

# Twenty Years in the Making: Understanding the Difficulty for Change in Belarus

Tatsiana Kulakevich  
*Rutgers University*

Even after twenty years of Lukashenka's rule, Belarusians still have to struggle for democracy. However, there has been a modest growth in the number of protesters during presidential elections and in the pro-EU mood of the Belarusian population. This article analyzes the dynamic of this growth through the prism of social movements literature and such concepts as framing, political opportunity, and mobilizing structures. The argument is that the weakness of the mobilizing structures and framing processes at times when political opportunities presented themselves in Belarus resulted in an absence of large-scale protests and a failure to sustain the development of social movements in the country. At the same time, Belarus cannot be considered as being in a static or retrogressive state since transnational flows characteristic of a globalizing world have exposed people to wider flows of information, providing them with counterframes and resulting in a modest growth in the numbers of protesters and a change in the preferences of the Belarusian population.

**Keywords:** *Belarus; political opportunity; mobilizing structures; social movements; framing*

Lukashenka has been in power for almost twenty years and Belarusians still have to struggle for democracy. The cult of personality manufactured by his regime has helped to induce complicity, isolate Belarusians from one another, and restrict allowable public speech. Yet there have been protests, however weak. For the past twenty years, the largest number of protesters in any demonstration against the dictatorship has not exceeded forty thousand people. However, despite this strong presidential grip on power, the number of protesters during presidential elections has been growing: in 2001, there were about two thousand protesters in the streets, in 2006 the figure reached ten to fifteen thousand, and in 2010, about forty thousand people came out to protest the rigged elections. In addition, the pro-European Union mood in Belarus appears to be on the rise. Data presented by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) show that 29.3 percent of Belarusians were willing to vote for joining the EU in the event of a referendum in 2006. This number increased by 12.8 percent in 7 years regardless of many years of anti-EU propaganda by the state media. At the same time, the number of those favoring integration with Russia fell from 56.5 percent in 2006 to 37.2 percent in

2013. This number is higher than those who prefer joining the EU, but the pro-Russian orientation has been slowly weakening. What can explain the modest growth in the numbers of protesters and the slow but steady change in the geopolitical preferences of the Belarusian population? How can one analyze the dynamics of such changes? The purpose of this article is to address this issue by analyzing the situation in Belarus under the Lukashenka presidency through the prism of the social movements literature.

There are three broad sets of factors scholars consider while analyzing the emergence and development of social movements: political opportunity, mobilizing structures, and framing processes.<sup>1</sup> Because the effects of these three factors are interactive rather than independent, it is essential to emphasize the importance of studying all three of them together. For example, expansion of political opportunity only becomes an “opportunity” when it is defined as such by a group of actors ready to act on that definition of the situation. In their turn, framing processes encourage mobilization based on a growing awareness of the system’s illegitimacy and vulnerability. As a result, well-organized mobilizing structures and propitious framing processes may mediate the effects of an “adverse” political opportunity and help a social movement to achieve its goals. Concurrently, the weakness in one (or more) of these factors makes the movement more vulnerable to challenges from incumbents and competitors.

In this study, I will analyze the three factors of political opportunity, framing processes, and mobilizing structures in Belarus and argue that weaknesses in the mobilizing structures and framing processes at the times when political opportunities presented themselves resulted in the absence of large-scale protests and a failure to sustain the development of social movements in the country. At the same time, the situation in Belarus cannot be considered as static or retrogressive since in a globalizing world people are exposed to ever wider flows of information that provide them with counterframes to the official discourse produced by the state. Additionally, we can observe a modest growth in the number of protesters and a change in the preferences of the Belarusian population.

The study differs from existing research on Belarusian politics by relying on the social movements approach and focusing on the dynamics of the situation. I set out to observe the evolution of political attitudes and the growth of mobilization. Most existing works are part of a larger research program on the processes of democratization in the former Soviet Union republics and identify similar reasons impeding the process of democratization in all post-Soviet countries. Among the main reasons are a monopolized economy, state-controlled media, Russian economic interests, manipulation of historical traditions, and coercive measures employed by the Belarusian authorities. One such work, edited by Hans-Georg Heinrich and Ludmila Lobova,<sup>2</sup> suggests that the authoritarian regime, the monopolized economy and media, and Russian economic interests have been the decisive factors explaining the country’s failure to move toward democracy. Kuzio and Fritz review several case studies and

suggest that the Belarusian authoritarian regime is an obstacle for the successful transformation of Belarusian society.<sup>3</sup> Marples identifies the Belarusian government's manipulation of historical traditions to strengthen Belarus's ties to Russia, economic stability under Lukashenka, and lack of open media as the main reasons for the reluctance of Belarusians to fight for democracy.<sup>4</sup> Rutland points out the high level of popular support for Lukashenka and the strong economy as the reasons for the strength of his authoritarian regime.<sup>5</sup>

While popularity is a crucial legitimating factor for autocrats, there is no clear evidence confirming the hypothesis of Lukashenka's high level of popularity, particularly recently. As reported by IISEPS, in 2013 only 32.6 percent of the respondents would have voted for the current president in the event of presidential elections, and 37.6 percent would have given their vote for any other candidate. While for many years the public tolerated Lukashenka in return for socioeconomic stability or his perceived ability to act in the best interests of the country based on years of experience, many Belarusians have no objection to a different person taking over as president. Similarly, while it is true that in the USSR it was not possible for citizens to participate in political life and it is not the case in today's Belarus either, the question is why? While strong institutionalization of the nondemocratic system is, indeed, an important factor in helping autocrats to retain power, it should be noted that the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Kyrgyz leaders also made considerable efforts to institutionalize their powers and yet the popular challenges in these countries were more successful during the color revolutions and later. Also, in terms of economic stability and strong economic performance, the Belarusian president was able to stay in power despite the major economic crisis in 2011 and poor performance in 2012 and 2013.

The rest of the study is organized as follows. First, I examine the possibility of change in the moods and attitudes of the Belarusian population through the concept of framing, but analyze also the weakness of the framing efforts in Belarus and thus their ability to sustain collective action. Second, I explain the weakness of the protests by showing the lack of strength of mobilizing structures and the "unfriendly" political opportunity structure. I conclude by discussing how my findings enhance general knowledge in the area of democratization and social movements.

## **Framing**

The concept of framing is a great tool to understand the origins of change in the actions and attitudes of the Belarusian masses. Studied by Inglehart, Gamson, Tarrow, Tilly, McAdam, and others, and mediating between political opportunity and mobilizing structures, framing processes are used to generate meanings intended to mobilize potential adherents or demobilize antagonists.<sup>6</sup> Frame analysis focuses on efforts by leaders and activists to create shared understandings of the world among the broader audience. Such understandings become parts of a larger belief system

and help to legitimate and motivate collective action as they generate unity among the populace or some of its segments. Framing processes are as important for shaping the emergence of collective action as for its ongoing development. The difference between the two stages is that the initial framing processes tend to be absorbed less consciously by the “masses,” and the sources of framing are hard to identify as they are multiple. The later framing processes are far more likely to be shaped by conscious and strategic contestation between the state and the challengers. In Belarus, the initial stage of the framing processes was marked by the simultaneous influence of the two opposing forces. On the one hand, the strategic framing processes by the Belarusian government through assurances of a coat, a roof, and a dinner on a stable basis and the manipulation of culture was successful in dissuading the majority of Belarusian citizens from active participation in the political life of the country and led them to develop preferences favoring the government’s line. On the other hand, globalization, defined as a process of growing interaction and interdependence between economies, societies, and nations across large distances, contributed to the growing access to information and allowed the masses to be exposed to information outside of state control, which, in turn, led to a gradual change in the preferences of the Belarusian masses away from the government’s line and created the basis for the increase in the number of potential protesters. However, the absence of strong strategic framing efforts from the collective actors representing the movements at their developmental stages has led to inchoate framing processes and failure of collective actions to sustain themselves.

The framing efforts by the Belarusian government during the twenty years of Lukashenka’s rule can be usefully analyzed within the Gramscian model of hegemony, focusing on elite forging of a single cultural framework from a number of possible frameworks within society.<sup>7</sup> With the collapse of the economic, social, and political systems of the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, the peoples of the Soviet successor states placed an increasing emphasis on survival, and some placed more stress on traditional values.<sup>8</sup> For most Belarusians, values such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, independence of the media, political freedom, and participation in political life were not a priority. At the top of the list were economic prosperity, social security, and political stability. Belarusians elected Lukashenka in 1994 as a candidate who promised “he would freeze prices, beat inflation, provide jobs for everybody. He pledged more Government support to the elderly and a brake on privatization, a program that so far has touched almost no one.”<sup>9</sup> Lukashenka was committed to reunifying Belarus with Russia, and the majority of people liked his vision. They believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was to blame for the economic difficulties in the country. People wanted a better life and some stability, and Lukashenka promised to achieve those goals. Rather than using an opportunity to restructure the domestic economy through privatization and liberalization, the regime stimulated GDP growth through Russia’s energy subsidies for Belarus. Because of the steep discount on Russian crude oil and natural gas, Belarus was able to export refined oil

products produced from Russian crude oil at market prices. The GDP growth constituted the basis of the regime's legitimacy. At first, it appealed to the interests and sentiments of Belarusian citizens who were satisfied with the results of the growing economy while appreciating the need for law and order after the financial hardships caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic crises in Russia in 1998 and 1999, resulting in a decline in trade with Russia and other CIS countries. Over time, people got used to the fact that the state claimed to be the guarantor of the correct functioning of the economic and legal systems. The data collected by IISEPS show that in 2013, 57.6 percent of the respondents felt that ordinary people have no influence on the political and economic life of the country and 45 percent of the respondents blamed the president for the worsening economic situation.

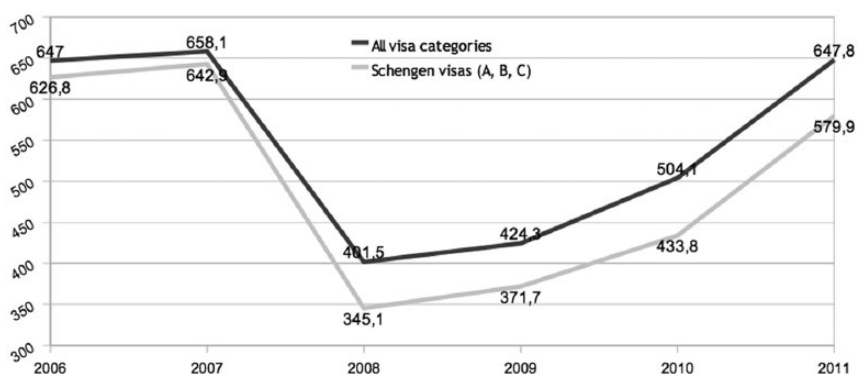
Besides the strategy of stimulating the growth of the economy and presenting itself as the guarantor of the country's stability, the government engaged in framing efforts whose aim was to discourage people from taking collective action. This was achieved by controlling the educational and media system as well as manipulating language and state symbols. According to Sewell, authoritative cultural action, launched from the center of power, "has the effect of turning what otherwise might be a babble of cultural voices into a semiotically and politically ordered field of differences."<sup>10</sup> Such action created a map of the "culture," telling people where they and their practices fit in the official scheme of things. An official course called "Ideology of the Belarusian State" was introduced in schools and state enterprises in 2003 and continues to be a part of the educational programs today. The ideological position of the president has also been expressed in his decisions and speeches. All statements of the president, designed to set goals for Belarusian society and the state, are directed toward manipulation of shared values, interests, and priorities of the masses. During the reign of Alexander Lukashenka the Russian language, the state flag, and the coat of arms became the symbols of power in Belarus, and the Belarusian language together with the white-red-white flag and the "Pahonya" coat of arms has been identified with the opposition. In officially controlled newspapers and on television, Lukashenka has been praised as the "father," his image has been used as a disciplinary device, generating public dissimulation when citizens acted as if they revered their leader. By inundating daily life with tired symbolism, the regime exercised a subtle, yet effective, form of power. And the greater the absurdity of the required performance, the more clearly it demonstrated that the regime could make most people obey most of the time.

This symbolic onslaught was resisted, however, as various groups and individuals offered counterframes. The rise of counterhegemonic discourses had several causes. Chief among them was the influence of the forces of globalization. The impact of globalization on Belarusian society is well documented. With respect to the KOF index, which captures the economic, political, and social dimensions of globalization, Belarus advanced from 33.58 in 1994 to 54.98 in 2013. (The maximum value is 100 and the minimum value is 1. Higher values denote greater

globalization.) The *social globalization index* is designed to capture the expansion of various networks of cooperation. It is expressed as the spread of ideas, information, images, and people by capturing personal contacts, information flows, and cultural proximity. The Belarusian social globalization index grew from 36.05 in 1994 to 61.91 in 2013. Even though Belarus is not very advanced in social globalization, the impact of this process on the society is undeniable. The volume of interpersonal contacts and dealings has increased, and according to a World Bank report ([www.worldbank.com](http://www.worldbank.com)), the number of mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people) increased from 5 in 2002 to 112 in 2012. Similarly, the number of internet users (per 100 people) increased from 9 in 2002 to 46.9 in 2012. In addition, Belarus is highly urbanized. According to the World Bank, in 2012 the urban population accounted for 75 percent of the total population. It is now widely accepted that urbanization is as much a social process as economic and territorial. It transforms societal organizations, the role of the family, demographic structures, the nature of work, and the way we choose to live and with whom. It also modifies domestic roles and relations within the family and redefines concepts of individual and social responsibility. In the case of Belarus, urbanization has led to the agglomeration of the population in areas considered to be true centers of progress that offer multiple options to residents, including access to new technologies and to various areas of activity. The population has been on the move. The sharp decline in the number of visas issued for the citizens of Belarus, as a result of the inclusion of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia in the Schengen area in late 2007, has reversed. As a result of the sustained increase in the number of visas issued by the consulates of EU countries in 2008, the figures almost reached pre-2007 levels in 2011 (Figure 1). Regardless of anti-EU propaganda by the state media, the change in opinion of the Belarusian masses in favor of joining the EU was reported by IISEPS: while 29.3 percent of Belarusians were willing to vote to join the EU in the event of a referendum in 2006, this number increased by 12.8 percent in 7 years.

*Economic globalization*, characterized by long-distance flows of goods, capital, and services as well as information and discourses that accompany market exchanges, and *political globalization*, defined as a diffusion of specific governmental policies, have intensified, as recorded by relevant indexes. But globalization in these two areas has grown at a slower pace than social globalization. The index of economic globalization grew from 35.58 in 1994 to 51.61 in 2013 and the index of political globalization rose from 24.84 in 1994 to 49.78 in 2013. The lower growth of these indexes reflects the slowing down of social mobilization and can be explained by the fact that the immediate aims of the Lukashenka state were those of reinforcing its present power base and substantially increasing its legitimacy in the eyes of its Western neighbors during the global economic crisis; the uneven, wavering spirit of Belarus–Russia relations; the Russian–Georgian War, etc. The government took this path in the belief that it had to adjust to internal and international pressures, and also because this strategy was consistent with some of its own ideological premises. All

**Figure 1**  
**Number of visas issued by consulates of EU countries in Belarus**



Source: Yeliseyeu, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 7 July 2012.<sup>11</sup> Available at [http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/english\\_research\\_yelis.pdf](http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/english_research_yelis.pdf).

these events got Lukashenka and his team wondering how to keep control and maintain Belarusian stability. Over the years, the Belarusian regime has made very well thought-out tweaks to the political as well as the economic landscape, without having to institute real changes. The tweaks were not systemic and thus safe for the government. The opposition was still kept away from the real political processes: the parliament was 100 percent opposition-free. The laws were still repressive, and the government could cancel temporary liberties at any point. On the other hand, while in reality the government did not mean to loosen its power, the economic tweaks together with the forces of globalization exposed the population to alternative possibilities.

Beginning in 2008, the Belarusian government had made small steps toward economic liberalization, improving conditions for private business and making some moves toward privatization. These came as the regime was feeling pressured by the effects of the global financial crisis as well as by increasing Russian energy tariffs. As a reaction to worsening conditions, Belarus had undertaken some economic reforms and improved business conditions for private entrepreneurs. In 2008 and 2009, presidential decrees established favorable conditions for doing business in rural areas and small towns. They simplified the procedures and waived certain taxes for small enterprises there. Directive No. 4, signed on 30 December 2010, laid out a detailed vision for microeconomic liberalization across the whole country. Its pro-market spirit caused high expectations in the Belarusian business community and among local and international experts, but the government's contradictory policies during the economic crisis of 2011 buried all these expectations completely. It seemed that even after the return of Russian subsidies in 2012, liberalization was off the agenda but on

7 May 2012, the president signed Decree No. 6 yet again, significantly lightening the financial and administrative burden for businessmen in rural areas and small and medium-size towns. Moreover, in the situation of stagnating GDP, melting currency reserves, a devaluating ruble, and no money to pay debts, on 10 October 2013 the Government and National Bank issued a plan for structural reforms to the Belarusian economy, focusing on the contraction of direct lending programs, budget reform, tax reform, privatization, and further liberalization of the economy. Considering that Belarusian government has had serious problems with transforming its own strategies and decrees into consistent policies, many experts believe that the government and the National Bank designed the plan of structural reforms mainly to persuade international lending organizations to open new credit lines for Belarus, with no intention of actually implementing the reforms. However, despite the constantly failing macroeconomic policy, there have been successes due to microeconomic liberalization. In the “Doing Business” survey published by the World Bank, Belarus has shot up from the 91st position in 2009 to the 63rd in 2013 out of 189 countries. Already it is ranked 11th among the 26 countries in Europe and Central Asia, which is nearly twice as good as Russia (ranks 21st) and Ukraine (ranks 23rd).

A similar situation can be observed with foreign direct investment in Belarus, which is recognized as an indication of economic globalization in the sense that foreign investment has often been an important avenue for the transfer of skills and technology. Despite the Government’s inconsistency, its poor macroeconomic policy, and opposition to reform from within the political elite, foreign investment in Belarus was steadily growing up until 2011. The low responsiveness of foreign investments to political developments became obvious in the second half of 2011. With inflation exceeding 100 percent in 2011, the country could not expect to receive considerable amounts of foreign investment or to revive the activity of local entrepreneurs. However, despite the sharp decline in foreign direct investment in Belarus in 2012, the inflow of investments into Belarus in 2012 still exceeded the level of 2010 (Figure 2). While the Belarusian economy was playing catch-up after a disastrous crash in 2011 and the state was trying to achieve a higher stability for Belarusian laws and the economy, it is safe to say that the masses were already being exposed to the information outside of their state’s control and began acquiring new knowledge. This produced a fertile ground for the creation of counterframes providing an alternative to the government’s line and preparing the basis for change in the preferences of the Belarusian masses. The populace was thus better prepared to take collective action at times of expanding political opportunities. While such changes in attitudes and behavior, resulting from spontaneous and uncoordinated cultural evolution, were enough to mobilize people for some action, more decisive, coordinated framing efforts had to be developed to prepare people for political contests between insurgents and the state. But this dependence of the framing efforts combined with the weak mobilizing structures contributed to the loss of the opportunities for change.



**Figure 2**  
**Foreign direct investment, net inflows (balance of payment, current U.S. dollars)**

Foreign Direct Investment, net inflows (BoP, current US\$)						
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
<b>Belarus</b>	1,807,300,000	2,187,900,000	1,876,500,000	1,393,400,000	4,002,400,000	1,463,600,000

Source: [www.data.worldbank.org](http://www.data.worldbank.org).

## Political Opportunity

Globalization forces played their role in the development of “alternative counter-cultures,” preparing the ground for the acceptance of interpretive frames that would move people away from the government’s ideology and generate moderate changes in the attitude and behavior of Belarusians. But the successes of cultural change and modest reframing are harbingers of mobilization success; they are not enough to explain the failure of the movements in Belarus to sustain themselves. To do this, we need to return to the concepts of political opportunity and mobilizing structures. Political opportunity presents an approach of social movements that argues that exogenous factors enhance or inhibit movement dynamics toward political protest. The political opportunity approach provided an extensive conceptualization of the political environments that social movements face thanks to the works of the political process theorists such as Kriesi, McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, and Kitschelt.<sup>12</sup> These researchers claim that social movements are developed by political constraints and opportunities unique to their national context. There has been disagreement over what counts as a political opportunity: mere changes in the institutional structure or also people’s perceptions of these opportunities. I will employ Tarrow’s definition here, which includes both cultural and structural interpretations. He defines political opportunities as those “dimensions of political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.”<sup>13</sup> The role of political opportunity changes depending on the stage of the collective action: while initially political opportunity is independent of the actions of movement groups and is purely shaped by the external political environment, after the onset of collective action it becomes a product of the interaction of the movement with its environment. Because of the weakness of organizational structures and, in turn, the lack of conscious reaffirmation of the framing processes by the collective actors representing the movements in Belarus, potential political opportunities were rarely interpreted as “opportunities” and did not lead to an ongoing development of social movements in the country.

It is not surprising that the political opportunity for mobilization in Belarus can be noticed primarily during presidential elections: in 2001, there were about two

thousand protesters in the streets, 2006 was marked by approximate ten to fifteen thousand, and in 2010, as noted above, about forty thousand people came out to protest the rigged elections. The framing processes by the Belarusian government intended to demobilize the government's antagonists, and credible threats in Belarus sufficed to ensure the compliance of most citizens. In coercive compliance, people obey because they fear being punished. As a result, an abusive or unrestrained state such as Belarus presents a classic collective action problem, in which a group can benefit from cooperation, but the lack of individual incentives to engage in the actions necessary for this cooperation prevents the goal from being attained. The fraudulent elections, in turn, presented the way to overcome the collective action problem in Belarus, since it is more difficult to remove officials after they have been sworn into office and have gained the legal authority to rule, and because regimes are generally more vulnerable during the electoral cycle, decreasing the likelihood of repression. Additionally, because elections come with a limited time frame, they also eliminate the free rider problem associated with collective action problems, since individuals realize that if enough protesters do not appear in a very short period, then the opportunity to confront the regime will be lost.<sup>14</sup> The growth in the number of people gathering to protest the abuses of power by the regime can be explained by the outrage resulting from stolen elections when the regime has recently engaged in electoral fraud and by the exposure of the Belarusian masses to the forces of globalization.<sup>15</sup> The exposure of the Belarusian masses to wider avenues of information can be observed in their awareness of events that were not supported by the government. According to IISEPS, while only 69.4 percent of the population answered yes to the question whether they were aware of the protests against the rigged presidential elections taking place in the capital of the republic right after the announcement of the results in 2006, people answering affirmatively to the same question in 2010 grew to 92.1 percent. In addition to this growing awareness of ongoing protests, the moods of the masses in Belarus suggest an increasing readiness to express their attitudes openly. According to the survey conducted by the Axiometrical Research Laboratory NOVAK in February 2012, 69 percent of the respondents answered positively to the question whether they thought the citizens of Belarus would have been more politically active had they not feared that they might lose their jobs. The moderate growth in the number of protesters during presidential elections can also be explained by the fact that individuals were more likely to engage in protest activity because they expected large numbers of people to participate.<sup>16</sup>

For the Belarusian case, it is also useful to examine two other highly recognized and politicized events that can be perceived as possible political opportunities for mobilization in Belarus: the Chernobyl Way protests, devoted to commemoration of the Chernobyl accident in 1986 and blaming the Lukashenka regime for agricultural exploitation of the contaminated territories, and the Freedom Day protests, celebrating the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918, usually accompanied by mass opposition rallies, and not recognized by the incumbent regime. However, after

**Figure 3**  
**Number of protesters during Chernobyl Way and Freedom Day protests in Belarus**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
<b>Chernobyl Way</b>	20,000	10,000	4,000	1,500	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
<b>Freedom Day</b>	30,000	10,000	3,000	1,000	1,500	3,000	5,000	5,000

Source: [www.svaboda.org](http://www.svaboda.org); [www.novychas.info](http://www.novychas.info).

the presidential elections in 2006, the number of protesters during these events started to fade, with a moderate growth on Freedom Day during the past 3 years (Figure 3). Such a decrease is not surprising considering the growth in the section of the Belarusian population afraid to express their political views from 32.2 percent in 2006 to 40.5 percent in 2010, as reported by IISEPS on their website. Nevertheless, while the number of protesters on these oppositional dates decreased, the political opportunity during presidential elections together with the rising awareness of the wrongdoings of the regime contributed to the mobilization of a higher number of protesters.

### Mobilizing Structures

While political opportunity and framing processes shape the prospects for collective action, their influence is dependent on the mobilizing structures through which groups seek to organize. According to McAdam, mobilizing structures are “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal through which people mobilize and engage in collective action.”<sup>17</sup> Departing from the sociological assumptions that shared grievances and an agreement as to the possible means of dealing with them are sufficient preconditions for emergence of social movements, resource mobilization and political process theories emphasize yet another factor: mobilizing structures. Mobilization processes have both formal and informal dimensions and both need to be studied. While the simple availability of “unstructured” mobilizing resources is often enough to get a collective action off the ground,<sup>18</sup> it is essential for the collective actors representing the movement to be able to create a structure capable of representing and sustaining the movement. The existence of democratic opposition in Belarus has been sufficient to initiate emergent movements at times of expanding political opportunities; its polarization, however, resulted in its inability to set in motion framing processes that would have further undermined the legitimacy of the government and would have helped control the broad political environment to prevent the shifting fortunes of the movements under way.

Belarus has experienced the emergence of both formal and informal collective vehicles through which people have mobilized for collective action. However, history

shows that neither type was able to create an enduring organizational structure for the protests to survive. The reason has been the polarization and weakness of the organizations planning and carrying out collective actions. Informal actions of protest in Belarus have been sporadic and largely born out of environmental opportunities without the support of strong organizational structures. The economic crisis of 2011, the stagnating economy in 2012–2013, and the exposure of the Belarusian masses to larger amounts of information and wider possibilities to organize led to several informal collective expressions of protest. They include the silent protests, the campaign “Stop Gasoline,” and the online currency exchange activity, when a student from Minsk replaced the National Bank by determining the dollar exchange rate in the country for six months at the time of the currency crisis. His website <http://prokopovi.ch/>, allowed citizens to buy and sell currency when it was not in exchange. Similarly, in 2013 the media and civil society demonstrated massive disapproval of the presidential initiatives to top up the budget by introducing an exit fee of \$100 when crossing the border to discourage shopping abroad; a tax on the unemployed, with the intention of collecting about \$280 from each Belarusian citizen working in the shadow economy or employed abroad; and an automobile tax making all car owners pay \$15–100 a year. For instance, dissatisfied citizens launched an Internet petition against the exit fee, receiving almost twenty-seven thousand signatures. Although the government had to back away from the exit fee initiative and even publicly repudiated the idea, most of the protest campaigns failed to achieve their goals and were unable to grow into sustained movements that could challenge the government.

Any study of “formal” protests, or protests organized by transparent social movement organizations (SMOs), must begin with a brief analysis of the role of the Belarusian political opposition. It is, after all, the democratic opposition that is expected to raise the cost of authoritarian rule and persuade passive supporters of the regime that the elites’ hold on power is not as secure as they believe. The majority of the opposition forces in Belarus support complete removal of the current regime and a radical change of the entire political system to a democratic one. While an active opposition has been able to maintain some degree of independent existence in Belarus, its freedom to operate has been severely curtailed as the government has used all the tools of state coercion at its disposal to demobilize, marginalize, or criminalize the opposition’s activities. These techniques include persecution and repression of opposition members through detentions, threats, and imprisonments. The government seeks to neuter any potential challenges in advance before they can become a serious threat.

While the nondemocratic regime in Belarus has its undisputed leader, President Lukashenka, the forces opposing him have been far from a homogeneous group. At the end of the 1990s, the Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces had succeeded in uniting the majority of the anti-regime actors of the period during the run-up to the 2001 elections. During the 2006 presidential elections, the majority of anti-regime actors were brought together under the banner of the United Democratic Forces.

However, after the elections, the coalition broke down, partly due to the shallowness of such a union. By the 2010 presidential elections, there was not even a pretense of presenting a united opposition front or an agreed single alternative candidate to stand against Lukashenka. To date, the opposition is divided. Each group privileges a different dominant strategy in challenging the regime: “sanctions” or “dialogue.” In April 2013, the leader of the movement “For Freedom” A. Milinkevich, the leader of the civil campaign “Tell the Truth” U. Neklyaeu, and the chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front A. Yanukevich issued a joint statement that called on the EU to resume a full-fledged dialogue with the Belarusian government. In their opinion, cooperation with the EU would help Belarusian society to modernize and begin democratic reforms. The rest of the opposition camp represented by the chairman of the United Civil Party A. Lebedko, the coordinator of the civil campaign “European Belarus” U. Kobets, and the Co-chairman of the Belarusian Christian Democracy V. Rimasheuski criticized the idea of a dialogue with the EU authorities. On 18 April 2013, Charter '97 reported on its website that U. Kobets compared Lukashenka's modernization of Belarus with the modernization of the concentration camps: “You can paint a fence and plant roses around the perimeter of barbed wire, but this camp will not change its essence,” he said. The absence of a common position on this and other issues makes it impossible to agree on successful development and implementation of a common strategy. The October of 2013 confirmed contradictions among the democratic forces in anticipation of the local elections in 2014 and the presidential ones in 2015 with two clear blocks emerging—the People's Referendum and Talaka—that have almost no common ground. While Talaka proposes to choose a single candidate in the 2015 presidential election via primaries and will talk to voters about the need for political reform, the People's Referendum prefers to hold a Congress of Democratic Forces, which will choose a future presidential candidate and will appeal to voters with messages about fulfilling everyday needs. Several organizations decided not to join either of these two blocks. Among those are the Belarusian Christian Democracy, the Social Democratic Party, and nearly all the leaders of the European Belarus group. Under the regime's persistent pressure and the latest warnings to refrain from getting involved in counter-activities in the light of the events in Ukraine, one can hardly expect the opposition to be able to create an attractive strategy for change.

Because the political party leaders have been in opposition for almost a decade and often much longer, with differences of opinion in areas such as historical legacy, the market economy, language, and geopolitics, it is not surprising that public support for the opposition in Belarus has been weak. IISEPS reports that while in 2009 only 25.2 percent of the respondents would have voted for a candidate from the opposition in case of the presidential elections, this number decreased to 13.6 percent in 2013. Overall, the lack of organized opposition has made it very hard if not impossible to wage and sustain collective action that would generate frames powerful enough to initiate the process of reshaping the broader political landscape. As Gene Sharp states in his famous book-length essay on the generic problem of how to

destroy a dictatorship *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, “In order to increase the chances for success, resistance leaders will need to formulate a comprehensive plan of action capable of strengthening the suffering people, weakening and then destroying the dictatorship, and building a durable democracy.”<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

By analyzing the transformations of attitudes and moods in Belarus over a time span of about twenty years and by studying some examples of Belarusians’ collective behavior through the social movements literature, this study shows that the weakness of the mobilizing structures and framing processes at times of expanding political opportunities resulted in the failure of collective actions to sustain themselves. Belarus is still a long way from being a democratic state due to the control of economic, political and social life by the government. However, it is undeniable that the associative fabric of Belarusian society has been growing hand in hand with the rise in its exposure to foreign cultural influences and, therefore, to a more open and tolerant culture. Thus, the simultaneous processes of sociocultural change and political and economic liberalization have contributed to the moderate growth of mobilization during presidential elections and have induced a modest change in the political preferences of the Belarusian masses.

I provide a new perspective on the ongoing political process in Belarus and contribute to the literature on democratization and social movements in Belarus. While I present evidence of modest changes in the popular attitudes and patterns of mobilization, I also identify new reasons for the failure of democratization in that country.

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## Notes

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**Tatsiana Kulakevich** is a PhD Student in the Department of Political Science and a Graduate Associate at the Center for European Studies at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She grounds her research in comparative politics and international relations, with a regional focus on Eastern Europe.