Belarus Starts the Series of "Corona-Crisis Revolutions" – Pavel K. Baev

Revolutions and upheavals leading to revolutions always come as a shocking surprise, but never out of nothing. In hindsight, they are always explained as determined by accumulation of grievances and escalation of tensions – and they tend to happen in series, like in the Eastern Europe in 1989, color revolutions in early 2000s, and in the Arab world in 2011. It is logical to assume, therefore, that the extraordinary severe impact on the world system and on the social integrity of many states produced by the Covid-19 pandemic might resonate in a sequence of uprisings. For example, just a month ago, it was entirely implausible that Belarus would experience a sharp revolutionary crisis, but the apparent and persistent

mismanagement of the coronavirus epidemic destroyed the habitual stability.

President Alexander Lukashenko, first elected in 1994, was supremely confident in his ability to ensure the desired outcome in the August 9, 2020 presidential elections, and this arrogance resulted in a sequence of blunders, leaving him desperately clinging to power with only the police and the military remaining loyal to the regime (Moshes & Nizhnikau, 2020). The first of these blunders was the resolute downplaying the covid-19 epidemic as a "corona-psychosis", so that not only no quarantine measures were instituted but also the Victory Day parade was held as usual on May 9, while it was postponed in Russia (Tsarik, 2020). Presidential suggestions to treat the deadly virus as a common cold and use of sauna and vodka for prevention appalled many in the vulnerable groups and eroded Lukashenko's usually solid support base among the pensioners.

The choice for adopting such a uniquely feckless policy was informed not so much by personal idiosyncrasy but primarily by the desire to minimize the economic damage from the epidemic. The heavy industry that forms the backbone of Belarus economy is oriented primarily to the Russian market, and the contraction of demand there was a problem that Lukashenko was afraid to aggravate by ordering lockdowns. He positioned himself as the big boss over the state-owned enterprises and sought to justify this role by acting as protector against predatory privatization (Sonin, 2020). The workers, however, were fed up with the centrally-planned mismanagement and their determination to go on strike has become a major force in the revolution (Walker & Roth, 2020).

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What secured a relative success for Belarus economy for the last couple of decades was Lukashenko's tough bargaining with Moscow over trade preferences and subsidies provided in the framework of the so-called "union state" (Åslund,

2020). This generosity, however, was gradually curtailed as Putin became irritated with the reluctance in Minsk to accept his offers for ever-closer economic and political integration. Lukashenko tried to portray himself as a defender of Belarus sovereignty and made the defiance against pressure from Russia a key theme of the election campaign.

That posturing impressed some geopolitically-minded US experts, and the rare visit of US State Secretary Mike Pompeo to Minsk last February opened for Lukashenko some new opportunities (Makhovsky, 2020). Moscow paid scant attention, but when Lukashenko opted for presenting material evidence of Russia's hostile intentions by arresting 33 mercenaries from the notorious "Wagner group" (who were apparently using Minsk as a transit hub), the reaction was furious (Seddon & Shotter, 2020). Putin conveyed a meeting of his Security Council but refused to call his "ally" expecting that he would soon come to common political senses.

Huge rallies and unexpected strikes indeed pushed Lukashenko in a tight corner, so he had to release the "Wagner" hostages and plea Putin for urgent help. The Russian leader, however, has remained hesitant to launch a cross-border intervention in the absence of any signs of NATO interference, which the desperate Belarus leader tried to invent. Russian mainstream media has provided remarkably extensive coverage of protests and published few commentaries arguing for coming to the rescue of neighbor-in-need (Pertsev, 2020). The difficult dilemma for Putin is that propping up now hugely unpopular Lukashenko is an expensive proposition, but allowing the street protests to prevail is a dangerous precedent, too. Facing such tough choices, he typically procrastinates, and the crisis in Belarus is stuck in a precarious culmination.

Revolutions, like politics, are inherently local, and Belarus features a particular combination of domestic discontent and external influences, so that it could be a *sui generis*case (Gould-Davies, 2020). The strong impact from the covid-19 pandemic, however, signals that it could also be a part of a larger trend of escalating unrest and makes it possible to identify probable further crisis. In the post-Soviet space, Moldova has experienced a bad epidemic, and its chaotic

political arena can be upset by public anger. Armenia has also suffered badly, but its politics shows greater resilience after the 2018 revolution. Further south, Iran is hit with extraordinary force, and while several previous explosions of street protests were futile, a new one can produce greater resonance. Central Asia constitutes a wide area of uncertainty, where reliable data is non-existent and political structures – whether despotic (as in Turkmenistan) or quasi-democratic (as in Kyrgyzstan) – are fragile. One clear lesson from the still-evolving Belarus crisis is that it is not the scale of corona-disaster as such that brings the unrest; what matters is the readiness of politicians to recognize the responsibility for mitigating the menace and to communicate to the polity the need to stand together against it.

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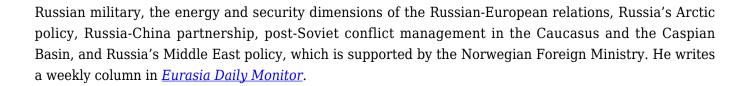
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