

**Tale of Two Pandemics: How COVID-19 exposed
governance gaps in authoritarian states**
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Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the
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Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, and other members of the committee: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment to address the importance of Protecting Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus. I would like to thank my colleagues who oversee the Belarus portfolio in the Eurasia division of the International Republican Institute (IRI) for their support and input in preparing this testimony.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and attendant *infodemic* exposed and exacerbated transparency and governance gaps across Europe and Eurasia. The pandemic was – and continues to be – an unprecedented stress test for democratic resilience, one that the Belarusian regime has failed spectacularly, demonstrating the impotence and lack of sustainability inherent in authoritarian structures. Spontaneous civic activism filled the gap left by the state’s failure to address or even acknowledge the pandemic, which exposed how disconnected the country’s leadership was from the concerns of its citizens. Suddenly, more than two decades since coming to power, *batka* – Lukashenka’s nickname which means father in Belarusian – was no longer the fatherly protector of the nation. He was an authoritarian relic of the Soviet past that the Belarusian people have collectively transcended. What distinguishes democracies from other forms of government is their ability to learn lessons, adapt and evolve to become more resilient and better serve the interest of the people. So far, President Lukashenka is instead opting for repression and retrenchment. Despite these authoritarian tactics the Belarusian nation has been born and garnered admiration from all corners of the world.

COVID-19 – Challenges and Responses

In Europe, as elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed institutional and governance inefficiencies that undermined the efforts of states to address the public health crisis and further eroded public confidence in the government. The full fallout, both in terms of political competitions as well as long-term public health consequences, remains to be seen. However, the impact on public trust, elections and electoral processes around the European continent has already been felt as the often-criticized handling of the crisis dominated political discourse on the individual state, as well as EU-wide levels. As the number of infections rose, authorities found they not only had to deal with an evolving public health crisis but also an attendant surge of dis- and mis-information that in some places actively undermined efforts to ensure public compliance with proscribed efforts to contain the virus.¹ According to the OECD, trust in government² is key to its ability to effectively implement policy and maintain social cohesion. Moreover, a “government’s values, such as high levels of integrity, fairness and openness of institutions are strong predictors of public trust. Similarly, government’s competence - its responsiveness and reliability in delivering public services and anticipating new needs - are crucial for boosting trust in institutions.” As elaborated below – Lukashenka lost public trust by continuing to deny the

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf

² <https://www.oecd.org/governance/trust-in-government.htm>



existence of COVID-19 and advising the use of vodka as a preventative treatment while people were becoming gravely ill and dying.

Infodemic

Disinformation thrives in an environment of fear, uncertainty and mistrust. It can be targeted, malicious in intent and driven externally, but also organic. Influence operations, including the spread of mis- and dis-information have long been part of the arsenal of competition among political actors. Whether the aim is to propagate a certain position or to sow uncertainty, ultimately the effect is an erosion of social cohesion and public trust in the authorities. And today's unprecedented global pandemic offered fertile ground for the transmission of these societal ills.

However, there were also positive developments. Prior to the pandemic, although awareness of the challenges malicious disinformation poses increased, it was still largely contained to specific interest circles. However, COVID-19 caused such perceptions to jump the proverbial fence from defense and security concerns to those revolving around a genuine existential crisis to societies worldwide, spurred by the disinformation-fractured social fabric. Another positive outcome was the realization that the threat and challenge could only be met with a whole of society response. A number of governments, as well as EU institutions, understood the need to engage non-governmental organizations,³ including several members of IRI's [Beacon Network](#)⁴, to push back against the flood of conspiracy theories and disinformation. This not only entailed identifying and debunking false information but also recognizing that civil actors enjoyed greater trust among the general population and therefore were more effective in ensuring compliance than government agencies.

The European Union's External Action Service concluded by mid-March that disinformation could have a "direct impact on public health and security."⁵ In response, its StratCom division began publishing a series of reports tracking the narrative arc of the infodemic, particularly from the Russian and Chinese "official and state-backed" actors targeting audiences in the EU and its neighborhood with misinformation and conspiracy narratives.⁶ The upshot was that while the themes of disinformation revolved around the health crisis, they essentially repeated earlier narratives that sought to erode trust in public institutions and question the ability of democracies to serve their citizens or – in other words – to deliver. Distrust, like disinformation, thrives when there is lack of transparency and perceived lack of accountability that ultimately renders the state ineffectual. In the context of COVID-19, the stakes of distrust-fueled lack of public compliance with health measures were very high. Thus, the need to identify and close governance gaps in order to regain public confidence and increase democratic resilience have taken on a new impetus and gained traction in policy circles within the EU. A crucial component of this became increasing transparency and accountability, including the need for greater civil society engagement.⁷

³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/fighting-disinformation/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.iribeaconproject.org/>

⁵ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/category/blog/eeas-special-reports/>

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-74-resilient-institutions-in-times-of-crisis-transparency-accountability-and-participation-at-the-national-level-key-to-effective-response-to-covid-19/>

Broken Social Contract and New Demand for Accountability in Belarus

Aliaksandr Lukashenka has maintained his regime for 26 years based on the legitimacy of his image as a benevolent father of the Belarusians. He protected the interests and well-being of his people and in return they implicitly consented to not questioning the methods used to maintain stability and order. His legitimacy was lost in the course of the recent presidential election campaign and the blatant falsification of official election results. Each subsequent move away from post-election dialogue backed the regime further into a corner and chipped away at both its legitimacy and its options. In the immediate aftermath of the election, Lukashenka could have walked away from office with some credibility to assert his legacy as father of the modern independent Belarusian state. Instead, he now seems set on destroying it.

Belarus has witnessed almost continuous protests since the Central Election Commission handed the victory to Lukashenka. Few question that the elections were fraudulent and not representative of the will of the people of Belarus. Consequently, the violent crackdown on protesters in the days that followed exposed the brutality the regime had been keeping somewhat in check the past few years as it courted the US and EU in its ongoing attempts to balance between its eastern and western neighbors. The size, scale, consistency and duration of the protests have caught many by surprise, not the least the Belarusian regime itself. This raised the question of what had changed in a country many characterized as a stagnant Soviet-era theme park with a repressed democratic opposition and an unchallenged dictator who guaranteed the country's stability cherished above all by its citizens and the international community.

What was different this time was that ironically – given his populist predilection and roots – Lukashenka clearly lost touch with the source of his legitimacy, the Belarusian people. And perhaps succumbing to the hubris that often seems to be the undoing of authoritarian leaders, he failed to appreciate that human society by its nature is not stagnant. Over the past 26 years, Belarusian society has transformed as have its expectations towards its leaders. But Lukashenka's blind mishandling of the COVID-19 epidemic seemed to have turned the tide for many. His insistence to hold Victory Day celebrations (the only other post-Soviet state to do so this year was Turkmenistan) undermined his image as the protector of Belarusians, exposing him instead to criticism that he cared more for his public image than the welfare of vulnerable war veterans. Moreover, Lukashenka's callous disregard for the health and safety of citizens by first denying and then underplaying the pandemic, directly contravened one of the core pillars of his 'social contract'⁸ with the people, whereby state-sponsored benefits are offered in exchange for political apathy. Though the state eventually rallied its considerable resources to contain the virus, the intermittent period was enough to raise public ire and launch unprecedented civic mobilization efforts that would roll its momentum into the election race. Additionally, roused by a fresher, more diverse and more viable slate of opposition candidates, the Belarusian citizens for the first time took to the ballot box as a means of political expression.

COVID-19 as driver of social cohesion

There has been an uptick in public protests in Belarus in recent years, usually localized or addressing specific topics, such as the parasite tax (a controversial law obliging unemployed

⁸ <http://balticworlds.com/the-covid-19-pandemic-in-belarus-wither-the-social-contract/>

people to pay taxes as punishment for unemployment), also indicating the country was perhaps not as stagnant as it appeared from outside and that slowly the public's relations to its government was changing. The state's failure to act against the pandemic created the impetus for civic engagement by non-traditional actors and set the stage for what followed.⁹ As reports spread of medical staff lacking adequate equipment and the state continued to underreport infections, there was a flourishing of efforts to support the medical community from online fundraising efforts, to 3D mask printing, to school teachers sewing cloth masks. Support for the medical workers and the country's most vulnerable also drew in the business community, most notably within the burgeoning IT sector,¹⁰ and united society in a common cause. The belated and somewhat blasé response by authorities to the pandemic merely stoked public anger, as did the regime's behavior in the months leading up to the elections. Opposition candidates had always been arrested after elections, not before. Similarly, the preemptive moves clamping down on independent media and opposition actors, while rather par for the course, were unusual in their timing and intensity.

The emergence of Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya as the main opposition candidate, reluctantly assuming the mantle after the arrest of her husband, a famed video blogger who ran in the election prior to his arrest, served as a catalyst for public discontent and rejection of the status quo. This is evidence of the birth of a form of civic nationalism rallying around calls for good governance, transparency and accountability, as well as state sovereignty and independence. Ironically, the emphasis on national sovereignty has been one of Lukashenka's leitmotifs of recent years as he balanced the country's interests between Russia and the West. That balancing act is now done as he his future is firmly in the hands of Russia.

Just as the state's action (or inaction) vis-a-vis COVID-19 mobilized citizens to the polls, so too did its egregious behavior on election day send people into the streets to protest. It is hard to gauge the degree to which there was a genuine expectation that the Central Election Commission would break with tradition and accurately tabulate election results. However, the margin by which the incumbent was claimed to have won (80%) was disingenuous enough to further erode support for the regime and spark public outrage. Likewise, the disproportional violence and mass arrests during protests immediately following the elections that in the past had so effectively cowed dissent, this time simply drew more people into the streets.

Women changing the game

The role and prominence of women both in the election and protests has been a game changer. Lukashenka's dismissal of the viability of a female challenger, allowing Tikhanouskaya to register as a candidate and letting her campaign to roll through the country largely undisrupted, reflects the regime's inherent misogyny. It also marks another point at which Lukashenka failed to read the public mood until it was too late. The post-election women's protests also throw a wrench into the security services' usual crowd dispersal tactics, both in terms of their hesitancy to use physical force against women and being powerless when women interfere to prevent the harsher treatment of their male compatriots. The apparent abduction of Maria Kolesnikova, one last of the trio of women who led the campaign to have remained in the country, reportedly by masked men in Minsk this past Monday (7 September) could be a sign of the regime's further desperation and lack of

⁹ <https://eapcivilsociety.eu/news/civil-society-news/localcorrespondent-opinion-how-covid-19-changed-life-in-belarus.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/stories/how-techies-belarus-help-prevent-spread-covid-19-eu-help>

options. Reports of her subsequent resistance to forced deportation into Ukraine the following morning, by tearing up her passport, creates a dilemma for the regime.

Looking ahead

Though it is still not clear how or when the ongoing wave of protests will end, it is clear there is no return to status quo ante. Lukashenka's position is untenable, but this is clearly not a lesson he is learning. While there have been resignations (reportedly 900 officers resigned from the OMON, a special police unit), it seems overall the administration and security forces have decided to continue supporting the regime rather than opting for the negotiated transition proposed by the opposition. Perhaps they are sticking with the devil they know due to the fear that transition will seek to call them to account. There has also been a notable increase in the presence of Russian nationals, particularly in Belarusian State media, which saw a number of resignations and strikes, as well as in security services. Notably, it is often RT journalists who are replacing them and the outlet's presence in Belarus is growing. It was one of the few foreign media not stripped of accreditation, whereas all independent local and Western media were banned. Indeed, Lukashenka officially thanked RT for the support and friendly coverage,¹¹ and Margarita Simonyan, RT's editor in chief/lead ideologue is currently in Minsk. Lukashenka has few options but to turn to Moscow (as well as China and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States) openly for support. But this is the choice he has made and with every decision to crush and punish protests, instead of seeking to engage in dialogue, he makes a conscious choice of where he is taking his country.

The EU and US must above all respect the will of the Belarusian people and its calls for democratic governance, accountability and transparency. Lukashenka must accept responsibility for his choices and actions. His temperament makes him an uncomfortable nuisance in the eyes of Moscow, which would likely also welcome his departure. However, the replacement they might propose won't be better for Belarus and simply serve the Kremlin's geopolitical interest of having a strongly Pro-Russian leader in place.

Recommendations

For the international community, the main takeaway is that support for democracy requires patience, as well as a long-term commitment and vision. The crowds that come out to the streets of cities, towns and villages of Belarus are calling for accountability, transparency, fairness and respect. And that in part is thanks to the work of IRI, along with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), Solidarity Center and National Endowment for Democracy (NED), as well as IRI's European partners.

The Civic Forum of the Eastern Partnership conducted a monitoring mission to Belarus in August and formulated a series of recommendations to the EU and member states¹². Additionally, the EU and its individual members continue to make strong statements of the state of affairs in Belarus. Coordinating strategies with transatlantic allies should be a priority and include:

- Calls for dialogue between the authorities and representatives of the Belarusian people.

¹¹ <https://www.polishnews.co.uk/alyaksandr-lukashenka-thanks-rt-tv-for-the-support-of-belarusian-state-media/>

¹² <https://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/EaPCSF-Monitoring-Mission-report-Belarus-political-societal-developments-elections.pdf>

- Calls for immediate release of political prisoners, as well as dismissal of any pending cases, charges and fines against those detained.
- Support the political opposition's demands for holding new elections under international supervision and beginning negotiations on a post-Lukashenka transition.
- Increasing long-term support to democracy-building efforts, including providing institutional assistance to independent media, particularly those within the country, and fostering civic activism in the country's regions.
- Broadening of sanctions against the Lukashenka regime and its supporters.
- Reintroducing targeted economic sanctions.
- Withdrawing funding to programs involving state institutions, including professional training exchanges.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the opportunity to represent an organization that is helping to promote good governance in Europe and Eurasia and around the world, with the ongoing generous support of the Congress. I am proud to have previously long served with NED and worked with NDI, CIPE and Solidarity Center on Belarus and the region.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.