

# LUISS



Department of Political Science

Course of Political Sociology

## Dissent movements in authoritarian states: The “summer of protests” of 2020 in Belarus

Prof. Michele Sorice

---

SUPERVISOR

Gaia Catalani

ID No. 093282

---

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2021/2022

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	3
CHAPTER 1: Belarus: delineating the profile of the country .....	6
1.1 History of Belarus .....	6
1.2 The country today .....	11
CHAPTER 2: The protest movement of 2020.....	16
CHAPTER 3: The aftermath of the protests: a national and international overview .....	24
3.1 How the Belarusian state prevents and silences dissent .....	24
3.2 The repression strategies of 2020 .....	25
3.3 The response of the international community .....	30
CONCLUSION.....	34
APPENDIX.....	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	42
SUMMARY IN ITALIAN .....	47

## INTRODUCTION

According to her constitution, Belarus is a “democratic, social state” independent since 1991 and the largest landlocked country in Europe. The archaic term *Byelorussia*, “White Russia” in English, spread officially during the domination of the Russian Empire, even if it was present from long before. The origin of the word is highly debated: according to some it was inspired by the colour of the hair and clothes worn by indigenous tribes, others argue that it identified the territories that resisted the Mongolian offense or the western part of the *Rus* (a powerful political aggregation of the medieval period, whose different areas were identified with colours). Situated in the far East of the continent, for a long time the country has represented a land of conquest for her influential neighbours, among which the most powerful, Russia. After the fall of the USSR, the Belarusian state has finally gained political independence and inaugurated the life of the *Respublika Bielarus*, the Republic of Belarus.

Yet, the country is far from what in the Western world is known as a democratic republic. After the first presidential elections of 1994 Belarus has been progressively turned into what some may call a dictatorship. Indeed, some dare to call President Aleksandr Lukashenko the “last European dictator” and he has often lived to this title. From the first years in office, he has deeply amended the supreme law of the country, manipulated parliamentary elections and extended the office-term of the presidency to secure his place in the political scene. Additionally, he compromised the independence of the judicial bodies and introduced stricter and stricter illiberal laws against democratic freedoms. The press is heavily censored; the media is directly controlled by the central government. Journalists are harshly persecuted, while the few independent news outlets are periodically blocked. Social media use is restricted and users are spied on. As for protests, legal and informal methods contribute to discouraging them. Authoritarian means of repression were widely deployed to silence the faint voice of dissenters, the few times that they tried to be heard. As the only person to ever sat in the presidential chair, it was not difficult for Lukashenko to discredit his political opponents and eventually remove them from the scene. When threats do not work, detention and torture are the most successful solutions; sometimes, opposition members “voluntarily” flee the country. Moreover, the little dissent that he experienced outside the political arena was always met with indifference and lack of support from the rest of the population and fought with violent repression by the regime. The majority of Belarusian were, and still are, quite content with the system that the authorities built in the country.

From the start, Lukashenko presented himself as the “Father of the nation” and his promises of wealth and freedom from the oppressors were particularly appealing to one of the poorest peoples of Europe. As he distanced himself from Russia trying to balance his country’s sovereignty with the crucial economic ties between the two, he remained deeply attached to the Soviet system and faithful to market socialism. Belarusian economy is founded on anti-liberalism sentiments, distrust towards the market, reluctance to adopt competition

policies. The measures pursuing these objectives have been arguably successful, contributing to a steady growth of the GDP, improved living conditions and industrialisation. However, Lukashenko's resistance to market competition and private ownership has become closer to a burden for the country's economy. Former collaborator during his electoral campaign in 1994, Alexander Feduta, described him as a person fearing what he did not know.<sup>1</sup> And his fear has become his own enemy.

In the last decades, the Belarusian society has undergone decisive changes, unnoticed by its President. Or rather, incomprehensible to him. In the words of Feduta, he is in fact unable to understand that "things change". Belarusians have begun to express less and less approval for the traditional and old manoeuvres of their President. Positive attitudes towards the paternalistic nature of the state increasingly diminish, making way for more liberal and pro-market views. A cultural revival of national Belarusian traditions, history and language is spreading, driving the country away from Soviet ideas and memories. An increasing number of people are more welcoming towards European integration than accepting Russian influence. The high centralisation and state control further boost their wish to be included in the system and be able to participate to public and political life. During the years, the inability to grasp these critical changes has cost him order and authority. The home that Lukashenko built is slowly and alarmingly beginning to creak.

The most recent breach in the system and the most evident proof of this trend was the dangerous threat posed by the wide protest movement of 2020. The ferment appearing during election years this time was different, stronger; eventually, it erupted in a never-before-seen political event, of colossal size and phenomenal durability. From the electoral campaign, the presidential election attracted unprecedented attention from the public. Independent news outlets and social media chats provided a platform for political discussion, on which thousands relied for information. The political opposition as well benefited from them, being able to release statements and organise public gatherings before the election day. When in August Lukashenko was announced President of Belarus for the sixth time with 80% of the votes, Minsk exploded with disappointment, or rather anger. Thousands and thousands of people of all kinds and from every social stratus took the streets to manifest their discontent with what they believed rigged results. For months the country was shaken by an unprecedented political mobilisation and the violent repression with which the regime responded. These inspiring events gained the attention of the international community, which has taken actions in favour of civil society and democracy in Belarus since, and of a growing number of Belarusians, joining their fellow citizens in the demonstrations, often pushed by the unbelievably harsh response of their authorities. Two years later, Lukashenko is still in power, but the spirit of the 2020 protests is still strong. The massive events of 2020 and 2021 have shown him and the world that his legitimacy as the President of Belarus is eroding, and the bravery of Belarusians will most likely be an insurmountable obstacle in the future.

This thesis intends to develop a comprehensive and valuable analysis of these events, exploring in depth the causes and the consequences, enumerating the means of communication and mobilisation adopted by the

participants, painting a comprehensive picture of those who took (and still take) part to these events and what they had to endure. The structure is organised in three Chapters. The First provides a general description of Belarus, delineating the history of the country and introducing the political system and economic policies of Lukashenko's government. The Second Chapter analyses in depth the protest movement of 2020, giving particular attention to the sociological aspects of the movement and its participants. The Third and last Chapter adds other crucial details to the picture drawn by the Second and reports how the protests were met both at national and international level. In the Conclusion, a summary of the main argument closes the thesis. Finally, the Appendix contains an original testimony of Belarusian citizen V. L. from Minsk, wishing to remain anonymous. This interview enriches the thesis and provides an important sociological support to what will be discussed.

## CHAPTER 1: Belarus: delineating the profile of the country

Belarus, officially known as the Republic of Belarus, is situated in eastern Europe, former part of the Soviet Union that only recently has gained sovereignty and independence. The Belarusian nation has been shaped and contaminated by the numerous political entities that gained control over these territories, until the disintegration of the last, the USSR, in 1991. Since then, the authoritarian regime established by its President Lukashenko has become one of the most consolidated and longest running of Europe. He has been able to maintain successfully for over 28 years his rule over the country, first by borrowing from the Soviet tradition of the USSR period, then by gaining control over the political and institutional bodies of the state. Lukashenko has managed to secure his place and protect his regime through a few strategies. He discourages protests and prevents coups through strict restrictions and repression, stabilises the economy through state intervention and income redistribution, and balances external pressures. The structure of his original system has remained almost unchanged, contributing to the longevity of his rule, but recently the tables have turned. Unlike his policies, Belarus is evolving and the ruler is not anymore seen with much benevolence by his people.

### 1.1 History of Belarus

The history of the territory of what today is known as Belarus has been characterised by the political dependence on bigger and more influential political entities. Starting from late medieval times, these lands were part of numerous agglomerations of states for centuries, before finally being united and gaining independence. For these reasons, the history of Belarus is deeply intertwined with those of its neighbouring countries. Indeed, the concept of Belarus as a nation developed only in recent times, even if those identifying as “Belarusians” were joined together by common traits from long before. They shared cultural features, language and ethnic identity. The modern Belarusian *ethnos* is likely to have risen from the merge of both Baltic and Slavs tribes. The former represents the tie between Belarusian and Baltic peoples, in particular Lithuanians, which have experienced intertwined historical moments during the rise of Belarus as an independent nation. The Balts famously inhabited the territories between Europe and Asia before the advent of the Slavs but were gradually conquered or merged with other peoples. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, they settled in the Belarusian lands, where they merged with Slavs and became Slavicized. Their existence soon left space to stronger actors, while their cultures slowly disappeared. Their legacy today is in the hands of Lithuanians and Latvians, that preserve the cultural heritage of the old Baltic people. On the other hand, many believe Belarusians are the descendants of East Slavs, whom during the Migration Period migrated towards Eastern Europe and occupied the lands abandoned by the Germanic tribes.

The East Slavs, once settled, organised themselves in feudal organisations, for example the principality of Polotsk (today northern Belarus). Later, smaller feuds were joined in a large Slavic political agglomeration of

principalities that became known as *Kievan Rus'*. Its cities became important centres for trade, as they were built along a trade route in East Asia, connecting Scandinavia and the Byzantine Empire. These economic activities induced the Christianisation process in the Slavic lands, enabling the standardisation of the Slavonic language, until then never written. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century, *Kievan Rus'* underwent a process of fragmentation, during which Polotsk affirmed itself as one of the most powerful principalities. However, it was soon parted to be governed by multiple members of the local dynasty; among these newly independent fiefs there were territories of modern Belarus (Ruthenian principalities of Minsk, Vitebsk and Druck) and modern Latvia. The Ruthenian parts were soon integrated into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but they preserved their cultural identity, as the conquering people did not populate the newly acquired lands. As a consequence, the local population was able to let a Ruthenian culture bloom. During this period, the first Polish influences appeared, contaminating the official administrative language of Slavic origin (Old Belarusian) of the Grand Duchy, as well as pushing some Ruthenians to convert to Catholicism. At the same time, the written use of Slavonic language was abandoned in favour of local dialects, encouraging the evolution of the Belarusian language. Giving the scarcity of Lithuanians in the Ruthenian lands, the latter remained the most used colloquial language among common Ruthenian people. In this period, the first written work in Eastern Europe was published, using the Belarusian language: a translation of the Bible written by a Polatsk citizen.<sup>1</sup>

In 1569 the Grand Duchy aligned itself with the Kingdom of Poland, giving birth to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth through the Union of Lublin. The two political entities remained partially independent one from another, governed by two separate system of laws, guaranteeing an almost unchanged existence to the Belarusian territories. Their inhabitants were mostly rural population of Ruthenian identity, governed by foreign local power holders. Unfortunately, a process of Polonisation was enforced within the lands of the Grand Duchy. Catholicism became the dominant religious faith, and the rise of local and Belarusian languages was halted by the introduction of Polish as the official language of the entire Commonwealth, already in use among the upper local classes. Later, the decline of the Commonwealth, attacked by its neighbours that weakened its political and economic authority, resulted in the three Partitions of Poland. During the First, the eastern Belarusian territories were lost, while during the Second and the Third the rest of Belarus was joined to the latest major European power: the Russian Empire.

The Russian Empire was one of the four Slavic states across Eurasia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the Belarusian lands made part of it since their annexation in 1795 to the proclamation of the Republic in 1917 under the name of White Rus or White Russia. They were organised in four governorates, headed by the largest cities (among which, Minsk). Under the Russian Empire, Belarus did not thrive. It possibly was the poorest and least developed area of the Empire, with most of the population being rural peasants. While the rest of the Empire found a new economic drive in the effects of the Industrial Revolution, Belarus followed slowly with a few

---

<sup>1</sup> Britannica.

industrial centres, appealing to the peasantry. The new-born railways across the lands of the Empire encouraged a sizeable portion of Belarusians to migrate towards other parts of the Russian Empire. The population inhabiting the Belarusian territory was characterised by an incredibly low level of literacy, as well as a sad percentage of school attendance, amounting only to 6%. Those who were able to gain an education were only taught in Russian or, less frequently, in Polish. The few publications in Belarusian language were written in the Latin alphabet. No use of national languages and no interest in local cultural heritages were envisaged by the Empire's institutions and many cultural peculiarities were lost. The processes of de-Polonisation and Russification in favour of the Empire over the newly acquired lands led to the annihilation of national cultures. The term "*Belarusia*" was prohibited, along with the use of Belarusian in schools and publications. The Latin alphabet was abandoned, with a reintroduction of Cyrillic and the imposition to practice Orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, the 19<sup>th</sup> century represents a shift towards a Belarusian sentiment. Those who enjoyed a higher level of literacy had interest in taking care of their inheritance and became part of the earliest Belarusian nationalists. Among them, a certain category of Belarusians: the Roman Catholic Belarusians.<sup>2</sup> In 1902 the first Belarusian political party *Hramada* was found, of non-Marxist socialist stamp. At the same time, some authors began publishing in the Belarusian language. These works were often published under Polish or Bulgarian labelling due to Russian censorship. The Belarusian language was only recognised again by the tsars during the Revolution of 1905, at last permitting its teaching in schools. These changes led to the birth of modern Belarusian literature in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Worth mentioning is the *Nasa Niva* (Our Field) paper of 1906, published in Vilnius, Lithuania until 1916. Along with poetry and essays, it became the first publication interested in Belarus as a nation (not yet as an independent state) and the well-being of its people. The authors were aware of the conditions and characteristics of their fellow Belarusians, poor and uneducated peasants. Thus, they added an educational motive to the paper: firstly, they taught basic rules of hygiene and cleanliness and prevention of diseases. Secondly, they initiated a process of creation of civil society and national sentiments. At this time, Belarus's borders were very undefined: historically, it had never been a unified state, while no natural border was present. Ethnographically, those Belarusians with catholic faith were hardly distinguished from Poles. Moreover, the only clearer defining feature was the dialect in use, differentiating Belarusians from the Baltic populations. Thus, the activists started building an image of who they wanted to identify as Belarusian, providing a self-identification model to their people. They highlighted the Slavic origin of the Belarusian person, along with pointing out their physical appearance, their traditions, their language. Thirdly, they pushed for laying the basis to social justice, by suggesting the creation of economic cooperatives to lift the impoverished rural peasantry.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rudling (2015).



The first attempt at independence under the name of “Belarus” came during the First World War. When it broke out, the Eastern front happened to cross Belarus, as it was the extreme right part of the Russian Empire. This latter entered the war against Germany and Austro-Hungary and successfully managed to gain control over some of their territories, as East Prussia. However, in 1915 Germany pushed back the Russian army out of East Prussia and occupied Western Belarus, while the East remained under the Russian Empire. The advent of German occupation scared a generous portion of the population, that fled east; this mass migration of Orthodox Belarusians pushed the eastern border of Belarus approximately 200 km east, enlarging its territory. The immediate consequence was the dispersion of those who had been intended to participate in the earliest nationalist attempts, as they left. Surprisingly, their fear was unjustified: the years of German occupation revealed themselves to be a positive period of Belarusian history. As they were amazed to discover the peculiar local people who they called “tribe”, the occupiers allowed Belarus to flourish. In 1918 the first grammar book of Belarusian was published, allowing a standardisation and organisation of the language. Newspapers and written works in the local language were encouraged, as well as places to practice it were built, as schools and theatres. At the same time, the impact of the war resulted heavy on both the economy and the population of the Russian Empire: the Empire was pervaded by famine, inflation and it counted enormous human life losses, while faith in the authority of the tsar dropped down. People’s anger and military failures eventually caused the outbreak of the February Revolution in 1917. The tsarist system was overthrown and later that year the Bolsheviks executed the tsarist family. The elections that followed found the Bolsheviks to be the first party in Belarus, at the expense of nationalist parties. The latter organised an all-Belarusian Congress, with the intention of declaring independence, but their attempt was stopped by the Bolsheviks.

A new spark for the Belarusian nationalists arrived in 1918, after Russia signed the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk and gave up some of its western territories, including Belarus. It followed the establishment of two proto-states. Freed from the Bolsheviks’ control, Belarus saw another attempt to establish the first independent state on its territory. The nationalists gathered and declared the birth of the *Belaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika* on 25 March 1918, the very first independent and democratic state of all the Belarusian territories and the first official declaration of Belarusian statehood. The BNR activists were the first able to guarantee a national identity to Belarus: they adopted the white-red-white flag (resumed in the 2020 protests), the *Pahonia* symbol and the “March of the Warriors” national anthem. However, BNR’s life was short. First, it was not in control of its territory and it was only partially recognised under German occupation. Second, the German troops retreated in December 1918, leading to the return of the Bolsheviks, now led by Stalin. Unlike his predecessors, he adopted a different approach to Belarus: contrary to the belief of most Bolsheviks, he recognised the existence of a Belarusian people and their language. Under his rule, the BNR government was exiled in Lithuania (where it survives to this day) but Belarus preserved its independence. Indeed, the second buffer state of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1919, with nearly the same territory as the

BNR. The difference between the two resided into the Soviet features of the former: designed to be technically independent, it had a Belarusian Communist Party, a Belarusian Supreme Soviet and commissariats of the Belarusian people. It lived shortly, until the Bolsheviks joined it with the recently captured Vilnius, in the so-called Lithuanian-Belarusian SSR. Again, the latest Soviet-controlled state was suppressed when that same year Poland conquered back Vilnius during the Polish-Soviet conflict, with the capital moved to Minsk and the LitBel officially dissolved by Lenin. The Polish troops managed to capture Minsk and for a year held the Belarusian territories until the Bolsheviks gained them back again and re-established in 1920 the SSRB. The results of this tug of war were disheartening for Belarus: both its territory and people got divided between Soviet Russia and Poland. Dissatisfied, they attempted to organise a national uprising, but they were stopped in 1923 by the recognition of the borders by the international community.

The partition between Poland and Russia, now become the USSR, brought about various consequences. In the western part of Belarus, Poland introduced again a process of Polonisation similar to that of centuries before. Political representation of Belarusians got progressively limited in the 1930s and the use of Belarusian language was discouraged. As the schools and their Belarusian organisations were denied funding, they quickly diminished in number and almost disappeared. The lands that once had belonged to the Russian upper classes, now were in the hands of Polish veterans. Minorities were Polonised. In the East, political repression of Belarusian exponents was also adopted by Soviet Russia during the Great Purge. The highest exponents of the Belarusian society were deported or executed. Again, the use Belarusian language was seen as anti-Soviet thus deterred and its orthography was Russified.

Another turning point in the Belarusian history happened with the German invasion of Poland in 1939. After Stalin signed the non-aggression pact with Hitler, Soviet troops attacked Poland as well from the east. As a result, the SSRB acquired back a few parts of the area occupied by the USSR, namely the Bialystok region and other ex-Belarusian territories, which had been previously surrendered to Poland. However, Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 and the Soviet Union did not successfully contrast the attacking troops. Belarus was fully occupied by September and was officially given a puppet government, while behind the scenes Germans imposed a racist regime with the support of the local police. Belarusians were imprisoned, enslaved or killed, villages and houses were destroyed and almost all the Belarusian Jews were deported or killed. The population responded to the invaders by organising a powerful resistance, that eventually freed the Belarusian territories from the German rule in August 1944, after brutal fighting. At the end of the war, the land was devastated and a quarter of the population was dead. Western Belarus was added back to the Soviet Union, while Poles were deported to Poland. In 1945 the Belarusian SSR was offered a seat in the General Assembly of the United Nations as its own state, despite being part of the USSR, making it one of the founding members of the organisation of which it is still part today.

The aftermath of the Second World War was bitter in the SSRB. Apart from the devastation that had erased buildings, villages, cities and the enormous number of deaths, the country was heavily suffering also in the economic field. The World War had almost entirely shut down Belarusian industries and dramatically halted agricultural production. To help the whole USSR recover from the war damage, Stalin established the post-war Five-Year plans. The Belarusian SSR deeply enjoyed its benefits, as it grew economically and became quickly industrialised while its cities widened and welcomed more and more inhabitants. On the one hand, the new strong industrial sector was heavily tied with the Soviet factories and it depended on Russian imports for raw materials and energy. On the other, the Belarusian SSR became one of the most productive centres in western USSR, with large industries being built, job opportunities being created, and Russian immigration being encouraged by the fast growth. Belarusian language was further put aside to promote Russian as the administrative language and Moscow retained most of the control over Belarusian production.

Under Khrushchev the Stalinist Sovietisation continued. Russian language and traditions were promoted over Belarusian's. However, the Belarusian nationalist sentiment was still alive and burning. As the German occupation had promoted nationalist drives against the Soviet rule, separatist actors promoting independence from the Soviet Union lived long and made themselves be heard especially under Gorbachev's presidency. In the 1980s he adopted less strict policies and initiated a process of soft liberalisation, to which the Belarusian SSR responded with a revival of national sentiments. Even if the population was not expressing strongly the desire to separate from the USSR, in those years the pro-independence forces became more powerful and prominent on the political scene. Political parties like the Belarusian Popular Front were calling for democratisation, while promoting Belarusian history and language. They gained an important spot during the crisis of the central authority of the Soviet Union and contributed to the Belarusian declaration of sovereignty in 1990 and later to stopping the political dependence of the country on its Soviet neighbour.

## 1.2 The country today

Belarus has officially gained its political independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union, when it changed its name and proclaimed itself as the free and autonomous Republic of Belarus. To this day, its borders have remained untouched; it is neighbours with Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, all countries with which it has been associated to or being a part of since medieval times till throughout modern history. Ethnically, nowadays four-fifths of the entire population is Belarusians. The biggest ethnic groups of the rest of the inhabitants of the country are Russians, Poles, Ukrainians. Other smaller minorities are composed by Latvians, Lithuanians, and Tatars, along with Jews (nearly eliminated after the WW2 genocide). The traditional rural peasantry has given way, during the centuries, to the larger urban population, that today represents more of the 75% and of which one fifth resides in the capital, Minsk. The spoken languages are the

two most present during the development of the country, which today have become the official languages of Belarus: Russian and Belarusian. The latter has developed from the Old Belarusian, the chancery language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which has been contaminated by both Polish and Russian, the latter being related to both Belarusian and Ukrainian. Likewise, the religious faiths professed in the country have remained the same from the past; while some people are atheist, the rest stays faithful to Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Along with them, there are small minorities of Judaism, Islam, and other Christian forms.

From an institutional point of view, Belarus is one of the most interesting European countries as its existence and political character draw from two different and separate traditions. On one hand, the regime of Lukashenko borrows most of its features from the Soviet experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the respect for Belarusian Soviet past, inherent to the institutions of the regime, flows the foundation of its legitimation. The economic model followed by the President heavily draws from Soviet tradition. On the other hand, the peculiar characteristic of Belarus is the existence of a government in exile, elected every few years following the tradition of the BNR government exiled in 1918, making it the only European state to have one. Nowadays, the BNR *Rada* continues its activity as the advocate for Belarusian independence and democracy, embodying a welcoming place for politicians of the Belarusian opposition. In fact, it is the political entity closest to Belarus to condemn the rule of law abuse and human rights violations perpetuated by the President, as well as the continuing process of Russification keeping it strongly tied to Russian political and economic choices.

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the relationship with *Matushka Rossiya* has persisted, as Belarus is the most Russified country of the post-Soviet area. Right after having gained freedom, Belarus experienced a period of precariousness that made the stability characterising the Soviet era a nostalgic and desirable option. Lukashenko himself built his political image and ideology on his upbringing under the Soviet Union and adopted Sovietisation strategies. He described himself as a “Soviet Belarusian” and displayed Soviet symbols and ideas. In addition, Belarusians famously lacked history of political independence or even a defined national identity. Indeed, in the All-Union referendum of 1991, 83% of the Belarusian population voted in favour of the preservation of the USSR. Both the scepticism and the absence of enthusiasm turned Belarusians towards Russia. Soon after the declaration of independence, the freshly elected President consented to the establishment of tighter relations through the signing of the Union State agreement in 1996. Additionally, the two states are linked by multiple other political arrangements, encouraging cooperation in political (CSI, SCO), economic (EEU), and military (CTSO) affairs.

Nonetheless, the tight relationship between Belarus and Russia has been mitigated by the choices of Lukashenko, who has managed to assert on several occasions the independence of its country. Instability and pro-Russian sentiments among the population opened the way to the top for Lukashenko, but his intentions towards Russia have always been related to his preoccupation with Belarus’s well-being. The collapse of the Soviet Union had numerous distressful effects for the newly independent states. He proposed himself as the

solution to the problems of corruption, criminality, diminishing standards of living. When he signed the 1996 agreement with ill-prone Russian president Yeltsin, he was planning to unify under his presidency Belarus and Russia. He was only stopped by the election of Putin in 2000. In the short term, the post-Soviet integration and Russian sympathy faded, as Belarusians became used to the idea of an independent and sovereign state. The long-term consequence has been an unexpected turn, according to which Belarusian policies have balanced the Russian influence ever since. Lukashenko has proved his qualities particularly in the field of economics: he has been able to capitalise on the imperial ambitions of Putin towards Belarus in exchange for continuous economic support and political approval that have both contributed to the longevity and stability of his regime. At the same time, he has initiated negotiations and dialogues with the West and the European Union to counterbalance the Russian influence on the state.

A closer look at the evolution of the Belarusian republic may help to analyse further the peculiar elements mentioned above. The first free elections in the country were held in 1994 after the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, attesting the new democratic and social character of the state. Alexander Lukashenko, energetic populist who sided “neither with the leftists nor the rightists” as he declared to the New York Times, had an incredibly successful electoral campaign and won the elections against 4 other candidates. He centred his programme on what Belarusian people needed, without a pre-thought plan, promising jobs and wellness in a climate of economic instability and uncertainty. He shared the concept of an independent Belarus, but he was not fond of the idea of establishing a national democracy. Thus, once in office, he renewed the process of Sovietisation (which only recently has been halted in favour of Belarusian sovereignty) and entered a dispute with the parliament. The consequences of this institutional clash culminated in the referendum held two years later, which established the supremacy of the President over the parliament and the constitutional court. In fact, he proposed several amendments to the 1994 constitution to expand his powers, and the public officially voted in favour of a deeply structurally altered parliament (which became a bilateral national assembly, with the lower chamber appointed entirely by Lukashenko) subject to the President, who could rule by decree, could prolong his office and had full control over the judiciary and the executive. In short, in two years Lukashenko consolidated and enlarged his power at the expense of democracy and initiated the process through which he got his hands on every corner of the country, including media and other non-political fields. Apart from the structural changes, Lukashenko’s presidency proceeded to affect the state even more in the following years. Politically, he built an authoritarian regime and his political decisions mirror his vision since the beginning. First, he had the intention of extending his 5-year term of office to 7 years. At the time the second turn of elections was supposed to be held in 1999, he made clear he was not leaving soon. As the opposition parties organised an alternative election, the organisers and the two designated candidates Pazniak and Chygir either disappeared or were arrested, de facto nullifying the elections. Until today, the opposition continued to be marginalised and weakened to the point that it has never been able to be a credible opponent

(fed by the belief that there is no feasible alternative to Lukashenko and his adversaries are not qualified). Second, he issued a presidential decree in 1997 restricting the right to demonstrate and the freedom of expression with flags, symbols and slogans. From then on, he has continued to adopt stricter measures, as discouraging protests intervenes at the roots in eliminating threats to the regime's survival. As a result, in his 28 years of existence the regime has only a few times experienced strong national waves of protests and the population is either demoralised or accepts the regime as inevitable.

With his Soviet nostalgia and the fear of nationalist uprisings, Lukashenko's regime has regrettably discouraged the re-discovery and revival of Belarusian traditions and culture. After 1991, Belarus experienced renovated interest into the national traditions and culture, with a rediscovery of national symbols and language. A drive of patriotic pride pervaded the country, freed from the Soviet rule that had suffocated its identity. The educational system enjoyed reforms and renovations, as the introduction of Belarusian written textbooks and history courses on the Belarusian road to independence, painting the Soviet Union as a repressor. The election of Lukashenko reversed this auspicious process. To this day, schools teach the Soviet version of Belarusian history in Russian language, which has become the predominant language for institutional purposes and in state media. The "risks of nationalism" have discouraged the teaching in Belarusian even in Belarusian-language schools and the number of university students studying in Belarusian is miserably very low, reaching only 0.2% in 2017.<sup>3</sup> This drastic change has politicised the language question, conferring on Belarusian an oppositional meaning, as it is relegated only to non-state structures. For example, among the opposition newspapers written in Belarusian there is one that resumes the old *Nasa Niva* from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, borrowing the name. In addition, Belarusian language is becoming trendy and is not anymore thought as the synonym of backwardness and lack of education, increasingly used by independent businesses and young people.

Furthermore, he remained loyal to the Soviet economic tradition, introducing a system that has confirmed the state as the main economic actor in Belarus. Exploiting the wave of recession that followed the dismantling of the USSR, he built a paternalist social contract, according to which the state should guarantee the welfare of the country in exchange for the political approval from the population. The lack of the possibility to participate to political life was traded off for economic stability. State intervention for the redistribution of income and the economic surplus, government regulation and state monopolies are some of the measures adopted in the system. Once in office, Lukashenko immediately stopped the expanding process of privatisation, as he is hostile to private ownership and market economy. As a result, the public sector was (and still is) characterised by underperforming industries, while the state made up the 60% of national GDP.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the state has become the largest producer and employer of the country, and the provider of socio-economic stability in

---

<sup>3</sup> Moshes and Nizhnikau (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Shraibman (2018).

Belarus. The “Belarusian model” envisages the collaboration between the presidency and a few privileged social groups, selected for government offices or state-owned industries’ head offices. Lukashenko remains the head of economic activity by acting directly throughout policies and maintaining strong control over ministry-driven enterprises, the most numerous in the country. This process has encouraged the loyalty of the business class to the regime but has ultimately promoted the creation of a class of political elite, disdained by the rest of the population.

While Belarus has experienced a stable and even growing GDP ever since 1995,<sup>5</sup> external factors like the crisis of 2008 and the recession of 2015 have slowed down remarkably the process of growth. Belarus has relied for a long time on exports with Russia, main economic partner of the country, and more recently the European Union; the economic crisis in both has contributed to the fall in levels of imports and exports and the depreciation of the Belarusian rouble, as well as a worse performance of Belarusian enterprises. These changes have shown the weaknesses of the economic system built by Lukashenko. He has difficulty in making decisions that would solve these problems but shake the system, undermining its stability; for this reason, in 2016 he forced his advisor to withdraw a reform proposal that he believed would have caused social distress. Since then, he has continued to stick to the strict rules of the “Belarusian model” introducing only irrelevant changes. Subsequent decisions brought to the first nationwide protests in the following years, expressing the discontent in response to the insufficient policies adopted by a President that progressively lost his people’s trust and support.

---

<sup>5</sup> Klysiniski (2016).

## CHAPTER 2: The protest movement of 2020

The theory of authoritarian consolidation suggests that the blame for the prosperity of such political regimes is to be placed on the population of the state. Fearing violent repercussions through repression, the people accepts the political status quo giving up a certain level of liberties, in exchange for security and stability. According to this statement, the regime of Lukashenko has been remarkably long-lasting primarily because the Belarusian population has accepted its existence. As it was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, people in Belarus express apathic and resigned feelings towards politics and their leader, which have discouraged them to question and oppose Lukashenko's presidency. Although the population is well aware of the democratic deficiencies and the little consideration for freedoms and human rights, most Belarusians have surrendered and tolerated the regime. Firstly, Lukashenko has built a system of economic and social stability which was praised by some and put up with by the rest. The social contract guaranteeing order, political stability, and economic security in exchange for loyalty was an acceptable price to pay for most Belarusians. Secondly, any discontent with the system has been suppressed by the punitive machinery of the regime, deterring turmoil through threats and coercion. Crucial groups as the police, the military and special forces carry on being faithful and supporting, allowing the enactment of repression when needed. The security services are a key actor to controlling the bureaucracy, the elite and the population, often manipulating investigations and trials for arranged outcomes. Lastly, Lukashenko has presented himself as the only feasible alternative for governing the country, if not the only existent option, rendering void any attempt at reform or change. To fuel these elements, he promoted the image of a failing opposition and portrayed it as a self-destructing actor, bringing on itself the consequences (repression) of its actions, further legitimising the regime. In short, the tools for the consolidation of authoritarian rule have been applied more than successfully in Belarus.

Indeed, the regime has hardly ever encountered a menacing threat for its existence. The earliest of the few major challenges are the events of 2006 and 2010. They represent brutal and violent but failed attempts at revolution after two subsequent presidential elections, both with unfair and rigged results. During the former, Lukashenko ran against a "unified" candidate representing a coalition of opposition parties and he won with 86% of the votes. The proclamation of Lukashenko triggered an unanticipated mass opposition rally of thousands of people for days. The police was sent to arrest exponents of the opposition and hundreds of protesters and the riots slowly faded. The latter elections were won again by Lukashenko, although they were the fairest elections since 1994 according to David Marples. His opponents had been unable to organise themselves as in the previous case and they could not catalyse the votes for one winning candidate, even though the most voted (the independent Andrei Sannikov) had a support of 25-30%,<sup>6</sup> enough to strip

---

<sup>6</sup> Marples (2013).



Lukashenko of an outright majority. Despite this, Lukashenko was sworn for his fourth term with a common-practice misreported result of 80%. As a consequence, the second round of elections never took place and the confirmation of Lukashenko's position caused a crackdown. Up to 700 among protesters, activists and alternative candidates were arrested and several of them got beaten, tortured, or detained. After 2010, Lukashenko's legitimacy as the president of Belarus was not further challenged by his people and the accusations of unfair and undemocratic elections by multiple international actors were dismissed. Such claims were reiterated during the following presidential elections in 2015, but again they had no consequence on the elective mechanisms and Lukashenko was confirmed president for the fifth time. This time, the people accepted his re-election and the country did not tremble under riots. However, social tension spread regardless. As Lukashenko fears change and its unpredictable consequences, the system of political, social, and economic stability built by him remained in place unaltered; his choice to reject reforms or even slight modifications eventually harmed peace and order. The first episode of manifest unrest happened in 2017, when an unemployment tax law was published. The country had been experiencing economic regression for two years, as a result of a wider crisis involving few post-Soviet states, including the main economic partner Russia, and a global drop of fuel prices, affecting one of the main exports of Belarus (oil products reach 30% of the country's exports). Since 2015 the GDP of the country positive and stable for two decades (the last evidence of a decline in Belarusian GDP had been in 1995) dropped below 0.<sup>7</sup> As an emergency measure, state employment and pensions were gradually cut and their levels have not gone up since, despite constant inflation, while production and exports decreased remarkably. The value of the Belarusian rouble fell, devaluing the real income and wages of individuals, who became more prone to poverty, while prices were rising. In other words, the system of social guarantees established by Lukashenko was failing to support the population and its main promises were being broken, while he could not find an acceptable solution. Instead of structural reforms that could undermine his authority, he favoured the manipulation of economic factors, as state employment, and controlling growth and society. When he introduced what became known as the "Social Parasite tax" (introducing an annual fee to be paid by Belarusians working less than 183 days a year without formal employment), demonstrations broke out and more than 700 people were arrested.

Unfortunately, the uneasy sentiments expressed by his population did not ring a bell for the President. The tax was eventually revoked, but his policies stayed on the same page with the same effects: the state was not able to halt the recession for years.<sup>8</sup> Lukashenko's early acclaimed capacity of listening to his people had faded in time and his actions had become incapable of keeping up with the needs of the state. From the "father" of his nation that saved it from the 1990s chaos, he has grown into a "president of the past"<sup>9</sup>. While he prefers to stick to his old methods and the outdated inefficient economic system, Belarus is rapidly evolving, unnoticed

---

<sup>7</sup> Wilson (2016).

<sup>8</sup> The World Bank.

<sup>9</sup> Moshes and Nizhnikau (2019).

by its President. Drifting away from the Soviet days, the Belarusian society is leaving behind more and more aspects related to the Soviet Union and has entered a new phase of modernisation. Steady growth in GDP and consequent rising standards of living encouraged modernising processes of society in the 2000s, which today enjoys a significant high human capital potential. Education became more affordable and desirable, and the number of students and university degrees increased considerably. Travelling became common, and the increasing use of the Internet and social media all contributed to alter opinions and expand social consciences. Especially in the last 10 years, Belarusians have experienced a partial liberalisation and a value shift away from the paternalistic narrative sold by the regime, and their interest with politics has increased. There is growing sympathy with democratic and liberal values, along with demands for more tolerance and openness. They have become interested in participating to public life, within a centralised state that does not guarantee political participation, as well as involved in grassroot activism. However, they remain mostly unheard or isolated, unable to exert any influence at all.

Hence the regime is not aligned anymore with the Belarusian society, and the latter demands for change. The authoritarian rule consolidated by Lukashenko does not appear as successful as it has been in the past decades, steadily eroding the much-appreciated durability of it. The failure of economic measures in response to the latest crises fed the growing disbelief with the promises of welfare and social benefits. The crisis of 2009 and the recession of 2015 have had unfortunate consequences for Lukashenko: the leading role of the state in the Belarusian economy is thinning and leaving room for the private sector to fill in the gaps. The fear of an “untameable market” and the reluctance to promote market economy are not enough to stop the expanding social and economic mobility and the spreading of pro-market views among the population. Moreover, the often disproportionate and brutal repression methods adopted by the police and the security forces have scared away a large share of the population. Belarusians have become more sceptical and critical towards the state authorities and an increasing number of them considers the governance system obsolete and inadequate. In summary, the socio-cultural changes that have been developing in Belarus for years materialise in the dangerous widening gap between the state and the people, highlighting the urgency for reforms that would most likely be painful to enforce.

Amid all these alarming elements for the stability of the regime, the day of the upcoming presidential elections of 2020 was approaching. To complicate things, at the beginning of the year the Covid-19 pandemic spread. Among the choir of voices expressing different opinions, state authorities declared that the elections would be held just the same. While elsewhere strong and unprecedented decisions were being taken in the interest of the health of individuals, Lukashenko dismissed the dangers of the pandemic as “psychosis” and chose to keep the state open to preserve the already bleeding economy. On the other hand, a ZOiS Report (2021) informs that large shares of the population were asking for stronger and stricter measures against the pandemic, demanding closings and even a full lockdown. Their reaction to how the authorities dealt with the pandemic,

deemed to have been inadequate, with poor timing, lack of coordination and ignoring citizenry's requests, was clearly negative. Groups of volunteers mobilised to provide support to doctors, to distribute free masks and to collect and spend money on other medical supplies. The discontent with the pandemic merged with the pre-existing social distress in a ticking bomb ready to explode.

It was in these unpleasant circumstances that the elections took place. Lukashenko ran for his sixth term and was expected by the state authorities to cruise smoothly through the electoral campaign and to gain a considerable win in votes. The absence of a genuine alternative and the distrust towards the opposition had never dented the outright majority that had guaranteed his re-election five times. Unexpectedly, the 2020 elections surprised the authorities developing as an extraordinary event from the beginning. The participation of the public to the electoral campaign was exceptional: the activism sprung in the fight against Covid-19 turned into political engagement. The requisite of 100,000 signatures to candidate was easily reached by three adversaries of Lukashenko (Viktar Babaryko, Valery Tsapkala, both part of the elite, and the blogger Syarhei Tsikhanouski), all debutants on the political stage. Neither of them was formally part of the opposition, thus it was easier for people to accept they could represent an alternative to Lukashenko. Their support was so large that the state authorities resorted to emergency measures: firstly, Tsikhanouski and Tsapkala were banned by the Central Electoral Commission as they were accused of having turned in papers with invalid signatures. Secondly, Babaryko was charged of tax evasion, money laundering and bribery, and was arrested. Amidst the chaos generated by the different opinions on the validity of the accusations, the vacancy was filled by the candidacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Syarhei's wife. She as well was threatened by unknowns (her children's safety was targeted during a phone call)<sup>10</sup>, but she continued to run and was even joined by the teams of her former adversaries. Thanks to her collaborators, she became a powerful opponent for Lukashenko, but no action was taken against her; according to Sophie Bedford, she was most likely underestimated on gender grounds. And gender actually became crucial in her campaign: the joint efforts of her, Veronika Tsapkala (Tsapkala's wife) and Maria Kolesnikova (Barbaryka's former campaign manager) turned the tables around.

The months preceding the election day of August 9<sup>th</sup> were intense. A growing number of people started to get interested in politics and to participate in electoral activities, both online and offline. Unofficial communication through the Internet played a key role as it promulgated unpleasant phrases on Lukashenko (the "cockroach"), hinting at his diminishing public support (an independent Belarusian media published an opinion poll, conveying the message that Lukashenko enjoyed only a shrunk 3%) while painting an appealing image of Tsikhanouskaya as a "smart and invincible" woman. The circulation of images and memes on the President discredited and delegitimised Lukashenko, also depicting his supporters as a minority; on the contrary, it benefited Tsikhanouskaya, as her candidacy against Lukashenko gained credibility. Slogans like

---

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021).

“Long live Belarus”, “Stop the Cockroach!” and “We Believe, We Can Do It, We Will Win!” pervaded online chats. Telegram became the main means through which one could engage in political participation by taking part in discussions, sharing live news, spreading information and awareness. Participants were often involved in online debates to single out the tactics through which they could defeat Lukashenko. For example, Tsikhanouskaya’s team encouraged potential voters to register on online platforms that could provide proof against the usual practice of rigged votes, as *Golos* (“Vote”), *Zubr*, *Chestnye Liudi* (“Honest People”) or to wait to vote until the last moment, to hamper any counterfeiting of the actual result.

However, the most striking part of the campaign took place offline. The work of Emma Mateo reports the presence of social networks active from the beginning of the electoral campaign. Discussions on whether demonstrations and protests would be profitable strategies resulted in the organisation of multiple events in several localities around the country. People supported the opponent of Lukashenko by signing petitions and donating to crowd-funding campaigns, as well as by participating in events, meet-ups, and protests organised via chat rooms. During gatherings, they displayed symbols of the oppositional tradition, as the white-red-white flag (originally the emblem of the BNR). All over the country, electoral rallies in favour of Tsikhanouskaya welcomed thousands of people, until when on July 30<sup>th</sup> the government revoked the authorisation and put in place governmental events instead. Nevertheless, the enthusiastic mobilisation and the numbers of Tsikhanouskaya’s supporters kindled their hopes that this time the outcome of the presidential elections could be different.

When Lukashenko was announced as the winner with 80% of the votes on August 9<sup>th</sup>, the fuse caught fire. Several independent online voting platforms and polls showed discrepancies (which are still visible on their websites<sup>11</sup>) between the votes recorded online and the official results; every platform registered a majority more or less defined for Tsikhanouskaya.<sup>12</sup> As the opposition denounced a blatant electoral fraud, numerous voting stations closed before all the citizens in line could express their preference on the ballot. Among these, Tsikhanouskaya’s supporters were joined by other “early risers” of the pre-election mobilisation and initiated what would become known as the biggest protest movement in Belarus. Differently from before, these events interested every area of the country. That evening, demonstrations against the re-election of Lukashenko broke out in at least 19 cities, a number that grew rapidly in the following weeks. In two days, it doubled until it reached at least 101 localities at the end of the first week, involving smaller centres and rural areas as well as the larger urban cities.<sup>13</sup> Protests were held every weekend in multiple places, even in two or more neighbourhoods of the same city simultaneously, to decrease the possibility of being shut down. The streets were filled with people: two weeks after the publication of the official results, the number of protesters peaked

---

<sup>11</sup> Voice of Belarus (2020).

<sup>12</sup> Rudnik (2020).

<sup>13</sup> Mateo (2022).

at 200,000 people at the Stella square in Minsk. The publication of the results of the unfair elections had transformed the mobilisation of some citizens in a huge national opposition movement.

In the words of Onuch and Sasse, those who were participating formed a much diversified “cross-class and cross-cleavage coalition”<sup>14</sup>. Surprisingly, they cannot be directly associated with the opposition, the historical promoter of such events: Tsikhanouskaya and her team did not militate in the frontline but limited themselves to making public statements encouraging the protests. Instead, who took the spot was the common person, often new to political participation and activism (a survey showed that only 4% of protesters had previously participated in protests)<sup>15</sup>. A large part came from the pre-existing networks of the electoral campaign, of which mostly young people and women. In demographic terms, most of the protesters were between the ages of 30 and 55; however, age did not prevent participation, as both children and senior citizens marched together with the rest.<sup>16</sup> The majority was Russian speaking, better educated than the general population and belonged to middle classes. They had the most varied job occupations, from industrial workers to entrepreneurs to university professors, but the most were from the private sector or skilled professionals, in particular belonging to the IT sector and the educated proletariat. However, despite the wide mobilisation, some groups remained alien to the protests and even rejected them as “immoral”.<sup>17</sup> An example are the *kolkhoz* workers of the rural areas, who continue to wish for a strong and interventionist state, able to protect and support the collectivised countryside. In summary, the 2020 protests saw an inclusive and bizarrely diverse assortment of individuals; yet Elena Gapova implies that they shared a common trait: being prevented from participating to the system, if not as those “outside” and only recognised as “resource groups” for the common good. Accordingly, what they were ultimately seeking for was to be recognised as both citizens and political subjects.<sup>18</sup>

Hence the protests originated from a general demand for socio-political change and reforms. Narrowing the perspective, the requests were numerous and varied: people protested for fair elections, transparency, justice and against the brutal repression. The first demands reflected the shift in values of the Belarusian society. Indeed, a turn to liberalisation requested by Western states and the European Union after the previous rigged elections had pushed Lukashenko towards more openness and more tolerance, which encouraged the population to develop an interest in politics. At the same time, the social and economic changes altered the attitudes of Belarusians towards the state and democracy. As they became disillusioned with the promises of paternalism, they began to recognise the bright side of political participation. A strong centralised interventionist state was not anymore welcomed or valued more than rights, accountability, and market economy. On the contrary, the last demands drew significantly from the direct consequences of the protest movement. In particular, individual reactions to the violence against the protests were one of the key mobilisers.

---

<sup>14</sup> Onuch and Sasse (2022).

<sup>15</sup> Krawatzek and Sasse (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Onuch (2020).

<sup>17</sup> Greene (2022).

<sup>18</sup> Gapova (2021).

As the participation was remarkably high, it was common for Belarusians to personally know a victim, listen to witnesses or see online proof, if they were not a victim themselves. On the other hand, the strategy of violent repression perpetuated by the regime scared off from protesting a non-negligible amount of people, the “silent opponents”<sup>19</sup> afraid to join the protesters.

The regimes of engagement adopted by the protesters were a mix of nonviolent new and old practices, which have gradually evolved to elude worsening police brutality. The earliest modes of action were traditional, as marching, chanting slogans and organising speaker meetings in safe locations. Whenever a square was chosen as the gathering location, singers and poets would enliven the protesters with their art. People would collectively create and display their self-made banners or wave the white-red-white flag, while chanting simple slogans against the regime like “*Spynitse hval!*” (Stop the violence). On the other hand, signs and slogans were also the epitome of innovation and originality: messages, questions, memes, and countless others revealed irony and persiflage towards the system. Similarly, other forms of protest directly reflected the personality of the Belarusians involved in the movement, recognised for their individuality rather than for their loyalty to an opposition leader. Examples of personal and individual actions were wearing crowns to challenge Lukashenko’s self-appointed position, painting graffiti and murals, and organising clothes lines in order to compose the white-red-white flag on houses’ balconies. Certain actions were taken to attack the system from within: some people resorted to economic pressure through boycotting companies and non-paying bills or they resigned from state-managed businesses and organisations. Further, specific social groups put forward their competences to serve the cause. An illustration was the IT sector organising online portals for fundraisings, to which donations came from both Belarus and abroad, and creating tools and channels of communication online. They provided protesters with platforms for coordination, on which instructions for a gathering or reports of another were shared. Telegram became the common link between the diversified agency of the protests: as during the electoral campaign, users exchanged news, information, and reports of events. The number of subscribers of the local and national chats progressively increased, including even cross-boarders spectators. While the latter granted a broad coverage of the protests, the former were successfully used by neighbourhood groups to organise smaller gatherings, discuss the wider political situation, or deliberate on everyday concerns. The continuous discussion and sharing of innovative ideas contributed to the longevity of the “summer of protests” that, working around police reprisals, managed to survive for months after August 9<sup>th</sup>.

Indeed, the last worth-mentioning feature of the protests in Belarus is how long they have managed to last, in spite of the repressive nature typical of authoritarian regimes. State authorities adopted stricter and stricter measures against the protesters, but they did not capitulate, even if considerably weakened. On one hand, the cities and villages of Belarus continue to be animated by protesters two years after the first night of protests. However, the number of people in the streets has decreased considerably, as the time passing without receiving

---

<sup>19</sup> Krawatzek and Sasse (2021).

any positive response disheartens them. Additionally, political support and economic aid from Putin's Russia reassured the President, while financing the costly manoeuvres of the police against the protests. On the other hand, opposition figures themselves faced serious consequences. After Tsikhanouskaya complained about the confirmation of Lukashenko, she was detained for seven hours; when her family was threatened, she was forced to flee to Lithuania, where she still resides. From there, she launched a Coordination Council with the task of rectifying the results and negotiating a transfer of power. Such negotiations were stubbornly refused by the President, who accused the Council of plotting to seize power and harming national security. Then, he launched a criminal case against it, registered the participants' names under a terrorist list and ordered the arrest of several of them. Former members of Tsikhanouskaya's team fled to Poland and Russia, while some others were detained before they could exit the country. Nevertheless, the 2020 protest movement has yet to be extinguished and, while the opposition continues to act from abroad, Belarusians bravely persist to fight for their rights from within.

In conclusion, if the blame for the prosperity of an authoritarian regime is to be unfairly placed on the shoulders of the population, Belarusians have redeemed themselves. Indeed, the year of 2020 represents a milestone in the history of Belarus. The socio-economic circumstances, the social distress and the extraordinary political engagement erupted in a never-before-seen situation in the country. People of all sorts flooded the streets of several cities in an attempt to make their voices heard in a state where political participation is absent and dissent is overcome with repression and police brutality. Summing up, the events are astonishing for multiple reasons. First, the last political expression of discontent of this magnitude in Belarus had been seen in 1994. This could hint at the dissatisfaction with Lukashenko's archaic economic policies or at the shift towards liberalisation undergoing among Belarusian society. Second, the exceptional political participation to the protests represents a unique event in the country. Every social stratum besides the elite took part to the post-election activities, without exception of age, gender, and occupation. Third, unlike the past, protesters have not retreated despite the violent repression ordered by Lukashenko and have continued to agitate the country for an astounding period of time, in an effort to fix the outcome of the elections, rigged by a weaker and weaker authoritarian leader.

## CHAPTER 3: The aftermath of the protests: a national and international overview

### 3.1 How the Belarusian state prevents and silences dissent

In Belarus, dissent has often been met with a harsh counteraction from the state. Lukashenko's strong personality and his characteristic wariness towards any external element are a perfect match for the typical authoritarian response to threats. While his repressive strategy has contributed to render his regime stable and secure, the balance between necessary use of force and excessive violence has recently fell out of equilibrium. On the other hand, the judicial system is deliberately and systematically abused by the government to eradicate dissent and erase political opponents. The lack of respect for rights, transparency, and accountability has progressively attracted attention from abroad, where other international actors have become preoccupied with what happens inside the country. As various international organisations have been signalling human rights violation and other dangerous practices for decades, Western states have taken measures to try pushing Belarus towards a more democratic and just path.

The few protests and dissent movements in Belarus have always been countered with the typical tools that authoritarian regimes resort to for annihilating threats. As Lukashenko has his firm grip on the police and the security forces, he has relied on their support to enforce repression and strike terror into dissidents' hearts. To achieve this aim and maintain public order, two police bodies have been put in place: the national police service "*militsiya*" and the riot police, the OMON special units. Their units are specifically trained for crowd control, for dispersing mass gatherings and isolating and "neutralising" subversive elements. To do so, they are authorised to use force while remaining anonymous, without wearing any uniform or tag, which makes it impossible to recognise them and hold them accountable for any excessive measure adopted. Actually, there is no supervisory entity to discipline the police bodies and to ensure the legitimacy of their activity. Further, their militants are strategically selected among young men from the poorest regions of the country, who are given the privilege of the exemption from compulsory military in exchange for total dedication to their task and unconditional loyalty to the state authorities.

The demonstrations after the presidential elections of 2006 and 2010 were extinguished by both the *militsiya* and the OMON units. In the first case, Amnesty International reported countless arrests among opposition figures and members of civil society, as well as citizens participating to the protests. In March, presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin was beaten and charged with disorderly conduct along with some of his supporters, after having tried to register to a government-organised rally in the capital. Activists of the youth opposition movement *Zubr* were detained for writing slogans in graffiti and faced up to 6 years in prison. To prevent post-election protests state authorities warned the population that they could be charged with terrorism. The threats did not intimidate the public, as following the elections a few thousands of protesters occupied October Square in Minsk forming a tent camp. The riot police intervened and arrested hundreds of people; the



following days the situation worsened, as the police clashed with demonstrators, launching grenades, killing one protester and arresting many others. The security services detained several opposition leaders, as Kazulin who was sentenced to more than 5 years in jail (he was released in 2008) and continued successfully to apply violence to definitively halt the demonstrations.

In 2010 thousands of people took the streets to protest against a non-transparent election. The use of batons in a police reprisal against a demonstration in Minsk was justified as the right answer to an alleged attempt to break into the parliament building (encouraged by only a small group of young protesters, covered with scarfs); the intervention ended with 700 arrests among the protesters. Among the former candidates, several were detained and tortured. Foreign minister Sannikau was wounded by the riot police, then arrested and beaten with his wife on his way to the hospital; “Tell the Truth” party leader Niaklajeu got detained and beaten, hospitalised, and later incarcerated in a KGB isolation cell; 37 activists accused of inciting mass riots had the same fate. The release of detainees was often conditioned by an agreement for cooperation with the security services to prevent further protests.

### 3.2 The repression strategies of 2020

The degree of police brutality and repression against protests peaked to unprecedented levels during the 2020 movement. The first days of protests were marked by a governmental crackdown of unprecedented violence. The OMON units and the *Spetznaz* (Special Designation Forces) used unlimited and excessive force to punish and humiliate the protesters, as well as intimidate potential others. Accordingly, they resorted to the use of rubber bullets, stun grenades, chemical irritants, water cannons, and tear gas, resulting in thousands of arrests and 4 deaths among the demonstrators. The riot police selected people to arrest according to what they were carrying that could be associated to the opposition or to the protests (“protective equipment, medicines, white ribbons, and white-red-white flags”). In one case, the police arrested and beaten a florist that had never protested but sold flowers to demonstrators. Once violently removed from the crowd, people were brought inside cramped police vehicles, where they were beaten while fighting for breathing. Women claimed to have been threatened with rape or the loss of custody of their children. Leading Belarusian human rights organisation *Viasna* reported a total of 8,712 demonstrators detained, of which at least 850 were sentenced with criminal charges.

Once inside the detention centres, individuals suffered countless types of abuses and ill-treatment. Detainees were held in overcrowded cells or forced to stand motionless in corridors or to held stress positions. In some cases, they were held outside or forced to stand naked in the cold. They were forced to wear coloured identifiers for particular treatment. According to the words of Vitold Ashurak, political prisoners must wear yellow labels on their prison uniforms to be recognised. Access to water, food, toilets was denied, along with the possibility

to speak to a lawyer. Women were often denied sanitary pads and they were forced to undress in the presence of male guards and constantly watched by them through security cameras in the cells and toilets. Long hair and dreadlocks were cut with knives, while tattoos and piercings attracted worse treatment. In the worst scenarios, they were subjected to beatings, electric shocks, and other forms of torture. In one case, a man was raped with a truncheon. Detainees suffered from broken bones, skin wounds, electrical burns to brain injuries meanwhile medical supplies were confiscated to prevent treatment. The majority was released without the enactment of judicial proceedings or after a minute-long standing in front of a judge, with minor consequences (custodial sentences for administrative offenses). Yet, 2021 reports counted at least three people's deaths behind the bars. First, member of Belarusian Popular Front opposition party and activist Vitold Ashurak was serving a 5-year term for having participated in anti-government protests when he collapsed twice in his empty cell, allegedly for a heart attack, and died. Second, volunteer Kira Bayaranka lost her unborn child while being detained. Third, Alena Amelina died after contracting Coronavirus in jail.

However, this time the choice of violence does not appear to work. While the continuous persecutions of protesters have decreased considerably the number of large demonstrations as the weekend marches of 2020, the spirit of the protests has yet to be eradicated. Rather, the disproportionate methods used by the police have strengthened the negative sentiments of the public towards the state, which responds with excessive force against non-violent protests. Even among Lukashenko's traditional sources of support the harsh violence against his citizens has represented a political awakening, as the numerous strikes of factory workers demonstrate. The shocked reactions of the Belarusians caused by the violence against protesters was one of the strongest reasons for mobilisation, as the previous chapter has shown. A 2021 survey by the Chatham House showed that the demands most supported by the Belarusians were the total end to the use of force against protesters and the fair investigation of law enforcement bodies for having inflicted violence on protesters. Further, their views on the future of Belarus if "Lukashenko does not leave" clearly shows that they have no hope for the end of repression (or reforms).<sup>20</sup>

Thus, where violence does not work, Belarusian authorities systematically abuse the justice system to eliminate political enemies as an alternative. The practice of unfair trials to intimidate both opposition members and dissidents is widely employed. Politically motivated trials are manipulated, and evidence is constructed to find guilty those to be eliminated. In 2020 the government opened more than 500 politically motivated criminal cases resulting in at least 118 pretrial detentions by the end of the year. Protesters were often accused of mass rioting, hooliganism, violations of official guidelines on public gatherings. Presidential candidates were mostly accused of bribery, money laundering, inciting hatred, or conspiracy to seize power. Viktor Babaryko was one of the victims of false economic charges, today fined and sentenced to 14 years in prison. Coordination Council members Maryia Kalesnikava and Maksim Znak were charged with accusations

---

<sup>20</sup> Chatham House (2021).

of “extremism” and “harming national security” and were sentenced to up to 11 years in prison after a swift closed trial. In the cases of companies and businesspeople openly supporting opposition figures, security forces often authorised the opening of criminal cases on the bases of false accusations of tax evasion and fraud. These strategic moves of Belarusian authorities within the legal system are paired with direct attacks to those who can help the victims: their lawyers and human rights groups. While corrupted judges charge innocents of false accusations, defendant lawyers face threats of detention or withdrawal of licences (Amnesty International reported over 30 withdrawals in 2021 where the lawyer defended victims of political persecution or protested abuses)<sup>21</sup>. Kalesnikava’s lawyer Illia Salei was initially detained with the same accusations as his client, then released on bail; he then fled to Poland and was removed from the bar in October 2021 for “not specified” reasons.<sup>22</sup> The job of Salei and his colleagues was continuously hampered by the authorities, who disregarded official rules and undermined the independence of the legal profession. Belarusian lawyers were prevented from meeting their clients, or when they had access to them, authorities would be present in the room and later would share illegal recordings with broadcasting media. Moreover, a law passed in November 2021 further ensures the full control of the regime over practicing lawyers through regional associations directly managed by the Ministry of Justice. On the other hand, human rights groups face closing while their members face harassment, raids, searches, beatings, and imprisonment. Human rights defender Dzmitry Salauyou faced an intrusive search in his house and was beaten by security forces. Leading human rights organisation *Viasna* was one of the Belarusian organisations that monitored the elections of 2020; a year later, seven of its members were in detention after criminal charges were placed on them (among them, volunteer coordinator Marfa Rabkova and her colleague Andrei Chapyuk). In July 2021 Lukashenko explicitly announced a “purge” of civil society and by the end of the year the government had initiated closing processes of 278 human rights organisations.

This civil society purge launched by Lukashenko specifically targeted also independent media outlets. The media landscape is significant element of the system built by Lukashenko, as it is one of the keys to the prosperity of the regime. The President obtained control of most media outlets, which has led to media censorship and a heavy restriction of the freedom of the press. Several legislative measures have contributed to achieve this aim: the 2008 Law on Mass Media placed every media outlet under the control of the Ministry of Information, establishing a monopoly of information, and introduced provisions against the defamation of high-ranking officials (mostly resorted to in politically motivated cases). In 2018 the law was amended to introduce the obligation of registration for online media (otherwise stripped of their media rights), the full responsibility of website owners of their platforms (with obligation to identify and report users violating guidelines), the government’s ability to block social media. Another measure of 2015 supplements the 2008

---

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, “Belarus 2021”.

<sup>22</sup> FIDH (2021).

law by subjecting Internet activity to the same criminal conditions. At structural level, once in office he replaced editors and media employees with his own appointees.

Despite the technological development that the country has undergone in the last decades, the situation has not improved. Today the biggest national news outlets and newspapers are state-owned, government controlled, and intruded into by external actors (specifically by Russia, through Russian television programmes, pro-Russian propaganda, Russian television speakers and commentators). Political, economic, and social information are directly controlled by governmental agencies and ministries. The biggest independent periodicals (1995 *Narodnaya*, 2003 *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*) have been shut down, independent TV broadcasting have been banned and both have been obliged to move their activities on the Internet and social media (as oppositional website *Tut.by* and Telegram chats *97% Minsk* and *NEXTA*). For this reason, Oleg Manaev has described the media landscape of Belarus as two sub-systems coexisting simultaneously: one, accessible to anyone but a product of government control and censure, and the other, forcibly hidden and persecuted, serving a minority (and the choice of media consumption became crucial during the 2020 protests, according to the survey of Samuel Greene, highlighting the social differences between the groups that chose one or the other)<sup>23</sup>. As a result, Freedom House describes Belarus as the European country with the most restrictive media environment, ranking among the “great oppressors” of media freedom China and Russia.

According to the data gathered by Reporters Without Borders, media environment has further deteriorated after the 2020 protests, as attested by the press freedom index declining of 10 points from 49.18 in 2021 to 39.62 in 2022 (currently Belarus is ranked 153<sup>rd</sup> out of 180 states). The heated discussion on government’s measures against Covid-19 caused a tightening of media restrictions. Later, the independent media outlets that denounced the fraudulent elections exposed themselves to harsh persecutions. Ten days after the elections 70 media channels had been blocked by the government, newspaper distribution was restricted, and news outlets were stripped of their equipment. The proliferating of Telegram chats and other social media channels of communication urged the authorities for the blocking of VPNs (virtual private networks), used by Belarusians to access banned websites covering the protests, and for a nation-wide Internet shutdown that was cleverly attributed to foreign actors. Both the platforms and their users were targeted by Resolution № 575, authorising the listing of individuals and organisations if engaged in “extremist formations”. Accordingly, working for non-state-owned media or leaving comments and messages on certain social networks can expose subjects to criminal investigations based on “extremism”, which the Criminal Code punishes with up to 12 years in prison. At the end of 2021, the Belarusian Association of Journalists reported 13 media companies labelled as extremist, as *BelaPAN* and *Belsat*, and apart from the state broadcaster BTRC, most independent outlets now operate from abroad or were forced to shut down.

---

<sup>23</sup> Greene (2022).

One of the most blatant cases of this type of censorship is the shutting down of *Tut.by*. It operated since 2000 as an independent opposition portal, founded by Yury Zisser. During the years, its subscribers grew until it became most popular non-state-owned news platform with 260 employees and an average of 300 million monthly visits. In 2020 the government authorised the withdrawal of its media status, which caused the final block of any platform and digital resource of the website in May 2021, as it was accused of violating Belarusian media laws (stripped of its registration, the activity of *Tut.by* was illegal). The offices were sealed, the headquarters raided, the equipment confiscated, and the houses of employees searched. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, the raid interested Minsk's and regional offices, where 130 employees were interrogated and held through the night; in the morning, 15 were detained, while the rest were allowed to go home after signing non-disclosure agreements. Among them, some fled the country and launched another platform to replace the previous one, *Zerkalo.io*, which was promptly listed as “extremist” and banned by state authorities. Currently, three former *Tut.by* employees are still detained, namely general director Liudmila Chekina (18/05/2021), lawyer Katsiaryna Tkatchenka (18/05/2021) and journalist Tatsiana Matveeva (25/08/2022).

The imprisonment of these women provides proof for the statement published by RWB, which has described Belarus as the “fourth largest jailer of journalists in the world”, many of which are indeed women. The decades-long persecution of non-state-owned media workers has earned it the name of “Europe’s most dangerous country for journalists” (second only to Russia, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine). From 2002 to 2016 the Committee to Protect Journalists reported five journalists’ deaths, never investigated but most likely politically motivated. During the worst months of the Covid-19 pandemic, they were frequently harassed and misspoken about by government authorities, accusing them of “spreading rumours” and “hysteria”.<sup>24</sup> After the elections, *Nasha Niva* photographer Natalya Lubnevskaya was shot with a rubber bullet while she was documenting the 2020 protests despite the visible “press” labels. Several others were beaten, causing broken noses, kidney damage and rib fractures. In other cases, Belarusian journalists face arrests, detention (113 cases), threats (29 cases) and their houses get searched (146 cases). Most of the charges relate to the participation to unauthorised mass events and the illegal distribution of media content without accreditation.

Real-time reports document that 4 media workers and 27 journalists are currently detained in the country. Four of them have reported abuses as ill-treatment and beatings of the same magnitude as those endured by the protesters. Journalist Raman Pratasevich, former editor-in-chief of one of the most used and trusted independent media outlets, Telegram news channel *NEXTA* (“someone”) represents one of the cases of abuse and silencing of media personnel. Pratasevich was taken from a Ryanair plane, after the flight from Athens to Vilnius was rerouted by the Belarusian government in order to arrest him and his partner in Minsk. The diversion of the flight was allegedly co-conducted with the support of Russian authorities, as secret service

---

<sup>24</sup> Greene (2022).

agents of KGB were seen on the plane and Vladimir Putin sided with Lukashenko. In an interview, youtuber Yauhen Merkis described the prison conditions as “awful”; his cell was cold and humid, he only had cold water and could receive letters only when authorised by the administration. When released, he recounted, journalists were often left kilometres away from their houses to prevent an encounter with other colleagues documenting the scene. Several of them have an “emergency” or “prison bag” in their homes, ready for when the police will ring at their doorbell unattended. Freelance journalist Larysa Shchyryakova shared the intimidation she received from the police, threatening to “take away” her teenage son if she was arrested once more.<sup>25</sup> In sum, in the words of IREX, Belarus is an “unsustainable” and “anti-free” for individuals pursuing the journalistic career.

### 3.3 The response of the international community

On these accounts, Belarus has been associated to a totalitarian regime, given the violent and pervasive ways through which the government has been trying to prevent and suppress any form of opposition. The international community often involved itself to deal with and improve the situation. (Marples) After the presidential elections and the mass arrests of 2006, the European Union introduced some restrictive measures, but advanced a plan to engage with the country if it fulfilled certain conditions. The tempting promises of the Union were in fact blocked by the authoritarian policies of Lukashenko. The plan written in the “What the European Union could bring to Belarus” non-paper provided for international cooperation, market collaboration, financial aid, and other benefits; however, only the satisfaction of 12 conditions could enact it. Among these, the Union demanded democratic elections, right of opposition, freedom of expression and release of all political prisoners and detained protesters. While some of the requests were progressively fulfilled by the Belarusians authorities and the country became closer to the Union, certain conditions were not satisfied. More openness and tolerance within electoral circumstances were partially met during the 2010 presidential elections, the “fairest elections”<sup>26</sup> since 1994, but a violent police reprisal burst regardless. Consequently, the European Union distanced itself from the country and strengthened the previous restrictions that year and again in 2012 and 2016.

In 2020 the Western powers quickly expressed their disappointment in the misconduct of the sixth presidential elections once again and refused to recognise the rigged results. In view of the high level of repression and police brutality towards both the opposition and who participated to the post-election protests, they progressively undertook a series of measures against Lukashenko and the Belarusian elite. At first, the international community stressed the need for democratic enhancement within the Belarusian political system and society. Transparent and fair elections, freedom of expression and of the press, prohibition of torture and

---

<sup>25</sup> Shchyryakova and Merkis (2020).

<sup>26</sup> Marples (2013).

abuses, respect for political rights and other internationally recognised liberties were some of the requests from Western states. Secondly, they encouraged the flourishing of Belarusian society through a funding project for human rights groups, independent media, and other civil organisations. International actors as the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States supported the Belarusian civil society through assistance packages and significant donations of money. A further approach to the Belarusian question involves the use of diplomacy. First, the European Union lowered the level of bilateral cooperation with the authorities whereas it intensified the support to the population. Second, the United Kingdom ended the military cooperation program with the country.

As a last resort, the international community has adopted packages of economic and personal sanctions to target the President and his government. Initially the European Union did not take unilateral decisions in order to avoid both the geopoliticisation of the events and an intervention of Russia, however they asked for an investigation into the election falsification and “all alleged abuses”<sup>27</sup>. Some suggested the opening of a diplomatic dialogue among the heads of state, envisaging the participation of Lukashenko and Putin. Still, sanctions directed at regime officials were imposed by certain individual member states, as Lithuania and Poland, who offered their support to the Belarusian opposition. In September, the approach of the remaining European actors shifted, when politicians from both member states and the European Union started openly siding with the protesters and showing sympathy towards the opposition. A month later the Union finally formulated a coherent response and agreed that restrictive measures should be enforced; the Council imposed travel bans and asset freezes on 44 individuals accountable for the falsification of the elections. Aleksandr Lukashenko was included in the list in November, along with other 14 government officials, responsible for the “unacceptable” repression against peaceful protests. The affair of Raman Pratasevich and the forced plane landing pushed the Union to adopt further measures, banning any Belarusian air carriers from EU airspace and airports. Additional measures were taken against the instrumentalisation of migrants adopted by Belarusian authorities to facilitate the illegal crossing of European external borders (during the migration crisis at the Belarusian-Polish border), as well as the involvement in Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine. According to the latest update in June 2022, the European Union’s sanctions target a total of 195 natural persons among the Belarusian population, besides several legal persons and some Russian citizens. Similar procedures were initiated by the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, as well as members of the European Economic Area.

The heavy economic and personal sanctions have yet to elicit a favourable response from Belarus. First, the impact of the economic sanctions has diminished because of Russia’s support. The economic aid and the security assistance from the powerful Russian neighbour awards Belarus with a shield that is hard to breach. Second, the international complaints condemning the numerous human rights violations have not scared the

---

<sup>27</sup> European Council (2022).

Belarusian authorities. The OSCE report of September 2020 on these allegations failed even in solving the question of impunity. Belarusian authorities have confessed to the use of excessive violence against the opposition and the protests. Lukashenko admitted on the BBC to having inflicted violence on detainees in a detention facility in Minsk. However, the only concern of the government seems to be avoiding accountability while encouraging the police forces to act harshly itself. Indeed, deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Mikalai Karpenkau was heard suggesting unlawful methods of protest repression and disregarding international human rights law in a leaked audio. During the most heated months, protesters were obliged to look for justice on their own. As the authorities refused to act and the identification of police members was impossible (they were covered by *balaclavas*, wearing civilian clothes, driving civilian cars), they reacted by trying to unmask them and hacking government devices to publish names and other information online. No trial, investigation or criminal case has been opened against any of the individuals responsible for abuses and violence yet.

One of the places where these crimes are committed are the Belarusian detention facilities, as it has been said above. The behind-the-scenes of Belarus's detention system have always been opaque. Claims of rights violation and abuse have not appeared recently. During the post-election crackdown in 2010, several arrests culminated in days of detention and torture. BBC's Charles Matthews reported the words of former presidential candidate Ales Mikhalevich who claimed to have been subjected to sleep deprivation, as he was forced to sleep under lamps without the possibility to cover his face. Protester Natalia Koliada recalled her hours of detention in a freezing corridor. She was prohibited drinking, eating, sleeping, or using the toilet; instead, guards verbally threatened her (of rape) and forced her to defecate in front of men. Former detainees shared the consequences of these abuses, as difficulty to walk and to see correctly. However, the riot police and the guards at the detention centres denied any allegations.

In 2020 things have not changed, rather, they have worsened. At the time of writing, almost a thousand political prisoners are being held inside detention centres, for a total of 35,000 from the beginning of the protests. An alarming number of them has accused the guards and the security forces of having committed horrible crimes. Consequences for the detainees ranged from bodily injuries to mental trauma. The man raped with the baton suffered "subcutaneous perineal hematoma, subcutaneous hematoma in the upper third of the right thigh, intramucosal haemorrhages of the rectal ampulla, mild closed-head injury, head concussion, paraorbital hematoma on the left side, chest injury on the left side" besides undergoing other ill-treatment. A minor of 16 years of age was beaten and electroshocked until he fell into a coma, while suffering from "a concussion, an open fracture of the zygomatic-orbital complex, rhinosinusitis of the right maxillary sinus, convulsive syndrome, periorbital hematoma, multiple bruises of soft tissues and limbs, and traumatic erosion of the cornea of both eyes". Even though the testimonies of these abuses were often supported by evidence, as witnesses, videos, photographs (journalists documenting the events were persecuted) and the medical reports were blatant,



the state did not proceed to punish those responsible. In both cases evidence was taken, but no one was held accountable.<sup>28</sup>

In brief, Belarusian authorities have made themselves indirectly guilty of countless horrible crimes. Basic and internationally recognised human rights are being systematically violated and the democratic character of the country, if present, is continuously eroded by these practices and the misconduct of political processes. The falsified elections of 2020 represent the last episode of a series of unfair events, that have ultimately triggered an astonishing reaction from the Belarusian public. Attempting at making their voices heard, the bravest individuals “took the streets” to protest, a result of politicisation and sociological transformations. The harsh and disproportionate response of the state has demonstrated once again the inability of the authorities to understand the ongoing changes within society and the need to adjust their governing strategies. Instead, they have provoked an international reaction and the involvement of numerous states and organisations. President Lukashenko and his officials, by violently trying to re-establish order, drew on themselves sanctions and preventive measures from all over the globe, restricting their freedom and further damaging the economy of the regime. As a result, their state has been bleeding for over than two years, in a desperate cry for justice and accountability.

---

<sup>28</sup> OSCE (2020).

## CONCLUSION

The unprecedented protests of 2020 have become a milestone in the history of Belarus. The extraordinary character of the public mobilisation derived from the rigged results of the latest presidential elections has been widely recognised as a unique event. For the first time, discontent with the system has been expressed through a proper social movement, involving enormous shares of the population. Those who took part to the demonstrations were not affiliated with a specific political group, instead they were often ordinary citizens voicing their disagreement with the decisions taken by the regime. Most of them had never mobilised before; this time they felt that it was not socially unacceptable to denounce the wrongs of the authorities anymore. Thus, they joined thousands of others that shared their feeling, a feeling that the Belarusian state was failing them.

Numerous scholars have pointed at the extraordinary character of the protest movement. Despite being attacked and suppressed by the state, Belarusian civil society revived and the consequences have been remarkable. The first sparks were seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, when several voluntary groups took matters into their hands and filled the gap that the government had left open. While the authorities adopted a superficial and inadequate approach, citizens supplied masks and medicines to those in need, organising networks for medical support by doctors. During the electoral campaign, these activities embodied the first step of the political mobilisation of 2020. Persuaded by the actions of the volunteering associations and displeased by the passivity of the government, a growing percentage of citizens began to cultivate an interest in politics. Consuming information from independent media outlets and reading daily live updates on the campaign became a habit. A series of independent platforms provided an alternative to the state-controlled channels of communication, the only information tools easily accessible in Belarus. Through Telegram chats and other untraceable means, small communities and larger groups organised politically led activities to show their support for one candidate or the other.

On the other hand, the political opposition was more credible and had more support than ever. In an authoritarian state where any political alternative to Lukashenko is harshly delegitimised and crushed by the propaganda, the political opposition was never able to capture the attention of the public in its favour. For decades politicians of the opposition were regarded with distrust by most and hardly recognised as a valuable alternative by the rest. In 2020 tables had turned. Among the different candidates, a YouTuber pro-democratic activist gained an amount of support that the authorities had to remove him from the scene. As he was detained, his wife Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya replaced him. From the point of view of the government, given her gender she did not represent a threat, thus she was able to run for the elections while many other candidates were either removed or abandoned during the campaign. Lukashenko's old-fashioned way of seeing women undermined his position. Indeed, Tsikhanouskaya's support grew to the point that her team and supporters were convinced she could win.

Nevertheless, things went another direction. The night of election day Lukashenko was re-elected for the sixth time, officially with a questionable high percentage of votes. The announcement caused an unforeseen discontent among the population, that in a few hours crowded the streets of the capital. In fact, the disappointment of the citizens turned in temper, and they manifested it in several cities around the country, shouting for fairness and truth. Despite their commitment to the cause, as the protests lasted for an extraordinarily long period of time, their request were neither welcomed nor tolerated. The thousands of demonstrators frightened Lukashenko and his officials, who responded violently to the peaceful contestations. Their brutal reaction, infuriatingly disproportionate, had the contrary effect of what had been hoped. Although they were harshly persecuted and faced with violence, protesters were hardly discouraged. Instead, the violence of the repression stimulated the mobilisation of others.

Accordingly, the 2020 Belarusian movement has exposed the mistrust that has been building between the population and the government. The original wide support enjoyed by the “Father of the land” has disintegrated in his hands. Today, Belarus is divided between a conscious and dissatisfied people and an alerted regime less and less able to satisfy the needs of the state. In fairness, the spread dissatisfaction with the regime is not a recent phenomenon. First, the social contract established between Lukashenko and the Belarusian people has lost its role as source of legitimisation. First, the economic shortcomings of the welfare system have demystified the promises of the President in the eyes of the population. As a result, more and more Belarusians turn their head towards economic concepts that have been despised for a long time in Belarus. Ideas as market economy and privatisation do not sound as unpleasant as they were depicted by the regime anymore.

Second, trends of liberalisation have also pervaded Belarusian society. Curiosity and sympathy towards the West have spread among the citizens; the accessible education system, the possibility to travel and the access to the Internet have all contributed to more open opinions and less will to be “ruled”. Positive sentiments towards democracy and the request for a more liberal state have become increasingly common. The old reasonings and scapegoats do not find resonance with the population anymore. Lukashenko’s rants against the Western enemy sound less and less credible. His accusations against the opposition, held responsible for the diminishing security within the country, are dismissed as exaggerated and fake. Indeed, most protesters were not affiliated with the political opposition; instead, they often were individual activists. Belarusians are aware that this narrative is just another instrument of manipulation. The government itself exposed its real intentions when they intentionally deployed violence against the people for personal gains, rather than acting in the interest of the population.

Third, the brutal response of the state to the protests of 2020 has unveiled the true character of the president and the regime he has built. The paternalistic character that has for so long been associated with Lukashenko was strongly denied by his authorisation of such unforgivable acts. The promises of security have been broken by the police forces and the authorities themselves once they deliberately attacked those who were supposed

to be protected. The violence employed to contrast the peaceful demonstrations has shocked the country, even shaking the souls of those that once were supporters of the regime. If at first Belarusians were protesting to rectify the results, in time their chants have shifted towards open and clear accusations against their President and his officials. In other words, while they were decanting their merit for having maintained the sovereignty intact in the country and alienating external threats, the danger has become domestic, or rather they have turned it so.

In short, the system of social security and stable economic growth that Lukashenko has established is showing its weaknesses and they are becoming unbearable. The dissent expressed by the Belarusian population through the years, despite its expansion, has been always extinguished by political propaganda and repression with success. Any political alternative has been delegitimised; any subversive political opinion was demolished. However, the increasingly noticeable failures of the system have provided a pretext for a hopeful attempt at change. The size of the political engagement emphasised how large the population share refusing to stay at Lukashenko's rules actually is. These numbers are expected to grow. Although the protesters have yet to achieve their aims and the movement has slowly fade out, their message was successfully delivered to the Belarusian authorities.

Lukashenko and his officials are conscious that the traditional sources of legitimation of the regime have become obsolete and inefficient. Among the highest ranks, some bureaucrats have taken the audacious step of encouraging Lukashenko to adopt at least a few market reforms. From their point of view, this could soften the negative sentiments of the public. Further, a slow but steady process of reforms could optimistically open the way to a path of deeper change, even presenting the possibility of a shift of power. In the meantime, they are obliged to continue to praise the state as it maintains order, stressing the need for security. But their arguments are less and less convincing. On one hand, the ruling elite could abandon Lukashenko if not reassured with facts that the system is not collapsing. On the other hand, Belarusian ordinary citizens increasingly struggle to trust and accept the paternalistic and interventionist narrative of their government.

The protest movement of 2020 has bravely lasted for long months. Despite the largest demonstrations in the streets have decreased in number and partially disappeared, the repressive machine of the state against dissenters is still functioning. The detention centres of the country have welcomed huge numbers of people, among protesters and journalists, and continue to hold several political prisoners. Indeed, the Belarusian authorities need to meticulously restore law and order to prevent their castle from crumbling down. Whether or not their strategies will efficiently achieve these aims will be told by the reaction of the citizens to potential future illiberal actions of the government. However, the events of the last two years seem to represent an undeniable break from the traditional apathy of the Belarusian people in the political field. Numerous international and private actors have voiced their opinions, arguing that Lukashenko is unlikely to step down. In this case, they expect Belarusians to embrace once again the spirit they had in 2020 and initiate another

wave of political mobilisation and active participation to political and civil life. Hopefully, next time their voices will be heard.

## APPENDIX

The text below refers to an interview the candidate held with a Belarusian citizen who wishes to remain anonymous (the name of his Italian contact has been censored for the same purpose). He lives in Minsk and occupies a position in the Belarusian IT sector, related to the independent media environment of his country. One of the online websites he works with was TUT.BY. In 2020 he has often participated to streets protests. In 2021 his office was raided by the OMON special units and his colleagues and him were detained for several hours. They were accused of tax evasion and a criminal proceeding had been open by the authorities. His testimony contributes to the thesis by adding an original source of information about the protest movement, providing an insight of a Belarusian citizen involved in the demonstrations and close to the independent media environment of the country.

The text is structured as follows: first, the question of the interviewer in Italic; second, the answer of the interviewee.

*Please, introduce yourself.*

My name is V. L. and I live in Minsk.

*Have you lived in Belarus for all your life?*

Yes, but I have often travelled. I have come to Europe multiple times, and I have been in Melbourne, Australia once. Of course, I have come a few times to Italy as a tourist – as well as to pay a visit to my cousin A. The last time I exited the country was in January 2020. Going out of Belarus right now is very complicated, due to the sanctions.

*You were born under the USSR. What did you think of it?*

I was very young, so I did not really think anything of it. I have good memories of my childhood.

*What are your thoughts about Lukashenko?*

I do not want to answer this question.

*If you could change the system you live in, what would you want instead?*

A democracy.

*What is your occupation?*

I work for Hoster.by<sup>29</sup>. It is a hosting provider, actually the largest of the state. Basically, we administrate the national domains of internet sites, that in Belarus end with .BY or .BEL. Personally, I manage spaces for publicity on Belarusian online sites.

*Since you work for Hoster.by, which is affiliated with TUT.BY (an independent media platform), do you use Telegram? Do you resort to other independent news outlets?*

Yes, of course. I often read news on TUT.BY. And yes, I used Telegram to see the latest news. *NEXTA* is still one of my sources of information. Telegram is key in Belarus – it is my messaging app of preference. I always used it to communicate with A., since she is in Italy.

*What did the protests of 2020 mean to you?*

For me, they represented “hope”. Hope for change, hope for freedom.

*Did you actively participate in the protests? Why?*

Yes, I took part numerous times in August 2020. Why did I participate? Because I saw the possibility for change.

*Have you suffered consequences from the protest movement?*

Yes. We always had to be careful because the police became violent for every little thing. I always went with a backpack, to carry my keys and other things that would help me in time of emergency. While I was taking part to one protest, armed members of the police started following me. I had to run to not get caught and I hid in a building. Luckily, they did not find me and when I was sure I was safe, I went home.

I can also tell a story about a woman I know. She worked for a scientific institute in Minsk, in a modest position. She often protested with her daughter. Apparently one day she was recognised, and a random day two months later she was called in for questioning at a police station. There, they told her that they knew she had been manifesting in the streets and made her an “offer”: they could get her a better job if she stopped protesting. Her other option was to “voluntarily” fire herself and the issuing of an order that would have prevented her to ever find another job. She accepted their offer.

*Have you experienced any other?*

---

<sup>29</sup> Hosted.by is a Belarusian hosting provider, an online service that enables consumers to publish websites on the Internet, by renting space on a physical server. It is the technical administrator of the national .BY and .BEL registries. It is the only ICANN accredited registrar in Belarus, the major domain registrar and cloud solutions provider with over 140,000 clients. Among these, the online independent media platforms (e.g., TUT.BY).

Yes, because I work for Hoster.by. Among our consumers are several independent media outlets, a danger for the government. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021, while I was at work in my office in Minsk, OMON special units entered the building. I could tell it was them because they had their faces covered; they do so for not being recognised. They came in using force, pushing doors and employees. Their excuse for such a scene was that we had not paid taxes for a prize we had won some time before, it was obviously a false accusation and an excuse to detain us – they cannot arrest you without an accusation. They held us captive within our offices for hours, until late at night. None of us could answer the phone while we were there, while our families were continuously calling our mobile phones, probably worried about where we were at that late hour. Some of us were questioned by the special units, others – like me – were not, but all of us had to stay sited and quiet and we could not leave the room. Only hours later, at night, could some of us leave to go home. The others, like my boss Sergei Pavalishev<sup>30</sup> and many others, were arrested.

*Those who were taken by the OMON units, where are they now?*

Since then, Sergei Pavalishev has been released on September 1<sup>st</sup> – three months after his arrest; however, his assets were freezed. We, him and I, are a few of those who are still in Belarus. Others have left the country since.

*After you were released, what were your thoughts? Were you scared or they deepened your discontent with the regime?*

I was scared, I stopped protesting. I feared repercussions on my family. The arrest of my boss Sergei shook me; we could not hear from him, his family and me. We could only send packages to the detention centre and hope they would be delivered.

*And before 2020, had you ever been persecuted by the government because of your occupation?*

No, never, and neither have my colleagues. Things were different this time because the protests were so big. That number of people manifesting in the streets had never been seen in our country before. There was hope. I guess everyone in the highest position was scared. We saw Lukashenko and his son leaving their residence armed, to catch a helicopter. They went around the city with it multiple times. He surely feared an assassination attempt and felt safer up there. That is how scary it was for them.

*What is your occupation now that TUT.BY is down?*

I still work for Hoster.by. Sergei Pavalishev is still my boss. Hoster.by is the main hosting provider of the country, so they cannot shut it down. It is too important.

---

<sup>30</sup> Sergei Pavalishev is the general director of Hoster.by.



*What do you think will be the future of the regime? Will Belarusians continue to oppose? Do they have a chance of success?*

I have lost most of my hope. The strong reaction of the state towards us and the lack of intervention by third parties have discouraged all Belarusians. I am myself angry with Europe.

*Have you ever thought about leaving the country for a “better life” in your opinion? Do the recent events have an impact on this opinion? Would you consider leaving?*

No, I have my life here. This is my homeland: I have grown up here, I have my family here. I would never leave them behind. Yet my dream would be to have a small house in Sicily – even if I don't like Italy that much. But I'd love a small farmhouse with animals, to come to from time to time.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amnesty International. 2006. "Belarus: Tightening the screws on dissent." Media Briefing.

Amnesty International. 2010. "Belarus urged to stop clampdown on opposition." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2010/12/belarus-urged-stop-clampdown-opposition/>

Amnesty International. "Belarus 2021." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/belarus/report-belarus/>

Amnesty International. 2021. "Belarus: Government's threats and history of crackdown on protesters require urgent international response." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/03/belarus-governments-threats-and-history-of-crackdown-on-protesters-require-urgent-international-response-2/>

Amnesty International. 2021. "Belarus: Blocking leading online media outlet is a brazen attack on freedom of expression." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/belarus-blocking-leading-online-media-outlet-is-a-brazen-attack-on-freedom-of-expression-2/>

Amnesty International. 2022. "Belarus: Immediately release human rights defenders Marfa Rabkova and Andrei Chapyuk." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/04/belarus-immediately-release-human-rights-defenders-marfa-rabkova-and-andrei-chapyuk/>

BBC News Europe. 2020. "What's happening in Belarus?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53799065>

Bedford, Sophie. 2020. "The Covid-19 Pandemic in Belarus: Wither the social contract?" *Baltic Worlds*. <https://balticworlds.com/the-covid-19-pandemic-in-belarus-wither-the-social-contract/>

Bedford, Sophie. 2020. "The Tsikhanauskaya Effect: How an accidental heroine transformed the Belarusian 2020 presidential election." *Baltic Worlds*. <https://balticworlds.com/the-tsikhanauskaya-effect/>

Bedford, Sofie. 2021. "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society." *Nationalities Papers* 49: 808–819, doi:10.1017/nps.2021.33

Belsat. 2022. "Belarus of 2021 in figures." <https://belsat.eu/en/news/01-01-2022-most-important-figures-of-2021-in-belarus/>

Belsat. 2022. "ICAO releases fact-finding report on forced landing of Ryanair plane in Belarus." <https://belsat.eu/en/news/18-01-2022-icao-releases-fact-finding-report-on-forced-landing-of-ryanair-plane-in-belarus/>

Bodrunova, Svetlana. 2021. "Social Media and Political Dissent in Russia and Belarus: An Introduction to the Special Issue." *Social Media + Society*. SAGE Journal. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211063470>

Charles, Mathew. 2011. "Belarus 'Tortured Protesters in Jail'." *BBC News Europe*, 1 March. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12606265>>

Chatham House. 2021. "Belarusians' views on the political crisis."

Committee to Protect Journalists. 2021. “Belarusian court bans Tut.by and affiliated news website Zerkalo.io as ‘extremist’.” <https://cpj.org/2021/08/belarusian-court-bans-tut-by-and-affiliated-news-website-zerkalo-io-as-extremist/>

Current Time. 2021. “Shutdown Of Belarus' Largest Independent News Site Part Of 'War Against Genuine Journalists', Critics Say.” <https://en.currenttime.tv/a/shutdown-of-belarus-tut-by-part-of-war-against-genuine-journalists-critics-say/31263354.html>

Douglas, Nadja. 2020. “Belarus: From the Old Social Contract to a New Social Identity.” Centre for East European and International Studies. ZOIS Report 9/11/2020. <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/belarus-from-the-old-social-contract-to-a-new-social-identity>.

Douglas, Nadja. Regina Elsner, Félix Krawatzek, Julia Langbein, Gwendolyn Sasse: ‘Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change’, ZOIS Report 3 / 2021, ([https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOIS\\_Reports/2021/ZOIS\\_Report\\_3\\_2021.pdf](https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOIS_Reports/2021/ZOIS_Report_3_2021.pdf)) EU Parliament. 2022. “Media environment in Belarus.”

European Council, Council of the European Union. 2022. Timeline - EU restrictive measures against Belarus. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-belarus/belarus-timeline/>

FIDH. 2021. “Illia Salei.” Mobilising for justice (online). <https://belarus.fidh.org/Illia-Salei-256>

Filtenborg, Emil. Weichert, Stefan. 2020. “‘He stopped listening... and became cruel’: Lukashenko remembered by former campaign manager.” EuroNews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2020/09/24/he-stopped-listening-and-became-cruel-lukashenko-remembered-by-former-campaign-manager>

Gabowitsch, Mischa. “Belarusian Protest: Regimes of Engagement and Coordination.” Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. *Slavic Review* 80, no. 1 (Spring 2021)

Gapova, Elena. 2021. “Class, Agency, and Citizenship in Belarusian Protest.” Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. *Slavic Review* 80, no. 1

Gerschewski, Johannes. 2013. “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes.” *Democratization* 20 (1): 13–38.

Global Nonviolent Action Database. 2006. “Belarusian citizens protest presidential election, 2006. Case Study Details.” <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/belarusian-citizens-protest-presidential-election-2006>

Greene, Samuel A. 2022. “You are what you read: media, identity, and community in the 2020 Belarusian uprising.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38:1-2, 88-106, DOI:10.1080/1060586X.2022.2031843.

Hervouet, Ronan. 2021. “The Moral Economy of the Kolkhoz Worker, Or Why the Protest Movement in Belarus Does Not Seem to Concern the Collectivized Countryside.” Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. *Slavic Review* 80, no. 1.

Human Rights Watch. 1999. Republic of Belarus: Violations of Academic Freedom. Volume 11, n. 7. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/belarus/Belrus99.htm#TopOfPage>

Human Rights Watch. 2021. “Belarus: Events of 2020.” In World Report 2021 (online). <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/belarus>.

Human Rights Watch. 2022. “Belarus: Events of 2021.” In World Report 2022 (online).

IREX. 2019. “Media sustainability index.”

Joint Statement of Nordic-Baltic Foreign Ministers on Recent Developments in Belarus. 2020. August 11, 2020. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/04-Raduneytin/Utanrikisraduneytid/PDF-skjol/NB8%20statement%20Belarus.pdf>.

Kavalionak, Inna. 2022. “Lukashenka’s justice on show.” Index on Censorship. <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2022/06/lukashenkas-justice-on-show/>

Kłysiński, Kamil. 2016. “How to Get out of the Crisis without Reforms? The Belarusian Authorities Confront Growing Economic Problems.” OSW Commentary, No. 202, March 22, 2016. [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary\\_202.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_202.pdf).

Krawatzek, Félix, and Gwendolyn Sasse. 2021. “Belarus Protests: Why People Have Been Taking to the Streets—New Data.” *The Conversation*, February 4, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/belarus-protests-why-people-have-been-taking-to-the-streets-new-data-154494>.

Krawatzek, Félix. Langbein, Julia. 2022. “Attitudes towards democracy and the market in Belarus: what has changed and why it matters.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38:1-2, 107-124, DOI:10.1080/1060586X.2022.2029034.  
Kupala, Yanka. 1906. “And, Say, Who Goes There?”

Marples, David. 2013. “Between the EU and Russia: Geopolitical Games in Belarus.” *The Journal of Belarusian Studies*.

Mateo, Emma. 2022. “‘All of Belarus has come out onto the streets’: exploring nationwide protest and the role of pre-existing social networks.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38:1-2, 26-42, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2022.2026127.

Mills, Claire. 2021. “Belarus: One year on from the disputed Presidential election.” House of Commons Library.

Moshes, Arkady, and Ryhor Nizhnikau. 2019. “The Belarusian Paradox: A Country of Today Versus a President of the Past.” Finnish Institute of International Affairs. FIIA Briefing Paper No. 256. [https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/bp265\\_belarusian\\_paradox.pdf](https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/bp265_belarusian_paradox.pdf).

Onuch, Olga. Mateo, Emma. 2020. “From ‘Glory to Ukraine’ to ‘Long Live Belarus’: A Comparison of Mass Mobilization in Ukraine (2013-2014) and Belarus (2020).”

Onuch, Olga. Sasse, Gwendolyn. 2022. “The Belarus crisis: people, protest, and political dispositions.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38:1-2, 1-8, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2022.2042138

Onuch, Olga. Sasse, Gwendolyn. 2022. “Anti-regime action and geopolitical polarization: understanding protester dispositions in Belarus.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38:1-2, 62-87, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2022.2034134

OSCE. 2001. Freedom of the Media in Belarus. Public workshop with Belarusian journalists, Vienna, 31 May 2001.

OSCE. 2020. Report under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations related to the Presidential Elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus. By Professor Dr. Wolfgang Benedek.

President of Russia. 2020. Telephone Conversation with President of Belarus Alessandro Lukashenko. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63894>

RadioFreeEurope, RadioLiberty. 2021. “Body Of Jailed Belarusian Activist Reportedly Returned With Bandaged Head, But Family Silent.” <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-political-prisoner-dead-bandaged-head/31273419.html>

Reporters Without Borders. “World: Abuses in real Time. Belarus.” Barometer.

[https://rsf.org/en/barometer?exaction\\_pays\\_pays=164&exaction\\_pays\\_annee=2022&type%5Bemprisonnement%5D=emprisonnement&&annee\\_start=2022&annee\\_end=2022&&#exaction-victimes](https://rsf.org/en/barometer?exaction_pays_pays=164&exaction_pays_annee=2022&type%5Bemprisonnement%5D=emprisonnement&&annee_start=2022&annee_end=2022&&#exaction-victimes)

Rudkouski, Piotr. 2017. “Soft Belarusianisation: The Ideology of Belarus in the Era of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict.” OSW Commentary, No. 253, November 3, 2017. [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary\\_253-tv.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_253-tv.pdf).

Rudnik, Lesia. 2020. “Explainer: How Do We Know that Belarusian Election Was Rigged and Who Won The Race? The Center for New Ideas.” ЦЭНТР НОВЫХ ІДЭЙ. September 1. <https://newbelarus.vision/explainer-elections/>.

Rudling, Per Anders. 2015. “The Beginnings of Modern Belarus: Identity, Nation, and Politics in a European Borderland.” Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies. The Journal of Belarusian Studies.

Rudling, Per Anders. 2015. “The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931.” University of Pittsburgh Press.

Scollon, Michael. 2020. “Lukashenka's Pleas To Factory Workers Met With Jeers, Not Cheers.”

RadioFreeEurope, RadioLiberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenka-s-pleas-to-factory-workers-met-with-jeers-not-cheers/30788630.html>

Shchyryakova, Larysa. Merkis, Yauhen. 2020. “Fear and loathing in Belarus.” Index of Censorship. Volume 50, Issue 1.

Shelest, Aksana. Kazakevich, Andrei. 2021. “Sociology of protests in Belarus and international assistance.” Policy Brief.

Shraibman, Artyom. 2018. “The House That Lukashenko Built: The Foundation, Evolution, and Future of the Belarusian Regime.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Carnegie Moscow Center.

The editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica [et al.]. Belarus. Britannica, Countries in the World. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Belarus>

The World Bank. GDP growth (annual %) – Belarus. Data.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2021&locations=BY&start=2015>

Vashkevich, Andrei. 2010. ‘Ploshchad’ – 2010’, Narodnaja Volia, 20 December <<http://www.nvonline.info/by/136/news/25153/>>.

Voice of Belarus. 2020. "Golos Platform Presents the Final Report on the Presidential Election." August 20, 2020. <https://www.voiceofbelarus.com/golos-final-election-report/>.

Wilson, Andrew. 2016. "Belarus: From a Social Contract to a Security Contract." *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 8 (1): 78–91.

## SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

La Bielorussia, formalmente conosciuta come Repubblica di Bielorussia, è un paese situato nell'est Europa, il più esteso stato senza sbocchi sul mare. Data la sua posizione geografica, è stata per lungo tempo strettamente legata ai suoi vicini, spesso più influenti di lei. La più recente aggregazione di stati di cui ha fatto parte è stata l'URSS, fino agli anni Novanta. Durante la sua storia, è stata spesso terra di conquista di altre entità politiche. Il primo popolo ad abitarla, secondo i più, furono gli Slavi Orientali. Essi stabilirono un sistema feudale prospero, che collegò per la prima volta i territori Bielorussi con altri popoli, ad esempio i cittadini dell'Impero Bizantino tramite delle rotte commerciali sul continente. Nei secoli seguenti, il territorio del paese fu spesso diviso per essere annesso a diverse potenze. La Polonia e la Lituania sono due dei paesi particolarmente presenti nel libro della storia della Bielorussia, con dei capitoli in comune. Più recentemente, i suoi territori sono entrati in contatto con la realtà Russa, in particolare nel Diciannovesimo secolo, quando fu stabilito l'Impero Russo. La regione Bielorussa rappresentava la parte più povera e retrograda dell'Impero. La popolazione, per la maggior parte di carattere rurale, non fu fortunata come il resto dei territori imperiali e non si sviluppò industrialmente. Dal punto di vista culturale, i Bielorussi erano per la maggior parte analfabeti, privati di un sistema educativo efficiente e della possibilità di conservare le loro tradizioni nazionali. Invece, l'élite intellettuale della regione, istruita e ricca, sviluppò una coscienza politica che permise la nascita dei primi documenti scritti e periodici di fazione Bielorussa. In questo periodo, nacque per la prima volta una coscienza nazionale, che tuttavia era limitata solo ai ranghi più alti della società. Durante la Prima Guerra Mondiale, alcuni territori vennero occupati dalla Germania che, sorprendentemente, permise alla cultura Bielorussia di prosperare. Com'è noto, nel 1917 il sistema zarista dell'Impero Russo cadde, in piena guerra. L'anno successivo, una volta che i Russi ebbero firmato la pace, i nazionalisti Bielorussi tentarono di istituire uno stato indipendente (seppur ancora parzialmente occupata dai Tedeschi). La Repubblica Popolare Bielorussia, fondata sul sistema dei Soviet, ebbe breve vita. Il ritiro dei Tedeschi e il ritorno dei Russi posero fine alla sua esistenza nel 1919; tuttavia, sotto la guida di Stalin, ai cittadini Bielorussi fu permesso di istituire un nuovo stato: la Repubblica Socialista Sovietica Bielorussa. In un secondo momento venne unita alla Lituania e in un terzo cadde parzialmente sotto dominio Polacco. La nazione rimase divisa fino all'invasione della Polonia nel 1939, parte sotto i Polacchi e parte sotto la recentemente proclamata URSS. Stavolta, l'occupazione Tedesca si rivelò essere scomoda: alla fine del conflitto, i territori erano devastati e un quarto della popolazione era stata uccisa. La RSSB fu ristabilita e venne riannessa all'URSS, sotto cui rimase fino alla sua caduta negli anni Novanta.

La Bielorussia com'è conosciuta oggi è nata nel 1991, quando è stata proclamata la Repubblica di Bielorussia. Da allora, il sistema politico in uso secondo la Costituzione del 1994 è presidenziale e il paese ha avuto un solo Presidente, Aleksandr Lukashenko, eletto sei volte per la stessa carica. Dalla sua prima campagna elettorale, si è proposto come il "Padre della nazione" e ha promesso stabilità e sicurezza ai suoi cittadini in

un periodo di grande instabilità politica ed economica. Una volta eletto, ha proceduto ad effettuare alcune importanti modifiche alla legge suprema dello stato e al sistema politico. Estendendo la possibilità di rielezione e la durata della presidenza, manipolando i meccanismi politici, diminuendo l'indipendenza del corpo giuridico, ha costruito un regime autoritario basato sul controllo di potere esecutivo e giudiziario. Negli anni ha anche screditato il lavoro dell'opposizione politica, spesso assicurandosi il posto di Presidente eliminando i suoi avversari politici.

Il sistema che ha stabilito nel Paese è fondato sulla nostalgia dell'era sovietica e sul paternalismo. Infatti, lo stato è presente come maggior figura nell'economia Bielorussa; in cambio della partecipazione alla vita politica, Lukashenko ha promesso al suo popolo la stabilità economica tramite misure interventiste. Lo stato contribuisce al 60% del GDP della nazione ed è il maggior ente produttivo e di impiego della Bielorussia. Da un lato, la redistribuzione della ricchezza e i monopoli di stato da lui attuati hanno garantito una continua crescita del GDP. Tuttavia, questa tendenza ha mutato tra il 2008 e il 2015, quando le crisi e le recessioni hanno notevolmente rallentato il processo. A seguito dell'adozione di misure inefficienti da parte delle autorità, applicate al fine di tamponare gli effetti negativi, la popolazione ha espresso il suo dissenso tramite il primo grande evento di protesta nel 2017.

Prima di quell'anno, il regime aveva difficilmente incontrato ostacoli sul suo cammino. Le promesse di stabilità economica e politica del contratto sociale erano per la maggior parte rispettate e le strategie governative per non dare voce ai minimi contrasti funzionavano. Il supporto delle forze di polizia del Paese, così come i corpi militari e le forze speciali, e le azioni dei tribunali, hanno costituito un'ottima macchina di repressione. Durante la sua lunga presidenza, Lukashenko ha soppresso i suoi oppositori con vari metodi e scoraggiato la popolazione a fare affidamento sull'opposizione politica, che non è mai stata vista come una alternativa realizzabile. Di conseguenza, i primi casi di pericolo per il regime sono stati nel 2006 e nel 2010, ma senza gravi conseguenze. Tuttavia, negli anni seguenti, il contratto sociale da lui stipulato con la popolazione ha cominciato a vacillare e mostrare le sue debolezze. Alcune manovre economiche con esito sfortunato (ad esempio la "legge dei parassiti") hanno portato a manifestazioni di scontento più grandi. La risposta delle autorità è stata inesistente: la paura del cambiamento e di riforme che potrebbero mettere in pericolo il suo posto, hanno spinto Lukashenko a continuare sullo stesso cammino, senza deviazioni.

Le conseguenze di queste tendenze sono molteplici. In primis, la società Bielorussa è profondamente cambiata ed è meno prona ad accettare senza discutere le decisioni del suo Presidente. L'espansione dell'educazione, la possibilità di frequentare facilmente le università, l'accesso a Internet e la crescente tradizione di viaggiare hanno avuto un importante peso sulle coscienze e le opinioni dei cittadini. Essi sono molto più aperti verso l'Ovest e verso la liberalizzazione di quanto il loro Presidente vorrebbe augurarsi, perciò più inclini ad accettare profonde riforme economiche, ma anche politiche. Tra loro serpeggia il desiderio per istituzioni più inclusive e democratiche, così come quello di poter partecipare attivamente alla vita politica del Paese, che



momentaneamente non gli è permesso. Come risultato, un numero crescente di Bielorussi ha perso la fiducia nel governo e considera il suo operato obsoleto e inadeguato.

Le convinzioni di questi individui sono state certamente confermate da come le autorità Bieloruse hanno gestito la pandemia di Covid-19. Nel 2020, Lukashenko fu uno di quei capi di stato che liquidò il virus come “isteria” generale, rifiutandosi di riconoscerne i danni. La diretta conseguenza fu la totale apertura del Paese per mantenere viva l’economia, nonostante attorno a lui più e più stati prendessero misure opposte e i numeri di contagiati e deceduti tra i Bielorussi crescessero esponenzialmente. Tra le richieste di chi sperava in misure di emergenza e di chiusura, emersero numerosi gruppi di volontari che riempirono il vuoto lasciato dallo Stato. Si incaricarono di distribuire mascherine e altri materiali medici, di fornire assistenza e di organizzare una rete di medici a disposizione dei malati.

In queste spiacevoli circostanze, nel frattempo teneva luogo la campagna elettorale per le elezioni presidenziali del 2020. Tra i candidati, Aleksandr Lukashenko, propostosi per il sesto round consecutivo. Tuttavia, la campagna elettorale di quell’anno è stata profondamente diversa da quelle precedenti. Incoraggiate dall’inadeguata risposta al Covid-19 e dalle varie misure economiche malriuscite, discussioni sul futuro politico del Paese erano sempre più vive tra i cittadini. Molti si affidavano ai mezzi di comunicazione indipendenti e a social media difficilmente rintracciabili, così da poter parlare liberamente della situazione nel Paese. Molti di loro, consapevoli della loro coscienza politica, hanno cominciato ad interessarsi agli altri candidati, tra cui il blogger attivista Tsikhanouski, il più seguito. Le autorità politiche, forse percependo il carattere particolare di quell’imprevisto coinvolgimento politico, hanno proceduto a imprigionarlo sotto false accuse. Con lui, il resto dei candidati è stato via via eliminato in vari modi.

Lo spazio libero lasciato dai nomi più prominenti è stato occupato dalla moglie di Tsikhanouski, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Essendo donna, Lukashenko non ha saputo riconoscere il suo potenziale e l’ha lasciata in corsa verso le elezioni. Ciò che è successo è stato il contrario: Tsikhanouskaya è stata in grado di catalizzare tutta l’attenzione del pubblico opposto al regime su di sé, un risultato senza precedenti. La donna era vista dai Bielorussi come una possibile reale alternativa a Lukashenko. Durante la campagna, molteplici attività e raduni sono stati fatti in suo nome. Il suo seguito era talmente grande da dare speranza a lei e ai suoi sostenitori che potesse essere davvero eletta. Per paura che il voto potesse essere truccato, una pratica comune in Bielorussia, il suo team ha consigliato gli elettori di ricorrere ad alcuni stratagemmi per far valere il loro voto. Registrare la loro preferenza online su siti dedicati, rimanere in fila fuori dalle stazioni per il voto e aspettare fino all’ultimo momento utile per votare, in modo da rendere più difficile il trucco del risultato. Alcune delle stazioni hanno chiuso prima dell’orario prestabilito, mentre molti elettori erano ancora in fila per esprimere il loro voto.

Quella sera stessa, il 9 agosto 2020, i media hanno annunciato la vittoria di Lukashenko con l’80% dei voti. L’opposizione e i suoi sostenitori hanno gridato alla frode elettorale e sono scesi in massa in strada per

protestare, dando vita al primo movimento di protesta della storia della Bielorussia, un fatto unico di immensa importanza. Le dimostrazioni sono andate avanti per settimane, soprattutto nei weekend quando per le strade si riunivano folle di migliaia di persone. In tutto il Paese, persone di ogni strato sociale scendevano in strada per protestare contro la manipolazione dei risultati delle elezioni. Tra loro, anziani, donne, bambini e persone diversamente abili. In media, chi vi prendeva parte aveva un'educazione superiore, parlava Russo e apparteneva alle classi medie. Tuttavia, dal punto di vista occupazionale, individui dalle più disparate occupazioni hanno arricchito le file dei protestanti. La maggior parte erano impiegati del settore IT o membri del proletariato istruito. Solo pochi gruppi sociali non hanno preso parte alle proteste; tra questi, i lavoratori delle aree rurali.

Le motivazioni individuali a protestare erano le più varie, eppure unite da un filo conduttore: cambiamento politico e sociale e riforme. Slogan riflettenti questi sentimenti venivano cantati per le strade. I dimostranti usavano metodi tradizionali di protesta, tra cui marce e comizi, sempre pacifici. Cantanti e poeti si esibivano per il pubblico. Tra la folla, erano visibili i simboli rossi e bianchi (nastri, braccialetti e bandiere), presi in prestito dalla bandiera della BNR del 1918. Essi erano visibili anche nel bucato appeso fuori dalle finestre, organizzati per comporre la bandiera. Molti costruivano degli striscioni fa-da-te con degli slogan contro il regime, altri li cantavano con fervore. Tra i canti e le espressioni più utilizzate, messaggi, domande retoriche, "memes" e altri tradivano l'ironia e la canzonatura voluta dai loro autori. Alcuni di questi potevano essere trovati scritti sui muri in graffiti e pitture canzonatorie. Azioni come indossare una corona erano utilizzate per delegittimizzare l'autorità di Lukashenko. Un ruolo fondamentale nell'ambiente di protesta è stato occupato dai social media e dai lavoratori del settore IT. Questi ultimi sono stati i primi a fornire a chi partecipava alle proteste delle piattaforme per scambiare informazioni in tempo reale e organizzare nuovi eventi. Allo stesso tempo, istituivano siti per sostenere economicamente le proteste dall'estero. La continua comunicazione tra i partecipanti ha sicuramente contribuito alla longevità e alla grandezza del movimento, permettendo di coinvolgere chiunque avesse un dispositivo elettronico per accedere alle informazioni condivise.

In risposta alle manifestazioni politiche dei cittadini Bielorussi, lo stato ha applicato la tradizionale strategia di repressione, tipica dei regimi autoritari. Con l'ausilio della polizia nazionale e delle unità speciali OMON, l'antisommossa, il regime ha sempre contrastato con successo il dissenso. Tuttavia, l'entità della repressione politica ha assunto delle proporzioni senza precedenti nel 2020. Fin dai primi giorni di proteste, le forze di polizia hanno utilizzato forza senza limiti ed eccessiva violenza per punire e umiliare i dimostranti, così come per intimidire e scoraggiare altri potenziali partecipanti. Secondo i report, hanno usato proiettili di gomma, granate stordenti, cannoni ad acqua, gas lacrimogeni causando la morte di 4 persone e arrestando migliaia di persone. Esse venivano selezionate tra la folla in base alla presenza sui loro corpi e oggetti di simboli che potessero essere associati alle proteste (colori bianchi e rossi, medicine, nastri bianchi, attrezzatura medica). Una volta prelevati violentemente dalla folla, le persone venivano trasportate di forza dentro ai veicoli della

polizia, dove erano trattenuti in spazi troppo piccoli per respirare senza problemi e spesso venivano percossi. Molteplici donne hanno testimoniato che i poliziotti le minacciavano frequentemente con la custodia dei loro figli e stupro. Al momento della stesura di questo documento, un migliaio di detenuti sono ancora trattenuti nei centri di detenzione, mentre il totale dall'inizio delle proteste raggiunge i 35,000.

Una volta dentro i penitenziari, i prigionieri subivano innumerevoli tipi di abusi e maltrattamenti. Essi venivano tenuti in celle sovraffollate o erano obbligati a stare fermi in piedi nei corridoi, o forzati a tenere posizioni di stress. A volte erano obbligati a stare all'aperto o a stare in piedi al freddo. In alcuni casi gli venivano assegnati dei simboli di riconoscimento, ad esempio i prigionieri politici indossavano del giallo. Cibo, acqua, accesso ai servizi igienici gli erano negati, così come la possibilità di parlare con un avvocato. Alle donne venivano negati prodotti sanitari e venivano spesso forzate a spogliarsi in presenza di guardie di sesso maschile; erano costantemente spiante dalle stesse tramite telecamere nelle celle e nei servizi. Rasta e capelli lunghi venivano tagliati; a chi aveva piercing e tatuaggi veniva riservato un trattamento peggiore. La maggior parte dei detenuti veniva liberata dopo un certo periodo di tempo, senza un processo né una sentenza, ma solo con piccole conseguenze. Tuttavia, non per tutti la sorte era così benevola.

Alcune testimonianze hanno stupito l'opinione pubblica per l'atrocità delle azioni commesse dalle guardie carcerarie. Nei peggiori casi, i prigionieri venivano sottoposti a percosse, shock elettrici e altre forme di tortura. In un caso, un uomo è stato stuprato con un manganello, oltre ad aver sofferto altri abusi. Un ragazzo minorenni di 16 anni è stato percosso e sottoposto a elettroshock finché non è entrato in coma, con innumerevoli conseguenze. Le conseguenze sono state varie: ossa rotte, ferite, bruciature, lesioni cerebrali. Il supporto medico era spesso negato. Addirittura, fino al 2021 sono state riportate tre morti nei centri di detenzione. Tra loro, un prigioniero politico, un feto nel ventre della madre incinta e una donna vittima del Covid-19. Nonostante la gravità delle testimonianze, nessuna azione punitiva contro il personale responsabile è stata presa dalle autorità competenti. Per quanto riguarda le forze di polizia, esse sono indirettamente protette dall'inesistenza di un corpo con ruolo di supervisore.

Malgrado la violenta risposta dello stato alle proteste abbia contribuito a diminuire i numeri dei partecipanti, molti hanno continuato a manifestare e scendere in strada per molto tempo, anche motivati dalla violenza stessa, increduli che il governo abbia preso tali misure contro i suoi stessi cittadini. Tra loro, i giornalisti indipendenti del Paese, coraggiosamente schierati in prima linea per documentare gli orribili fatti Bielorussi. Molte di queste piattaforme indipendenti sono state chiuse o bloccate dal governo, oppure ne sono stati ristretti l'accesso e la circolazione o sono state private della loro attrezzatura. Inoltre, coloro che, invece dei giornali indipendenti si sono rivolti alle piattaforme online, sono stati minacciati con l'essere aggiunti a liste terroristiche. La maggior parte di queste organizzazioni oggi lavora dall'estero o è stata forzosamente chiusa; tra le seconde, il famoso portale online TUT.BY. I loro dipendenti sono stati spesso vittime di detenzione ingiustificata, rendendo la Bielorussia uno dei Paesi più pericolosi al mondo per un giornalista.

Oltre al giornalismo, altri due settori sono stati colpiti dalla dura repressione governativa, coloro in grado di aiutarne le vittime: gli avvocati e le organizzazioni umanitarie. Ai primi sono state revocate le licenze per esercitare, oppure gli era reso impossibile incontrare i loro clienti, o quando vi avevano accesso, non gli era permesso farlo privatamente. Spesso erano presenti autorità che poi divulgavano registrazioni illegali degli incontri. Le seconde sono state perseguitate con irruzioni nei loro uffici, perquisizioni, percosse e detenzione. In particolare, sono state vittime di una epurazione della società civile Bielorussa, il cui risultato è stata la chiusura di 278 organizzazioni per i diritti umani.

La totalità di questi spiacevoli fatti avvenuti durante e a seguito delle proteste Bielorusse hanno attirato l'attenzione della comunità internazionale. Così come è successo in passato, varie entità politiche hanno preso delle misure per contrastare la violenta repressione autorizzata da Lukashenko e hanno preso le parti della società civile. Per prima cosa, i poteri occidentali hanno cercato un dialogo diplomatico con le autorità Bielorusse, ponendo l'accento sulla necessità di rispettare i tradizionali principi democratici. Poi, hanno finanziato numerose organizzazioni sociali e civili, tra cui difensori dei diritti umani, media indipendenti e altre associazioni. Come ultima risorsa, stati e organizzazioni sovranazionali hanno messo in pratica delle sanzioni economiche e personali, dirette a particolari figure governative. Nei periodi successive, esse sono state aggiornate e ad oggi le sanzioni dell'Unione Europea coinvolgono circa 200 funzionari dello stato, tra cui Lukashenko. Sfortunatamente, esse non hanno prodotto gli esiti sperati: infatti, con il supporto di Vladimir Putin, la Russia ha offerto un importante sostegno economico e politico al regime di Lukashenko.

In conclusione, il movimento di proteste del 2020 in Bielorussia ha rappresentato una pietra miliare della storia del Paese, segnando la prima azione nazionale di partecipazione e mobilitazione alla vita politica, in una nazione che non riconosce questo diritto. La reazione sproporzionata e inadeguata del governo alle manifestazioni pacifiche dei cittadini è l'ennesima dimostrazione che le autorità non hanno le capacità né la sensibilità di comprendere le richieste della nazione. Mentre le loro intenzioni erano di silenziare il movimento di dissidenti e scoraggiarne altri, le conseguenze sono state la radicalizzazione e l'empatia con chi partecipava alle proteste e cadeva vittima di orribili crimini. Inoltre, il governo si è attirato addosso l'attenzione mediatica internazionale, coinvolgendo involontariamente nella sua scena politica attori che non erano previsti. Nonostante il movimento si sia lentamente spento, la sua durata e la sua entità ne sottolineano il carattere straordinario. Per la prima volta, il popolo Bielorosso ha manifestato una identità nazionale partecipando a un movimento che ha coinvolto tutto il Paese, risvegliando le coscienze politiche intorpidite dall'ambiente autoritario di quella che è la loro patria. Sarà interessante vedere dove, in futuro, questa deviazione dal cammino prestabilito da Lukashenko porterà il popolo Bielorosso.