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## Belarus: Pandemic Life and Hope

**In Minsk, president Lukashenka held a crowded Victory Day parade on 9 May as if the Coronavirus didn't exist. But while the regime in Belarus can still force citizens to march in parades, it has lost control over the information space and protest is forming, writes Iryna Vidanova.**

The day is grey, cold and rainy. I'm shivering in my light summer dress while waiting our turn to dance during the May Day parade in Minsk. As we waltz by the grandstand full of top state officials, I notice that they are bundled up in hats, gloves and coats. At the end of the huge square, my grandmother is waiting for me. Usually smiling, she looks worried as she wraps me in a warm jacket. As soon as we are home, she rushes me into the shower and vigorously scrubs me with soap. It is May 1, 1986, five days after the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. There is still no official news about the disaster and the government is hiding the truth, but everybody whispers that something terrible has happened.

This childhood flashback came to me as I watched the surrealistic streams from this year's May 9 Victory Day parade that took place despite the coronavirus pandemic. Belarus' permanent president Lukashenka in his military uniform, surrounded with elderly veterans – none of them wearing a mask – proudly oversaw hundreds of soldiers and students marching by a live crowd in Minsk. In his address he claimed: "We had no other choice, and if we had, we would have done the same." He suggested that we owe our lives to those who died in the war.

The parade and Lukashenka's speech caused an outcry. Unlike 1986, Belarusians today are well-informed about the danger and scale of the Covid crisis in Belarus and elsewhere thanks to the internet

and smartphones. The public's response was that our grandparents who suffered for us wouldn't want to see us die from a virus helped to spread by a parade.

The authoritarian regime can still force citizens to attend and march in parades, but it has lost control over the information space. In the Soviet tradition, the state first tried to squelch news about the virus. But people started sharing their stories online and reports spread like wildfire through social networks, messengers, and online outlets. Independent journalists published the Covid stories of ordinary people and exposed the poor state of the healthcare system and its lack of means to protect patients and staff. By making endless inquiries to state institutions and asking uncomfortable questions to state officials they succeeded in breaking the government's information blockade and forcing the authorities to provide regular updates. However, the state continues to obfuscate, avoid responsibility, and try to silence critical voices. People here know all too well that, when the state TV promises the situation is under control, it means things are really bad. They have learned from this regime that, at such times, they have no choice but to take the initiative themselves. And they have.

While Lukashenka issued hollow orders – shaking the air with empty words, as my grandmother used to say – for protective gear nobody had and blamed frontline doctors for getting infected, volunteers urgently launched a crowdfunding campaign, purchased thousands of respirators, safety masks with filters, and delivered them to hospitals across the country in just a few days. Several of the capital's trendy restaurants, whose clients were mainly hipsters, switched to making free meals and delivering lunchboxes for medical workers. The Minsk Hackerspace tech club designed and manufactured plastic face shields for healthcare staff using 3D-printer technology. A popular local clothing brand made reusable protective wear. A tech startup working on a VR suit produced masks. Hundreds of private companies and thousands of citizens donated money to support healthcare institutions and victims. Different civic initiatives joined forces in the national #BYCOVID19 campaign and raised 250,000 dollars in 45 days in one of Europe's poorest countries.

For more than two decades, the regime has tried to suppress freedom of association and expression by staging fake elections, building a propaganda machine, controlling the private sector, and employing pervasive repression. And yet today we see that it has failed. The remarkable response of citizens to the Covid crisis shows that civil society is rising in Belarus, despite adverse conditions. The so-called "strong state" is, in fact, a bully who is confused and cowardly in the face of a real threat. Committed and courageous citizens, who have self-organized and mobilized so quickly and on such a large scale, are proving more effective than the state's bumbling bureaucracy. In Belarus, authoritarianism doesn't seem to be the answer.

Unfortunately, arrogant rulers rarely admit mistakes or back down. On the contrary, they often become even more aggressive. Rather than words of compassion and gratitude, Belarusians hear angry and threatening speeches from our head of state. Transparency and accountability remain alien concepts for government institutions. The virus has exposed the inability of the authorities to act responsively and responsibly. Accordingly, public trust has fallen.

It seems to me that there is greater dissent in society now, across more groups, than ever before. With a presidential election scheduled for August, protests are starting to break out. These are led by bloggers

who have been trying to hold the government accountable and speak truth to power. Medical workers, disappointed by the inability of the state to protect and support them, have joined demonstrations and spoke openly online for the first time. Some have been arrested and lost their jobs.

We've seen this story before. The police break up the protests and persecute activists, journalists and bloggers, even those diagnosed with the virus and already in hospitals. And our servile courts continue to sentence them to prison terms. But somehow this feels different.

At the moment, Belarusians are focused on surviving the virus. But as uncertain as post-pandemic life might look like, people are already questioning if they want to see the existing state order in their tomorrow. Three decades ago, it took a tragedy at Chernobyl to shock people into perceiving a different future and launching the changes that led to a new and independent Belarus. Like then, the changes will not come fast or easy this time. But at this strange and challenging moment, I feel very proud of my compatriots and hopeful about my country's future.

*This piece is dedicated to the life and work of Yuri Zisser, a pioneer of internet media in Belarus, founder of the country's largest independent portal TUT.by, philanthropist, and renaissance man, who passed away on May 17, 2020.*

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