

Peace for Change

by Isabelle Diserens, MIA Student

This July, I started an academic internship of three months at the Swiss Embassy in Minsk, Belarus. Before I left, people were often asking me “Why Belarus? Is there something to do there? Is it still part of Russia?” Indeed, up to the presidential election on the 9th of August, no one, not even Belarusians, could have imagined that Belarus would become the past months’ international headlines.

It is the first time in the Belarusian history that a large part of the population managed to unite on such a large scale to call for a change in the political regime. The demand of the opposition movement consists of the introduction of new free and fair presidential elections that go hand-in-hand with the departure of Alexander Lukashenko, in power since 1994. Before I move on to my personal experience, let me first give you a brief overview of Belarus’ past 26 years in order to better understand what makes today’s events historic: After the fall of the USSR in 1991, newly independent Belarus first suffered from an important economic crisis, which led to Lukashenko’s election in 1994. In fact, the president’s legitimacy was, until today, based especially on his reputation for allowing a controlled modernization and economic development, possible through the introduction of “market socialism”. Simultaneously, Lukashenko maintained a certain level of repression, which did not allow strong opposition parties to grow. Faced with such a political and societal construction, Belarusians seem to have had to accept an authoritarian state which, despite a lack of liberal ideas, guaranteed them a more or less stable daily life. However, Belarus has not escaped to an opening and digitalization over the last twenty years, giving birth to a more pluralist and critical identity, in particular among young people society.

Being on the spot, I could witness myself how this summer the country experienced a real turning point in which civil society, especially women, as well as the use of social medias played an extremely important role.

The explanation for the current mobilization lies in a series of complex and unexpected events, starting with the pandemic. Yet, I will only focus on the events which I personally experienced: To begin, a week after I arrived, on the 14th June, the candidates registered on the ballot for the presidential election taking place on the 9th August were officially announced by the national electoral commission, which resulted in the exclusion of the two potential opposition candidates, namely Viktor Babariko and Valery Tsepkalo. The former being detained since the 18th June and the latter left the country before election day for safety reasons after being barred. These results had two consequences: First, it was perceived as an unfair breach of electoral procedures by a large part of the population, which directly led to two days of peaceful protests. And second, Lukashenko was left with Svetlana Tikhonovskaya as only remaining real opponent. To better illustrate the situation, I could not access my home that evening, the 14th July, because all metros in the centre of Minsk were blocked to avoid people's gatherings and it was too dangerous for me to walk due to the riot police's presence. What struck me the most was the reaction of the opposition, which formed a peaceful coalition reflected in the trio of the candidate, Tikhonovskaya, Veronika Tsepkalo, the wife of the excluded candidate Tsepkalo and Maria Kolesnikova, the head of Babariko's electoral campaign. All three did not have any political past nor interested intentions but simply one common goal: defend and represent the interests of the men they are supporting the most. Indeed, from the 19th of July until the elections, the three women travelled all around Belarus to campaign, which turned out to be a success. On the 30th July, already 60'000 people gathered in Minsk to support the trio. I followed on the spot to this – back then still authorised – gathering where the atmosphere was very peaceful, full of hope and inspiring (see picture 1). Then, two days later, I was



Picture 1. Election picket on the 30th July



Picture 2. Election picket on the 1st August

witness again of another trio's election picket where, despite the fact that it took place in a small provincial town called Volkovysk, over 3'000 people came (see picture 2).

On election day, as part of the diplomatic team, I personally witnessed the lack of transparency, the very high turnout for Tikhonovskaya as well as the efforts of the independent national observers, who in a very organized manner, counted the opposition candidates' supporters from the outside of election locals. Tikhonovskaya had indeed recommended her electors to wear a white bracelet and fold the ballots many times in order for her electors to be identifiable. By late afternoon, an independent observer told me that the rate of votes in favour of Tikhonovskaya was estimated at 60-70% in Minsk. These observations allowed me to truly understand the essence of the frustration and the sense of injustice felt by a large majority of the population and my Belarusian friends.

After Lukashenko's official victory by 80.23%, on the 9th August evening, people gathered peacefully to denounce the rigged ballots but they were this time immediately violently repressed by riot police for almost a week. On the streets of Minsk, we could see how people were beaten and taken in brutal way in custody. Internet was also shut-down for a week as well as public transports interrupted. Once again, I was not able to go home, living in downtown Minsk.

Furthermore, I was particularly astonished by people's reaction to this brutal wave of repression, which resulted in a huge movement of mutual solidarity. Indeed, exactly a week after the elections, on the 16th August, I followed to the first "March for Peace" which gathered over 200'000 people in Minsk and in parallel thousands in the province. It was a very moving day, like a revival of the people after a week of violence where hope was felt in each one of them (see picture 3).

According to my friends there, the trio succeeded to convey a message of hope and courage that is still felt today while valuing the natural peaceful character of most of the Belarusians. Indeed, I was really impressed by the major roles of women and the rest of civil society in maintaining people together in such a peaceful way. For instance, following this first March for Peace, hundreds of women dressed in white, contributed

to carry the democratic movement further by initiating human chains for peace while encouraging and inspiring others to join in (see picture 4).

In addition, the civil society is playing a crucial role with the organisation of gatherings, which relies on the social media (i.e. Telegram) coordinated by activists, independent journalists and NGOs. The NGOs and many volunteers actively collect pictures, testimonies and information that they instantly post for all subscribers. The most popular Telegram channel, "Nexta live", has 2.2 M subscribers (pop. 9,5 M.). As a subscriber myself since my arrival, I daily witness the essential contribution of this social network to the evolution of the events. I have also seen the rapid increase in the number of subscribers - in July NEXTA had less than 500'000 subscribers. This channel has become the first source of information in- and outside the country. I was also told by friends that other non-violence actions are reflected in many people stopping to pay their rent or income-taxes in order not to support the government anymore. When I left Minsk, people continued to peacefully gather, dressed in white and red (the historic flag of Independent Belarus 1918 and 1991), while repression continued.



Picture 3. "March for peace", on the 16th August



Picture 4. Human chains for peace

Thanks to the trio Tikhanovskaya, Tsepikalo and Kolesnikova, I could witness that the dignity of women, and of a large majority of Belarus society, could be put forward and a vast majority of the Belarusian people now are believing that a democratic system also has its place in the country.

As an academic intern, it was fascinating to get a first-hand experience of diplomatic work and the daily challenges that it represents especially in a time of a not only political but also societal, economic and sanitary crisis. My daily activities consisted mainly in writing reports and protocols for the headquarters in Bern, reading on the political evolution as well as following inspiring webinars because of the pandemic. Thus, it was also interesting to observe the introduction of alternatives regarding consular matters as well as conferences or meeting in person. These three months were extremely instructive and an enriching experience, enhanced by the fact that I came home with the feeling of having left an entirely changing country than the one where I arrived three months before.