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Belarusian History in the Making blog

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On 9 August, everyone who closely followed the situation in Belarus waited for a miracle, however, the seemingly impossible suddenly started to seem realistic. Yet these circumstances suggest now is the right time to induce change in a country that has often been portrayed as an island of stability and the rule of law by neighbouring ex-Soviet allies during the 26 years of Lukashenko's rule. While votes were still being counted, the state television already congratulated Lukashenko for an unprecedented victory, claiming he had taken 80.1% of votes. According to the [Belarusian Central Elections Committee](#), Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the main alternative contender, received only 10.2%. However, [exit polls carried out by independent observers](#) across Belarus and overseas as well as copies of original protocols that have since become available, suggest the opposite.

The elections were rigged on a massive scale both during early elections and on the voting day. While COVID-19 is not formally recognised in Belarus, the pandemic was used as an excuse to deliberately slow down the voting process across all polling stations overseas. Under instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, only one person was admitted at a time and thorough security checks were carried out prior to voting. This meant many overseas voters were left waiting and consequently were deprived of the right to vote after 8 hours of queuing.

Belarusians initiated massive peaceful protests after polling stations were closed, with members of the voting commission reluctant to announce the results. Lukashenko gave permission to use force: riot police used explosives, stun grenades, water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets to suppress the protests on the night following the elections. The expectations that riot police forces would take the side of their people instead of defending the dictator were fading. Their brutality did not know any limits with everyone who happened to be on the streets and not at home after 7pm risking severe beatings or arrest. Yet the first three days of the resistance of Belarusian citizens were critical to securing the hope for change in favour of the opposition.

There will be generations of Belarusians speaking about their bravery standing up to the regime and fighting for freedom in an information vacuum. Internet traffic across Belarus went down in the afternoon of 9 August, and this lasted for three days. In such an atmosphere, it was difficult for people to coordinate their actions well or understand the scale of brutality and violence, let alone communicate this to the rest of the world.

[Over 7,000 Belarusians were jailed](#) in the first three days since 9 August, and many were hospitalised for serious injuries. Two [fatal casualties](#) are formally confirmed, yet the authorities misrepresented the cause of confirmed deaths of both victims. [Police shot 34-year-old Aleksandr Taraikovski](#) while the authorities claimed he died after an explosive device he held blew up in his hand. Alexander Vikhor, a 25-year-old from Gomel city, [died from not receiving timely medical help after detention](#). [Widespread torture was inflicted on jailed protesters](#) in Belarusian prisons, with the Okrestino prison in Minsk [particularly notorious for aggressive tactics](#). A [death toll](#) is expected to rise given new fatal casualties reported in connection to the recent protests and about [92 people reported as missing](#).

What makes these presidential elections different?

- Never in recent history has Belarus seen such mobilisation and solidarity among people on the election day and during post-election protests. Many volunteers across the country and overseas came together to monitor the elections; provide medical help and food supply during the protests; collect evidence of the brutal suppression and those responsible for this; reach out to the international community and offer assistance to victims.
- Unlike previous years, this year's election campaign had some particularities. These include commonly used 'spoilers' [allegedly, these are presidential candidates provisionally agreed with the regime], which were used to create an image of opposition to Lukashenko, and the unexpected entry of two serious contenders, Viktor Babaryko, ex-head of 'Belgazprombank', currently imprisoned, and Valeriy Tsepkalo, an ex-Belarusian diplomat and founder of the Hi-Tech Park in Belarus. Sergey Tikhanovsky, a popular Belarusian blogger, who also entered the election campaign, managed to wake up the society by travelling across Belarus and talking to ordinary people, opening their eyes to the bitter reality.
- Lukashenko underestimated the power of women to bring the society together, dismissing the idea that a woman could rule the country. In his own words, the Belarusian constitution is not written for women. However, the unexpected stepping in during the presidential campaign of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya following her husband Sergey's imprisonment, and the integration of forces with two other women, Maria Kolesnikova, Viktor Babaryko's campaign chief, and Veronika Tsepkalo, Valeri Tsepkalo's wife, have become a symbol of change for people. Women's peaceful protests rolled out after the first three days of violence, which also played a critical role in ensuring the continuation of resistance.
- Lukashenko also underestimated the power of the internet and digital technologies. While the consolidation of people was natural, various social platforms and channels helped to facilitate Belarusian people's integration and coordinate their actions during the strikes without any feasible national leader. This also helped to mobilise the Belarusian diaspora overseas, who reached out to the international community, fundraised for victims of political repression and created other means of support. On the digital platform 'Golos' ['Voice'], an initiative of a civil rights group called 'Honest people' sought to ensure alternative electoral monitoring. The aim of this was to use the platform to pre-register people's votes and submit photographs of their ballots later as evidence of voting.

Growing peaceful protests uniting ever more Belarusians domestically were followed by women's flower protests on the 4th and 5th day of resistance, while flagmen of state enterprises initiated industrial strikes. This is particularly significant as the state of the Belarusian economy is very fragile; the authorities cannot afford industrial strikes to roll out across the country as this would bring the economy down. The international community has responded too, with both the USA and the European Union calling these elections neither free nor fair. The [UK government](#) on 17 August has also joined in condemning the violence, by not recognising the

results of the presidential elections and calling for further investigation of the fraudulent results through the OSCE.

The unexpectedly massive scale of resistance and the response of the international community are putting pressure on the authorities to stop the violence on the streets and release the people detained in the course of the brutal suppression. The EU is currently working on a proposal to establish a dialogue with the Belarusian authorities and the opposition, represented by Coordination Council, established on 18 August. The EU also agreed on the introduction of sanctions against those responsible for violence, repression and election fraud.

With the weakening of his regime, Lukashenko [has turned to Russia for help](#). Russia is expected to provide security assistance under a collective defence security pact of former Soviet states. But a military intervention would not be without risks for Russia. There is a possibility its internal anti-Putin rallies in Khabarovsk which started from 11 July and triggered by [the arrest of its governor, Sergei Furgal](#) (on charges of his involvement in multiple murders 15 years ago but claimed to be politically motivated) could escalate further across Russia. On the 10 August, [protesters have continued their rallies in Khabarovsk, marching also to express solidarity with Belarus](#). Russia may also face a threat [of further sanctions from the West](#) that could jeopardise an economy already weakened by the impact of the COVID-19 and low oil prices.

The people's resistance keeps on growing, with the opposition freedom rallies on Sunday 16 August gathering more than 500,000 across Belarus with Minsk attracting 400,000 alone (see the photograph below). There are two national television companies and also more factories joining the strike, including the leading Belarusian exporters: Belaruskali, one of the world's biggest producers and exporters of potash fertilisers, and a Naftan refinery plant. During the meeting with [factory workers of MKZT plant](#) on 17 of August, Lukashenko's speech was continuously interrupted by workers chanting in his face: "Lukashenko, Go Away!". It is hard to see how this awakening of the society can be stopped though may be not bearing immediate results. One should not underestimate Russia's role in this endgame. Not intervening with military force does not preclude Kremlin from using other less externally feasible ways for interference in Belarus affairs. More importantly, the collective memory of the violent repression has left scars which will never heal calling for a change!



Source: photo by Nadzeya Buzhan, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=257219>