

A Very Belarusian Affair

WHAT SETS THE CURRENT ANTI-LUKASHENKA PROTESTS APART?

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Natalya Chernyshova¹

University of Winchester

Unprecedented mass protests in Belarus against the rigged presidential elections on August 9 continue into their sixth week with no signs of abating. They are massive, tenacious, and draw on a remarkably broad social and geographical base. These qualities, combined with the absence of a single opposition political leader, pose an unprecedented challenge to Europe's longest-serving ruler, Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

These protests also defy easy comparisons with the color revolutions. Despite continued police brutality and intimidation, Belarusian protesters remain resolutely peaceful, insist on the strictly internal nature of this political crisis, and repel charges of nationalism. While Lukashenka shows every determination to fight his people, he is facing a very different nation from the one he has ruled for the past quarter of a century.

Police Brutality as a Catalyst of Political Mobilization

The signs that this would not be a "re-election as usual" came early. Even before Belarusians went to the polls, rallies for incumbent Lukashenka's main challenger, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, drew such impressive crowds that eventually they were blocked by the authorities. She and two other would-be candidates, whom the authorities prevented from running, joined forces. Their teams set up a digital platform to carry out an alternative count that relied on voters using smartphones to send snapshots of their ballots, and over 1,260,000 out of six million eligible voters [signed up](#). When Lukashenka was officially declared a winner with 80 percent of the votes, despite accusations of blatant electoral abuses, thousands of peaceful demonstrators across the country took to the streets. In response, the authorities unleashed police violence.

¹ [Natalya Chernyshova](#) is Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Winchester, UK. She recently returned from Minsk. Her research on Soviet Belarus is funded by the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship, 2020-2021.

It is this brutality that outraged so many in Belarus, a country that suffered terribly during World War II. The collective memory of its trauma is very much alive, not least thanks to the efforts of the current regime. The unrestrained and indiscriminate violence meted out on ordinary people quickly evoked references to [concentration camps](#) and [Gestapo](#). If the dissatisfaction with the regime—fuelled by prolonged economic insecurity, lack of prospects for the young, and embarrassment with an aging dictator—has simmered for some time without boiling over, the courage of Tsikhanouskaia, a stay-at-home mother who ran in place of her jailed husband, allowed many to imagine another way. The viciousness with which this vision was attacked now looks set to become the straw that breaks the Belarusian camel’s back.

The police used rubber bullets and stun grenades against unarmed demonstrators. Nearly 7,000 people were detained in the first three days of the protests. Certainly, Belarus is unaccustomed to arrests on a scale that makes even neighboring Russia’s response to domestic protests look restrained. The numbers detained in other significant post-election protests never exceeded several hundred. But it was the violent rounding up of random passers-by, the smashing and shooting at cars—execution-style, with passengers huddled inside—with rubber bullets at close range and the sickening [torture of detainees](#) in custody that galvanized even those Belarusians who had previously kept away from politics.

It was a shock to learn, for example, of a 25-year-old man in Gomel’ being snatched by the police—gone without a trace—until his body was [released](#) to his parents several agonizing days later. People shared the story of a young mother’s [emotional account](#) of a police attack at her local store when a policeman hit her 9-year-old son with a baton to force the child to drop to the floor. Hundreds of anxious relatives gathered outside pre-trial detention centers in search of relatives. When the detainees began to be released, independent news sites and social media shared stories of their mistreatment with photographs of their bruised bodies. Many, including minors, were forced to kneel for hours, beaten, deprived of water and food, verbally abused, and raped.

These reports reached a vast audience quickly. Although the authorities have a tight grip over state media, Belarusians can access alternative sources of information: 79 percent of the country’s population was online in 2018-2019, according to the Freedom House 2019 report, [Freedom on the Net](#). Despite the government’s constant efforts to block critical websites or even shut down the Internet, Belarusians have found ways to circumvent such restrictions. They have used smartphone messenger services such as Telegram, which hosts channels such as Nexta (“Somebody”). Since the protests started, Nexta’s audience exploded to well over two million subscribers (equivalent to 30 percent of Belarus’s voters)—and its founder is now wanted by the police.

Instead of being cowed by the police brutality, Belarusian women donned white clothes and locked arms in human chains along the streets of cities and towns in explicit

condemnation of violence. Doctors, well-known athletes, cultural figures, and even diplomats spoke out. Scores of state TV and radio journalists resigned, causing Lukashenka to ask for TV crews from Russia. The first week after the elections culminated in the [largest rally in modern history](#) of Belarus. Hundreds of thousands marched on Sunday, August 16, through Minsk.

Why Should Lukashenka Be Worried?

Political protest has occurred over Lukashenka's 26 years as ruler, but the current movement is different in important ways. Its geographical spread, with demonstrations taking place in all major cities and in many towns, is unusual for Belarus, where politics tend to center on the capital. In the western region of Hrodna, protesters even wrought significant concessions from the local government, which apologized for the use of excessive force and agreed to permit all demonstrations. Lukashenka promptly removed the region's governor, appointing instead his former Health Minister who was implicated in suppressing the truth about the country's COVID-19 infection rates. Protests in Hrodna have resumed in new force.

This persistence is also novel. Compared to Russia or Ukraine, Belarus is often seen as a quiet country, and this stability, enforced by intimidation, has been central to Lukashenka's claim to legitimacy. Yet, the protests show no sign of stopping. Smaller-scale demonstrations are constant, and Sundays have become a traditional day for huge rallies. On August 23, a week after the first rally, and just as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov observed that the situation was "[calming down](#)," another march of an estimated 177,000 participants flooded Minsk and turned toward the presidential Independence Palace, forcing Lukashenka to don a bullet-proof vest and grab a Kalashnikov. Despite renewed police crackdown, huge rallies have gathered in Minsk every Sunday after the elections, and tens of thousands join in other locations across the country.

Such unprecedented turnouts make it difficult for Lukashenka to continue dismissing the protesters as a minority of "[criminals and unemployed](#)" or "[sheep](#)" brainwashed or paid by the West. This rhetoric was dealt another blow when workers at several major state plants threatened to strike. Thousands walked out in the days following the police violence as the news of detained friends or family members spread quickly. The novelty of this overlap between workers, Lukashenka's traditional constituency, and the protesters, was brought into sharp relief during Lukashenka's visit to the Minsk Towing Tractor Factory on August 17 when, instead of cheering him, the crowd [chanted](#) "Go away!" Lukashenka had never been publicly challenged, and this was visibly an unpleasant shock.

More unpleasant still can be economic fallout. Many of these enterprises are national industrial giants that bring substantial hard-currency revenues into the state coffers. For

instance, Belarus' kalii, whose workers threatened a hunger strike, is one of the world's largest producers of potassium fertilizers, responsible for one-fifth of global production. Naftan, where 3,600 workers signed the demand for Lukashenka's resignation and an end to violence, is one of the country's two oil refineries that generated, together, \$7.7 billion last year. The Belarusian economy cannot sustain such losses easily, and the authorities' response has been swift. Workers have been intimidated and trade union leaders arrested. Workers switched to "Italian strike" methods; the mood resembles what one worker described to the Belarusian news site www.tut.by as "a powder keg."

Other social groups stepped up in an unprecedented show of unity. IT companies and other businesses signed open letters to the government, supplied protesters with bottles of water and free pizzas, and pledged to re-train and employ policemen who quit their jobs. Scientists, doctors, and university students staged protests, and over \$1.8 million have been raised by individuals for strikers. Even local football teams joined in public displays of solidarity. When several protesters were chased by the police into a river in central Minsk following a Sunday rally on September 6, the water safety guards [ferried](#) them to safety on the other bank.

These features of the movement—protesters' self-organization through social media, extraordinary social solidarity, their geographical spread—pose a significant challenge for the regime, which is reinforced by the absence of a single leader. Tsikhanouskaia, a political novice, has always insisted that she has no plans to remain president if she won, but only to facilitate fair elections. After she was forced abroad, the newly formed Coordinating Council, which includes her representatives, has stressed its open membership: it now has over 4,600 associate members. Instead of choosing a leader, it formed a presidium made up of seven members with equal voting rights.

Some observers see the absence of an opposition leader with a defined political program as a weakness. But this is precisely what gives so many Belarusians a sense that, for once, they truly are the main drivers of change. Hundreds of thousands have experienced a liberating sense of political initiative and self-respect that has not been felt in the country since the early 1990s. The clear aim of removing the dictator unites the broad movement that might otherwise be splintered along finer political lines. Pointedly, some protesters carry the state red-green flag along with the white-red-white banner of the opposition. Six of the Council's seven presidium members have now been [deported or detained](#); yet, the mass protests continue undeterred, as the latest Sunday march showed.

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The Belarusian protesters' commitment to non-violence in the face of such severe provocation is remarkable. Their determination goes beyond the rejection of a physical confrontation with the police. On the eve of the first Sunday rally in Minsk, social media accounts received instructions to marchers saying things like: "If we climb a bench, we

take off our shoes. We will drink only water. We'll tidy up after ourselves. When we cross the street, we wait for the green light." Calls for being civil were heeded. A man and his teenage son returning from the march told me: "[There's] not a beer bottle in sight." After the march, volunteers collected empty plastic water bottles and placed them in garbage bins.

In the face of the authorities' accusations of hooliganism and criminality, and in contrast with their use of force, "clean" has acquired a new meaning for the protesters. Granted, there is plenty of anger, and protesters occasionally attempt to stop the police from abducting someone. However, there is a manifest desire to draw a clear line between the methods of the president and those of the people.

Belarus is also unusual for its absence of nationalist rhetoric or hostility toward Russia, nor does it have the same pronounced east-west divide as Ukraine. Lukashenka has attempted to play on the Kremlin's fears by accusing his opponents of harboring plans to leave the Eurasian Economic Union with Russia, ban the use of Russian (one of Belarus's two state languages), and join the EU and NATO. But the leaders of the Coordinating Council in Minsk have vigorously denied any intention to break off friendly relations with Russia or jeopardize their economic links.

Moscow Hesitates

Whether the Coordinating Council has convinced the Kremlin is unclear. It might help their credibility that one of the Council's leaders is Maryia Kalesnikava, the campaign manager of Lukashenka's would-be challenger in the presidential race, Viktor Babaryka, who was widely believed to be Russia's man. Babaryka headed Belgazprombank, a joint venture in which the Russian share is held by Gazprom and Gazprombank, for twenty years before declaring his intention to run. He was promptly arrested on tax evasion charges amidst the regime's protestations that Russia was meddling in the elections. Kalesnikava then joined forces with Tsikhanouskaia, and unlike her, she remained in Minsk. However, on September 7, she foiled the security forces' [attempt to deport her](#) to Ukraine and is now in custody.

While not a fan of popular democratic movements, the Kremlin might well have wanted a change in Minsk. Lukashenka is an old but awkward partner. He has resisted Russia's attempt to gain control over Belarusian enterprises and squabbled over the prices of Russia's crude oil and gas deliveries to Belarus (the latest spat was in April 2020). Lately, it has been Lukashenka who has turned up the nationalist rhetoric in Belarus, made overtures to the West, and sought to weaken Belarus's dependency on Russian energy resources. Lukashenka pulled out at the final stages of the Belarus-Russia Union project, [forcing](#) Putin to conduct a costly constitutional referendum instead to secure his own position as president-in-perpetuity.

But as the protests gained force, the embattled dictator repeatedly telephoned Putin while rejecting the EU offers to mediate. After a long delay, Moscow finally declared its willingness to help restore order, if required. Many saw this as a commitment to Lukashenka, as likely did Lukashenka himself. Yet, Putin also noted that he saw no need for such interference just yet. It would be far more awkward for Russia to intervene directly in Belarus than in Ukraine: Belarus has no Crimea, and destroying the widespread popular goodwill toward Russia would be costly.

Moscow's desire to tread more carefully was confirmed on Monday when Putin [told](#) Lukashenka in Sochi that Belarus's protests were its internal affair. While Lukashenka thanked Putin for support, it remains to be seen whether he managed, in the course of their four-hour private talk, to convince Moscow that he is the only guarantor of Belarus's political and economic loyalty. As Lukashenka's plane landed in Sochi, the Coordinating Council in Minsk addressed the Kremlin leadership with a competing [declaration](#) of Russo-Belarusian friendship.

Accusations of nationalism ring hollow in Belarus, where lack of ethnic national ambition has become a cliché among political scientists. But it is no bad thing. Instead, this former "most Soviet republic" has drawn successfully on a different source of shared identity that builds on civic values, as demonstrated by placing rubbish in bins, taking off shoes when standing on public benches, and a doggedly peaceful protest in the face of police brutality. But it has taken anger to bring this civic national identity to gel.

Conclusion

Famous Finnish writer Tove Jansson wrote a children's story entitled "The Invisible Child" about a girl who had been so neglected that she became invisible. When she is brought to stay with a new family, the Moomins, their patience and kindness help the child gradually become visible again, except for her face. Her friends urge her to become angry in order to show her face, but she cannot. It is only when she thinks that Moominmamma, to whom she has grown especially attached, is about to be attacked, that she gets really angry. As she charges to defend her friend, her face comes into full view. As I read the story to my children, I thought: Belarusians have found their face. Whether Lukashenka accepts it or not, Belarusians will never be invisible again.