

Interview – Katsiaryna Shmatsina

Written by E-International Relations

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Katsiaryna Shmatsina is a Research Fellow at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, where she focuses on Belarus' foreign policy, regional security, and the impact of great power relations on small actors. Katsiaryna is also a Rethink.CEE Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the U.S., where she researches the intersection of digital technological rivalry and geopolitics. Previously, Katsiaryna worked at the American Bar Association where she managed the democratic-governance and rule-of-law projects. Katsiaryna has published her analysis on the post-election crisis in Belarus, the importance of the US elections for Belarus and on Belarus' participation in the EU Eastern Partnership Program. Find Katsiaryna on Twitter @kshmatsina.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There is a topic I consider timeless: great power relations. Whether we talk about the current U.S.-China-Russia triangle, Cold War rivalry, or turn to the lessons drawn from the “Thucydides trap,” relations between major powers shape the world order and force smaller actors to adjust. This notion sounds obvious, yet it is not uncommon that political analysts focus too narrowly on bilateral relations of their respective countries and regional issues, withholding attention from the greater picture. To have a better understanding of where our world might be heading, I find it useful to look at the Pentagon war games scenarios over Taiwan or other projections of escalation over small states, like the ones presented in Michael O’Hanlon’s *The Senkaku Paradox*. In a similar vein, I find it fascinating how rivalries find their way into the digital domain. Whoever wins the digital technological competition will shape our century.

Another debate that I follow is the future of the world order and the exchange of arguments between the proponents of liberal internationalism and those who hold more critical views from a realist perspective. The assessment that I find most appealing is John Mearsheimer’s projection of two separate “bounded” orders led by the U.S. and China, and the idea that the liberal international order requires unipolarity.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My understanding of world of politics is not set in stone, as I discover new angles all the time. As a law student at a Belarusian university, I heard a lot of state propaganda that praised the Lukashenko regime and condemned political opposition. At the same time, I volunteered in human rights NGOs that draw attention to the lack of democratic freedoms in the country. As a young professional, I worked with UN agencies and foundations that supported good governance projects globally, where I received an insight into how the international development field functions. Later, I made the transition into the world of think tanks and discovered a gap between the policy recommendations and the interests of the decision-makers. Having consulted political parties, I saw how decisions were made and later presented to the public, and how political commentators made educated guesses yet were mistaken, not knowing the full picture. The scale of repression in my home country in the current political crisis revives parallels with the times of Stalin. Now I can better understand the stories of my great grandparents, who stored a suitcase with basic necessities under their bed in case of being arrested at night. At the same time, the ongoing fight for freedom in Belarus gives us hope that Belarus will make a democratic transition that is long overdue.

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What are the key factors behind current protests against the Lukashenko government?

The pushback against the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko is not new. In 1996-1997, there were major “Minsk spring” protests against the unconstitutional referendum that allowed Lukashenko to consolidate power and to sign integration agreements with Russia. In the following years, Lukashenko sent his political opponents to jail, including potential contenders who could challenge him at the elections. In 1999, several forced disappearances took place: the former Minister of Interior Yury Zakharenka, Viktor Gonchar, the former head of the Central Election Commission, and Anatoly Krassovsky, a businessman who supported the opposition, were kidnapped. Years later, evidence of their murders appeared along with a claim that orders came from high-ranking officials. All three were strong critics of Lukashenko’s authoritarian tendencies.

In subsequent years, the opposition was expelled from parliament. The parliament turned into a rubber stamp institution, and Lukashenko eventually conducted a referendum which allowed him to run for president without any limitation of terms. Since 1994, no other presidential elections were recognized by the OSCE as free and fair. There were several major protests after the elections in 2006 and 2010 when several thousand Belarusians gathered on the streets to object to the rigged elections and to demand new elections without Lukashenko. In both cases, the demonstrations were violently dispersed by riot police, and hundreds of activists were detained. At that time, the brutal response of the authorities managed to curb the protest mood.

The incumbent’s decision to run for a sixth term came as no surprise this year. And there was little surprise regarding the repression that started during the electoral campaign. Major frontrunners were removed from the race, two of them imprisoned, one forced to leave the country. Sporadic gatherings on the streets in support of the imprisoned candidates were dispersed by riot police. On August 9, Belarusians took to the streets to express distrust in the election results – again, as usual, the vote count was not transparent, observers were removed from polling stations, and recordings appeared showing intimidation of members of the electoral commission to report the vote count in favor of Lukashenko.

If you read the news reports about major events in Belarusian politics over the past 26 years and compare them with the current crisis, you will have a strong sense of *déjà vu* – the same reports about fraudulent elections, harassment of the opposition, and independent media. What is different this time is that it seems that peoples’ patience has come to an end and that repression is no longer stopping Belarusians from fighting for democratic change.

The events in summer 2020, when the police brutally attacked protestors, seemed like a turning point. On August 10, police shot a clearly unarmed protester, Aliaksandr Taraikovsky. In the coming days, heartbreaking news about two other demonstrators who died from police violence was released, along with the news of several suspicious deaths. These suspicious deaths were demonstrators who were found in public spaces and whose deaths were reported by police as suicide or heart attacks. For example, the body of Konstantin Shishmakov, a museum director and a member of the electoral commission, was found near the river, several days after he refused to sign fraudulent protocols at the polling station. Hundreds of protesters were detained and put under administrative arrest. They were held in unbearable conditions and denied food and water, several detainees reported sexual assault, people were lying in their own blood and denied medical treatment. Some activists were intentionally beaten by the guards before their release from the detention centre to ensure that they were physically unable to take part in future protests. Such cruelty of the regime leads to the point of no return. The protest turned into something bigger than an objection to the vote count on election day – it became a struggle for human dignity.

How do current protests in Belarus compare to earlier protests in other post-Soviet states?

One can seek parallels with Ukraine’s Maidan or suggest lessons from the Armenian revolution. However, I would rather look at the end of the Soviet era and the fight for freedom in the Soviet republics. The Belarusian state under Lukashenko resembles the Soviet-style structure and political opposition exists in conditions similar to Soviet dissidents. We still have a KGB building in Minsk city centre where political prisoners are held. This place has remained a symbol of terror for almost a hundred years, while, for instance, Baltic states turned KGB buildings into museums and exposed the crimes of state terror. The Barricades in Latvia and the January Events in Lithuania in

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1991 paved the way to freedom and democracy at the high price of sacrificed lives. Similar processes are now taking place in my home country.

Do you envisage the protests and pro-democracy movement in Belarus gaining any ground?

The protests started in the summer of 2020 and continue to this day, despite over 30,000 detentions, 1,000 testimonies of torture victims, and 228 political prisoners. Street gatherings might not be numerous in the winter months, yet they persist. People create grassroots initiatives in their neighborhoods and participate in solidarity campaigns, helping the victims of repression to pay fines and provide other forms of material and moral support to each other. This happens with the horrifying background of state repression when any civil initiative is under attack. Literally every day there is news about new arrests. The most recent example is the interrogation of lawyers from the Office of the Rights of People with Disabilities, who faced prosecution for their human rights work. What is more, there are troublesome leaks of conversations by state officials discussing the creation of a special camp to isolate the protesters. In such an environment, any protest activity requires exceptional courage and dedication, which many Belarusians demonstrate. Lukashenko and his cronies heavily rely on the administrative resources and repression to preserve the status quo, and one should not expect a quick change overnight, as long as they have not exhausted those resources. Yet, the change in public perception is irreversible. In the past months, Belarusians realized that those who stand for a democratic change are the majority in the country. In the longer run, this makes the authoritarian system unviable.

To what extent do foreign states and actors influence Belarusian foreign policy? What are the most significant foreign influences?

The existence of the Lukashenko regime is possible due to political and economic support from Russia. Such support comes, of course, with an attached condition of loyalty, which keeps Belarus in Moscow's orbit. In the current crisis, the Kremlin rhetorically supports Lukashenko's government, yet there are informal talks about the consolidation of pro-Russian forces in Belarus and the creation of a pro-Russian political party. There is fatigue in Moscow with regards to Lukashenko, and the turbulence in Minsk could present a good time to seek his replacement. At the same time, the unraveling protests in Russia complicate the situation for Belarus. The more tensions there are between Moscow and the West, the less likely it is that Putin agrees to some form of mediation for Belarus under the auspices of the OSCE – a scenario that has been advocated by Belarusian democratic forces along with their supporters in Brussels and Washington.

What direction do you see Belarusian foreign policy taking? Will Belarus continue to be a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or do you foresee a pivot toward NATO?

The direction of Belarusian foreign policy depends on who has a chance to formulate it. Currently, the Lukashenko government finds itself in isolation, having entered another cycle of distancing from the West due to mass human rights violations. If Lukashenko manages to preserve a grip on power, Belarus will follow a familiar pattern that occurred over the last 26 years of his presidency: falling into excessive dependence on Russia, agreeing to deeper integration into Russia-led Eurasian integration structures, including the CSTO, and seeking to diversify its foreign policy options by turning to China. Over time, another sporadic wave of “normalization” of relations with the West could occur, when sanctions are lifted, and high-level contacts are restored – until the next major protest and subsequent repressions.

Should a democratic transition occur, an optimal formula for Belarusian foreign policy would entail neutrality and a balanced stance between the West and East. Belarus' democratic leaders cautiously formulate their future foreign policy priorities, emphasizing the importance of preserving good relations with Russia, bearing in mind that any miscalculation could trigger Russian aggression to which, regrettably, we are vulnerable and unprotected.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Build a personal brand and promote your public visibility. Your visibility corresponds to how much weight your opinion

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has in the eyes of the public if you are invited to a debate or a policy discussion. You might be a brilliant researcher, yet if you only sit in the library and hesitate to speak up about yourself, you could be overshadowed by a commentator who produces quick and possibly less thoughtful analyses on social media. The balance I aim for is to merge policy-relevant research and personal promotion.