almost impossible to avoid at least some degree of internationalisation and securitisation as the crisis continues to unfold.

In fact, this has already started to happen.

At the height of the protests, Aliaksandr Lukashenka appealed to Vladimir Putin for security assistance. He referred to existing bilateral agreements within the framework of the Union State of Belarus and Russia and multilateral mutual commitments within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Whereas getting the CSTO involved looks problematic for all sorts of reasons, bilateral Russian assistance is very likely to arrive if the protest regains momentum (which is improbable, though). President Putin has recently confirmed that he has "set up a certain police reserve" ready to be deployed to Belarus if the situation "gets out of control." He also made it clear that Moscow is watching closely how the West deals with the situation in Belarus and will not allow any Western interference.

These developments have essentially made Russia the kingmaker in the context of the Belarusian crisis. From now on, any scenario is still possible in Belarus but only if Russia does not object to it. Then what are Moscow's interests?

In the short-term, it is clearly interested in keeping Aliaksandr Lukashenka in power and has therefore put its political weight behind him. The rationale seems obvious: now that Lukashenka has cut all ties to the West, no quick return to any kind of a balancing act by Minsk is feasible and Moscow is again the only game in town for Belarus, whereas replacing Lukashenka would amount to increased uncertainty for Russia, no matter how much the oppositional Coordination Council emphasises its Russian-friendly attitudes. Also, on a mental level, the Kremlin does not appear ready to accept the normalcy of post-Soviet leaders being kicked out of power by popular uprisings.

However, Moscow has certainly not committed to supporting Lukashenka endlessly. In a longer-term, it would be rational for Russia to diversify its political bets in Belarus and for that it needs, among other things, to institutionalise political presence in the country. Until now, Lukashenka has skilfully prevented the emergence of any influential pro-Russian political force in Belarus and has centred all communication and cooperation with Moscow on himself. But the prospective constitutional reform, which the Belarusian government now portrays as a possible way out of the internal deadlock, presents a great opportunity for Russia to enhance its strategic control over Belarus's political scene by potentially supporting the emergence of strong political parties sympathetic to Russia.

> Given Moscow's dominating position in the context of the current crisis in Belarus, it has the luxury of not being in a hurry. Thus, it can watch further developments and assess its own options as new facts emerge on the ground.

Moscow might even attempt to use the situation in Belarus to improve relations with the West, while making sure that it enhances its overall strategic leverage over Minsk. Putin's recent calls with the German and French leaders, as well as the President of the European Council, seem to point to such a possibility.

Overall, the domestic crisis has already made a profound impact on Belarus's foreign policy. More than five years of consistent and hard work by Belarusian diplomats aimed at widening the country's room for international manoeuvre have been destroyed almost overnight. Minsk has nearly annihilated its long-bred image of a donor of regional stability and security and an East European diplomatic hub. It has also undermined previous achievements in the diversification of foreign trade and economic cooperation, which Lukashenka had himself proclaimed a core national security interest.

This is particularly worrisome in light of continuing geopolitical turbulence in the region and in the entire international system.

> With significantly reduced wiggle room, Minsk will in any way find it increasingly difficult to maximise its national interest in foreign affairs and will have to bandwagon with Moscow on most international issues.

This might carry negative implications for security in Eastern Europe, as the security guarantees Belarus provided to its neighbours before – primarily, guarantees by Lukashenka that no military aggression against Ukraine would ever be launched from the Belarusian territory – will no longer look credible. Both Belarus's immediate neighbours (Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia) and their NATO allies might in the end be affected if this likely structural consequence of the Belarusian political crisis materialises.

Conclusion

Ongoing developments in Belarus have already thrown the country in a qualitatively new political reality compared to what was the case only recently. For the time being, the Lukashenka government seems strong enough to survive, especially given Moscow's backing. Yet, the protest is unprecedentedly strong and, therefore, the authorities will not be able to supress it completely. Thus, Belarus looks set for a long-term internal crisis, which will likely be of a lower intensity but will manifest itself in many new decentralised forms, while a hypothetical escalation of violence might change the course of events on the ground in most unpredictable ways. Further developments notwithstanding, it is already obvious that the crisis has made a fundamental impact on Belarus's foreign policy and, hence, on regional security in Eastern Europe, where Minsk has played an important constructive role since 2014.

[1] Later in 2016, the Belarusian authorities organised media and legal attacks on the IISEPS and, as a result, the Institute had to terminate its operations in the country. Other Belarusian and foreign research institutions continue to carry out national opinion polls, but they are either done on an irregular basis or are widely perceived as politically biased.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations