

The Belarus Protests and Russia: Lessons for “Big Brother”

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The anti-Lukashenka protests in Belarus, which have lasted since August 2020, may have slipped off the front pages of international media, but the recent pro-Navalny demonstrations in Russia make for a powerful reminder of their significance. Both the protesters and the authorities in Russia have taken important lessons from their counterparts next door. For Alexei Navalny’s supporters, the Belarusian protests offered moral and strategic inspiration, while the Russian authorities clearly took a leaf from the Belarusian police’s playbook on the violent dispersal of demonstrations. The potential for actions in Belarus to serve as a blueprint for events further east makes a democratic resolution of the Belarusian crisis even more imperative. The hiatus in mass demonstrations of the kind seen back in autumn 2020 should not be taken as President Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s victory.

Belarusian Protests as a Source of Inspiration

Belarusians watched with a sad sense of recognition as the Russian police attacked street demonstrators demanding the release of Navalny, President Vladimir Putin’s most vocal critic, during mass protests that broke out across Russia in late January and early February. The images on social media of riot policemen beating unarmed protesters, dragging them, some unconscious, into crammed police vans, forcibly pulling people out of passing cars, and keeping detainees in overfilled prison cells without water and food are scenes all too familiar in Belarus. Tens of thousands of Belarusians have endured similar and worse treatment at the hands of their own law-enforcement services since the protests against the fraudulent presidential elections broke out on August 9, 2020. Indeed, the similarities have been so striking that one major Russian newspaper, *Kommersant*, ran its [report](#) on the February 2 demonstrations under the headline: “A Minsk evening in Moscow.”

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The Russian police are not the only ones who might be taking lessons from the Belarusian events. Although the Kremlin declared its refusal to draw parallels between the protests in Belarus and Russia, with Putin's spokesman Dmitrii Peskov [telling](#) journalists on February 3 not to make comparisons, this is not how the protesters saw things.

During the string of mass rallies across Russia in response to Navalny's imprisonment, Belarus was clearly on the protesters' mind. On January 23, some demonstrators in Moscow and in St Petersburg carried white-red-white flags of the Belarusian opposition. On January 31, Moscow protesters chanted in Belarusian "Zhyve Belarus'!" (Long live Belarus!), while further south, in Krasnodar, a crowd of demonstrators shouted, "Put Lukashenka in the police van!" Even before the pro-Navalny demonstrations, slogans of solidarity with Belarus have been a regular feature of the months-long Khabarovsk protests in Russia's Far East.

Taking Strategic and Tactical Lessons from the Belarusian Opposition

All of this highlights the significance of the Belarusian protests for Russia. While the Navalny team has also pointed to important differences between the political situations in the two countries, they have certainly drawn lessons from the six-months-long protest movement next door.

For one, they turned to [using](#) Telegram channels for the organization of the January-February demonstrations, something that the Belarusian protesters have been doing since last August. The use of Telegram has helped make mass protests more fluid and harder to track for the authorities, a "be water" lesson that Belarusians themselves have taken from the [Hong Kong](#) protesters. The Navalny team's reiteration of their commitment to peaceful protest in the aftermath of police brutality also echoes the Belarusian approach with its insistence on civil demonstrations, social solidarity, and rejection of violence in favor of political and economic pressure. This approach has given the Belarusian protest movement the high moral ground that it has carried with it for the past six months in the face of acute pressure from the authorities.

The Belarusian protests have proven useful in another respect. Faced with police brutality of the Belarusian type, Navalny's team was quicker to drop the strategy of mass protests in order to avoid further arrests of its supporters and stave off protest fatigue. Two days after the February demonstrations, they [called](#) for a halt to the street protests, concerned about the authorities following "an Belarusian scenario of forcible suppression" and fearing a further drop in numbers. Instead, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) declared that they would now focus on encouraging the West to apply financial pressure on Putin's regime. This move also mirrors the months-long diplomatic efforts of the Belarusian Coordination Council led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, Lukashenka's main opponent, who was forcibly deported from Belarus by the authorities back in August 2020 after the opposition recognized her as the election winner. Since then, Tsikhanouskaia,

who has been joined by most of the Council's leaders in a forced exile, has campaigned relentlessly with EU and U.S. leaders to exert political and financial pressure on the Belarusian authorities. In February 2021, the EU prolonged its sanctions (now in their third round) against top Belarusian officials and Lukashenka's family members until 2022 and threatened further sanctions if repression continued.

These efforts are not focused solely on economic measures. In January, a campaign by the Belarusian opposition led to the International Ice Hockey Federation stripping Belarus of the right to co-host the 2021 World Championship after several international sponsors threatened to boycott the event. This came as a heavy blow to Lukashenka, an avid hockey fan, for whom hosting the championship would have brought a degree of international acceptance and a propaganda coup at home.

Belarusians are showing a new way to push for change in yet another respect. Tsikhanouskaia's team insists on the peaceful transition of power, carried out in dialogue with the current regime, to the point of [allowing](#) Lukashenka to save face and leave his post with dignity. This shows remarkable political pragmatism and restraint. If this is combined with renewed protests at home against the backdrop of a collapsing economy, and if the international community steps up its pressure on the regime, it might just work. Such a democratic outcome in Belarus would have resonance for Russia.

A Master-Class in Resilience and Protest Creativity

The above is certainly not a quick-fix strategy, but Belarusians have already demonstrated extraordinary resilience. Although mass rallies of the kind that made the headlines have been put on hold during the winter months, this does not mean that the movement has collapsed and Lukashenka can rest easy. Smaller-scale protests take place across the country on a daily basis. Localized marches, flash mobs, petitions, and organized floods of formal complaints against various violations, from problems with internet access to border closures, persist and are widely publicized via Telegram channels. That these put the regime under pressure is indicated by state repression that has continued unabated. The number of detainees in Belarus has [grown](#) to 258 political prisoners, including minors, as of March 1, 2021, and it continues to rise. Unfair dismissals, arrests, and unlawful imprisonment remain a regular occurrence.

The harsh repression against any manifestation of political dissent has brought forth a surge in courageous creativity that allows protesters to carve out new spaces for political expression. One example of this has been the struggle over the opposition's white-red-white flag (which was also the official state flag of independent Belarus between 1991 and 1995). Displaying such a flag in a window of one's house or apartment can result in a heavy fine or arrest. In response, people began to turn all sorts of everyday items into flag surrogates. Clothing, wedding dresses, umbrellas, curtains, cakes, and even Christmas decorations were rendered in white-red-white. Instead of homes, opposition flags

appeared in public spaces where ownership was impossible to determine: giant banners were found stretched between high-rise apartment blocks, and little toy boats with white-red-white sails could be seen floating in a park's pond on a frosty morning. A group of women, clad in bright red and white, took to holding flash mobs in the Minsk metro, posing with tomes such as the "Constitution of the Republic of Belarus."

Such actions might seem so localized as to render them insignificant, but their impact is magnified by publicity on social media. They plunge the authorities into feverish activity to remove such symbols of protest and to punish the perpetrators. The cost to those caught can be high. In January 2021, a man in the south-western city of Homel', who built a snowman in his own backyard and decorated it with a red scarf and words "Long live Belarus!," [faced](#) a trial for "unsanctioned protest," a charge that could land him in jail.

More recently, the authorities targeted several private shops selling Belarusian souvenirs and crafts, many of which are made in the traditional shades of white and red. One such small shop in Minsk, which had attracted the authorities' attention even before the elections by selling merchandise with pro-opposition slogans, was [raided](#) by the police in January 2021. Its employees were sentenced to several weeks imprisonment for "unlawful picketing." In the most appalling instance, in November 2020 a young man was [beaten](#) to death by regime-sponsored thugs for asking them to stop removing the white-red-white ribbons that residents put in his apartment's courtyard. Since then, the authorities have attempted to pass a law banning the white-red-white flag as "extremist." All of this testifies to the regime's ruthlessness but also points to fear.

What Next for Belarus?

Even for Lukashenka's authoritarian government, blatant lawlessness on such a scale is new. But rather than strengthening his regime, it is set to wipe out the last vestiges of its legitimacy that had centered on a promise to maintain order and stability, which was shattered by the police violence after the elections. Lukashenka sought to recover some of this legitimacy by calling an All-Belarusian People's Congress, which took place on February 11-12, 2021. However, the complete lack of transparency over its electoral process or its agenda meant that it had been widely – and rightly – [seen](#) as yet another piece of political circus.

Indeed, Lukashenka used the two-day gathering as an opportunity to abuse and [threaten](#) real and imaginary dissenters in all walks of life, from Belarusian diasporas abroad to private businessmen and opposition-minded medics at home. Yet, his speeches also betrayed some anxiety. In his opening address, he [warned](#) the delegates that the country had been saved from a revolt, but only "for now." He also noted that he would leave the presidential post only if the safety of all his supporters was guaranteed, a not-so-veiled warning to those who might be thinking of jumping ship.

The talk about “leaving” is unlikely to fool many, especially when the same speech ended with the old motto of Lukashenka’s electoral campaign: “Beloved are not to be parted with” (by “beloved,” he means Belarus). Clearly, for Lukashenka to go, he needs to find himself in a position of no choice. As the Belarusian economy [plummets further](#), and with the arrival of spring’s warmer weather, mass protests are likely to return. When this happens, the EU and United States should be prepared to play a more active role in supporting Belarusian civil society and acting as brakes on state violence. Russia’s cooperation is highly desirable; however, it may be more difficult to achieve in the aftermath of the Navalny affair.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Coordination Council abroad are [determined](#) to keep Belarus on the European and American leaders’ agendas to maintain the international pressure on Lukashenka while also encouraging flight from his political establishment. This is also the model that Navalny’s FBK has in mind. They have [promised](#) a return of mass demonstrations in spring in time for the Russian State Duma electoral campaign.

Differences from Russia

For all the cross-pollination of ideas, Russia’s latest protests also highlight some important differences between the two countries’ political landscapes. While still impressive, Russia’s turnouts at the latest demonstrations were proportionally on a much lower scale than those in Belarus back in August-September 2020. A simultaneous national gathering of 150,000 protesters in a country of only nine million people carries a very different political weight compared to twice as many protesters in a country of over 144 million.

It is testimony to Lukashenka’s depleted popularity that Tsikhanouskaia was able to draw so many supporters on a political platform that some observers thought weak because it aimed for nothing more than new and free elections. Yet, this rudimentary program, together with Tsikhanouskaia’s credible lack of personal political ambition, has proven effective at uniting different political strands of Belarusian society and brought unity to the opposition leadership. Such unity of opposition is not yet evident in Russia, a fact that was highlighted by the mixed reaction of anti-Putin forces over the FBK’s decisions to halt street demonstrations.

Conclusions

The Belarusian protest movement is far from being over. Instead, it has spread to a variety of different spaces and adopted new forms. It was always clear that Belarusians were in for a long haul to dislodge the man who has monopolized power for over a quarter of a century. In the last six months, the movement has achieved much, both politically and socially. For one, the legitimacy of the Lukashenka regime has been fatally eroded, as the latest opinion poll by the UK-based institute Chatham House [suggests](#). At the same time, the protests have done much to bring Belarusians together as a civic nation. Widespread

social solidarity, grassroots political and support initiatives, and a strong sense of community have been observed in a variety of settings, from the new phenomenon of neighborhood parties to social media and assistance to refugees from the diaspora. There is also a shared understanding that change can only come from within, a point that Tsikhanouskaia consistently reiterates in her interviews with Western media and diplomats. But months of political struggles are taking their toll, which is why international support remains vital for Belarusians. In turn, their struggles have distinct significance beyond the country's borders. As protesters in Russia are watching, the outcome of the Belarusian crisis might hold the key to democratic changes further east.

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