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Belarus

Belarus: the beginning of what end?

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The sixth re-election of Alexander Lukashenko as President of Belarus on 9 August, 2020 was preceded and followed by popular mobilizations fuelled by police brutality, against a background of fraud and increasing challenges to old social protections. The Belarusian autocrat, after multiple tensions with his Russian neighbour, is now asking Putin for his "help" in dealing with an unprecedented social protest.

The breakup of the USSR was decreed on Byelorussian territory on 8 December, 1991 by Boris Yeltsin as President of Russia and his two counterparts from Ukraine and Byelorussia - although the population had voted overwhelmingly for the maintenance (and reform) of the Union on 17 March of that year. [1] But the neoliberal shock therapy driven by Yeltsin and initially also advocated by the pro-Western "Byelorussian Popular Front" (BNF), was halted by the ouster (for corruption) of the incumbent president and the election of Alexander Lukashenko to the presidency in 1994. If he adopted the old name of Belarus, the new leader proposed to reject (by a referendum in 1995) the red and white flag of the first pre-Soviet republic of 1918 in favour of the "Soviet flag" - but without the hammer and sickle surmounted by the red star.

His blocking of neoliberal shock therapy and maintenance of a strong public sector was aimed at consolidating his regime which became increasingly autocratic. And it was accompanied by the repression of powerful strikes which were underway. As David Mandel points out (comparing the situation and workers' and trade union struggles in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the 1990s), the Lukashenko regime "subjected the unions to a much more systematic repression" than was the case in countries inflicting "stronger social decomposition" through privatization - another means of breaking any challenging of the old bureaucratic system by its own social base, the workers. [2]

This anti-union and political repression was accompanied by an initial search for stabilization of the new regime through socio-economic gains. In 2018, Belarus was ranked 53rd out of 189 countries according to the Human Development Index with one of the lowest inequality rates in Europe. Its GDP per capita has quadrupled since 1990 (20,000 dollars compared to 9,000 in the Ukraine in purchasing power parity). But the social gains linked to employment, and the "cult of work" (not of workers!) have gone from traits borrowed from "Sovietism" towards a strong neo-liberal logic such as the obligation to accept any job (public or, increasingly, private). [3]

Since 2004, individualization of employment contracts has replaced collective agreements; and the pension scheme does not take into account time spent in military service, nor that of maternity and study leave. The country suffered less than others which were more open to financial globalization from the banking and financial crisis of 2008/2009: growth fluctuated but was maintained until the Ukrainian crisis of 2013 (ending the regime of the oligarch President Yanukovych). [4]

It was the latter which inflicted on the country's its first recessions since 1995, due to its close ties to both Ukraine and Russia.

The road to 9 August

This Ukrainian crisis and Russia's "recovery" of Crimea were traumas for the Belarusian regime as well as for many other "post-socialist" autocrats, in multiple senses - and also polarized the left. [5] The thesis of a "coloured revolution" fomented by the Western powers (and moreover identified with the fascistic currents which were very

active there) became for the autocrats the formula for denunciation of the social movements which opposed them. But leaders of former non-Russian Soviet republics, such as Lukashenko, have also been suspicious of Russian power and its very asymmetrical plans for union. The regime's repressive top-down course grew stronger and, as in Russia, it identified all opponents as foreign-funded pawns... Except that, for Lukashenko, this "foreigner" could also be Russian.

That's why he chose to diversify his cards and play mediator in the negotiation in Minsk of agreements between the then Ukrainian president, Putin, Merkel and Macron. This "neutrality" earned the lifting of European sanctions in 2016. [6]

In practice, early treaties signed by Lukashenko and Yeltsin provided for a "union of states" between Russia and Belarus - and Putin would like to make this a reality. And he wouldn't mind replacing Lukashenko with a leader who is more docile and open to new privatizations: the last negotiations in December 2019 were indeed met with resistance from the Belarusian leader. [7] At the same time, plans for a Eurasian Union, founded by Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia in 2014 (with the "model" of the EU as reference point) are floundering. [8]

But Belarus' public debt has gone from less than 10 per cent of GDP in 2005 to around 50 per cent now. Pressure from both Russia and the IMF has aggravated all the tensions. For five years, the regime has applied a wage freeze while many prices are increasing. The generalization of fixed-term contracts was imposed in 2017 along with a project for a tax on unemployment (identified as "social parasitism"), a project which was finally dismissed in the face of the first social protests involving in particular young people and bloggers. Covid-19, initially treated with derision by Lukashenko, was a factor aggravating the growing discredit of the regime. [9]

Women, youth, workers ...

The elections of 9 August were held against this internal social background and when tensions with the Putin regime were high, despite popular proximity and lasting dependencies. The shadow of Moscow was thus behind two of the three candidates excluded by Lukashenko before the elections but also behind 33 recently arrested mercenaries, members of a "Wagner group" active on behalf of the Russian regime in Ukraine, Syria, Libya and Central Africa according to Vincent Présumey. [10]

But the unforeseen entered into this context. Lukashenko began by invalidating in various ways his three main opposing candidates (Siarhei Tsikhanovski, Viktor Babaryko, and Valery Tsepkalo) – "all socially linked to 'business' sectors", according to Présumey. But the autocrat wanting to demonstrate his "pluralism" by accepting the candidacy (which he supposed harmless) of the imprisoned Tsikhanovsky's wife, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya (then those of the wives of the two other ousted candidates) – all of whom, without political experience, decided to take on the legacies of their spouses.

The opposition campaign was marked by Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya who expressed her fears (for her family) in a manner that had a popular resonance. She was quickly supported by the other two women, Maria Kolesnikova (the head of Babaryko's campaign) and Veronika Tsepkalo. Both her courage and her fragility "spoke" to the people. Young people got involved massively, with a pivotal "moment" on 7 August, when Lukashenko decided to encourage a rock concert – which Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya attended. The surprise came when in her presence, the disc jockeys at the event played an unexpected song, *Peremen* (Changes), by Victor Tsoi (who died in 1990) from the old Russian group Kino - a cult track from the days of *perestroika*. [11] The proclamation of the results (giving only around 10 per cent of the vote to Tihhanovskaya and 80 per cent to Lukashenko) produced anger and protests. The violence of the repression - in particular that by the special forces, the OMON - only accentuated a popular shift to

“getting rid” of this regime, and this throughout the country, well beyond Minsk.

A major turning point, from 10 August, was the involvement of workers in emblematic workplaces and calls for strikes and demonstrations - demanding an end to the violence, the release of those arrested and contesting the election results. [12] Several leaders of strike committees were brutalized and/or arrested, such as Nikolai Zimine, a metalworker and a veteran of independent trade unionism (BKPD), severely beaten in August then arrested and sentenced to 15 days in prison.

Internal and international uncertainties

It was by keeping quiet about their (pro or anti-Russian) privatization program that the candidates campaigned against the regime, its frauds and its violence. But the “front” of the candidates has already cracked while remaining opaque. A Coordination Committee of this opposition was established. [13] But on 31 August, Maria Kolesnikova (a supporter of Viktor Babariko), a member of the praesidium of this Committee, unilaterally announced the creation of a new party, opening the door to a scenario of new elections without the prior departure of Lukashenko. [14] Which Svetlana Tikhanovskaia (who had taken refuge in Lithuania) radically rejected. [15]

At the same time, after denouncing Russian interference, Lukashenko decided to seek Russian help - after returning to Russia the 32 Russian citizens among the 33 mercenaries arrested. Putin would not want to support a loser - nor encourage a popular movement that would produce his downfall (without certainty about the succession). The Navalny affair makes it harder for (Macron and Merkel’s) plans to rely on Putin to manage this crisis (against pressure from Poland, the Baltic States and the United States). For the time being Lukashenko has been granted a loan of 1.3 billion euros (probably accompanied by a debt restructuring and deliveries of hydrocarbons at reduced prices).

For the moment, no one on the ground is in a position to “represent” and defend popular aspirations which look neither to Russia nor to the EU, but to the demand for fundamental rights and freedoms, at the political and social level. The trade union and international political left must support these demands, independent trade unionism - weak under such a regime, but real - and all forms of popular self-organization which alone can limit “instrumentalization” from all sides.

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[1] This was not the case for the three Baltic republics that had been forcibly incorporated into the Union and had voted for their independence. On 25 December, the president of a USSR which no longer existed, Mikhaïl Gorbachev, resigned.

[2] See David Mandel, “Workers after communism (Auto Workers and Their Unions in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus)”, 2004, PDF, page 227

[3] For a benevolent presentation of this system read Loïc Ramirez, *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English) February 2020. [“Belarus, the industrious state”](#).

[4] On the context of this crisis - especially the projects addressed to Ukraine and Belarus by the EU “Eastern Partnership” in conflict with the

Belarus: the beginning of what end?

projects of the Eurasian Union of Russia, read my article in *Revue Les Possibles* (Attac), 21 February 2014 "[La société ukrainienne entre ses oligarques et sa Troïka](#)".

[5] *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*
Volume 24, 2016 - Issue 1, Catherine Samary "[What internationalism in the context of the Ukrainian crisis? Wide open eyes against one-eyed "campisms"](#)".

[6] *The Guardian*, 15 February 2016 "[EU lifts most sanctions against Belarus despite human rights concerns](#)".

[7] Chatham House 14 January 2020 "[Integration on Hold for Russia and Belarus](#)".

[8] In French, *Regards sur l'eurasie - l'année politique 2019* Ed. Anne de Tinguy, Sciences Po. The founding countries of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014 were Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, joined later by Armenia et Kyrgyzstan.

[9] Nonetheless the country has 40.7 doctors per 10,000 inhabitants, as against 32 in Finland, and control of the contagion has been easier given the low population density and abundant green spaces.

[10] Mediapart, 19 August 2020 "[Belarus : savoir reconnaître notre belle amie la Vieille Taupe !](#)".

[11]]Recounted in Vincent Présumey's already-mentioned blog, cité. The film *Leta* by Kyril Serrebrennikov celebrates the group Kino and its singer. See "[Viktor Tsoï, première rock star russe](#)".

[12] For more on social struggles see the articles by the Ukrainian researcher Volodymyr Artiukh, including "[In Belarus, the Left Is Fighting to Put Social Demands at the Heart of the Protests](#)" or those by Volodymyr Ishchenko on the [openDemocracy site](#) and on LeftEast such as "[From Ukraine with Comparison: Emerging Notes on Belarus-](#)".

[13] One of the members is Svetlana Alexievitch author of *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (Random House 2016), subject to recent repressive pressure.

[14] The only member of the "women's trio" of the Belarusian opposition then still present in the country has since been brutally driven to Ukraine (by tearing up her passport she was denouncing what amounted to an expulsion).

[15] See Volodymyr Ishchenko, *Jacobin*, 22 August 2020 "[The Opposition in Belarus Is Not All on the Same Side](#)".