

## Turning the Soviet Ethos into a Democracy Cause

### LESSONS FROM THE 2020 BELARUS MOBILIZATION

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Expectations have been low for decades that Belarusians would rise up against their country leader, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, but the 2020 election changed everything. The massive support for the three new presidential candidates with no political experience, the protests against electoral falsifications, and an even larger mobilization after the crackdown changed what most people thought was possible in the country's politics. Although many factors contributed to the 2020 mobilization, the creative approach of the new opposition to political framing and messaging seems to be among the most important ones.

The mobilizational power of the new framing came from a reinterpretation of the basic values on which the Soviet ethos was based. The messages of the new opposition spoke to collective solidarity, fairness, equality, and progress – the very values that made Soviet ideals (although not their realization) attractive to many. The new opposition became the real alternative to Lukashenka because it challenged him on his own terrain rather than attempting to change that terrain by advancing a different set of values.

Opposition in other countries, such as Russia, could [learn](#) from this experience, but Russia's war in Ukraine has made it a lot more difficult. As Ukraine fights for its independence, the war deepens the association of democratic values with Western culture while making it difficult to look at the Soviet experience as a source of anything but pure evil. At the same time, the war highlights the price of not looking for solutions that would be appealing to Russian society and create a real alternative to Putin's version of the country's future. For this reason, the Belarus experience is worth learning from.

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## The 2020 Electoral Protests in Belarus

Since Lukashenka's rise, observers of Belarus have mostly [discussed](#) why there has been so little protest, especially compared to neighboring Ukraine. Belarus has looked hopelessly attached to its Soviet past. Lukashenka has skillfully balanced between Russia and Europe while mastering populism at home. The opposition has been divided and unpopular, and it has not been clear whether any force could challenge the status quo.

In the 2020 election, Lukashenka was unexpectedly challenged by three new competitors with little political experience: YouTube blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, banker and philanthropist Viktor Babaryka, and former diplomat and founder of the first IT hub in Belarus Valery Tsapkala. The new candidates inspired great enthusiasm in society. Gigantic lines [formed](#) during the signature collection process. Thousands of volunteers responded to Babaryka's call to join his campaign. Civic initiatives aimed at election monitoring rapidly grew within weeks.

Feeling threatened, Lukashenka arrested Tsikhanouski and Babaryka and refused to register Tsapkala as a candidate. He did, however, allow Tsikhanouski's wife, Sviatlana, who decided to run instead of her husband, to register and run.<sup>2</sup> In a matter of days, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, Maria Kalesnikava (Babaryka's chief of staff), and Veronika Tsapkala, Valery Tsapkala's wife, united around Sviatlana's candidacy and ran a powerful campaign that seemed to doom Lukashenka's rule.

The subsequent election result was grossly falsified: Tsikhanouskaia received only 10 percent of the vote, which was implausible to any witness of her campaign. Massive protests followed and were brutally repressed, which only fueled societal outrage. After the crackdown, new groups, such as industrial workers, joined the protest. It lasted for several months, gradually subsiding under repression. And even though Lukashenka held on to power, the 2020 mobilization was unprecedented in the country's history.

How did a mobilization of this size become possible? Analysts point to the role of several factors. The COVID-19 pandemic that started shortly before the campaign [contributed](#) to the regime's declining popularity. Lukashenka mishandled the pandemic in every way possible by denying the significance of the virus and blaming the illness on people themselves. The lack of supplies in hospitals and the doctors' pleas for help triggered the emergence of civil society [initiatives](#) that would attempt to cover the need. Civil society organizations that grew during the previous years, the IT expertise easily available in the country, and the expansion of social media, especially Telegram, in recent years, have helped both the pandemic activism and the political activism that followed.

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<sup>2</sup> Recommended: [A Conversation with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#), PONARS Eurasia-BEAR Network event, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, April 2022.

Another factor was the modernizing society that was [tired](#) of Lukashenka's outdated political agenda. During the last decades, Belarus saw a [rise](#) of the middle class – educated urbanites open to the world, exploring new professional opportunities, art forms, and identities. Maria Kalesnikava, who became one of the most recognizable leaders of the protest movement, [cited](#) the commonality of values with Viktor Babaryka as the primary reason why she decided to join his electoral campaign. Other activists echoed her words.<sup>3</sup> Some professionals who joined Babaryka's campaign had no personal connections that influenced their decision – the support for Babaryka's values was their one and only reason to do that.

Why, however, did it take the new candidates with little political experience to activate the potential of the modernizing society? Why couldn't the established opposition capitalize on that?

### **The Established Opposition's Agenda**

The opposition parties in Belarus have never received significant support from the population. Certainly, a lack of basic political freedoms played a role in their inability to build that support. They also went through multiple splits and restructuring, which created an impression that the opposition leaders valued personal political ambitions more than achieving political outcomes and doing something useful for the people. Not without the help of the state propaganda, they were viewed as the agents of the West who emerge around election time, challenge authentic Belarus values, and aim to disrupt the country's political stability for the sake of receiving more monetary support from the West.

Some opposition parties also advanced an ethnic nationalist agenda that was distinctly anti-Russian. For example, they argued for increased usage of the Belarusian language and making it the only official language in Belarus. This agenda did [not inspire](#) much enthusiasm in a country where the Russian language dominates everyday life and where sociocultural identity did not form in opposition to Russia. Paradoxically, the opposition agenda, which was based on Western democratic values, did not resonate with the modernizing Belarusian society because it was too [Western and anti-Russian](#).

### **The Advantages of the New Framing**

The new presidential candidates did not have the baggage of the old opposition and had a record of accomplishments, which contributed to their reputation as doers rather than talkers. Babaryka, for example, was not only a banker but also a philanthropist who put a lot of effort into supporting Belarusian culture: he brought the famous paintings of Belarus

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<sup>3</sup> Recommended: Laura Adams, Natalia Forrat, and Zack Medow, "[How Civic Mobilizations Grow in Authoritarian Contexts](#)," Freedom House, November 2022.

artists back to Minsk and opened a public gallery with them; he funded the publication of the works of Nobel Prize Laureate Svetlana Alexievich to make sure that every library in the country would have them; and he founded the art center OK16 that provided space for cultural experiments. With such a background, he was not someone who could be accused of prioritizing his political ambitions over the interests of the country.

A notable factor was that the messages advanced by all three candidates resonated with a version of Belarusian national identity that was not focused on ethnicity and the Belarusian language. Researchers often [describe](#) Belarusian national identity as weak and even invisible. If Belarusians emphasize anything about themselves, it is likely to be peacefulness and lack of tensions, which is one of the reasons why Belarusians look so Soviet. The Soviet collectivist ethos matches well with how Belarusians see themselves: they dislike tensions, divisions, and inequality and value solidarity, unity, and fairness. It is also a paradoxical reason why Volha Charnysh and Harris Mylonas [wrote](#) that the 2020 “current moment is different. People from all walks of life have come together to demand free and fair elections.”

The agenda that the new candidates advanced was not trying to utilize the political tensions currently existing in the world: the tension between Russia and the West or the tension between democracy and autocracy (or, as some would say, the different versions of democracy). The new candidates proposed a vision of the nation’s future that had at its core economic development, a state working for the good of the people, fair rules of the game, and preservation of Belarusian culture in a way that does not involve antagonism with other cultures. Babaryka’s philanthropy, for example, underscored the contributions of Belarusians to the world culture and the pride that Belarusians should feel about it. In his [interview](#) about his vision of national identity, Babaryka referred to Belarusian culture as the thing that makes Belarusians unique and interesting to other cultures. He also rejected the idea that the usage of the Russian language should be limited; instead, he suggested that it would be great if Belarusians could easily speak both Russian and English, in addition to Belarusian, because those languages would open economic opportunities for them. This new agenda satisfied demands for authenticity, development, and good governance, while also matching already widespread societal values.

Ironically, in his early days, Lukashenka himself used a somewhat similar appeal. He used to be a progressive director of a Soviet state-owned farm (*sovkhoz*) who took advantage of the new opportunities to increase profits, thus showing that he focused on economic development rather than his own political ambitions. He was also advancing an anti-corruption agenda that spoke to the demand for fairness and equality. He opposed ethnic nationalist forces and developed relations with both Russia and the West. The new 2020 opposition, thus, successfully challenged Lukashenka on his own terrain, becoming a real alternative to him in the eyes of the population.

## The Ukraine Factor

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 significantly complicated the situation for the Belarus opposition, a large part of which is now in exile. The war, the atrocities committed by the Russian army, and the consolidation of the West in helping Ukraine to beat back the Russian aggression solidified the link between democracy and the West in public discourse. The relatively neutral stance between Russia and the West that the Belarus opposition used to occupy and that contributed to their appeal inside Belarus does not exist anymore. As the new Belarus opposition-in-exile sided with the West in this conflict, its image inside Belarus seems to be gradually [merging](#) with the image of the old pro-Western opposition. Lukashenka, in his turn, quickly took advantage of the situation. In January 2023, he [signed](#) a new law that allows revoking Belarusian citizenship of those abroad who “lost their legal connection” with the state, which further portrays the opposition-in-exile as Western puppets not representing the interests of Belarus citizens. Russia’s war in Ukraine, thus, significantly undermined the prospects of the democratizing agenda that could eventually take root in Belarus.

## Lessons Learned

As the Belarus case shows, presenting democracy as a universal value authentic to any culture rather than a construct of Western civilization can help grow a democratic movement even in a place that seems unlikely to experience one. The long-term strategy of democracy support in countries such as Belarus and Russia should emphasize democracy as a universal aspiration of people with different cultural backgrounds. It should avoid the assumption that democratization means losing cultural authenticity and succumbing to Western influence. The war has made this task extremely difficult. Both Lukashenka and Putin actively use the Soviet past in their political narratives to demonstrate the authenticity of their regimes to Belarusian and Russian cultures and societies. To have a hope for a democratic change in these countries, the opposition must eventually challenge the regimes on their own terrain by finding a way to reinterpret the Soviet ethos into a democratic cause.