Belarus Uprising

THE MAKING OF A REVOLUTION

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Journal of Democracy Volume 31, Number 4 October 2020

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The Belarus that we read about in books no longer exists. This essay is an account of the ongoing Belarusian social revolution. So it is not based on books, at least not primarily. It is written on the basis of a month spent in the country, from August 4 to September 2, witnessing key events—the rigged election, state terror, labor and student strikes, and mass demonstrations. I observed the major protests, strikes, demonstrations, and detentions in the capital and largest city, Minsk, as well as in Grodno, Maladzyechna, and several other places, including some villages, up close. I was a journalist without accreditation. I did not even apply for it. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to accredit all foreign journalists who sought official permission in advance of the election. I felt more like a participant, though I knew I had to report what I saw, and I did so for Polish and international media. One of the reasons was the very small number of foreign journalists in Belarus.

The revolution in Belarus will be recalled for several features that make it unique. As I write this on September 3, the day after my return, it is not clear who will win: dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka (b. 1954), or the social movement that opposes him. It seems that Lukashenka, whom the street calls either "the cockroach," "Sasha 3 percent" (due to the low level of support he enjoys), or "the psychopath" (due to statements by psychiatrists proffering that diagnosis), has regained control of the situation, although his 26-year-old dictatorship has failed to contain mass protests. So that goal has not been achieved. The fight continues.

Before the August 9 election, Lukashenka's support was estimated at 15 to 20 percent. After the August 9 to 12 wave of terror, that num-

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ber can only have shrunk. Mass demonstrations and numerous forms of resistance continue. The Belarusian people are not afraid; indeed, they are ostentatiously manifesting their opposition. The dictator controls state structures and has begun the process of "cleansing" them of people whose loyalties are uncertain. He is continuing repression of the opposition, while at the same time and at least for now eschewing open terror (beatings, shooting, torture). Almost all of society has turned against him, however.

Europe's Least-Known Country

It is surprising that the Belarusian uprising is taking place at all, and doubly surprising that Belarusians are showing themselves to be capable of mounting such active, large, and modern protests. Whether Belarusians are a nation at all was considered debatable, especially because Lukashenka based his model of power on Russification. He adopted it as a concession to Russia, which made it easier for him to exercise power by providing him with cheap oil and gas.

In Europe, the Belarusian dictatorship, due to its duration and the behavior of the dictator himself, evoked primarily pity and did not attract significant attention for a long time. For Europeans themselves, Belarus is probably the least-known country in Europe. Those in the United States or other distant nations know even less about it. Due to the antagonism between Lukashenka and the West, the state was effectively isolated for a long time. Ninety percent of tourists come from Russia. The country is widely seen as poor and ugly (due to the ubiquitous socialist architecture and the prevalence of concrete), ruled by a bizarre politician, and offering nothing interesting to see. It is a kind of blank spot on the map.

For almost everyone entering from somewhere other than Russia, arriving in Belarus can be a culture shock, or at least a huge surprise. The expectation is that you will see a collapse of civilization, a prevalence of communist trash. But what you encounter is a modern, clean, and relatively affluent country that offers practically everything that any other EU country offers, apart from the principles of liberal democracy. Moreover, in certain areas, Belarus evokes respect. Indeed, this is true when it comes to matters that are especially valued in the West: social policy, technological advancement, well-organized public transportation and motorways, and means of addressing the most pressing social problems.

According to World Bank data, Belarus's poverty rate of 0.5 percent is lower than the poverty rate found in any of the EU's postcommunist countries, and comparable with figures from the Nordic region. (The average poverty rate across the entire EU is 2.9 percent). The level of inequality in Belarus today is lower than it is in any EU country, including the Scandinavian ones. There is no oligarchy, no crime, and no

unemployment. (There is hidden unemployment, which is the regime's way of forcing society to conform—the defiant can be fired at almost no cost to the state.) Moreover, Belarus is a country that has not undergone deindustrialization. It is extremely clean, with a high work ethic and good management. "Belarus is a Northern European country," I was told by Ales Mihalevich, a 2010 presidential candidate who subsequently became a political prisoner and torture victim before spending five years in exile.

Half of Belarus's GDP is generated by the state. Five percent of GDP is created by the information-technology (IT) sector (a much higher percentage than in neighboring Poland). In postcommunist countries that underwent democratization and the privatization that usually accompanied it, clothes, food, and equipment are bought almost exclusively from Western brands. Belarus has its own brands, factories, and advertisements in almost every segment of the market. These goods are definitely not Soviet trash. Of course, they are usually worse than their German or Polish counterparts, but they work, look decent, and serve as effective substitute goods. Per capita GDP at Purchasing Power Parity amounts to $22,000. For comparison, in Ukraine the figure is $10,000.

If Belarusians succeed in overthrowing their dictator and opening the country to the world, they will be in an incomparably better position than Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, or Bulgaria were in 1989. We will not see Western capital swooping in and buying up whatever it wants and introducing its own brands. Belarusians will not be relegated to cheap labor, and their enterprises will not collapse. Belarus has not only its own retail chains, restaurants, cars, and clothes, but also a strong IT sector, which Lukashenka cares about greatly and which gives his regime almost complete economic freedom (or did until the ongoing wave of protests and repression). Of course, the "Belarusian economic miracle" is largely financed by Russia, but it is also the result of independent development, good education, solid organization, and a strong work ethic that has historically been found in the Baltic states and Belarus.

Even Lukashenka's greatest critics speak approvingly of the Belarusian standard of living. Lukashenka with all his quirks would not have survived for nearly three decades if Belarusians were starving, if they had nowhere to work and no opportunities to pursue. People emigrate for political rather than economic reasons. The Belarusian diaspora has now become as active as its Polish counterpart was in the 1980s, and it consists mainly of students, academics, musicians, and corporate employees, not Uber drivers or retail workers. The emigrants say that they are fed up with Lukashenka because he makes it impossible for them to live in Minsk. Whereas a fourth or a fifth of young people have left countries such as Bulgaria and Lithuania, that has not been true in Belarus, and with good reason. Minsk, whose metropolitan area is home to about 2.6 million people, is overflowing with the young. The scale of the

protests attests to this fact. On Sundays, the demonstrators gathered in Minsk alone can number two-hundred thousand, an impressive turnout in a country of just 9.4 million.

In short, not counting the Baltic states, which are EU members, Belarus is the former Soviet republic with the highest standard of living. But is it really a *former* Soviet republic?

The Only Politician in Belarus

Lukashenka came to power in 1994 promising to reverse the democratic transformation and restore the Soviet Union in Belarus. That promise fell on fertile ground. Belarus was to Soviet communism what the Vendée had once been to the *ancien régime* of France—a grand redoubt of belief in the old order. In the March 1991 referendum, 83 percent of Belarusians voted against independence and declared their preference to remain part of the Soviet Union. It was said that six months later, Belarusians effectively had independence imposed on them. Lukashenka rose to power in opposition to the local Communist Party elites who had remained in power since the declaration of independence. Their leader was Vyacheslav Kebich, the last premier of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic and the first leader of independent Belarus. His methods were Soviet. So it could be said that Lukashenka's victory in Belarus was the first of the "color revolutions." But the Soviet Union never truly collapsed in Belarus, and only the success of the demonstrators will bring about its true end. In Belarus, the KGB is still called the KGB. Death sentences are still carried out with a shot to the back of the head. Today's green-and-red national flag is (with only slight modifications) the flag of the Belarusian SSR. Soviet-era symbolism still predominates. The largest squares and streets are still named in honor of Bolsheviks. The two main squares in Grodno are Soviet Square and Lenin Square. Among other things, the protesters are angry that their country is seen as a backwater because of Lukashenka.

Belarus is a hybrid of late modernity and an open-air museum of the Soviet Union. In effect, Belarus in 2020 represents an alternative form of transformation to that which other postcommunist countries underwent. Is this Belarusian model worse? Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have undergone democratization, but today they are poorer, territorially fragmented, devastated by corruption, and looted by oligarchs. Lukashenka still holds out hope that his country will appreciate this difference. A society that is not pressed against the wall economically will eventually stop protesting.

Marya Kalesnikava, the only one of the three female opposition leaders still in Belarus, told me openly that she believed Lukashenka could have won all previous elections in Belarus democratically—he rigged them not in order to win, but in order to secure his status as the only pol-

itician in Belarus. If Lukashenka had retired a few years ago, he would be remembered as the creator of the modern Belarusian state. He would be to Belarus a figure such as Marshal Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935) is to Poland: a leader remembered for using authoritarian methods, including a coup d'état, but who upheld national sovereignty and brought reasonable degrees of social equality, international security, and economic prosperity.

Lukashenka's problem is that a generation has grown up no longer remembering the Soviet Union, but knowing the West and its values very well. For them, the green-and-red Soviet-era flag is a form of treason; they wear the white-red-white flag adopted by the independent Belarusian state in 1918. It seems that Lukashenka made a mistake in changing the flag from the latter to the former, because in doing so he created a symbol for the opposition to take up. Like Lukashenka himself, the Soviet-era flag is popular only among older people who spent their best years in the Soviet Union, who want stability, and who enjoy regular, decent pensions. For the younger generation, the former collective-farm director who has ruled the country for 26 years is a freak of nature. They grew up outside the system. That is why today nobody has to teach them democracy or new technologies.

In Poland, the most liberal of the Warsaw Pact countries, the communist-era circulation of *samizdat* newspapers and books proceeded on a relatively large scale, but the underground literature mostly reached opposition elites, or the East European intelligentsia. It created significant possibilities, but it did not remove the state's monopoly on information. Until recently, the situation in Belarus was similar. The main television stations and the largest newspapers were state-controlled and used to spread state propaganda.

But in recent months the independent media have become mainstream. Because the authorities have complete control of the official media, a kind of second media sphere has arisen online. The readership of independent online outlets has grown 300 to 400 percent in recent weeks, assuming mass scale, and it is still growing rapidly. The most important of these are the weekly *Nasha Niva,* Radio Svaboda, and the independent internet portal *TUT.By*. Popular channels on YouTube and Telegram (including, for instance, the one run by Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the jailed presidential contender whose wife Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya replaced him on the ballot) also play a crucial role. The most famous video bloggers number their subscribers in the hundreds of thousands. The Telegram channel NEXTA, run by a young Belarusian émigré in Warsaw, has 2.5 million subscribers (a world record). This means that independent media messaging is already reaching the majority.

This is not about idealism any more. With the coronavirus pandemic, it became a pragmatic choice. It was in the vital interest of ordinary Belarusians to access more and freer information. Unofficial media out-

lets are seen as better sources of such information than the state media. Almost no one buys Russian newspapers. One of the factors behind the independent-media breakthrough is the covid-19 pandemic, which Lukashenka has completely bungled. At first, he said that it did not exist. There was no lockdown in Belarus, and little of anything that could pass for state policy regarding the virus, which Lukashenka himself caught (though without symptoms).

Lukashenka's lack of an effective coronavirus response left him discredited. When he denied the threat and failed to intervene beyond advising people to drink vodka, it seemed like a moral abdication. That was especially disappointing to the middle-aged, who feared for their parents. Belarusians had to deal with the threat of covid-19 on their own and began banding together to buy masks and equipment, to help the sick, and to assist medical personnel. The regime lost ground, and civil society gained it. Bonds of solidarity were formed. People began to get to know each other and communicate with each other. The regime lost its legitimacy because it could no longer guarantee a basic level of security, and the economic crisis was making itself felt.

Lukashenka is mentally stuck in the 1990s, or even the 1980s as Kalesnikava says. He has learned nothing in terms of his messaging or his worldview, and he is unable to make effective use of the state-run media to counter independent reporting. All he can do is block the internet. On sensitive days, communications are blocked at potential demonstration locations or turned off completely by domestic operators on the orders of the authorities. The IT sector and the economy more broadly are suffering as a result, and Belarus has lost some of its credibility with foreign partners. The authorities have also blocked the websites of the several dozen most important independent media outlets and organizations. People have found ways around these barriers, however. There are proxy servers, VPNs, and Psiphon, as well as private ISPs that are outside government control. The Belarusian diaspora is playing a significant role during the protests by facilitating the spread of information. So there are some obstacles, but they are not sufficient to influence the course of events. With the strong IT sector, the opposition can counter the regime. Hackers are constantly switching off the government websites or adding Lukashenka's name and face to official lists of criminals.

The Opposition

Until recently, Lukashenka had a simple way of strangling the opposition: He arrested its leaders. Before the last election, he did the same. He arrested Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktar Babaryka, and expelled Valery Tsapkala. He allowed Tsikahnouski's wife to register, but only because he was sure she would only embarrass herself. Tsikhanouskaya learned her part as a presidential candidate very quickly, but most im-

portantly Lukashenka made a mistake when he assumed that the opposition leader—not the people, not democracy, not the rules—was the key factor. He focused on the idea of having a competitor. But the opposition did not need a leader, and the figure of a leader is ultimately not important. People are not going out into the streets for the sake of a leader, and they are not listening to any one person. That is not because this is some kind of horizontal protest or because the Belarusian people are such superdemocrats. It is because they want to overthrow Lukashenka, to stop the drama, and to release political prisoners. Whereas a longer agenda would cause the opposition to split, the three points of this minimalist program bring the entire freedom movement together in unity, which is the fundamental principle of these protests. That is why the huge Sunday marches are called "unity marches," and why "one for all, all for one" is a common slogan. People in Belarus know that the protest movement must be peaceful, conflict-free, and resolute.

If a German or Polish politician were to visit the Belarusian opposition's campaign headquarters, a conversation with their social-media specialists, event planners, and sociologists would give him an inferiority complex.

A leader would be necessary if it were possible to negotiate with Lukashenka. If we are wondering how to conceptualize the possible collapse of the regime in Belarus, we can rule out all scenarios that involve an agreement between Lukashenka and the opposition. The so-called Spanish road to democracy or a roundtable scenario are out of the question. Lukashenka can end up either like Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovych or like Romania's Nicolae Ceauşescu—in exile (living off the fortune he stole) or shot in the same manner in which he killed his political opponents. His closest allies will face either the same fate, or a court trial.

The opposition's electoral campaign was led by three women: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Marya Kalesnikava, and Veranika Tsapkala. Women form the backbone of the protests. A president who placed his wife under house arrest, had a son with his personal physician, and is infamous for spending money on prostitutes evokes disgust. The opposition's women leaders quickly came to an understanding, united the opposition, and organized an exceptionally effective campaign staff. If a German or Polish politician were to visit the opposition's campaign headquarters, a conversation with their social-media specialists, event planners, and sociologists would give him an inferiority complex. I have observed several electoral campaigns in Poland and Germany, and there is really no comparison. This surplus of modernity is a reaction to the country's political backwardness. The Polish opposition

would do well to learn that it takes unity to win. In Belarus, the opposition's success took much more effort than winning an election in an ordinary democratic country. Breaking the government's monopoly on information required IT experts, excellent social research, and the best social-media specialists.

Officially, Lukashenka won the August 9 election with more than 80 percent of the vote, while Tsikhanouskaya received only 10 percent. This was an even higher percentage of the vote than Lukashenka had accorded himself in the previous elections that he falsified. He knew that opposition rallies were drawing crowds of up to seventy-thousand people, so he could have faked the results less ostentatiously. But he proved incapable of such restraint. He provoked an even stronger reaction than might have been expected. When people took to the streets, he reacted just as ostentatiously.

Lukashenka Strategy Number 1: Terror

Election day, August 9, and the following day saw demonstrations. The opposition had formulated a plan long before the election so that everyone would know what to do, even if the internet was shut off. Sunday's protest took place in the heart of Minsk at Victory Square, as planned. Lukashenka sent in the riot police, who managed to take control of the space piece by piece. The next day, people started to organize themselves around some of the Minsk Metro's 29 light-rail stations. A barricade was erected at the intersection near the Riga shopping center, but the sharpest confrontation took place at the large intersection by Pushkinskaya station. I was there. The riot police were not content with taking control of the area. Without warning, they attacked the crowd, shooting rubber bullets.[1] The authorities switched from defense to offense. The Interior Ministry troops armed with shields and clubs disappeared, replaced by riot police armed with rifles and undercover agents tracking down and arresting journalists.

Stun grenades, flash bangs, and water cannons were only a prelude to rubber bullets, beatings, and police sweeps of dispersed demonstrators. Jail cells designed to hold eight people held as many as fifty. In Gomel, the second-largest city, people were kept in police vehicles due to a lack of space at the detention center. As a result, one young man died. The independent press also documented what turned out to be the earliest instances of rubber bullets being used. About a hundred people "disappeared." So far, only two have been located—or rather, their corpses have been found. Their funerals have served as important political events and demonstrations of common pain.

The next night, Lukashenka's security services moved on to a new phase. They no longer waited for demonstrators to gather, but began "teaching a lesson" by punishing whomever they found in the streets.

Cars were stopped with truncheon blows, and their drivers pulled out and beaten. I drove past several such attacks, and I saw one victim being resuscitated. On two separate nights, I saw sixty to eighty armored vehicles driving along Minsk's main street, Independence Avenue. According to Amnesty International, "over 6,700 people were detained and hundreds have delivered testimony of widespread torture and other ill-treatment of detainees in police stations and detention facilities."[2] The sadistic violence had an effect. The demonstrations stopped.

And then a miracle happened. On Wednesday, August 13, women and girls spontaneously took to the streets *en masse,* wearing white, holding flowers, and making the V sign with their fingers. They lined the streets and demonstrated against violence. They demonstrated all day. It made one's eyes water. Drivers constantly honked their horns in support. In the afternoon, the doctors who had tended to the victims of police beatings joined in, saying that they had never experienced anything like this before. The next day, workers in one factory after another began to go on strike. It began with the country's largest and most prestigious industrial enterprises: the BelAZ truck factory, the nitrogen plant in Grodno, and tractor-manufacturing plants in Minsk. Then the railroad joined, followed on Friday by the Minsk Metro. The workers stood with the women.

The security services were at their wits' end. They had not foreseen this. How could they shoot and beat women, doctors, and workers armed with heavy machinery? The opposition regained the streets, restoring control of the situation and political effectiveness. Paradoxically, the lack of leaders strengthened the protest, because Lukashenka did not know whom to arrest. The protesting women were not afraid of anything. They stood in front of KGB buildings, they seized every street.

The next day, fifty soldiers were stationed in front of the National Assembly, and they symbolically lowered their shields. Women started adorning them with flowers and embracing the soldiers. This further discredited the Lukashenka regime, and served as a disarming example for other members of the security services. Social media were flooded with photos and videos of dozens of police officers throwing their uniforms into the trash and their torn-off epaulets into the toilet. They said they would not serve a state that tortures defenseless civilians.

Lukashenka Strategy Number 2: Preventing Protests

Once the country came to a standstill, the regime changed its strategy and stopped engaging in violent repression—not because Lukashenka took pity on the demonstrators, but because, apparently, he had not expected that repression would cause such a strong moral outrage in society, leading to marches and solidarity strikes that almost drove him out of power. Now the regime is aiming to prevent demonstrations and wait

out the protesters. To frighten the opposition, but in white gloves. In the morning, the authorities barricade the squares, deploy heavy equipment, and send the security services into the streets. Demonstrations are immediately met with arrests and dispersal, but the protesters are no longer beaten and tortured.

Lukashenka is hoping that this strategy will buy him time. How long can people continue going out on the street under the slogans of freedom? If these were social or economic slogans, the kind that fueled the Polish opposition in 1980, this level of human determination would be more understandable, and only economic improvement could be expected to have an effect. But social slogans are not heard at the Belarusian demonstrations, even among the workers. The miners striking in Saligorsk earn a better living than people in Minsk and, as in any Belarusian factory, they receive an impressive array of benefits, including their own hospitals and cultural institutions. The slogans of freedom and independence are ubiquitous. Everyone carries the white-red-white flag and banners bearing the Pahonia, the red shield blazoned with a sword-brandishing, mounted knight that is a symbol of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania and also of Belarusian republics from a century (1918) and a few decades (1991–95) ago. Citizens hang huge flags between apartment blocks, making them difficult to remove, or project the Pahonia onto buildings.

After August 29 and 30, the authorities' efforts to prevent demonstrations proved useless. People came out in massive numbers, and Lukashenka had good reason to feel ridiculed, especially during his visits to two factories, where the workers constantly interrupted his remarks with cries of "Go away!"

He ordered the Interior Ministry and the KGB to end the "riots." But as of this writing in early September, there is no end in sight. The authorities had counted on being able to use the prospect of Russian intervention to scare the demonstrators, but that has not worked either. If Lukashenka's first appearance with a Kalashnikov and his first four calls to Russian president Vladimir Putin did not stop people from demonstrating, another rifle display and another conversation with the Russian president will signal more weakness than strength.

This is good news, but it could also be bad news. Lukashenka will now be looking for a new—third—strategy. He is known to be unscrupulous, so rather than sharing power, as the communists did in Poland in 1989, it seems likely that he may start shooting. Armored vehicles with guns mounted have already been seen in Minsk. Flying around in a helicopter with an AK-47 in hand may seem pathetic, but Lukashenka does have weapons and what if he starts using them? That would certainly not be beyond him. It is doubtful that the army would obey orders to shoot, but the KGB and Interior Ministry formations are more reliable. To date, however, Lukashenka has avoided trying to use that kind of force. He has been hoping to wait out the demonstrators, but it appears

that they are the ones wearing him out, handling everything he is able to throw at them.

Reductio ad Geopoliticum

Although it dominates outside analysis of the current situation, geopolitics hardly concerns Belarusian protesters. Nevertheless, another significant error made by Lukashenka before the election was losing his Russian guarantor. Russia, of course, prefers Lukashenka to the opposition and will not let Belarus fall out of its sphere of influence, but it no longer intends to make his life any easier. Lukashenka can be satisfied that he has been able to take advantage of Moscow for so long, but Russia sees him as a con artist. He received hydrocarbons at a steeply reduced rate, keeping Belarus's standard of living much higher than, for example, Ukraine's, but he was supposed to pay by surrendering independence. Meanwhile, integration with Russia has not taken place at the economic, legal, or political levels. Belarus was supposed to adopt the Russian ruble, a common judicial system, and a common parliament, and state-owned enterprises were supposed to be handed over to Russia. Nothing like this ever happened, or if it did, only on a semi-fictitious basis. Even cultural Russification has begun to regress. The independent media is bilingual, and the Belarusian language is slowly regaining ground. Few dream of joining Russia anymore. Ironically, it was Lukashenka who created the Republic of Belarus as a country with a distinctive identity, even if it is (or was) linguistically Russified.

How will Russia react if Belarus breaks free of the dictator's shackles? I asked experts on the region, both inside Belarus (Valer Bulhakau) and abroad (Adam Michnik, Timothy Snyder, Radek Sikorski, Donald Tusk), and all agreed that Russia will not intervene. There will be no Ukrainian scenario in Belarus, because Ukraine has not paid off for Russia. It gained the Donbas and the Crimean Peninsula—meaning it gained only problems—and lost Ukraine. Before 2014, Ukrainian society was favorable to Russia and largely spoke Russian. Russia had economic influence and an ally. Now, the Russian language is disappearing from Ukraine, the Ukrainian economy is slowly recovering, the Ukrainian military is arming, and Russia has become the country's primary enemy in the eyes of Ukrainians. Anyone who thinks otherwise is ashamed to admit it, including the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky.

If Russia were preparing something, we would be seeing the Russian press lay the groundwork. There would be propaganda slandering the opposition, while Putin would be inventing conspiracy theories and amassing troops at the border. Little green men would not have gotten caught like the Russian Wagner Group mercenaries who were mocked and shown half-naked on Belarusian television in late July 2020. Lukashenka would be waxing poetic about Slavic unity, not shouting at

Russia and accusing the mercenaries of attempting to take over his country. Nothing like that is taking place.

Instead of planning a pro-Lukashenka intervention, Russia was waiting for Belarus to sort itself out so that Moscow can deal with whoever is in power. Putin has probably been hoping that the Belarusian people will soon start quarreling among themselves. Then, gas and oil can be sold to them at market prices, and the West will offer Belarusians little more than scholarships (the EU could at least ease visa restrictions). That would be better for Russia than, say, seizing Vitebsk in northeastern Belarus and holding the city at astronomical cost in the face of further Western sanctions. Such an aggressive Russian stance would only turn Belarusians away from Russia, and in a few years Russian would cease to be their language. Of course, a weakened Lukashenka who needs Russia to prop him up also is a good scenario in the Kremlin's eyes.

If Lukashenka were to leave, Russia could also accept a Belarus that somewhat resembles Armenia—a state that is relatively independent and democratic but which remains generally favorable to Russia and stays out of NATO and the EU. This would create a geopolitical window of opportunity for the opposition at a time when the dictator's authority is collapsing. Even as democracy struggles with its prolonged political recession on a worldwide scale, it could notch a triumph in a place where one might least expect it to succeed. "History," as T.S. Eliot writes in his poem *Gerontion,* "has many cunning passages," and surely this would be one of them.

The Belarusian people are giving the world a lesson in freedom and courage. They are putting to shame the Poles, the Hungarians, and other nations that are squandering their historical achievements. Several thousand demonstrators would be considered a failure for the protesters in Minsk, while it would be a significant success in Warsaw.

This is their moment, and it is likely just a moment (if the opposition prevails, democracy will bring with it all the disputes inherent to political dealings). For now, people are walking on air. They are united, they help each other, they like each other, they clean up after themselves. The protesters even avoid walking on grass, which is a serious challenge with thousands of people marching together. There is universal enthusiasm. This was the case in August 1980, when a myth arose and the West fell in love with Poland, just as it has fallen in love with Belarus today.

NOTES

1. Some of the rubber bullets came from Poland. The Polish Ministry of National Defense has yet to explain this, even though it is obligated to monitor sales by third countries.

2. "Belarus: Police Must Be Held Accountable for Violence,"Amnesty International, 31 August 2020, *www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/belarus-police-must-be-held-accountable-for-violence.*