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THE CURRENT: What's driving mass protests in Belarus?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: Alexander Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus since 1994, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But although the most recent elections in early August returned Lukashenko to power once again, the people of Belarus have come out in mass protests, with tens of thousands disputing the legitimacy of the elections. Now a month later, protests are still continuing, even as opposition leaders have been forced to leave the country.

With us to discuss what's happening in Belarus is Steven Pifer, a nonresident senior fellow here at Brookings and also a William J. Perry fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. Steve, thanks for talking to us today.

PIFER: Happy to be here.

PITA: Lukashenko has ruled for decades. He was commonly referred to as "Europe's last dictator." And much of the media and the economy in Belarus I understand are still state-run. So, what was it about this moment in Belarus that's lead to these mass demonstrations?

PIFER: This was actually interesting, and I think what probably surprised a lot of people, myself included, is that for a long time, the people of Belarus have been prepared to put up with Mr. Lukashenko. And it goes back to the beginning – Belarus was probably the new independent state that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union that least knew what it wanted to do with its independence, and wanted the closest relationship with Russia. But you've seen a number of factors that have worked to bring these demonstrations out that we've seen over the last four weeks. One was a stagnant economy. Second, a very inept response by Lukashenko to COVID-19. Basically, denying it was a problem, saying you can drink wine and that will keep you free of the virus. And then after 24 years now, the population was just getting tired of him and you had a blatantly stolen election. The official results reported that Lukashenko won perhaps 80% of the vote, but exit polls showed something very, very different; that he drew maybe only 15-20% of the vote. And then some of the anecdotal reports, where local election commissions released their tabulations, showed that Lukashenko really did not get very much.

PITA: And how wide-spread have these protests been? Is it primarily in Minsk, or throughout the country? What all and who all has been involved?

PIFER: The largest demonstrations have been in Minsk, typically on a Sunday, on weekends. I think each of the last three Sundays you've had probably 100,000 people on the streets, which for Belarus is a big deal. But there've also been demonstrations and protests around the country. And it seems to be a fairly wide segment of the Belarusian population that's participating. So, you have students, elements of the middle class, but also workers, which Lukashenko would probably have considered his political base. He tried to rally support a week or two after the elections and he went to visit some of these large, state-owned industrial concerns and actually was heckled by the workers. So, it

seems like it's a pretty broad segment of the population that wants to see him gone and that considers that the election was indeed stolen.

PITA: What has the response from his government been to these protests?

PIFER: The response has varied. In the first week to ten days, it was pretty brutal. I think I've seen reports of 6000-7000 people arrested, and very badly treated – reports of beatings and all sorts of things. Then the authorities seemed to back off a bit. They were not arresting large numbers, although in the last week or so that appears to have picked up. And you've also seen in the last 5 or 6 days the security services move against what they have targeted as the opposition leaders still in Belarus. The main opposition leader – and I really wouldn't use the term opposition leader – but the woman, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who won the election by the results reported by exit polls, she fled Belarus. She's now in Lithuania. But over the weekend, three members of the opposition coordinating council – were arrested. It looks like the Belarusian authorities tried to deport three of them to Ukraine today. Two were deported, but a third, Maria Kolesnikova, tore up her passport at the border so they couldn't deport her. So, she's still being held by authorities; she's still in Belarus. The tactics of the regime seem to have changed from large, mass arrests to trying to target those individuals the regime believes are in fact coordinating and organizing the demonstrations. Although this really does have the feel of demonstrations where it doesn't require a lot of coordination. People are showing up on a regular basis to protest and they're being quite creative about it. So, the protesters fly a red and white flag, which has become a symbol of the opposition to Lukashenko -- and about a week ago in Minsk they banned hanging that flag from apartment buildings and such. So what people are doing is, they're hanging, for example, red and white shirts. They're hanging their laundry out to dry on their balconies, so they're sending a signal while still technically complying with the prohibition on flying the flag.

PITA: Got it. You had written something interesting last month when you were writing at the beginning of these protests. Here in the U.S. we often view political struggles or debates in Eastern European and some of the other former Soviet states as being a struggle between Western models of governance – or, whether to be more Western-aligned versus Russian-aligned. But you've pointed out that's not the case here. Can you explain that a little bit more?

PIFER: Sure. I think for example, in Ukraine, which is just to the south of Belarus, there is a geopolitical competition there. There's a Western view and there's a Russian view. And in Ukraine, you have a population which has largely decided that they want to be with the West. They want to be fully integrated in Europe; they do not want to be in a Russian sphere of influence. That entire geopolitical dynamic is really missing in Belarus. You don't have a large segment of the Belarusian population saying, "We want to be members of the European Union." There appears to be close to zero interest in Belarus in joining NATO. And there's no real interest in NATO or the European Union in pulling Belarus in. So that geopolitical factor is gone. And what you have now in Belarus is a protest movement that is motivated by a desire of the people to have a greater political voice, to have a more democratic system. Even Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, she's said this demonstration isn't pro-Russian, it's not anti-Russian, it's not pro-the European Union, it's not anti-the European Union; it's about democracy. And in a way, that offers an opportunity for Russia to handle this crisis in a different way from how it's handled Ukraine, although so far it looks like the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin are making bad choices with regards to Belarus.

PITA: Yes, I was going to ask if we have seen or what we've seen from them so far in terms of interference in Belarus.

PIFER: Right, well, I believe that Mr. Putin like Mr. Lukashenko, they're hoping just to wait out the protests, that the protests just fade away and they can get back to what they would continue the pre-election normal. It doesn't look like that's going to happen. The demonstrations are going on strong now four weeks after the vote. And it really presents to the Kremlin, to my mind, a fundamental choice, which

is, do they side with Mr. Lukashenko or do they side with the population, the people of Belarus. Right now, it looks like the choice made by the government is to back Mr. Lukashenko. So, for example, as members of the Belarusian state media have resigned, you have reporters and journalists from RT, which is a Russian state-organized media outlet, coming in to replace them. You have Vladimir Putin about two weeks ago announcing that Russia has organized a special police unit that would be available to assist the security services in Belarus if that became necessary. So, Mr. Putin seems to have made a choice.

I think that's a somewhat risky choice and the risk to Mr. Putin and to Russia is that if they side with Lukashenko and if the repression becomes brutal, you may take a Belarusian population that is very favorably inclined towards Russia now and you may begin to turn that population against Russia. And you may begin to see a geopolitical element enter into this, where Belarusians say, "look, we need to be with the West because Russia is joining with Lukashenko in suppressing us." Now the other choice would be for the Kremlin to basically back the protesters, find a way to ease Mr. Lukashenko out – they could give him a nice dacha next door to Mr. Yanukovych – Mr. Yanukovych of course is the president who fled Ukraine back in 2014 who now has a dacha on the outskirts of Moscow. You then would see a leader come in who would be very favorably inclined toward Russia if Russia helped solve the problem. The concern in the Kremlin however seems to be that if you have, in addition to Ukraine and the Baltic states and Georgia, yet another state emerge on Russia's border where you have a democratic, pluralistic political system, the concern seems to be is then you have the Russian population begin to ask, "if they can have that kind of democracy in Ukraine or in Belarus, why can't we have it here?" And that probably is the principal factor behind the Kremlin's decision so far to support Mr. Lukashenko.

PITA: While we're on the subject of Russia, what can you tell us about the latest in terms of the apparent poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny?

PIFER: Alexei Navalny was poisoned on a domestic flight in Russia. Russian doctors implausibly said this was due to low blood sugar. In fact, he was evacuated to Berlin and placed in a medically induced coma. He's now come out of that coma and now appears to be responding to treatment in Germany. But it's not yet clear whether he'll make a full recovery. The Germans came out last week – in fact, Chancellor Merkel herself made the announcement – that they have concluded that Mr. Navalny was poisoned by a nerve agent that's in the Novichok class of nerve agent. As you may recall, Novichok was the nerve agent that the British government reported was used in the assassination attempt against the Skripals back in 2018. Russia has now gone into typical denial mode. You have Russians saying, "wait a minute, Navalny was not poisoned." You have some saying, "well, he was poisoned by the Germans." There's lots of little stories coming out trying to discount this, but given the history of poisoning attempts against Russian regime opponents – go back to Litvinenko back in 2006 when he was poisoned with radioactive polonium in London – there's a certain history there and most have concluded that state elements of the Russian government were behind this attack on Navalny.

PITA: Lastly, looking ahead, about how long do you think these protests can maintain themselves in Belarus? How long does Russia have to try and make a decision about whether to exit Lukashenko more gracefully from the scene or not, as you were talking about? What are you expecting to see in the coming months?

PIFER: Yeah, I think the really big question is are these protests sustained? Do you continue to see 100-130000 people coming out on the streets of Minsk every weekend to protest? Certainly, the hope of Lukashenko and Putin is that they will just fade away. Lukashenko has said when the demonstrations stop, we can have a new constitution and then maybe even an early election; I don't think anybody takes that seriously. Lukashenko is just trying to get the demonstrations to end. He'd like to get back to business as usual as he's conducted it for most of his previous 24 years in office.

For the Russians, again, the signs all seem to be that they have chosen to support Lukashenko and probably would be prepared to be supportive if he engaged in violent suppression on a large scale against demonstrators. One hopes they might really reconsider, because I believe they're on the verge of making a mistake in the same way that they made a mistake in Ukraine. Nothing has done more to push Ukraine away from Russia and towards the West than Russian policy of the last 6 years. Russia now, if it mishandles this crisis in Belarus, could begin the process of pushing the Belarusian people – who, again, of all the republics that emerged as independent states after the Soviet Union collapsed, were the ones most favorably inclined toward Russia – that the Kremlin now has the opportunity to push that population away from Russia as well.