

What Will Happen To Belarus After Lukashenko Falls?

Even with Vladimir Putin backing Belarusian Dictator Lukashenko, his position looking increasingly unsustainable. The future is uncertain.

By Valery Engel, PhD with RANTT Media



Protests in Minsk (Belarus) - August 16, 2020. (Максим Шикунец/CC BY-SA)

On August 9, 2020, Presidential elections were held in Belarus. Officially, 66-year-old *Alexander Lukashenko*, who held this post for 26 years, won the election. According to the [Belarusian Central Election Commission](#) (CEC), he received 80.1% of the vote, while his main rival, *Svetlana Tikhanovskaya*, received 10.1%. However, the opposition did not recognize the result, since it was considered that [at least 70% of voters voted for *Tikhanovskaya*](#).

According to the opposition, the voting results were massively falsified. The fact of mass falsification was also confirmed by the Chairman of the precinct election commission in Vitsebsk, [Sergei Pitalenko](#). After the announcement of the preliminary official results, [mass protests](#) began in many of Belarus's cities, with hundreds of thousands of its citizens taking to the streets. Mass arrests resulted, with 7,000 people being detained (so far) in the course of the protests.

Today in Belarus, however, there is a rather rare situation happening where *Lukashenko* continues to control law enforcement agencies and the army, but has almost completely lost public support. It is clear that this cannot go on without popular support any longer and (now dubbed) the "last European dictator" will either have to leave or to share power with his opponents. Lukashenko still cherishes the hope that the protest will "fizzle out", but this is unlikely to give him legitimacy and citizens' support. In any case, for the first time in many years, the Belarusian opposition not only loudly declared itself, but also made quite real claims to the power.

What is this opposition and is there any risk of right-wing radicals coming to the ruling institutions, as happened 6 years ago in Ukraine? The answer to this question is rather difficult. First, because the opposition, which was able to bring to the streets of Belarusian cities an unprecedented number of protesters in the entire post-Soviet history, does not have in reality a leader with a clear political position.

The Opposition

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who won the election (according to the opposition), admits herself that she is an accidental person in politics. Back in early July 2020, she was just the wife of a Gomel businessperson and blogger *Sergei Tikhanovsky* and worked as a translator. She neither thought about a career as President of Belarus nor as a simple politician. The peculiarity was that her husband decided to compete with Lukashenko in the Presidential elections and, according to the good old Belarusian tradition, he was arrested on a trumped-up charge exactly three weeks after filing an application for joining the presidential race.

Having violated the law, CEC [did not register Sergei](#) as a presidential candidate, and then, literally an hour before the deadline for submitting applications, [Svetlana Tikhanovskaya submitted herself](#) as a presidential candidate in the documents to the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus for registration of the Initiative group for presidential elections. It happened on May 15, and exactly a month later, she announced that her group had collected the [100,000 signatures](#) necessary for registration as a Presidential Candidate.

Why Lukashenko nevertheless decided to admit her to the elections remains a mystery, because CEC rejected the signatures of all his main, pro-Russian competitors, [Viktor Babariko and Valery Tsepkalo](#). Most likely, the point is in the banal sexism of Lukashenko himself, who has [repeatedly said](#) that the Belarusian society "is not ripe to vote for a woman." He underestimated his competitor, considering Tikhanovskaya a weak opponent, who would ultimately lose.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya calls herself a [symbol of protest](#). At the same time, she [does not get tired of repeating](#) that she is "not a politician and not a president in the full sense of the word", because she has "neither the necessary ambitions, nor qualities, nor knowledge." Actually, this explains why her [program](#), largely, consists of only two points. The first was the release of all political prisoners and the second was holding of repeated general Presidential elections, in which all political forces of the country could take part. All other

points of the program are treatise on what Tikhanovskaya deems are "for all good and against all bad."

Realizing the general weakness of her program, *S. Tikhanovskaya* also accepted the proposal of a group of small political parties, mainly of a nationalist orientation (from the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the «Rukh for Freedom» party to the Green Party and the Belarusian Christian Democratic Party), to adopt their program, the "Reanimation Reform Package" published on a dedicated website: <http://reformby.com/>.

For the first time, Presidential Candidate [Tikhanovskaya mentioned her allegiance to the Reform Package on July 27](#), i.e. immediately after the official registration for presidential elections. On August 15, already after the elections, her press secretary [Anna Krasulina](#) referred to the Reform Package as a program of reforms agreed "with all opposition democratic parties". She did it in an interview with the opposition Russian radio station "Echo of Moscow." And, on August 17, the Tikhanovskaya's website informed the Belarussian public that her team "has united with the teams of [Lukashenko's unsuccessful opponents] *Viktor Babariko* and *Valeriy Tsepka*", who also share the main provisions of the "Reanimation Package of Reforms" too.

Thus, this Program really united all the opposition. Already in mid-July, she became the object of close attention of the Belarusian and foreign public, which previously viewed the elections only as an expression of protest against the dictatorship of Lukashenko. Now people wanted to know what the Opposition which won the elections, is proposing to do.

Right-Wing Radicalism: Belarus's Program for Reform

However, on August 16, a scandal erupted. Analysts, who read the provisions of the opposition's national security reform package, grabbed their heads – they found there a very real and radical program as if copied from similar programs of Ukrainian nationalist parties. Immediately after that, the opposition shut down the websites www.reformby.com and www.zabelarus.com, where the text of the "Reanimation reform package" was originally posted. A few days later, their work was resumed, but without the scandalous section on "National security" (which [does not work now](#). However, the [Internet history](#) collected by caching of the web browser allows us to restore this section.)

[It states:](#) "...the situation both inside and outside the country is developing unfavorably for the national interests of Belarus. The main threats to National security are caused by the growing aggressiveness of the Kremlin's foreign policy, Belarus's participation in post-Soviet integration projects under the auspices of Russia, the dominance of Russian media in the information space of Belarus and the low level of national consciousness of Belarusians.

The main directions of reforming the existing state policy are: withdrawal from integration associations with the participation of Russia; preservation and development of the national cultural heritage, the Belarusian language; sustainable economic growth; high level and quality of life of citizens; democratic form of government."

After reading this section, the negative reaction of *Vladimir Putin* to the Belarusian protest becomes clear. However, we are of course interested in the radical right aspect. It concerns specifically the cultural sphere and assumes the following:

- "Returning the status of the *only* State language to the Belarusian language, guaranteeing the rights of national minorities to education and carrying out cultural events only in their native language;
- Development and implementation of administrative and financial incentives for Belarusian-language media, book publishing, cultural life. Return of state supplements for education and upbringing in the Belarusian language in preschool secondary and higher educational institutions;
- Carrying out a comprehensive decommunization and de-Sovietization of Belarus;
- Belarusianization of the *religious life* of all Christian confessions and other religions (i.e., permitting the conduct of religious rites *only* in Belarusian - *author's note*);
- Belarusianization of the education system of all levels and forms (transfer of the education into the Belarusian language - *author's note*)...;
- Creation of a cross-cutting education system in the Belarusian language from kindergartens to universities. "

The reader should not be misled by the words about the guarantees to national minorities for education and cultural events in their native language. Everyone – with a memory for other post-Soviet projects - remembers those words at the start of all education reforms in Ukraine, Turkmenistan and the Baltic countries. Nevertheless, all of them ended by the fact that national minorities were given only the right to study their native language and literature in their schools. Everything else was translated into state languages. However, the Russian-speaking residents of Turkmenistan did not receive this either. There, Russian classes were simply disbanded, and the police suppressed spontaneous protests from parents.

In other countries, Russian teachers explain Chemistry and Biology to Russian children in Russian schools in a bad state language. The provisions of the "Reanimation Package of Reforms" in the field of National security on the Belarusianization of the education system of all levels and forms, as well as on the creation of a cross-cutting education system in the Belarusian language from kindergartens to universities, best of all confirm this position.

It should also be added that, as a priority measure in the field of culture, Belarusian reformers suggest the "popularizing of the national heroes with a bias towards the 19th and 20th centuries" and there are risks here, as known from the Ukrainian experience, of the glorification of Nazi collaborators on the Second World War.

Right-Wing Radicalism: Popular Appetite for Nationalism within Belarus?

Does the majority of the population of Belarus share these views? Not yet, of course. For the majority of the country's population, the native language is Russian. Religious people

who are accustomed to listening to sermons in churches in Russian or Church Slavonic languages will not support this either. Most Belarusians have tragic family histories of their ancestors who defended their homeland during the Second World War from German invaders, and they will not like the glorification of collaborators.

People in Belarus protested against the rigging of elections, against the annoying President *Lukashenko*, who staged a massacre in the streets of Minsk. However, they did not protest against discrimination of the Russian language and not even for a break with Russia, with which there are centuries-old friendly ties, and which is the main market and a source of cheap raw materials for Belarus. That is why the opposition leaders preferred to suspend temporarily the access to the section of their program on the website related to national security, and *Tikhanovskaya* herself, together with her headquarters, preferred to declare that this was nothing more than a provocation of *Lukashenko* and no one was planning any of the above reforms.

In an interview with the Russian news agency *Interfax* on August 18, the head of the opposition's joint headquarters [Maria Kolesnikova](#) said that the opposition "is constructively disposed towards all external partners of the Republic of Belarus. We believe that all existing agreements should be observed."

"For our part, we confirm our desire and readiness to build mutually beneficial relations with all partner countries, of course, including the Russian Federation," said Kolesnikova. At the same time, she noted that the opposition is not discussing the country's possible withdrawal from the union structures with Russia. "This issue is not on our agenda at all. We regard Lukashenko's statements as an attempt at manipulation and deception," she is quoted by the Russian news agency. Then what about the Statement of *Tikhanovskaya* herself, made a month earlier, that Belarus does not need a [Union State with Russia](#)?

[Maxim Znak](#), the Lawyer of the Coordination Council of the opposition also denies the existence of a nationalist program. He stated at one of the press conferences, referring now to the updated website of *Tikhanovskaya*, that there are no links to the "Reanimation package". However, as we have shown, this is not the case. After the scandal erupted, on July 29, the Belarusian web portal (www.tut.by) published the [detailed information](#) about the opposition's Reanimation Package as a program on which, according to *Tikhanovskaya*, she will rely on as President.

The Russian opposition portal *Meduza*, based in Riga (Latvia), conducted its own investigation and [concluded](#) that "at the end of July (2020), the authors of the "Reanimation Package" proposed it to *Tikhanovskaya*. As a result, her reform program was almost completely taken from there. Even in design and structure, the two software sites are very similar, " - writes the online Edition.

It is quite obvious that in the absence of a real opposition leader with his original program and intelligible ideology, in the conditions of cleaning the political field by Lukashenko's team from any serious opponents whom he considered dangerous for himself, there is simply no other Opposition program in Belarus today, except for the "Reanimation package". It is difficult to say whether *Svetlana Tikhanovskaya*, if she comes to the Power,

will implement his provisions, especially in the field of National security, but (as mentioned above) today she simply does not have another program to speak of.

Nationalism from the Top: Lukashenko's Nationalist Ideology

Are there any preconditions for the triumph of right-wing radicalism in Belarus today? As yet, there is again none to speak of; the slogans of the nationalists are not the main demands of the protest, and Belarus, unlike Ukraine, cannot be clearly divided along ethnic lines. Moreover, the Belarusians do not yet have any prejudices against Russia.

Despite this lack of a 'demand side', however, the fact is that the current government in the country has been actively instilling itself in the elements of nationalism in recent years.

Despite the widespread opinion that *Alexander Lukashenko* is a pro-Russian politician and almost a protégé of Russia, in fact, the essence of his policy is to successfully maneuver between Russia and the West in order to obtain serious economic advantages from Russia (for example, in the form of preferential prices for energy resources).

Despite the creation of the Union State with the Russian Federation back in the 90s and loud words about the need for deeper integration of the two states, Lukashenko has done absolutely nothing for rapprochement with Moscow over the years. Moreover, after the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, he began to see in any calls from Russia for real rapprochement a threat to absorb his country. That is why all these years he obstructed the activities of pro-Russian NGOs, that is why he allowed nationalists to carry out their work to "strengthen the Belarusian nation", albeit with one condition - not to cross the line between culture and politics, which the nationalists are well aware of. Therefore, all these years they were actively involved in cultural issues and did not get involved in politics.

This suited the officials in Minsk quite well. As indicated in the report of the group of experts from the [CIS-EMO research center](#), the Belarusian authorities came to support the nationalist Belarusian initiatives against the background of the events in Crimea and Donbass. By speculating on the linguistic and cultural conflict between Russia and Ukraine, they can justify the disruption of integration initiatives by "public opposition" and even stimulate this opposition. "

Recently, [Lukashenko himself](#) liked to talk about the "sound nationalism". Thanks to his efforts, the country revived its own nationalist ideology. According to this ideological interpretation of history, says the famous Belarusian political scientist [Kirill Averyanov-Mirsky](#), Belarus is the heir to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the Lithuanian Belarusians fought with the Muscovites, and these wars are viewed as a confrontation between Europe and Asia, that is, Russians are more alike to Asians than their European counterparts.

Accordingly, the Belarusian language is a marker of Belarusian identity, and there is no blood brotherhood between Belarusians and Russians. Therefore, *Lukashenko* wants to show to the whole world, and maybe even prove to himself, that *Belarus is not Russia*, and, accordingly, there can be no talk of any deep integration, let alone the unification of the two

countries. In addition, he can hold himself on to these positions only by relying on nationalist ideology, and this requires “*Belarusian nationalists*”.

Conclusion

Thus, it was precisely the fear of Russia that led to the fact that under the dictatorship, right-wing radicals (i.e. nationalists) felt at ease. *Lukashenko* himself created the preconditions for the development of Belarusian right-wing radicalism and its ideology. This ideology was taken as the basis of their political program by the small nationalist parties in Belarus, which were so small that they did not even nominate their candidates for the Presidential elections. However, in the absence of a real program for the people's candidate *Svetlana Tikhanovskaya*, for which, apparently, millions of voters voted for, the nationalist's political program suddenly became the *only* opposition platform.

Does this prove that the opposition candidate is in fact a radical nationalist candidate? Of course not. She is really only a Symbol of Protest, with no clear political views. Does *Tikhanovskaya* sympathize with the nationalists lobbying for the Belarusianization of all forms of life in the country and calling for a revision of the history of the 19th and 20th centuries? More likely than not, as she saw nothing strange for herself in the first version of their platform, and declared that she was taking it as her “Reform Program”.

Could this lead to the fact that Belarusian radical right, who today have almost no influence, will begin to determine the ideology and humanitarian policy of the country if the opposition wins? Definitely yes, and this is confirmed by the political experience of neighboring Ukraine, where nationalists victory began with the fact that in 2002 the second President *Leonid Kuchma* published his book, in which he substantiated the need for Ukrainian nationalism. The Book was called “*Ukraine is not Russia*”. Twelve years later, aggressive nationalism won out in Kiev, practising discrimination against the languages of national minorities and glorification of the World War II collaborators and organizers of Jewish pogroms. Hopefully, a similar situation in Belarus will be avoided.

This article is brought to you by the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR). Through their research, CARR intends to lead discussions on the development of radical right extremism around the world.