

BOFAXE

Flashbangs against Empowerment

WHAT A GOVERNMENT'S VIOLENCE TELLS US ABOUT CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (I)

— The last weeks were turbulent in Belarus. For the first time in his 26 year-reign, president Alexander Lukashenko faces a meaningful challenge to his power in the form of a unified opposition. On the evening of the presidential election on 9 August 2020, shortly after polling stations had closed, government exit polls were published, claiming that Lukashenko won re-election with approximately 80 % of the votes, despite independent exit polls conducted at embassies and disclosed election protocols showing 80 % and more for his challenger Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Protests quickly formed all over the country, the largest ones taking place in Minsk. They were met with a harsh crackdown.

This post looks at the events before and after the election through a human rights lens and highlights a particular quality of civil and political rights that becomes apparent in the way the government has reacted: their potential to empower people.

An extraordinary challenge

Immediately after Alexander Lukashenko came to power in 1994, he started concentrating power in his own hands. His reforms were accompanied by ever more restrictive policies towards civil and political rights, even though the country is party to a handful of international human rights treaties, e.g. the ICCPR. In 1992, the Republic of Belarus even ratified the first optional protocol to the ICCPR, accepting the individual complaint procedure before the Human Rights Committee (HRC). The reality is, however, sobering. By 2018, Belarus had not implemented a single view of the HRC that had found violations of the ICCPR. Belarus is the only state in Europe which still applies the death penalty, is not a member of the Council of Europe and has not ratified the European Convention on Human Rights.

In this year's election, Lukashenko faced a surprise contender: Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, an English teacher and the wife of an oppositional blogger and promising presidential aspirant. After her husband had been detained in May, Tikhanovskaya took over his candidacy. She quickly grew into her unexpected role and campaigned on two demands alone: the release of political prisoners and the organisation of free elections within six months of her election. With these simple promises, Tikhanovskaya was able to unite the fragmented Belarusian opposition. Once registered, Tikhanovskaya managed to organize large rallies – something that is only allowed for registered candidates in the weeks leading up to an election – in many Belarusian cities and towns, not only in the capital. Her rally held on 30 July 2020 was the largest the country had seen in decades with an estimated number of 63.000 participants. Tikhanovskaya's campaign created powerful images that had not been seen in the Republic of Belarus.

Even before Tikhanovskaya's rise, the government had been hard on any form of opposition, arresting promising challengers, barring them from running in the elections, and cracking down on subsequent protests. However, the more the unlikely challenger Tikhanovskaya who was underestimated, not least because she is a woman, gained support, the more nervous the authorities became. In the last days before the election, the government organized concerts in those places that Tikhanovskaya had planned to hold her rallies at. State media broadcasted images of Lukashenko overseeing anti-riot police trainings, and more and more peaceful protesters were detained.

On the day of the election, reports of election rigging started appearing early on. The internet was shut down across the country but some nevertheless managed to report occurrences. A particularly bizarre video widely circulated on social media showed a woman with a large plastic bag climbing down from the window of a polling station on a ladder held secure by a police officer. The bag in her hand appeared to be filled with sheets of paper which led many to the conclusion that it contained ballots for the opposition the officials were trying to get rid of. Shortly after the government-sponsored exit polls had been announced, protests started forming all over the country. These protests were met with violent crackdowns, and shocking images went around the world. According to numerous reports, the police used rubber bullets and stun grenades, known as flashbangs, against the protesters, police vehicles drove into people and protesters were arrested. The Interior Ministry stated that 3,000 people were detained, and more than 50 citizens and 39 police officers were wounded on the night of the election alone. The protests and crackdowns continued the following nights.

VERANTWORTUNG Die BOFAXE werden vom Institut für Friedenssicherungsrecht und Humanitäres Völkerrecht der Ruhr-Universität Bochum herausgegeben: IFHV, Massenbergrasse 9b, 44787 Bochum, Tel.: +49 (0)234/32-27366, Fax: +49 (0)234/32-14208, Web: <http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/ifhv/>. Bei Interesse am Bezug der BOFAXE wenden Sie sich bitte an: ifhv-publications@rub.de.

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