

Fatigued Authoritarianism in Belarus?

Written by Stephen G F Hall

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STEPHEN G F HALL, OCT 4 2020

Another election year in Belarus results in another fraudulent election. The victory of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was assured before the election happened. Since 1994 any alternative has been jailed, exiled or even disappeared, and the regime has dealt with any threats brutally. The limited protests that occurred after presidential elections returned Lukashenka to another five years in power in 2006 and 2010 were met with savage repression from the authorities. In the build-up to elections on 9th August 2020 the authorities denied registration to alternative candidates, and when this was not sufficient enough some contenders jailed. The authorities published absurd electoral results which gave Lukashenka 80.1%. If Lukashenka had “won” with 60% then the protests that have rocked Belarus since early August would not have been so large or state-wide. Instead the regime went for its usual tactic of overwhelming force and a large vote result for Lukashenka.

However, the authorities miscalculated and have not recognised that Belarus has undergone societal change which no longer accepts mass electoral fraud. The option of a victory at a reduced tally was not considered by the authorities. Lukashenka himself insisted that the electoral victory had to be unequivocal, hence the 80.1% of the vote. As self-confessed “father of the nation,” Lukashenka cannot countenance even a large minority of voters not electing him. This highlights the contention here that the regime has lost its adaptability and is a tired shell.

In the early 2000s there was a contention by Vitali Silitski that the Belarusian regime was effective in its pre-emptive authoritarianism, reacting to situations and adapting where necessary. Belarus was a testing-ground for the development of effective authoritarian consolidation tools, helping other post-Soviet regimes develop best practices to counter the Colour Revolutions of the 2000s.

Yet, there has been a change in how the Belarusian regime operates since 2015, brought on by regime longevity and the leader in the ivory tower syndrome, out of touch with the population. Why else would the government announce a tax on the unemployed – which fined those who had not paid income tax for 183 days in 2017? Dubbed the Social Parasite Law the idea of solving an economic recession by taxing the unemployed led to mass demonstrations across Belarus.

In the 2000s the authorities developed polling capacities through the presidential administration which gave information on public attitudes, thereby allowing the presidential administration to head off issues that could lead to protests. However, since the 2017 social parasite law the regime appears to be unable to gauge public opinion as effectively as it used to do.

This is because the regime is fatigued. Having been in power 26 years Lukashenka has become increasingly isolated. Key allies, like Viktor Sheiman and Natallya Pyatkevich have increasingly kept information from Lukashenka, and the security services are the body that Lukashenka listens to for Belarus’s economic policy. For over two decades Lukashenka was widely known for his almost mythical capacity to know what the average Belarusian wanted. Now no longer it seems.

The information gap between society and the higher echelons of the regime seems to have become acute. In a personalist regime, like Belarus, the system cannot function without the leader’s diktat. Yet, increasingly it appears that Lukashenka has lost his touch, or that his close entourage are stopping information reaching the only person

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who can change the current trajectory to the previous course of adaptive authoritarianism.

There are other factors to the fatigued authoritarianism in Belarus. Firstly the populace has changed whereas Lukashenka has stayed the same. The electorate that voted for Lukashenka in 1994 is now old and been replaced by a younger generation who have only known Lukashenka and increasingly see him as the problem. Lukashenka has also aged and not adapted to this societal change. The leader is out of touch and society has changed and is less willing to accept a patrician father as epitomised by Lukashenka. This incapacity has resulted in a regime that is becoming increasingly ossified.

Since the Euromaidan in the post-Soviet region protests have become increasingly leaderless. This was the case in 2017 and again in 2020. While Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya was the opposition figurehead at the 2020 presidential elections, she and the other members of the opposition Coordination Council are not leading the protests. Civil society has developed in Belarus as the regime has calcified, meaning that the authorities have less capacity to deal with the situation other than through repression. The protests are not exactly leaderless, but they rely on the encrypted Telegram messaging app to send information about protests. This makes it much harder for the authorities to stop demonstrations and arrest leaders, as those that organise the protests are hidden behind encryption. In the past the regime merely arrested opposition leaders and this often decapitated nascent protests. However, this tactic is not viable in 2020.

The Russia factor is also crucial for the increasingly fatigued authoritarianism in Belarus. With the annexation of Crimea and Russia's proxy conflict in the Donbas, the Belarusian authorities have feared a Russian incursion in Belarus. This has resulted in a weakening of the relationship between both regimes and increasing limitations on monetary flows from Moscow to Minsk. Although the Russian authorities offered the Belarusian regime a loan of \$1.5 billion in late September, the Belarusian economy needs at least \$5 billion. Very little of the loan will reach Belarus, as the Belarusian authorities owe various Russian state companies \$1.3 billion payable by the end of 2020.

Without Russian money, the Belarusian regime has less capacity to co-opt existing and new supporters by raising state pensions and the wages of state employees. This situation has become acute and unable to use money to co-opt or legitimise the limited financial flows are spent on the security forces. This results in a spiral. Protests lead to repression, which results in further and greater protests. Subtlety has never been the Belarusian regime's speciality, but with limited money coercion has again become the fall back option.

While there are other factors to why the Belarusian regime is currently flailing, the growing fatigue that now pervades the regime, resulting from a situation where the higher echelons are increasingly out of touch, has led to the inability of the authorities to adapt. The failure, or unwillingness, to adjust will result in the regime becoming increasingly illegitimate and reliant on force to keep power.

Having resorted to violence the authorities have thrown everything at the peaceful protesters. This has emphasised to most Belarusians that the regime has no legitimacy. Therefore, it is increasingly unlikely that the authorities can bring in Belarusians willing to work in the state bureaucracy. This will result in people who wanted to modernise Belarus without radical change either not joining the state, or even more likely, leaving Belarus. Therefore, the authorities will become increasingly intransigent and not countenancing change which will reduce an already limited legitimacy.

Lukashenka will survive, he has long been adept at this and too many have predicated the demise of both Lukashenka and the Belarusian economy before. However, the seeming fatigue that has been a part of the regime since 2017 will result in stagnation as Lukashenka and his inner-circle hold onto power at all costs. How this will turn out remains an open question, but for now it appears that the authorities have turned from adaptive to fatigued authoritarianism.

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