

Belarus: “When We Rise”

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In August 2020, a revolt broke out in Belarus, nearly toppling Alexander Lukashenko, the dictator who has ruled the country since 1994. In the following analysis, anarchists who participated in the revolt discuss the ways that it succeeded and how both the regime and its liberal opposition were able to undermine the movement before it could topple the dictatorship. The result is an invaluable resource for those seeking to understand the mechanics of revolution, repression, and cooptation, not to mention post-Soviet politics in the region.

Their conclusions will be familiar to those who have participated in revolts elsewhere around the world over the past few years. To succeed, a revolutionary movement must immediately pursue its aims through concrete action, rather than symbolic gestures or appeals to authority. The lure of “peaceful” protest, respectability, and legitimacy serves to incapacitate movements, sapping their strength and undercutting their leverage on those who hold power. Those who desire profound social change should develop decentralized networks based in robust relationships, setting long-term goals that can address the needs of those who suffer under the prevailing order. These are hard-won lessons, developed in the course of open struggle against a brutal dictatorship. As governments around the world become more and more authoritarian, the experience of the fighters in Belarus will become increasingly relevant elsewhere.

An earlier version of this text appeared in Russian here. For more background on anarchist organizing in Belarus, you can consult the interviews we published discussing the movements of 2017 and 2020. This collection of documents is also a useful reference for the 2020 revolt.

When We Rise

A year has already passed since the beginning of the electoral campaign of 2020, which was the starting point of the uprising of the Belarusian people against the dictatorship. For many months, we resisted the regime in the streets, in our neighborhoods, and in our workplaces—employing creative forms of civil disobedience and engaging in full-fledged clashes with the forces of the regime in the streets of the country. In some places, we were victorious, but elsewhere, the regime managed to respond quickly to spontaneous organizing.

By the approach of New Year’s Eve, the big protests fell silent, and only small underground actions continued to shake the capital. We went from a feeling that “we have already won” to the current situation of depression, when it seems that spring will not come for the Belarusian people. In order to understand how we should move forward, it is necessary to analyze the situation constantly, to learn from mistakes in order to avoid them in the future. This text is an attempt to engage in such a critical review. It is not intended to inspire new participants or to maintain morale, but primarily to understand what is happening in the streets here and now and where we should go from here.

Critique is welcome!

Decentralization as a Core Strength of the Belarusian Uprising

The mobilization against the dictatorship in 2020 took place throughout the country. The united initiative groups that formed around the headquarters of [opposition candidate] Svetlana Tikhanovskaya did a great job of activating the population. Most Belarusians already knew the results of the elections in advance, but this political agitation was based primarily on participation in the democratic process and attempts to protect their votes. Anarchists had few expectations in this regard, and therefore, most of the collectives called for a direct boycott of the election, with calls to take to the streets on August 9.

Because of this lack of illusions about the re-election, local resistance groups formed even before August, with the aim of participating in protests after the “counting” of the votes. The efforts of the liberal groups, which were working in the cities of Belarus with a semi-legal status, increased the potential of this mobilization.¹

It is difficult to say whether Tikhanovskaya and her team understood the scale of the storm that had begun even before the presidential campaign. Dissatisfaction with Lukashenko’s policy in fighting COVID-19 had already mobilized a significant part of the population. Self-organized mutual aid groups were active in various regions.

Tihanovskaya’s political campaign, like the coronavirus, affected the whole country. The plan for election day was not based on a huge protest in Minsk, but on participation in rallies throughout the country. The Lukashenko regime did not expect such a high mobilization throughout different regions.

As a result, we approached August 9 with prepared groups (including anarchists) not only in Minsk, but also in other cities and towns of the country. Although the authorities tried to extinguish the growing fire in various regions by means of a few targeted detentions of prominent politicians and activists, on election day, tens of thousands of people took to the streets across the country, demanding the fall of the regime.

The forces drawn into Minsk that evening were ultimately able to disperse the protest. But after protesters forced the police to flee in some small towns, the damage to the reputation of the supposedly indestructible “punishers” was enormous.² The flight of the riot police filled Belarusian society with momentum that carried us forward for months to come. Social networks played a huge role in demoralizing the regime in the early days: despite the regime’s attempt to shut down the Internet, it was easy to find videos, photos, and personal accounts of clashes with the regime in which people came out victorious. In small towns, people celebrated their victory over the dictatorship after the local punishers fled.

At that point, decentralization outflanked and temporarily defeated the centralized Belarusian state. It was the decentralization of the movement that made it possible to continue the protest until November.

¹ The Belarusian elections are sometimes called “re-elections” because they are a spectacle, in which the votes are not even counted, but the results are published from above.

² Starting in July, numerous Telegram channels and news platforms began to use the term “punishers” to describe the employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs/KGB (i.e., the secret police) and internal troops (a semi-military organization within the Ministry of Internal Affairs).

But it was in those first days that the first problem of the Belarusian protest became apparent: the absence of concrete goals for street protests. Almost no one had any understanding of the mechanics of bringing down authoritarian regimes. Yes, there was a hope, fueled by liberal myths, that if enough peaceful people took the streets, the regime would become frightened and collapse. But the reality was much less romantic.

After the nighttime clashes with the riot police and internal troops, when protesters fled to their homes, there were some people who stayed awake: the regime strategists who were actively continuing to work and plan their next steps.³ The symbolic victories in Pinsk or Brest failed to win back space for further protest; the squares and buildings were neither occupied nor destroyed. And although several dozen punishers were injured during the clashes, no serious damage was done to the infrastructure of the dictatorship. We could discuss at length whether it makes sense to seize the administrative buildings or the main post office, but in any case, people did not do this.

Still, the symbolic victory of the first days was a heavy blow to the morale of the authorities. Until then, they had been able to count on complete impunity for their deeds, and most of them had never felt the wrath of the people. After this, an exodus began from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB (in Belarus, the secret police are still called the KGB). Some of the KGB officers tried to join the protest structures; some of them lay low, waiting for the dictator to flee.

It was the fear of being massacred, not their high moral values, that made the majority of the officers flee.

In Minsk, the decentralization gave rise to neighborhood initiatives. In some places, local communities held joint festivals for children and grownups. Elsewhere, groups engaged in rapid politicization. For example, in Uručča (Minsk), local initiatives united and even adopted a political program. The same kind of political declarations and formation of political groups took place in other parts of the capital. Although neighborhood initiatives were more engaged in cultural work or subbotniks, the movement, for the first time in the long history of the region, brought political organization back to the grassroots level.

The lack of political parties and clear leaders rallying activists made it difficult to suppress the protests. For a long time, the state apparatus could not figure out how to adapt to the decentralized format of the actions in Minsk. Numerous lectures, rallies, and open political meetings were held without the danger of repression. This level of political freedom was simply unfamiliar to the majority of Belarusians.

Unfortunately, the movement of neighborhood assemblies only spread in the capital. In Brest, Grodno, and several other protesting cities, there were attempts to organize local groups, but the wave of activism reached these regions only by the time the authorities learned how to cope with the local movements successfully, and the number of protesters continued to fall.

After weeks of intense street marches and decentralized actions, the regime once again adapted to what was happening and consistently cleared neighborhood after neighborhood.

³ "Internal troops" describes a semi-military organization within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, used mostly for political repression. Apart from officers, these troops are drafted from conscripted soldiers.

Although numerous groups on Telegram continue to exist, most neighborhood initiatives are now in survival mode and rarely hold any kind of action. The significant decline in activity has also made it much easier for the regime to control what happens in the neighborhoods and to respond to small marches or outdoor events.

Working with neighborhood assemblies also brought some challenges to the movement against Lukashenko. In many of the organized neighborhood groups, there were people who put themselves in the role of leaders. These same people were actively engaged in pushing a certain agenda within their networks. This meant that some chats deleted any messages calling for direct action, while other chats deleted any attempts to call for peaceful protests. This kind of separation occurred throughout the democratic movement in general, but the presence of moderators, who became the de facto chiefs of their respective areas, often reproduced the dynamic of dictatorship in miniature, so that people were forced not only to fight Lukashenko, but also to fight against local activists who had more power within the neighborhood initiatives because of their technical knowledge.

This is quite in line with Belarusian society as a whole, which has been in the hands of one dictatorship or another for many generations. The authoritarian dynamic of the state manifests itself in our society in many ways, from education to the workplace. It is logical that the same problems began to arise with small ringleaders within neighborhood initiatives.

Discussions about decentralization and neighborhood assemblies led to an increase in the influence of ideas about decentralized social organization from Swiss liberal federalism to anarchism, which gained new meaning for some participants in the democratic movement. At some point, the agenda of decentralization became so important that even liberal political parties and groups began to try to promote it in various formats, ranging from using fictitious institutions of self-government within the dictatorship to lectures on Swiss cantons and the possibilities of civil control of the state apparatus.⁴

In the current context of repression and the necessity of political survival, conversations about different formats of decentralized organization have receded into the background, but we hope that this political agenda will return in future attempts to overthrow Lukashenko. After all, Belarusian society saw the example of Russia, which tried to escape its Soviet legacy of state capitalism in the 1990s and ended up with Putin's dictatorship. Ukrainians were forced to revolt again in 2014 after the peaceful Maidan protests of 2004, touching off another round of struggle against authoritarianism in the region. We believe that these sprouts of decentralization will survive this wave of repression, and also—the regime itself.

Repression against Everyone

But the victory over the police came at a high price. In three days, more than 6000 people were detained; torture and rape took place in cells and prisons, and at least a few

⁴ In 27 years of dictatorship, Lukashenko repeatedly resorted to “decentralizing” power, creating state institutions that were supposed to distribute power at a grassroots level. In reality, these institutions were traps to absorb local initiatives and destroy their influence in society. Apart from that, local “institutions of self-governance” were used as a means to receive funding from the European Union.

people were murdered. During the day, the major cities experienced the regime's chaotic attempts to capture anyone they could. A huge proportion of the detainees were random passers-by who were seized in broad daylight. State violence targeted all strata of society. The victims included everyone from ordinary workers to regime supporters whose families were dragged off the streets despite their loyalty to the regime.

In this atmosphere, many welcomed the non-violent marches, which spread across the country in just a few days, creating an illusion of safety. The beginning of peaceful protests coincided with the decision of the Belarusian regime to temporarily abandon its policy of total repression. Sunday marches became the main organizational focus for these so-called peaceful marches.

The repression of the large demonstrations in Minsk and several other cities was mild; usually about a hundred people were detained. Given that over 100,000 people came out to the streets, such detentions seemed small. Some Telegram channels even calculated the chances of being detained at a demonstration, utilizing the past numbers of detainees.

But while Minsk continued to celebrate the relative calm and the feeling that the regime was about to fall, in outlying regions, the repression was much more active. Already in August, dozens of people were detained in various criminal cases. The pressure on the organizers of local street rallies intensified, and dispersals were more effective.

A couple of weeks later, many observers noted that the situation was already getting worse, as the grassroots movement was gradually being suppressed in the very regions that had initially been the basis of the Belarusian uprising.

Lukashenko's strategy was relatively simple. First, he repressed the small towns, then the regional centers, and when things calmed down there, he began to plan a full and final cleanup of Minsk.

This step-by-step approach to repression enabled the regime to restore its power. Most of the major media outlets and bloggers were in the capital, so organizational problems and the need for solidarity with the outlying regions rarely made it into the agenda of most protest groups.

For anarchists, the situation regarding repression in the outlying regions was already obvious by the second week, when activists in various cities started getting criminal charges. Some of them decided to leave the country as early as August. Gradually, the situation for the majority of local activists became so difficult that they started leaving the country in whole groups, parallel to the mass exodus of democratic activists.

The violence continued even as a feeling of victory lingered in Minsk. Beatings and torture were systematic. And although the volume cannot be compared with the first days after the elections, the regime continued to "break" activists in prisons. Physical and psychological pressure forced many participants in the movement to flee the country.

The second wave of COVID-19, which began in the fall of 2020, dealt an additional blow to the uprising. The regime used the virus as a tool of political repression. Healthy detainees were placed in cells with coronavirus patients. A person could be transferred from cell to cell several times during detention, increasing the spread of the virus throughout the prison. Almost all of the anarchists detained in the fall of 2020 either contracted the coronavirus while in custody or were released sick and spent several more weeks receiving treatment.

It was impossible to get any medical help during detainment. We know of only a few cases out of 30,000+ in which people received a coronavirus test. One of these cases involved an anarchist. The test confirmed the presence of the coronavirus, but the prison authorities decided not to release our comrade for treatment, contrary to medical requirements. Instead, they put him in solitary confinement in a cold cell for the rest of his sentence.

At least one member of the liberal movement died of complications from the coronavirus that he contracted while in custody.

It is worth noting that conditions in Belarusian prisons and detention centers can be considered torture per se. The number of prisoners in the cells was two or three times the number of beds. Many arrestees were forced to sleep on the wooden or stone floor. The bright lights in the cells were not switched off even at night. The daily outdoor walks of one hour's duration prescribed by the regulations took place not more than once or twice a week, and the duration was reduced to 10-15 minutes. Blankets were often not provided and later, the authorities stopped providing mattresses. Prisoners were systematically beaten—and are still being beaten today.

For a long time, the treatment of political prisoners arrested under criminal articles was slightly better, but it has continued to deteriorate over the past few months. Prisoners are beaten both before and after trial. The death of Vitold Ashurak was the consequence of the torturous conditions that political prisoners face.⁵

Today, the regime is trying to crush the remnants of the neighborhood activists and destroy political life in Belarus. They use collective punishment for this purpose: people who did not take part in the protest, but who are on the list of activists and who, in the opinion of the regime, deserve punishment for others' actions, may be detained in some neighborhoods. In this situation, when organizing actions, there is a danger that random people will be detained, and the regime attempts to place the responsibility for this arbitrary repression on the activists themselves. This tactic was used against anarchists in 2014-2016, when some groups held spontaneous actions and the government targeted known activists in response.

The De-Escalation and Subsequent Escalation of the Conflict

In the first days of the protest, the regime chose a strategy of total suppression. Lukashenko's strategists assumed that most people would go to the capital, where it would be possible to end everything in one or two days. A few days later, the tactic of mass repression had showed little efficiency, only increasing the level of confrontation—among other things, mobilizing informal collectives of workers at various factories. In this situation, Lukashenko's strategists were able to change direction fairly quickly, and by the weekend they had already abandoned their attempts to crush the protest as quickly as possible. Instead, the regime in Minsk adopted a strategy of relative de-escalation. News about

⁵ Vitold Ashurak was an activist of the liberal opposition for many years. He was arrested on September 19, 2020 for participating in the protests; in January 2021, he was sentenced to five years in prison. Ashurak was killed in prison by the regime in May 2021.

mass brutal detentions stopped appearing on the Internet. Although the protesters were outraged by the behavior of the cops in the first week after the election, calls for peace drowned out attempts to deal with the dictatorship once and for all.

Peaceful protests brought many more people to the streets, and for the liberal part of the uprising, the revolution had already been accomplished—according to the liberal concept of political participation in the life of the country, such a huge number of protesters would inevitably lead to radical changes. Major Telegram channels and bloggers were talking about this. During this period, Russian blogger Maxim Katz achieved incredible popularity, asserting that Belarusian society had already won and that Lukashenko was a political corpse after the blood shed. Katz and other liberal politicians made the mistake of trying to apply democratic political analysis to an Eastern European dictatorship. Lukashenko's political unfitness for governing society has been proven repeatedly throughout his presidential terms. This does not prevent him from staying in power and continuing to create an image of being a dictator for the people.

Although the temporary de-escalation allowed us to gather strength and create a broad self-organized structure in Minsk and some other cities, in the long run, the de-escalation played more to the advantage of Lukashenko and his gang, who regained control of the outlying regions one step at a time, while the media and activists mainly paid attention to what was happening in Minsk.

The Lukashists “worked” the de-escalation period to perfection: step by step and carefully, they repressed not only liberal activists, but also organized workers who tried to build up protest momentum in the factories. The workers’ relative isolation from the rest of the protest community made it possible to deal with protesting factory workers quickly.

A sharp re-escalation of the conflict in Minsk no longer provoked a similar response. By the time it escalated, many activists were already in jail on criminal charges or in exile. Attempts to ignite a new round of protests ended in failure—the last such attempt was the defense of the memorial to Roman Bondarenko, which ended in a complete sweep. Afterwards, a significant number of protesters decided to leave the square to avoid reprisals, and several hundred people were detained on the spot.⁶

After repeated defeats, willingness to take to the streets declined. Several weekends of decentralized marches made it harder for the cops to repress protests, but failed to restore protest potential in the capital or outlying regions in any way. Although the movement had largely died out by the end of 2020, repression continues at a high level to this day.

As activists, we failed to use the temporary de-escalation to build up our own forces. Fear of repression and of condemnation not only from Lukashenko but also from other protesters largely stopped our own attempts to escalate the movement, which could have destroyed Lukashenko and his regime. Instead, we accepted the narrative of peaceful protest—and by the time the government initiated a new round of escalation, we were severely demoralized and exhausted from repression targeting individual activists.

⁶ Roman Bondarenko was an activist involved in one of the first neighborhood assemblies in Minsk. He was killed by the regime at the neighborhood square, where cops and activists of the regime were destroying flags and protest art. His last words in neighborhood chat were “I’m going out.”

The fact that the majority was not prepared to resist actively should not have determined the horizon of our own actions. Organized groups of ten or more people can act effectively within peaceful demonstrations with their own purpose and strategy. We have been able to speak as an organized group with our own agenda within the marches, but we failed to put that agenda into action.

Strikes and Labor Protests

Already in the first week, a wave of strikes swept across the country. Workers, outraged by the repression of their colleagues and the lawlessness of the cops, demanded that the regime stop the violence and release all those arrested and detained for protesting. Many of them formed informal collectives comprised of colleagues working the same shifts. The booing of Lukashenko at the MZKT factory inflicted considerable damage to his image as the “people’s” ruler.

Unfortunately, the protests of the worker collectives died down relatively quickly, with the exception of a few enterprises. Only part of the demands were met, but relatively quickly, repression began against the most active participants in the strikes. Some workers were fired, and some were criminally prosecuted.

By the time the strikes began, the labor movement in the country was in a very bad state. There were only a few independent liberal trade unions, uniting a small fraction of the workers. Most workers had no experience of collective organizing. Building workers’ structures during the active phase of the conflict was a huge challenge. Attempts by liberal NGOs to “help” workers’ organization in some enterprises did not produce any particular results—the NGOs themselves had no experience organizing a workers’ protest movement, and only methodologies from liberal countries with their own rules about organizing strikes. The illusion of the legality of the strikes and protests shifted part of the struggle from the streets and factories to the courts, where independent trade unions unsuccessfully attempted to defend the right to organize in the workplace.

Attempts to “finish off” the dictatorship in the first weeks of peaceful protest led to many changes in the vector of protest. The days of agitation for the strike were quickly replaced by calls for an economic boycott of the regime and, a week later, by a road-blocking strategy. Understandably, the protest movement was looking for new forms of organization and means of exerting pressure on the regime, but the lack of continuity undermined morale, including that of the labor movement. Solidarity pickets outside the factories lasted for several days, until the first organized groups of OMON troops arrived (, “Special Purpose Police Detachment”—the riot cops in Belarus). Threats of reprisals were enough to break the bridge between the workers and the rest of the protesters.

In addition, the most privileged part of the working class in Belarus—information technology (IT) workers—refused to participate in the strike movement. Many IT workers argued in favor of this approach on the grounds that it was necessary to finance the protest movement. Indeed, some of these people actively financed various solidarity structures. Some also argued that strikes would damage private firms as well as Lukashenko, which in turn would damage the image of the country’s IT sector.

Taking all of these arguments into account, an organized strike movement of IT workers would have done more good than the money that these very IT workers poured into the

protest. In the first place, a major strike movement by any industry would help spread the strike to other sectors. That said, the risk of losing employment is far less existential for IT workers than it is for factory workers, many of whom live from paycheck to paycheck. Any so-called damage to the image of the IT industry in Belarus would quickly be restored if the regime was overthrown, given that the IT workers themselves were not protesting for better working conditions, but for general democratic processes. We should also add that it was relatively safe for IT workers to organize in the workplace: during the protests, there were only a few cases of reprisals against IT workers from private firms. At the same time, these same workers were able to use some of the company infrastructure that was available to them for their personal leisure time to hold organizational meetings.

Overall, the IT sector showed little or no political power. Yes, IT workers participated in the protests independently. But IT workers did not show full-fledged organization, even though many have skills and capabilities they could have employed.

In some cases, small private firms held one-day symbolic strikes to support the striking companies, but these actions did not have a mass character; the agitation was carried out only a few days before the protest and in many cases was drowned out by the general information noise.

As of now, several hundred workers across the country are still on strike, but at this point, we can say that the strike movement in Belarus has failed without becoming organized on a mass scale. The current situation is a result of the successful strategy of the regime to destroy the independent workers' organizations and trade unions, starting back in the 1990s. The attitude of the Belarusian state to the workers' movement is similar to the Soviet one. The role of the state Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) is to destroy any initiative that might arise from workers. But in addition to this, the FTUB is also important because it creates the image of an absolutely useless trade union that collects part of workers' wages and provides tickets to state events.

The liberal opposition's lack of interest in the labor movement only distances the average worker from the idea of destroying the dictatorship and the aspiration for freedom. Meanwhile, anarchists are not able to influence workers in any significant way at this stage because of their small numbers, their relatively small organizational resources, and their specific political agenda, in which workers play almost no role.

At the same time, in 2020, for the first time in 20 years, the workers of Belarus were able to show political will and express their opposition to state violence and dictatorship, if only for a few days. The relatively rapid extinction of the protest agenda within the workers' collectives was primarily due to the regime inflicting serious repression. Stronger solidarity or more serious structures could not be formed in the first place because of pressure from the state on both workers and the rest of the protest movement.

The Old Opposition and the New Opposition

To begin with, it is worth defining what the "old" opposition is. This term refers to liberal and right-leaning groups in opposition to the Lukashenko government. This includes

registered political parties, political organizations, and individual politicians who have been active for many years. Traditional examples of the old opposition include the United Citizens Party, the Belarusian Popular Front, Belarusian Christian Democracy, and European Belarus. Statkevich, Severinets, Vechorka, and even Pazniak can be counted among the old, but active, opposition politicians. The old opposition is not a homogeneous group, so we will focus on individual politicians or organizations.

The new opposition refers to political organizations, groups, and politicians that have begun to appear in the public arena over the last few years. This includes people who were not active in the opposition before these elections. The brightest examples of such politicians are Tikhonovskaya/Tikhonovsky or Babariko. The politicians and organizations of the new opposition differ from each other in their political views and in the methods they apply to fight against the dictatorship.

During the years of Lukashenko's rule, he has managed to deal with the organized opposition mainly through repression. Between 2010 and 2020, most liberal and nationalist parties were defeated. Youth street organizations ceased to exist. And although since 2015, Lukashenko has begun to work closely with the European Union on various economic and political processes, this did not help the revival of liberal political forces in the country. For the most part, the European Union and the United States turned a blind eye to the repression of civil society until 2020. The repression of the movement against the law penalizing "parasitism" in 2017 raised classic EU concerns about civil rights violations in Belarus—but Western politicians took no action at that time.

In this atmosphere, only a few politicians from the old opposition continued to systematically exert political pressure. First of all, we are talking about Statkevich and Severinets, who launched the movement against the "parasitism" law in 2017. Enough has already been written about the political views of both. With the exception of these politicians, most of the career opposition leaders have been pushed to the background. After the Maidan protests in Ukraine in 2015, a part of the old opposition decided that it was better to have Lukashenko and at least some independence than to try to rebel and risk Putin invading Belarus. Pozniak's calls not to participate in the protests of August 9 are one example of this—for some, the risk of losing independence is more important than toppling the dictatorship.

With the exception of a few politicians, in many respects the old opposition does not provoke any emotions in people. These are people who have been fighting Lukashenko for years, but most of whom are very rarely willing to take any risks. Links connecting the liberal and nationalist opposition with various organizations in the West often cause a negative reaction inside Belarusian society. The dependence on Western grants has long sustained the legend that the Belarusian opposition benefits from Lukashenko, as it exists in an equilibrium with the dictatorship.

It is wrong to say that all the politicians and organizations of the old opposition are not really against the existence of the dictatorship, at least because there are still politicians like Statkevich. But it would also be foolish to deny the comfortable position of many liberal opposition politicians under the dictatorship. As usual, the truth is somewhere in the middle. There are people like Olga Karach, who live off grants professionally and are hardly interested in seeing radical political transformations in the country, because those might change

the way that money flows. And there are activists like Viniarski, who are ready to participate in protests against the dictatorship even if it costs them their freedom.

Approaching the 2020 election campaign, the old opposition had been extremely weakened. The political cooperation between the EU and Lukashenko undermined the balance of forces inside the country. The liberal and neoliberal economic reforms largely fulfilled the economic demands of some liberal-conservative parties, but the reforms themselves did not introduce more freedoms to Belarusian society. Statkevich, who has the most political weight within the active opposition, was not allowed to participate in the elections, although he participated in the first weeks of the election campaign alongside the new opposition.

The weakening of the old opposition created a political vacuum in the country. It was only a matter of time before other organizations and groups occupied this vacuum. The 2020 elections became a platform for the mobilization of new forces.

The blogger Tikhanovsky, who had been working in the outlying regions of Belarus for several years, became one of the political figures of the new opposition. Although Tikhanovsky had ties with the old opposition, he looked relatively fresh compared to the old politicians. The format of his media project gave voice to many Belarusians that the old opposition had not paid much attention to—the workers from the outlying regions who feel the burden of the dictatorship every day. Not surprisingly, Tikhanovsky received a lot of support among the general population. In many ways, Lukashenko's struggle with the blogger gave him a reputation as a dedicated liberal politician ready to resist the dictatorship.

The arrest of Tikhanovsky, Statkevich, and many other politicians made room for a new “moderate” politician from the Belarusian elite—Viktar Babariko. The banker, who does not need to rob the Belarusian people because he has earned enough money during his career, has become the new symbol of protests in Belarus. Numerous Belarusians rallied around Babariko’s headquarters, all striving for the middle class of the country. Babariko is an example of a successful capitalist, who earned his fortune over the years, as if by his own hard work. This narrative is appealing to many who are still forced to live in Belarus’s soviet stagnation.

In many ways, Babariko is an example of Lukashenko’s elite, which exists in spite of the so-called social state. The millions Babariko acquired are not the result of hard work. Rather, they are the result of banking speculation and the willingness to serve the dictatorship. But the compromises that Babariko made to obtain his fortune were of little interest to many Belarusians. This is why Babariko became the new political leader of the election campaign after Tikhanovsky. Hundreds of young people who believed in a bright future under this banker’s leadership joined his campaign. Only a few were concerned by the fact that Babariko was the head of Belgazprombank, directly affiliated with Putin’s Gazprom. Many analysts believed that Babariko was the ideal pro-Russian candidate to replace Lukashenko.

Babariko’s rather high support forced Lukashenko to carry out a new wave of repression and to detain almost all the remaining opposition candidates. At that time, the dictator had no idea that Tikhanovskaya could pose any kind of threat. However, the campaigns of all the detained politicians united around Tikhanovskaya, and she became the candidate that all the politicians of the old opposition had failed to create for many election cycles.

The misogyny of the dictator and his regime led them to underestimate Tikhanovskaya, creating enough political freedom to mobilize not only Minsk, but many regions by August 9. Likewise, it was Lukashenko's sexism that enabled Tikhanovskaya to get registered as a presidential candidate.

Although Tikhanovskaya's campaign sought to create some kind of advanced political agenda, it all boiled down to the release of detained politicians and new elections without Lukashenko. Such a simple political message was widely popular among the general population. On August 9, it was not proposed to elect a new president, but rather to vote in a kind of referendum, where a vote for Lukashenko meant the continuation of the dictatorship, and a vote for Tikhanovskaya meant the end of the era of the mustachioed dictator.

New opposition forces, including major bloggers and telegram channels, were able to unite around Tikhanovskaya and to create a powerful informational agenda in social networks. On the streets, numerous registered meetings were held without the candidate herself; these constituted political rallies.⁷

It was thanks to the focus on the outlying regions that it was possible to mobilize such a huge number of people. Political life in the country became not only the domain of the capital, but also of many small towns, in which fatigue with Lukashenko had reached a much higher level than in relatively prosperous Minsk.

New faces in the campaign, a relatively simple message, and a willingness to work on the ground were the keys to the electoral success of the new liberal opposition. Problems and slippage began immediately after the election, when the illusion spread that Lukashenko was giving up. With Tikhanovskaya out of Belarus, the remaining liberal politicians in the country were forced to look for new representatives.

Liberal political analysts' predictions that the regime was about to fall were met with enthusiasm. All that was left to do was to take advantage of the situation to start scoring political points for the next election cycle. Unfortunately, as already mentioned, this analysis of the situation was incorrect. Attempts to create new political parties and political organizations to take over the agenda only confused protesters in the street. And while the news channels received the establishment of a coordinating council (CC) with excitement, many continued to be puzzled about the role of this council, receiving their attempts to become a new vanguard with skepticism. The announcement that Maria Kolesnikova had created a political party provoked even more dissatisfaction with the ambitions of some politicians in the new opposition.

In addition, the protests of August 9, 10, and 11 presented many regime politicians and propagandists with a choice: stay on the sinking boat and potentially come out on the losing side of the new political order, or change sides and join the opposition. One such politician was Pavel Latushko, a former Lukashenko diplomat who was head of the Kupalov Theater when the protests began. Latushko was a member of the CC and was obviously aiming for a serious political career in a free Belarus.

⁷ All political rallies and demonstrations are banned in Belarus. However, during the election cycle, there are some extra rules that allow candidates to meet the people in public places without the explicit permission of the state. Tikhanovskaya's team used this loophole to make official calls for political rallies even without the candidate's participation, which made it possible to hold dozens of political gatherings around the country.

In addition to politicians, cops also began to abandon the galley. At some point, they created their own organization called bypol, with a long list of goals. Recently, one of the former leaders of the political police, and now a representative of bypol, stated that high-ranking positions in the new Belarusian government awaited the members of the organization. Both bypol and Latushko are now developing a reform program for the Interior Ministry, with a rather modest program to clean up the current repressive apparatus.

The more time passes since the presidential election, the more the new Belarusian opposition resembles the old one. There are constant splits, attempts to divide zones of influence, and new political organizations that are created—among other things—to spend money. The sincerity of these politicians and organizations is largely questioned by street activists. Although Tikhanovskaya is still a unifying figure for many, and representatives of the old opposition have also united around her, her influence on the processes within the new opposition continues to diminish.

The new liberal groups and organizations have made many of the same mistakes that the politicians before them did. A deep belief in Western support has only further undermined the legitimacy of liberals inside the country. Today, many are well aware that change can only come from within, not from outside, no matter what sanctions foreign powers promise. Only the Belarusian people can overthrow Lukashenko, not sanctions from the West.

But the regime also played an important role in destroying the political influence of the new opposition. With Russian support, gossip and facts taken out of context to discredit certain politicians are constantly spread online. The lack of transparency on the part of the liberals creates a favorable environment for the dissemination of rumors and negative PR. In addition, the regime has been actively engaged in supporting politicians from the opposition who are engaged in undermining the authority of liberal leaders. Olga Karach and Igor Makar have played this role, becoming widely known primarily due to the active re-transmission of their ideas by various troll factories in Russia and Belarus.

Today, the liberal opposition is extremely weak. Although hundreds of thousands of people subscribe to the channels belonging to Tikhanovskaya and other opposition politicians and bloggers, their ability to mobilize people is at an extremely low level. Calls to take to the streets in late winter and spring failed to mobilize people even for small street protests.

Anarchists in the Protest Movement

The anarchist movement approached the beginning of the election campaign without much energy. Attempts to create a common platform to mobilize various groups failed as early as May 2020. Some anarchists felt that the new elections could hardly provide an opportunity to overthrow the dictatorship. Others did not want to take part in a joint effort because of time constraints, coronavirus problems, and other personal issues. Overall, most of the anarchist movement had little idea what might happen in August.

Although no general agreements were reached, some anarchists began to participate in the political processes surrounding the elections. The Pramen collective and the blogger Nikolai Dedok were active on social networks. In July, the former called for a boycott of

the electoral show and protest mobilization on August 9. Dedok, for his part, was active throughout the election campaign, covering the situation around the protests and the politics of the candidates.

Some affinity groups worked on the streets: in Minsk and other cities, they put up flyers and stickers calling for a boycott.

A group in Baranavichy, which actively participated in organizing rallies in the city, deserves special attention. The group provided equipment and managed to achieve an open microphone for all protesters. One of the public anarchists of the city actively spoke at the rallies with an anarchist agenda and encouraged people to speak not only against Lukashenko, but against authoritarianism in general.

Before the election, the anarchists' information platforms had little visibility, besides the blogging of the anarchist Nikolai Dedok. After the elections, that situation changed dramatically. Due to the participation of anarchists in the protests, many Belarusians became actively interested in anarchist ideas. A small media group was able to outdo many large platforms when it came to determining the information agenda online and on the street. But despite this expansion of media leverage, anarchists have not been able to use their influence to determine the format of further action; we have been excluded from the liberal Sunday action planning groups, despite numerous attempts to get into this closed club. At the same time, most anarchists understood perfectly well that if we made calls for actions on our own, we would face far more serious repression than the peaceful weekend demonstrations experience.

After the elections, anarchists were able to resist not only in Minsk, but also in some other cities around the country. Organized affinity groups took part both in clashes with riot police and internal troops and in erecting barricades in various parts of Minsk. However, as the protest tactics changed and the number of participants increased, the anarchists were absorbed by the masses of peaceful protesters.

During the first days after the clashes and then during the first Sunday marches, some anarchist activists were more afraid of drawing a negative reaction from other protesters than of the violence of the police. Organized groups of peaceful protesters circulated videos and photos of supposed "provocateurs," alienating many of the protesters who had been active in the early days from participating in subsequent demonstrations.

It took several weeks to overcome fears of a possible conflict within the protests, which could be considered a missed opportunity for a revolutionary anarchist agenda. Some affinity groups carried out agitational raids on Sundays and participated in small rallies on the weekdays. As repression escalated, anarchists once again became welcome guests at all rallies, being trendsetters in security culture. But by that point, the repression had already hit many activists.

On the whole, the anarchist movement was unable to fully consolidate itself into an effective force during the protests. For many months, individual groups of anarchists continued to participate in the protests, but the so-called black bloc was never able to gather more than 30 people. There were quite a few reasons for this:

1. The state crackdown against the anarchist movement in 2017 had an impact on the willingness to participate in liberal demonstrations in a large bloc. At that time, in Minsk alone about 50 anarchists were detained during the protests against the “parasitism” law. Some comrades were not able to get over the repression of those days.
2. Lack of long-term activist cooperation. Some affinity groups never worked together. Some affinity groups were formed from people who had not previously participated in joint actions. These kinds of spontaneous organizations are suitable for a short period, but it can be extremely difficult to stay together for a long time under constant external pressure. Many of the anarchists who took part in the protests of August 9 through 11 were not part of organized collectives and hardly worked within any sort of general coordinating strategy.
3. Direct repression at the marches themselves. Many people did not want to be put on the sidelines or receive criminal charges for participating in peaceful marches. The strategy of the KGB and GUBOPIK, the police department supposedly focused on fighting organized crime, was incomprehensible to many, as the repression of activists was delayed by several weeks.⁸
4. The anarchist movement was deeply fragmented due to unresolved conflicts. This also impacted potential cooperation between some collectives.
5. People from the traditionally anarchist punk subculture largely refrained from participating in the protests with anarchists, again because of the relatively high level of repression against anarchists.
6. Many older anarchist activists abstained from participating in joint columns or blocs without explanation. A number of these people participated in peaceful protests on an individual basis, or with a few friends.

These are only a few of the factors that contributed to the low mobilization in the anarchist bloc.

Football fans with anti-racist views refused to cooperate with anarchists because of the high likelihood of reprisals by the GUBOPIK and KGB against anarchists. As a result, anti-racists also took part in the protests separately and in small groups.

Among anarchists, a group of partisans consisting of experienced activists also emerged. Alinevich and Dubovsky crossed the border between Belarus and Ukraine illegally, met with Romanov and Rezanovich, and continued their active struggle against the regime for several weeks, allegedly committing several arson attacks. Although this group was arrested while trying to retreat back to Ukraine, the very fact of its existence became important in maintaining the image of anarchists as determined foes of the regime. Even for many liberals, the anarchist partisans set an important example of organized resistance.

⁸ Since the elections, GUBOPIK [“Main Department for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption”] has mostly concentrated on political repression. It includes a sub-department focused on fighting “extremism.”

Repression against anarchists began even before the elections. Many prominent anarchists were forced to go underground. For example, the anarchist Nikolai Dedok went into hiding from July to November, when he was arrested as a result of a special operation by GUBOPIK.

It's also worth noting that the return to normality in the anarchist movement happened relatively quickly. A week after the elections, more than 40% of the movement's members returned to work and everyday life. Involvement in political organization decreased significantly when the conflict de-escalated. Many anarchists believed the liberal narrative about victory over the dictatorship. In light of this, the lack of desire to mount the barricades was understandable: many believed that even without the participation of anarchists, Lukashenko would not survive.

Once again, this was a mistake, which has cost the anarchists almost their whole movement: today, at least ten anarchists and five more anti-fascists are behind bars. Many comrades left Belarus in search of a safe haven for further political work. Some experienced torture and beatings. Essentially, the Belarusian anarchist movement was crushed by repression. There are small groups left in the country who continue to organize against the dictatorship, but the level of pressure from the state does not allow for even basic agitation. The names of many activists are known, and in the case of anarchist actions, the known activists will be detained quite quickly.

The structures of anarchist solidarity continue to operate: ABC-Belarus is engaged in supporting prisoners, repressed activists, and their families.

At this stage, the remaining anarchists are more likely to focus on surviving the repression than to engage in a full-fledged political struggle. The prospects for the anarchist movement are unclear, and it is difficult to imagine the continued activity of anarchists in the current environment. The high level of interest in the activists from the GUBOPIK and KGB only complicates any contact with outsiders, who fear additional problems due to connections to the anarchists. And while information projects like Pramen are still of interest to some part of Belarusian society, this interest continues to wane.

Lukashenko, Putin, and the European Union

The relationship between one dictator and another has always been complicated. Beginning with the lifting of sanctions in 2015, Lukashenko began gradually distancing himself from Putin. His speeches increasingly referred to an independent Belarus. Putin, in fact, despises Lukashenko and is well aware that he is being used in political games in Belarus. The Belarusian regime must pay for Russia's support with political and economic integration. Lukashenko is resisting this process, because he knows that, sooner or later, integration will result in the loss of power.

The warming of relations with the European Union has given the dictator an opportunity to limit Putin's political influence. Loans from Western "partners" and contracts with large firms could potentially reduce the Lukashenko regime's dependence on Russia. It also helped that the EU stopped putting pressure on the political processes inside the coun-

try. For many European politicians, Lukashenko's stable authoritarianism has been more attractive than the risks of a repeat of the Ukrainian scenario with anti-government protests and a subsequent invasion by Putin.

Until August 2020, Lukashenko was utilizing rather aggressive rhetoric toward Russia. The scandal about the Russian Wagner soldiers who "tried" to organize a military coup in Belarus demonstrates Lukashenko's desire to shift responsibility for any political instability in the country onto Putin's shoulders—a role previously reserved for the European Union and the United States. The dictator himself likely hoped the protests would be small, and that he could return to negotiations with European politicians afterwards.⁹

The violent breakup of the protests of August 9 through 11, and the population's active resistance in various cities, greatly altered the balance of power. The liberal West could not tolerate such lawlessness, as doing so could have had a negative effect on the popularity of the ruling political parties. But despite the murders of protesters over those first weeks, the West's reaction to the events in Belarus was quite restrained. It took time for the reports of torture, rape, and murder to compel political elites to speak out in support of the protesters and condemn Lukashenko's actions. For European politicians, this meant the end of the "cooperation" between Lukashenko and the EU, and the risk of another rapprochement between Russia and Belarus.

Putin's reaction to the protests in Belarus was also very cold during the first weeks. At first, it was unclear who would win in this whole affair, and Russian support for Lukashenko in case of his defeat would provoke a rise in anti-Russian sentiments across Belarusian society.

For Putin, although the Donbas story was able to increase his popularity for a while, in the long run it turned out to be a failed operation that cost him too many political points. Although Russia's operation in Syria is important geopolitically, Assad continues to be extremely unstable in the overall arrangements. In this situation, any Russian aggression against Belarus would once again cost enormous political capital.¹⁰

When it became more or less clear to Russian political analysts that Lukashenko was regaining control of the situation, personal meetings between the two dictators began. Loans started pouring in, most of which went to pay the regime's existing debts.

Now the balance of power for Lukashenko has changed dramatically. If back in 2019 he could navigate between the West and the East, now he has no choice but to work with Putin. The Russian emperor's contemptuous attitude toward the Belarussian potato baron remains

⁹ Wagner is a private security company from Russia. Several dozen mercenaries from Wagner were arrested in July 2020 at a resort in Belarus and accused of preparing acts of sabotage to overthrow Lukashenko. Later on, they were all released and there was no follow-up story. Many believe that the dictator was trying to use Wagner to distract attention from the protests in Belarus as well as to seek support from the European Union, though this didn't work out.

¹⁰ In April 2015, pro-Russian forces in the Donbas region with the support of the Russian military rebelled against the Ukrainian government. Originally, separatists were hoping to become part of Russia, but this never became reality. Instead, over a million of people were displaced by war. Today, the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic remain under the control of Russian forces.

on the surface. Many analysts point out that Russia's goal at this stage is to continue its efforts to re-absorb Belarus.¹¹ The new constitution could be the basis for just that.

It is difficult to predict the relationship between Putin and Lukashenko, since most of the agreements take place behind closed doors. Although Lukashenko does not name the price of Vladimir Vladimirovich's support, it is clear to everyone that it will not be possible to buy off Putin with watermelons and potatoes from his garden.

Alexander Lukashenko's Technocratic Regime

Many people mistakenly think that the Belarusian regime, headed by the former chairman of the state farm, is just a group of former soviet functionaries who only know how to use cops with sticks against their opponents to make them disappear.

This perception is erroneous: today, Belarus is a relatively advanced technological country. Numerous private IT companies provide engineering services to a number of major Western firms, including Microsoft, Google, and many others. Within the state apparatus, the people who work at the Operational and Analytical Center under the President of Belarus understand a little more about technology than Lukashenko.

Belarusian police constantly travel to exhibitions held by private firms for law enforcement agencies of various countries to acquire private equipment to both monitor and repress civilians. For example, the Italian Hacking Team noted in internal documents from 2015 that their hacking service for state players has interested "clients" in Belarus. This means that where the Belarusian state lacks the technology to repress its citizens, private firms can help them do so.

The Lukashenko regime prepared well for the 2020 protests, purchasing Canadian water cannons, Czech tear gas, electroshock shields, and many other technological innovations for crowd control.

The regime has been cooperating for several years with the private Belarusian company Synesis, which develops facial recognition technology; just days after the protests began, it became known that the cops were using automatic facial recognition systems to identify protesters and locate activists. Printouts from the Synesis system were used during some protesters' trials; their pictures and profiles from the program hung in the administrative file.

Equipment from the American firm Sandvine, Inc. was used to restrict access to the Internet. Israeli Celebrite equipment was used to hack mobile devices. Experts from China came to support the Belarusian regime in the censorship and monitoring of online activity.

The regime actively used SIM card cloning to hack into Telegram accounts. The de-anonymization bug in Telegram made it possible to create lists of participants in certain Telegram chats, and subsequently to link specific comments to certain people and initiate

¹¹ At the end of the 1990s, Lukashenko and Boris Yeltsin (then president of Russia) signed a union treaty between Belarus and Russia, creating a so-called "union state." The idea for the Russian government was to absorb Belarus one step at a time. The project of the union state was not really successful, but at the end of 2019, Putin began pushing a road map to "integration," seeking to acquire as much political influence as possible.

criminal proceedings against them. Data analysts inside the GUBOPIK and KGB were able to link uploaded footage to individual IP addresses and, in this way, to track the activists of neighborhood initiatives.

For the first time, Belarusian society faced a cunning and educated opponent—and we are not talking about Lukashenko and his sons. A huge number of people are working for the regime, having made the choice to provide service to the dictatorship for the sake of their own comfort. These people are not driven by their ideological love for Lukashenko, but by the money, and they are ready to perform any technical task without considering the moral consequences of that choice.

We have seen that numerous technological solutions on the Western market become available to authoritarian regimes very quickly. Technologies such as automatic facial recognition have played an extremely important role in combatting democratic movements and stabilizing dictatorships. The growth of the surveillance and control market will only make any attempt at liberation more difficult.

Nonviolence and Inaction

Prior to June 2020, protests in Belarus were largely nonviolent. With the exception of anarchists, no one called for violent resistance to repression. This situation changed very rapidly over the summer. The first skirmishes with the Belarusian cops took place in small towns, when attempts to detain protesters provoked resistance. These actions were spontaneous and extremely effective; the Belarusian regime is not used to an active population, and in the first weeks any resistance provoked bewildered the punishers.

The attack on the riot police in Minsk in July became a turning point for many protesters. It turns out that the supposedly invincible special police unit breaks down very quickly in a conflict situation. For generations, the Belarusian riot police have sought to present themselves as warriors who can work in the most difficult situations and stop riots. However, numerous trainings did nothing to help the young Lukashists with battered heads to confront the protesters on the streets. The flight of these riot cops changed the balance of power on the streets, as Belarusians realized that they could successfully confront the repressive apparatus.

After these clashes, there were many small rallies and marches. Many groups and ordinary citizens were preparing for the main event, election day. Although some still hoped for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, most people repeatedly fought back against the cops all over the country on election day. In some places, the population was able to completely free themselves from the dictatorship for one night. In Minsk and other major cities, the punishers were able to “clean” the streets by morning, but they could not stop the movement. The following nighttime protests demonstrated the effectiveness of active resistance and decentralization.

The undermining of the authority of the Interior Ministry continued and spread.

In a desperate attempt to prevent the protests, police began to detain everyone who looked like a protester. During the day, cops in police vans, buses, and ambulances tried

to apply pressure. Random detentions increased the number of people affected by political repression in the country; for example, such tactics led to the detention of many workers returning from night shifts. This, in turn, increased the level of confrontation in the factories and became one of the catalysts of the strike movement.

For some protesters from the liberal camp, the level of confrontation was too high. The violence of the authorities led to the deaths of several protesters, hundreds of injuries, and the torture of thousands in the cells of the police department and pre-trial detention centers in just a few days. For the relatively peaceful population of the country, these tactics came as a surprise.

In response to the violence, on the fourth day of the post-election protests, peaceful marches began. Hundreds of mostly women in white with red flowers gathered in downtown Minsk, demanding an end to police brutality, the release of all prisoners, and freedom of assembly. At first, the authorities did not repress the women's marches.

Many liberal news platforms promoted pacifism. At this stage, the chief agenda of the protests was to bring the violence to an end. On the first Sunday after the elections, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in cities across the country. This has never happened in Belarus before. On that day, it seemed that the dictatorship had lost and we could finally breathe freely.

The liberal part of the protest perceived this day as the beginning of the end for Lukashenko. After such a large demonstration, surely the dictator had to go. But the lack of goals was a problem that the protesters could not resolve. In a few cases, demonstrators were able to force the authorities to release prisoners by marching to the detention centers. In Minsk, a march of several thousand led to a conflict with the "volunteers" organized around arrestee support, who formed an additional line of defense around the prison against the protesters—the reason for this behavior being the agreements between these volunteers and the administration of the prison, which, according to the volunteers, could have been terminated in case of attempts to press for the release of detainees. The demonstrations themselves often turned from protest actions into mass meetings just for the sake of meetings.¹²

Attempts from a number of Telegram channels to set a goal for a particular day of protest largely failed; only a small part of the demonstrators were prepared to take action. In this case, we are not even talking about direct clashes with riot police, but various forms of nonviolent resistance.

Peaceful protest quickly became a dogma, and proactive actions of any sort were perceived as provocations. In a short time, the Belarusian protests shifted from clashes with the authorities to complete passivity. Many even perceived attempts to block roads via solidarity chains as provocations, while many thousands of demonstrators standing at red traffic lights was interpreted as an example of a high culture of protest and order within Belarusian society.

¹² After first night of protests, over 1000 people were detained and placed in various pre-trial facilities around the country. In Minsk, a group of volunteers came together to support the relatives visiting the prisons as well as the people released from prison. They were also responsible for publishing lists of detainees, as the cops refused to give this information to the public or to relatives.

This kind of de-escalation without pressure on the regime created an opportunity for the authorities to develop a new strategy for suppressing the protests. While the information environment was dominated by the agenda “overthrow the dictatorship—not a sprint, but a marathon,” the relative calm on the streets of the capital allowed the cops to apply the strategy of step-by-step repression, which we have already mentioned.

Peaceful protesters in Minsk woke up to this too late, when the movement had already been crushed in other parts of the country. Belated attempts to use direct action after a few months of Sunday marches did not produce any serious results; many of the activists who had been ready to escalate the conflict were already in prison or abroad. The tactics of un-arresting prisoners and attacking police officers who dared to enter a crowd of demonstrators continued for several more weeks, but they were aimed primarily at defending the demonstrations, which still had no concrete objectives.

It is worth remembering that in addition to large protests, solitary acts of sabotage continued in many cities: people blocked railroad tracks, destroyed equipment, and so on. However, this format did not reach the critical mass it would have had to in order to inflict serious damage on the regime.

The prioritization of peaceful protest hit the movement very hard. Although hundreds of thousands of people across the country were able to join the uprising against Lukashenko at the price of de-escalation, the division between the radical and peaceful camps played into the hands of the dictatorship. Belarusian society found itself in a situation familiar to many Western protesters, in which pacifists attempt to exclude supporters of direct action from the movement and thus end up aiding the movement’s opponents.

The agenda of peaceful protests was enforced in the streets as well as via social media. Many people who came out after the radical demonstrations of the first days wanting to stop the violence saw in any action a possible provocation by the regime, a pretext for another wave of repression. Yet this assumption was completely contrary to logic: the Lukashenko regime, weakened in August 2020, was not seeking to provoke people into violence in order to further escalate the conflict, because such a strategy would only destabilize the situation, rendering it extremely difficult to regain control. The regime understood this after the first days following the election.

Anarchists and other radical groups, in turn, should not be afraid of destabilizing the protest in case of clashes with OMON and other cops. Obviously, the more active resistance takes place in the streets, the greater the likelihood that the regime will make mistakes or even collapse. Active methods are necessary even if the peaceful majority opposes such action. The liberal information agenda may frame such actions as provocations, but we should not forget that our goal in the protests is not to support the liberal camp but to overthrow the dictatorship, even if working with liberal allies is important.

Conclusions

Months of protests have completely shattered the democratic opposition’s illusion that one big march will change everything. Simply marching through the streets of the country

without goals or objectives can do no damage to the regime. Only a synthesis of different tactics, from peaceful demonstrations to open clashes with the regime and the seizure of strategic points, can lead to toppling the dictatorship. In seeking this, each link in our rebellion must act in solidarity with the rest of the movement. The attacks from the peaceful camp against the so-called radicals must stop, as must the condemnations of the peaceful protestors by the more active population. Only together could we create a force capable of destroying Lukashenko and his supporters. It should be understood that peaceful protests can also include active forms of resistance such as roadblocks, pickets and actions at various strategic points, strikes, and so on, all of which undermine the regime and create additional pressure. Radical action must not be limited to defending a demonstration or stoning the cops. The structure of state power is much more complex than the cordons of the riot police; attacks on those structures can occur in several ways, not only as part of large demonstrations.

We should not only rely on big media channels to coordinate protests. At first, women's marches were organized without any major support, but thanks to their format, they became popular among thousands of protesters. Anarchists and anti-fascists should also try to organize outside their small circle of activists, going beyond comfort to develop protest strategies in accordance with our principles, ideals, and experience in large protests.

The uprising demonstrated the effectiveness of decentralized protest tactics. It is thanks to organizational efforts in many regions that we were able to come so close to destroying the dictatorship. Traditional centralized protests in the capital city are much easier to isolate and extinguish than numerous points of resistance across the country. We need to continue to look for allies in small towns, ready not only to draw back enemy forces, but also, if necessary, to seize power in the cities and liberate the regions beyond the capital entirely from the dictator, both via guerrilla methods and civil disobedience.

The effectiveness and importance of decentralization introduced anarchism to many Belarusians—not as chaos and disorder in the streets, but as an organized movement with political goals, which became a full-fledged alternative to state centralization. Although the ideas of anti-capitalism remain alien in Belarusian society, resistance to centralization as well as horizontal models of distributing power are of great interest. Should Lukashenko be defeated, we have no illusions about the possibility of creating an anarchist republic or federation within Belarus, but the influence of anarchists on liberal circles and society could lead to an important and rapid breakdown in the centralization of the state apparatus.

For generations, there has been a certain stereotype in the minds of people: the peaceful Belarusian, capable of adapting to any situation and accepting any injustice. This stereotype was nurtured by the Belarusian dictatorship and also by many opposition politicians who sought to "peacefully" overthrow the dictatorship. Jokes about tolerant Belarusians spread all over Eastern Europe.

But together, we have managed to overcome this stereotype, showing the entire world that the people of Belarus yearn for freedom no less than anyone else—and that we are ready to take decisive action to win it. The uprising of 2020 broke the image of the submissive lackey who is ready to swallow any mockery and humiliation. The growth of social power has been an important factor in our path to liberation. Yes, we could not overthrow

Lukashenko in the summer of 2020, but the war against the dictatorship is not lost. Long months of realizing our own strength and continuing to organize and rebel for a free Belarus lie ahead.

Let's leave pessimism for better times, and return to organizational work and preparation for new attempts to overthrow Lukashenko. The dictatorship will fall, and we will do everything in our power to break its legs and become free at last!

find each other.



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