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Belarus Protests Signal the Autumn of Lukashenko's Regime

It's not yet clear how the country will emerge from this crisis, but it's safe to say things won't go back to the way they were.

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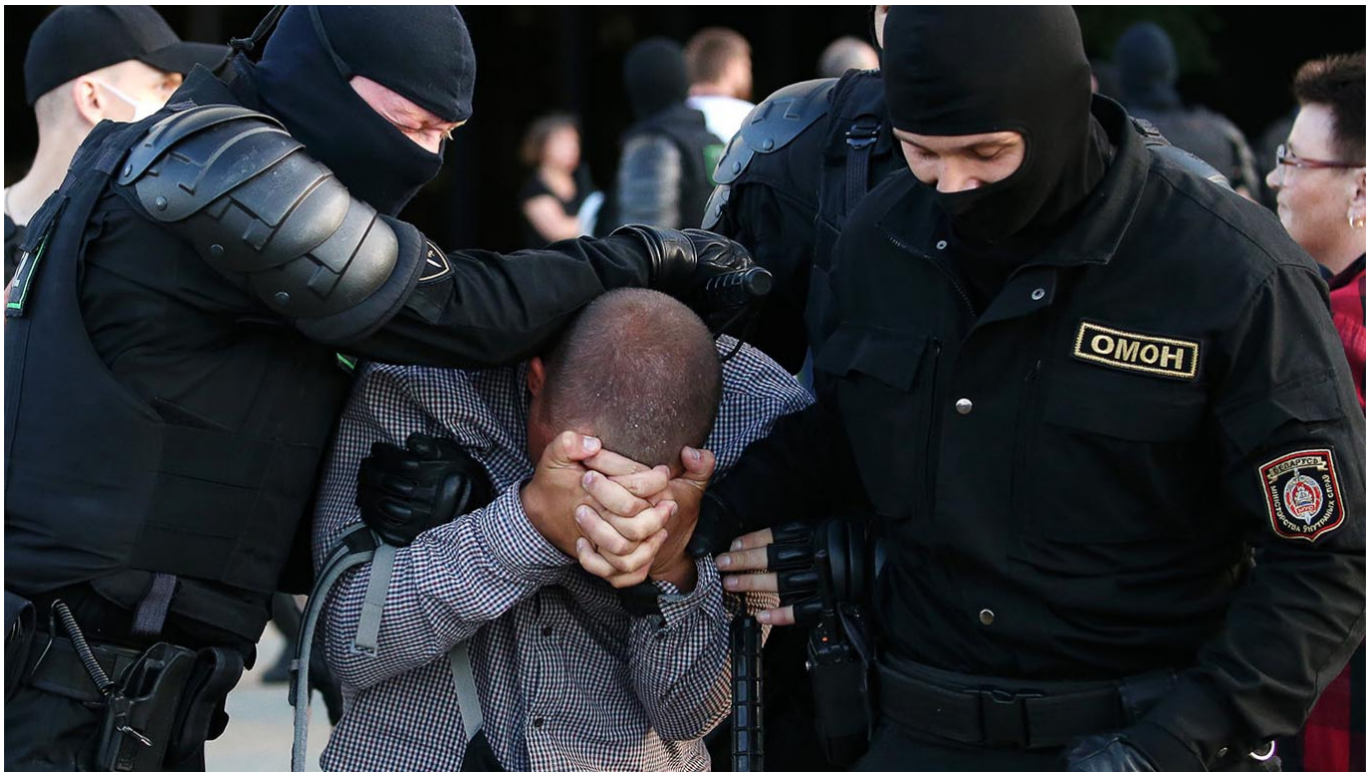

Natalia Fedosenko / TASS

If the official results announced following Belarus's presidential election on Aug. 9 were entirely typical — a landslide win for President Alexander Lukashenko with 80% of the vote — the public reaction was anything but.

The fiercest street clashes in the country's history, which have already cost at least one life and left dozens of others seriously injured, will go down in history as a symbol of the autumn of Lukashenko's decades-long regime. There's no obvious way to bridge the gulf between the authorities and what may well be the majority of Belarusians.

The Belarusian government had been sowing the seeds of the current protests since the beginning of the year. Having shown itself to be passive and indifferent during the coronavirus pandemic, it began turning a great number of previously apolitical people political. Lukashenko's slumping ratings and the appearance of dynamic new alternative candidates only fueled people's hopes for peaceful changes this year.

Related article: Belarus Detains Hundreds More in Post-Election Crackdown

Belarusian political culture has always adhered to the principles of nonviolence and compliance with the law, but if all the outlets for protest energy are closed off one by one, eventually it will burst forth like an explosion. In the run-up to the election, over 1,000 people were detained at various protests, and the three most popular candidates — Sergei Tikhanovsky, Viktor Babariko, and Valery Tsepkalo — were barred from running. The first two are now in pretrial detention awaiting criminal charges, while the third managed to leave the country.

People started registering en masse as electoral commission staff, but were rejected: the commissions were formed almost entirely of state sector employees and officials. Independent observers were refused entry to the polling stations on the pretext of coronavirus precautions. The most persistent ones were arrested by the dozen at the polling stations.

This wave of repression tipped too many Belarusians over the edge, and meant that protests were inevitable, even if the authorities had given Lukashenko a modest 60% of the vote, rather than his traditional 80%. Even within a system of electoral commissions carefully made up of tested loyalists, with clear instructions from above and no observers to get in the way, some still proclaimed victory to Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who ran in place of her jailed husband. There are already at least one hundred photos from across the country of results showing a win for Tikhanovskaya.

The people who took to the streets in the following days came from all walks of life. Protests took place in over thirty cities, and were put down harshly nearly everywhere. For the first time in the country's history, rubber bullets, stun grenades, and water cannons were deployed.

At least one person has been killed, and hundreds of others are in the hospital. There are reports from all over the country of protesters and passersby being detained and beaten at overflowing detention centers.

Mass rage

The authorities' blocking of both the internet and the center of the capital Minsk, the lack of protest leaders, and the clear advantage of the authorities in terms of strength made a repetition of Ukraine's Maidan revolution impossible in Belarus right from the start. These are protests of mass rage, not an attempt at regime change.

Personalized authoritarian regimes like that in Belarus hardly ever give in without a bloody

fight. There is no ruling party, influential parliament, clans and oligarchs, or military class: all the things needed to divide the elite under pressure from the public.

Meanwhile, the opposition has no leaders or center that officials could co-opt. It would be wrong to assume that Tikhanovskaya or her team had anything to do with the protests. Meeting points for protesters were designated by the administrators of popular opposition channels on the secure messaging app Telegram.

It's impossible so far to predict with certainty how this political crisis will end. If the protests fizzle out under pressure from the security services—which currently looks like the most probable scenario—it's unlikely that the authorities will refrain from inflicting a retaliatory blow. Much as Minsk doesn't want to be the subject of more Western sanctions, the impulse to react will be stronger.

Dozens of criminal cases have already been launched, and they can't all simply disappear. The temptation will almost certainly be overwhelming to take revenge on civil society and the media, which have blossomed in the last five years of a relative thaw.

No matter how much the authorities might persuade themselves and their audience that the protests are merely the result of foreign interference, the campaign and its vicious end have inflicted serious psychological damage on Lukashenko. In his worldview, the ungrateful people have shown they do not deserve the authorities' trust.

The scars sustained by society will be even greater. It's not just that blood was spilled, and that the authorities brought special forces and water cannons out onto the streets. Five to seven thousand detainees means tens of thousands of shocked relatives and friends. Now they are set to experience the delights of the political justice system, too. Talk of election fraud is no longer the preserve of opposition and human rights activists. Now even people who have never previously taken an interest in politics know about it and are talking about it.

Related article: Belarus: Days of Post-Election Turmoil

Cooperating with and working for the state will now become more toxic than it was before. We can expect to see not only waves of political and educational emigration, but also the peeling away of professionals from various spheres of the state apparatus, and a subsequent decline in the quality of state management.

Deprived of the support—or, at least, the silent loyalty—of the majority, and without the economic resources to win it back, the regime will rely more and more on the *siloviki*, or security services. *Siloviki* already head the government and presidential administration. Now, following the election, they won't just determine Lukashenko's worldview by preparing nearly all the reports on his table; they will also know that the regime owes its survival to them.

This could become a prologue to reformatting the regime. The untouchable *siloviki* could gradually become irreplaceable, and then start to feel that beyond carrying out someone else's orders, they have the right to a voice in the decisionmaking process.

The Belarusian regime has less room to maneuver now than ever before. The public is angry; the economy has been in a state of stagnation for a decade already; reform seems risky; relations with the West look set to be frozen; and to get any support from Russia, Belarus will have to share its sovereignty. So now the most important thing for Lukashenko is money: because money buys time.

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