

Catastrophe and Denial in Belarus

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In Belarus, the COVID-19 pandemic was dismissed by the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko, as a mere "psychosis" that can be fought off with regular meals or vodka, visits to the countryside or a sauna. As the virus spread around the world, and while other countries went into lockdown, Belarus took no official measures. Its soccer league was allowed to start on schedule, in stadiums open to the public. On May 9, the cities of Minsk and Brest proceeded at the president's insistence with impressive Victory Day celebrations to commemorate the defeat of the Nazis in World War II, complete with troops parading in close formation and thousands in attendance. Lukashenko and his son Mikalai presided over the parade in Minsk.

Lukashenko, the only president the Republic of Belarus has had to date, has been in power for 26 years, leading an authoritarian state that is regarded by some as a dictatorship. He entered office in the summer of 1994 in a democratic election, but he has held on to power ever since through carefully manipulated votes, denying his opponents a level playing field. He faced a new election in early August 2020, and though few expected change, a new challenger, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, whose husband had been barred from running and jailed, attracted huge crowds to her rallies.

In its earlier guise as Soviet Belorussia, the nation faced two catastrophes outside of the officially recognized war years. In each of those cases—Stalin's mass executions (1937–41) at the Kurapaty Forest in northern Minsk and other locations, and the Chernobyl disaster of 1986—the response has been to ignore and forget, just as in the current pandemic. Is this a peculiarly Belarusian response to catastrophes?

Such reactions at any rate seem typical of Lukashenko and his government when faced with an overwhelming disaster: they declared Chernobyl to be officially over early in the twenty-first

century, and they have had problems even acknowledging the existence of a pandemic that had afflicted almost 70,000 residents of Belarus by late July. As the political analyst Vitali Shkliarov has asked:

What is the real invisible enemy? Is it a microscopic virus or unseen radiation particles in the air? Or is it an unwillingness to wrestle with events now invisible in contemporary life because they have never seen the light of day?

RESHAPING THE PAST

The Second World War had a particularly devastating impact on Belarus, which lost around two million people, including about 80 percent of its prewar Jewish population. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, Lukashenko began to use the war as the defining symbol of national identity in Belarus, building on the Soviet legacy of the 1960s, but with singularly Belarusian content. Thus, Victory Day celebrated the partisans (irregular anti-Nazi resistance fighters who operated mostly on Belarusian territory from 1941 to 1944), the air force, and their heroic conquest of the "brown plague" of fascism. The Holocaust was either left out of the narrative or subsumed under the losses incurred by Soviet citizens.

The theme of national victimization in the war has been encapsulated in a memorial site at Khatyn. Located about 40 miles from Minsk at the site of a village destroyed by police forces working for the Germans, the memorial honors all of the settlements razed by the Nazis, which are named on plaques. An elderly man who was the only resident of Khatyn to survive the massacre is memorialized in a statue at the entrance. It depicts his gaunt frame holding a dead child, a somber scene made even more so when a bell tolls mournfully in the background.

Most Belarusians can identify with these images. But they can also recall memories that have been passed down from an earlier period when the republic was a target of Stalin's Great

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Purges. To the north of Minsk, about 30,000 victims of the NKVD (the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, later known as the KGB) are buried in Kurapaty Forest. A memorial site there is maintained mostly by nongovernmental organizations and opposition parties including the Christian Conservative Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, the Christian Democratic Party, the Youth Front, and others.

In November 2018, the authorities agreed to allow a monument to be built on the site. But it includes no mention either of who carried out the killings or the identity of the victims. In 2019, Lukashenko ordered the removal of over 100 crosses and the erection of a fence around the site. At the entrance, incongruously, businessmen have opened a restaurant called "Lets Go! Let's Eat!" The site's supporters regard it as sacrilegious, an affront to the memory of the corpses in the forest.

The contrast between the two sites at Khatyn and Kurapaty is a reflection of the conflicted official stance on memory-making. Hitler's victims can be remembered, but Stalin's victims create problems because the revered victory in World War II occurred under his leadership. Thus, the official attitude is that Belarusians must forget about Stalin's crimes, even though a growing number of mass burial sites have been uncovered, particularly in the past six years.

FORGETTING CHERNOBYL

In late April 1986, explosions at the Chernobyl nuclear power complex, just across the southern border in Ukraine, contaminated large swathes of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic with radio-nuclides, particularly iodine-131, strontium-90, and cesium-137. About 80 percent of the republic was affected by iodine, while the other two radio-nuclides, with half-lives of three decades, were more persistent in the southeast and southern regions.

For several years after the accident, many families continued to live in the area and eat food grown on contaminated land. By 1990, thyroid cancer began to appear among children—around 300 cases at first, but soon rising to several thousand. Other diseases and ailments also cropped up, and the general level of resistance to illness declined. While it was still part of the Soviet Union, the republic did not need to assume direct

responsibility for such issues. But after Belarus became independent in 1991, health problems stemming from Chernobyl radiation consumed as much as a quarter of the entire health budget.

In 2004, Lukashenko decided to lift restrictions on life in the contaminated zone. He declared that the accident was a thing of the past and that it was time to resume cultivation of the land. He encouraged evacuated families to return to the afflicted area in the Homiel (Russian spelling: Gomel) region. Horses and cattle could be grazed and bred, flax and other crops grown, and the whole area rejuvenated. After all, returnees would need jobs.

Lukashenko's approach reflected his desire to restore the dormant economy of southeast Belarus, but also impatience to overcome the psychological effects of the nuclear accident. People might be putting themselves in danger by returning, but their very presence would provide a solution of sorts. Whereas Ukraine was still struggling with the effects of Chernobyl, it could now be said that Belarus had surmounted the disaster, thanks to the boldness of its leader.

The same attitude has shaped the nation's energy policies, particularly the construction of a nuclear power station, the country's first, at Astraviec (Ostrovets), close to the border with Lithuania.

Two 1,200-megawatt reactors are expected to come online late in 2020.

Building a nuclear power plant in the country that was worst affected by Chernobyl might seem foolhardy, but the new plant is needed to offset dependence on Russian oil and gas. The fact that it was built and financed by Russia, using Russian reactors, was kept firmly out of the public discussion. At the same time, information about the health effects of Chernobyl that contradicted the former Soviet Union's official version—which acknowledged only 54 deaths—continues to be suppressed.

VIRAL DENIAL

Like Chernobyl, the coronavirus presented a problem that could not be resolved by force. Lukashenko and his government seemingly had no response to it. They believed they lacked the resources to resist the virus without undermining the country's economy. They assumed that a lockdown would spell disaster, especially in an election year. The president's answer was to declare COVID-

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19 a fabrication, a psychosis invented in the West. He claimed that no one had died from the virus; underlying illnesses had caused every death. Life—and the economy—must go on.

It was critical to Lukashenko that the Victory Day Parade proceed as planned. It was the 75th anniversary of the end of the war, and the last major anniversary that could include some who had a living memory of the events, despite the fact that these veterans were in the age group most vulnerable to the virus. Thus, it had to take place, even after Russian President Vladimir Putin postponed the Moscow version until June 24.

The Ministry of Health has continued to publish daily reports of new reported cases of COVID-19 infections. But as with Chernobyl, the official death toll, which stood at 543 as of July 28, does not appear to correspond to the total number of deaths attributable to the virus, given the extent to which it has spread. The reported incidence of death per total number of cases was around 0.5 percent at the start of June, compared with 6 percent in the United States.

Sweden, the only other country in Europe not to respond with a lockdown, had recorded over 4,400 deaths as of June 1, for a fatality rate of 11.7 percent. But Sweden at that time had 37,452 positive cases, considerably fewer than the 44,255 in Belarus. The size of their respective populations is also quite similar. The difference is that in Belarus, it is still possible to suppress unpleasant information.

That assessment, to be sure, comes with a caveat. Belarusian civil society, in the absence of leadership from above, has started a number of new initiatives in response to overcrowded hospitals and lack of personal protective equipment for medical workers. A volunteer movement called ByCovid19, which distributes medical equipment such as syringes and face masks, was launched on March 26 and managed to raise \$250,000 in less than seven weeks.

UNEXPECTED CHALLENGE

A new sense of activism has also emerged in the political arena. Thousands took to the streets to support groups gathering signatures for new opposition candidates for the August 9 presidential election—observing social distancing, wearing masks, and waiting patiently to get to the signing table.

The prominent vlogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who has a YouTube channel with over 200,000 subscribers, was arrested in May while campaigning for his wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, after he

was barred from the race. The authorities said they found large sums of cash in his apartment, ostensibly to fund a foreign-backed uprising. The furious reaction catalyzed his wife's campaign, which called on voters to "Stop the cockroach!"

Two other opposition candidates were arrested and barred from running. Viktor Babaryka, who held a lead in some polls, faces serious fraud charges after police raided Russian-owned Belagazprom Bank, which he had headed until recently. Valery Tsepkala, a former ambassador to the United States, fled to Russia.

However, the Central Election Commission did allow Tsikhanouskaya's candidacy. Her campaign was aided by Tsepkala's wife, Veranika, and Babaryka's campaign manager, Maria Kalesnikova. They proved an effective team, despite Lukashenko's scornful dismissal of the possibility of a female president. (He ignored the fact that several of the governments with the most successful pandemic responses to date have been led by women.)

Tsikhanouskaya vowed, if she won, to hold new elections with all three imprisoned candidates. The crowds that assembled to back her in the middle of a pandemic and in the face of mass arrests and harassment spoke volumes about Lukashenko's declining power. The fear factor had disappeared. Belarusians want change, and their resolve was symbolized by the courage of this 37-year-old former schoolteacher.

Although the official count claimed that Lukashenko had won outright in the first round with 80 percent of the vote, few saw the results as credible. Tsikhanouskaya in turn claimed victory based on several exit polls, one with 85,000 respondents. On election night, Minsk was cordoned off, and the army and police used tear gas and rubber bullets against a crowd of more than 100,000 people that gathered to protest the official results. Over 1,300 were arrested and hundreds were hospitalized after clashes throughout the night. More protests followed.

Lukashenko may still have the tools to stay in power, but he has lost the bond he once had with the public. The president abandoned his people to the pandemic, just as he lied to them about the lasting effects of Chernobyl. And he can no longer point to a thriving economy as compensation. Even Moscow's support, which used to be a given, is now uncertain; Lukashenko holds a weaker hand for negotiations with a Kremlin disinclined to continue subsidizing his regime. Although he has claimed another victory, it will be a bitter and hollow one. ■