

Signs of Hope Rather than a Color Revolution

Vitali Silitski

Some things are best learned through comparison. On the dark evening of September 7, 2004, when Alyaksandr Lukashenka announced the referendum to allow himself infinite rule over Belarus, only one person out of thousands who watched the announcement on October Square in Minsk dared to shout "No!" He was immediately arrested for hooliganism. Less than two years later, the same square was full on the cold and snowy nights following the March 19 presidential elections, as thousands protested the fraudulent vote and demanded new elections. Hundreds of them ended up in jail, only to find a new determination to continue the struggle for democracy. In the end, even though there was no orange-style revolution in Belarus, there may have been the beginning of a revolution of the spirit that will bring the last autocratic regime in Europe to an end. Nevertheless, Belarus seems to have just embarked on its agonizingly long and difficult road towards democracy.

From the beginning of this campaign, there was little sign of a real contest or prospect for a strong protest action afterwards. Among the multitude of factors that precluded Belarus from following the scenario known from Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, one is fundamental. Even the few independent opinion polls available showed that Lukashenka can rely on considerable support in Belarusian society, and could possibly have won a free and fair election. Strong economic growth and social stability might have guaranteed him half of the vote or so, had the vote been counted fairly. But, a free and fair vote carried the risk of defeat, however remote, and the ghost of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 fueled hysteria within the regime. Consequently, Lukashenka unleashed a series of preemptive actions aimed at ensuring a problem-free reelection. His security apparatus was boosted, and new legislation was passed giving the president a free hand in deciding when police can shoot in peace-time (in other words, when fire can be opened against protesters). Most active street organizers in the opposition were rounded up and sent to prison, or into exile. Dozens of independent newspapers were closed down, suspended, or denied publication and distribution. Last, but not least, just before the campaign was announced, the government criminalized opposition-related activity and began to arrest election monitors and activists from nongovernmental organizations on charges of terrorism.

In the end, the preemption of a democratic revolution transformed the country so much that any comparison with other unconsolidated semi-authoritarian

Vitali Silitski is a Visiting Researcher at the Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law at Stanford University.

regimes in the postcommunist world seems inadequate. Put simply, it lacked meaningful competitive elections, an institutionalized opposition, at least partial respect for the rule of law by the government and due procedure in government, all factors decisive in facilitating victories for the democratic opposition in recent cases of successful color-coded revolutions. By March 2006, the political and social order in Belarus had acquired many elements of what Lukashenka's chief ideologue promised would come to pass after the election: that is, the "corporatist state". Never mind that Lukashenka's front men are not ashamed of using definitions usually reserved for the regimes of Mussolini and Franco. Indeed, many of the elements of the Francist-style regime are in place in Belarus by now, for example, the personalized system of authority, almost unlimited subordination of the individual to the state through political, administrative, and repressive means, de-legitimation of the zones of political and social autonomy from the regime, and the institutionalization of repression by the codification of punishment for unwanted political activity.

Can there even be a talk about elections or politics in general in a "corporatist state"? Indeed, political regimes so organized never lose an election: their end usually comes as a result of an external intervention, internal disorganization, or the death of the chief protagonist. But, Belarus is not yet a "corporatist state" in the full sense. One of the reasons is that the regime lacks means of legitimating itself through anything other than elections. To the extent that this is true, Lukashenka needs someone to run against him, needs enemies to defeat, and hence cannot completely remove all the elements of political pluralism in Belarus. Therefore, politics still matter and the opposition, although emaciated, has not been completely erased from the social map.

Contradictions within the Lukashenka Regime

This contradiction of Lukashenka's regime was fully demonstrated during the March 2006 presidential elections, viewed by many (including the author) from the outset as an administrative procedure instituted to merely validate the status quo. Since Lukashenka did want some legitimacy for his reelection, he had no choice but to allow opposition candidates to participate. Surprisingly, two challengers, the leader of the united opposition, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, and the former rector of the Belarusian State University, Alyaksandr Kazulin, refused to bow to the dictator and decided to play by their own rules. Their 30-minute campaign speeches on state TV (that is how much exposure to alternative opinions an ordinary TV viewer in Belarus has had in five years) were devoted not so much to the issues but to attacking Lukashenka's character – an act previously unthinkable in a country where one official once declared Lukashenka to be "a bit higher than God." Both candidates emphasized freedom and democracy rather than day-to-day issues in their messages and found much sympathy, much to the surprise of observers. Thousands turned out on

the streets to hear speeches from opposition candidates, numbers that were unthinkable in Minsk even a year ago.

As a result of the campaign, the opposition can boast some modest but nevertheless important achievements. First, it achieved unity. This stands true even in the face of the fact that there were two opposition candidates running instead of one. In fact, the second opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, defied the expectations of some that he was candidate planted to dilute the democratic alternative in the election, and he added an aggressive attitude to the race. In the end of the day, the Belarusian opposition received two leaders who established trust with the democratic constituency and will most likely become faces of the democratic opposition in the future. Last, but not least, the campaign helped to consolidate the anti-Lukashenka segment of society.

The sad truth for the Belarusian democrats, however, is that they failed to score these modest achievements in the past, before Lukashenka's regime hardened its grip and the opposition's space for maneuver in society became severely limited. Nowadays, Lukashenka's opponents have to make monumental efforts to achieve minor progress in the fight for democracy as the regime is in full position to neutralize any damage done by active campaigning. Kazulin, whose particularly scathing attacks instantly made him a celebrity, has been beaten up by riot police. Dozens of observers and reporters were denied visas, expelled, or even arrested and charged with helping to plot a coup. State TV stepped up its propaganda, and the KGB began to discover one alleged plot after another every few days. In the last revelation, the head of the KGB claimed that the opposition would attempt to poison the tap water in Minsk, using decomposing rats. Dozens of opposition activists with experience in street protests were rounded up in the run-up to the vote.

Yet even in the face of these repressive tactics, Lukashenka's autocratic regime failed to deter people from mobilizing on the streets after the vote and denouncing the fraudulent results. On March 19, at least 20,000 people took to the streets to protest the announcement of a "smashing" victory for Lukashenka, who was declared winner with 83 percent of the votes cast. And the protesters did not stop there, organizing an around-the-clock vigil on the central square of Minsk to demand the annulment of the vote and new elections. To be sure, the size of the protests was nowhere near the crowds that turned out in the streets in Kiev a year and half ago. Yet thousands of Belarusians braved not only below-zero temperatures and blizzards but also explicit threats of imprisonment and even the death penalty made by the KGB on the eve of elections. Most of them faced immediate dismissal from state jobs or university if found in the crowd or even caught checking an opposition website. And they barely had means to communicate with each other due to the suspension of most of the opposition press and an almost total blockade of the Internet and mobile communications. Could one have expected a protest of more than just a handful of dissidents in these, almost Soviet-style, conditions?

The protests, however, did not account even for an attempt to start the

revolution. In the classical sense of the word, revolution is a situation when two political forces or personalities put forward contesting claims of sovereign authority over the same territory. This was not the case in Belarus, as the opposition did not even attempt to declare victory and only disputed the margin of Lukashenka's lead. In fact, it would have been hard for it to create this clash of legitimacies even in the event that the opposition had fared better with the voters (according to the most optimistic estimates, Lukashenka's main opponent did not even receive one third of the votes), as all channels that could have been used to quickly communicate the opposition's victory to society, such as independent exit polls, electronic media, and, on the day of the election, even the Internet, had been cut off by the regime and were, thus, not available to its opponents. The demand for a fair recount (and possibly a revote) is an extremely weak message for mobilizing the masses, as it essentially provides them with no hope of regime change. Hence, the protest was doomed at its very inception, and was carried out on the wave of enthusiasm that was produced by the somewhat unexpectedly high turnout at the first opposition rally on March 19. The numbers of protesters quickly dwindled but nevertheless, the protest continued long enough to have some impact on the opposition and on society, in spite of its violent dispersal and the subsequent wave of arrests.

One such consequence is the demonstration of the fact that the struggle for democracy can and will continue even in the unbearable conditions of a near-"corporatist state". Another one is the demonstration of the quality of the democratic subculture in Belarus. For a long time, observers and insiders alike explained the current state of affairs in the country by pointing to factors explaining why Belarusian society is not like its neighbors in Eastern Europe. Now there is evidence that at least part of it is as imbued with the democratic spirit and sense of personal responsibility for setting the country on the path to freedom that has been demonstrated by Serbs, Georgians or Ukrainians in recent years. Some of these similarities are presented below.

Signs of Hope for a Democratic Belarus

First, the growing repression resulted not only in increased apathy within the society but also in a certain radicalization of its democratic subculture, especially of the core of opposition activists who turned out to be ready to engage in seemingly hopeless and illogical protest actions.

Second, the post-election protests confirmed that civil society in Belarus had matured and enhanced its commitment to democracy building in spite of the prohibitive consequences and even criminalization of its activities. Particularly after the regime rounded up some of the principal political opposition leaders before the ballot, it became clear that NGO activists have become capable of self-organization to the extent that even the disruption of the chain of command failed to cause disarray and stop the protest efforts. The maturity

of civil society, however, is the reverse side of insufficient professionalism on the part of political leaders who seemed to be perplexed by the unexpectedly high turnout on the square and failed to come up with any meaningful plan of action to harness the mobilization before them.

Third, there are signs of a broader democratic subculture being activated, or of the activation of democratic-minded citizens who are so far not actively involved in the opposition. Invigorated by the election campaign they refilled the ranks once protesters were arrested *en masse*, and came up with new forms of activity and new methods for communicating with the public. For the first time ever, the mood of this social opposition changed from waiting until the political opposition would do something to get rid of Lukashenka to getting ready to make small independent actions by themselves. This segment of the opposition, for example, was responsible for an outburst of unconventional protest activities, such as flash mobs, in the Belarusian capital following the election. Internet blogs and discussion forums were full of spontaneous suggestions and calls for action, be it *samizdat* printing of leaflets or creating alternative web sites to make up for the ones blocked during the campaign.

Fourth, for the first time in Belarusian political history, Internet was an important alternative medium of information. During the peak political events, such as the beating of Kazulin by riot police, the voting day, and the protests in its aftermath, the number of visits to the principal independent sites, in spite of the attempts to block them, was several times higher than usual. Likewise, spontaneous protest actions were mostly coordinated online. The Internet has also become a tool of campaigning for the “traditional” NGO sector, even if this was a consequence of the near impossibility to continue its work legally. Of course, speaking about breaking through the information blockade imposed on society by Lukashenka would be premature as the Internet is off limits for the large parts of Belarusian society and access to sites can easily be blocked. Yet there is visible potential. At the very least, it can be asserted that online communication made it impossible to keep the democratic subculture in society disorganized.

Last but not least, the protests confirmed the importance of identity, culture, and symbols in consolidating the democratic forces. The ranks of independent, socially-active citizens who took huge personal risks during the election campaign and in its aftermath, were dominated by those who were struggling not only for democracy, but for the right to use and study in their native language, revive national culture suppressed by the Russification politics of the regime, and even to listen to their own music. The campaign showed the extent to which cultural and political divides in Belarus have been intertwined. While regime media instigated images of a “cultural war” between the West and the Orthodox civilization, protesters renamed the square where they set up the tent camp after Kastus’ Kalinowski, the leader of the uprising against the Russian empire in 1860 and despised by Lukashenka’s officialdom as an extremist terrorist. With scores of local and Russian pop-stars joining the bandwagon of official propaganda, the opposition was supported by Belarusian-language

rock and folk musicians who sang their songs of freedom. And the denim color chosen by the opposition as a symbol of freedom was quickly joined by the white-red-white of the traditional Belarusian flag banned by the regime in 1995. Much was said and written about the feasibility of political nationalism in the extensively de-nationalized and Sovietized society of Belarus. But, there seems to be no other alternative when it comes to mobilizing those who are ready for a personal sacrifice for democracy.

Some Caveats

All the above, however, only refers to a certain segment of the society, and the story of the March 2006 events in Belarus also has its other, more sobering, side. Unfortunately, this show of commitment and activism also highlighted the gap that separates this democratic subculture from the rest of society, and it confirmed an unpleasant fact for the Belarusian opposition. A combination of fear imposed by the government on some parts of society and acceptance of the regime by others still limits the opposition’s appeal and following. The streets of Minsk these days were full of pictures of solidarity and defiance, but also of indifference from passers-by and loathing for the protesters from the regime’s supporters.

In this context, Minsk was indeed a radically different place compared to Kiev just over a year ago. There, the protest on the Maidan was a magnet that pulled people from all corners of the country. Here in Minsk, the island of democracy on October Square was a thorn in the flesh that most tried to ignore even when passing by. In Kiev, the city administration provided the protesters with food and supplies. In Minsk, the police arrested anyone who tried to bring food to the youngsters who held an around-the-clock vigil. There, university administrations cancelled classes to allow the students to join demonstrations. Here, universities explicitly threatened anyone caught on the square with expulsion. There, the police smiled and chatted with protesters, even if that happened only after a few tense days of indecision and unclear intentions on the part of the government. Here, the police mercilessly attacked, not being shy, according to eyewitness records, of beating even young girls. There, TV journalists refused to repeat the propaganda supplied from the “black boxes” of the government. Here, official TV crews provoked the protesters and quickly cooked up stories about drug addiction and prostitution rings on the square. And the manifestation of national identity, the rallying cry to defend freedom and democracy on the streets of Ukraine, was met with refusal by many in Belarus who still associate, at the prompting of the authorities, the nationally-minded opposition with the descendants of the Nazis.

In sum, there is another sobering fact for the advocates of democracy in Belarus. Whereas most pessimistic forecasts about the prospects for democratic change in Belarus usually focus on institutional factors (such as the character of elections) and the repressive capacities of the government,

they do not always take into account the societal consequences of more than a decade of the Lukashenka regime and the degree to which it has created its clientele within society and among those strata that are usually considered as potential building blocks of the democratic constituency. Most of them, be it urban professionals or private entrepreneurs, are too dependent upon the state to actively support the opposition even if they wanted to. Many managed to adapt to the conditions dictated by the system and have settled for what they have. Others even became active participants in repression. Thus, even if young democracy activists were a majority among the protesters, the success of Lukashenka's politics of using both sticks and carrots with the younger generation (that is, punishments for unwanted activities and opportunities for cozy living and lucrative careers in the state apparatus for loyalists) was also evident: riot police, KGB provocateurs, and official TV propagandists were also young people.

But, does this all mean that the struggle for democracy in Belarus is hopeless? Surely not, even though the Belarusian opposition will have to face an even tougher crackdown from the regime and a new round of preemptive attacks following the partially successful campaign. One of the greatest questions is whether the Lukashenka regime will finally decide to pursue its project of a "corporatist state" to the end and, thus, come up with some other idea of reproducing power than elections. In this case, the opposition is automatically transformed into a network of dissidents who pursue not a political fight but rather personal struggles for rights and liberties. If not, and elections remain the principal tool of legitimizing the regime, this flaw in design may turn out to be that of Chekhov's gun that, even unloaded, can shoot in the third act. This being said, this author's previous assertion that a Ukraine-style electoral revolution in Belarus is already impossible remains valid. But, elections (any elections) may galvanize the society to the extent that other, unexpected forms of regime change may become possible. After all, if the secret ballot turns into roll-call voting as people take to the streets, who will give a dime about all the niceties of vote counting?

Of course, Belarus is far from this at this point, and the struggle for democracy promises to be long and hopeless for at least some time. But the largely unnoticed revolution of the spirit experienced by many Belarusians may have its long-lasting legacies. If this democratic subculture proves to be capable of expanding even under immense pressure, if this largely cultural and idealistic movement will have a chance to be reinforced in the future by other societal elements, including those who turn their backs on the government for social and economic reasons, if the political opposition preserves itself and continues to provide society with a credible democratic alternative to the current regime, change cannot be ruled out. And it may well turn out in the future that its first seeds were planted during those hopeless protests on snowy nights in Minsk in March 2006.

Part One

Before the Presidential Elections: Domestic Developments in Belarus