

## **‘The Politics of Uncertainty’ in Practice: The 2020 Presidential Election that Changed Belarus<sup>1</sup>**

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When the Belarusian leaders decided not to postpone the presidential election in August 2020, despite the fact that it would have been entirely possible with reference to the ongoing global Coronavirus pandemic, they made a fatal mistake. They expected Alyaksandr Lukashenka to be re-elected for the fifth time, in the usual order without major complications. They could not have been more wrong. This is not the first time the election results in Belarus have been falsified. In fact, none of the elections since 1994, when Lukashenka came to power, have been judged free and fair by international standards. This is also not the first time that the election results have been openly questioned. Demonstrations against electoral fraud in the 2006 presidential election gathered over 10.000 people, the largest protest against the regime in many years. Inspired by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, activists set up a tent camp on October Square in Minsk, which survived for five days before finally being brutally demolished by the police. At least 500 people were arrested for participating in illegal activities (Naumov, 2014). After Lukashenka’s fourth re-election in 2010, opposition candidates again managed to gather thousands of people to protest the official results, but this time too it ended in tragedy. The protests were shattered even more violently and hundreds were arrested, including seven of the nine presidential candidates (Ash, 2015; Padhol & Marples, 2011).

The protest movement that emerged in connection to the 2020 election is a very different phenomenon than the demonstrations which took place after previous elections. Not only were these much smaller in scope, but the biggest difference is that previous protests were mainly driven by the ‘traditional’ opposition, that is the only ones that constantly demanded political change. Today’s protests are instead characterized by the fact that many, or even most, of those out on the streets openly challenging the system have not previously been politically involved (Douglas, 2020). It is equally significant that they are protesting because they voted for Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya. As many as 200.000 people are reported to have met at the Stella Square in Minsk a week after the election, to oppose the election result and protest against President Lukashenka’s government and the autocratic regime he represents. Despite the

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<sup>1</sup> A Swedish version of this text with the title: Osäkerhetens politik i praktiken. Presidentvalet 2020 som förändrade Belarus, is forthcoming in *Nordisk Østforum* and scheduled to be published in May.

violent reaction from the authorities a large part of the population continues to express their desire for change.

After the violence against protesters in 2006 and 2010, few expected a rise of this caliber to be possible in Belarus. The purpose of this article is partly to clarify the circumstances which contributed to such an unexpected and spectacular mobilization and politicization of the Belarusian society and, partly, to explain why this development is so severe for the authoritarian regime. To do this, the article relies on the literature about electoral authoritarian regimes as its theoretical point of departure

### **Electoral Autocracy and the Politics of Uncertainty**

Although the development in Belarus came as a surprise to most observers, the academic literature on so-called electoral authoritarian regimes is, in retrospect, an excellent theoretical tool to try to understand what happened and why. It can be argued that the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath well illustrate what Schedler (2013) has called the ‘politics of uncertainty.’

Electoral autocracies are regimes that hold legislative elections to governing bodies which seem democratic, but because they lack the fundamental freedoms and rights ensuring there are actually alternatives to choose from, these elections are in practice irrelevant (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Schedler, 2013). In a ‘hegemonic’ electoral authoritarian regime such as Belarus, the regime is characterized by the ruling elite’s monopoly on political power<sup>2</sup>, but unlike in a ‘dictatorship’, formal elections are an important part of the democratic facade (Lindberg & Teorell, 2013)<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, elections in electoral autocracies are generally minimally inclusive (universal suffrage), minimally pluralistic (opposition parties are allowed to participate, but it is, for example, difficult to register new parties), minimally competitive (parties and candidates outside the ruling elite are allowed to win votes and seats, but not to win the election) and minimally open (dissent is not subject to massive, but often selective and sporadic repression) (Schedler, 2006). Since the current leaders control and dominate the entire election process, the official result is almost always their preferred one.

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike in so-called competitive autocracies, where elections are characterized by a certain degree of genuine competition between the incumbent regime and its challengers.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to Schedler (2013) electoral autocracy is now the most common form of non-democracy in the world.

Yet, the electoral process in these contexts is not entirely static. For those who want to see political change elections are important even though they have a predictable outcome, because the election campaign is the only time when opposition politicians in an authoritarian state have access to public space. No matter how much the authoritarian leaders try to control the situation, they can never be completely sure that they have actually succeeded in identifying and eliminating all threats to their position of power. Oppositional actors are constantly striving to intensify and exploit this uncertainty, which ultimately means all regular elections entail certain risks for the regime, something that in theory could lead to change. This has been evident not least in connection to the various ‘colorful, flower-scented’ democratic uprisings in various post-communist countries in the early 2000s, which Bunce and Wolchik (2006) have called ‘electoral revolutions’ (but which are often also referred to as ‘color revolutions’). What these have in common is that “an election became the political turning point that led to a defeat for illiberal political forces and a victory for the liberal opposition” (Bunce & Wolchik, 2006, p. 5). Although the popular uprising in Belarus has not yet led to ‘success’ in the way it is defined by their research, it can nevertheless be likened to an electoral revolution.

As in other autocracies, elections in Belarus never really mattered previously. The regime controls the election cycle from beginning to end – they decide who can participate, and they control the process as well as the outcome. Therefore, everyone knows who will win. This time, however, there were special circumstances which helped to activate and intensify the element of uncertainty in the electoral situation. First, the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime came to be strongly questioned as a result of two serious dormant problems rising to the surface. Frustration with the country’s long-running economic crisis culminated in connection to the Covid-19 crisis, at the same time as growing cleavages in society between the stagnant system Lukashenka represents and the part of the population that wants to see change was put to the test. Second, the dynamics of the Belarusian ‘election game’ was altered when the role of the population in the electoral process changed.

### **Background: The Politics that Disappeared**

Jokes about President Lukashenka who has led the country for 26 years are both common and popular in Belarus. These often do not only make fun of the president’s long reign, but also of the political system in general and the elections in particular. Also Lidiya Yermoshina, chairwoman of the Central Election Commission in Belarus since 1996, who is suspected of

repeated election fraud (and therefore, for example, has been described as an ‘election wizard’, see Astapova, 2017), often gets her fair share of ridicule as well, as seen in the example below:

The head of the Central Election Commission in Belarus, Lidiya Yarmoshina, says to President Lukashenka:

- Alyaksandr Grigorievich, I have two pieces of news: one good and one bad. Which one should I start with?

- The good one.

- You have been elected president.

- Okay, what’s the bad one?

- Nobody voted for you.

In all its banality this type of anecdote can be said to illustrate an astonishing phenomenon: electoral fraud is seen as commonplace, and despite the fact that the majority of the population is well aware of the lacking democratic standards in their country they simply seem to accept the status quo. According to Gelman (2010), such ‘resigned acceptance’ inevitably contributes to the survival of the authoritarian regime. The joke above emphasizes, however, that the longevity of the authoritarian system in Belarus is not necessarily an outcome of the population’s undivided loyalty. Rather, the main reason for the persistence of Lukashenka’s rule was that the authorities successfully managed to remove politics from the public sphere. More specifically, that they succeeded in turning politics into a ‘non-issue’ for large sections of the population. Since people generally felt that politics was uninteresting and irrelevant, they also did not care about changing the government. This secured the continued existence of the authoritarian system (Bedford, 2017).

### ***Political opposition without relevance and influence***

How could politics ‘disappear’? An important reason was the total marginalization of the opposition. As Charnysh and Kulakevich (2016) cynically state, the fact there are a total of fifteen parties in Belarus gives the impression there is political competition, which makes it possible for Lukashenka’s government to counter Western criticism. In reality the parties are isolated from Belarusian society and play a limited role in politics. No party has ever had power in the government or more than symbolic representation in the parliament since Lukashenka took office in 1994 (Minchenia, 2020). Although on paper there are ideological differences between the parties, the major dividing line is their attitude towards Lukashenka’s regime.

Those who oppose it are described as opposition.<sup>4</sup> These parties operate under more or less constant repression while the other group i.e., those who support Lukashenka, enjoy some degree of state support and protection.

Through their control over the entire state administration, as well as economy and media, the current leaders have easily been able to regulate who can say what and where. Over the years they effectively ensured that oppositional actors did not have access to legal channels or platforms where those in power could be challenged. Thus, in reality the opposition parties had few or often no opportunities to be political actors. The only time they are allowed to ‘agitate’ among the population is during the election campaigns.

Although the electoral autocratic regime officially states that elections are a manifestation of the will of the people, in reality it was obvious that in Belarus neither the state nor society took elections seriously. The electoral process was seen as a kind of ‘game’ in which oppositional actors were allowed to participate, but where their participation was only symbolic. By participating in this ‘election game’, the oppositional actors also came to be seen as ‘players.’ The consequence was opposition as such was perceived as symbolic rather than relevant by the population at large, which contributed to its negative reputation. At the same time, criticism of the opposition reveals that many in the population are disappointed that oppositional actors did not succeed in ‘delivering’ political change either through elections or electoral revolution (Bedford, 2017).

### *A people that did not want to ‘wake up’*

Another important aspect is the fact that the political opposition’s struggle against the authoritarian regime became so closely linked to the struggle for Belarusian identity. Bekus (2010, p. 282) explains that because the Belarusian opposition leaders saw “the national awakening as the most important precondition for the democratization of the country,” their “rhetoric of national revival in the Belarusian public sphere” became an important instrument to attract people to the struggle against authoritarianism. She describes a situation where two competing myths about the background of the Belarusian nation were set against each other. The official version of the regime was based on the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) and advocated that the Belarusian people were closely related to the Russians. It was

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<sup>4</sup> These consist of the Belarusian People's Front, the United Civic Party, the Conservative Christian Democratic Party, the Belarusian Left Party “Just World,” the Greens and also two Social Democratic parties.

opposed by the alternative version that saw the Soviet experience as a parenthesis in Belarusian nation-building. Belarusian nationalists in general and the Belarusian People's Front (which started as an anti-Soviet dissident movement) in particular instead describe "an imagined golden age in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 17th century" as the starting point for Belarusian nationalism (Rudling, 2017, p. 79).

The short-lived so-called Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) in 1918 is the central point in the alternative nation building story. Therefore, the celebration of Dzen' Voli (Freedom Day) on March 25 to celebrate the BNR's declaration of independence has become an important focal point for the opposition and their resistance against the incumbent regime. Since the regime (at least not earlier) neither recognized nor paid attention to this holiday, it became an alternative national day of sorts, at which time oppositional actors traditionally organized protest marches, demonstrations and other events. On Dzen' Voli and during other opposition gatherings, the alternative white-red-white flag with the coat of arms Pahonia, which was the official flag of the BNR, is always visible. The flag dates from the early 20th century and the red and white are said to represent the traditional colors of Belarusian folk costumes and military banners in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia (Kotljarchuk, 2020). Shortly after independence, in 1991, the white-red-white flag and Pahonia were recognized as state symbols, but after a controversial referendum, Lukashenka reintroduced the red-green flag representing the BSSR.

The use of the white-red-white flag and Pahonia was later prosecuted because, according to Lukashenka and his administration, they were 'fascist' symbols. From this it followed that the entire nationalist opposition was indirectly claimed to be fascists (Bekus, 2010). In addition, the president has often pointed out in public that the opposition, especially some of them, are the nation's enemies – so-called '5th columns' paid by foreign governments to destabilize the country (Marples 2009, p. 760).

Many in the population are critical of the opposition. Ioffe (2003) believes this is not surprising. He describes the Belarusian People's Front in particular as arrogant, because they tried to impose a Belarusian national identity that never really existed on the population. By insisting that one must speak Belarusian in order to be 'Belarusian', the nationalist opposition alienated the majority of the people who preferred to communicate in Russian. According to Ioffe (2007, p. 39), this led to many in the population feel "allergic" to the so-called "benefovets" (that is

the members of the Belarusian People's Front party)<sup>5</sup>. There is also a widespread perception that the 'oppositionists' have contributed to their own failure by being disorganized, unwilling to cooperate, disillusioned and weak (Ash, 2015; Korosteleva, 2009; Marples, 2006). Hervouet (2013) notes some people argue the oppositional actors only have themselves to blame for being oppressed since they chose to continue their regime-critical activities even though they (like everyone else) were well aware this would cause problems and perhaps even result in state violence against them.

Although much criticism of the opposition is certainly justified, Bekus (2010) points out that because of the authoritarian context the struggle over the Belarusian identity was fought on highly unequal terms. The fact that one of the narratives is in fact the formal national idea of the 'state' makes the alternative version by default being 'against the state.' This gives at hand that the latter is at constant disadvantage. However, in this particular regard the dividing line in society between 'opposition' and 'non-opposition' has softened, most likely as a result of the regime changing its course on the matter. In 2014, Lukashenka, who had previously always emphasized Belarusian identity as part of the Russian orthodox civilization, began to highlight and promote the Belarusian language and culture in various ways, both in theory and in practice. He even started to include fragments of the BNR legacy in his rhetoric. This 'soft belarusization' has been described both as an attempt to distance the country from Russia, when relations between the countries were unstable and Lukashenka wanted to improve relations with the EU (Rudkouski, 2017), and as a way to make the regime more politically legitimate without necessarily straying from the authoritarian path.

The fact that the regime has integrated parts of the nationalist opposition's rhetoric, mythology, and historical representations (Rudling, 2017) could be interpreted as further marginalization of the oppositional actors, as they have now been deprived of their main alternative agenda. Alternatively, it can be argued the nationalist opposition, to some extent, has actually achieved some of its goals because the Belarusian language and identity issues are no longer perceived as acutely controversial.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that the opposition is not still frowned upon by the population: few believe there is any oppositional actor who could govern the country better than Lukashenka. The feeling that there are no alternatives to the existing arrangement

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<sup>5</sup> *Benefovets* can roughly be translated as 'someone representing/belonging to BNF.' BNF is the Belarusian abbreviation for the name of the party.

<sup>6</sup> This is a conclusion based on the author's fieldwork in Belarus during the period 2015–2020.

contributed to the resigned acceptance that kept the authoritarian system going strong for over 20 years.

### **The Emergence of ‘Non-Oppositional’ Activism**

#### *Selective repression and professionalization of political protests*

Another process that contributed to the de-politicization of Belarusian society is the combination of selective repression and controlled openness. By targeting in particular those who were explicitly political, and especially those who openly challenged the regime through street protests, the regime sought to reduce the general motivation to participate in such activities (Bedford 2017). The traumatic memories of the violent intervention against the protests in 2010 were, for example, a strong incentive to discourage most people from participating in protests, especially of the public type (Ash, 2015).

The repression combined with the perceived lack of actual results led to fewer and fewer people getting involved in political activism. According to Minchenia (2020), this development has caused a ‘professionalization of activism,’ that rather than being driven by volunteers and grassroots activists was mainly carried out by a small group for whom the political struggle had become the main occupation. This also made the gap between political activists and the rest of society, that is the ‘apolitical’ citizens, even more pronounced. According to her, even within the activist community there were internal contradictions between the participants in protest actions and the leaders of the political opposition, who were perceived as unreliable and not doing enough in situations when it really mattered.

Navumau (2016) similarly describes how activism became ‘ritualized’ since the end of the 1990s as oppositional mobilization was gradually reduced to occur only on a number of symbolically important historical dates. To this end, in addition to Dzen’ Voli the opposition’s annual protest calendar also included Dziady (memorial march for the victims of the Stalinist repression) and a Chernobyl march. Moreover, he notes, above all these gatherings turned into a tool for the opposition to get attention from the West. In this respect, as oppositional activity became increasingly ritualized and symbolic, it consequently became even more irrelevant to the national public.



### ***Controlled openness in a societal gray zone***

Notably, the selective repression meant that as long as the Belarusians stayed away from the ‘dirty field of politics,’ they could live a relatively ‘normal life.’ In recent years the authoritarian authorities have allowed what can be described as a certain degree of controlled openness, while at the same time combating public political activism. This has allowed the population to engage in various types of social activities within, for example, academia, the cultural sphere or environmental movements – as long as these were seen as apolitical (Bedford, 2017; Dinerstein, 2019; Poleschuk, 2015). According to Dinerstein (2019, p. 8), the cultural events organized by the ‘state’ were not popular among the ‘creative people.’ At the same time ‘non-state’ lectures, classes, clubs and other similar activities were well attended, especially in Minsk but also in other cities. The difference was that these took place in a kind of societal gray zone where the organizers and participants neither fully accepted nor officially questioned the state discourse (Ackermann, Berman and Sasunkevich, 2017).

Under these circumstances many Belarusians did not even feel they were living in an authoritarian state, as they still had the opportunity to freely and openly pursue their interests and passions. Engaging in pronounced political activism, however, came to be seen as something abstract, unattractive and unnecessary, and above all something that only the notorious opposition bothered with (Bedford, 2017; Hervouet, 2013). Nonetheless, it is possible that precisely this controlled openness laid the foundation for the activism, commitment and initiative that became the driving force for the 2020 protests. Although the majority of Belarusian citizens saw themselves as ‘apolitical’, the lively grassroots activity in recent years clearly shows the population was by no means passive (Ackermann, Berman and Sasunkevich, 2017). Moreover, in his analysis of different cultural identities in modern Belarus, Dinerstein (2019) describes how many of those who were active in the cultural sector perceived the prevailing social order in Belarus as unfair and unacceptable. They wanted change and saw their own involvement in various public creative initiatives (such as city festivals, poetry communities, and social entrepreneurship) as a way of trying to do something about the problem themselves.

### ***From civil society to political activism***

Even before the 2020 presidential election, there were indications that ‘non-oppositional’ activism was developing in society through a number of local protests against specific issues. One of the most notable examples is the wave of popular protests against the so-called ‘parasite

tax' that shook Belarus in 2017. According to Presidential Decree No. 3 'on the prevention of social dependence', citizens who worked less than 183 days a year should pay a 180 Euro fee. This applied to about 10 percent of the able-bodied population, and therefore led to great dissatisfaction. According to Wilson (2018), the regime made this mistake due to the pressing economic situation. Besides, Douglas (2020, p. 17) notes that Lukashenka's description of the current protest movement as a collection of 'people with criminal past' and 'unemployed' suggests that he generally seems to nourish contempt for those who have no job. These protests, which took place across the country, seemed to be indirectly aimed at the state's inability to deal with the economic crisis at large. Initially, the rallies could take place largely undisturbed, but when the opposition, trying to take advantage of this wave of unrest, called for a large demonstration in Minsk on Dzen' Voli, this led to the reinstatement of restrictive and repressive methods and a large number of activists being arrested (Chausov, 2018).

The protests against the Chinese lead-acid battery factory in Brest are another example. For several years, the local population has demonstrated against the pollution and health risks that the construction of the factory entails. During the past years, they have expressed their dissatisfaction by meeting every Sunday in a park and peacefully feeding the pigeons without neither placards nor flyers in order not to give the police any reason to stop their activities. Interestingly, both in the case of the 'parasite tax' and the factory in Brest, the protests can be considered somewhat successful – the tax was never implemented and the factory was built but has not yet been taken into use. This may have given the impression that the authoritarian state was, after all, receptive to this type of criticism.

The November 2019 parliamentary elections revealed this activism had spread to the political arena, as reflected for example by the number of 'democratic nominations' to parliament being the highest ever (Kostyugova, 2020, p. 130). An interesting example of civil society activists becoming politicians was the improvised and creative campaign carried out by the so-called 'youth bloc'. Three youth organizations decided to participate in the electoral process to 'wake up' their fellow students and friends and show that politics is not 'dangerous.'<sup>7</sup> Although ultimately none of the democratic candidates were elected Kostyugova (2020, p. 131) points out the campaign was nevertheless successful for those who advocate democracy, since it gave

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<sup>7</sup> Author's interview with representatives of the organizations: Belarusian Student Association, Legalize Belarus and Uchoba Vazhneye, Minsk, December 2019.

the ‘protest candidates’ important experience that helped them prepare for the presidential election campaign. Furthermore, she suggests the active campaign increased the politicization of society and created an awareness of the mechanisms used by the state to rig elections. For the first time, political bloggers also proved to be an important part of the campaign. For example, Syarhei Tsikhanouski’s blog ‘A Country for Life’ doubled its number of subscribers during the parliamentary elections by, among other things, publishing interviews with independent candidates.

## **The End of Popular Cooptation: Wither the Social Contract**

### ***Struggling economy and lack of reforms***

Belarus has often been presented as an unusual type of authoritarian state because of the positive attitude many in the country still seemed to have towards its president (McAllister & White, 2016), popularly known as ‘Bat’ko’ (father) – “a head of the family who governs his country with a just and firm hand” (Rudling, 2017, p. 88).<sup>8</sup> To this end, a commonly recurring explanation for Lukashenka’s authoritarian system being accepted by its citizens is the existence of a so-called ‘social contract’, which guaranteed the people economic stability and security in exchange for their loyalty. The social contract has been described as is ‘an implicit agreement between the state and the main social groups, in which parties are more or less aware of the costs and benefits of their behavior’ (Haiduk et al 2009: 9). As various population groups have different needs the provided benefits differed, but largely the ‘contract’ provided “opportunities to find a job, offered a wide range of complimentary services and subsidized some prices and tariffs” (Adarov et al 2016 p.10).

This system was based primarily on incomes from heavily subsidized natural gas and crude oil from Russia, which made it possible both to run domestic industry cheaply and to generate revenue by re-exporting refined oil products to Western Europe. The global financial crisis, a deteriorating Russian economy due to the sanctions resulting from the occupation of Crimea and falling oil prices have had a major impact on the socio-economic situation in Belarus and subsequently on the state’s ability to provide the same level of welfare and financial stability for its population as before. Previously, GDP per capita has increased steadily, but during 2014-2019, growth was zero percent (Guriev, 2020). The 2015-2016 recession hit the country

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<sup>8</sup> According to Rudling, this term is also strongly pro-natalistic because Lukashenko often expresses that he wants to see his population grow and insists that Belarusian families should have at least three children (Rudling, 2017, p. 88).

particularly hard. Real incomes fell significantly more households were classified as ‘low-income groups’, indicating that the population became more vulnerable to poverty (Bornukova et al., 2019; also, IPM 2017). Even after this, average wages have not increased and income disparities between Minsk and other regions have grown. Pension payments have also stagnated and not increased in line with constant inflation. Most pensioners do not have to live in extreme poverty but, importantly, also do not have the same high standard of living as before (Douglas, 2020).

### *Security instead of welfare*

Officially in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, but most likely as a result of economic difficulties, Lukashenka was trying to introduce a ‘security contract’ guaranteeing the citizens national independence and security, rather than primarily social and financial benefits. Research has suggested there was little evidence the population endorsed this re-branding (Wilson 2016). Which is not surprising as in reality it seemed to mean more funds went to state-sector employees, particularly members of the security apparatus than into strengthening the social welfare sector (Douglas 2020). Overall, there were less and less resources to maintain the extensive general social and welfare policies, which were the backbone of the social contract (Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė and Maksimiuk 2012). Attempts to reform the social security system in response to internal and external challenges have led nowhere and the current system has been described as ‘fragile and miserable’ (Chulitskaya, and Matonyte 2018: 543). It was inevitable that as the ‘father of the country’ Lukashenka would be blamed for this. Many analysts pointed out that the reason he did not implement the reforms necessary to strengthen the economy was that they would have weakened his own position (ex. Astapenia, 2020; Kłysiński, 2016). It has also been suggested that Lukashenka refused to change because he personally thinks that market economy is ideologically unacceptable (Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2017). When they decided to hold the 2020 presidential election under the prevailing conditions, the Belarusian leaders did not seem to understand that the social contract was no longer working to protect the regime in the same way. There was also a fear the economic situation would get even worse in the future given the instable relation with Russia and insecure future of energy subsidies. Many people had already seen their personal financial situation deteriorate and at least to some extent blamed Bat’ko for this.

It was in this context President Lukashenka’s response to the COVID-19 crisis became the straw that broke the camel’s back. To not put more stress on the already weak economy,

Belarusian leaders chose to keep society open during the current pandemic. Moreover, Lukashenka joking and calling the pandemic a ‘psychosis,’ indicated to the Belarusian people he was not taking it seriously. While he was telling his citizens to drink vodka and drive tractors to stay safe<sup>9</sup>, they wanted strong state measures as they saw the virus and its effects as an actual threat. The President’s decision to go against the stream and not cancel the annual Victory Day Military Parade despite most other post-Soviet states doing so (the only other exception being Turkmenistan) signaled to many he cared more about his own prestige than about protecting the innocent old people who are particularly vulnerable to this disease. After this event even more Belarusians seem to be openly skeptic to their government’s approach to the crisis. The fact the authorities were perceived as ignoring the situation gave rise to vast community mobilization. Volunteers were not only producing masks but were also collecting an enormous amount of material and money through various citizen initiatives to support health care workers and others fighting the virus (BelasatTV, 2020) The already defunct social contract became completely invalid. It was not so much because people felt they were not being supported financially but rather about not being able to trust the government to care about your wellbeing at all. They had to take matters in their own hands, simply because they could no longer count on their president and his administration. It was truly unfortunate for Lukashenka this happened during an election year.

## **The Election Game that Became Serious**

### *New players and new hope*

President Lukashenka severely misjudged the situation when he, in the midst of the ongoing pandemic, announced that presidential elections would be held in Belarus on August 9, that is, even two weeks earlier than previously stated. At first glance, one could get the impression that the decision had the intended result. Attempts to democratically elect a united candidate who would represent all oppositional actors were unsuccessful, as the primary elections the opposition parties had planned to hold across the country were canceled due to the risk of infection.

Nevertheless, in the light of the discussion above, it can be argued that few in the population really cared about whether the traditional opposition succeeded in finding a united candidate

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of some of his most memorable commentary can be found here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BahmPnzBkr4>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqH41yL64m8>;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqH41yL64m8>

or not. However, the news that Viktor Babaryka, former chairman of the board of Belgazprombank and Valery Tsapkala, former ambassador to the United States (later founder of High Technologies Park in Minsk), would run in the election attracted a lot of attention. Likewise, the announcement from the popular video blogger Syarhei Tsikhanouski that he would be a contender received much positive response. Unsurprisingly, Tsikhanouski was arrested shortly after launching his candidacy. Instead, his wife Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya took over his campaign.

Tsikhanouski first became famous when he traveled around and talked to people all over the country publishing the interviews on his YouTube channel. Many of those he met expressed great frustration over their situation. One of the most notable interviews was the angry old lady who compared Lukashenka to a cockroach and said that the only way to get rid of such pests was to crush them with a flip-flop (Shkliarov, 2020). ‘Stop the cockroach’ subsequently became Tsikhanouski’s election slogan and the symbolism continued to be important throughout the election process. Many people waved flip-flops or slippers at the various events organized during the campaign.

An important piece of the puzzle for understanding the further development is that neither Tsikhanouskaya, Babaryka and Tsapkala were associated with the conventional opposition. This made them more credible in the eyes of many. Since both Babaryka and Tsapkala were perceived as part of the ‘establishment’, some people had the impression that they could pose a real challenge to Lukashenka’s system. This is probably why none of their candidacies were approved. The authorities tried to make sure that the threat was neutralized. Like Tsikhanouski, Babaryka was eventually imprisoned, accused of economic crimes. Tsapkala fled the country in order not to be arrested. Surprisingly, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya managed to register as a presidential candidate. It was surprising because the collection of the 100.000 signatures needed to submit her application to enter the race had showed she had a lot of support in society. Across the country, people were queuing up to give their signatures and show their sympathy for her and her husband’s campaign. In retrospect, it appears that Lukashenka’s administration underestimated her. Since she was a woman, and nonetheless ‘just’ a housewife (and a teacher) without previous political experience, they assumed that she would not be able to capitalize on the support of the population. To the contrary, her election campaign in fact became a huge success story, largely due to the collaboration with Maryia Kalesnikava (Babaryka’s campaign manager) and Veranika Tsapkala (Tsapkala’s wife).

### *A changing population against an unchanging president*

Together, the three women formed a photogenic and seemingly invincible trio that instilled hope in society and certainly showed that ‘women can do it’. The gender aspect became an important and integral part of the conflict between the protest movement and Lukashenka. On social media there are numeral illustrations of the frustration many women felt regarding the president’s open male chauvinism and his habit of publicly trying to diminish women.<sup>10</sup> For example, after Lukashenka in July 2020 – once again – proclaimed that women are not suitable to become presidents a video was published in which 42 Belarusian women dismiss some of his most infamous comments. “A woman’s calling is to decorate the world”; “A woman should be 165–175 cm tall”, “If you weigh down a woman with the constitution, she will fall over – the poor thing” are some of the phrases responded to in the video that got 3.5 million views in just four days.<sup>11</sup>

The collaboration between Tsikhanouskaya, Tsapkala and Kalesnikava highlighted both in images and action that Belarusian women considered themselves ready to take the lead in the transformation of society. Correspondingly, women have come to play an important role in the protests. When the post-election demonstrations seemed to be on the wane due to the violence of the police, it was the women who made sure that they continued. Because the police, at least in the beginning, were less aggressive towards female participants, they were able to form chains of solidarity which protected the men and gave new life to the peaceful resistance movement.

Furthermore, there are indications that the outdated and static system that Lukashenka represents not only has lost its legitimacy among women but among the younger population overall. Douglas (2020) writes that Lukashenka has become especially unpopular among young people in recent years by introducing not only the ‘parasite law’ but also by making legislation on drug possession stricter, and by restricting young men’s right to postpone their compulsory military service. In a report from 2019, Moshes and Nizhnikau (2019, p. 3) write that Lukashenka:

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<sup>10</sup> A funny, but sad example is this ironic test where the reader, according to the editorial staff of Studentskaya Dumka, can check how much he/she knows about the president’s view of a modern woman:

<https://dumka.me/test/lukashenko>. Another example is this text where ‘women’ is replaced by ‘men’ in some of Lukashenka’s most infamous statements: <https://nash-dom.info/58678>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDn1ixSniWy/>

has obvious difficulties in realizing that the country where he came to power a quarter of a century ago, and the country where he rules today, are not the same (...) Over time, the contrast between the backward-looking presidency and the modernizing society will become stronger and sooner or later the conflict is likely to become apparent.

In an opinion poll conducted in January 2020, O'Loughlin, Toal and Bakke (2020) found that, unlike the older generation, a large proportion of those under the age of 45 said they preferred Western democracy to the current model. Additionally, these completely reject Soviet traditions and oppose Lukashenka's government.

It is not yet possible to say whether it is precisely this development that has caused and driven the protest movement. Throughout the election campaign, however, social media has conveyed the image of Lukashenka as a president who is no longer popular and even disgusts the population. He was first described as a cockroach by Tsikhanouski and after independent Belarusian media published the results of an informal election poll indicating that his support among the population was extremely low, the internet was filled with memes mocking 'Sasha 3%' which became Lukashenka's new nickname. References to 'Psycho 3%' were often seen as well (as a reference to his insistence that coronavirus is only a 'psychosis'.) Since there is no reliable information on the level of support the authoritarian system actually has, or does not have, these memes filled an important function besides making people laugh. They conveyed the message that the president's supporters were in the minority. In that sense, they helped de-legitimize Lukashenka's government and spread the hope that political change was within reach.

### ***A unique election campaign but a well-known false election result***

It was not only the intense protests against the result that was unique in relation to the 2020 presidential election, but the voting was preceded by an unusually active election campaign, in which 'ordinary', formerly apolitical residents suddenly openly expressed their desire for change. For the first time ever, people across the country, not just in Minsk, got involved in the political process. They went to election rallies, shared their political views on social media and most importantly, ultimately voted for Tsikhanouskaya. Political activism became visible in a completely different way than before, both on social media and in the streets and squares during what has been called the 'summer of protest.' When more than 60.000 people gathered in a park in Minsk on July 30 to support Tsikhanouskaya's election campaign, it was the largest



political event in Belarus since 1991. Election day saw much more activity than any other election in the country's history. Long queues wound up at the polling stations and a sizable number of those waiting was wearing the white bracelet that had become a symbol of support for Tsikhanouskaya.

The official election result, which gave Lukashenka 80 percent of the vote, compared to Tsikhanouskaya's 10 percent, did not at all reflect the enormous backing of Tsikhanouskaya that emerged during the summer. No independent international election monitors were present and in many cases national observers were not even allowed in the polling stations, officially because of the pandemic. Despite this, there is no doubt that massive election fraud, as usual, occurred. Data from the various platforms where Tsikhanouskaya's supporters were asked to register their vote, such as Golos (Voice), Zubr and Chestniye Lyudi (Honest People) show both that Lukashenka could not possibly have received 80 percent of the votes and that it is likely that Tsikhanouskaya was supported by a majority (Rudnik, 2020; Voice of Belarus, 2020). Likewise, the OSCE Rapporteur notes that the election did not meet the basic requirements established by previous election observation missions and that it was neither transparent, free, nor fair (Benedek, 2020).

Probably the people's vote for Tsikhanouskaya was in essence a vote against Lukashenka. She consistently reiterated that she did not want to become president – she merely wanted her husband to be released from prison and for the country to hold democratic elections. Similarly, the dynamics of the post-election protest movement clearly show its main goal is not for Tsikhanouskaya to become president, but rather to bring about system change and remove Lukashenka from power. Therefore, the protest movement has been largely leaderless – neither Tsikhanouskaya nor any of the other two women who led the election campaign have taken on a central role. Nevertheless, it was Tsikhanouskaya's campaign that gave people hope of being able to influence developments. It inspired them to vote, which in turn is the reason for the scale and strength of the protests.

## **After the Election: New Dynamism in the Belarusian Society**

### ***An uncontrollable, leaderless and dynamic protest movement***

As mentioned in the introduction, previous election protests in Belarus were relatively small-scale, both in terms of number of participants and in geographical spread and could therefore be easily dissolved by the police. This time the election result was disputed in many different parts of the country and the protesters were unwavering. Despite the fact that they were constantly met (and at the time of writing still are met) by harassment and police interventions, the protest spirit still appears strong. After six months large-scale protest marches continued to be held every weekend in both Minsk and other cities, although the number of participants decreased significantly from about 200,000 when they were at their largest to several thousand in December (Onuch, 2020).<sup>12</sup>

This time around the mobilization is not centralized in the same way as before, but more resembles an eclectic civil resistance movement. No attempt has been made to build a tent camp in central locations à la Maidan. Instead, the protesters have been inspired by the protest movement in Hong Kong and strive to conduct activities in many different places at the same time to make it more difficult for the police to focus resources and stop the development. In addition to marches and demonstrations a number of other, both collective and individual, protest activities have developed – often related to highlighting the white-red-white flag in different contexts. The process has generated a large number of self-organized protest groups which regularly carry out local protest activities. Many have even designed their own logos and protest flags.<sup>13</sup>

The instant messaging app Telegram has been an important tool for communicating, organizing, and disseminating information about various activities among protest participants both before and after the election. The advantage of this app is that it works even when the authorities ‘turn off’ data use via the mobile network, which they did the week after the presidential election and continue to do at regular intervals, when they consider it strategically important to prevent communication between protesters.

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<sup>12</sup> However, because of increasing police pressure and the harsh weather the systematic large-scale marches were more or less discontinued by the winter 2020.

<sup>13</sup> So far most information about this can be found on Twitter. See for example:  
<https://twitter.com/alesherasimenka/status/1305978471538196480> or  
<https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1313812644554592257?s=20>

The Warsaw-based Telegram channel Nexta has become important not only for the coordination of protests and the dissemination of information but also for the strategic planning of the resistance against Lukashenka. In August, the channel had over two million subscribers and was one of the most popular Telegram channels in the world (Edwards, 2020). Nevertheless, Herasimenka et al (2020) point out that one should not overestimate the role that online platforms played in the success of the protests. Rather, they say, the fact that mobilization has a strong ‘offline’ component, for example in the form of cooperation with neighbors or friends, has equally helped expand and maintain the protest movement. An interesting observation is the informal networks which have begun to emerge between the many women who are arrested in connection to the protests. Despite their different backgrounds and experiences, a kind of ‘sisterhood in captivity’ arises and many keep in touch even after they have been released.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Cracks in the authoritarian foundation***

According to the academic literature on ‘authoritarian consolidation’, the stability of the authoritarian regime rests on three pillars: oppression (use of coercion), co-optation (benefits to certain groups for them not to oppose the system), and finally legitimation (to make citizens accept or at least tolerate the regime) (Gerschewski, 2013). Before 2020, the majority in Belarus accepted the political situation due to the fear of reprisals, the promise of a social and financial safety net in exchange for their loyalty, and a sense that there was no political alternative.

At present, the base of the Belarusian authoritarian system seems extremely unstable. Co-optation still seems to partly work to keep the regime alive, at least in regard to some groups. Although it is unclear to what extent the political elite supports the president, most of the police, military and special forces dutifully stand by Lukashenka’s side maintaining repression. By mid-November 25.000 people had been arrested for taking part in the demonstrations, many of whom have since been prosecuted and imprisoned. A large number of those arrested testify to torture (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Police have used excessive force on the streets, and according to the human rights organization Viasna at least three protesters died as a result of

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<sup>14</sup> Author’s interview with a previously imprisoned feminist activist, November 2020 (via Zoom).

the police's use of weapons, or failure to provide timely medical care (the Human Rights Center 'Viasna', 2020).

Despite this, the authorities do not seem to know exactly how to handle the situation. The dynamic and decentralized nature of the resistance makes it difficult to stop the protests. The selective repression previously used against everyone publicly demanding change is not as effective when such a large part of the population has become politicized. The authorities have particularly targeted those who could possibly be seen as leaders of the protest movement – the board members of the Coordination Council created to eventually lead negotiations with Lukashenka on the transfer of power. According to state propaganda, the council is preparing a coup and several of them have therefore been arrested and the rest, including Tsikhanouskaya, forced to flee the country.

The state's brutal reaction to the protests after the election damaged Lukashenka's legitimacy, as many previously did not believe their president would resort to this level of violence against his own citizens to secure his position. A survey in December 2020 shows that 80 percent of the protesters report it was precisely seeing the violence that convinced them to get involved (Krawatzek & Sasse, 2020). The video released in the fall 2020 showing hundreds of workers at the MZKT tractor factory in Minsk cheering and shouting 'Retire' or 'Disappear' (*ukhodi*) likewise reveals that Lukashenka can no longer fully rely on the support of his previous core supporters (Scollon, 2020). Workers at several companies, including some large state-owned factories, joined a nationwide strike in support of the protests. The fact that most of them have since then been forced to return to work is significant because it signals that 'repression' is the only instrument left in the authoritarian toolbox. Yet, research clearly shows that authoritarian leaders cannot rely solely on repression to stay in power. They must in various ways try to convince the population that their rule is legitimate (Guriev & Treisman, 2015). In this respect, the foundation of the Belarusian authoritarian regime appears to have suffered severe damage.

### ***The awakening of a politicized Russian-speaking Belarusian nation***

It is interesting to note that the symbol of the protest movement, which is dominated by grassroots activism, has become the white-red-white flag of the 'traditional opposition' along

with Pahonias.<sup>15</sup> That the visible majority of the protesters are Russian-speaking, Kazharski (2021, p.7) sees as a sign that a new hybrid has been born: “a Russian-speaking or bilingual political movement under a flag that was previously associated with a much more ethno-cultural opposition.” An interesting observation in this context is that, according to Kazharski, the protests have come to be called ‘Belarus Awakening 2020’, which undeniably brings to mind the social project of the Belarusian People’s Front and the Belarusian-speaking nationalists.

One of the reasons for Tsikhanouskaya’s popularity was precisely that she did not have the national identity as the main focus on her agenda. This was attractive to a large part of the population who saw the stubborn struggle for the Belarusian language and culture waged by the opposition, as well as their “Russiaphobia,” as abstract and unnecessary (to say the least) (Burkhardt, 2016). Surveys both before (Krawatzek, 2019) and after the election (Chatham House, 2020) clearly show that a majority of the population prefer Belarus to have good relations with *both* Russia *and* the EU – not one or the other. Tsikhanouskaya almost always spoke Russian in her appearances and the campaign could be said to illustrate what Fabrykant (2019) has called a Russian speaking Belarusian nationalism. Although Tsikhanouskaya of course emphasized that Belarus is an independent country, the geopolitical agenda has been notably absent both during her campaign and the protests that followed. The core message was about free elections and democracy – not about choosing between Russia and Europe (Kazharski, 2021).

Perhaps this is why the military support from Russia that Lukashenka has repeatedly been threatening the protesters with has not yet come into fruition. In principle, the two populations perceive each other as brotherly nations. Of course, in the eyes of the Kremlin it would not set a good example for the Russian opposition if the authoritarian regime in Belarus collapsed due to the pressure of the demonstrators. Still, a military intervention would neither increase Putin’s popularity at home, nor in Belarus. Moreover, as the countries’ economies are closely interconnected, it is unlikely that Belarus would be able, or even willing, to distance itself from Russia even if ‘democratic forces’ come to power. As long as the protests are peaceful it is therefore more likely that Russia’s support for Lukashenka stays primarily economic. By

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<sup>15</sup> Initially, an interesting feature of the protests was that it used both the red-green and the white-red-white flag. Often the same person carried both flags, and couples held one of each as a symbol of national unity. Later, the white-red-white flag has come to dominate the resistance movement.

saving Lukashenka's regime from economic collapse and revolution Putin assures its dependency. This guarantees Lukashenka is not going to try to 'get closer' to the EU in the way he did around 2015.<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusions**

This article can be said to illustrate two concrete examples of what the 'politics of uncertainty' of the electoral authoritarian regime mean and can lead to. The first relates to the actors. In general, the interaction between the ruling elite, the opposition and the voters in undemocratic elections contributes to strengthening the authoritarian state. The case of Belarus shows that if the fundamental dynamics, or power relations between the parties, change in any way, it could be the starting point for a gradual or sudden process of change. In Belarus, the authoritarian leaders had succeeded in persuading the vast majority to perceive 'politics' in general, and the elections in particular as uninteresting and irrelevant. Belarusians at large did not even necessarily care to vote, and therefore did not have much interest in contesting the falsified result. Today, the situation has reversed. Those who previously actively shielded themselves from politics have become an important part of the protest movement.

Furthermore, developments in Belarus illustrate how vulnerable the authoritarian regime becomes when its legitimacy is openly questioned. According to the theory of the politics of uncertainty, hegemonic states often appear unassailable, despite the fact that there are a number of latent threats to their stability. When such threats become visible, they often turn into effective tools for collective action by regime critics, as they are used to demand state responsibility and highlight the regime's weaknesses. In the literature economic crises and societal cleavages are two examples of such latent threats – both relevant for case at hand. Before 2020 many Belarusians accepted the political situation because of the 'social contract.' When the authoritarian regime could not deliver their end of the bargain their situation became precarious, and the Covid-19 disaster reinforced the feeling that Lukashenka had broken the deal. Furthermore, the protests have come to highlight the contrast between the outdated society structure that Lukashenka represents and the younger generation's different mindsets and wish for change.

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<sup>16</sup> Relations between Belarus and Russia have long been unstable, and some analysts believe that Putin is growing increasingly tired of Lukashenko and his antics and is looking for a suitable and acceptable successor (EurActiv, 2020; Rainsford, 2020).

There is reason to believe that the intensity and resilience of the protests is a result of protesters actually having voted in the presidential election – they are essentially objecting to their votes being stolen. After the 2006 and 2010 elections the opposition called for protests against election results, which were undoubtedly also manipulated. However, it is unlikely there was a candidate who truly could compete with Lukashenka for the presidency at that time, mainly because people in general did not care enough to vote. This time it seems Tsikhanouskaya actually got the people’s vote, and therefore the protests have a completely different magnitude and mandate.

Political change in Belarus is not likely to happen overnight, but the explosive increase in political participation and civic activism is a positive sign. The authoritarian state was maintained by most people accepting the authoritarian status quo and considering politics as ‘somebody else’s’ problem. In this respect, the political status quo has already changed for the better. In addition, attempts have been made to build a political platform based on the protest movement (BelarusFeed, 2020). Although Lukashenka refuses to compromise, the electoral autocracy has suffered heavy defeats. The election result is not recognized by the EU (European Council, 2020) and many European leaders refuse to accept his presidency (Joint Statement, 2020). Furthermore, it is not likely that those who protest today will ever again accept the ‘election game’ in its previous form.

Sooner or later, some kind of action will be needed to try to restore the democratic facade. Whether it is to implement the constitutional changes that Lukashenka has long promised, or to hold new elections, the politicization of society is likely to make it difficult, if not impossible, for Lukashenka to restore the legitimacy and stability that characterized his authoritarian regime. In addition, if there is a credible political alternative, and perhaps even a candidate that Russia can accept, it is possible that this could lead to democratization ‘by mistake’ (Treisman, 2017). That is, change will take place as a result, even if it was not Lukashenka’s intention. Therefore, the mobilization and politicization triggered by the presidential election is probably the most dangerous threat the authoritarian regime in Belarus has ever faced, regardless of the outcome of the electoral revolution.

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