

False Promises and Real Hopes:

What the Belarusian Protests of 2020 Can Tell Europe

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Protester in Minsk, September 12, 2020

Introduction: Failing Upwards

Authoritarians are learning. The old protest tactics are failing, but amidst failures, new hope blossoms. The recent anti-authoritarian movements all over the world may look like they spell doom for nonviolent protests. However, they have had a long-term impact that will pay off in the future if activists and institutions play their cards right. I will use Belarus as my central case study, but this could be a global phenomenon.

The story of the 2020 protests in Belarus is the most illustrative of a painful yet unavoidable transformation of peaceful protest tactics from immediate gratification to a long game. Nonviolent protests, while not immediately effective in the short term, left a democratic legacy and served as a learning experience for Belarusians.

The Belarusian revolution disappeared from the international headlines as the world moved on, seeing that the protests yielded no immediate success. That's a pity because the revolution offers a valuable lesson for Europe and the world. The lesson is that while the nonviolent protests no longer bring the results like those of the Singing Revolutions, they evolved and now function as modular events, creating enduring legacies. Thus, activists and institutions have to learn to play the long game, using nonviolent protests as a tool of learning and not necessarily regime change. As Franak Viachorka, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's political advisor, told me: "the protests were an exam for Belarusian people."

The lessons of Belarus are important beyond the country alone. Russians often bitterly joke that Lukashenka is the demo-version of Putin. Belarus, they say, is a barometer that demonstrates the latest developments in authoritarian tactics. Belarus is a functional illustrative case for how 21st century's authoritarianism progresses and how to interact with it.

This essay is divided into four parts. The first part gives a short background on the timeline of the revolution. The second looks at the perceived failures of nonviolent protest movements and especially the failures of the one in Belarus. The third part looks at the real hopes that the Belarusian movement, and similar movements worldwide, brought. Throughout the first three parts, I look at the role of European identity in Belarus, which many experts consider to be a driving force behind the protests. The fourth part is a sketch of policy recommendations for pro-democracy NGOs and grassroots activists focusing on Europe in particular.

Along with traditional scholarly and journalistic sources, I draw on interviews with activists and experts as well my personal experience on the ground in Minsk, Moscow and Hong Kong. All photos are taken by me unless stated otherwise. All activists' names are changed to ensure their safety.

Part I: Background

Belarus is a post-Soviet nation sandwiched between Russia, Poland and Ukraine. Since the fall of the USSR, it was ruled by the “Europe’s last dictator”, a former collective farm manager, Alyaxandr Lukashenka. Lukashenka’s propagandists claimed that “dictatorship is our brand” and wanted to distance Belarus from Europe as a unique country that values its Soviet past and stability.¹

In 2020, the international community was amazed that the quiet dictatorship suddenly jumped out to the global headlines. Protests engulfed the nation after yet another election was stolen by the autocrat — protests on a scale never before seen in Belarus. Belarus had protests before, most notably the failed 2006 Denim Revolution.² The protests tended to be focused around stolen elections, fitting neatly into the paradigm of electoral protests that is so popular amongst scholars of Eastern Europe. However, in 2020, the stolen elections by themselves didn’t become the locus of the protests. Instead, it was violence.³

Ivan (pseudonym), a medical student from Minsk, told me: “we knew the election would be stolen. Only the most political people came out after the elections. It was after the massacre that thousands of people went to the streets, it was when I went onto the streets.” The massacre he is referring to was the brutal violence from Lukashenka’s

¹ "Dictatorship is our brand Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko owes his tenuous grasp on reality largely to his press secretary, Natalya Eismont. Here’s how she gained such influence." [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// meduza.io/en/feature/2020/08/28/dictatorship-is-our-brand](https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/08/28/dictatorship-is-our-brand).

² David R. Marples, "Color revolutions: The Belarus case," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 351-364.

³ Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, "Democratising Elections in the Post-Communist World: Definitions, Dynamics and Diffusion," *St Antony's International Review* 2, no. 2 (2007): 64-79.

forces exerted against early protests of August 10-13, when over the course of three days, the security forces killed two men and injured a five-year-old. Security services brutalized protesters on camera, the images quickly made their way onto the internet. Thousands poured onto the streets.

The chant *Zhivie Belarus* (long live Belarus) thundered through the country, highlighting the protesters desire to claim their national identity as democratic and European. As Franak Viachorka puts it: “a nation was being formed in these protests.” Many protesters told me in September 2020 that their identity is tied to Europe. Maria (pseudonym), a young woman from Minsk, said that while she doesn’t “want a breakup with Russia, Belarus is first and foremost a European nation and must be free and democratic.” The sentiment has its history in Belarus. The aforementioned short-lived Denim Revolution took up denim fabric as a symbol, because in the former USSR it meant freedom, the West and a democratic Europe.⁴ These protests were quickly put down after a faux mediation by Russia.

Pundits in Europe and all over the world were in awe of the Belarusian protesters, who almost never broke with the tenets of non-violence. The protesters were inspiring and well-presenting. They were often women or led by strong women like Maria Kolesnikova, adding a feminist flair to the movement — a welcomed novelty in Eastern Europe.

⁴ "Belarusians Wear Jeans in Silent Protest," [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=1502762](https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=1502762).



Women's March. Minsk, September 12, 2020

Katya (pseudonym), a veteran LGBTQ+ activist from Minsk, recalled to me that she was profoundly inspired by how caring the protesters were towards their surroundings, “even taking their shoes off before climbing on a park bench.” I personally witnessed protesters pedantically gathering litter in neat bags in the middle of a thousands-strong march.



Minsk, September 13, 2020

Western commentators jumped on the revolution eagerly. Leading publications ran pieces counting the days till Lukashenka abandons his throne.⁵⁶ Even seasoned Russian commentators like Maxim Katz expected the dictator to retreat with his tail between his legs.⁷ EU politicians were making encouraging statements. Lithuania even

⁵ "Belarus protests show no sign of fading as 100,000 turn out in Minsk," -09-06T16:52:59.000Z [cited 2021]. Available from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/06/belarus-protests-100000-turn-out-in-minsk-alexander-lukashenko>.

⁶ David Ignatius, "Opinion | Belarus's dictator isn't winning. He's desperate." *Washington Post*

⁷ "«10 тысяч ня могуць перамагчы 9 мільёнаў», — Максім Кац пра суд над Лукашэнкам, будучыню Калесьнікавай і прыезд у Менск," [cited 2021]. Available from <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30901600.html>.

recognized protest leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the legitimate president of Belarus.⁸ Even workers, Lukashenka's supposed base, were going on wildcat strikes.

It seemed that the old-style Soviet dictatorship was destined to fall and be replaced by a modern European democracy. As Viachorka put it, the regime "wasn't sexy, wasn't attractive." Lukashenka looked old-fashioned and ridiculous. When he staged a photo-op swinging an AKM rifle around his palace, the Internet filled with memes mocking the dictator's cumbersome appearance.⁹

⁸ Reuters Staff, "Belarus says Lithuania broke international law by recognising Tsikhanouskaya as leader," *Reuters*, -09-15 2020

⁹ "President Lukashenko And His Gun," -09-03T05:44:16+00:00 [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// englishrussia.com/2020/09/02/president-lukashenko-and-his-gun/](https://englishrussia.com/2020/09/02/president-lukashenko-and-his-gun/).



Source: RIA news

Media-savvy protesters who amassed a mass following, with opposition channel NEXTA becoming the largest telegram channel in Russia, laughed at Lukashenka for weeks.

The laughter, however, subsided when it became clear that the dictator was unwilling to leave his throne and that his photo session sent a clear message — Lukashenka

wouldn't go without a fight. As the strongman put it in a public speech at the peak of the protests: "even in death, I won't give up this country."¹⁰ It only went downhill since.

Already in September the protests began to dwindle as more and more people ended up detained. Lukashenka was careful to avoid public beatings, and instead protesters were brutalized in jails all over Belarus. At least four people died in total, at least fifty are missing.¹¹¹² Lukashenka was put under sanctions by the EU and the US, although many activists claim that these sanctions only scratch the surface.¹³ Regardless, Lukashenka was essentially bailed out by the Kremlin, which is in exchange attempting to swallow Belarus' security apparatus in pursuit of Putin's Union State project.¹⁴

As of the date of writing, Belarus remains in Lukashenka's tight grip as his KGB kills activists at home and abroad. The regime felt emboldened enough to ground a Ryanair flight passing through Belarusian airspace, only to detain a journalist and opposition leader Raman Pratasevich. Pratasevich has since been turned into the regime's toy, making frequent appearances on state media, where he denounces his former friends and colleagues in the Belarusian resistance. His girlfriend, who was also seized by the

¹⁰ "Lukashenka says he will not give up country even after his death," [cited 2021]. Available from <https://belsat.eu/en/news/lukashenka-says-he-will-not-give-up-country-even-if-he-is-dead/>.

¹¹ "Protesters keep pressure on Belarus' dictator, and pay the price," [cited 2021]. Available from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/belarus-news-protests-keep-pressure-on-alexander-lukashenko-minks-arrests/>.

¹² "Сотня в лікарнях, десятки зникли безвісти: що відомо про долю мітингувальників з Білорусі," [cited 2021]. Available from https://24tv.ua/100-mitingovalnikiv-dosi-likarni-desyatki-znikli-novini-bilorus_n1398869.

¹³ "Belarus Opposition in Exile Wants Tougher EU Sanctions Against Lukashenko," -06-02T16:11:00+02:00 [cited 2021]. Available from <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/06/02/belarus-opposition-in-exile-wants-tougher-eu-sanctions-against-lukashenko-a74085>.

¹⁴ "Belarus Opposition in Exile Wants Tougher EU Sanctions Against Lukashenko,"

regime, has not been heard from in months. Pratasevich's family and friends are confident that he is being tortured. The outrage that the Pratasevich incident caused in Europe and elsewhere had no apparent effect on the regime's power.¹⁵

Part II: False Promises

Nonviolent revolutions are inspirational tales that look neat in western headlines: roses in Tbilisi, orange flags in Kyiv and white ribbons in Moscow. However, recent years show a surprising resilience of authoritarians. From Minsk to Moscow to Myanmar, peaceful marches are met with violence by authoritarians who end up keeping their grasp on power. Belarus is an excellent illustration of this trend.

The key tactic the Belarusian protesters used was non-violence, inspired by Gandhi and the Singing Revolutions of the Baltic States. A violent fight that would lead to blood, deaths and violence of massive proportions was too much for the protesters to stomach. For many, it was completely unacceptable: Katya, the LGBTQ+ activist echoes the sentiment I heard many times on the Minsk streets: "violence is immoral; it is the line that we shouldn't cross."

Artyom Shraibman, a foremost Belarusian political scientist, who is now exiled in Kyiv, told me that "all people of the world dislike violence... However, a strong dislike for violence is a part of Belarusian identity, as it was influenced by many devastating wars

¹⁵ "Online Appearance By Dissident Belarusian Journalist Pratasevich Raises Questions," [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// www.rferl.org/a/31346235.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/31346235.html).

on its territory.” While speaking at an event of the Oxford Belarus Observatory, Franak Viachorka said there is a “very small percentage of Belarusians willing to resort to violence, and an even smaller percentage of those who would engage in armed resistance.”

This distaste for violence is at odds with the traditional definition of a “revolution” per Theda Skocpol. The renowned researcher defines revolution as a violent turmoil customarily driven by class.¹⁶ For many scholars and activists there is no revolution without blood. **Was it perhaps the lack of willingness to commit violence that made the Belarusian protests so impotent in the short term?**

After all, neighbouring Ukraine showed that violent protests yield better short term results. The primarily peaceful Orange Revolution was largely discredited when its key antagonist, Victor Yanukovich, was elected president four years after being kicked out of power by mass protests. However, the violent Euromaidan, which made Kyiv go up in flames, sent Yanukovich running to Russia. Whether it was causation or correlation is hard to tell, but Yanukovich did cite fear for his life as a primary motivator for abandoning his luxury villa with golden toilets.¹⁷ Even the non-violent revolutions that work out sometimes fail to create enduring legacies and solid ideologies.

¹⁶ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979)

¹⁷ "A Year After Maidan: Why Did Viktor Yanukovych Flee After Signing the Agreement With the Opposition?" [cited 2021]. Available from <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/59172>.

Non-violent protests do look great in the news. The protesters interviewed are well-dressed and well-spoken, often with good English. Sometimes the leaders are educated in the west, like Mikhail Saakashvili, who was proclaimed the hope of the free world in Georgia. However, Saakashvili is now jailed on corruption charges in the democratic Georgia he supposedly helped to create.¹⁸

The problem with even successful nonviolent revolutions is that today they often ring hollow, as they struggle to “lock in” a new vision of their country. Despite attractive imagery, they often offer little substance and cannot yield long-lasting structural change —such was the case in Georgia and to a larger extent in Ukraine. The latter even became a sort of an Eastern European bogeyman for negative change brought about by protesters. Regardless of the multiple Maidans it went through, Ukraine remains incredibly corrupt, recently topping the list of countries implicated by the Pandora Papers.¹⁹

The even more critical aspect of contemporary protest movements is authoritarian learning. In a conversation about the 2021 Navalny protests, Timothy Garton Ash, Director of the Dahrendorf Programme at the University of Oxford, noted to me that the authoritarian regime learned two things from past revolutions: “ruthlessness and a skill set for managing [protests]”. He also pointed out that “[a regime] can actually

¹⁸ "Thousands rally in Georgia demanding release of Saakashvili," -10-14T22:10:34Z [cited 2021]. Available from <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-rally-georgia-demanding-release-jailed-pro-west-ex-leader-2021-10-14/>.

¹⁹ Erin Francis Cunningham Ellen, "Pandora Papers: Leaks prompt investigations in some countries — and denial in others," *Washington Post*

live with people letting off steam on the streets for quite some time...as long as it doesn't become politically threatening."²⁰



Protester hurt during Navalny protests in Moscow, January 23, 2021

Authoritarians indeed became smarter and attained a wide variety of insidious tools. In Belarus, Lukashenka likely realised that the protesters can trudge the streets for as long as they want —as long as the security services can keep them away from governmental infrastructure and from building a base camp. As a result, massive crowds would

²⁰ "Why Putin is Winning the Power Struggle With Navalny in Russia," in The Center for the National Interest [database online]. -02-05T12:09:23-05:00 [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// nationalinterest.org/feature/why-putin-winning-power-struggle-navalny-russia-177701](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-putin-winning-power-struggle-navalny-russia-177701).

wander aimlessly throughout Minsk, with the Internet turned off in the entire city. The protesters, unwilling to use violence, had only one resort against riot police — flight. By nightfall, the thousands-strong marches were nearly always completely dispersed.

One could see the importance of physical location in protests through the Maidan or the Tahrir square. In fact, the very word *maidan* in Ukrainian means “a square,” a sort of an agora. Physical camps, where protesters can come to recharge, organise and eat are extremely important —and authoritarians learned to destroy these spaces at all costs. In Hong Kong, activists turned to Bruce Lee’s wisdom —“be water,” they said. The fluid tactics of Hong Kongers, however, faltered under the CCP’s push.



Hong Kong, January 2, 2020

The consequence of authoritarian learning, which is visible in many other contemporary protest movements, is forced leaderlessness. The modern state, especially the modern authoritarian state, has an outsized capacity to track, surround and capture dissidents. By even the early stages of Belarusian protests, most of their leaders were either in jail or in forced exile.²¹ Belarusians found themselves without a leader on the ground, which made it difficult, sometimes impossible to organise.

A Minsk medical student, anonymised here as Ivan, said that the lack of leaders was one of the key reasons for the fizzling out of the protests: “maybe, if some sort of a grandpa Lenin drove up on an armoured train we would rise up, but for now everyone is sitting tight.” Actors like NEXTA emerged, attempting haphazard coordination, but it was nevertheless minimal, making it impossible to create Maidan-esque spaces or even lay out concrete demands.

Another Skocpolean issue is that Belarusian protesters rarely crossed the boundaries of class. While signs of a cross-cleavage coalition were spotted early on by researchers like Olga Onuch, the protests failed to deliver on nationwide strikes and working-class mobilisation.²² As Onuch herself noted in her presentation for BEARR trust, the majority of those on the streets were middle-class, well-educated urbanites —

²¹ "Belarusian exiles fear Lukashenko's reach," -06-11T02:00:00+00:00 [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// www.politico.eu/article/belarusian-exiles-fear-alexander-lukashenko-reach-belarus-tikhanovskaya-protests-ryanair-kidnapping-minsk-protasevich-dissident-blogger/](https://www.politico.eu/article/belarusian-exiles-fear-alexander-lukashenko-reach-belarus-tikhanovskaya-protests-ryanair-kidnapping-minsk-protasevich-dissident-blogger/).

²²Olga Onuch, "Analysis | There's more to Belarus's 'Telegram Revolution' than a cellphone app," *Washington Post*

the same demographic that the world saw on the streets of Hong Kong or Moscow or Kyiv.

This often gives critics the opportunity to paint the pro-democracy protesters as young petite-bourgeoisie that are not in touch with the common people. The common people, these critics argue, are fine and happy living in a dictatorship, as long as it meets their material needs.²³

This is only partially true. The workers in Belarusian plants went on wildcat strikes at the beginning of the protests as they too had plenty of issues with the state. In fact, working-class protesters held so much power that they were the only protesters Lukashenka was willing to talk to.²⁴ However, the nascent opposition leadership could not establish a productive relationship with strike committees: they were unwilling to go with the demands and were slow on coordination.

For this piece, I spoke with a labour activist pseudonymised as Nikolai. In 2020 he travelled to Belarus from another post-Soviet nation in order to stoke up the protest mood amongst working-class Belarusians. Nikolai recounted to me how Tsikhanouskaya's Coordination Council appeared disinterested in the workers' demands for better wages and working conditions. "They couldn't offer us anything; they

²³ "How a Russian Nationalist Named Alexei Navalny Became a Liberal Hero," [cited 2021]. Available from <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/01/alexei-navalny-russia-protests-putin>.

²⁴ "'Resign!': Alexander Lukashenko heckled by factory workers in Minsk," -08-17T21:22:50.000Z [cited 2021]. Available from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/17/belarus-opposition-calls-for-general-strike-after-biggest-protests-yet>.

were condescending and uncaring. They wanted to announce a nationwide strike, and strike committees kept telling them that there needs to be more time to agitate and coordinate...” The national strike announced by Tsikhanouskaya eventually failed, and the protests fizzled out almost immediately after that.

Summing up, despite the striking imagery and thousands of protesters, Belarusian protests failed in the short term. The protesters were unwilling to use violence; they lacked leaders and organisation, making it hard for them to reach across class boundaries. The massive state apparatus was able to overwhelm Belarusians with a great deal of help from the Kremlin. The Belarusian strongman learnt from watching post-Soviet space and ensured that power remained in his grasp.

A similar scenario seems to have played out in Hong Kong and Moscow —the authoritarian leviathan put down a largely nonviolent protest that attracted plenty of western attention. The tendency in its variations is seen all around the world, from Minsk to Myanmar.

Part II: Real hopes

At first glance, the situation might seem hopeless. The promises of non-violent revolutions lie unfulfilled; authoritarians all over the world learn and consolidate.

However, there is power in non-violent movements, and the truth of the matter is that they work in tectonic ways, often invisible in the short term.

The key obstacle on the path of democratising change in dictatorships is often not secret police or propaganda. It is atomisation and apathy within society itself.

The problem is well known by both activists and dictators. Liberal opposition in Russia routinely bemoans atomisation and apathy on the part of average Russians.²⁵ According to a Harvard University study, Chinese censors would often target any groups on the internet that show large numbers of citizens self-organising — even when these groups are pro-Beijing.²⁶

Peaceful protest movements don't necessarily result in a Delacroixean dethroning of *anciens régimes*. However, they serve as a pinnacle and a catalyst of the de-atomisation of societies. In Belarus, protest groups formed through neighbourhoods and districts. When the gargantuan marches ended by nightfall, people would gather in their urban neighborhoods. They would befriend each other, exchange experiences and agendas.

Artyom Shraibman, the exiled political analyst, said about de-atomisation: "it started with COVID... the state failures prompted volunteer groups to gather together, and later

²⁵ "Why the prevailing doom and gloom view of Russia is wrong," [cited 2021]. Available from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/15/why-the-prevailing-doom-and-gloom-view-of-russia-is-wrong>.

²⁶ ZEYNEP TUFEKCI, *TWITTER AND TEAR GAS: the power and fragility of networked protest*. (S.I.: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021)

these volunteer groups became a driving force behind the protests. The neighborhoods were really brought together by the protests.”



Masked Lukashenka's men invaded a nighttime neighbourhood vigil. . Minsk, September 12, 2020

Similarly, in Russia, the massive Navalnyst protests saw hundreds of activists packed in jails. These jails became a place of networking and socialising. Some activists even

exchanged love notes in a system that was dubbed “prison tinder.”²⁷ The examples of protests bringing people together could fill an entire book.

The peaceful protests are a potent mechanism of de-atomisation and of teaching democracy. Through de-atomisation, activists have a chance to learn to engage in direct democracy and make their voices heard as a collective. Ivan, the Minsk medical student, told me that the first days of the protests felt like euphoria: “we were walking around, completely dumbfounded by this amazing sense of freedom, understanding that we can just walk out was magical.”

As at nearly any mass protest, there sprang up spontaneous teach-ins, discussions, lectures, and debates during Minsk demonstrations. For many in authoritarian regimes, this sense of freedom of expression in itself is a novelty. Mass peaceful protests then provide a space where democracy can be learned and tried by those who have never experienced it. And the peaceful aspect is important because it makes people feel safe, allowing people of all genders and ages to participate — when violent protests are often limited to young men who are, on average, more physically able than other demographics.

Non-violence builds a strong and lasting moral legacy that becomes enshrined in the national spirit, even crossing national boundaries. Many Belarusian protesters

²⁷ "«Вышла из полиции улыбаясь»: Люди о приятных знакомствах при задержании," 2021-04-21T14:42:56+0300 [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/good-question/256213-my-poznakomilis-na-aktsii-protesta](https://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/good-question/256213-my-poznakomilis-na-aktsii-protesta).

recounted to me the singing revolutions of the fall of the USSR. Katya, the LGBTQ+ activist, mentioned that she is inspired by the Polish *Solidarność* movement that worked for many years prior to Polish independence.

The key of the non-violent protest is to “give people energy,” as Franak Viachorka argued to me. Viachorka said that the protests were “charging people with energy. While in most protests people exert energy, in ours they would come to receive energy, to charge up.” This is the nature of Viachorka’s — and by extension Tsikhanouskaya’s — approach. Instead of focusing on the hard power of barricades and bullets, Belarusian opinion leaders focused on the power of emotions, honour, and other non-tangibles. While this approach might be seen as naive by many, it is important to see how much of a legacy and ideational change it is able to create. And indeed, looking at the “hollowness” of some aforementioned protest movements, it becomes clear why such an emphasis on ideology and legacy is important.

Belarusians today are not the apathetic nation they used to be. Many, especially the youth, are now politically aware, active and see themselves as carriers of a democratic European identity. This can be seen solely through how many young Belarusians are now seeking to move to or study in the EU.²⁸ As Viachorka says, the fledgling Belarusian identity is clearly “democratic, peaceful and European.” A Belarusian exodus to the EU might not be to the liking of those who would want to see a picturesque

²⁸ "EU4Belarus - new EU scholarship for students from Belarus – Education – Careers in Poland," [cited 2021]. Available from [https:// www.careersinpoland.com/article/education/eu4belarus-new-eu-scholarship-for-students-from-belarus](https://www.careersinpoland.com/article/education/eu4belarus-new-eu-scholarship-for-students-from-belarus).

revolution in Minsk. But this exodus means that the future of young Belarusians is in a European democracy. Even if they don't immediately attain that future in Belarus, they will do so elsewhere. Which means that the lesson of democracy that the 2020 protests provided was taken to heart.



Protest in Minsk, September 12, 2020

Summing up, contemporary nonviolent protests do not often yield immediate gratification. However, they provide a foundation, an experience of democracy and freedom that can be carried through for decades. They create a legacy. And in this sense, nonviolence is an ultimate sacrifice — for the dictator that is not overthrown today will torture and slaughter his people for years. Shraibman is pessimistic on the

speed of the possible democratisation in Belarus saying that it would take “another ten, twenty years.”

Countless lives would be broken, no matter how powerful of a legacy the Belarusian protests of 2020 left. Activists are still tortured today within Belarus and also hunted down and killed abroad. It remains up to those who survive in the diaspora and sympathisers to make this sacrifice worthwhile.

Part VI: Who is to Blame and What is to be Done?

If NGOs or governments want to help anti-authoritarian movements, they should not aim at the flashy protests and should not despair when these protests “fail.” Instead, they should invest in long-term infrastructures geared for multi-year and even multi-decade operations. Many Belarusian activists realise that. They are now concentrated not on the immediate gratification of mass protests but on building and sustaining long term structures such as the Coordinating Council and Belaruski Dom.

Another critical realisation that must come from the contemporary pro-democracy protests from Egypt to Belarus is the importance of grassroots organising. The leaderlessness does create its unique problems, but in a way it makes a better protest, more in touch with the people on the ground — because the people on the ground are the leaders. This sort of horizontal technique has long been hailed and deliberately adopted by groups like Antifascist Action. It may very well be that the age of great

leaders is gone, and the age of great masses is afoot: it is the masses that enact revolutions, and with the modern social media tools, they have the ability to mobilise and organise horizontally.

An example of a successful long-term grassroots organisation would be Serbian *Otpor*. The *Otpor* served as a modular organisation for groups all around the post-Soviet space, even helping create Belarusian *Zubr*.²⁹ Journalists, NGOs and academia often ignore their work —Belarus, for instance, was almost a *terra incógnita* for many pro-democracy groups in the west before the 2020 protests kicked in. The work of *Otpor*-esque groups is long, gruelling, and it rarely makes headlines —but they are the hegemons of a profound political change, fighting atomisation, raising political awareness, building crucial networks.

When I asked both Shraibman and Viachorka about what the institutions of democratic Europe can do to promote freedom and democracy in Belarus, they added a couple more points. Both highlighted the importance of making it costly for the Kremlin to support Minsk, most effectively through sanctions. They also pointed out that the EU should encourage an elite split within the Belarusian *nomenklatura*, perhaps through a promise of aid packages.

Summing up, the policy recommendations are fairly straightforward. Pro-democracy organisations and media in the EU and elsewhere should aim at supporting long-term

organisations rather than react to picturesque protests. They should be proactive rather than reactive. They should also concentrate on driving a wedge between dictators and their cronies as well as on creating a disincentive for international authoritarian cooperation.

Conclusion

The recent years are full of great hopes and significant failures. In Moscow, Minsk, Myanmar, and Hong Kong; non-violent protests are put down, and authoritarians keep learning new tricks and banding together. However, the glimmer of hope is nevertheless shining. The example of Belarusian resilience shows that non-violent movements should not be discarded —instead, they should be reassessed and reoriented towards long-term goals. This reorientation is already happening in the Belarusian diaspora and even on the ground in Belarus. As long as the activists do their gruelling work, Belarus will live. And the impulse to do this work is still there, even within Belarus. As Ivan, the medical student, put it to me: “Who could —ran... But I can’t emigrate, even though I have Polish roots. I love my hometown, and I love my people. I want to give back to the community. I grew up here. I want to be a part of a democratic Belarus. I at least don’t want to be a asshole.”



Minsk, September 13, 2020

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