The 2020 presidential campaign in Belarus resulted in a popular mobilization against Aleksandr Lukashenka's regime at a scale the country had not seen for almost three decades. Three new presidential candidates, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, Viktar Babaryka, and Valer Tsapkala, none of whom represented the established political opposition, inspired great enthusiasm in society and attracted many volunteers for their campaigns. Lukashenka swiftly arrested Tsikhanousky and Babaryka, after which Tsapkala left the country, fearing for his freedom. Tsikhanousky’s wife, Sviatlana, however, was allowed to register as a candidate because Lukashenka severely underestimated her potential to lead a campaign. She ended up uniting opposition to the regime around the demand for a fair election and ran a very successful campaign, despite obstruction by the regime. On election day, the voting results were grossly falsified, which triggered wide-scale protests across the country. Lukashenka responded with a brutal crackdown, which came as a moral shock to a society not used to large-scale violence. The shock triggered an even bigger wave of mobilization, which lasted for months but ultimately subsided in the face of continuing repression.

Several precursors made the unprecedented growth of the anti-regime mobilization possible. Two social processes that had been going on for years—the weakening of the social contract with the regime and the growth of the urban middle class—created demand for political change among different social groups. Under the old social contract, Lukashenka was the guarantor of security and stability, but this guarantee had been undermined by worsening conditions of state employment, shrinking social
services, and especially by the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic right before the presidential election in 2020. As for the normally apolitical urban middle class, they disliked Lukashenka’s neo-Soviet rhetoric but had not seen an attractive political alternative—until the 2020 election.

The new candidates were able to challenge Lukashenka on his own terrain by speaking in a different way to the same societal values he spoke to, rather than by suggesting a new set of values. The new presidential candidates—Tsikhanousky, Babaryka, and Tsapkala—presented an attractive alternative in the eyes of many Belarusians. Unlike the established political opposition, which was often perceived by the population as pursuing their narrow materialistic interests or being all talk and no action, the new candidates were seen as doers who wished to use their talents to benefit society. The messages of their campaigns engaged with ideas of civic nationalism—solidarity, agency, dignity, and fairness—which Lukashenka had also engaged in the early days of his political career. The new candidates were able to challenge Lukashenka on his own terrain by speaking in a different way to the same societal values he spoke to, rather than by suggesting a new set of values. The broad character of their agenda appealed to a wide audience with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

More immediate precursors that aided the growth of the mobilization were decentralized and non-hierarchical communities that had emerged over the previous few years, and the growth in social media and IT solutions these communities used for organizing collective action to solve social problems. These horizontal communities included different groups in the urban middle class: IT professionals, artists, NGO activists, creative class professionals, Siarhei Tsikhanousky’s followers on social media, and networks of self-help organizations that formed during the COVID-19 pandemic. These activists and organizations swiftly repurposed their skills and earlier experiences of collective action to help the growth of popular mobilization around the election.

Finally, poorly targeted and excessive repression by the regime contributed to the upward shift in citizen mobilization. The arrest of the three main alternative candidates led to the unification of the opposition behind Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who built on the emerging demand for a fair election and used existing networks of supporters to take the mobilization to a new level. After the election, moral shock from the government’s brutal crackdown on protesters led to another upward scale shift with new social groups joining the protests. The same moral shock led to defections by several high-profile state officials and rank-and-file members of the police force. Over the long run, however, systemic repression succeeded in keeping Lukashenka’s regime in power.

About the research project:

**HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS**

This case study is part of a larger project examining when and why citizens mobilize to challenge the state in hard authoritarian contexts. The project compares 21 recent episodes of mobilization in order to understand the factors that contributed to the mobilization’s growth. Four mobilization episodes (Ethiopia in 2015-2018, Vietnam in 2016, Sudan in 2018-2019, and Belarus in 2020) were selected for in-depth case studies. The summary presents a brief description of the episode and the main factors that contributed to the mobilization’s growth.¹

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