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**Belarus**

# **"Belarus will never be the same"**

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**The number of social groups involved in the Belarusian protest movement guarantees a broad front, but it also makes the emerging coalition internally fragile.**

Today, many people are watching Belarus closely. Events over the past 12 days have raised questions about the country's famed "stability", in the words of the authorities.

On 9 August, Belarus held its main day of voting in the presidential election. By evening in Minsk and many other cities, large groups of people began to gather to express their dissatisfaction over voting falsifications. Special police units were deployed to deal with them, and their actions were accompanied by unprecedented brutality, cruelty and force. [1] In response, people came out to protest further, and eventually the protest mood made its way to Belarus' state enterprises. [2]

Despite the apparent retreat by the authorities, the situation in Belarus is unpredictable. Aliaksandr Lukashenka still considers himself president, and is not planning on giving up power under any circumstances. He is yet to express any desire to hold negotiations with protesters and find a compromise.

Protesters, alongside the newly formed opposition Coordination Council, are demanding that the elections are declared void and that Lukashenka swiftly resigns. To ensure a peaceful transfer of power, the opposition proposes round table meetings between representatives of society and state institutions.

But how far are these actions justified in current conditions, and does the Belarusian opposition have enough real power to realise its demands? How far does the opposition's economic programme fit with the interests of the majority of the electorate, including workers - who are now actively participating in the protests?

## **The regime's weak points**

Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994 on a wave of social discontent, produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union and "market reforms" to the economy. But he quickly began to move away from the populist programme he was elected on.

In 1995, the country removed some social benefits, and then introduced a forced fixed-term contract system of employment, limited the state's control of prices, and raised the pension age. Indeed, Belarus became financially dependent on the IMF under Lukashenka, and in exchange for loans from the latter the country was forced to implement their demands on cuts to social programmes. The only measure that Lukashenka did not implement was the mass privatisation of Belarus' state enterprises. The authorities, meanwhile, limited the activity of independent trade unions, and their leaders were subject to persecution.

All elections held since 1994 have taken place with numerous and serious violations. And this is why Lukashenka approached this year's presidential contest with a particularly low approval rating. Although all independent surveys are banned in Belarus, surveys conducted online suggest a support rating for Lukashenka of [no more than 25%](#). Here's a few reason why.

First, the difficult socio-economic situation of the majority of voters affected their attitude ahead of the election. Officially, the average monthly wage in Belarus is \$505 (May 2020), but in reality, in the regions the monthly wage is somewhere around \$250-\$300. A loaf of bread costs \$0.70, and a bus ride costs \$0.25. Utility bills for a two-room apartment are around \$50 per month.

Second, Lukashenka's position on Coronavirus hurt his support levels in society. Belarus did not introduce quarantine measures, and schools and enterprises continued operating as normal. Many started to suspect that the Ministry of Health's statistics were significantly reducing the numbers of people who had caught the virus, and those who had died from it. But it was Lukashenka's jokes about COVID that had the worst effect (["I'm worried most of all that people will develop psychosis"](#)), as well as attempts to lay the blame for deaths on the people who died. In this sense, Lukashenka's public attitude to the pandemic was reminiscent of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Third, Lukashenka's attempts at scaring society had the worst effect. In one of his speeches in June, the president reminded dissenting listeners of the [Andijan massacre in Uzbekistan in 2005](#), when hundreds of people were killed by security forces. In another interview, Lukashenka stated that if he had to, he would "[give the order to fire](#)" to defend the country.

Despite the clear failure at the ballot box, the Belarusian authorities continue to use their favourite rhetoric. References to past services still predominate in Lukashenka's speeches ("I pulled the country back from the brink in the 1990s"), as do attacks on opponents and protesters ("Agents of foreign powers", "drug addicts", "zombified by social media") and attempts to instil fear.

To demonstrate at least some kind of support from society, the authorities have also held public rallies ("For peace and stability"), which they have forced public sector workers to attend under threats of losing their jobs. The extremely bureaucratized system of power has turned out to be ineffective in retaining voters' sympathies. All of its attempts to come up with some kind of "state ideology" have been unsuccessful, and in that sense the Lukashenka system is in a less envious position than the Communist party nomenklatura under Leonid Brezhnev.

Indeed, a serious crisis has also started to emerge in the ranks of the Belarusian ruling class. Following the elections, several high-placed public officials resigned, and law enforcement officials have also resigned.

## The new opposition and old regime

In the past, Belarusian authorities's principal opponents were opposition parties - both liberal nationalist and left-wing. After the dissolution of Belarus' Supreme Council in 1996, these parties were more or less successfully prevented from getting their representatives into legislatures, given the total falsification of elections. Their activity was therefore limited to street protests, which became almost impossible to hold outside of Minsk. In effect, political parties in Belarus were forced to turn into scaled-up politicised NGOs.

Ahead of the 2020 elections, conservative and liberal parties tried to choose a "united candidate" to challenge Lukashenka. But due to personal ambitions and the general crisis of the "established opposition", these primaries were scandalously unsuccessful. Still, this electoral season's "sensation" came in the form of new leaders on the Belarusian political scene - blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, banker Viktor Babaryka and former deputy chief of the presidential administration Valery Tsepkala. [\[3\]](#)

Tsikhanouski, a businessman from Gomel, got involved in politics relatively recently - becoming known for his

[YouTube channel \("Belarus is a country for living in"\)](#). His videos about the problems of ordinary Belarusians made him incredibly popular. And indeed, Tsikhanouski acted as a classic populist, mobilising a broad protest electorate. But given the sudden emergence of Tsikhanouski and his team, and his having worked in Russia in the past, certain members of the "old" opposition viewed him with suspicion, and rumours spread about Tsikhanouski being a "Russian agent".

The candidacies of establishment heavyweights, Valery Tsepkala and Viktor Babaryka, were even more sensational. Tsepkala, a former US ambassador and deputy chief of the presidential administration, ran a state-backed IT park outside of Minsk; Babaryka was head of the board of Belgazprombank for many years. Initially, many saw these two candidates as "spoilers" promoted by the authorities, but it soon became clear that they are Lukashenka's real opposition. They became the candidates of the "new opposition" - the dissenting liberal section of the state bureaucracy and big business. Instead, it seems the spoiler candidate was Hanna Kanapatskaya, from the opposition United Civic Party.

Lukashenka saw the threat that the three candidates posed to him. In contrast to the old opposition, these new candidates had support from a newly mobilised, broad spectrum of society. Tsikhanouski and Babaryka were arrested on false charges during the campaign, and Tsepkala had to flee the country.

## Liberals and the proletariat

But another surprise for the authorities was that the arrests of Tsikhanouski, Babaryka and their teams, as well as leaders of the radical part of the old opposition, neither stopped the protest movement, nor disorganised it. Instead, the arrests gave the movement new impulse. An intense process of self-organisation began on Telegram, with activists coordinating their actions via internet chats.

In the end, the Belarusian Central Election Commission was forced to register several alternative candidates - Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, wife of the blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Andrey Dmitriyev - leader of the "constructive opposition", Hanna Kanopatskaya, and social democrat businessman Siarhei Cherachen.

Most likely, the authorities' logic was that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, an English-language teacher unversed in politics, would be a convenient opponent for the current president. But she became the main rival to Lukashenka early on, and was supported by the Tsepkala and Babaryka teams. Veranika Tsepkala and Maria Kolesnikova, representative of the Babaryka team, accompanied Tsikhanouskaya around the country - the diplomat's wife and public official giving weight to Tsikhanouskaya's sincerity.

Many different social groups have united around Tsikhanouskaya - small business owners and workers, young people and pensioners, intelligentsia and big business. The large number of migrant workers - who haven't made it to Poland or Russia due to quarantine - have also created additional tension for the regime.

It's worth noting that the Tsikhanouskaya team decided to use an economic programme previously developed by liberal economists for the Belarusian opposition's "united candidate". It proposes a far-reaching privatisation of state assets, introducing new employment laws and other anti-social measures. But in the euphoria of struggle against the authoritarian regime, ordinary voters neither see, nor think about this.

In their direct addresses to voters, the "united opposition" does not discuss the prospect of neoliberal reforms. And speaking before 14,000 people in Gomel, Maria Kolesnikova promised the opposite - to "restore workers' their

respect" and introduce workers' control at Belarusian enterprises.

## Bloody Sunday

After voting came to an end on the evening of 9 August, Belarusian police used rubber bullets, flash grenades and water cannons against peaceful protesters, and they led to serious injuries. The police detained both active protesters and passers-by. In the days after 9 August, up to 7,000 people were detained in the country.

According to many testimonies, detainees were subject to beatings during arrest, and then in detention centres afterwards. Official statistics suggest that more than 200 people ended up in hospital, and some of them are still in serious condition. In the city of Pinsk, a man received a firearm wound to the head and is still in a critical condition. At least three people died. And 80 people are still unaccounted for.

But even this unprecedented violence did not stop protesters, provoking instead an explosion of civic anger. Women were the first to come out against police terror, and in the week following the election they stood in white on streets and squares of towns across the country, demanding that the violence end. The authorities, it seems, chose not to use police force against them.

On 13 and 14 August, the protest movement shifted to the factories. The first to come out on strike were the Minsk Automobile Plant, GrodnoAzot and the Belarusian Metal Factory in Zhlobin. Then meetings started being held at other factories, largely around demands to stop violence, release those still in detention, and hold free elections. It was precisely these actions by the working class that forced the Belarusian authorities to stop mass arrests of protesters. And after four days of brutal repressions, the authorities ended the widespread persecution of protesters. Interior Minister Yury Karayev apologised for the actions of his subordinates, and arrestees started being released, including before their sentences were finished.

On Sunday 16 August, mass rallies, unprecedented in their size, were held in Minsk and the other big towns of Belarus. In the capital, between 120,000 and 200,000 people were in attendance. The police did not interfere, and the rallies were held with an atmosphere of a public holiday. In a number of towns, representatives of the administration and law enforcement had to justify the actions of their subordinates in public.

The next day, on 17 August, the strike continued and began to spread. Miners in Salihorsk declared a strike and held a rally in the centre of town. Large enterprises such as Belaruskalii, the Naftan petrochemical complex, Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant, Minsk Tractor Factory, Minsk Automobile Plant, Belarusian Metal Plant and BelAZ automobile plant and the Polotsk glass fibre factory came out on strike or held solidarity actions. The strike committee in Grodno had applications from initiative groups from 22 enterprises in the city, including the local airfield. Journalists from state television also joined the strike, having previously participated in the information war against the Belarusian opposition. Several thousand workers from Minsk Automobile Plant marched to the state television centre.

In response, Lukashenka visited the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant, arriving by helicopter. But he was forced to end his speech, which mixed pleas with threats, after workers shouted him down with cries of "Leave!". Several people were detained in the aftermath. [\[4\]](#) That same day, on the initiative of Tsikhanouskaya, a new opposition Coordination Council on transferring power was set up, and similar councils were formed around the country - and Lukashenka made some vague promises to change the Belarusian constitution via referendum and then hold elections.

## Locked in political struggle

But do protesters have enough real power to carry out these demands? Despite the rise of the protest movement, it's not so clear cut. In the majority of cases, enterprises have not gone out on strike. Instead, at state enterprises workers are mostly holding public meetings, resolutions and marches. At many plants, management still has the situation under control - for example, at Gomel's largest factory, the Gomselmash agricultural equipment manufacturer, workers are simply being locked in their workshops.

The mobilisation of workers to protest has often happened spontaneously, and independent trade unions have long held a "wait and see" position, joining the struggle slightly late. Their influence, it should be said, is extremely limited due to resistance by management. The people who initiated the mobilisations are mostly young workers at the big Minsk factories. In this regard, workers who are older, or who work in the provinces, are more conservative and inert.

Liberal ideologues and commentators are also forcing a purely political agenda onto workers. The Belarusian Independent Trade Union has already announced the creation of a National Strike Committee. Yet it often seems that people who speak for this committee have no relationship to the labour movement. If strike committees do put forward socio-economic demands - for example, an end to the fixed-term contract system or cancelling the pension age rise - then opposition media do not report it. Business, meanwhile, has announced a campaign of material support for striking workers.

Moreover, a new Marxist [Telegram channel \("StrikeBY", "ZabastovkaBY"\)](#) has been set up, which proposes more clear class demands for Belarusian workers. Aside from the demand to recognise the presidential elections as false, this channel proposes to ban privatisation, an end to the fixed-term contract system, the pension reform and the "social parasite" tax, and establish workers' control at state enterprises. [5] But the influence of this group among workers is limited.

A few weeks before the elections, a conference of left-wing parties and trade unions was held in Minsk - the Just World left-wing party, the Belarusian Green Party, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly), Marxist group Common Cause, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, the Independent Union of Metal Workers and several other organisations. The conference agreed to put forward a joint demand to the alternative candidates to include socio-economic demands in their agenda. Unfortunately, due to disagreement between Just World and the Green Party (of which I am the deputy chair), the conference was unable to agree the final text: the Green Party passed a separate social resolution; the social democrats chose to support Tsikhanouskaya's liberal programme.

The Coordination Council, now targeted in a criminal investigation, has hardly any delegates from Belarus' state enterprises, and is mostly made up of representatives from the liberal intelligentsia, including Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, creative professions, business and centre-right opposition parties. [6] Of course, neoliberal reforms remain a priority for them, though they don't wish to advertise this too strongly in front of most protesters.

The regime has also started actively mobilising their supporters, and one of the central themes of official propaganda has been privatisation. In Belarus' largely state-owned industry, people are afraid of being left without a job, and the authorities are playing on that fear. The Coordination Council has already publicly distanced itself from the "anti-Russian" section of its programme. But no one in the Coordination Council is in a hurry to distance themselves from neoliberal reforms. And this significantly reduces protest potential in the country.

Moreover, there are several voices on the National Strike Committee that suggest that workers have not come out "for money", while some in the liberal camp have put forward similar ideas. Despite its apparent idealism, these messages ignore the social component of worker unrest - and serves the true interests of the country's liberal

bourgeoisie. Similar messages were put forward during Ukraine's Maidan.

In his previous speeches, former banker Viktor Babaryka and other candidates have tried to give a populist slant to the prospect of mass privatisation. In their opinion, workers who lose their jobs as a result of privatisation will be able to retrain and requalify via state-supported programmes, joining the ranks of small and medium-sized business. The outcome of this proposal for many is clear.

The problem of business in Belarus is not that the state "suffocates" businesspeople. In fact, the government has long limited audits for business. Small business owners, much like the economy as a whole, suffer from high levels of competition, including from transnational corporations, people's low purchasing power, and global economic crises. The promise to make Belarus' economy "blossom" by turning millions of workers into individual entrepreneurs is a reactionary utopia. But as political advertising, it finds support among entrepreneurs and young people.

The variety of social forces involved in Belarus' protests guarantees a broad front, but it also makes this coalition internally fragile. Today, the authorities and their opponents are locked in a political grapple. On the one hand, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the state bureaucracy and sectors of big business connected to it. The more inert parts of society are also on their side. And then you have a broad spectrum of social groups, from liberal entrepreneurs, workers and service personnel, as well as even some public officials. They have a common aim: democratise the country. But it's hard to forget that the true interests of the "progressive bourgeoisie" and workers are not the same.

The outcome of the standoff in Belarus is far from being decided. But in any case, the country will never be the same. The authoritarian model of power has entered the most serious crisis in its existence.

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[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53776461>  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/a-carpet-of-bodies-one-womans-ordeal-in-detention-in-belarus/>  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/world/europe/belarus-crackdown-protests-minsk.html>.

[2] <https://globalvoices.org/2020/08/13/belarusian-workers-support-protesters-with-a-general-strike/>.

[3] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/lukashenkas-mistakes-bring-belarus-closer-to-democratisation/>.

[4] <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/08/17/belarus-workers-chant-leave-at-lukashenko-as-anger-mounts-over-vote-a71177>.

[5] <https://nypost.com/2017/03/27/european-country-imposes-social-parasite-tax-on-the-poor/>.

[6] <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/konyuk-criminal-case-opened-against-coordination-council-in-belarus-132734-2020/>.