

Does It Make Sense to Expect a Color Revolution in Belarus?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 485
October 2017

Arkady Moshes¹
Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Popular protests shook Belarus this past February-March. Tens of thousands of people—significant by the country’s standards—went out on to the streets of the capital and in various towns. The immediate trigger of the protests was a presidential decree introducing a “parasite tax” on a half million people residing in Belarus who do not have official employment but are not registered as unemployed. The more general motivator was public frustration with declining living standards in a country experiencing its third recession since 2009.

What should have worried the authorities was not the economic demands nor even the involvement of new, large groups of traditional pro-regime strata (such as pensioners and others presumed to benefit from the country’s socially-oriented economic model), but the widespread waving of the Belarusian People’s Republic 1918 tricolor flag and chants of “Long live Belarus!” Both have come to symbolize opposition to the personalistic ruling regime of long-time President Alexander Lukashenko. On March 25, the protests in Minsk were finally put down. Seven hundred people were detained. Approximately 500 received administrative jail sentences and many more received fines. Attempts to stage new protest rallies in May and July were largely unsuccessful. At the same time, the authorities suspended the “parasite tax” for one year.

In the aftermath of these developments, some raised the question of whether Belarus might be heading toward some kind of a societal shift that could eventually push the country and its political system in the direction of market reform and political liberalization. However, such an assumption would be premature at best. Neither Belarusian society, the behavior of the authorities, nor the international context implies that such a shift is probable. The majority of the population and the regime may actually be united in their wish to resist change and preserve the status quo.

¹ [Arkady Moshes](#) is Program Director of the EU Eastern Neighborhood and Russia research program at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (Finland).

Choosing “Stability”

Sociologists have established that the protest potential in Belarus fluctuates very little. According to data provided by the reputed Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS, which unfortunately had to stop polling in Belarus in 2016), in 2006-15, only 15 to 21 percent of respondents considered themselves in opposition to the authorities (there was one poll exception when an indicator reached almost 26 percent), while 65 to 73 percent did not. Equally, in 2007-15 only 15 to 23 percent said they were ready to take part in protests in their own town against the worsening economic situation, whereas 68 to 74 percent said they were not. If we take into consideration that this time period comprised dramatic downturns in the economy, a rise of political activism during the presidential campaigns of 2006 and 2010, and cycles of improving and worsening relations with both Russia and the West, it appears that the general preferences of Belarusian society is almost at a constant.

Of course, a protracted economic crisis may affect the state of affairs, but there is little ground to predict that long-term trends will be altered any time soon and that the regime will lose its long-time support (or at least, the acquiescence of the population). Three factors in particular add weight to this conclusion.

First, Belarus has a very painful experience of political street protests. Time after time, when deemed necessary, the regime has used “carpet” repressions against dissent, as is well-evidenced by post-election scenes in 2006 and 2010. The risk of losing a job or going to prison is quite high for any potential rank-and-file protester, let alone a committed opposition activist.

Second, Ukraine’s Euromaidan served as a warning against involvement in protest activities, not as encouragement. The message about a link between protests and destabilization, violence, and even full-scale war was amplified by both the national and Russian media, which remain an important source of information in Belarus. Already in March 2014 (the early stage of the Ukraine crisis), according to IISEPS, 78 percent of respondents thought “a better future” was not worth the bloodshed. Seventy percent said they would not like similar events to take place in Belarus. Another 23 would welcome them conditionally (provided there would be no violence) and only 4 percent welcomed them unconditionally. More than 50 percent combined (34 and 17 percent respectively) expected either the disintegration of Ukraine or a civil war. The ensuing conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas hardly allowed for the dissipation of such viewpoints.

Third, a color revolution implies allegiance to European values as an ideological platform—as epitomized by EU flags at the Euromaidan—and the readiness to make the “European Choice.” However, sympathies toward the EU are currently at a low level in Belarus. According to an April 2017 poll by the Warsaw-based Belarusian Analytical Workshop, only 13 percent of Belarusians would prefer membership in the EU to a union

with Russia, which would be the choice of 65 percent (a union is not the same as being a “part” of the Russian state). In a hypothetical membership referendum, only 14 percent would vote for and 51 percent against, entry into the EU, whereas in 2010-13, according to IISEPS, EU membership enjoyed plurality or sometimes even majority support. Sympathies toward the EU significantly decreased in 2014, as some Belarusians held the EU responsible for the crisis in Ukraine while others blamed Europe for not protecting Ukrainians. A hypothetical explanation for why Belarusian pro-EU sentiment continues to decrease may lie in the unacceptability for Belarusian supporters of European values of the Brussels decision in 2015 to re-engage with Minsk regardless of the lack of domestic liberalization.

Consolidated Regime and Divided Opposition

Unlike Ukraine or Georgia, Belarus has no alternative political elites, which is a prerequisite for a color revolution. Lukashenko’s system functions in such a way that the status, well-being, and personal freedom of any high official or rich businessman depends on the president’s will or benevolence. Any scent of disloyalty is not tolerated. Reshuffles in governmental bodies are frequent. Multiple security services scrupulously follow the behavior of the elites (probably more than ordinary people) and, no less importantly, keep each other in check.

Internal elite groupings certainly exist and they compete for influence on foreign and economic policy, but the differences between them should not be exaggerated. They all remain beneficiaries of the system and for the foreseeable future all are interested in perpetuating the regime’s existence (though their reasons differ). A characteristic example may be Belarus’s Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei, who is a face and allegedly one of the architects of the country’s current rapprochement with the EU, but who, in 2011-13, was under EU sanctions because he was the previous head of Lukashenko’s administration.

In turn, after two decades of repression, the Belarusian opposition is weak and divided. As Carnegie Moscow Center political contributor Artem Shraibman rightly [opined](#), in a situation when, by definition, even a wide coalition cannot lead to an electoral success, incentives to unite are absent and politicians choose leadership in their respective small structures instead of a role as “second fiddle” in a larger organization.

Because a radical political approach that aims for regime change has no perspective in practice, it is very tempting to take moderate positions and start advocating for a peaceful and incremental evolution. This is what happened to the “Tell the Truth” campaign founded in 2010 by former Belarusian presidential candidate Vladimir Nekliaev. He left the organization in 2015 accusing it of cooperating with the secret services. With new leadership, its representatives took part in the presidential and parliamentary elections and in 2017 the organization received official registration.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas created an opportunity for the authorities to bridge the gap with national-oriented politicians and intellectuals. Appealing to the value of independence and sovereignty, of which the president is a constitutional guarantor, and promising the promotion of Belarusian language and culture, it is apparently possible for the regime to win back some opposition-minded people, or at least incite confusion within the ranks of the opposition. Symbolically, the only civil society activist who entered parliament after the 2016 elections was a representative from the Community of the Belarusian Language, Elena Anisim. Although the crackdown on the recent 2017 protests halted the process of building a new "security contract" between the government and these groups of people, it can be resumed at some point in the future.

International Context

Another element resisting political change in Belarus is the position of Russia. It stands beyond the slightest doubt that Moscow will do everything possible to prevent the scenario of a color revolution unfolding in Belarus.

On the one hand, this means that Russia's subsidization of Belarus will continue, which should help Minsk address the economic root causes of potential protests. The level of subsidies is likely to go down (according to the IMF, Russia's subsidies to Belarus for 2005-15 reached a sky-high figure of \$100 billion, which is hardly sustainable), and the political price that Minsk will be asked to pay may increase, but the life-support line will certainly not be cut altogether. In this regard, there may be a causal connection between the spring protests and a new assistance deal reached between Moscow and Minsk in April 2017. This time, Russian help was not very generous; the "loan" barely allowed Minsk to pay back its gas debt to Russia, while the promised gas price discounts were marginal. It is nevertheless worth observing, without going into details, that a serious bilateral dispute over energy prices and other economic matters has been going on for more than a year and was resolved only in the wake of the protests, not before.

On the other hand, should hypothetical developments in Belarus start resembling the Ukrainian scenario, Russian direct interference would likely follow. Taking into account the public attitudes of Belarusians as cited above, the understanding of this logic constitutes an important factor of restraint in its own right.

Meanwhile, the West, and the EU in particular, do not seem to be interested in a Belarusian "revolution" either. Brussels' decision to engage with Lukashenko has been driven by praise for "stability." There is no appetite whatsoever in Brussels to get into another clinch with Moscow, especially since this time the chance to prevail would be far smaller than it was in Ukraine. The EU's reaction to the government repression of the 2017 spring protesters was half-hearted at best. It did not extend beyond an expression of concern and it did not affect the EU's practical interactions with Minsk. Even Poland,

which, along with Lithuania, was directly accused by Lukashenko of training militants and preparing unrest in the country, chose to ignore the demarche in practice and continue with “normalized” relations. The most benign explanation for the EU’s attitude is fear that a harsher European reaction might exacerbate the situation inside Belarus, although it is equally possible to imagine that political liberalization was deliberately sacrificed for other considerations.

Conclusion and Implications for the West

This analysis rules out a Belarusian color revolution scenario as a conscientious movement for a social and political transition to European standards and values. However, as the spring 2017 protests demonstrated, the old social contract in Belarus, within which a post-socialist distributive economic model used to provide enough benefits for the population and guarantee their non-participation in politics, is eroding. If the system now fails to provide for the population’s minimum needs or if the authorities introduce measures that are provocative, such as the “parasites tax,” protest sentiment will grow and Belarusian “stability” will be in jeopardy.

The regime’s ability to address this latent problem by starting macroeconomic reforms is limited, first, by the lack of understanding that changes are necessary and overdue, and, second, by the realization that embarking on economic reform may worsen standards, which will in turn threaten the regime’s political position. However, the longer reforms are postponed, the more painful and costly for the population they will eventually be.

In this situation, Western engagement with Belarus should be aimed at promoting transformation, at least economic. This will necessarily imply addressing a conditionality issue. Belarus should be offered a significant assistance package to help it endure the cost of the most painful reforms should they start. There is little point to provide funds if change is not coming. The EU should also pay attention to the weakening of, and frustration within, Belarus’s pro-European constituency and try to reverse this process, which is only possible if the issue of norms and political freedoms is put back on the agenda. If the EU continues with its current so-called “constructive dialogue” with Minsk, an approach that does not involve real changes on the ground, it means that the EU is taking a comfortable path, the one of least resistance, which makes future problems grow significantly.