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Democratic breakthrough and repressive response in Belarus: what should we do next?

Presidential elections were held in Belarus in 2020. The announced result was not accepted by the society, after which mass protests began. Why did this happen, after all, it was known before that the elections in Belarus were just an imitation?

I can suggest a few possible reasons to explain why the democratic breakthrough occurred:

- society in Belarus is tired of one person in power for more than a quarter of a century;
- a generation of people has grown up in Belarus who perceive Lukashenka's political approaches as archaic and hindering the development of the country;
- several presidential candidates appeared who sparked public interest and quickly gained popularity (Viktor Babariko, Valery Tsepkalo, Sergei Tikhanovsky);
- these candidates were prevented from participating in the elections through clearly unfair machinations by the authorities, and two of them were arrested;
- Svetlana Tikhanovskaya was registered as a candidate, who turned out to be the only candidate capable of gaining the trust of society, and supporters of change united around her;
- the majority of citizens in Belarus are confident that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya won the presidential elections in the first round, while the Central Election Commission announced that Lukashenka won with a score of over 80%;
- an additional reason for the protest was violence by the security forces against peaceful protesters.

The protest in Belarus lasted for several months, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in different settlements across the country. Mass protests were suppressed with violence, but the protest has not disappeared, it is taking on new forms.

What to do? What strategies did the democratic forces have, what is their current strategy?

The first strategy was the electoral strategy, and we won the elections. The majority of Belarusians do not doubt this, the leadership of the leading countries of the world does not doubt this either. Everyone knows that Lukashenka lost the elections, even he knows that. The best proof of this is Lukashenka's inauguration, which he held in secret, so that even the inauguration participants did not know where they were going and why.

The second strategy was the post-election strategy, we had two main goals: the legitimization of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and the delegitimization of Lukashenka. Both in Belarus and in the world. We have achieved these goals to a great extent. Unfortunately, Lukashenka is still recognized as the head of state “de-facto”, as he is still in control of the situation in the country. But de facto recognition is not the same as de jure recognition.

Now the democratic forces are implementing a **third strategy**. This is a strategy for changing the balance of forces and resolving the political crisis in Belarus, a strategy for restoring the right of choice to people. How is this strategy different? It is inclusive; a variety of organizations, initiatives, and just citizens participate in it. It is aimed at using distributed resources and concentrating them on achieving common goals. It is aimed at resolving the political crisis through dialogue, and in order to start a dialogue it presupposes pressure from society and international pressure on those who hold power in Belarus. Democratic forces have three main demands: stop repression, release political prisoners, and hold new, fair elections. They propose negotiations to negotiate new elections, but those holding power are refusing to negotiate for now. Therefore, pressure is needed on them. Of course, the change in the situation in Belarus is what we, the citizens of Belarus, are responsible for. At the same time, international support is very important for us. Examples of the support:

- international solidarity. We feel it;
- non-recognition of the legitimacy of the regime;
- initiation of investigations within the framework of universal jurisdiction for crimes against humanity in Belarus;
- sanctions for massive human rights violations;
- support for the repressed, civil society, independent media.

Where do we proceed when implementing our strategy?

Belarus is going through a serious crisis. This is a political crisis, but it is developing into an economic and humanitarian crisis. Economic - because there is lawlessness in the country, and the development of the economy in such conditions is impossible, and no responsible investor will invest in such a country. Humanitarian - because there is lawlessness in the country, and the state does not ensure the safety of its citizens. Law enforcement agencies are fighting not with criminals, but with the people. The most active and able-bodied citizens are leaving the country.

The crisis that Belarus finds itself in is caused by one reason - on August 9, 2021, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya won the presidential elections, but former President Alexander Lukashenko, who lost the elections and falsified their result, refuses to

leave his post. The underlying controversy that triggered the crisis is that the former president is trying to stay in power against the will of the electorate. It is possible to get out of the crisis only when the basic contradiction is resolved. All other actions can only drag out time and deepen the crisis. The basic contradiction can be resolved by holding new, free and fair presidential elections. And the best way to move on to new elections is to negotiate and

make decisions on the procedure for the elections, which would avoid confrontation in society and violence.

Lukashenko leaves for several

reasons: his attempts to remain in power without the support of the people only exacerbate the crisis;

- he has been in power for too long, and society is tired of him;
- the use of violence to hold on to power led to persistent rejection of Lukashenka by the people;
- Lukashenka cannot govern the country with normal methods, and he has no ideas for development;
- Under Lukashenko, Belarus has become an outcast in the international arena, sanctions against his regime are being strengthened;
- The Lukashenka regime does not have sufficient resources to govern when the country does not develop, but degrades;
- In the end, the old always makes way for the new.

There are many more reasons, but the main thing is that the former president became a brake on the country's development, and the majority of Belarusians have lost confidence in him.

How will Lukashenka leave?

Different versions:

- Negotiations for new elections. This is what we have been offering since August 2020, and this is the best option for everyone, for our society, for the country, and for Lukashenka.
- Resignation of Lukashenka. Also a good option for everyone.
- Lukashenka's flight from the country. Quite a possible option.
- Coup d'état. We consider this option undesirable, as it will create a bad precedent in the history of Belarus and may lead to a difficult political situation. But this option is possible, since without Lukashenka's departure the crisis will intensify.
- Lukashenka's leaves for health reasons. He hardly needs to wait for this.

Negotiating for a peaceful way out of the crisis is something that **benefits the whole of society**, it is something that people demand (more than **55** percent, according to a public opinion poll conducted in September 2021). Lukashenka wants to return to the **past** and is trying to drag all of us there. But this is unreal. What is happening **now** is unstable and does not suit anyone. People do not see prospects in a situation where there is no confidence that loved ones, leaving the house in the morning, will return home in the evening. It is obvious that a common interest for all can be a peaceful way out of this situation through negotiations, after which everyone can breathe freely. You cannot find solutions in the past,

you cannot drag out what is happening now. Solutions can and should be sought in the **future**. And we propose to negotiate new elections to take a step into the future and allow the country to develop.