



Protests in Belarus

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Recent protests in Belarus pose a challenge for the authorities, because along with slogans calling for improved social conditions, which appeared for the first time since the 1990s, the demonstrators have increasingly formulated political demands. So far, the Belarusian authorities have reacted in a limited manner by imposing administrative sanctions almost only on the opposition activists. In the near future, the intensity of the demonstrations will probably continue and may turn massive. Violations of human rights by Belarusian authorities is possible. Moreover, new events may prompt Russia to engage in the country directly.

Reasons for and Progress of the Protests. The implementation of an “unemployment tax,” established by Decree No 3 “On the prevention of social parasitism,” has become the main cause of grassroots public protests in Belarus. The slogans chanted by the protesters primarily concern social matters, including withdrawal of the decree. However, demands for change in the political system in Belarus are increasingly emerging. The real incomes of Belarusians in 2016 compared to 2015 fell by more than 7%, which was accompanied by increasing food prices and local charges. The average salary in Belarus is 720 roubles (€360), the average pension is about 300 roubles (€150 euros), and the unemployment benefit is 23–46 roubles (€11-23 euros).

The first demonstrations took place on 17 February, followed by ones on 19 and 26 February and 11, 12 and 15 March. Over 14,000 demonstrators took to the streets. They were held not only in Minsk but also in the capitals of the country’s districts (Brest, Grodno, Mogilev, Gomel, and Vitebsk) as well as in smaller towns like Baranovichy, Pinsk, Maladzyechna, Orsha, Babruysk and Rahachow. These include regions with the highest proportion of people benefiting from social assistance.

These are the first such demonstrations since 2011. What is more, on the streets were people who had not participated in manifestations before and who even define themselves as previous supporters of President Alexander Lukashenka. Even the latest independent polls did not point to a protest mood among Belarusians.

Some demonstrations (such as those in Minsk) were approved by the authorities, but most have taken place spontaneously (people often organised themselves through social networks) and without the permission of the authorities. In all cases, the protesters maintained order and the police did not intervene during the meetings.

After the last protest on 15 March (Constitution Day), which took place in Minsk, Mogilev and Grodno, opposition supporters signed a petition to the authorities. Their demands are related primarily to the economic sphere—the withdrawal of Decree No 3, reimbursement of taxes paid under it, introduction of economic reforms, an increase in the number of jobs, and abolishment of the contract system (in Belarus, there are almost no contracts lasting an indefinite period). In addition to the protest slogans, which emerged for the first time since the first half of the 1990s, demonstrators also used political ones, including demands for free elections.

Decree No 3. The tax introduced by presidential decree No. 3 on 2 April 2015, was justified as filling the need to co-finance state expenditures by people (including foreigners) who stay in the Republic of Belarus for more than 183 days a year. Indeed, the authorities hoped to tax people working in the shadow economy and estimate its size. However, it came along with a deteriorating budget situation and although the annual revenue from the decree is valued at more than €100 million euro, it is not significant to state income.

The tax was set at 20 times the base rate, which, according to the Belarusian government, is currently 21 roubles (about €10.5). That means that people who received a summons should pay 420 roubles (about €210).

Among those exempted were those under age 18, retirees and pensioners, as well as people “contributing to state expenditures” (such as full-time students, individual entrepreneurs, creators, priests and members of religious congregations, a parent of a child under 7, or having more than three children or a disabled child under 18, and prisoners who were in jail for more than 183 days in a given year). Despite these exemptions, the Ministry of Taxes and Duties issued 470,000 summonses, according to data from 7 February, or almost 8.5% of Belarusians of working age. It applied even to Belarusians who had quit work to care for someone with a disability or who are working abroad (according to estimates by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 400,000 Belarusians work abroad, mainly in Russia, although independent reports indicate that it could be as high as 1.2 million).

In case of non-payment of the tax, there is an additional fine of 2–4 times the base rate or administrative detention, such as referral to public works.

The Challenge for the Authorities. Taking into account the prolonged period of the protests, every one that follows becomes an increasing problem for the Belarusian authorities. Implementing Decree No. 3 also meant that the government and the president did not take into account social problems such as the deteriorating standard of living, which undermined confidence in their policies. Although Lukashenka has instructed local authorities to meet with demonstrators and invite them to talks, and pressured by the initial demonstrations decided to suspend implementation of the decree for a year, it is unlikely that these actions will weaken the protest mood or contribute to solving the existing social and economic problems.

Unlike in previous years (2006, 2010, 2011), Belarus’ improved relations with the EU have kept the government from attempting to forcibly pacify the manifestations. However, after the protests, about 200 people were arrested, though most were released the same day and authorities limited punishments to administrative fines.

The deep social frustration coupled with the minimal government response so far may paradoxically contribute to reducing the “fear barrier,” which may mean that people not only will be more inclined to protest but also to be more radical in their actions. In an extreme case, this can lead to two dour scenarios: one in which the authorities pacify the protests, likely ending the dialogue with the EU, or a second in which radical protests spread across the country and lead to political instability.

The authorities, afraid of further demonstrations and wanting to discourage people from marching, have spread information that there are fighters trained in Belarus and abroad who are trying to organise armed provocations.

Possible Reaction of Russia. Undoubtedly, Russia will strive to exploit the potential political instability for its own purposes. Although the Russians do not have a ready “successor plan” (a person capable of replacing the current president of Belarus), the situation may be used to increase pressure on Lukashenka. The Russian authorities, irrespective of their own economic problems, can offer specific financial assistance aimed at calming down social demands, in exchange for concessions from Minsk such as selling the country’s larger enterprises (mainly armaments companies) or building Russian military bases in Belarus.

The scenario of pacification of the protests would be seen in Russia as beneficial if it ends the dialogue with the EU and keeps Belarus within Russia’s so-called sphere of influence. In the long term, if Belarus were to move to further political, economic and military dependence on Russia, that would mean the gradual loss of sovereignty. However, only a scenario similar to the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity could cause Russia to intervene directly in Belarus.

Perspective. In the near future, further demonstrations should be expected. The first of them has been announced for Freedom Day (an unofficial holiday in Belarus celebrated on 25 March that commemorates the creation in 1918 of the Belarusian People’s Republic). The likelihood that Belarusian authorities would resort to violations of human rights, including the right to freedom of assembly, is high. It can be expected that a drastic violation of these rights, including the use of force against demonstrators, would result in a strong reaction from EU Member States and EU institutions, including the possibility of the reintroduction of sanctions. This would include withdrawing projects financed by the European Investment Bank that could be used for creating new jobs in Belarus. It probably also would prevent the International Monetary Fund from giving loans to Belarusian authorities. One solution to calm the protests could be the establishment of roundtable talks between the authorities, representatives of the opposition, NGOs and social activists.