Power, People and Politics: Understanding the Belarusian Crisis

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On 9 August 2020 Belarusians went to the polls to vote for a new president. Prior to the election, there were already signs of growing state intervention manifest through the extrajudicial violence and imprisonment of political candidates, as well as ordinary citizens. How far was the state prepared to go, to ensure another landslide victory for President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for 26 years, was on everyone's mind. The ensuing aftermath however, exceeded all expectations. It was not that Lukashenko claimed an 80.10% victory, that shocked the country and the world. It was the cynical and blatant way he stole the vote, and then thwarted peaceful protests through the use of Special Forces (OMON), and the Army, and even brought President Putin into the dispute, which broke the truce between the people and the president.

We all live in 'interesting times' today. Some would say, this is a curse that affects our sense of order, continuity with the future, and our experiences may even lead to an ontological crisis (Flockhart 2020). Others think, change or crisis may also be an opportunity depending on how we come to understand and respond to it.

If change were to be conceived as emergence, in a complex and non-linear world, full of possibilities and self-organising moments for individuals, and/or systems, in search of their own equilibrium (Luhmann 1990) – then the only way to grapple with it comprehensively, is by focusing on 'the local' and 'the person', as a trigger and a 'fixer' of change (Korosteleva & Petrova 2020). In other words, to understand anything 'global' today, as the recent experience of the COVID-19 health pandemic has attested to, whilst causing massive disruption to global governance with further systemic risks and unpredictable consequences (Flockhart 2020; Kavalski 2007; 2020), one needs to re-relate to 'the local' (Kurki 2020), to appreciate how a system adapts to survive, and what makes communities, through their intra- and inter-actions, resilient to resolutely embrace change and even endure pain and suffering in order to achieve a life worth fighting for.

The Belarusian crisis today, if viewed from a complexity-thinking perspective (Kavalski 2007; Cudworth & Hobden 2013), may present just such an unfolding opportunity. The 'system' as it emerged during the early 1990s had been shaped by centuries-long history of suffering, loss and near-annihilation (Marples 1999; Wilson, 2012; Ioffe 2014), only to be moulded today into a quiet, hard-working and resilient 'community of relations' (Glissant 1997), ultimately longing for a dignified and peaceful life within and outwith 'the system'. Even the hardships of the early 1990s, associated with crippling economy, low earnings, limited resources and Chernobyl disaster, were all without objection 'adapted to' by Belarusians who were strongly motivated by their enduring belief in a better tomorrow. This would give them a fair and secure sense of a 'good life', not necessarily materially prosperous but quietly satisfying and without conflict, with its neighbours to the east or west.

This 'tomorrow' however, has yet to arrive for many Belarusian, after nearly thirty years of continual change: No matter how hard they seem to try, either by voting on-mass for change in their first and only, fair presidential election in 1994; by protesting peacefully every five years; by enduring more hardship, oppression and increasing state violence, a 'better tomorrow' seems to have become an ever-more distant prospect, and the commodity of one – President Lukashenko – who continuously trades on the past sufferings to make the present stagnation the best-worst outcome. The system has reached an impasse due to lack of progression and severe systemic imbalance,

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which if not resolved, only increases the risks of ungovernability, and even implosion, potentially causing disruption to the wider regional and global security architectures with the nexus to 'the local'.

To examine any change in a system to date, scholars of IR would normally rely on explanatory prowess of the traditional grand theories – (neo)realism; (neo)liberalism or rational choice – which have proven their utility in a bi- or unipolar system prevalent during the last century. Presently they struggle to gain traction in the increasingly complex, and what seems to be an emerging multipolar/multiplex world (Flockhart 2016; Acharya 2017; Tang 2018). This new world requires a new thinking and governance,[1] which invariably relates to the way it is constituted, bottom-up, through 'resilience', and from 'the local'.

The Belarus crisis serves as a test-ground for traditional and emerging (complexity) thinking. The protagonists of classic theories presently advocate for the involvement of international powers, with realists insisting on gathering NATO forces in Poland on the border with Belarus to put pressure on Russia to negotiate; imposing sanctions; to cripple Russia's sphere of influence further. In turn, liberalists advocate for triangular negotiations involving Russia and Belarus, either via the OSCE, EU or even the country's clergy, which seem an unbiased and respected party to mediate the crisis. The latter has now been compromised by the authorities, while all the other options seem to rely on the external forces only, to bring 'equilibrium' back into the system. In complexity-thinking we argue elsewhere, this is not only 'old-fashioned' and interventionist, but also unsustainable (Korosteleva & Flockhart 2020; Korosteleva 2019) thus risking to add another protracted conflict to the heart of Europe.

To further examine the Belarusian crisis from complexity-thinking, attention would naturally have to turn to 'the local', and 'the personal', which are normally missed by classic theories. Complexity-thinking would draw on resilience as a process of adaptation to change (Chandler 2014), enabling local communities to build on their sense of a 'good life', this way reclaiming their vision of the future to make them complete (Berenskoetter 2011), and on their 'inherent' strength and support infrastructures to better respond to the challenges of time, under pressure or crisis, to adapt and transform, in the pursuit of a better tomorrow (Korosteleva and Flockhart 2020).

What Belarus has demonstrated, thus far moving into a fourth week of public demonstrations and brutal state violence, with many protestors being imprisoned, beaten, tortured, disappeared or murdered, is the awakening of Belarusian 'peoplehood', which serves as a catalyst and amplifier of change and its inevitability. If it were suppressed through international intervention, it would become a 'curse' for the system in crisis. For this to be turned into an opportunity, an understanding of full-blown public mobilisation is needed: their erupted emotions, that quell fear and pain; identity as an irrational struggle ('as if nothing else to lose but dignity') for a rationally-envisioned collective 'tomorrow' – a COUNTRY for LIVING,[2] and not for Leaving – and growing civic activism stimulated by COVID-19, when the state refused to recognise the pandemic. These components bring out an incredibly powerful moment of becoming 'a peoplehood' with a strong sense of self-worth, who cannot be governed as before, and who can only work through self-organisation, bottom-up and inside-out.

If we are to understand the Belarusian crisis through complexity and resilience-thinking, there is no turning back (even if a truce were negotiated internationally). There is only a way forward towards building a self-sustainable 'community of relations', aware of its own strength and capacities, which, having matured for nearly thirty years, is now ready to actualise their own potential, in their strife for a 'good life', the way they specify. This 'local' self-realisation in Belarus, has occurred through pain and suffering for a better tomorrow and is an important example to prepare us for the need to rethink how we govern today, in order to ensure the cooperative potential when adapting to a multi-order world (Flockhart 2020).

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Notes

[1] We develop a concept of 'adaptive governance' predicated on resilience; while Flockhart goes further to suggest a framework of Multi-Order Governance (MOG) to ensure the cooperative potential of a becoming Multi-order World (MOW)

[2] This is Tikhanovsky's campaign slogan

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