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Emerging from the political crisis in Belarus: with or without the intervention of external actors?

The protests against Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, which have continued beyond the August 9 presidential election, have been surprising in terms of their scale and level of politicization. The protest promises to be long-lasting bringing together people of all ages and professions, but the authorities are refusing to recognize it and are not satisfying any of its demands: to organize new this time democratic elections, to stop repression, to release detainees and political prisoners, to investigate crimes committed by the representatives of law enforcement agencies. Quite the opposite is happening: the crackdown orchestrated by Lukashenka's regime, after a certain lull between August 12 and 16, is intensifying with hundreds of arrests per day, the repression against the emerging leaders and journalists (from the private media) who report the facts. What are the scenarios of the development of this crisis which seems to have reached an impasse? Can Belarus emerge from it without resorting to foreign mediation? What role could the European Union play?

THE BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AS A CATALYST FOR THE POLITICISATION OF THE POPULATION

To the surprise of the Belarusian authorities and the international community, the presidential election of August 9, 2020 did not end as planned. Although it took place during the holidays and in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, it revealed and amplified an unprecedented politicisation of the Belarusian population, which rallied around the idea of voting "for anyone else but Alyaksandr Lukashenka", who has been in power for 26 years.

The elimination of potential opposition candidates, blogger Siarhei Tsihanouski, banker Viktor Babaryka, both arrested, and the former manager of the Minsk high tech park, Valery Tsapkala, whose signatures, collected to stand as a candidate, were invalidated by the Central Electoral Commission, led to the unification of the electorate around Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya - a 37-year-old housewife and trained English teacher, who decided to run for president instead of her husband after his arrest. She was able to register her candidacy, which did not seem threatening for the incumbent president, who declared that "*the presidential post is not made for a woman*". Taking advantage of this opportunity, Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya not only proved herself capable of speaking in front of the crowds during the agitation rallies,[1] but also of taking strategic decisions like forming a feminine trio by joining forces with Maryya Kalesnikava and Veranika Tsapkala - one representing the election camp of Viktor Babaryka and the other the wife of Valery Tsapkala.

Repression of all opposition voices has been consistent since the start of the election[2] with the limitation or prohibition of rallies, the arrests of members of the teams of the opposition candidates, of journalists from private media broadcasting the images of public gatherings in favour of alternative candidates. These events have largely contributed to strengthening the feeling of indignation among the population. The authorities, apparently aware of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's declining popularity, organised only a few rallies in his favour and mostly relied on the support of the security forces. Alyaksandr Lukashenka thus met with several law enforcement units in order to ascertain their loyalty.

[1]Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina, « [Belarus : après la mobilisation, qu'attendre du lendemain électoral ?](#) », *Regard sur l'Est*, 9 August 2020.

[2]Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina, « [Belarus : une campagne présidentielle pas comme les autres](#) », *Regard sur l'Est*, 22 June 2020.

"MY VOTE HAS BEEN STOLEN"

The widespread politicisation during the election campaign resulted in a high voter turnout, brought to light by very long queues leading to polling stations. When the results were posted, many citizens felt like their vote "has been stolen". When it comes to falsifications, the rate of early voting was higher than during previous presidential elections - more than 41.7% of the population. The actual turnout was about half as high, according to the independent observation initiative "Sumlennyya lyudzi" (Honest people)[3]. As a result, on the election day, some polling stations accused shortages of ballots. While thousands of citizens volunteered as electoral observers[4] from existing[5] or newly created[6] independent observation initiatives, the authorities limited the observation to three people during the five days of early voting and to five people on the election day, stating the epidemiological situation. Furthermore, independent observers could not count on the presence of the observation mission by the OSCE, which was invited too late by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Due to such limited observation, it is impossible to confirm the victory of Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya. Moreover, exit polls, as well as independent surveys are forbidden in Belarus. However, according to independent observation campaigns, including the "Golas" (The Voice) platform, which received photos of the ballots of more than a million voters, the count was fraudulent in at least one out of three polling stations, therefore, the official election results should be invalidated.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

The announcement of yet another "elegant victory"[7] by Alyaksandr Lukashenka with over 80% of the votes led to many people gathering outside of their polling stations in order to protest against the results. In few places where the count appeared to be fair, members of the polling stations were greeted with applause, while in other, presumably tarnished by fraud, in many cases members were accompanied home by anti-riot police. When people

gathered peacefully in the centres of many Belarusian cities, the situation quickly degenerated. From August 9 to 11, police, special brigades and military units violently dispersed the protestors with water cannons, sound grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets, causing severe injuries, at least four deaths and six people disappearing.[8] According to the UN, among the 6,000 people arrested, at least 450 detainees were tortured in temporary detention centres[9] with, according to some testimonies, the aim of "showing who they had to vote for".

These events deeply shocked the population. On August 12, women dressed in white with flowers in their hands took to the streets to protest against police violence. Following August 16, dubbed the "Freedom Day"[10], during which half a million Belarusians took part in rallies all over the country, repression resumed. Every day about 100s of people are arrested, State factory workers who express their intention to strike are dismissed, journalists of independent media are detained under the pretext of identity checks, and many foreign journalists had their accreditation revoked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nobody is spared: Sviatlana Alexievich, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, was questioned by the Commission of Inquiry; Aliaksandr Mrochek, a famous cardiologist at the head of a major hospital, was dismissed in front of his colleagues; the head of the Catholic Church, Tadeusz Kondrusevich, a Belarusian citizen, was unable to return to Belarus after a trip abroad.

Despite the repression, the protest movement has not weakened. During the work days, numerous solidarity actions are organised as well as rallies by various professions (doctors, teachers, railway workers, workers from the new technologies sector, actors from the Yanka Kupala theatre, students, etc.). Every Saturday, women's marches take place. And every Sunday, hundreds of thousands of people unite in marches in the centre of Minsk and in several Belarusian cities.

The Coordination Council, formed to represent the interests of the protest movement with the approval of Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya and including respected

[3] ["Sumlennyya lyudzi" iauka na dateterminovae galasavan'ne zavychanaia prykladna udvaia"](#) (According to "Honest People", the real turnout during the early vote was about twice as low), *Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty)*, 10 August 2020.

[4] Meeting of the analytic club of experts "Electoral observation-2020: new limitations et opportunities", the online magazine "Nashe Mnenie" (Our opinion), Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS), Belarus Press Club, 30 July 2020.

[5] The independent and non-partisan "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" observation campaign, the "Prava vybaru" (Right to choose) observation campaign linked to the centre-right opposition parties.

[6] The online parallel vote-counting platform "Golas" (The Voice), the community monitor "Sumlennyya lyudzi" (Honest People), the Zubr platform, the observation campaign by the movement "Tell the Truth!".

[7] Term used, for example, by Ethan S. Burger and Victor Minchuk to refer to Lukashenka's score in the 2001 presidential elections. "Alyaksandr' Lukashenka's Consolidation of Power" in Jörg Forbrig, David R. Marples, Pavol Demes, (ed.), [Prospects for Democracy in Belarus](#), The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2006, p. 31.

[8] [Presentation by the Special rapporteur on the situation with human rights in Belarus](#), Anaïs Marin, at the informal conference of the UN Security Council, 4 September 2020.

[9] [UN human rights experts: Belarus must stop torturing protesters and prevent enforced disappearances](#), 1 September 2020.

[10] Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina, [« Conséquences de la r-EVA-lution bélarusse : de la contestation politique à la formation d'une nation 2 »](#), *Regard sur l'Est*, 31 August 2020.

personalities of the Belarusian society, is not recognised by the authorities as a legitimate interlocutor. On the contrary, many of its members have been detained or forced to leave the country, and a criminal investigation has been opened against the council. However, the European Parliament considers the Coordination Council as the "provisional representative of the people demanding democratic change". Despite the announcement of the constitutional reform, Alyaksandr Lukashenka repeated several times in an interview with Russian journalists on August 9 that only his death could put an end to his presidency.

Within the Belarusian State, there are no institutional arrangements that could serve as a framework for dialogue between the authorities and the opposition. The parliament formed in 2019 is entirely loyal to the president. Governors and mayors are not elected but appointed by Lukashenka himself. The example of the Hrodna region speaks for itself: in this region, demonstrators managed to obtain the release of the detainees and a permission to gather legally in the main square of the city of Hrodna. This success was cancelled by the replacement of the governor by Uladzimir Karanik, loyal to Lukashenka and who has tarnished his reputation as the Minister of Health by manipulating statistics on deaths from the coronavirus.

COULD ALYAKSANDR LUKASHENKA STAY IN POWER BY TRANSFORMING THE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME INTO A SULTANISTIC REGIME?

The most pessimistic scenario on which the Belarusian authorities are counting on would be for Alyaksandr Lukashenka to stay in power by means of definitely transforming the authoritarian regime into one that Juan J. Linz, Alfred Stepan and Houchang E. Chehabi define as sultanistic.[11] In this type of regime, the leader, who does not enjoy popular support, remains in power by relying on repression and purges within his administrative and security apparatus.

The establishment of a repressive regime of this kind which systematically uses paramilitary forces to repress the opposing voices, would lead to the weakening of the

protest movement forcing many people to immigrate. However, this type of regime, described by Linz and Chehabi as one that can be easily overthrown by a coup d'etat,[12] cannot be sustained over a long period of time in a State such as Belarus, which is poor in natural resources and has an unreformed economy, unless financial support comes from abroad, according to the researcher Andrei Kazakevich.[13] The establishment of such a regime would lead to a decrease in foreign investment, the departure of foreign companies and especially information technology companies, one of the most dynamic sectors in the country, causing a further deterioration of the economic situation.[14]

Recent appointments show that Alyaksandr Lukashenka is increasingly surrounding himself with *siloviki* (representatives of the law-enforcement agencies). In December 2019, Natallia Kachanova, a specialist in social issues at the head of the presidential administration, was replaced by Ihar Sergeenka, deputy head of the KGB.[15] In June 2020, during the presidential campaign, Alyaksandr Lukashenka replaced the Prime Minister Serguei Rumas, a reform-oriented economist, by Raman Galouchanka, former chairman of the state military and industrial committee. Lukashenka also recalled Dmitri Paulichenka, colonel of the special forces' unit from the Ministry of the Interior, dismissed in March 2009. Paulichenka was banned from entering the EU because of his alleged implication in the disappearances of Belarusian political figures in 1999 - 2000. He was the one who [led the dispersion of demonstrators](#) in Minsk on August 10. At the beginning of September, while the mobilization started to prove itself as durable, the army representative Andrei Raikou was replaced at the post of the Secretary of the State Security Council by Valery Vakulchik, former KGB director.

PUTIN AT LUKASHENKA'S SIDE: IS BELARUSIAN SOVEREIGNTY AND INDEPENDENCE AT STAKE?

Raikou's dismissal is not surprising given his involvement in the arrest at the end of July of 33 mercenaries from the Russian private military company Wagner Group: Lukashenka's regime has changed its strategy, hoping that Vladimir Putin will come to its rescue.

[11] These are authoritarian regimes based on personal ideology and favours in order to keep the autocrat in power, with little ideological basis. H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (ed.), *Sultanistic Regimes: A Theory of Sultanism* Sultanistic Regimes, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, 284 p; Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan., *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 51 - 54, 70 - 71; Juan J. Linz "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes", in Fred I. Greenstein et Nelson W. Polsby (ed.), *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 3, Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley, 1975, p. 259.

[12] H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, op. cit. p. 19.

[13] The opinion expressed by Andrei Kazakevich, researcher at the University Vytautas Magnus, during the meeting of the club of experts "Optimism vs pessimism during the elections of 2020", *Nashe Mnenie (Our opinion)*, Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS), Belarus Press Club, 23 July 2020.

[14] According to the economist Kateryna Bornukova, academic director and researcher at the BERO economic research centre, growth in Belarusian GDP was weak in the years 2010 compared to the 2000s. In 2019, it grew by only 1.2%, the forecast for 2020 is -4%.

[15] Andrei Yeliseyev, "Belarus at a Crossroads: Political Regime Transformation and Future Scenarios", *Belarus Digest*, 1 September 2020.

Emerging from the political crisis in Belarus: with or without the intervention of external actors?

In the first days following the post-electoral violence, Alyaksandr Lukashenka was already boasting of Russian support by declaring that Putin had promised to intervene militarily in accordance with the obligations undertaken by the two countries in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), whereas such support is only foreseen in case of external military aggression. However, at the beginning of the crisis, the Russian authorities took a cautious stance. During this period, Alyaksandr Lukashenka phoned Vladimir Putin several times, refusing, according to media reports, to communicate with the leaders of European countries.

Kremlin's official support dates from August 21, when journalists from the TV channel "Russia Today" arrived to Minsk to replace the journalists and technical crew from the State news agency BelTA who had resigned. Since then, media coverage in Belarus by the State media has changed considerably. An association between the Ukrainian Euromaidan of 2013-2014 and the Belarusian protest has been created, whereas the latter is essentially an anti-Lukashenka mobilisation devoid of any geopolitical claims. There has also been an attempt to provoke a confrontation between supporters and opponents of Lukashenka, by presenting them as equal in size, stigmatising the protesters as nationalist and russophobe. For example, since the arrival of Russian media consultants, the police has started covering Soviet monuments with barbed wire, insinuating that they are in danger, even though there were no cases of vandalism by Belarusian peaceful protesters before. The fact that the demonstrators took shelter in a Catholic church in the centre of Minsk on August 26 as they fled from the anti-riot police, was also used by the government media to sow the seeds of religious disaccord. So far, all these attempts have proved ineffective.

Vladimir Putin's support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka has so far only had the effect of provoking an increase in anti-Kremlin moods among the protesters (manifested by the appearance of banners to this effect starting the manifestation of September 6), although anti-Russian feelings are uncommon among the Belarusian population. The latter fears in particular that Lukashenka, now that he has again become a pariah in Europe and the

United States, will sign the roadmaps for deepening the integration in the framework of the Russia-Belarus Union State which he refused to sign at the end of 2019. According to a pessimistic scenario, the signing of these documents would mean the end of Belarus as an independent State or, in a more optimistic scenario, the end of Belarusian economic autonomy. However, deepening integration within the framework of the State of the Union is not very popular neither in Russia nor in Belarus. In the latter, only 24% of the population want the creation of common supranational bodies (according to a survey carried out in June by the [Sociology Institute of the Academy of Sciences](#)) and 61.6% are in favour of preserving the country's independence from Moscow. In Russia, [according to a poll](#) undertaken by the Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion in August 2020, only 22% of those interviewed supported the creation of a single State and 43% supported the maintaining of friendly relations between two independent countries.

However, Russian support accorded to Lukashenka is limited: only 1.5 billion was promised by Vladimir Putin in Sochi - this sum can, for instance, compensate for the 1.4 billion decrease in gold reserves in August 2020 alone - and Kremlin's declarations remain moderate. Its spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, for example, expressed concern about the disappearances in Belarus after the kidnapping of the opposition leader Maryya Kalesnikava on September 9. He was also irritated by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's assertion that the protest movement in Belarus would expand to Russia.

China is another country capable of financially supporting the current regime in Minsk and who congratulated Alyaksandr Lukashenka on his election. However, given the political instability and the difficulties in Lukashenka's relations with the European Union, Belarus is becoming less attractive to China than before. Moreover, it is worth recalling that, in most cases, Chinese credits to Belarus were destined to specific projects and aimed at increasing Chinese exports, and that China has only once (in December 2019) granted a half a million \$ without attaching conditions.

WHAT CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION DO?

The [European Union's response](#) was both timid and slow. The European Union, Belarus' second largest trading partner, did not send a clear signal to the Belarusian authorities about the red lines that they should not have crossed while the political repression has been orchestrated since the early stages of the election campaign debuting in May. However, while previous Belarusian elections had been qualified as "having failed to satisfy the criteria to describe the for democratic elections", the European Union went [further](#) this time and did not [recognize the results](#), or Alyaksandr Lukashenka [as president](#), despite him being sworn into office. Lithuania went even further and recognised Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya as the president. The French President Emmanuel Macron, after declaring that President Lukashenka had to leave, travelled to Lithuania on 29 September where he met Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya and reiterated his offer of mediation within the framework of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). While this event was described as "historic" by the independent Belarusian media, during a telephone conversation, Vladimir Putin told Emmanuel Macron that he considers "all attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign state and external pressure on the legitimate authorities unacceptable". Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya said she would address the French Parliament on October 7, and that a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel would take place on October 6. On several occasions already Sviatlana Tsihanouskaya has spoken to [MEPs in Brussels](#).

The EU also announced an aid of €53 million, of which €50 million will be granted to counter the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, but may be used for other purposes by the Belarusian authorities. Only €3 million will go to the victims of repression and independent media. The economic assistance plan [presented](#) by the Lithuanian President, Gitanas Nausėda, prepared with Poland and Romania to help "democratic Belarus" is also an encouraging sign for the demonstrators.

To go further, the EU could suspend cooperation with State-controlled NGOs and projects with the public sector financed through the EIB and EBRD and increase the support for the development of the civil society.

While the Heads of State and Government of the European Union [decided](#) on October 2 to adopt targeted sanctions against 40 Belarusian officials (but not against Alexander Lukashenka), everything should be done to ensure that the Belarusian people are not left alone in the face of repression and the authorities refusal to engage in dialogue.

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