

In Belarus, Europe's "last dictator" is actually allowing protest. Here's why.: One key factor: the government wants Western support.

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FULL TEXT

In the past month, protests have swept across Belarus, a post-Soviet republic in Eastern Europe. Citizens are outraged by Presidential Decree #3, popularly known as the law against "social parasites." This 2015 law penalizes part-time or unemployed workers, requiring them to pay an annual tax of approximately \$250 -- a penalty that helps make up the taxes they would have paid had they held a full-time job.

The protests have been smaller than earlier demonstrations against the regime. But they're a substantial problem for the long-standing authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko -- because many of the protesters come from groups and in live cities that typically support him.

[[interstitial_link url="https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/19/why-are-there-protests-in-poland-here-are-the-five-things-you-need-to-know/?utm_term=.eeff160f81e1"](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/19/why-are-there-protests-in-poland-here-are-the-five-things-you-need-to-know/?utm_term=.eeff160f81e1)]Why are there protests in Poland? Here are the 5 things you need to know[/[interstitial_link](#)]

In the past, Lukashenko has clamped down on protests pretty quickly. But when these protests began, Lukashenko initially tolerated them to a surprising degree. Why?

We believe that his tolerance comes largely because he wants to keep improved relations with the West, and so is acquiescing to international pressure for free speech, free assembly and other basic democratic freedoms. If that's true, Western pressure for greater democracy may indeed be effective in this case. That's important to note when U.S. commitment to promoting democracy may be waning.

The timeline of the surprising protests against Europe's "last dictator"

As recently as two months ago, Lukashenko, first elected president of Belarus in 1994, seemed in complete control. He had decisively won a fifth-term as president in the 2015 elections, which were criticized by international observers for voting irregularities. The opposition leadership has been fragmented and disorganized since the early 1990s. Belarus's citizens have been rather politically torpid compared to their neighbors across Eastern Europe, often leaving politics to those in the regime.

[[interstitial_link url="https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/21/how-competition-helped-then-hurt-kurds-in-turkey/?utm_term=.6642ab304f60"](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/21/how-competition-helped-then-hurt-kurds-in-turkey/?utm_term=.6642ab304f60)]Turkey's Kurdish conflict has surged again. Here is why.[/[interstitial_link](#)]

But on Feb. 17, in the capital city of Minsk, about 2,500 protesters assembled. The demonstrators represented a large cross-section of Belarusian society, and united in chants criticizing the new law and the regime's economic performance. Purportedly, what triggered these protests was the Feb. 20 deadline for paying the 2016 tax. As the figure below shows, the protests, surprisingly uninhibited by the regime, have since spread across the country.

In previous protests, the Belarus government reacted to demonstrations by quickly arresting, jailing and treating participants violently, and clamping down on news coverage. This time around, the regime's response "was delayed and very limited." It let demonstrators assemble week after week. At first it even allowed journalists to freely cover events.

Then, in perhaps the biggest surprise, Lukashenko unexpectedly announced on March 9, that he would suspend the tax until his government had fully reviewed the policy. This might be the first time in which the Belarus president made policy concessions in response to public demonstrations. And yet the protests continue, with the organizers planning a protest in Minsk on March 25 and a major multicity protest on March 26. The immediate goal of the protests has changed from a repeal of the tax to a change in government.

Many observers blame Belarus's recession for the protests

Many news reports explain the protests by noting that Belarus's economy is in trouble, the result of decreasing oil prices and dwindling international support. The recession that began in 2015 is the first in nearly 20 years and has resulted in high levels of unemployment and a nearly insolvent government. When first introduced two years ago, the hotly debated tax was supposed to prevent "social parasitism." The real purpose was probably to bring in revenue so the state could pay its bills.

But such a tax violates Lukashenko's unspoken political compact with Belarusians that involves him providing large social welfare programs in exchange for political acquiescence. This worked in the 1990s and 2000s, when Lukashenko used international subsidies to keep Belarus relatively stable and prosperous. But the recent recession has likely damaged public patience with the regime and led to decreased support.

But there is more to the explanation than just economic grievances

Our fieldwork in Belarus revealed that the economic story might explain the underlying motivation for the protests, but not the government's willingness to tolerate them for so long once they began. By not immediately punishing protesters, the regime signaled that it was willing to allow some opposition. That signal likely encouraged the protests to spread. Opposition groups told us that Lukashenko might have wanted to avoid angering the West by punishing dissenters.

Why?

In the shadow of Russia's occupation of Crimea and the collapse of Belarus's economy, Lukashenko has cautiously pivoted his international policy to face westward. Consider: Lukashenko allowed two members of the opposition to win seats in the 2016 parliamentary election, freed all political prisoners and relaxed visa restrictions. He has also not supported Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine, has demanded lower prices on Russian oil and has repeatedly criticized Russia's policies toward Belarus.

[[interstitial_link url="https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/20/putin-is-waiting-to-see-whether-trump-will-fund-pro-democracy-programs/?utm_term=.514b12d64263"](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/20/putin-is-waiting-to-see-whether-trump-will-fund-pro-democracy-programs/?utm_term=.514b12d64263)]Putin is waiting to see whether

Trump will fund pro-democracy programs[/interstitial_link]

In response, the European Union and the United States have lifted many of their most restrictive sanctions, the number of bilateral agreements between Belarus and Western countries and institutions are increasing and there might now even be an opportunity for Belarus to receive another loan from the International Monetary Fund.

European and U.S. interest in promoting democracy abroad might be waning. But the economic carrots so far remain. Belarus's dictator might still reasonably think that if he had subdued the opposition with characteristic violence and arrests, he might have endangered these important material gains.

Will Lukashenko continue to tolerate the dissent?

None of his reforms have won Lukashenko any friends in Moscow. Russian state-run media regularly criticize him. The Kremlin would probably be all too happy to have him replaced with a more compliant successor. Given all that, Lukashenko may be calculating that he cannot afford to let the demonstrations continue for too long, lest Russia use them to justify his ouster. Perhaps in response, he has stepped up repression in recent days. Between Feb. 17 and March 20, more than 240 people have been arrested and dozens have been sentenced to 15-day jail sentences.

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There's no way to know whether he will continue these measures. But if the West were to no longer make demands for reform, a more violent crackdown would likely be the result. Over the past few days, spokesmen for the European Union, the United Nations and the United States have all expressed concern about the detained protesters. That's been echoed by international organizations, which have criticized the regime for violating individual rights to freedom of speech and freedom of association. If Lukashenko continues to punish the opposition, he risks losing the gains purchased with his earlier concessions to the West.

There may be renewed debate in the United States about whether to keep funding democracy promotion. But Western efforts in Belarus are making at least one dictator think twice before engaging in repression.

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