

Crisis in Belarus: Distinguishing Cause and Consequence in World Context—Transcription

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Speakers: Jarosław Dobrzański, Pavel Katarzheuski, Boris Kagarlitsky, Mick Dunford & Bruno Drweski

Moderator: Radhika Desai

Radhika Desai

Welcome to the International Manifesto Group panel on the “Crisis in Belarus: Distinguishing Cause and Consequence in World Context.” My name is Radhika Desai. I convene the International Manifesto Group, which is really an informal group of people across the world who have been meeting and discussing the fast-paced changes in the world that we have been witnessing since the start of the pandemic. And every so often, as today, we put our deliberations on live and we also invite guests and so on.

So, today we want to discuss the crisis in Belarus. The crisis has been going on for some months now and much remains very uncertain, despite the length of the crisis. Discerning the exact contours of this uncertainty is made difficult of course by the continuing degeneration of the press in the West—assailed as much by paucity of resources when corporate profits take precedence as by partisanship that the same corporate interests often require. At the domestic level, the protests continue and the Western press reports mass arrests, even continuing until today. But the overall direction of the opposition and the direction in which it would take Belarus is not clear. Nor is the social basis or the social identity of the opposition clear. And nor is it clear what are the forces that continue to support the Lukashenko administration.

Secondly the regional repercussions are still being defined. What are the real relations between Minsk and Moscow? How does Moscow view the crisis? What about the other regional powers, including Poland? Can we assume, for instance, Warsaw support for a pro-Western, pro-EU opposition at a time when Poland itself has its own difficulties with the EU and is at loggerheads with the EU on a number of counts? And finally, of course, what are the perspective of Washington and Beijing on this unrest? Can we see a pattern of their interests, and perhaps involvement, in this process as it has been unfolding? Ultimately, it seems that Belarus is poised at a moment of great uncertainty, where one option is towards some sort of neoliberal financialized capitalism, which is likely to enrich only a small minority and is practically guaranteed to the sort of social unrest that we are already seeing in the homelands of Western financialized neoliberalism capitalism, whether its in the UK, or France, or the United-States or anywhere else. Or, the other alternative is to try to build an alternative to it, but of course, it is not clear whether the forces in the existing society in Belarus has either the political resources in terms of legitimacy, trust, support, etc. for this option or the economic resources to go ahead.

So, this is the broad context. We can extend of course the list of uncertainties, but this is the broad context of the present crisis in Belarus. In the context of this, we are exceedingly fortunate to have a fantastic group of panelists who I will introduce as we go along to help to orient us to what is really going on in Belarus.

The next speaker¹, is Jarosław Dobrzański. Jarek, you will have to once again correct me, I'm sorry. He is a philosopher, a historian, and a specialist of Russia, a publisher, a journalist and translator and he's based in Kraków in Poland. So, if we can please have your talk about 12 minutes, Jarosław, that would be great.

Jarosław Dobrzański

Okay, your pronunciation was quite perfect. Jarek Dobrzański is my name. So, first of all, let me thank you for the invitation. I'm glad to be here. It's a pleasure to be part of this distinguished panel. Because we have only 12 minutes, I will go straight to the point, and the points that I want to make are two.

First of all, I want to show you my own opinions about the current situation in Belarus. Why my own private opinions and not just from a Polish perspective? Well, because my private opinions and the Polish perspective have nothing in common. And why this is so I will try to explain later. And the second point that I'd like to make is to present how the situation is viewed from the perspective of mainstream, mass media in Poland (both corporate, private media as well as state-controlled media), and from the point of view of major political parties and major political actors.

To begin with, I will try to avoid being lackluster, ambiguous and undecided in my opinions. I would try rather to sharpen my statements and to hope to provoke a discussion. So, please don't be shocked if some of my statements might sound strange or perhaps too extreme.

To my mind, the main question is the following: to what extent the Belarussian debacle, protest or social conflict, whatever you name you prefer, is a genuine popular movement expressing grassroots dissatisfaction with the government and the system as such in general; and to what extent, if at all, it is yet another colour revolution inspired from outside, while at the same time using some dissatisfaction and some discontents inside the country.

If the movement demanding profound changes together with the change the head of the government is genuine, then the question arises: how popular it is? How representative? Who is behind it? In whose interests is it? And eventually, who will benefit from these changes and who will become losers? Because this is hardly a win-win situation where the entire society will be extracting the same benefits. This is also hardly a clear-cut situation where we as observers can easily decide who is right and who is wrong. It seems that good reasons are split at the same time on both sides of the conflict, albeit to different proportions. So it may be argued, and I will start from this point, that Belarus is yet another colour revolution. If so, what can follow from this?

If it is inspired from outside by the so-called NGOs, the international organizations serving as front covers or facades behind which some well-known government agencies and the operatives are hiding. And NGOs, whose scope of activity is usually worldwide, by some strange accidents, usually happen to focus only on countries who are hostile to a current direction of the Washington government and to the State Department. This is a puzzling coincidence.

¹ Pavel Katarzheuski was the first speaker, but had to drop off from the call due to audio issues. Jarosław began speaking while Pavel was reconnecting. Pavel returns to deliver his piece in full following Jarosław. The transcription picks up from the beginning of Jarosław's piece.

So, if this is the case, then we can call it perhaps the hipster revolution: a revolution organized inside by a narrow layer of domestic upper middle class followed by young people [aspiring] to middle-class status. Perhaps it is the second and final act of killing and finishing off the Soviet Union, which ceased to exist in 1991 when it was dismembered and dissolved. But somehow, it remained frozen in microcosmic dimension in Belarusian state—because some people believe that Belarus is a relic of the old Soviet system. In large measure, the Belarus hybrid transition, which prevented Gorbachev style *catastrófica*, as well as Yeltsin style privatization [and] is a relative success story, which should not and must not be told because this history runs against the dogma that there is only one exit from Soviet system: through so-called Western style democracy and market economy, along the recipes of neoliberal shock therapists.

If this is the case, then no wonder that the entire propaganda machine was deployed, with its Orwellian methods of newspeak and double speak, to hide the truth about the current of Belarusian affairs and to present western intervention as benevolent, friendly, and basically humanitarian. I don't want, of course, to say that I endorse the policy of Lukashenko, that I'm in favour of iron fist of ruling, or in favour of government that lasts for 25 years, for a quarter of a century. But I'm also aware of and I'm against the claims that a well-organized movement of an upper class or a rebel rebellion of the high bourgeoisie should be named the "fight for people's cause" and "popular democracy". I don't know either, I must admit, what is the best way to build a genuine participatory and inclusive democracy in a country where there has been no strong tradition of popular representation, and which is under massive assault from within and from without, aimed objectively speaking against the interests of the majority of the society, because they're all ruled by a self-appointed comprador elite, [which] is hardly progress towards democracy.

Perhaps some basic historical facts are needed here because especially in the West, the media in the treatment of the Belarusian situation are completely oblivious of the historical and cultural context, not to mention the social and economic context. They are only interested in the Leninist questions of [inaudible], who, whom. (11:35)

So first, we have to realize that the territories of the present-day Belarus has been in the past neglected, and for a long time remained underdeveloped and backward. Many different countries made claims to these lands, and different political jurisdictions over them have been established in time in the past. These lands became part of the Russian Empire at the relatively late date and until the end of the 19th century, were considered vulnerable and as such, not worthy of any investments. Even the rapid state initiated and foreign banks sponsored in late industrialization of the last two decades of the 19th century left these lands largely untouched. The situation did not change much from the point of view of economic and social progress under Bolshevik rule, in the initial years of Bolshevik rule. What had changed at that time was the political separation of the Western part of these lands as the new Russian western frontiers were shifted inwards toward the east, with the rebuilding of Poland after 1918. Under Polish colonization to some extent, a late feudal order was re-established, with rural population of mostly Belarussian stocks subjugated to Polish laws.

On the other side of the border, there were no major changes at the time either. The major changes had taken place only after the World War II, when Soviet western borders were shifted, moved to the West, and when the Soviet Union was able to place along its frontier and a group of countries allied with itself the so-called "people's

democracies” providing so to speak, called on sanitary for itself the breathing space or whatever name you want to put on it. It is paradox that from that moment, the process of rapid modernization started in Belarus. Whatever we may think of the Soviet economic system, of the Soviet style of rule, of the atrocities committed, especially under Stalinist regime, the undeniable truth is and remains that for a large number of people of different ethnic and national backgrounds, it was an unprecedented progress in all aspects of life. We don't have time to go into details, and to data and numbers, but whoever is in that is interested in another country, he or she will easily find the proper data even in the internet.

So now, let's forget entirely the Soviet Union and the Soviet past. Instead, let us ponder for a moment on the balance sheet, taking into account the following crucial moments.

These three crucial moments are the following: when the Soviet Union was dismembered and new independent sovereign states were created, then the second moment at the end of the first decade of this independence of the separate existence of former Soviet republics, and third, finally, the present moment that is almost 30 years since the so-called Belavezha forest Accords. And please do compare these historical moments or stages, the situation from social, economic and political points of views in Belarus, in the Baltic states, in the Ukraine, as well as in Russia itself. Judged from the point of view of systemic political transformation, the Lukashenko regime's encouraging achievements are a mixed bag and probably a failure, especially when you look at it from the perspective of integration from western geopolitical and global economic interests.

However, if we look at this transformation from the point of view of building a more balanced and more just and more fair and more cohesive society, it was a relative success, and it has to be admitted. The same can be said about economic dimension, especially if we take into account Belarus's starting point. Ukraine, in comparison, was much better equipped at the start and in fact it was most, it was destined to success, but it ended in a disaster. The situation of Baltic states, sometimes described as Baltic tigers, similar to Asian tigers, the Baltic states are in not much better situation, even though they have been integrated in to the European Union as well as in the cooperation systems of Nordic countries. And in many respects, the situation is even worse, especially from the point of view of demographic characteristics, to say nothing about the problem of national minorities in these countries. This problem does not exist in Belarus. And I see that I have to conclude, so I'm sorry for running out of time, so just to conclude, we are dealing in Belarus with the clash of culture at present time and this is the key to understanding of this problem in my opinion. Perhaps during the discussions action, we will have time to go into this deeper. So now I have to yield to my colleagues, and forgive me for exceeding my allotted time.

Radhika Desai

Not at all Jarek, what you had to say was very important and interesting, and this is the typical problem with these panels is that of course we need to keep things moving, but there will be lots of time for further discussion as well.

So now I hope that we will be able to have Pavel back.

Pavel Katarzheuski

And can you hear me well now?

Radhika Desai

I can hear you very well. Very quickly for those who came in later, we are next going to hear from Pavel Katarzheuski, a member of the central committee of the Left Party Fair World. Earlier, we were not able to hear him very well, so he will speak, hopefully, I think, from the start of your presentation, Pavel. And Pavel is one of the leaders of the Youth organization of the Left Party, Fair World. So, Pavel, the floor is yours and you have twelve minutes.

Pavel Katarzheuski

For four months, workers, students, doctors, teachers and the entire working people of Belarus have been fighting against the dictatorship. During these times, tens of thousands of people were detained, hundreds suffered from torture. At least six were killed by the police, and even more people were brought to death by other means. A wave of protests began in May, but after a simulated presidential election, which was held in August, the protests entered into a new phase. The central election commission reports that the dictator received 80 percent of votes, and people didn't tolerate this spitting in the face. In fact, these were not elections, but a special operation of regime to rare point of the dictator [inaudible].

All this is happening in the context of destruction of social guarantees and increase in paid services in education and medicine. A fall in real incomes of the population and the existence of one of the most slavish versions of labour legislation. Even now, during an acute political crisis, Lukashenko declared the need to reduce part of the social guarantees that Belarus inherited from the USSR. In particular, it was proposed to reduce the time of paid parental leave from 3 to 2 years. Well, since August, there have been two attempts to organize a general strike, which haven't been fully successful. Nevertheless, for the first time in two decades, independent trade unions began to form in factories. Every day, more and more people joined the strikes. I would very much like to mention the heroes of the resistance from the [inaudible] and Belaruskali enterprises. I am talking about mines now. Despite the fact that police regime, is introduced in factories now, the working class continues to leave the pro-state official union and workers are pushing for freedom and for independent trade unions, high wages and dismantling of the dictatorship and new fair elections of course

Well, the workers are also taking radical measures and three miners chained themselves underground at depths of several hundred meters demanding the resignation of Lukashenko. Every day, there is information in media about workers who are joining the national strike. This strike doesn't have the character of outbreaks, but even the sluggish nature to the strike has led to the fact that the administration cannot replace a highly qualified specialist with a strike-breaker, and many enterprises are barely functioning.

Well, when I talk about torture and beatings, believe me this is not unfounded accusations. On August 10th, me and some other comrades from Fair World, we were detained and spent a day in a police station, and three days in prison in Belarussian city of Jordan. For about twelve hours, people lay with tight hands at the open air without food, water and medical assistance. The police beat people just for asking where they are and I saw how they beat the disabled people, treated women with rape and detained just random bystanders. This practice unfortunately continues. Now the police can break

down your door and conduct a search without any official documents and sanctions. Well, these people don't wear uniforms or some insignia, only masks and weapons.

Well, I don't know what you really see in Western media. In truth, I don't have enough time to follow this. But I want to assure that all attempts to show a dialogue between the society and authorities are fake and all confessions are remorse, or the detainees were obtained through torture. Well, nevertheless we are convinced that the days of the regime are numbered. And they have no money to maintain their repressive state. Lukashenko now really is not President of Belarus, he's president of the police, maybe. Well, the elimination of dictatorship is only matter of time.

Nevertheless, our Party understands very well that immediately after the dictatorship falls and our minimum program is fulfilled, we will again be forced to stand in opposition and fight not only for democracy but also for the social justice. Well, that's why I'm already at this democratic stage. We are putting forward our transitional requirements, including economic ones.

In finishing, I want to say that you may be interested in the prospects of this protest and I have to say that now Lukashenko and the bureaucracy talking about a new, more democratic constitution. I think this moment of transforming of the regime can become the end of regime because this fake dialogue people don't believe this fake dialogue between society and bureaucracy police state.

And it can sound very sad for the Left, but I think now we have the only one question. We have to choose now between the new liberalism with dictatorship or neo-liberalism with a minimum political democracy. Choosing between capitalist dictatorship and capitalist democracy, of course, our party won't choose the second options. And we think we will have more possibilities and opportunities to fight for socialism and real democracy for all workers and oppressed. Thank you for your attention, hope everything was understandable, and I'm very sorry but I have to leave in a couple of minutes.

Radhika Desai

Okay, Pavel has to leave, so earlier we had decided that we would have any quick questions for Pavel now because he will not be there for the question-and-answer section. First, I would like to ask the other panellists if they have any questions for Pavel.

Bruno Drweski

Yes, I wanted to ask, according to Pavel, what is the social base of Lukashenko? Because apart from police, I mean there is no all administration, and I guess it will be interesting to have his point of view on the social base of the regime.

Pavel Katarzheuski

Thank you for the question, Bruno. Well, let me reply. Previously, the social base of Lukashenko was teachers, doctors and all people who working in public sector. But now, it is really only police and administrations because now teachers, doctors, liked us in universities all the people who previously were social base of Lukashenko, now they actively participate in the protests.

Radhika Desai

Okay, any other speakers? If not, Dimitrios, please go ahead. And I'm also opening the floor to other members of the audience. You can raise your hand electronically, or you can just make yourself known to me visually.

Dimitrios (audience member)

So, I have to short questions. The first one, if I understand well, the most probable scenario if Lukashenko is overthrown now—it will be something like Ukraine or Yeltsin's Russia. Does our friend believe this is a progressive outcome, and that it will help anybody in Belarus? And the second question is the following one: what is the property of the main industrial and economic units in Belarus now, and what will it be after a change of regime like he wants.

Pavel

Dimitrios, thank you for the question. It is understandable. Let me try to answer this question. Nobody knows what will happen after the dictatorship will fall. We never know what will happen after the regime will be changed. But, I don't think that it will be same as Ukraine. Because the first point, Belarus, it's not so divided into the east and west. The second point, as I know, at Ukrainian Maidan working class and public sector workers wasn't represented as well. And now we have a strong representative of independent trade unions and working class and public sector workers at their protests. Well, maybe it will be a bit same with Yeltsin's Russia but Belarus is not Russia, and it is difficult to compare Russia in the 90s and Belarus in 21st century.

Dimitrios

Why? What is the difference?

Pavel Katarzheuski

Well, how to explain it... Because in the 90s, Russia goes through its own way with own model of capitalism, with some. Let me explain. We have state bureaucratic capitalism. As I can see about Russia in 90s, it was a kind of South American liberalism, it is for me.

Now, about their property in now and maybe after. Now is about 50 percent of property is state sector. But it is not controlled by the workers, it is controlled by the state bureaucracy.

Well I'm really sorry, I can see there is another question in chat of what protestors want: liberal capitalism or something else? Protestors want new, fair elections. Nobody talked about some kind of political program, at least now. And believe me, I'm sure that you can see. Yes, protest without program, you are right. The only point of protest program is new elections. Well, people at the squares, it is very different people. It's new faces in politics, because these people usually are not members of older positions. They are not members of old opposition organizations. People demanding free possibilities to join independent trade unions—it is almost impossible now. People's demanding free elections, of course they are talking about social stuff too. But, as I said before, people are very different. It is working class, it is teachers, it is a small bourgeoisie too, and so on, so on. The only way I see is to promote left agenda in this protest. Very sorry for this very short, into maybe not very understandable, no change understandable answers. But I'm really very sorry now.

Radhika Desai

Okay, Pavel, do you have time for more questions? There are loads of other questions, some written down here and I have at least two people who want to ask questions. Do you have time?

Pavel Katarzheuski

No, not really. Really sorry, I'm missing my train. So, thank you!

Radhika Desai

Okay, well I guess we will have to continue the discussion in some other way. But thank you very much for coming and have a good trip to Minsk.

Okay folks, sorry about that, but I didn't realize that Pavel had to leave so early. Anyway, we are glad to have heard him and we can discuss amongst ourselves, in any case, what he had to say. So now I would like to go to the next speaker. The next speaker will be Boris Kagarlitsky. I guess I should say he's one of those people who needs relatively little introduction. He's a Russian Marxist theoretician, sociologist, coordinator of the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements and the Transnational Institute global Crisis Project. He's based in Moscow, where he also teaches. So, Boris, please take it away and you have twelve minutes

Boris Kagarlitsky

Okay, thank you very much indeed Radhika. I will try to answer some of the potential questions which I think Pavel, partly for the lack of time, failed to answer. But let me be very clear. If you are taking these almost 30 years of—well, 20-26 years of Lukashenko's political career and Lukashenko's experience--it's a very mixed bag. And this is very important, but unless you understand that we can't understand anything about Belarus.

And by the way, answering what Dimitrios said, one very important aspect of Belarusian experience is that after 30 years of Lukashenko—or more like 25 years—if you take the whole experience, it's more than 30 years of separate experience of Belarus as a separate country or state, whatever you call it. So, one important thing is that after Lukashenko, Belarus is a very different society compared to the kind of society we have in Ukraine or in Russia. In that sense there is no reason, even to consider the possibility of thing which happened to the Ukraine in 2014 or in Russia in '99 being repeated in Belarus, which doesn't mean things are going to be very good, that they're going to progress well. What I mean is that just you cannot mechanically expect the same experiences, which happened in totally different situation, in totally different circumstances, to be kind of imposed on a country which now has a completely different social, political, economic and so on, dynamics.

So what about Belarus? I think the first 10 years of Lukashenko were absolutely essential in terms of practicing some kind of socially oriented protectionism in terms of Lukashenko managing to prevent not only privatization, but which is much more important, they managed to prevent the decline of industry, which inevitably happened both in Ukraine and in Russia, not only because of their privatization and marketization, but also because of the disconnection between different markets and different segments of the former Soviet Union. So that says much of the industrial decomposition which has

taken place in Eastern Europe is due to a combination of free market policies and this kind of political division, which also involved economic fragmentation of what could be called some kind of Soviet common market, which is absolutely essential. So, in that sense, the policy of Belarus was not only to avoid privatization, and to protect local markets, but at the same time to integrate as much as possible with the former Eastern partners of Belarus. So that was their reintegration, and that's for reintegration. So that made Belarus also very dependent on Russia and at the same time, Belarus was, Belarusian industry was diversifying its markets. So, they did a lot of work to penetrate third world markets, former Soviet Markets or third world countries. I mean where Soviet technology and industry exported their products and to some extent it was quite a success story.

The price of the Belarusian society was to pay for that was that wages had to be extremely low, even compared to Russia and Ukraine. But at the same time, employment was guaranteed, and to some extent that was compensated by the former Soviet welfare measures, which were retained in Belarus while they were destroyed or partly dismantled in Russia or Ukraine, not to speak about Moldova, for example, where the situation was quite disastrous. Because don't forget there is a fourth country in this comparison, which is Moldova, which is *that* disaster and *that* disaster.

So then if we are taking the last 10 years, the situation is a bit different. Because on the one hand, that was the period of so-called "multi-vector" policy of Lukashenko, who had reasonably, by the way, I have a feeling that he came too close to Russia, and Russia is definitely a *very* dangerous animal given the kind of leadership and the kind of oligarchy we have at the top now. But the answer of Lukashenko was basically to look West. So in that sense it was talk of the multi-vector policy. Moving away from Russia as much as possible and tried to get as close as possible to the West but at the same time there were certain things, he didn't do just to please the West. He had to do certain things to please his own bourgeoisie, which was also developing. During that period, on the geopolitical level, as I told you, Belarus was floating away from Russia and to the West also because of the Western markets.

On the other hand, that was a period where they introduced new labour legislation. And this is very important. This labour legislation their worst in the former Soviet Republics. For example, collective bargaining is not possible in Belarus. Just to begin with, you see, there is no collective bargaining. And all workers are all individual contracts. All these contracts are also only can last one year. Every year, workers have to redefine their contract, also.

And finally, the new monetary policies, which were introduced about, as far as I remember, about three years ago. Their situation started getting much worse in terms of—well it was getting better and getting worse at the same time. Because, in terms of inflation, they did manage to suppress inflation, definitely. So the Belarusian Ruble is now stronger than the Russian Ruble. And so it was a tremendous success because one price Belarus had to pay for its so-called success was that inflation was very high. But, in the last three or four years, the Russians did the opposite of the Belarusians: they suppressed inflation at the same time they suppressed wages even further, as it usually happens. So, they accept a very monetarist, neo-liberal approach and, well Belarusian money is now much better as money.

But they started dismantling much of the welfare state, that led to the decomposition of the original base of Lukashenko. So, I disagree with Pavel that it was

just the workers of public employees or the public police, of course. I disagree it was just public and police who were part of—who were the core base of Lukashenko. I think, especially in the first years, Minsk was always a position, Minsk was always very critical. But if you were looking at provincial cities and towns, especially the same normal and so on and we were looking that the country side and their small towns were basically pro-Lukashenko. And they actually generated a massive voting for the president.

But ironically, during the success of the original stage of the Lukashenko experience, Belarusian economic society modernized quite dramatically. I was able to witness that I visited Belarus quite a few times in the 90s and recently and so on, and you can see tremendous differences. So ironically, it was successful, but the success story changed Belarusian society. So, these days, the whole of Belarus is very much like Minsk, you see. It became much more homogeneous, and so this original provincial and rural base, which was the core of Lukashenko's voting success. It kind of disappeared or changed. It changed very much, and demands were different. People started wanting, and they started wanting other things. More wanted, not only more freedom, but also more control and so on and so on. I think that the level of corruption and so on was also increasing. So, given the fact that we are now facing a global crisis, you know the COVID crisis all over the world--what's happening, turning all these different processes into one, and all that colluded. And that produces this explosion.

So, finally, from my point of view. First, Belarusian society is very different from Russian society. Ideologically, it's much more to the Left, definitely. And even, there is a right-wing trend in the opposition, but it's much weaker. In the case of Ukrainian Maidan, the Left was almost absent or kicked out if you tried to participate. In Belarus, it's completely different. So, the Left is quite visible in the movement. But, more important, all political forces taken together, are many % of the protestors. 80% or 90% or the protests are apolitical people who are just angry and frustrated. And they will continue to act.

Foreign influence is very weak. When, by the way, Russia was also part of the story, because Russia backed some of the opposition much more than the West did. And that also made Putin very frustrated because it seems that Russia wanted to frighten, but not overthrow him, and they kind of went too far and they were all far too successful because nobody expected Belarusian society to turn so much against Lukashenko. In the society. Not some NGO groups okay or the capital. Lukashenko was extremely successful in suppressing all the foreign NGOs and all foreign influences. By the way, Russian influences were stronger than western ones, but even Russian ones were under control. But what happened, what made everybody so surprised, that the explosion was many times much stronger, and it's totally out of control. There is no one now who controls the situation. No one, either in Belarus or internationally. So it's quite an open story and nobody knows what's going to happen next.

Radhika Desai

Thank you, Boris, that was great. Also, thanks for the timing, perfect. My next speaker is Mick Dunford. Mick is emeritus professor at the University of Sussex, and is at the moment a visiting professor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. Among various other things he does, he is the editor of a journal called area development and policy. And I know he's recently done some research on Belarus. So, Mick, the floor is yours, 12 minutes.

Mick Dunford

The story I wanted to tell, I suppose, starts when three of the leaders of former Soviet republics (at that time they were Soviet republics) met in the forest near Minsk and decided to dismantle the soviet union. You know, in 1989, Gorbachev had actually spoke about Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok. And then from 2001 to 2006, Putin actually sought engagement with Western Europe. But in a sense, was rebuffed.

In a way, what happened was with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the arrival of a unipolar moment, the United-States, NATO and the EU, headed by a newly unified Germany, sought essentially to assume control over large areas in Europe and indeed in the Middle East that had formally had close relationships with the stop with the Soviet Union. What they, in a sense, sought to do was to establish liberal political, economic and ideological capitalist orders in which national sovereignty was overruled, and in which essentially the core values and codes of conduct were the ones that were determined by western countries. Now in a sense, it was a continuation of 500 years of western global domination that extended into a new era after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To do that, of course, they drew on a whole range of instruments. Obviously, there was the attraction to many people of Western models, but there was NATO's war against Yugoslavia, there were colour revolutions, there were strategies for European enlargement, there was European Association Agreements. A whole series of instruments essentially designed to change the complexion of a whole series of countries. Essentially, increasingly encroaching on Russia itself. So that was the first point.

The second point I just want to come to this notion that Lukashenko is the last dictator. Now, basically, Lukashenko came to power, as others pointed out, in 1994. When he did, he stopped privatization. He subsidized transport and he decided to preserve free health and education, preferring, in his words, a somewhat adjusted Marxist-Leninist ideology over neoliberalism. People have already documented the extensive public ownership in the economy. And then in 1999, Belarus signed the Union's Treaty with Russia. Basically, they envision a Union state of Belarus and Russia with Poland. Foreign policy, currency, market, judicial, energy, transport and communication systems. But essentially after that point, Belarus stalled.

The third point that I want to make is about economic performance. I actually have a slide which I could share, or I'll just give you the key figures. I'll give you the key figures, shall I?

Radhika Desai

I can make you co-host, but yes.

Mick Dunford

Don't worry, I'll just give you the numbers. So, Belarus is actually from 1989 the second best performing socialist, former communist country. The top performer, is actually Poland, whose GDP in 2019 was 257% of 1989. But Poland of course, massive foreign investment and a huge share of the European Union's Structural and Cohesion Funds. Belarus, although there were difficulties, in the last few years stands at 196. Russia is 120. Ukraine is 61. Extraordinary. 61% of 1989. In 1989, there was an

attempted colour revolution in China, which failed. The figure for China is 1449%. 1-4-4-9. So, an extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary contrast. So, two paths with radically, radically different consequences.

The third point really concerns the relationship between Belarus and Russia. Belarus is essentially dependent on Russian and other loans. Including Chinese loans. Belarus purchases oil and gas from the Russian Federation at discounted prices. Belarus refineries import cheap oil from Russia and then they re-export it at world market prices to Ukraine and also to Western Europe. Belarus also obtains subsidized gas from the Russian Federation. It then sells that gas to something close to market prices and it uses the revenue that it generates in order to support its social programs. Belarus has been involved in nearly constant disputes with Russia, essentially about what they pay for Russian oil and gas. And to some extent, it is those disputes that led to this multi-vector path.

These intensified actually towards the end of 2018 when _____ basically, a form of the taxation system in Russia, and a kind of ultimatum was actually given to Lukashenko, by Medvedev. So, it was in this context that Belarus had sought to develop a multi-vector strategy. And that multi-vector strategy was oriented, as Boris has pointed out, towards Western Europe. Although, as soon as he started to engage Western Europe, Western European countries sought to overthrow him in a succession of elections. But you also opened the door to China, and I'm going to say a few words about that aspect of this multi-vector strategy.

Of course in 2019, the Belarusian embassy was reopened in Minsk and a large number of National Endowment for Democracy projects were established in Belarus designed to promote regime change.

The sixth point, you know, Belarus, in order to diversify its economy, adopted a strategy of promoting high-tech parks and free economic zones. These high-tech parks are of course the places in which people who have played a very active role in the movement work in many cases. And many of the people who service these, these high-tech industries have also played a significant role in that movement. But it's very striking that these zones have relatively low wages paid to people with relatively good qualifications. And actually, the value-added per employee is actually extremely low. They are not integrated at all with the Belarusian economy. They're basically doing sort of contract work, you know, programming work and contract work of one kind of another. So, in a sense, Belarus saw these zones as being relatively unsuccessful in economic terms in terms of diversifying the economy. So, in 2010, Lukashenko actually approached China, because China has an experience of developing special economic zones. They approached China to try and learn from China about strategies for developing economic zones and for promoting economic development. In that time, in 2010, there was an agreement with Xi Jinping when he was vice-president of China, before he became the Chinese president, to establish a special economic zone 25 kilometres from Minsk. I have some photographs, but I won't show you them now.

Radhika Desai

You're co-host, so you can if you want.

Mick Dunford

Well, never mind. So, the aim here, great stone is the project. The aim is to create a new planned eco city for 250 to 300 000 people. It's a high-tech zone, with related services. It's designed to attract electronics, biomedicine, bio-chemistry, engineering, new materials. It involves nan intergovernmental agreement between China and Belarus. The economic development strategy is closely aligned with Belarus's 2020 and 2030 national economic development plans and the aim is to perhaps double the GDP of the country within 10 to 15 years. It's an extraordinary ambition.

So, there was a multilateral move towards China. Russia has not been especially concerned about the relationship between the Belarus and China, partly because, in contrast to the European Union, China is not trying to pull Belarus into a new alliance which is hostile to Russia itself.

So, in light of that, the last point I want to make, obviously you've then seen this attempt to promote a colour revolution in Belarus. My view actually is that this attempt to extend NATO, EU expansion to embrace Belarus with the support of, I think, it seems to me, a minority of the population that it will actually fail. I think it will fail first of all, because it seems that Lukashenko contacted Putin. And it is quite conceivable that Lukashenko actually agreed to accelerate the completion of the Union Treaty with Russia. If that Union treaty is completed, then I think it becomes very improbable that the reorientation of Belarus towards Western Europe will take place and that Belarus will be cemented into a different architecture—which is an architecture which is quite conceivable to develop economic relationships with Western Europe.

I think the second reason why it will fail is that essentially that unipolar moment is coming to an end. Eurasian multilateralism, so the Eurasian Economic Union, the Belt and Road Initiative, SCO, RCEP, are all initiatives which offer an alternative polycentric model that respects national sovereignty. That it will perhaps drive in the direction of increased economic and political integration in Eurasia and it seems clear that if you look at Russia itself, it increasingly sees itself less as being attached to Western Europe and more as being a center of Eurasian integration.

The last point is that you know I think it comes back, you know it's something quite interesting is that Brzezinski you know once said that, Russia without Ukraine, will never be a great power. And yeah, of course, if you now look at the situation in relation to NATO, NATO has now declared that China is a full spectrum systemic rival. But it's actually its second most important rival after Russia. But I think that basically this creates a situation in which it's quite conceivable you know that Belarus's future will to some extent lie more with your Eurasian integration than with integration with western Europe and with the European Union. That of course, as I've said, doesn't preclude developing win-win economic relationships with Western Europe.

Radhika Desai

Okay great, thank you Mick. That was all very interesting. So, our final speaker is Bruno Drweski. Again, please correct me if I'm wrong in pronouncing your name. Bruno is a historian, a political scientist who studies Belarus and Poland. He's co-director of the Polish Section of the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations. Inalco in French at Sorbonne University and member of the directory board of the anti-war and anti-imperialist organization arak, that was created at the end of the first world war. So Bruno, please, floor is yours and you have twelve minutes.

Bruno Drweski

Yes, so I just wanted to remind some geopolitical and historical context and then I will try to explain what is happening now in Belarus and especially in the society and in the Left. So, I just want to remind the fact that up to the beginning of 20th century, Belarus was rather a very archaic country that was partly oriented toward Russia, toward Poland and in between all the time. But the real birth of, let's say a Belarusian society, modern society, was at the beginning of the 20th century, just at the moment of the '95 revolution, and then of course at the revolution of 1970, the post-Russian Revolution. And what was also very important to understand why the Belarusian society is much more left-oriented than all societies in former Soviet Union, including Russian society, is also a part from those facts—the fact that it was the so-called partisan republic during the war, which created that more or less one-fourth of the territory was liberated by Belarusian communist partisans before the coming back of the Red Army.

On the other side, we have the so-called Belarusian nationalism, which was also a creation of German occupation. The first German occupation created the People's Republic of Belarus, with the flag of the opposition is now waving and the second German occupation during the Second World War with the same flag the opposition is now waving. And this is symbolic of course of a split in Belarusian society, which is also linked with the traditional orientation of the big majority of the society which is rather left-oriented, and part of the society which is rather nationalist oriented and western oriented. This situation of course changed recently, but not so much.

What I would say for Belarus is important is that traditionally, up to the beginning of the 20th century, Belarus was a feudal country and that they changed directly from feudalism, very backwards feudalism. Much more backward than Russian feudalism or Polish feudalism. From a very backward feudalism toward real socialism. And this real socialism was something like a post-feudal socialism, and that explains to a certain extent what is the Lukashenko regime. If I had to define the Lukashenko regime, I would say it's a post-neo-Soviet identity regime under autocratic, paternalistic and pragmatical ideology. The base of the Lukashenko regime was something like no ideology regime, but with post-Soviet or neo-Soviet nostalgia and no party, no political party, what is especially no presidential party, and that's the point now is that can change in Belarus because Lukashenko realized that the fact that he has no real party, in front of the opposition didn't help him.

The second thing Lukashenko built his legitimacy of course on what was already said on social and state-owned property. And in this situation, Belarus was in front of two threats. Of course, the threat of Western neoliberal oligarchy or the neoliberal bourgeoisie and imperialism from the very beginning of the post-soviet era. And on the other side, he was under the threat of Russian pro-liberal oligarchy that wanted both oligarchy, the western one and the Russian one, they wanted to have privatization in Belarus because Belarus is a very interesting economical point for the capitalist, and I will explain that.

In this situation, Belarus tried, Lukashenko tried to find a middle of the road way between the West and Russia. He developed a very strong relation with different Russian regions and Russian different factories and enterprises, or Soviet, post-soviet area. But also, as it was told, he developed very strong contact with China, but also with Vietnam, with Cuba, with Iran, with Venezuela, with Syria, with Turkey and up to the end of Gadhafi's regime, with Gadhafi's Libya. All that in the purpose to find alliances

that could help his middle-of-the-road way and mostly to preserve the economical sovereignty of this new country.

On the other side, he has quite a lot of good arguments toward Russia because Belarus hosts the Russian military radar that is used for the Russian fleet all over the world. His factories are producing very necessary elements, components, for Russian space, military, agriculture, mining and informatic industries. Because Belarus is really from the Soviet time already, a center of highly developed tactical technology. And he preserved, to a certain extent, the state-owned sector of this branch.

But on the other side, he let develop in Belarus a Silicon Valley style private industry, which led to the creation of a new bourgeoisie. Lukashenko thought that it would be a loyal bourgeoisie since it was created under his protection, let's say. But now it appears that this high-tech Silicon Valley style bourgeoisie is the base of the opposition, or of what we call sometimes the Minsk Hipsters, who constitute the vanguard of the opposition.

So, we have to understand, and it's very important to understand that the Russian oligarchy, some of them, like for example Dmitry Mazepin are even Belarusian, and they have very strong position in Russia in the chemistry, in the chemical industry, and they are looking for, and Mazepin is looking to acquire—to take over the Soligorsk Potash Plant, which is a very world-scale, planned in Belarus. And he financed quite a lot of the opposition in Belarus, and we have to know about that.

The second problem with the state-owned sector in Belarus, is the question that was never very solved during the socialist time, the Soviet times, is the question of the efficiency of working force. What we always know of course that the traditional Soviet-style system, had difficulty to put workers to work very efficiently because they had guarantee of work and they had guarantee of a minimum of life. And that's the reason officially, why in Belarus Lukashenko changed the working law, changing the long-term contracts or lifelong contracts to much shorter contracts. Now, in Belarus, most of the workers have contracts from one to five years, depending on which factory, depending on their condition. But anyway, the aim is to push them to be a little bit more efficient in the factories than normal soviet socialist time.

Radhika Desai

Please wrap up Bruno.

Bruno Drweski

Just to finish, I will talk about the Belarusian Left, because it's important. We have in fact three Lefts in Belarus. Because anyway that's right, very right: Belarus is very left oriented. And that's even why people are waving the nationalist era flag o[without] knowing really what flag it is, but they don't wave European Union flag, or NATO flag, or fascist flags you can see in Ukraine for example, or other countries.

We have three Lefts, in fact in Belarus. I told earlier that there is no Lukashenko party. There was an attempt to create a Lukashenko party, but Lukashenko didn't want it and it's just an association which is called Belaya Rus. But there is one party that supports Lukashenko, even if it's not the majority of the regime, is the Communist Party of Belarus, which is on the side, which is trying to mobilize on manifestation on the side of Lukashenko. So that's the main pro-Lukashenko Left.

And you have also the Anti-Lukasehnko Left Pavel talked about. I will not have to talk about because he did. And in between, you have the so-called Communist Workers Party of Belarus, which is a split from the Communist Party of Belarus because he became anti-Lukashenko, especially due to these anti-social labour laws. He's underground and repressed, but now, since the July and August election and manifestation, he decided that Lukashenko regime is bad, but the opposition is much worse because it's pro-West and liberal, a he's supporting Lukashenko as a not so bad side as the opposition. Liberal or social democrat but, anyway, the Communist Workers Party in Belarus says, you know, the situation is the same as the Polish Left in the '80s. They were convinced that there is no capitalist in Poland so there couldn't be Poland. And so, they decided there will be no capitalism in Belarus. And this, the Communist Workers Party thinks it's a pure nonsense because imperialism can introduce capitalist and especially you have capitalism.

What is important from the crisis in August that Lukashenko is using now propaganda he never used for the last 10 years. He's using words like socialism, Karl Marx, Leninism, October Revolution and he told, what is important: the only difference I have with opposition is on the privatization. I will never accept privatization and they do. And that's his slogan and now he's trying to build a People's Congress that has to be in the next year to prepare new constitution, new referendum and after that, new presidential election. We will see if it's really planned, but it's important to know that because it means one thing at least: Lukashenko knows that if he wants to survive, he must have a strong Leftist orientation, not only for the Belarusian people, but he must show to Putin that there is no way—there will never be a Belarus under oligarchic and privatization policies, even pro-Russian, because Belarusians are not so pro-Russian, they are pro-state owned sector. And that's the base he wants to take back, I would say.

Radhika Desai

Fantastic, great ending thank you very much Bruno and sorry to cut you off, you are very interesting, but we need to have a discussion as well. And so, what I'd like to do—we have at least a half an hour, and if people want, we can extend it a little bit further. But I'd like, first of all to ask the panelists if they have questions for one another. And then I will move up questions to the audience. So, panelists, do you have questions for one another at this point, or do you want to just open it up?

Okay, I see none. Great. Let's open it up. So, members of the audience, please feel free to raise your hand electronically or you can simply make yourself visible and raise your hand. But be aware that I don't necessarily always see you because there are two screens here. Okay, Alan, you have a question. Go ahead!

Alan (member of the audience)

I want to thank the participants for what I thought was an incredibly informative discussion, especially since it successfully covered a wide range of viewpoints, which is important in these things to be well informed. Dimitrios made an analogy, which I think was in the forefront of many people's minds, which is the analogy between Belarus and Ukraine, Belarus and Yeltsin. But I wonder, especially after hearing the speakers whether the actually best analogy is Poland? Because what you had was Solidarnos, which was a mass workers movement that was not anti-socialist, originally, which was in favour of democracy, which was clear that you know what we want is democratic

socialism, and somewhere along the road, it went wrong. And it went wrong because it was captured, and it was captured because it did not have a left leadership. It had a good leadership, but it was not a left leadership. It was not committed to defend the social gains of the Polish state, such as the social services, the industrialization and so on. It was not committed against NATO. Solidarnos had no clear position on NATO, it didn't understand that anything that moved to the West of Russia would be an immediate target for Western interests. Now, therefore it seems to me, and then it went wrong and what you have now is the Poland today, and I don't think the Poland is better than the Poland of that time, I have to say that. So, the question is—obviously there's grounds to believe that Belarus would not necessarily go in that direction, but I wonder if the best analogy is Poland? Not Ukraine, not Yeltsin.

Radhika Desai

Okay I'd like to group together two or three questions. So are there any other questions from the audience? Michael, you have a question?

Michael (member of the audience)

Yes. Helen and I thought that was very, very informative and interesting introductions. I like panelists to comment on the following things. With a lot of the former Soviet Bloc countries, which has previously fallen to the reintroduction of capitalism, it's been clear that those types of regimes could be overthrown from the Left or could be overthrown from the Right. And we've seen that they were overthrown from the Right even in the case of Poland that Alan has just reminded us all. So I'd like to get more of a feel as to the—I mean, people have said that the opposition is in favour of privatization state assets and those kinds of things. I'd like to get more of a feel—presumably the opposition is a movement trying to overthrow Lukashenko from the Right. But I'd like a bit more in-depth discussion and clarification of that and how it fits into the escalating Cold War situation. Because people have used the term “colour revolution.” I'd like that to be clarified, first of all. Are there NGOs from the West active in these situations?

Radhika Desai

Okay great, thank you. And I guess I'll add a third small point, which sort of dovetails to the other questions a little bit. And I think that Mick mentioned that China was helping to expand and stabilize and make more successful the technological parts and special economic zones. And many of the high-tech employees of this are today in the opposition. So do you see a sort of irony here at all? And I know that Boris also has limited time, so I'd like to ask Boris to go first, and then the other speakers in some order. So, Boris, go ahead.

Boris Kagarlitsky

Well, I think Alan made a very good point about comparing Belarus with neither Russia nor Ukraine, but with Poland. Which is an interesting point. It is good in the sense that Allan shifted there the emphasis, but I think again it's kind of missing the major thing. The major thing is that yes, the politics is something yet to begin in Belarus. It's not yet there, the mass politics. At the same time, what is very important, and I think somebody claims that this is a minority movement.

The important thing, there's a tremendous difference with either Russia or with Ukraine, which really makes sense when you speak about Poland. It's a real mass movement, and this is very much a worker's movement. Work is a quite essential element, it's an essential element of this movement. Although of course the first wave of strikes was first very successful immediately and then failed. It failed because it was not only lacking Left leadership—it was lacking any leadership. It's absolutely essential. And it's partly because the whole thing is totally apolitical. So the question is into which direction the whole process of politicization is going to develop, and actually it's not something which we can answer because it depends on people like Pavel and others, how successful are they and how much can we do to help them? And this is absolutely essential because we can either fail or succeed. So it's an open story. It's an absolutely open story. It can go both ways.

Anyhow, it's not going to get into the original direction of Ukraine and Russia for one very important reason. In Russia and Ukraine, the actual result of neoliberal transformation was the destruction of industry. In Belarus, it's going to be different, which doesn't mean it's going to be good, because both Chinese and Russians, and Western companies—they all want to retain and develop Belarus industry because today, it's 2020 and not 1991, or even 2014. Given the new wave of kind of forced protectionism, which is emerging as a general trend, Western European capitalism needs to increase its industrial base inside Europe or in the so-called backyard of Western Europe, which is exactly Poland, Belarus and so on. So in that sense, Belarusian industry is not something they want to use just for scrap metal, but it is a potential gift, or a potential reward. Something you can take over and develop. But, it doesn't mean it's good news for Belarus either because foreigners are going after it. Foreigners are going after it, and if privatization happens, it's going to end up with foreign companies taking over.

Ironically, this is partly potentially bad news for the Belarusian bourgeoisie. Because if they want to take over these companies themselves, they're not going to be allowed to do that just because their competitors are much stronger. But this allows you to expect a much more interesting outcomes of Belarusian bourgeoisie after realizing the danger would actually be kind of reluctant to support privatization proposals. This is already happening to some extent. The smarter part of the Belarusian bourgeoisie understands that it's not going to benefit from privatization. This is a very interesting phenomenon.

So, finally, what is the country you have to compare Belarus with? I think you have to compare Belarus with Russia and 2021-2022. With something which didn't yet happen, and maybe will happen, maybe not. Because the general trend is very similar.

I think Russian society is now aimed at coming at the end of Putin's era. It's going to happen anyhow, either through some kind of upheaval or maybe even through some kind of coup, or, which is also quite possible, because of the health reasons. Because Putin seems to be unable to continue staying in power, so Russia is definitely going into this post-Putin stage. That means that we have to wait for the moment when Russian society will or will not wake up. If society wakes up, in that sense if it follows the Belarusian sort of trend, then ironically Russia will be Belarus with a Left leadership, at least some of the Left leadership. I don't want to say that the Left will be leading every movement, but only I want to say that the Left leadership will be present within the movement, which is a big difference. So obviously if society remains kind of sleepy and

repressed, then that's bad news from Belarus because then Lukashenko not only would be defeated because I think he's going to be defeated anyhow, but the beneficiary and the beneficiaries of the press will be not the guys we would love to be beneficiary, so to speak

I have to say goodbye because I'm going!

Radhika Desai

Okay thanks very much Boris. I'd like to now go to Jaroslaw, Bruno and then Mick. How's that?

Jarosław Dobrzański

Somebody has already mentioned Poland in this context. That would be the best point of comparison. I agree, but it may be understood in two ways: as a warning, or as attraction. Perhaps somebody said before that Poland is now in a much better situation than it was before, and before the Solidarity movement and before 1999. Well, it depends whom you are asking the question.

Secondly, we tend in the West to overlook the extremely high social costs that have been paid so far, and that not been yet calculated. These costs are still lingering on. I will not go into theory here; I will just try to present this on two examples that will give you like first-hand experience what has happened in Poland.

With the removal of the working class, and the replacement of a precariat, many people who don't remember the old realities under real socialism, they just are accustomed to think that precariat is something normal. This is normal to be paying a wage below minimum of existence. That this is normal not to be paid a wage for several months in a row. This is normal to agree on so-called trash contracts, civil rights, civil law contracts between employee and employers where no labour law applies whatsoever and when you have absolutely no protection, because this is just a civil contract. If you take for instance, the housing question in Poland—this is the vital question in every society. As you know, under the old Soviet system, the system works in such a way that in a small, medium size or large state city, there would be an anchor—a big factory that would serve as an anchor for social and economic purposes. It was not only producing some things to be sold, but it was also a provider of a broad array of social services, public services beginning with childcare, with cafeterias, with housing, with healthcare and so on and so forth.

Now, after 1989, this was overnight removed. Imagine a situation when your parents or yourself, you are working in such a large firm, the only one in the city, which as then closed down, forcibly, not for economic reason, not because it was inefficient, but because the theory at that time was that “well it is state-owned, it is worth nothing.” That history has to be simply done away with. Now the consequences are haunting you 30 years from then now, because you may happen to live in an apartment complex, in an apartment building, the owner of which was this factory which was sold. In the meantime, several people have purchased this building because if you have some cash set aside, you can invest. This is called investment, you know, purchasing buildings together with people living inside. This is something that even Margaret Thatcher has not done, because she was actually trying to privatize public housing by giving priority to tenants. Of course, in reality it looked different because wholesalers bought this apartment and then made other uses from it. But in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern

Europe, people didn't even have this choice to buy this apartment, which during 30 years' time, have been dilapidated because you know nobody owns this building, nobody invested nobody maintain it properly and so on and so forth. Now, when you are 60, 70, or 80 and you are faced with a situation where you have to pay credits because somebody who purchased this building 10 years ago took a credit in the bank for millions, secured by this real estate and now the credits were sent, the company are gone and the debt remained, and you are faced with the debt, which is not yours. So, this is the situation which may which the Belarusian people may face. If they go the same way that Poland went through.

Radhika Desai

Bruno again, please keep it brief and to the point.

Bruno Drweski

I just wanted to concentrate on the question could we compare Poland and Belarus. At that time, in Poland in the 80s and 90s, and Belarus now. I just want remind the discussion I had at the end of the 80s before the change of regime with the Left oriented Solidarnos militants that created the so-called Polish Socialist Party Democratical Revolution. And they were sure for that time that if there is a regime change in Poland, it's impossible to have capitalism because there are no Polish capitalists and no Polish government will open the border to have enterprise [sold] under their market values. So, there will be automatically a democratical and very, an ultra-democratic socialism. And we know what happened. I think that the Left in Belarus, which is against Lukashenko, is more or less on the same romantic vision that if Lukashenko goes, people are against privatization and is it means we will have a pure, democratic system that will go toward socialism.

I think that on that point of view, the Communist Workers Party of Belarus is much more clever because he understands that even if they are underground, even if they are repressed by the regime, they know that if the regime falls, it will be much worse than under the Lukashenko regime, and I think they pay quite a lot to have the right to say so. And it's important.

And at the same time, Lukashenko is very, very clever in a certain sense. We can support him or not, but he's very clever because, of course, at the beginning of the events in August, part of the workers were thinking about strike. Not the majority of workers, because if we look at real sociological inquiries in Belarus, we can say that at the election you have two thirds of people voting really for Lukashenko, and one third for the opposition. Of course, the official rates were falsified, but anyway have something like two-third – one third of the population. But basically, a worker, all this Minsk at least society was shocked by the scale of the police repression, that's for sure. And some workers began to strike.

But very quickly, Lukashenko appeared with his minister and so on in every factory of the city. They went all in front of workers and more or less they said the opposition wants to privatize everything. And the strike finished, and very quickly. Because I don't know what Lukashenko thinks really, but he knows that if he's defending the country against privatization, he will have some support, and that's his strategy. And that's of course what changes.

The problem of the Left in Belarus is always the same thing with Solidarnos, is because sometimes money is coming from the West, and which money is coming from the West? Money is not coming from the extreme Left working organization. Money is coming from European commissions and European parties and structures which are more or less linked with the Western liberal standard. And we have to be aware of that.

And second, I will finish on that—why would the Belarus industry be protected in case of a regime changes? That's now the Polish actual regime, I'm not supportive of the actual police regime, but they were told—talking all the time, because they are supposedly populist—that they will re-industrialize the country, and they couldn't reindustrialize the country. The country was not re-industrialized because nowadays, Western capitalism is not for industry. It is a financial capitalism. The only thing we produce in the West is arms. All other things are produced in low-cost, working-class countries. And Poland's success is just that some factories in Poland are producing components for German industry at low pay, for low pay workers. So, Belarus will be in the same case. They will destroy Belarusian industry and they will ask Belarusian workers to produce component for German or other but mostly German big capitalist producers. There is no doubt about it, but basically, now we have a strong crisis in the West. And that's why I'm relatively optimistic. Now, the tiding is changing, and Eurasia and Asia are developing, and the role of China is maybe much more important for Belarus than the role of Russia.

Radhika Desai

Great. Thanks Bruno. Mick, and then I'd just like to say that after this, we will take one more round of questions and then we will conclude, ecause I know there are some questions. So Mick, please go ahead

Mick Dunford

First, in relation to these high-tech zones, I tried to say that Belarus established high-tech zones. But, the salary is only equal to the average salary of Belarus. Value-added per employee is very low, there was no significant development of new sectors. So, in a sense, that path was seen as being relatively unsuccessful. But it's from these zones that a significant number of the people who actually supported the opposition movement have come. If one looks at the Chinese zone, you're talking about something that is radically different in scale. You're talking about something that is oriented towards new industries, but you're also talking about a zone in which it is essentially international investment that is coming in. You know, from China, but also from many other countries. So, it's something you should differentiate quite sharply from what happened in Belarus's own high-tech zones. I mean, Lukashenko turned to China, you know, on the grounds that China had experience in developing successful economic zones whereas their own indigenous strategy proved relatively unsuccessful and led to the emergence, if you like, of some of these Belarusian capitalists. So, that was the first point, in case it didn't come over clearly.

I found many of the things that people have said absolutely fascinating. I was very pleased when Bruno talked about the positions of the Left movements that actually have felt that you know, this opening to the West would actually be extremely dangerous. I mean, leading perhaps in the kind of direction that it led in Poland. But I suppose I tried to say that, in a sense, one of the central issues in Belarus in the recent

past is essentially being—will it be part of Eurasia alongside Russia, alongside China, or will it join Western Europe, the European Union, NATO. To me, that in a sense is one of the key issues that is actually involved. That was why, when I said, I got the sense, you know, that I mean Lukashenko was put under huge pressure by Russia. And that pressure, of course, comes from the sanctions that Russia itself was subjected to by the European Union. In that situation, a lot of these economic difficulties that Bruno talked about—the way they tried to address these issues of productivity and industry in a very interesting way.

So, Belarus does confront certain difficulties in sustaining this model that have been put in place, because it did depend on significant transfers from Russia. But, obviously as Bruno said, there is this fear of Russian oligarchs. Already, Gazprom for example, (which is state owned, of course) has acquired much of the gas infrastructure in Belarus.

So, I think there are important questions about the direction in which industrial change will move, but I certainly think it's the case that if you look at Western Europe, productive investment is very limited. If you look at a country like China, productive investment is still remarkably high. What Belarus needs is productive investment. To build upon its existing industrial potential. So, the only other point I wanted to make is that it seemed to me that faced with this revolt, Lukashenko turned to Russia and that Putting gave him certain guarantees. But I'm sure there must have been a quid pro quo. And the quid pro quo was almost certainly the union with Russia.

So, I think the question then is, what does that union with Russia imply for the future economic and political development of Belarus? But I think that if he has, in a sense, conceded that, then it does mean that this question as to where will Belarus lie in a kind of Eurasian framework has to some extent been settled. That said, that still leaves open a lot of questions about the way in which Belarus will develop economically and politically from this point in time. But I do think it's important to see that there is a context brewing between different models of international cooperation between certain kind of multilateralism that are concerned with protecting national sovereignty, and then a Western model in which its essentially, you know, the European union and the United-States that want to set, unilaterally, the rules of the game for everyone.

Radhika Desai

I'd like to now as Danielle to ask her question. And is there anyone else who would like to pose a couple of questions that I think have been left unanswered. Danielle, please go ahead.

Danielle (audience member)

Yes, thank you very much. This is absolutely fascinating. Belarus is obviously in a hard place stuck between the oligarchs on the West and the oligarchs of the East. And it seems to me that its relatively successful model of independence and anti-imperialist development with a social model that has been adjusted, as you said, since the Soviet system, has been relatively successful but now we're coming to an end to it, in a certain way, in just that if the model is only based on national sovereignty and independence and not on explicit social basis, that is, socialism, then it will have a difficult time

surviving just simply ideologically. Because the uprisings that we're seeing today are coming up because of difficulties of this ideological understanding of what's happening.

Bruno it's fascinating what you said about Lukashenko now being forced, but perhaps by choice, but I imagine it's more by being forced to adopt some Marxist rhetoric. And I'd like to know if there's any action behind that besides just defending the fact that we will not privatize the industries. In other words, is he talking about re-negotiating the work contracts that were probably behind so much of the current uprisings and the difficulties of the split in the Communist Party, for example. And I fault Lukashenko for waking up so late—he's been there for 25 years. How could he wait so long to understand that we need to have ideological work done so that the population will appreciate its position, especially stuck between oligarchs—capitalist oligarchs in the West and in the East? How could he be so, so late and so slow? Is he just kind of a fake Marxist now trying to use this rhetoric now in order to stay in power, or what does it mean? Thank you very much.

Radhika Desai

Okay, Brendan do you think there are any questions that are left unanswered from the ones you have been collecting?

Brendan (tech assistant)

Only question that I see that hasn't been answered I think was earlier in the chat from Anna Maria—and the question was can we say that it is a revolt of the middle class for the increased living standards that has halted?

Radhika Desai

Okay. So, is it a revolt of the middle class that is resentful of the halting of rise in living standards? And there was also I noticed a question about specifically the role of students, so if anybody would like to address that then I'd just like to throw in one last question.

And for everybody, I think Mick you've raised a very interesting possibility that there has been a secret meeting between Lukashenko and Putin and that we may quite possibly expect the union to finally take place decades after it was first agreed in principle. My question is to what extent do you think that this is—and this also relates to the broader question of in which direction is Belarus going to go—in the Western neoliberal direction or in some kind of more socialistic left direction etc. Now here the question arises—what is the capacity of the larger powers to do anything? I mean, it seems to me that if people could comment on whether they see the level of engagement—how they see the level of engagement of the major powers. I don't see quite as intense an engagement from the West as you saw the case of Ukraine, but maybe I'm mistaken. Secondly, can Russia actually, I mean what would be the difficulties Russia would have? I don't think it's necessarily going to be easy to establish a union between Russia and Belarus especially given the quite distinct political and economic setup--so politically Belarus is much more left-wing. Can put Putin take that. Secondly, Russia is much more oligarch-dominated, whereas Belarus has a rather different model of capitalism, so what would be the outcome?

And finally, on is reading in the western papers, including in the financial press that China is actually beginning to reduce its international engagement—it's lending less

and generally Xi Jinping thinks that it's time to sort of, perhaps, withdraw a little bit into China. They are reading the dual circulation announcement in a certain fashion as involving China retracting. So, is China still going to retain the same level of international engagement? Will it be retracting or will it be increasing? Some commentary from anyone who has ideas about this would be much appreciated. Thank you.

So, I think that will be the last round of questions. I guess Bruno would like to go first. I will ask him to go first. Try and keep it to the point and brief, but of course I'm not asking you to stint on your answers.

Bruno Drweski

Yes, yes, I understand. I will be quick. I just wanted to explain, especially to Danielle, what is the Lukashenko behaviour. And what it means, in fact.

First of all, we must understand that Lukashenko, when I said he is a pragmatical, anti-ideology and anti-party man, it is not only the man as himself, but it's something which is post-soviet. Because when the Soviet Union and all the socialist countries collapsed, all people that were more or less believing socialism is the good way felt betrayed, because it happened that people that were a so-called pure Marxist-Leninism one day, the next day, they just became neoliberal or pure orthodox or pure catholic or whatever you want. But anyway, not Marxist anymore. And people were so deceived they say "what this party, this nomenclature with its purely ideological discourse, it was all fake." So at that time, the normal, logical reaction was let's be pragmatic, because if you use ideology, we will just behave like the Gorbachev, Kruschev, Jaruzelski, Kádár or whatever you want style of bureaucracy—and it doesn't fit.

So, during all that time, Lukashenko rather was talking about the social oriented state, and only now he told in his speech that in fact his social oriented state is socialism. And then he began to quote Marx and to quote Lenin and so on and so on. Maybe it's demagoguery, but I don't care if it's demagoguery or not, it means that he understood that if he wants to be popular in his country, he has to come back to the fundamentals. And that's important. What will happen, I don't know. But the idea he's tending to promote now is the so-called People's Congress. So now, in every city, in every place in Belarus, you will have reunion of grassroot organization that will work on the new constitution, a new system, a more democratic one, it's officially said. The question is: is this a more democratic system? Will it be a more social democracy, a more socialized democracy—it's not clear. Will it be demagoguery and pure fake, or will it be something serious? I don't know. We will see next year. But anyway, what is important for me is the fact that this is the discourse they have. And this discourse shows what real people want. Because, you know, if you want to be demagogical, you have to tell people what they want to hear. And that's the base. That's the basic thing.

Now, the question is that Lukashenko seems to more clever in taking the discontent of the people than the opposition. The opposition was much more organized two, three, four months ago. Now, he took back the control of the—let's say, discontent. How it will finish—I don't know. But anyway, it's an interesting game, I would say.

Radhika Desai

Okay, thank you Bruno. I guess, Mick, would you like to go next? And then Jarek.

Mick Dunford

In relation to what you said about China—China remains very strongly committed to a multilateral international system. That's the first thing. COVID has obviously had quite a considerable impact on—if you think about the BRI and BRI projects, and what seems to have happened is that there's a concentration on what I've seen as being key projects. In relation to that, I mean the Belarusian projects is one of the key projects. So, that will continue to play an extremely important role. But I think the third thing that is very, very striking is that there's a strong development of trade, international investment, but this development of trade and international investment is now much more strongly focalized on, let's say the kind of near neighbourhood. So, in other words, South-East Asia, Central Asia and parts of Eurasia. And that's in part being driven, of course, by the existence of the trade war with the United-States. So, it's not so much of a withdrawal. It's, in a sense, a focusing upon a smaller sort of geographical arena. So, that is an arena that in a sense embraces much of Eurasia. And it also embraces, interestingly, you know, there's a big agreement being established between Iran and China involving very, very substantial Chinese investment in Iran. There's been a new deal really relating to oil recently with Iraq. So, it's quite clear that in certain parts of the world, China remains very active. and obviously it's got a strong interests in some of the internationalization of some of this investment. So, I think that's how I would respond to you point.

In relation to what you were saying about integration of Belarus into a Union with Russia. I mean, that's basically as I understand it, the central issue is security. Russia would not want NATO to be present just 125 kilometres away from Moscow. So, this Union Treaty is in a sense, first of all, really concerned with the security of Russia. The important question is once they've harmonized transport and other infrastructures, which are part of this union treaty, what scope does it leave for the political autonomy and the political sovereignty of Belarus? I mean, that's something which I can't really say very much about, but that to me is the key question. And that ties up very closely with what Bruno was saying about the political options for the future development of Belarus. But that obviously critically depends in many ways on the preservation of a certain degree of sovereignty in relation to the sort of economic and political course of that particular country.

Radhika Desai

Great, thanks Mick. And Jarek, you have the final word.

Jarosław Dobrzański

Okay, thank you. Well, it refers to the question of whether it is a revolution of the middle class that you posed. Well, it can be safely said, I hope you will agree with me, that there answer is no. There is no middle class in Belarus. If it is a revolt, it is a revolt of the upper middle class, and of the aspiring classes or imitating classes, imitating people. And of course, it's a revolution of heightened and perhaps unrealistic expectations, which have been also, somehow, with which the people have been imbued from outside.

Now, if to some extent, to a large extent, this problem is of Lukashenko's own making, because the state supported the solid educational system, which was inherited from the Soviet time. The state supported good, higher education system, the research and development. And so, it developed the sector of high-tech economy of communication and information technologies. It is not true that everybody in the sector is paid low wages. Of course, there are people on the lower level of employment who are paid inadequate salaries, but there is a substantial group of people who have made colossal money, even millions and billions. And it is even calculated it's 0.1% of millionaires. And these people have been acculturated to a Western style of consumption. And of course, they have acquired a substantial economic power, which is not corresponding, to which political power is not corresponding, so this is what they are after.

If the Polish case can serve here as an example, as a lesson, then you have to take into account that after 1989, there has been a succession of. Left-wing or center-right governments until 2015, when a right-wing populist, nationalist, law and justice party won election and then repeated its success second time in the role. And this is not an accident, because what happened in the meantime is that the left parties lost their constituency and the electorate shifted its allegiance to the right-wing formations. Which, of course, promised to undo some of the neoliberal reforms and so on and so forth. They reneged on these promises once they were elected, making some kind of readjustments, which are not really all that important.

Another question here is what kind of integration? Because, there are two possibilities. As far as the integration of Belarus with the Eastern sphere of influence is concerned. One is of course the swallowing by the Russian partner and emasculating the Lukashenko regime. But there is another opportunity of a bringing Belarus into a broader structure of integration of Euro-Asian integration, where the relationships are more partnership, partner-like, and not just transmission belt from Moscow to Minsk, because this is not going to happen. For this, Lukashenko is too smart, and even if he's ousted, this is not in Putin's interest to take such a problem on his back now. So, this is how I see this.

Radhika Desai

Great, thank you very much! I think we should probably bring this to a close, although I'm always amazed to see that I guess this discussion has been so interesting that it has kept 40 plus people staying with us all through this.

So, thank you very much to all the panelists, I think you've shed a lot of light, we've heard a lot of different possibilities, and it just shows how fluid in some sense the situation still remains. You heard from Pavel that the choice before Belarus is between a democratic neoliberalism or authoritarian neoliberalism. You heard from Boris that it's between more or less democratic forms of social democracy. And Boris also sort of threw in for good measure a certain characterization of the Lukashenko base of power, which is kind of, essentially a bit Trumpian base of power in the rural areas and so on in the fading industries and so on. But, anyway, these are all interesting points. And then of course, we have heard from the other panelists basically about you know, whether there will be a union. It looks according to Mick anyway, there is very likely for security reasons if for no other, a union with Russia and therefore also further process of integration with Eurasia and also, more or less, general agreement among other

panelists that the neoliberal option is not really an option for Belarus, which sounds interesting. Anyway, I'd just like to say thank you again very much. I think this has been fascinating. And who knows, maybe we will be discussing some further developments about this in a few months or weeks' time. Thank you very much, we will bring this to a close, and we will send you further notices about events being held by the International Manifesto Group. Thank you very much.