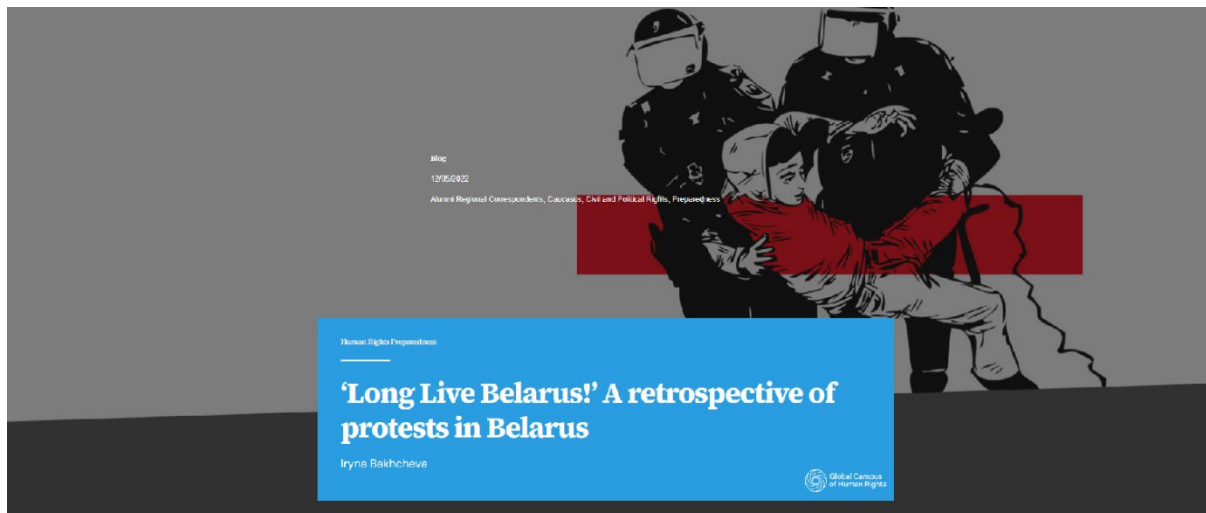




'Long Live Belarus!' A retrospective of protests in Belarus

Iryna Bakhcheva

Abstract: On February 24, 2022, I woke up in a new reality. My morning began before dawn with phone calls, messages and emails from family, colleagues and friends telling me that Russia had attacked Ukraine, with tanks entering from the territory of Belarus.

News channels and international media had been talking about the military threat to Ukraine from Russia since late 2021, the embassies in Kyiv had been empty for at least two weeks prior to 24 February 2022 and one could hardly see a foreigner across Ukrainian cities and towns due to persistent recommendations of Western governments to leave Ukraine ASAP. Yet the 24 February news about Russian tanks on Ukrainian soil seemed surreal. Just as surreal was the news that Russian tanks had entered from the territory of Belarus.

In what follows I propose a retrospective view on the protest movement in Belarus in summer 2020. Of course, it was not the first attempt of Belarussian people to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo in their country and hold fair elections that would turn their country towards more democratic development. These protests, however, were the largest by far. And although the protests did not lead to the overthrow of the self-elected president, it was a point of awakening and activation of the country's civil society.

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Understanding context

In 2020, more than a million Belarusians took to the streets to protest against its dictatorial regime. State forces clamped down violently and oppression continues. Revolutionary spirit lives on but dedicated national and international activism is necessary to achieve democracy.

In the summer of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, a very different story from the small Eastern European state of Belarus dominated the international media for months. Mass protests swept the country, which has a population of fewer than 10m, after Alexander Lukashenko was re-elected as a president in an apparent landslide victory.

Official [exit polls](#) on 9 August 2020 claimed that Lukashenko had received a generous 80 per cent of votes in contrast to opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's measly seven per cent. However, online surveys showed only three per cent of voters supported the long-term incumbent president.

Lukashenko has been president since the post was established in 1994, three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of Belarusian independence. Many times during his 26-year political career, his opponents have been 'dealt with' in various ways so that he remained in power. In 1999, ex-head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Yuri Zakharenko, ex-chairman of the Central Election Commission Viktor Gonchar and pro-opposition

businessman Anatoly Krasovsky [disappeared without a trace](#). In 2020, several opposition candidates were jailed under the pretext of preventing political instability. For example, Sergei Tsikhanousky was detained in late May 2020 during sanctioned protests, accused of violence against police officers and planning mass riots. Another potential political challenger, former banker Viktor Babariko, was unexpectedly accused of financial crimes in June 2020 after openly criticising Lukashenko's leadership and recently jailed for 14 years.

But as Lukashenko's sixth term in office began, an unprecedented wave of public demonstrations swept the country. In the capital (Minsk) alone, around 300,000 people gathered on Sundays in late summer to demonstrate their disapproval of the official election result.

The protest movement spread to the cities of Lida, Baranovichi, Brest, Grodno, Zhodino, Zhlobin, Pinsk and Kobrin, with the crisis peaking on 16 August 2020, National March for Freedom Day. An estimated total of [one million people](#) took to the streets in various Belarusian cities, with 500,000 people congregating at Minsk's centrally-located Hero City Stele monument.



Minsk protests 16 August 2020. A protester holds a poster which reads 'Go away!' Source of photo: Карнавал свободы по всей Беларуси - Хартия'97: Новости Беларуси - Белорусские новости - Новости Белоруссии - Республика Беларусь - Минск (charter97.org)

Brutal police suppression: thousands arrested

Peaceful protest is a fundamental human right, guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights ([ECHR](#)) Articles 10 and 11 and reflected in the Belarusian constitution. This, however, was not the case in Belarus.

On 9 August 2020, Lukashenko vowed that the protests would not pick up steam but by the end of the month an open confrontation began between the people and the president. A good example of Lukashenko's position was his birthday photos outside the Palace of Independence with a Kalashnikov in his hands that were all over the media in late August. During that month, around 10,000 Belarussians were detained, arrested, jailed or disappeared without a trace. Several different sources claimed that detainees were beaten and held in inhumane conditions with no medical care.

More than one year later, many are still in jail, serving sentences for extremist activities though their trials were far from transparent. A defining feature of these protests was the violence of the notorious special police department, OMON, whose officers dispersed the protesters with light and noise grenades, rubber bullets and water cannons. This led to five deaths, including that of [Roman Bondarenko](#), beaten to death in his neighbourhood in November 2020.

Another noteworthy factor was the sudden change in Lukashenko's rhetoric regarding COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Belarusian president denied the threat, deriding global restrictions and lockdowns as mass psychosis that the Belarus republic had allegedly managed to avoid.

However, as the protests accelerated, he started blaming demonstrators for spreading COVID-19 throughout the country. In some [interviews](#), he professed 'concern' for vulnerable persons, cautioning them to stay away from the protests. He claimed that the elderly were his priority and if they were not protected then Belarus would suffer a much higher infection rate than surrounding countries.

This, however, did not stop the Lukashenko-controlled special police forces using violence against all groups of the population, including the elderly.



Great grandmother [Nina Baginskaya](#) (73) became an icon of 2020 protests in Belarus. She started participating in political protests in 1988 and has been detained many times. A video where she insisted 'I'm Going For a Walk' when challenged by police went viral.

Lukashenko seeks Putin's aid after West imposes sanctions

After his presidential opponent Tsikhanouskaya fled to Lithuania, Lukashenko felt confident enough to hold an official inauguration on 23 September 2020, though he conducted it in secret without inviting foreign heads of state. The Western world refuses to recognise his presidency: the UK, Canada and the Baltic states were the first countries to impose sanctions on Lukashenko and other officials involved in the alleged rigging of the Belarusian presidential election and the brutal crackdown on protestors. The EU and US also later imposed sanctions. Faced with isolation from Western democracies, Lukashenko turned to Russian president Vladimir Putin, whose financial and political support have helped him to stay afloat. Over the past two years, the Belarusian leader has made frequent visits to Putin, to discuss measures to counter '[attempts by the West to undermine the situation in Belarus](#)', warning that if Belarus failed to quell the protests, Russia would be the next.

Dedicated activism key to overcoming ongoing oppression

August 2021 saw the first anniversary of the protests in Belarus and the situation over the year has deteriorated. Belarus is rated as authoritarian, with a score of just 11 out of 100 in [Freedom House's annual assessment](#) of different countries' political rights and civil liberties worldwide. As of April 2022 Belarus got even a lower mark—just 8 out of 100 for political and civil freedoms. [Yuri Svirko](#), a Belarusian political expert and a journalist writes:

There are more than 600 political prisoners in Belarus. And Belarusians are very intimidated. After all, many were injured and fined for nothing, for example, for white and red [the colours of the alternative Belarus flag, symbol of the protest movement] socks or panties hung on someone's balcony. In the latest horrific incident, someone was arrested and held for 15 days for hanging white sheets on a balcony and fined by a court for expressing political opposition.

The repression of civil and political rights continues with country-wide raids and arrests of non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists and remaining independent journalists.

The recent case of Belarusian sprinter [Krystsina Tsimanouskaya](#) who sought asylum in Poland, shows that the Lukashenko regime has no intention of loosening the thumb screws it has put on the nation. Tsimanouskaya claimed that Belarus officials forced her to withdraw from the Tokyo Olympics just before they began, due to her criticism of them on social media for registering her for 4x400-metre relay without telling her.

No matter how hopeless the situation in Belarus may seem at the moment, there appears to be optimism that the dictatorship will not last forever. It needs to be remembered that August 2020 marked a new stage in the development of Belarusian civil society, with citizens daring to protest and show their disagreement with Lukashenko's seizure of power.

The key strength of Belarus is its people who wish to see their country enjoying a democratic future, where elections are fair, political opponents are not repressed and citizens feel safe and free to enjoy their fundamental political and civil freedoms. Achieving this future will take time and requires dedicated national activists and international actors to work together to defeat the Lukashenko regime. Another revolution may even be required before Belarus steps into a more autonomous era.

Note on the title of the blogpost:

'Long Live Belarus!' (in [Belarusian](#): Жыве Беларусь! *Žyvie Bielaruś!*) is a [patriotic](#) motto used by opposition activists. It was the motto of 2020 protests in Minsk and other Belarussian cities and towns. Its origins lie in XIX century protests and it appeared in writing in Janka Kupala's patriotic poem in 1906-1907. Currently, use of this motto carries the risk of arrest and prison time.