

# In Belarus, the Coronavirus Rains on Lukashenko's Parade

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On Saturday, Belarus was the only country in Europe to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War with a full military parade, notwithstanding warnings from the World Health Organization and health risks due to the coronavirus pandemic. This decision was symbolic on several levels. The government of Belarus is a coronavirus-denial stronghold, despite the clear damage to public health. In the run-up to presidential election on August 9—the autocrat Alexander Lukashenko's sixth—the Eastern European country braces itself for several fights.

Unlike most countries around the world, Belarus has opted not to resort to a lockdown. Lukashenko dismissed the pandemic as a “psychosis,” made fun of the victims and their lifestyle, and suggested sauna or a tractor ride as a remedy. At the same time, he explained that the country is not rich enough to shut down its economy, and dismissively wondering what people would have to guzzle on if it did.

However, the coronavirus situation is far from being under control. According to the official data, as of May 14 there were 26,772 confirmed cases and 151 deaths, while 8,168 had recovered. This means Belarus has one of Europe's highest per capita infection rates, and local experts believe deaths are considerably undercounted. According to the Ministry of Health, those who had the coronavirus and got cured before they died are not included into the statistics. One of the possible explanations is Lukashenko's promise that “no one is going to die of COVID-19,” but chronic diseases. As a local joke goes, coronavirus in Belarusian is “pneumonia.”

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The decision to stage the military parade was frowned upon by the Kremlin, which had postponed Russia's celebrations. Belarus's closest ally had already publicly criticized its lax approach to the pandemic due to consequences that are unpredictable. Minsk recently revoked the accreditation of a Russian state TV crew after a report about rising coronavirus deaths.

This is another wedge between the two neighbors that comes after an exchange of blows over crude oil, which Belarus used to import at a subsidized rate to refine and sell on the European market. The next flashpoint could be over Russian military facilities in Belarus whose leases run out in June.

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At the same time, Belarus has accepted aid from Russia and China, as well as loans from the International Monetary Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to deal with the impact of the pandemic. Support from the EU in the framework of its Eastern Partnership has been requested but is tied to recommendations of the World Health Organization—in particular, the cancelation of mass events, which is not happening.

As the pandemic demonstrates, democratic and authoritarian regimes can be equally successful or ineffective in fighting against the spread of the virus. What it comes down to is the readiness to act. Lukashenko has been placed on the spot because he cultivates the image of a serene leader. He can neither back down from the path he chose, nor find fault with his staff as this means admitting the loss of control, something an autocrat cannot allow himself.

While the president seems to be more preoccupied with the potential economic damage, the people have worked to protect themselves. As the public resorts to voluntary self-isolation, concerts are canceled, and cafés close as people do not show up. Healthcare workers are stretched in handling the situation, reportedly left to their own device in the absence of an official policy and given the president's statements. Civil society organizations have united to support each other; several grassroots initiatives acted to protect vulnerable groups; around \$250,000 has been raised by from the public to supply healthcare workers with protective equipment. Independent media outlets work with primary sources to cover the crisis and fact-checks leaks to have a better picture of the scale of pandemic. Unfortunately, the elderly, who are the most likely to watch state TV with its misleading messages about the virus, remain at risk.

This rift between the authorities and the people undermines Belarus's social contract that requests obedience in exchange for relative financial stability. It might lead to popular unrest during the electoral campaign and presidential election. Even if Lukashenko's gets away with his "Don't panic" gamble and the human cost is not too high because citizens have taken measures to protect themselves, by then the economy might stall anyway. No wonder that since the end April, Belarus has seen a wave of small, but very angry protests as well as detentions and arrests of a hundred bloggers, journalists, and activists.

At the same time, it is unlikely that the election campaign will lead to any kind of political mass mobilization. The united opposition parties have already canceled their primaries to elect a joint candidate due to the public-health risks during the collection of signatures. Two dozen figures have announced their candidacy, but there is not really one potentially strong enough to lead public opinion or attract crowds. However, the presence among them of Valery Tsepkalo—formerly a diplomat, assistant to Lukashenko, and head of Belarus Hi-Tech Park—and Victor Babariko—who resigned as a head of Belgazprombank to run—is evidence that fatigue with the system is found within it as well as among the public.

With the coronavirus pandemic laying bare the vulnerabilities of Belarus's political and economic system, criticism of the president is increasing, even though the people seeking change lack meaningful channels for dissent, apart from social media. A possible increase in public dissatisfaction, an economic slump, and the fatal mistakes of a non-restrictive response to the pandemic could be a real downpour on Lukashenko's parade.

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