

# BELARUS



**– where society  
is deprived of power  
but not agency**

by **Alesia Rudnik**

Protest rally against Lukashenko  
in Minsk, August 30, 2020.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



**I was terrified and scared but more than ever before I felt that I am a Belarusian and I could not stay home. I can't say that I felt exactly like a soldier preparing to die while protecting the Homeland, but a similar feeling overwhelmed me then.**

**T**hese are the words of one of the female protestors who took part in a street demonstration in Minsk on February 27, 2022. According to different estimates, between 1,000 and several thousand Belarusians came out to protest against the start of the war in Ukraine and against the referendum on constitutional change in Belarus.

The national vote covered amendments to the Constitution that granted immunity for a president that served his term, secured a transfer of power to the Security Council if a president “dies violently” as well as removing the country’s neutral status from the constitution. With the long practice of manipulating elections in Belarus, the stated number of 65,2 percent Belarusians who approved the amendments caused a lot of doubt. Additionally, the constitutional reform was developed without any participation of citizens; no public hearing was held.<sup>1</sup> Many foreign stakeholders criticized the upcoming referendum. For example, the Venice Commission noted that the amendments “fail to correct the strong imbalance of powers which already exists



People take part in an anti-war manifestation under the slogan "For Your and Our Freedom", on the occasion of the Belarusian Freedom Day, in Gdansk, northern Poland, March 27, 2022.

under the current Constitution and indeed may even aggravate it".<sup>2</sup> The Belarusian opposition was working on an alternative version of the new constitution,<sup>3</sup> open for public discussion online. Just before the referendum, the Belarusian opposition announced its campaign calling people to sabotage the voting ballots and gather at polling stations at 14.00.<sup>4</sup> However, after February 24, democratic leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya announced<sup>5</sup> that voting on the referendum was no longer about constitutional change but about protesting the war in Ukraine. The day of the national vote was the last large-scale protest in Belarus up to now. More than 500 people were detained and placed in detention facilities for up to 15 days.<sup>6</sup> For many, joining this protest was an act of unprecedented bravery, when striving for justice and peace outweighed their fear.

**REPRESSIONS AGAINST** representatives for civil society and private business, politicians, journalist, activists, and many others who have expressed discontent with the Belarusian regime have shaped Belarusians' lives in the last two years. The costs of any public criticism grew with increasingly restricted freedom of speech. By different estimates, from 100,000 to 500,000 out of 9.5 million Belarusians left the country, tens of thousands were charged and given short-term sentences and at least 1,443 recognized as political prisoners.<sup>7</sup> Severe human rights violations against Belarusian civil society deprived it of any decision-making opportunities within political life.

Since summer 2020 the international community has stood in solidarity with Belarusians who demanded free and fair elections but ended up oppressed and squeezed out of the country by the regime. However, since February 2022 the image of Belarusians abroad shifted along with Lukashenka's decision to assist Putin in launching the attacks against Ukraine from Belaru-

**"LESS THAN 3 PERCENT OF BELARUSIANS WANTED TO SEE BELARUS AS AN ALLY OF RUSSIA IN THE WAR."**



Leader of Democratic Belarus, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya meets Oleksiy Arestovich (Voice of Belarus) in Vilnius on September 8, 2022.

sian territory: A decision that Belarusians did not support but became trapped in.

Challenged by the Belarusian population in summer 2020 following the rigged election and unprecedented violence against the population, Lukashenka lost a part of his supporters. In November 2021, 30 percent of urban population in Belarus mentioned they would vote for Lukashenka as the future president. The same number would vote for an imprisoned presidential candidate, Viktor Babaryka, and around 10 percent for the opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In addition, Belarusian society was polarized in its trust in state institutions. While those supporting protest completely distrusted all state institutions, regime supporters demonstrated high loyalty to the army, courts, and Lukashenka.<sup>8</sup>

With the attitudes of general distrust of the state, lack of security and a high level of repression, Belarusians woke up on February 24 to the news that shook the whole world. Belarusians' position on the war was different from the support the "special operation" received from the population in Russia. Less than 3 percent of Belarusians wanted to see Belarus as an ally of Russia in the war.<sup>9</sup> Leader of democratic forces Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya immediately released a statement condemning the actions of Belarusian regime:

**One hour ago Russia, with the participation of Lukashenka's regime, launched a groundless and shameless military aggression against Ukraine. The regime turned our country into an aggressor. But Belarusians don't want war. Belarus strongly condemns this move and stands with Ukraine, reads Twitter of Tsikhanouskaya.<sup>10</sup>**

At the same time, the regime of Lukashenka started a long game

of reconvincing his electorate of the necessity of “helping” Russia, despite his long-term promises that Belarus will always remain a peaceful country. While Tsikhankouskaya’s support to Ukraine was rather an expected political statement, Lukashenka’s electorate had to change their vision. Firstly, for a long time, Lukashenka’s promise of stability was grounded on him serving as a guarantor of peace. For Lukashenka, the famous saying “aby ne bylo wajny” (anything but war) constructed one of his long-lasting promises that he can personally secure country’s independence and peace. Secondly, Lukashenka refused to formally recognize the annexation of Crimea or the self-proclaimed eastern Ukraine republics, DNR and LNR. Thirdly, he suggested Minsk as a negotiation platform for Russia and Ukraine in 2014. Those and many other political moves attracted a section of the Belarusian population. However, after Belarusian territory served as a platform to launch attacks on Kyiv, those principles had to be reconstructed for the electorate loyal to him. Thus, in March 2022 Lukashenka met with Putin where he promised to show “where the attack on Belarus was being prepared” allegedly pointing to Ukraine and Western countries.<sup>11</sup> He also tried to serve as a mediator in the conflict, suggesting Belarusian territory for the negotiations that were held on February 28 in Homiel. Before that Lukashenka had a phone call with Volodymyr Zelensky, during which he promised a ceasefire.<sup>12</sup> Unsuccessful negotiation and continued firing of rockets to Ukraine from Belarus made it clear that Lukashenka would not manage to maneuver and maintain neutrality, as he did after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Eastern Ukraine. The new status of Belarus as a co-aggressor pushed Belarusians to launch an underground partisan movement.

## Partisan movement

I watched this video and I couldn’t believe it but I also clearly understood that it was him. I went on a couple of dates with him 15 years ago. It was like a hit, a shot, my body was in cramps... I have watched the video again and again to make sure it was him, and to see some goal in his eyes to understand that he was ready to face the consequences for what he has done. I was really afraid that he would end up in a wheelchair, because he is an athlete, and he was shot in the knees. I was afraid he will remain in prison for years or murdered there. When the wave of fear went away, I was overwhelmed with hatred and anger for those who do this to my people, to us, to the best of us.

In this quote an independent Belarusian journalist from Barysau, currently living in exile, describes her reaction to the dramatic and cruel video that appeared on the state-controlled Telegram channels a few weeks after the outbreak of war. On the video she recognized a person she knew. Group of men had been violently detained and shot in the knees by the police. All of



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February 2022 Lukashenka’s (right) decided to assist Putin in launching the attacks against Ukraine from Belarusian territory.

them later became suspects in ‘terrorist’ cases for damaging railway infrastructure to prevent transportation of military equipment through Belarus to the Ukrainian border.

**RAILWAY PARTISANS** became known to the public in the first days of the war. A group of individual railway saboteurs, coordinated through the number of initiatives, targeted the rail network across whole country but mostly near the border with Ukraine where Russia transported its military equipment and manpower.

Rail is the most convenient and cheap means of transportation of food, people and equipment – disruption of it created a serious challenge for Russian troops in the speed of deliveries and probably even deterred a much stronger attack on Kyiv.<sup>13</sup> The first acts of sabotage happened on February 26 and 27, damaging rail alarm and control functions. These actions of the railway partisans were highly risky and involved preparation, knowledge and

skills. The acts were performed in small groups or pairs to maintain trust and remain unnoticed. Supposedly, Belarusian railway workers with their experience were involved in the most effective signal interlocking sabotages. The head of Ukrainian railway reached out to the Belarusian railway workers and thanked them for assisting Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Physical attacks on the railway were combined with the active work of Cyberpartisans – the initiative claimed to have hacked the Belarusian railway transportation management point. This led to slower movement of trains as well as a blockage of centralized control over the railway.

The word “partisans” has more than a symbolic meaning here. Though such initiatives as Cyberpartisans, ByPol took responsibility for the railway sabotage – the rest of the people risking their lives remained unknown. Similarly, thousands of reports and visual proofs of transportation of military equipment



Empty streets in Minsk, January 2022. Image from the official site for tourism reading “Minsk is a great place to visit for its many attractions. One of the top attractions to see in Minsk is the National Museum.”

PHOTO: CHASING WHEREABOUTS

through Belarus reached the project Hajun. Belarusians actively engaged in anonymous tips to the initiative in order to help gather information about Russia’s military movements.

**If we talk about Belarusian Hajun, a new project, the bot (chat-bot on Telegram) was only launched on February 28. 10,000 people sent more than 33,000 messages, commented the founder of the Hajun initiative for *Ukrainska Pravda*.<sup>15</sup>**

While according to Chatham House,<sup>16</sup> almost 40 percent urban Belarusians did not consider that Belarus is a participant of the Russian-Ukrainian war, residents of towns and villages close to the border observed the presence of the Russian army and witnessed military equipment being transported in the region. The independent poll of pro-protest Belarusians *Narodny Opro*s showed that one fifth of respondents regularly saw movements of manpower and weapons.<sup>17</sup> Not only did ordinary citizens report to initiatives tracking the military activity and preparations in Belarus but doctors who treated wounded Russians opened up about the scale of Russia’s casualties.<sup>18</sup> Leaks from the Belarusian army were another source for the public. Democratic initiatives and politicians reported on reluctance of the Belarusian

military personnel to join the war on Russia’s side if Lukashenka were to order it. Tsikhanouskaya and ByPol appealed to the generals of the Belarusian army, suggesting that they either sabotage entrance to Ukraine or surrender.<sup>19</sup> While the Belarusian army has not yet formally joined the war on the Russian side with its manpower, Lukashenka continued to supply the Russian army with military equipment and to host thousands of Russian soldiers in Belarus. Addressing the threat of disruption of the railway, on May 29 the regime approved an amendment to the Criminal Code that sanctioned the death penalty as a punishment for “terrorist acts”.<sup>20</sup> Dozens of suspects who had a significant impact in slowing down and sabotaging the Belarusian railway remain in custody. Most of them are in drastic conditions, like the group of partisans from Barysau, mentioned above, who were shot in the knees.

War resistance took an active turn with hundreds of Belarusians forming the first national division within the international legion of the Ukrainian army. The stories of the Belarusian men who decided to join the defense of Ukraine as a part of the Ukrainian army within the Belarusian Battalion named after Kastus Kalinouski are very varied, ranging from former political prisoners to professional soldiers who served in the French legion. Some of those Belarusians had already participated in defense

of Donbass since 2014 and were living in Ukraine. Others were in exile in countries such as Poland, Lithuania or Georgia. After being verified, they were allowed into the country for preparation. Many joined the defense missions of Bucha, Mykolaiv, and Lysychansk. By summer there were about 1,500 Belarusians formally employed by the Ukrainian army within the regiments and battalions formed by Belarusians.<sup>21</sup> Hundreds of other men and women joined the territorial defense or the volunteering initiatives. The Belarusian authorities immediately reacted to the formation of the Belarusian battalion in Ukraine and reported on 50 criminal cases against the soldiers.<sup>22</sup> Another source at the battalion reported on instances of blackmailing the soldiers while their relatives were held in custody and interrogated. When I reached a soldier who is currently off the front due to wounds and mental trauma, he said:

**I had not talked to my mom in months because I did not want to put her in danger as a target for the Belarusian secret services. Recently we have talked. I found out that they have already interrogated her and threatened her with imprisonment if I do not return to Belarus... But she still won't leave home.**

## Solidarity at all costs

“Koly nastane den, zakinchyt'sya viyna...” [When the day comes, the war will be over], – young singer Meriem Herasimenka sang the song by the famous Ukrainian band Okean Elzy in the cozy yard of a popular bar in Minsk. Hundreds of people around sang along and lit up their phones. Next day, Herasimenka was detained by the police and has still not been released. Currently she is accused of organizing action that ‘undermines public order’ and donating money to the Ukrainian Army.<sup>23</sup>

For those who did not observe the military preparations with their own eyes, the war felt less close but not less terrifying. For reasons of justice, and safety of their relatives, fellow Belarusians chose Ukraine as their second home, fleeing repressions in Belarus. Local protests among Belarusians occurred now and then despite the extreme threat to individual safety. Telegram groups of local communities that were created during the protests in 2020 have transformed from open groups to closed communities of neighbors who trust each other. They coordinate and organize small-scale individual protests with Belarusian historical white-red-white flags and slogans – but in 2022 they have to cover their faces. Reports on such protests regularly appear from districts of Minsk, for example Chy Zhouka and Barauliany. Another person from one of the Minsk city centers described to me their house community as a closed and trusted circle of people who gather in different apartments each week, despite their fear, and talk over a cup of tea while they discuss plans for the weekly partisanship (partisanship) or underground activities. Others demonstrate solidarity through graffiti

**“MANY ARE SCARED OR HAVE SIMPLY LOST HOPE FOR THE VICTORY OF DEMOCRACY.”**



PHOTO: INSTAGRAM.COM/MERIEM\_GERA

Belarusian singer Meryem Herasimenka was detained after performed a Ukrainian song in a bar in Minsk. She was arrested due to “active participation in group actions that grossly violate the public order”.

in support of Ukraine. Since 2021, several initiatives of samizdat or self-produced brochures with independent news have been distributed anonymously on paper to mailboxes.

**BELARUSIANS HAVE** actively donated to Ukrainian army, for which dozens of people have been identified and imprisoned, including Meriem Herasimenka, the singer mentioned above, who donated for Bayraktar and paid with her freedom. In Poland, Belarusians donated \$20,000 for the needs of Ukrainian army within a short time.<sup>24</sup> In Sweden, the Belarusian diaspora has donated a car and gathered money for thermal clothes and a thermal imaging camera for the Ukrainian soldiers. Foundations that actively supported former political prisoners, Belarusian refugees, and other suffering from political repression in Belarus, have partly restructured their work to help out Ukrainians in need.

**FOR OTHER BELARUSIANS** inside the country, risks related to expressing their public opinion resulted in acceptance of the reality. Many are scared or have simply lost hope for the victory of democracy and continued their daily lives “without politics”. Others enjoyed the momentum of free Belarus in 2020 but have given up. Continuing to live in Belarus without risk-

ing detention required Belarusians to depoliticize (at least publicly), avoid any open activism and obey the new rules.

## Survival despite oppression

The news on mobilization in Russia came as another blow. Thousands of Russian citizens came to Belarus in an attempt to hide from the potential military draft. This news has triggered worries that mobilization will be announced in Belarus. Some independent media reported on queues to visa centers, lines to prepare

papers for taking pets abroad, and queues to renew passports. At the same time, Minsk has become a new service hub for Russians who came to open a bank account to receive Visa or Mastercard, now banned for Russian citizens, to visit shopping malls with world-famous clothing chains that recently closed in Russia, and most importantly, to hide from the military draft.<sup>25</sup> 66 percent of Belarusians surveyed by the above-mentioned Narodny Opros state that they are not ready to assist the Russians arriving in Belarus but will not create any obstacles either.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, Belarusian authorities have reported that the KGB will now have the power to forbid people to leave the country for six months to secure national interests. Most likely the measure is targeting Belarusian men eligible for mobilization and representatives of law enforcement services.<sup>27</sup> Those who managed to leave the country have been facing obstacles legalizing in other countries. First of all, it targets Belarusians who were living in Ukraine and emigrated to EU countries, as they are not eligible for temporary protection as war refugees.

**INSIDE BELARUS**, the repression wave is hitting harder and harder. In October, the KGB raided the Academy of Science and detained over 44 employers;<sup>28</sup> in Hrodna the history lecturer at the state university was fired after spending three days in prison for distributing “extremist materials”.<sup>29</sup> Earlier the authorities detained several owners of food chain stores in a framework of fictional criminal cases.<sup>30</sup> Against this background, repressing Belarusian citizens, Lukashenka continues to strengthen Russia’s military might. Recently, reports from monitoring initiatives suggested that Belarus is supplying Russia with its old tanks<sup>31</sup> and that Belarus and Russia will activate its joint training exercises on the western border of Belarus.<sup>32</sup>

Whether or not Lukashenka will send his troops to take part in the war against Ukraine on Russia’s side, the aftermath of the decisions made by the strong man in Minsk have significantly damaged the international image of Belarusians, created the strongest distrust in the political system and undermined guarantees for the country’s independence in future. Unfortunately, this is a challenge for Belarusian society and opposition to be solved in future, as it is unlikely that Ukraine’s victory will lead to automatic democratization of Belarus. Until Lukashenka checks the movements of military equipment and activities potentially resulting in new attacks on Ukraine, and negotiates with Putin, the international community will continue to consider him a main actor. In this picture, the role of the democratic forces embodied by Tsikhanouskaya, her office, cabinet and diaspora, fades away. Supporting the initiatives of democratic politicians and diaspora projects is therefore vital to strengthening and supporting a traumatized civil society in Belarus. ❌

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