EUROPE 02.06.2020

# Stress test for Lukashenko

## With protests across the country, Belarus' presidential election may become the most serious stress test for Lukashenko yet

*Read this article in Russian.*

The presidential campaign in Belarus began on 11 May, against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic and economic decline. Minsk is fighting the pandemic in a particular way: unlike its neighbours, the country has introduced very light quarantine measures and continues to allow mass events such as, football championship, Easter celebrations and a parade on 9 May. A recent poll by SATIO company showed that more than half of Belarusians do not approve of the measures taken by the authorities, while more than 70 per cent want to cancel all mass events.

Despite the absence of a lockdown, economic growth has been undermined by the oil war with Russia since the beginning of the year, followed by a sharp decline in demand for petroleum products in Europe and potash fertilizers in Asia. These are the two main Belarusian export commodities. On top of that comes the general slowdown of the economy of both Belarus and its trade partners. The result is a 1.3 per cent decline in GDP in the first four months of the year, with a forecast of at least 5 per cent recession by the end of the year. Minsk has already applied for USD 3bn in foreign loans to the IMF, European banks and China.

Because of the general uncertainty, Alexander Lukashenko has not even addressed the people and Parliament with his annual April message. But he still decided to hold the presidential election; and even ahead of schedule – on 9 August instead of 30 August.

This decision shows that the authorities no longer regard turnout as a priority. If necessary, the figures can be provided election commissions in their reports. Instead, a bet has been placed on demobilising the electorate. The authorities have a reason to be afraid of politicisation by election day: the first signs of a growth in protest activity are already visible.

## YouTube in Belarusian politics

However, it's not the traditional opposition that plays a key role, but video bloggers – a new phenomenon of Belarusian politics. The most prominent among them is Sergei Tikhanovsky. He created scattered movement of supporters around him under the sharp slogan 'No pasaran – stop the cockroach', hinting at the permanent president of Belarus.

Tikhanovsky has a popular YouTube channel called 'Country for Life'. This spring, the blogger and his comrades-in-arms began traveling around the country and shooting videos from the central squares of small and large cities, where his subscribers came and talked about their more frequent economic problems and arbitrariness of local authorities.

When the Tikhanovsky announced the first serious protest action, modelled after the Ukrainian Automaidan, and called on his supporters to block the centre of Babruisk as a protest against the parade in Minsk, he and more than a hundred of his supporters all over the country were detained.

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Tikhanovsky has no other goal than to change the president through mass protests. He uses the electoral and ideological field of Lukashenko himself, addressing his former supporters – the poor residents of the regions, hit by a protracted crisis in the country. All this makes him particularly dangerous for the authorities.

For formal reasons, Tikhanovsky was not allowed to stand as a candidate in the election while he was serving his arrest. But Svetlana, the wife of the blogger, joined the election race instead of him as a technical candidate to take advantage of collecting signatures to organise legal protests.

## Establishment candidates

But the surprise came from somewhere else. Two establishment candidates with solid management experience joined the campaign. One establishment heavyweight, Alexander Kazulin, was nominated for president in 2006 and the former rector of the Belarusian State University. After the election he spent two years in prison. Now, 14 years later, Valery Tsepkalo, former deputy head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and creator of the Belarusian Silicon Valley – High Technology Park (HTP) –, as well as Viktor Babariko, ex-head of one of the largest

banks in the country – Belgazprombank –, a well-known philanthropist in the country, were nominated for presidency.

Both of them were immediately suspected of being ‘sparring partners’ of the authorities. But so far, there's no conclusive evidence suggesting this. On the contrary, the Belarusian authorities have never played such complex games, all their sparring-partners were always easily recognisable and had no real political weight. Both Tsepkalo and Babariko did not emerge from the void, they were known for their liberal views long before the campaign. The former had a reason to resent the state: in 2017, he was fired from his own brainchild, the HTP. Both Babariko and Tsepkalo crititicse the president and he attacked both of them in return.

The Belarusian authorities have to be extremely cautious with political experiments. It is simply risky to release sparring partners with such biographies. Babariko and Tsepkalo have money, connections in the establishment  and business circles, as well as the potential to quickly gain a rating in a situation when the president’s support is not high.

The ex-banker managed to gather a huge group by Belarusian standards – about 9,000 people within a week. Only Lukashenko has more, but administrative resources are involved in the formation of lists. According to the polls published on the websites of the largest non-governmental media, Babariko would defeat Lukashenko and all other candidates. This, of course, is not a representative survey, but gives an idea that the opponents of the president can quickly gain popularity.

## What do they want?

The question about the goals of these candidates remains open. People with a long-term background in the system (Tsepkalo was in Lukashenko’s team back in the mid-1990s) cannot but understand how much the result of the Belarusian elections is controlled by the authorities. Tsepkalo has not yet made it clear how he is going to break through the barriers of the authoritarian machine. Babariko is sure that if he gets a convincing majority, Lukashenko will not be able to falsify the elections.

So far, their unexpected march into politics looks more like a product of a long personal dissatisfaction with Lukashenko’s rule, ambitions and sense of his own mission. Perhaps, there are hopes to draw some elites to their side, or this is just an attempt to create political capital for the future, when the regime in Belarus will become less consolidated.

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For now their nomination looks like a symptom of a wider process – a certain fermentation among the establishment and business elite tired of many years of Lukashenko's rule and stagnation in the Belarusian economy, which has not shown sustainable growth for almost 10 years. This is not yet a split, but the elite is not as ideologically monolithic as it once was.

So far there is no reason to predict the collapse of the Belarusian regime this summer. About USD 7bn of gold and foreign currency reserves will be enough to plug the holes in the economy before the elections. It is possible to re-credit on foreign markets..

The authorities have many ways to stop dangerous competitors on the fly – for example, by not registering candidates too popular or announcing the usual 3-4 per cent after voting. Leaders of street protests can be preventively put in jail according to old administrative protocols. There are still loyal law enforcers for dispersing the protests themselves.

That's exactly what happened on 29 of May. Sergey Tikhanovsky and a number of his supporters were arrested on charges of violence against the police officer during one of his regional rallies. An incident that triggered the crackdown is widely believed to have been an orchestrated police set up. The news has sparked new protests with thousands heading to the streets of Minsk and smaller towns on 31 May to sign for nomination of alternative candidates.

It is the first time that the Belarusian authorities face such a bouquet of external and internal challenges during the election year. And this is against the background of the crisis in relations with Russia as well as the European Union's alertness because of the repressions that started in the country. Everything points to the fact that 2020 may become the most serious stress test for Lukashenko's system since the first years of his presidency.