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SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

The Dynamics of Mass Mobilization in Belarus

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Abstract
How can and should we analyze mass mobilization and its outcomes in authoritarian (and potentially democratizing) states as social scientists? Are there any distinctive features to the study of mass mobilization and its outcomes in Eastern Europe? And how much should we focus on comparative analyses versus context and country specificities? The case of the 2020 mass mobilization in Belarus offers an opportunity to engage with and answer these questions in a reciprocal dialogue between scholars of protest and activism, politics of competitive authoritarian and democratizing contexts, and regional and country experts. This symposium brings together a diverse set of scholars and combines comparative and case-specific analyses and empirically driven and interpretive analyses that focus on different political, social, and cultural angles of this episode of mass mobilization and its aftermath.

Keywords: Belarus; political behavior; protests; democratization; social movements

Introduction

Although moments of mass mobilization are generally rare and often take us by surprise, they seem to be occurring more frequently – not in democracies but rather in still democratizing or even authoritarian contexts (M. R. Beissinger 2022; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Garrett 2014; Ketchley 2017; Levitsky and Way 2022; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Onuch 2014; G. B. Robertson 2010; Rosenfeld 2020; Smyth 2020; Tarrow 2005; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tufekci 2017; Weiss 2014). These can be moments of intense systemic, political, and international rupture, or remarkable continuity (Aya 1990; Barker 2008; M. R. Beissinger 2022; Dupont and Passy 2011; Onuch 2011). Some regimes are overthrown, some are simply weakened, and others still become more entrenched. Participation in mass mobilizations can be triggered by deprivation or by personal abundance, by diverse collective identities, and by political and/or economic rights claims and grievances (Giugni and Grasso 2016; Goldstone 2001; Goldstone, Gurr, and Moshiri 1992; Gurr 1970; Kerbo 1982; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Opp 1988, 2009; Rosenfeld 2017). In fact, the same and most egregious violations of political and or economic rights might trigger a mass mobilization in one country but not in another. In some contexts, repression quells or prevents mass engagement, while in others its use or escalation increases engagement exponentially (Carey 2006; Davenport 2007; De Vogel 2022; Moore 1998; Opp and Roehl 1990). Moreover, the actions and interactions of political elites (both in power and in opposition) during moments of mass mobilization and in their aftermath vary between repression, cooperation, and co-optation (Dimitrova 2018; Hagopian 1990; Jenkins and Klandermans 1995; Onuch 2014). Typically,

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moments of mass mobilization are seen as an urban phenomena, and yet research shows that they can have a regional and geospatially diffused component. Classified often as progressive and liberalizing episodes, they can also include religious and conservative elements/actors/organizations in a society as part of a cross cleavage coalition (Abu-Lughod 1998; Lynch 2011; Beissinger 2013; Ishchenko 2014). Master frames (including perceived and recorded claims and grievances) deployed in the moment of protest are often reshaped and reinterpreted after the event by both participants and observers – at times unintentionally and at times purposefully to create or dispel national myths. This is also possible because data on the events and on participants – their aims, motivations, and process of mobilization – are often collected post-fact, thereby allowing for biases to shape or even to direct the analyses and our understanding of the outcomes and future pathways of moments of mass mobilization. To say that these are complex phenomena to study is an understatement.

So, how can and should we analyze mass mobilization and its outcomes in authoritarian (and potentially democratizing) states as social scientists? Are there any distinctive features to the study of mass mobilization and its outcomes in Eastern Europe? And how much should we focus on comparative analyses versus context and country specificities? The case of the 2020 mass mobilization in Belarus offers an opportunity to engage with and answer these questions in a reciprocal dialogue between scholars of protest and activism, politics of competitive authoritarian and democratizing contexts, and regional and country experts. This symposium brings together a diverse set of scholar and combines comparative and case-specific analyses, empirically driven and interpretive analyses that focus on different political, social, and cultural angles of this episode of mass mobilization and its aftermath (Bekus 2023; Douglas 2023; Elsner 2023; Hansen and Ford 2023; Korosteleva and Petrova 2023; Kulakevich and Kubik 2023; Stykow 2023; Onuch et al. 2023; Way and Tolvin 2023).

The fraudulent, unfree, and unfair Belarusian presidential elections on August 9, 2020, and the falsified result declaring the incumbent Aliaksandr Lukashenka once again the victor marked the beginning of an extended period of mass mobilization in the country. Mass protests of up to 200,000 people and across the whole of the country took place regularly from August to October 2020, with smaller protests continuing into December 2020, and by some accounts into 2021. The events caught many observers by surprise and challenged some of the assumptions in the comparative literature on protests. The prolonged nature of the demonstrations, their all-country nature, the potential role of social media and messenger services, the informal organizational structure behind the mobilization, collective identities, the dynamics of regime repression, and the events' aftermath are among the features that social scientists have begun to explore (Basik 2022; Bedford 2021; Bekus 2021; Bodrunova 2021; De Vogel 2022; Gapova 2021; Greene 2022; Kazharski 2021; Kazharski and Kubová 2021; Kulakevich 2020; Leukavets 2022; Maliauskaya 2022; Mateo 2022; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021; Murashcenkova et al. 2022; O'Loughlin and Toal 2022; Onuch and Sasse 2022b, 2022a; Pendse 2022; Petrova and Korosteleva 2021; G. Robertson 2022; Sierakowski 2020; Weller 2022; and Wijermars and Lokot 2022).

While the events did not come out of nowhere, building on a history of activism and opposition in the country (Herasimenka 2019; Hrycak 2010; Korosteleva 2009; Kulakevich 2014; Marples 2006; Nikolayenko 2015b, 2015a; Pospieszna and Galus 2019; Titarenko et al. 2006), and while they were preceded by smaller opposition activist protests since May 2020, the events that unfolded in August 2020 were different to anything seen in Belarus previously. Even at a time when the political outcome was still uncertain, it was already clear that this moment of mass mobilization marked a watershed moment from a societal perspective. It is estimated that about 10% of the Belarusian population engaged directly in the protests, making Belarus more like its democratic neighbor Ukraine and less like its autocratic neighbor Russia. There is much to learn about the protests themselves and about their aftermath.

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What Were the Dynamics of Mass Mobilization? And How Can We Understand Them?

Firstly, it is important to note that between August and October 2020, we witnessed a sea of ordinary citizens spill out onto the streets of Belarus' cities, with the largest and most significant protests occurring in the capital Minsk. We call the median participant of these protests "ordinary" because, at first glance, they may or may not have voted or paid taxes, they may or may not be members of opposition parties or other organizations, and, due to the sheer numbers, we know that unlike during smaller protest events in the past these median participants did not have (much) protest experience. Compared to previous protest events in Belarus, such as the so-called Jeans Revolution in 2006 or the Parasite Tax Protests in 2017, we could see from the diverse composition of the protesters – from mothers along with their babies to young males, from soldiers burning their uniforms to tractor factory workers, doctors, and journalists – that this was definitely a moment of mass mobilization when institutional politics failed, and people voted with their feet.

In our own protest event analysis of the events as they unfolded, the tipping point from significant but still rather small and cleavage-based opposition to mass mobilization occurred on August 13–14. It is at this moment that we began to observe the formation of a cross-cleavage coalition, specifically with the commencement of the workers' strikes and some initial elite defections, first from low-ranking military officers and former officers, ambassadors abroad, and staff at Belarus' state television. On August 16, mass protest built simultaneously across many cities all over Belarus.

Arguably, this moment of mass mobilization was facilitated by a severe tactical failure on the part of Lukashenka and his regime. Like other authoritarian leaders (not least Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine in 2013–2014), Lukashenka miscalculated the effects of regime repression – here in the form of mass arrests. About 7,000 individuals in localities across the country were arrested. The momentum behind moments of mass mobilization often stems from the mistakes authoritarian leaders make. Once the election fraud and large-scale repression triggered mass protest, the events also tipped into becoming an elite game. While the continuity and persistence of the protests was vitally important, what the parties in power and those in opposition did, or were not able to do, would determine the outcome. People power alone could not predict just how revolutionary this moment would be.

Immediately, we also noted distinctive features of these protests compared to other mass mobilizations in the region and beyond. For example, there was a geopolitical dimension to the Belarusian protests. Comparative accounts have shown that the geo-spatial diffusion was more widespread across Belarus and occurred at a much faster rate than in other East European cases, such as in Ukraine in 2013–2014. Although the EuroMaidan also had a presence across Ukraine's regions, the extent of this diffusion was different. Moreover, a staggeringly large number of protesters attended the protests on their own. Up to 60% of protesters who responded to our MOBILISE protest survey reported that they went to the protests alone. And the protests also never generated any one name or title that caught on, even if our respondents suggested that the name could be "Belarusian Evolution," "Women's Revolution," "March for Freedom," "Revolution for Human Dignity," and a "Flower Revolution/Evolution." Instead, we refer to the protests by generic descriptions, such as "2020 Anti-Lukashenka Protests" or "2020 Protest in Belarus." Not unlike in the case of the EuroMaidan, a very high level of engagement in online contention was observed in Belarus, with ordinary citizens reporting in the MOBILISE protest survey that they reposted a symbol, poster video, photo, watched a live broadcast of the protest, engaged in online discussions, and used a hashtag as their own examples of online protest engagement.

Notably though, after two to four weeks, the regime and state defections slowed or stopped altogether, and new targeted repressive tactics were developed and expanded with the support of the Russian Federation. The regime militia targeted smaller protests in towns and villages and also followed individual protesters home from protest sites or arrested them at metro stations. Pressure was also specifically placed on workers and according to MOBILISE protest survey data

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(2020–2021), the percentage of protesters involved in strike actions also fell from approximately 20% to under 4% after the first month (MOBILISE 2020).

And although very large protests continued over the months that followed – in fact, according to MOBILISE protest survey data (2020–2021), more than 80% of protesters said they attended protests more than once – over time, the Lukashenka regime "won" the war of attrition. The regime then resorted to further informational control and repression, including the re-direction and forced landing of a Ryanair flight at Minsk airport in May 2021, which resulted in the detention of activist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega. By late 2021, few were speaking about contention in Belarus, and most scholars focused on regime entrenchment. Prominent opposition figures in exile and some scholars continued to highlight the rise of a new conception of peoplehood of nationhood in Belarus as a lasting impact of the protests.

In the collection of articles that follows, a diverse group of scholars address the different elements mentioned above and collectively contribute to a better understanding of this mobilization and its aftermath.

The Symposium

We begin with the protesters themselves. Onuch, Sasse, and Michiels provide an empirical s*urvey-based assessment of anti-Lukashenka protest participants*. Employing unique data from an original online protest survey among 18+ citizens of Belarus residing in the country at the time of the protests (Onuch et. al. MOBILISE 2020/21, n=17,174), fielded in August 18, 2020–January 31, 2021,[2] they answer a simple yet important question: Who are the people who, in the face of extreme repression, unexpectedly took to the streets *en masse* in an authoritarian state? They provide descriptive statistics about the socio-demographic characteristics of the protesters, self-reported protest grievances and claims, and median protester preferences on a range of attitudes and policies and thereby paint a portrait of who the median protester was. They also employ regression analysis to test whether these patterns hold at a statistically significant level when comparing protesters and non-protesters. Their analysis acknowledges both the complexity of collecting data during crisis moments and in authoritarian contexts, while problematizing some early assumptions about who the protesters were and how they may or may not have differed from non-protesters. Their analysis is an important first step to understand the social dynamics of the events of 2020, while also providing a baseline for understanding ordinary citizen's mobilization capacity in the future.

Building on the theme of understanding the role of different actors, Elsner combines a theological and an empirical approach to assess the role of different Belarusian Churches in the protests. Elsner highlights the puzzle that while the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church shape popular social discourses, neither actively participated in the protests against the Lukashenka regime. And yet, as the mass mobilization unfolded, the events deeply affected the churches and even challenged their self-perception of the role they should and do play in Belarusian society. Elsner examines the heterogeneous nature of the two churches and their communities and compares and contrasts their awareness of the political crisis, as well as their ability to mobilize. Thus, her article challenges perceptions that these churches are homogeneous structures loyal to the state and Lukashenka regime.

To explain why the 2020 Belarusian protests ultimately failed to oust Lukashenka, Way and Tolvin explore weaknesses of the Belarussian opposition. They locate the oppositions' key weakness in Lukashenka's successful authoritarian state building in the 1990s. They argue that two factors significantly increased the costs for the opposition and impeded their coordination: 1) the concentration of economic resources, and 2) the construction of coercive apparatus. They also contrast the Belarusian case of mass mobilization with that of Ukraine and conclude that the lack of a strong national identity in Belarus at the outset of the protests left the opposition with fewer resources to mobilize. They also acknowledge, however, that the lack of regional divisions in Belarus

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became a source of strength for potential activists and protest leaders once the protests were sparked.

Stykow enters the discussion from a theoretical angle and focuses on the different ways in which observes have tried to "make sense of a surprise." She develops three theoretical perspectives – "protest-democracy," "authoritarian/patronal regime dynamics," and "contentious politics" and applies them to the Belarusian case. Stykow shows that neither structural nor agency-related factors would have predicted the 2020 mass mobilization. She then examines how while the 2020 election fraud presented a political opportunity structure for the opposition, Lukashenka's weakness preceded these events. He had made several political mistakes, in particular on pandemic (non) control and allowing political newcomers to challenge his candidacy. Stykow retraces two further mistakes by Lukashenka that became the focal points for collective action: blatant electoral fraud and excessive repression. Supporting the findings of other scholars of protest, Stykow shows that Lukashenka survived in office because, in the end, elite defection remained low. She argues that "the case of Belarus indicates that hegemonic-authoritarian regimes are more vulnerable to mistakes by incumbents than to challenges from below and outside the regime."

Kulakevich and Kubik provide a comparative analysis by examining the anti-Lukashenka protests and the opposition movement connected to them alongside the Solidarity movement in Poland. They identify and analyze four stages of the development of the two social movements: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. Based on a detailed retracing of both movements, Kulakevich and Kubik conclude that – in contrast to Solidarity in Poland – the Belarusian opposition movement reached the bureaucratization stage, but failed to transform into a durable movement as a result of extreme repression. They also suggest that shifts in the collective conceptions of national identity are likely to sustain affective mobilization in post-2020 Belarus.

Hansen and Ford place the 2020 Belarusian protests in a historical context and examine political attitudes and participation throughout Lukashenko's presidency. They assess temporal patterns and shifts in popular satisfaction with the political system, trust in political institutions, and political participation. They employ data from the World Values Study (WVS) and the European Values Study (EVS) to assess the variation in citizen dissatisfaction between 1996 and 2018. They seek to connect this variation to a reciprocal change in political participation during a particular period in time. They find that satisfaction with the government and trust in institutions was stable over time, as was the willingness to engage in protests, especially among those dissatisfied with the political system. Overall, the authors highlight that there were consistent patterns of both regime support and dissent capacity characterizing Belarusian society.

Douglas explains in her article how in 2020 state-society relations in Belarus – previously characterized by a "social contract" of basic economic wellbeing and political stability, which atomized the local population and limited contention – were disrupted. First, this occurred as a result of economic decline, then the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally, the electoral fraud in August 2020 accelerated this process. Douglas argues that the state became driven by its own security concerns, as political elite actors invested in the domestic security structures. This resulted in a redefinition of the social contract (previously encompassing all of society) into a much narrower security agreement between Lukashenka and key state, militia, and intelligence structures and different types of "siloviki" (strongmen). Employing the prism of securitization theory and relying on state documents, original survey data, and interviews, Douglas spells out the increased "securitisation" in Belarus over the last decade.

Finally, Korosteleva and Petrova widen the perspective and unpack the many different crises in Belarus, which they argue are often seen through a "prism of democratization, post-communist transition, and nation- and identity-building." These theoretical lenses, however, fail to account for informal, hidden, and unstable processes in Belarusian society. Drawing on the insights from complexity-thinking, the authors propose a theoretical framework that helps them to explain that transformative and irreversible change has now taken place in Belarus, despite Lukashenka clinging on to power.

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The articles collected in this symposium enrich our understanding of the long-lasting mass protests in Belarus that caught most observers by surprise. The multidisciplinary group of scholars assembled here approaches these events from different empirical and conceptual angles: some employ original data; others gain leverage through comparison with other cases or theoretical reflection. Jointly, they remind us of the challenges involved in studying societies in authoritarian regimes both in "normal" times and during extraordinary moments of mass mobilization. They highlight the importance of a range of actors, including the protesters themselves, the opposition movement preceding and developing alongside the protests, and different regime elites, as well as the structural conditions shaping regime (in)stability and the capacity for collective action. The contributions to this symposium map issues and dynamics of an evolving research agenda on contentious politics in authoritarian settings and the case of Belarus in particular.

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