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ANU Centre for European Studies Briefing Paper Series

Belarus, Russia and NATO: Bringing Russia to NATO's eastern flank

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**Vol.12 no.3 (July 2021)
ISSN 1838-0379**

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Belarus, Russia and NATO: Bringing Russia to NATO's eastern flank

In August 2020, Alexander Lukashenka, the long-standing president of Belarus, lost the election to Svyatlana Tsikhanouska, the wife of a presidential candidate who had been jailed for satirical attacks on the incumbent. Despite this, Lukashenka claimed victory. Huge crowds turned out in Minsk and other cities to demand that the falsified result be set aside. Lukashenka and his regime brutally suppressed these protests but demands for his removal remain.

On 23 May 2021, a Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius was forced to land in Minsk whereupon one of the passengers, Raman Pratasevich, was arrested. The incident caused international outrage being referred to as an 'attack on democracy' and an 'international scandal.' The EU closed its airspace and airports to Belarusian airlines, and assured Belarusians that they would not be 'left alone.' Numerous protests in neighbouring countries have followed, calling on the EU to impose firmer sanctions on the Lukashenka regime. Whether the Western response is adequate is debatable, especially since Lukashenka abandoned his semi-independence from Putin's regime. This was a great boon for the Kremlin now granted open slather for its military in Belarus, presenting a new threat to the eastern flank of NATO, and the northern border of Ukraine.

On 16 June 2021, the ANU Centre for European Studies hosted a seminar on the implications of recent events in Belarus. The panellists – Dr Elena Govor, Dr John Besemeres, Associate Professor Matthew Sussex, and Mr Kyle Wilson – shared their insights into the situation in Belarus, discussed the adequacy of the response from the international community and considered the security implications for NATO and Ukraine.

This Briefing Paper brings together some of the presentations that were delivered during the seminar. Matthew Sussex's commentary "Return to Empire: Belarus surrenders its sovereignty" was first published by Griffith Asia Institute in its blog *Asia Insights* on 4 June 2021, and it is republished here with GAI permission. Katarzyna Williams' commentary "The Belarus-EU Migrant Crisis" was first published by the Australian Institute of International Affairs in *Australian Outlook* on 8 October 2021.

Belarus: History and Identity

Elena Govor

I am Byelorussian, as we would earlier say, or Belarusian, which is the new way to refer to the people of Belarus. For years, when people hearing my accent would ask 'Where are you from?', I had to explain that Belarus is a place between Poland and Russia, and I felt somehow ashamed that this was some sort of in-the-middle place with no identity of its own. Since 2020 it is no more, Belarus came to the forefront of the world's attention, adding a new page to the region's history of peaceful resistance to dictatorship, development of civil society and regeneration of national identity.

Over the last half millennium, this region, situated at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe, has changed hands many times; with each transition the identity of Belarusians - a Slavonic peoples distinct from modern day Russians and Ukrainians - has been forced to adapt to a new form. At the end of the 18th century the land of Belarus was occupied by the Russian Empire, which imposed its own language and religion. The Belarusian language and the word Belarusian itself were prohibited. Between the First & the Second World Wars the territory of Belarus was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union. During the Second world war the country's population was decimated, with each fourth person losing their life. After the war the territory of the modern state became one of the republics of the Soviet Union. The industrialised rebuilding of Belarus by the Soviet Union coincided with some political liberalisation in the late 1950s-1960s, and broadly speaking 'modernity'. When people moved from the villages to the newly rebuilt cities they shook off their village ways, language and religion and embraced modernity in the form of Soviet culture and Russian language.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a brief national revival in the early 1990s, while Lukashenko, democratically elected as president in 1994, encouraged the new country to become Europe's last island of Soviet-style stability. In a way this was a world of hobbits like in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, living in secure bubbles – home, family, friends, a basic salary or pension. And, most importantly, everyday life in this country, as it had been in the Soviet Union, was anchored not in liberalism and constitutional law, but in what is called *жить по понятиям*: 'to live according to unwritten rules'. I was taught by my grandmother, who survived 9 years of Stalin's prison camps, to 'Be like everyone else, to stay in your lane'. The situation in Belarus became especially harsh in the last fifteen years, as Lukashenko suppressed all opposition and began to kill off his political opponents.

The danger of COVID-19 during 2020 summer tipped the balance. People realised that their leader did not care about their wellbeing, and this emotional component triggered a political

avalanche. And here I need to mention that Lukashenko's nickname is Батька, a respectful Belarusian word for a strict but caring father. And this is not by chance. Belarusian society has long had a strong male dominating and patriarchal tendency. But the balance between Батька Лукашенко and Belarusian society began to look more and more like a situation of domestic violence. As we know, such situations can last for years, tying more and more strings around the abused which do not allow them to simply get up and go. There was nowhere to go!

But during the Covid disaster community self-organisation, mostly by women, awakened this society. Then followed Lukashenko's unscrupulous arrest of the potential male candidates for the elections, but here Lukashenko got into his own trap of male superiority: he did not deign to curb Svetlana Tikhanovskaia, the wife of opposition candidate and blogger Sergey Tikhanovsky. Moreover, he spoke about her in an intentionally dismissive way: 'What kind of debates could I have with a housewife! Her place is in the kitchen, frying blinys!' Had there been a PR agency behind Svetlana's electoral campaign, they could not have invented a better sequence of events for her ascendance. Svetlana joined forces with two other women representing the arrested or expelled competitors of her husband at the elections and gathered the support of thousands of people all over Belarus. People voted for her, the candidate without a political program, but with a simple promise of justice, and organising honest elections if she won. And she won!

The next mistake by Lukashenko was disproportionately rigging the election results, which was followed by several nights of unprecedented brutality towards the protesters and uninvolved passers-by, in which detained people were continuously beaten, tortured and even raped. And then women again came to the fore. On the fourth day, dressed in white, they lined the streets holding flowers. They did not speak about liberalism, feminism, geopolitics, the European Union, or higher wages. Their desires were about the restoration of human dignity and inner freedom, saying to the autocrat patriarch: 'I am not afraid of you anymore'. These manifestations became the tipping point - the beginning of a people's revolution.

In general, the protests in Minsk were dominated by people in their 20s and 30s, young professionals and by a growing number of students. They are versatile in the use of modern technology, able to communicate on messaging platforms such as Telegram even when Lukashenko turned off the country's Internet. For these reasons the protests' format seems to be horizontally distributed, similar to those in Hong Kong, when there is no single centre or leader. It has allowed for the rapid formation of grassroots social collectives, when people find comrades among neighbours, school parents, in working enterprises, or unite to provide practical help to the victims of arrests, to sew huge protest flags, or when business owners distribute flowers, food and water to the chains of protesting women. It may be too early to describe these activities as the formation of a mutual aid economy operating outside the state, but they have the hallmarks of such collectives.

In spite of the terror the protests often involved humour and jokes, music and songs. To give you the feeling of these protests, I want to say a few words about the symbolism of one of the protest songs, 'Walls'. It originates from Catalan song by Lluís Llach «L'Estaca», which in the 1978 was reworked by Polish poet Jacek Kaczmarski, and became the hymn of the Polish "Solidarność" liberation movement. In 2010, at the time of the previous mass protests in Belarus, Belarusian poet Andrei Khadanovich translated the Polish version into Belarusian. The hero of the Polish-Belarusian song, - an inspired young singer, - leads crowds to the squares, to destroy the prisons and topple the walls of the old world. The climax of the song comes when victory is close – thousands are ready to take power and declare "Those not with us are against us". But the singer keeps singing on his own, watching how the crowds picking up his song march to the fore, while the song fades down and the walls keep growing. Kaczmarski, who grew up in socialist Poland, knew very well how the revolution devours its children, destroys its own ideals, divides the world into right and left, and only a lone singer is able to preserve the purity of her original thoughts.

Sergey Tikhanovsky, the husband of Svetlana Tikhanovskaia, adjusting the song for his election rallies before his arrest, changed the philosophical end of this song to a more optimistic simplified appeal to make Belarus a country for life. Nevertheless the song was not ruined, thanks to the ingeniously simple line added by Khadanovich to the refrain: «Прагнеш свабоды — то бяры!» (If you want freedom, take it!) It expresses the very essence of the song - the freedom to choose freedom, the realization that the walls to be destroyed are in ourselves. We can listen to the song [here](#).

Chains of women in white with flowers in their hands, standing along the streets of Minsk in protest against the lawlessness of Батька, became a turning point in the Belarusian people's revolution. It was overcoming fear and inner liberation, the realization of unity and the birth of a new, free nation. It was on that day that the walls of the Soviet, authoritarian world collapsed. Political scientists and geopoliticians discussing the Belarusian protests criticize them for the lack of a program and leadership. But this, perhaps, was the essence of the Belarusian protest - a non-violent way to defeat untruth, to get rid of fear and take the honest path to the country of freedom. I recall here the classic lines of another bard, Bulat Okudzhava: «О, были б помыслы чисты! А остальное все приложится» "Oh, let our aspirations be pure, and the rest will come".

The last aspect that I want to discuss are issues of national identity. As I mentioned earlier, at the time of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union Belarusian language hardly was used in the cities at all. With language gone, the identity of 'Belarusian' had no readily recognised visual, material markers either. When my father studied Belarusian folk art in the 1970s it was considered a dead-end occupation. As protests expanded people felt the need for unifying symbols, restoring the use of a simple white-red-white flag which traces its history back to the medieval state of Belarus. The other intuitive symbol were the white clothes of women associated with the country's name, Bela, or 'white', Rus, and the white strips of

fabric which Svetlana Tikhanovskaia suggested to wear on the wrist to help with counting exit polls at the day of the elections. Two weeks later women's white dresses were supplemented with red colour as a scarf or decoration to match the colours of the white-red-white flag. A similar return is occurring with the Belarusian language. While most of the participants of rallies answer Belarussian correspondents in Russian, rallying chants often sound in Belarusian. Amazing protests songs also sound in Belarusian, unless it is Victor Tsoi's famous song 'Changes!' It seems Belarus has regained an almost lost national identity, and while at the core of this forming identity are freedom, humanity and dignity rather than nationalism, it is derived from deeply rooted national symbols.

My colleagues will speak about what has happened with Belarus during the following year of protests, political killings and total terror which culminated with the seizure of the Ryanair plane and Protasevich's interviews in the style of Stalin's show trials of 1937. I personally do not see this as a defeat, and want to believe that the world is mature enough to stop the domestic violence in our global home. Perhaps, the Belarusian revolution a year ago was a naïvely-emotional rather than a proper political revolution, but it makes me, a citizen of the world and a staunch anti-nationalist, to say for the first time: 'I am proud that I am Belarusian!'

Lukashenka Crushes his Creative Intelligentsia

John Besemeres

Lukashenka succeeded in establishing his autocracy in 1994, not long after the emergence of an independent Belarus following the meeting in the Belovezha Forest in December 1991 of Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk (Ukraine) and Stanislaw Shushkevich (Belarus). In the complex manoeuvring that followed, Lukashenko pursued authoritarian power with single-minded and ruthless determination, emerging in 1994 as the president of Belarus, with extensive powers.

Since 1994, Lukashenka has been the proverbial “last dictator of Europe”, and the regime which he established, complete with its own KGB, Investigative Committee, OMON special riot police and other loving replicas of Soviet institutions, has been the “last dictatorship of Europe”.

In the 26 years since then, up to the revolt of the urban intelligentsia against yet another falsified election result last August, Lukashenka had often deployed violent repressive measures, ‘disappearing’ some of his opponents, and jailing when expedient people who were aspiring to compete for the presidency. August 2020, however, was in its scale and viciousness clearly worse than any of the earlier crackdowns he had employed to ensure his re-election, including the 2010 election, where distinguished candidates were summarily arrested and jailed and crowds of protestors were bashed on the streets.

Despite the pro-Russian and hardline communist attitudes he brought to the politics of Belarus in the early 1990s, Lukashenka did not want to be a subordinate to Moscow, but rather an independent boss. Lukashenka agreed to the creation of a Union State between Russia and Belarus in 1999, but till recently has been at pains to avoid consummation of the deal. He does not want to be left a mere cypher on the political scene.

Even now, when he has become very dependent on the Kremlin for economic, political and security support, and has made many concessions to Moscow, he continues to try to stave off efforts by Putin to achieve a closer union of the two states.

Until last August, Lukashenka had gone to a lot of trouble to present himself as an independent voice on the international stage, offering Minsk as an ostensibly neutral setting for negotiations on international issues, for example on the war instigated by Putin in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. But now, Kyiv has declared it will no longer accept Minsk as an appropriate venue for such negotiations.

Lukashenka may hope that he can return to his erstwhile role as a neutral and independent broker in international affairs. But it's highly unlikely at this stage, with his domestic support and his international standing at unprecedentedly low levels, whether he can play any such role again, or indeed hold onto his precarious grasp of the presidency. Though he has survived the 2020-21 crisis for now by dint of violence, lies, massive repression, and Moscow's support, it would seem that Lukashenka has brought himself undone, and has little hope of recovering anything like his previous position.

So how and why was it that he came to undermine himself last August? He first became acutely aware of trouble brewing when a popular satirical blogger, Siarhei Tsikhanovski presented himself as a presidential candidate. The years leading up to 2020 had not been particularly prosperous in Belarus. But IT industries were flourishing, which brought a greater pungency to informal online political campaigning and commentary, of which Tsikhanovsky was a good example. His main political slogan was to 'stop the cockroach' (.ie. Lukashenka).

Making the jest more effective and more offensive, he would wield a slipper at his rallies as if smiting a cockroach. In response, the regime began to harass Siarhei with trumped up accusations, and after several such cases, his wife, Sviatlana, who had been campaigning in her husband's defence, agreed to take over from him as a presidential candidate. Lukashenka, dismissive of women, did not block the candidacy. It was a fatal omission on his part.

Meanwhile, the pandemic was wreaking many casualties in Belarus. Like other tyrants, e.g. Putin and Bolsonaro, or grotesquely vain insouciant like Trump, Luka viewed the health crisis as a mental health disorder, to which the strong like him were not susceptible, while the weak had it coming to them.

Two other candidates, Valer Tsapkala, another IT executive and an old colleague of Luka, and Viktor Babaryka, a businessman and art connoisseur, who was popular with the public and also had links with influential people in Moscow. Both were rejected on totally specious grounds, and in the latter case, punished severely into the bargain.

Meanwhile, repression of election activists increased sharply. By mid-July, over 700 people had been arrested, and there were already at least 25 established political prisoners.

Tsapkala's wife, Veranika, and Babaryka's campaign manager, Maryia Kalesnikava both joined Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya in the campaign to forestall another Lukashenka term in office. Luka found it very hard to cope with so many women performing as politicians, asserting that the Belarusian constitution was not appropriate for women, or 'girls' as he tended to call them. But the three charming, intelligent and energetic women ran a

compelling campaign, generating huge crowds and undermining the ratings of state TV, while various online sites supporting the opposition became immensely popular.

One in particular, 'Nexta', meaning 'someone' in Belarus, run by a skilful young Belarusian émigré based in Poland, accumulated 2.5 million subscribers, a world record, amounting to 30% of Belarus's entire population. That young man so enraged Lukashenka by his success and his elusiveness, that the dictator was later to hijack him by lying that a plane flying from Greece over Belarus to Vilnius in Lithuania, had to be diverted immediately under armed escort to Minsk, which was not on its agenda at all. The young man was wishing to visit the leader of the opposition Tsikhanovskaya, who had taken refuge in Vilnius after her family had been threatened.

Now that young man, Raman Paratsevich is regularly appearing with a brutalised and swollen face, half concealed by make-up, and making mechanical Stalinoid denunciations of himself for having undermined Belarus's proper order, for which he felt bitter regret, etc.

The response of the regime on election day itself had been to grotesquely and implausibly distort the real results. Various analysts made use of whatever more reliable data was available to make their own estimates. The official result had been posted as 80.1% for Luka and 10.1% for Tsikhanovskaya. The independent analysts found results for Tsikhanovskaya around 50% of the vote or higher. A Chatham House estimate based on online interviews gave Tsikhanovskaya 52%, and Lukashenka 20.6%, the rest nowhere, or against all, or refusing to answer. What all the analyses and analysts agreed on was that there had been prodigious fraud in the official conduct of the election and that the result Lukashenka had awarded himself had no legitimacy.

The first conspicuous contribution Moscow made to the situation came shortly after the election was declared, when many Belarusian media staff, disgusted by the mendacious 'result' and the brutal attacks on the protestors, chose to leave their careers and livelihoods behind. Moscow responded by sending a contingent of their own TV propagandists who simply walked into the vacated spots. There was no problem with language of course, and the newcomers were richly experienced in the arts of mendacious pseudo-reporting. Efforts were also made to block online support for the protestors, but again the widespread IT skills of the protestors continued to overcome such obstacles.

The first few days of the crackdown were ferocious. Nearly 7,000 people were detained in three days, and large numbers were hospitalised. Police brutality was clearly visible on many videos, and by 1 September there were 450 documented cases of torture. The first officially acknowledged case of a death came on the second day. Scores of people were not accounted for (Wilson p. 287), and some of them may have been fatalities.

As of now, over 30,000 people have been detained for some period of time, and increasingly, smaller numbers of people are being given jail sentences, in some cases lengthy, typically for having said something wrong or walking in a public place. Journalists as a profession are being all but wiped out, and defence lawyers are also under acute pressure.

As many would have seen in videos, the OMON riot police would hit people caught on or near the street (mistakes were common) and then belt them repeatedly on the head. A study conducted by intrepid hospital visitors about two months after the election found that over 230 people were suffering from severe concussion. The videos suggested that brain damage later could be expected to be extensive. But while the Lukashenka regime remains in power, any adequate assessment of all the harm the victims have sustained will remain problematical.

Turning away from the non-violent uprising of the Belarusian people and the ugly lies and brutality to which they were subjected, there are, unfortunately, more dismaying developments that emerge from Lukashenka's actions. Seeing that the survival of his regime and possibly of himself and his family (including his prospective successor) were under serious threat, Lukashenka decided to seek refuge in the welcoming arms of the Kremlin.

The quid pro quo for this insurance policy included acceptance of greater access for Putin's military in Belarus in the form of numerous joint exercises, something which Lukashenka had been reluctant to indulge more than sparingly up till then. This development fits in well with Putin's plans for larger exercises (this year, the quadrennial Zapad-2021, with Belarus, is set for September) and the major expansion of the Russian presence in Russia's Western Military District, currently in preparation. This development has been presented as a necessary response to NATO's threatening activities in its eastern flank, these of course, could not be linked to Putin's aggression against his Western neighbours or around the Black Sea, now rapidly becoming a private Russian lake.

Return to Empire: Belarus surrenders its sovereignty

Matthew Sussex

This commentary was first published by Griffith Asia Institute on 4 June 2021:

<https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/return-to-empire-belarus-surrenders-its-sovereignty/>

The decision by Alexander Lukashenka's autocratic government to force a Ryan Air passenger jet to land in Minsk – so that it could arrest Roman Pratasevic, the co-founder of the prominent NEXTA Telegram opposition group – showed just how committed the government in Belarus is to repressing dissent. But far from demonstrating Lukashenka's strength the episode instead highlighted the weakness of sovereignty under the current regime. Increasingly dissociated from his own people, and facing a torrent of opprobrium from the international community, Belarus is now almost completely reliant on Vladimir Putin's Russia to prop up its sclerotic dictatorship. And as events descended into high farce, Lukashenka's façade of tough control revealed that Belarus is now little more than a Russian proxy, primarily useful to Moscow as a buffer zone, and to test Western responses to gross violations of international laws and norms.

The first test of sovereignty Lukashenka has failed concerns the expectation of commitments by states to uphold longstanding international agreements. Sending a Mig-29 to compel an airliner to land on its territory was a clear breach of the Montreal and Chicago Conventions, which regulate safe overflight by civilian aircraft. It is therefore not surprising that the episode has been labelled an act of state piracy and hijacking. It also sets a dangerous precedent that has made dissidents elsewhere fearful that the same tactics will be employed by Russia and China.

Lukashenka has also failed sovereignty's legitimacy tests for internal and external audiences alike. Setting aside the rigged 2020 elections that saw him claim victory, force his opponents into exile, and brutally put down protests, his government's claims of a Hamas bomb threat to the Ryan Air flight were swiftly exposed as fake. The emailed threat demanded a ceasefire in Gaza that had in fact begun two days earlier. It was sent after Belarus had told the Ryan Air flight to land. And it was sent to Belarus rather than Lithuania (where the aircraft was allegedly to have exploded), or to Greece where the flight had originated. The fact that four KGB agents left the aircraft along with Pratasevic and his partner also demonstrated that the episode was orchestrated by the government in Minsk.

Hence the only sense in which we can speak of Belarussian sovereignty is in its bleakest and most blunt context: a ruling central authority that controls the means of organised violence.

But even on that score it is clear that Lukashanka is unable to act independently, in spite of his desire to engage in acts of transnational repression. Citing a confidential report by the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, a recent Atlantic Council analysis noted that Belarus lacked the ability to track opposition figures abroad, and that the involvement of Russian special services – not to mention foreknowledge by Russia’s air defence network, which is extensively integrated with Belarus – was highly likely.

Russia’s state-controlled media also swung quickly behind Lukashenka with talking points, adding to the suspicion that the event was coordinated. They included a level of vitriol unusual for even the most bellicose Russian commentators. The Russia Today correspondent in Minsk claimed that Pratasevic was ‘a scum, a punk, a freak, using explicit language to describe him, saying he must die’. And the head of the Belarussian KGB has suggested Pratasevic was a member of the Azov Battalion, which the Kremlin has labelled a neo-Nazi terrorist organisation, amid speculation that he could be handed over to pro-Moscow militants in Donbas for interrogation.

Regardless of the extent of Russian involvement in the arrest of Pratasevic, ostracizing Belarus from Europe serves the Kremlin’s broader strategic objectives. Lurching between East and West had previously been something of a hallmark of Lukashenka’s economic and foreign policy. But the Pratasevic episode, coupled to prior Russian support for Lukashenka following the chaotic 2020 protests, has put a stop to that. It has also come with inducements: Putin’s meeting with Lukashenka on a private yacht at Sochi included a new Russian US\$500 million dollar loan to Belarus, and the bland statement that Russia was ‘not indifferent’ to the fate of Sofia Sapega, Pratasevic’s Russian partner who remains under arrest in Minsk.

The upshot of this is that Russian leverage over Belarus extends far beyond the notion of a ‘union state’ between sovereign equals. For some time Russia has been easily the biggest destination for Belarussian exports (at around 40-50% of total trade). Despite regular disputes over oil and gas pricing and transit fees, annual Russian subsidies for Belarussian businesses amount to around US\$4 billion annually. The two nations are close security allies, with joint command activities held ahead of the annual major annual Russian Zapad exercises. And now the goal of bringing Belarus firmly into Russia’s orbit now includes elite capture as well. As Lukashenka himself put it when asked by Russian state TV if he and Putin were on the same team, ‘they pushed us tightly into one team for the rest of our life’.

Doubtless Lukashenka realises that being on Team Putin has its risks, which is why he has equivocated for so long. But the Pratasevic episode leaves him with few choices. It also leaves the EU and the broader transatlantic West, now mulling more sectoral sanctions to punish Minsk, with little option but to consider Belarus under its current leadership little more than a Russian satrapy. Ironically, in seeking to strengthen his control over Belarus, Lukashenka may well have weakened it even further.

‘Mature enough to want freedom’: some background to the plight of the people of Belarus

Kyle Wilson

Today we have heard three of the best qualified people in the land review and interpret recent events and trends in Belarus. So to paraphrase John Cage: ‘I have nothing to say, and now I’ll say it’.



Officers of the ‘Special Purpose Police Detachment’ (Отряд милиции особого назначения) arrest Pratasievič in Minsk Airport (Sergei Grits/Associated Press)

But this image, of Raman Pratasievič being seized by Lukashenko’s thuggish police at Minsk airport, is far more eloquent than anything I might say. For me it ranks in expressive power with that of a lone protestor confronting a PLA tank in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. It captures an inflectional moment in the history of a nation. In times to come, when Belarusians achieve the freedom to wear red and white, this image will surely define that moment in their history.

What follows is a selection of images and quotations that illustrate where we have come from – i.e. some of the factors that have produced, and help us to understand, the protests against Lukashenka and his reaction to them, viewed against the backdrop of key events and trends in post-Soviet Russia. This personal selection is inevitably subjective. My choices would be rejected by those who support Lukashenka and his patron Putin – they claim, implausibly, that all but a few Belarusians actually support Lukashenka’s rule, and that the opposition to him is CIA-funded and directed.

The selection has big gaps. For instance, I could have dwelled further on the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008; or on the steady drift to a more overtly repressive authoritarianism under Putin, focusing on some of his more prominent victims, especially among investigative journalists such as Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in 2006 on Putin’s birthday (7 October); or on the more-than twenty Russian journalists murdered since; or on Irina Slavina, who self-immolated in October last year in Nizhny Novgorod, leaving a brief note of defiance against the present rulers.

In 2000, when Putin came to power formally as president, one of his first decisions was to restore the Soviet anthem. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 it had been replaced by popular music by Glinka, known as his ‘patriotic song’. Putin reversed that decision, implicitly hinting at an intention to restore much more of the Soviet Union than just its anthem. In response, a sizable group of about 40 artists, musicians, composers, actors, etc., many of them household names, sent an open letter of protest to Izvestia, at that time still an independent newspaper. Here is an excerpt (my translation):

The idea of reviving the music of the Soviet anthem arouses revulsion and protest. No new text can erase from memory the words glorifying Lenin and Stalin. For those who have forgotten, before Stalin selected the melody as the national anthem, it was the anthem of the Bolshevik party. By what right is it being revived? What is the historical logic? Why do those vested with legislative and executive power in the new non-Leninist, non-Stalinist Russia want to present the communists with such a resounding moral victory? The essence is that those who yearn for the past epoch and dream of wreaking vengeance on the decade of Russian renovation need a symbol...we, the children of Russia, live and want to go on living in a country that has an anthem at the strains of which one is not ashamed to stand. August 2008 was a key date. It saw the Russian military invasion of Georgia, the second of four occasions on which Putin has used military force to change Russia’s borders – without recourse to mediation. He did not negotiate, or seek UN intervention – he invaded.

This attack, as a result of which Russia now occupies land recognised in international law, and by all but a handful of states as Georgian territory (and not just Abkhazia and South Ossetia) prompts reflections on the role of chance and individuals in history. After all, Putin’s presidency is the result of chance – had Yeltsin’s ‘family’ decided otherwise he might have been succeeded by Boris Nemtsov, a gifted scientist of democratic reformist views, decent and courageous. He too was murdered, in 2015, virtually under the walls of the Kremlin, at

the age of 55. Almost undoubtedly, this was with Putin's approval, even if the Chechen dictator, Ramzan Kadyrov, was used to supply the assassin.

The trajectory of post-Soviet Russia owes more to Putin than to anyone else – as Stalin put it, *кадры решают все*, which one might reasonably paraphrase as 'ultimately, personnel decisions are the only ones that matter'.

Pertinent here too is an observation attributed to Dmitry Trenin: 'every attempt to reform Russian political culture has left power in the hands of one man.' The question arises: does it have to be this way? Is it Russia's fate eternally to be an autocracy (using fate here in the sense of *sud'ba* [судьба] i.e. preordained)? Belarus seemed condemned to share that fate when Lukashenka installed himself as dictator in 1994.

Let's recall another gifted, decent, moderate Russian liberal, from the 19th century, Alexander Herzen, of whom an even more famous contemporary, Lev Tolstoy, said: 'I've never met another man with so rare a combination of scintillating brilliance and depth...' Much has been written about Herzen and his ideas, most notably in English by his admirer Sir Isaiah Berlin (who incidentally was once a visiting fellow at the ANU). But essentially Herzen stood for: rejection of autocracy and corruption; and for individual rights and freedoms; and he held a prescient conviction that any ideology or abstraction that promises liberation from injustice inevitably leads to enslavement. In other words, grand political doctrines ultimately result in tyranny. What, you may reasonably ask, is the link between the convictions of Herzen, Russia under Putin and Belarus under Lukashenka?

Well, first, Putin embodies the Russian tradition of repressive autocracy. Second, he espouses a particular ideology, a reactionary, obscurantist brand of Russian imperial nationalism that would be anathema to Herzen. One of doctrines of this latest iteration of Russian autocracy was captured with axiomatic precision by a former KGB colleague of Putin's, Leonid Shebarshin: 'democracy does away with those trifles that a dictatorship provides – employment, housing, social stability – and in return offers freedom.'

Another notion used to justify the Putinist autocracy is the claim that, because Russia is under constant attack by malign forces from without and their 'foreign agents' within, who seek to dismember her, only as an autocracy can she both be strong enough to deter her myriad enemies and survive as a state. Only Putin and his cohort of chekists – that is, KGB and GRU military-intelligence officers – can protect and save Russia.

Further, according to Putinist doctrine, preserving Russia also requires the restitution to Russia of, or control over, certain lands that are either historically imperial possessions or part of a cordon sanitaire – now designated by the Kremlin a 'sphere of privileged interest', that is, a buffer between Russia and Europe. As one of the most trenchant commentators on Putin's policies put it:

Putin certainly regrets the collapse of the USSR. He is not so silly as to think that it can be restored, but there is a core that is rightfully ours and that it would be great to restore. As Solzhenitsyn wrote 25 years ago, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and North Kazakhstan are the core. The rest...is not required.

Belarus is both historically a Russian possession and a key component of the 'sphere of privileged interests'.

Second, it is instructive to consider a view put by Herzen that is often quoted in considerations of his ideas:

я друг республики, я друг демократии, но гораздо более друг свободы, независимости и развития. Если мне возразят: «да может ли быть свобода и независимость вне республики и демократии?», я отвечу, что и с ними они не могут быть, если народ не дорос до них.

Translated into English:

I'm a fast friend of a [Russian] republic and of democracy. But far more so am I a friend of freedom, individual rights and development. To those who would object by querying 'can one really have freedom without first having a republic and democracy?' I would reply: even with them, a republic and democracy, we cannot achieve freedom until the people is mature enough to want it.

It is instructive to consider the treatment of Herzen in Russia since Putin came to power. Under the Soviet dispensation, from about 1920 and until quite recently, thanks mainly to a laudatory article about him by Lenin ('Памяти Герцена', Социал-Демократ, №26, 1912; 'In memory of Herzen', The Social Democrat, №26, 1912) Herzen was placed in a constellation of ideological saints, as 'the father of Russian socialism'. A museum dedicated to him, full of memorabilia, was established in the early 19th century house in old Moscow where he had lived. It is still there. In Soviet times it was daily thronged with school children. But today it sits virtually empty, its exhibits guarded by a few of those redoubtable women who patrol Russian museums, and who can be daunting until one evinces an interest in their work. They will tell you bitterly that, in 'the country with an unpredictable past', Herzen is now very much on the nose, especially in the perceptions of the Russian Orthodox Church. And they will tell you why: because – well, first he was an atheist, and second, presumably now a more heinous sin, because he 'opposed the Tsar'.

Let us recall Herzen's words: 'we cannot achieve freedom until the people is mature enough to want it.' Earlier today Dr Govor spoke of the Belarusian people, of whom she is one, and of their maturity. I think we can be reasonably confident that Herzen would endorse all that she said, and agree especially that the Belarusians are a people mature enough to know what they want. They want to be rid of a brutal tyrant.

The Belarus-EU migrant crisis

Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams

This commentary was first published, in a slightly shorter version, in Australian Outlook (AIIA) on 8 October 2021: <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-belarus-eu-migrant-crisis/>

The decision by After condemnation from EU countries of the May 23 forced landing in Minsk of a Ryanair plane and the subsequent arrest of journalist Roman Pratasevich, Lukashenka was believed to have said: “we were detaining drugs and migrants [on the border with the EU] - now you will be catching them yourselves.”

These words are now being often quoted by journalists commenting on the situation developing over the European summer months on the Belarus’ border with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Over 4,000 migrants have crossed the Lithuanian border in the first half of 2021. About 4,300 attempts were recorded on the Polish border during the three weeks of September alone. This significant increase in migration mostly from Iraq, but also Afghanistan, Congo and Cameroon, through Belarus to the EU is believed to be the result of Lukashenka’s “hybrid warfare” aimed to exert pressure on the EU and threaten the security of its eastern border.

While Lukashenka denies allegations of using migrants as a weapon against the EU, he is also known to have been repeatedly threatening the bloc with halting transit of EU goods through Belarus to the east and instead allowing passage of people moving westwards. During the government meeting in Minsk in July 2021 he announced: “We will not hold anyone back. We are not their final destination after all. They are headed to enlightened, warm, cosy [Europe](#).”

Recordings made available by a Belarusian journalist, Tadeusz Giczyn, show Belarusian border guards pushing migrants over to Lithuania. Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya considered this an obvious attempt by Lukashenka’s regime to take [revenge](#) on Lithuania for helping her in exile and on the EU for supporting civil society’s actions in Belarus. Pavel Latushko, one of the most prominent opposition figures in Belarus, [commented](#) on this situation saying that “The dictator not only opened the border for illegal migrants, but instructed them to be taken to Belarus, [to] issue them tourist vouchers and visas, and then deliver them to the border and facilitate their passage to the EU.” Referring to the current situation on the Polish-Belarusian border, Giczyn pointed out that Belarus is now implementing the action developed 10 years ago under the code name “[Sluice](#)” and aimed at bringing migrants to the

borders with EU countries and causing a crisis. In his recent [article](#) that quickly gained popularity in social media, Giczan describes the details of Lukashenka's organized operation that allegedly involves state institutions, the army, border services and businesses that facilitate "import" of migrants to the EU borders.

Official comments accusing Lukashenka's regime for creating a dramatic situation on the EU borders are made in unison by the EU's and member states' leaders. Lithuanian foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis accused Lukashenka of using refugees as "human shields" and announced the country needed to take decisive steps: declare a state of emergency, build a secure fence and develop new legislation to allow mass detention and easier deportation. Latvia has made similar decisions: a state of emergency on the country's border territories has been declared until 10 November. Latvia's Minister of Justice, Jānis Bordāns, [commented](#) that in the situation of "a practically declared hybrid war" these were necessary actions to support the border guards and strengthen surveillance. During her visit in Vilnius on 2 August, Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, [confirmed](#) the need for tough measures at the border, saying "we have to make it clear that there's no free access to the EU territory. Lithuania, the EU and Schengen countries are obliged to prevent non-authorised access to the Schengen area." She also [stressed](#), referring to the situation unfolding in September on the Polish-Belarusian border, that it is an act of aggression "toward Poland, Lithuania and Latvia with the aim to destabilize the EU," rather than a migration issue.

Most recently, media attention has focused on a border strip between Poland and Belarus, near a small village in eastern Poland, Usnarz Górny, where a group of 32 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq was stranded. Being refused entry by Polish guards and not allowed to go back by Belarusian guards, the group became an instrument of a political game. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki [announced](#) that Poland has become the subject of a "hybrid attack" and a "specially planned provocation" by the Lukashenka regime's attempt to trigger "a pan-European migration crisis." Barbed wire was stretched along that part of the border and the construction of a 2.5-meter-high fence began. On 2 September Poland introduced a state of emergency at the country's border with Belarus. This is the first such decision made in Poland since 1981. The state of emergency was initially introduced in two provinces for a period of 30 days and has now been extended for a further 60 days. The decision was made following the government's [assessment](#) that there exist serious threats to security, the safety of citizens and to public order.

The increasing tensions on the EU eastern border have already taken a tragic toll: migrants, including children, are stranded in forests along the border, some are seriously ill and five people are known to have died, presumably from exhaustion and hypothermia. It has been repeatedly reported that migrants lack access to food, water, shelter and medicine. The Polish authorities are repeatedly criticised for violating human rights and pushing migrants back to Belarus without acknowledging their right to claim asylum. In order to legalise

pushbacks at the border, Poland introduced an [amendment](#) to the law on foreigners, the law on the protection of the state border and the law on granting protection to foreigners within the territory of the Republic of Poland. These changes allow border guards to immediately remove any foreigners from the territory of Poland and prevent them from re-entering the country. Not only do Polish authorities refuse to accept asylum requests from the migrants, but they also do not allow medical aid, non-governmental human rights groups, journalists or the EU Frontex to access the border zone. Poland's response to migrants crossing the border with Belarus is seen as a yet another example of the violation of international law and a further display of the country's divergence from core EU values. It is also an opportunity for the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party to follow up on its 2015 election promises of being tough on migrants and thereby to strengthen its position in opinion polls. The Polish opposition seems to be up against the wall.

After five confirmed deaths were reported on the Polish-Belarusian border, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson [commented](#) that while the EU "must help Poland to protect its borders", it must also "prevent people losing their lives at these borders." Yet, the European Commission is also criticised by migration law experts and human rights activists for endorsing the efforts of member states' governments to tighten their borders and providing partial and [misleading](#) explanations of EU law in respect of asylum claims. At the same time, the EU keeps resisting the pressure from Lithuania to fund the construction of fences and reinforcements on the border. It is also criticised for being slow in issuing a new package of EU sanctions against Belarus, as both Poland and Lithuania have called for. Thus, the migration crisis is seen as increasingly dramatic but only *one* of the problems the EU needs to face. And sharing the attention, that is, getting tougher on Lukaszienka while ensuring human rights of people at the border are protected, seems to be the biggest challenge at the moment.

Migration does remain a weak point in the EU's policymaking, as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen herself acknowledged in her State of the Union address on 15 September 2021. She also [highlighted](#) that "this is the moment now for a European migration management policy" to gain on speed. Meanwhile, it is a political turmoil within the EU – between the governments of the states bordering with Belarus and their opposition, migration lawyers and activist groups, and the EU leaders – that is unfolding faster under increasing media attention. The humanitarian crisis on the EU border and in Belarus is deepening too, but out of public sight. The EU is getting increasingly anxious about the impending migrant crisis, Lithuanians are worried about national tensions, and Poles are either dreading Islamic extremism or looking with horror how the ruling right-wing party takes advantage of the situation for their own political gain. The tough measures employed at the borders are seen, on the one hand, as flagrant violation of human rights, particularly the right to apply for international and national protection and, on the other hand, as necessary and unavoidable. In the midst of this chaos, helping those people stranded at the

EU border has fallen on the shoulders of individuals, doing what they can to provide simple aid and save lives.

Lukashenka seemed to have been pleased with himself during the [interview](#) he gave to CNN on 30 September. Asked about human rights abuses and treatment of protestors, he said he had nothing to apologize for; asked about weaponizing migrants in revenge for European sanctions, he replied he should not be taken for a madman. Yet, the Lithuanian Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mantas Adomėnas, is [convinced](#) that if left without a strong EU response, Lukashenka will “try to come up with new schemes and new methods of destabilisation and new kinds of hybrid attacks.” Latushko also [believes](#) there is much more that the EU should expect from Lukashenka and that “[o]nly an international court, [and] international criminal prosecution can stop the dictator”. If given an opportunity, Lukashenka would most likely reply, repeating what he had said many times, that if the West keeps attacking Belarus, he will be president forever.

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