

COMPASS Policy Brief

WHAT HAPPENED IN BELARUS ?

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What happened in Belarus?

On August 9th 2020, Belarus went to the polls. The people voted (most of them, probably, for change); and yet the President remains in power.

This policy brief provides a summary of what happened and an analysis of why.

It's important to realise that elections occur in authoritarian regimes because they serve a purpose. They allow the party in power to periodically rebrand itself, they test the loyalty of regional leaders, they provide moments of common, collective purpose, and give the leadership an opportunity to present themselves as the only credible option.¹ They also, in the absence of a functional civil society, provide a release valve for the regime to monitor and learn from.

In Belarus, spring 2020 exposed several reasons for a democratic awakening.² These were:

- i. a stagnating economy and falling incomes
- ii. more serious opponents than previously
- iii. the mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic

It's clear that the regime underestimated these dynamics and made tactical errors. The three main ways to fix an election are mass early voting; non-transparent counting process; and control over candidates.³ It was the last of these that backfired.

By forcing opposition candidates to gain 100,000 signatures before they could run meant that people saw with their own eyes the kilometre-long lines of people queuing to sign. This intended barrier to democracy encouraged those who were confronted by it. And Lukashenko seemed to genuinely believe that “they won't vote for a woman here”, allowing the (jailed) opposition leader Sergie Tsikhanouskaya's wife, Svetlana, to run in his place. This was intended to “lend the election a degree of democratic credibility without posing a genuine threat”.⁴ But he ended

¹ See Krastev, I., and Holmes, S., 2019, *The Light that Failed*, Allen Lane (p.101-103), although note that they are referring to Russia and not Belarus specifically.

² See “Lukashenka vs. democracy: Where is Belarus heading?” Atlantic Council <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/lukashenko-vs-democracy-where-is-belarusheading/>

³ Wilson, A., “Belarus votes – and this time it matters” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 9th 2015

⁴ See “Lukashenka vs. democracy: Where is Belarus heading?” Atlantic Council <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/lukashenko-vs-democracy-where-is-belarusheading/>

up with a remarkable triple threat of courageous female opposition figures, representing a country where 55% of the voters are female. These were:

- Veronika Tsepkalo, wife of Valery, jailed opposition candidate and former ambassador to the US
- Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, wife of Sergei, jailed opposition candidate and vlogger
- Maria Kolesnikova, campaign manager for Viktor Babariko, jailed opposition candidate and former banker

After the (widely disputed) election results were announced protests began,⁵ but really stepped up a gear with the defiant women's march, on the afternoon of Wednesday 19th August.

The protests succeeded because they were decentralised, widespread, and represented a tipping point of private truths. As Anders Aslund has said, the movement was broadly pro-democracy, pro-West, and anti-Russia.⁶

“The protests currently taking place in Belarus are driven by small localized groups with a strong emphasis on creativity and nonviolent resistance.” Nicolai Khalezin

However, getting people to bravely take to the streets, en masse, is insufficient, and there were weaknesses with the movement. There was no central leadership, no credible alternative to Lukashenko, and therefore no clear *outcome*. Svetlana wasn't standing as an opponent, and having the sole goal of new elections played into Lukashenko's claim that the only alternative to him is “chaos”.

There are three options for dealing with protests:

1. Ignore and wait to die down
2. Meet their demands
3. Use force to intimidate

⁵ Official results can be found here: <https://news.tut.by/economics/696655.html> ⁶ See “Lukashenka vs. democracy: Where is Belarus heading?” Atlantic Council <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/lukashenko-vs-democracy-where-is-belarusheading/>

From Aug 9th—12th we saw a bit of each. It was essentially a “wait and see” approach, with not enough force to stop people coming out but enough force to fuel future protests. Protestors capitalised on this window of opportunity for peaceful protesting, and become emboldened.

Ultimately, we can view that Lukashenko’s regime rests on four areas of support: (1) the KGB/“silovki”; (2) the military; (3) labour unions; (4) the public.



It isn’t obvious how many of those he needs the support of in order to retain power, but it was instructive to see how each changed during the critical phase of the protests.

On August 8th, prior to the election, none of them were posing a real problem. The securotat were loyal; he had military support; state owned firms were following orders; and the public were cautious. For Lukashenko’s perspective, all four were green.

From August 9th-15th all four switched to being at risk (which we can mark as orange). We saw the deputy minister for the interior apologise for violence; a request for Russian support; works stoppages (and the MZKT director speaking out; and widespread and sustained mass protests.

Using this analysis, the closest the regime came to being toppled was August 16th17th, as two of these groups began flashing red. While the siloviki and military were still loyal we saw mass strikes and open dissent, and public demonstrators in full control. As this point, if either the siloviki or military turned it could well have been the end.

But Lukashenko came back from the brink. From August 18th-19th he shored up the siloviki by awarding 300 medals; the military showed low appetite for intervention; there was a state theatre walkout but MAZ backed down; and the creation of a planning committee replaced the need for mass protests.

Figure 1: Summary of Lukashenko's key support

	August 8th	August 9th-15th	August 16th-17th	August 18th-19th
KGB/siloviki	Securocrat loyalty	Deputy Minister of Interior apologises for violence	Security services remain quiet	300 medals shore up support improving compliance
Military	Military support	Request for Russian (possibly Serbian) support	Military mobilising but without external support and uncertainty over continued loyalty	Low appetite for intervention, but mobilised and ready
Labour unions	State owned firms following orders	Work stoppages - MZKT director speaks out	Mass strikes and open dissent	State theatre walkout but MAZ backdown as incentives hit home
The public	Public caution	Widespread and sustained mass protests	Public demonstrators have full control	Creation of a planning committee replaces need

Lukashenko clearly made some errors. He was complacent (partly because the 2015 election was so smooth for him), and surprised. He took time to realise the scale of the problem and strength of the opposition. Maybe he believed his own propaganda and events revealed how much of an anachronism he is. The coronavirus looked like it could have been his Chernobyl—doctors were the first to protest (putting significant public pressure on him), and the crowd funding website that Babariko’s son ran was being widely used for covid recovery. For the first time in power, he looked seriously vulnerable: he was publicly booed at a rally, and lacked the support of his chief ally, Vladimir Putin.

However, Lukashenko is a savvy opportunist with a demonstrated record of using external events to his advantage. He adopted a “wait and see” approach knowing that protests are hard to sustain over time, and that western media would lose interest. He prioritised negotiations with Putin and created a new narrative of opposition leaders being anti-Russian nationalists.

According to Ackerman and Merriman’s “Checklist for Ending Tyranny”,⁶ successful civil resistance requires: (1) Ability to unify people; (2) Operational planning; and (3) Nonviolent discipline. These capabilities permit increased civilian participation; diminished impact of repression; and increased defections. We did see members of the Belarusian national television

⁶ <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/the-checklist-for-ending-tyranny/>

defect, but not the army. Interestingly, civilian participation is the “single largest predictor” of success. And Belarus seemed to come very close to the supposed 3.5% tipping point beyond which all previous protests have succeeded.

We can establish four key questions that will determine the outcome:

- How long can protests be sustained?
- Will they turn violent?
- Will security services defect?
- What will Putin do?

As of January 2021, the protests have been sustained and remain non-violent. But there’s no evidence of defections, and Putin has decided not to intervene. When we look at the role of Russia, we can identify five main options:

1. Intervene and take over
2. Support Lukashenko publicly
3. Support Lukashenko privately
4. Call for new elections and put trust in election technology to get a favourable candidate
5. Wait and see

It seems as though Putin does not have an appetite for 1 or 2, and has been reluctant to do 3 given their personal history. Option 4 would possibly help Russia, who’d be the main beneficiaries of privatisation, but thus far Putin hasn’t seemed to be in a hurry to resolve anything. In Belarus, he only ever needs to apply slightly more pressure than the EU is doing, and given the lack of tangible response from the western international community, Putin has been able to let Lukashenko attempt to muddle through.

Looking forward, we can imagine 6 scenarios.

Colonialism

- Putin steps in, Russia takes over

Wait and see

- Lukashenko waits it out
- Vague promises
- Weakened but in power
- E.g. Maduro

A people's victory

- Trial at the Hague

Mob justice

- Trial by security forces
- E.g. Ceaucescu

Suppression

- Civil war and little green men
- E.g. Assad

Negotiated exile

- E.g. Yanukyvych

Assad, Ceaucescu and Yanukyvch all provide templates of a potential fate.

Lukashenko remains in control, and may forge his own path. But unless something changes, and it's hard to see where from, there's no reason for him to abandon his current strategy. And given that his only objective so far has been to retain power, you have to conclude that it's working.