

THE WOMANLY FACE OF BELARUS

Svetlana Alexievich in conversation with Nina Khrushcheva

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Moscow-Minsk: When, on August 26, Svetlana Alexievich was called to the Belarusian Investigative Committee for an interrogation, the grim visit turned unexpectedly celebratory. As the 2015 Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature walked into the imposing yellow KGB building, she was surrounded by friends and supporters. People chanted “Love” and gave her white flowers—a symbol of the colossal protests that have emerged in response to the August 9 massive presidential election rigging in favor of the long-lasting Belarusian strongman, Alexander Lukashenko.

Alexievich—Belarus’s world-famous writer—was summoned for questioning as a member of the Opposition Coordination Council for the Transition of Power. The president, whose nickname has long been “Europe’s last dictator,” turned the Council’s demands for a dialogue with the authorities about the unfair and unfree elections into a criminal case aiming at seizure of state power. Its members were accused of “[inflicting damage to national security](#).”

The current thousands-strong demonstrations against Lukashenko’s quarter-century rule have been decidedly different from any such revolution of their kind. In the Belarusian people’s pursuit of a change in power, women have become the unifying figures—Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who ran against Lukashenko as an opposition candidate, and Maria Kolesnikova, a protest leader of the past month. They have given this month of struggle its jubilant overtones. Lukashenko’s brute muscle, with police and the military detaining and beating up protesters in great numbers, has been met with transformative female power in all its might.

The feminine phenomenon in world affairs has already been brought to the fore by the Coronavirus crisis. In the countries run by women, for example, the pandemic response was handled better than in those ruled by men. Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Germany has seen less deaths than many other European nations. In New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was the envy of the world because her country acted swiftly against the virus spread. Her counterparts in [Norway](#) and Finland, Erna Solberg and Sanna Marin respectively, kept death numbers in the low hundreds versus thousands in the neighboring Sweden. And of course, no one [has topped the performance](#) of Her Excellency Tsai Ing-wen, president of Taiwan, the country of 24 million people, which saw the lowest number of infections and mortality.

One of the reasons, perhaps, in our era of multiple crises is that women deal with a problem—most problems—in front of them instead of grandiosely playing politics as do many their male counterparts.

In Belarus, when the sitting president arrested his most significant male opponents in the months before the vote, he thought he was safe. But, then, the opposition candidate Tikhanovskaya stepped into the place of her jailed husband, Sergei. Along with two other women representing Lukashenko's main challengers, she formed a powerful alternative voice. The conventional, out-of-date president—formerly a communist collective farm director who never denounced the Soviet Union—dismissed these women as “[unfortunate little girls](#),” claiming they were too weak to run the country. Yet, weeks after the elections, it is Lukashenko who is running scared with an AK-47, bringing tanks to the streets to threaten women protesters standing with white flowers, who form daily human “chains of solidarity.” Theirs, despite the fact that a month after the elections most of the members of the Coordination Council are either arrested or exiled abroad, it continues to be a fete of endurance, a quest for fairness and freedom.

Alexievich, who is now the only member of the Council remaining free (undoubtedly due to her world famous status of a Nobel Laureate), is proud that her life's work has been about this very female force that stepped into the vanguard in global affairs; that hers is an important voice in Belarusia's demand for change. Author of *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), *Voices of Chernobyl* (1997), *Secondhand Time* (2013), and other books, Alexievich believes that “the womanly face has been a special nature of revolution in Minsk and other cities” against the “Butcher of Belarus”—the brutal suppression of demonstrators graduated Lukashenko to this new nickname. “It is not just some internet meme that people follow, it is our amazing national character, our national creativity [on display],” Alexievich says.

I first met the acclaimed writer some years ago at a literary festival in Austria—incidentally, by courtesy of the Kreisky Forum—and we have been friends ever since. For a month now, I have been speaking with her over the phone, expressing support and worry, listening to her calmly and heartily describe the country's mood, people's feelings, and her own state of mind. Some of these conversations are worth sharing.

On the Investigative Committee interrogation:

My lawyer told me not to answer any questions, so I refused, citing the constitutional right against self-incrimination. We didn't do anything wrong, but this is an old Gulag trick. You mention someone's name and then this person gets called upon, and then they accuse us of being a criminal group.... First rule is to name no names. I made a statement before I went in saying that we are only for the peace process, and what we have done is absolutely legal.

They wanted to bring me quietly on Tuesday, but I said I'd come on Wednesday. The police thought I wouldn't come at all, that I would leave the country. Of course, I wasn't leaving, and, by Wednesday, people knew that I was called in. There was a lot of support.

Lukashenko opened so many national security cases against everyone that they had to bring officers in from other divisions. My investigator was moved from homicide; he was actually embarrassed that he had to talk to me. He was polite and uncomfortable. I was classified as a witness, at least for now, and he didn't even ask me to sign any papers at the end. Hope he doesn't get in trouble.

I told him I am not going anywhere. I just want to live in a free country. I already left once because of Lukashenko. I lived in Italy, Germany, and so on, but came back in 2011—a writer needs to be close to the place she writes about. For almost a decade, Lukashenko has simply ignored me. I hoped this would continue, but now they arrested or exiled everyone from the Coordination Council, so I had to call journalist to bear witness in case of my arrest. And now I have European diplomats keeping watch in my house. It is very serious. The bravest Maria Kolesnikova, the head of the Council, now is not only arrested after she refused to leave the country, she is charged with “attempts to change power,” and may get five to seven years in prison.

Yet people fearlessly continue to protest. We are witnessing something remarkable now: a nation is being created in front of our eyes. I am proud of the Belarusian people. I have fallen in love with them anew. When we see thousands of them, their faces, it is clear that civil society has grown in Belarus and a brave one, too. I don't want to immigrate and miss it.

On the special nature of Belarusian protests:

Europe has been supportive, and we appreciate it. But it is important to understand that when it all started, the Belarusian protest was not geographically oriented towards Europe. For example, Ukrainian protests in 2013 were called Euromaidan. But in Belarus, it is not the Euro and not the Maidan. Lukashenko keeps saying the revolution was orchestrated from the West, and in the West, we are often expected to be anti-Russian, but we are not in a geopolitical struggle. We are in a political struggle for the soul of Belarus—for the free and fair elections that allow us to honestly choose a leader. Belarus needs a modern president, for modern times. This one is from the last century and stands in the way of millions of people.

All have seen women in white with flowers and wreaths holding hands against police brutality. This is a special Belarusian trait, an amazing response to Lukashenko's patriarchal, sexist remarks about “little girls who don't know what they are doing.” In fact, it is the women who made the quest for freedom in Belarus so unique. Women are pragmatic, they create the fabric of life. And Svetlana [Tikhanovskaya] couldn't have [said it better](#), “This is not a pro-Russian or anti-Russian revolution. This is not an anti-European or a pro-European revolution.” Our struggle is for our own freedom, not someone else's politics.

Women are practical, and that's why I was admitting—not a very popular point of view—that the Coordination Council would not be able to cope with the situation on its own. And it couldn't. Now when most are arrested or had to leave the country, involuntarily, the crisis is even greater. Our civil society is growing but it is not strong enough yet. We need help from the world, but not to be torn up by their own struggles. Early on I said Russia can be helpful since Putin is the only one who Lukashenko talks to. The Kremlin says that Belarus is “[a brotherly nation](#),” so let them support those brothers. Putin [explained](#) that, at Lukashenko's request, he had created a reserve of law enforcement officers to use only if the situation gets out of control.

Isn't Lukashenko already out of control? And instead of helping us, the Kremlin now condones, even participates, in the government's violent suppression of our demands for a free election process.

Allegedly, originally the Kremlin was critical of the abject brutality that Lukashenko unleashed on his people after the elections. Lukashenko listened, and for weeks the police were restrained. But now the Russians decided to stand by the lame-duck president, ignoring the opposition. Unwisely in my view, protests—women’s marches especially—are still going strong. That’s how Russia may lose Belarus.

On the national artistic expression of discontent:

Ours is an unusual revolution. Pavel Latusko, a member of our Council, former Minister of Culture and now an ex-director of the oldest national theater Yanka Kupala, supported the opposition from the start. When he was fired for it (and now had to leave the country for Poland), most of his troupe resigned. The next day, the actors tried to enter the theater only to discover it was locked for “sanitation,” a familiar tactic from the Soviet era. It is now completely shut down by the officials. And the actors and their supporters draped the building in white and red—the colors of new Belarus—and every day they gather in front of the theater to perform and read poetry.

I was moved to tears at the market. Even those who don’t go to demonstrations, they find ways to express their feelings and views. People, both shoppers and sellers, have been singing national folk songs in the past weeks. Especially *Pahonia* (“a chase”), a song about Belarus’s independence written in the early 20th century, became an unofficial anthem of the struggle. A burly butcher sang *Pahonia* while chopping meat. People gathered around, clapped, and chimed in. Then the whole market began to sing.

Same happened in a department store in the center, on Nemiga Street. One woman started to hum *Pahonia* while looking at porcelain, someone picked up the tune in Shoes, and then shoppers all through the open floors and those riding on escalators were carrying a melody about the unbendable Belarus. And now there are reports that there is a lot of pressure from the top: those protesting by just singing or some other very peaceful means, lose their spots, their stalls, in the market or are fired from their jobs as sale persons.

There are other amazing ideas and talents. Women have begun to knit in public, in white-and-red yarn. It is symbolic. The country is tried up, strangled by Lukashenko, and so they untie themselves by knitting their own path. This kind of national behavior cannot be organized from abroad, no matter what the president claims.

And if you walk the streets in the morning after demonstrations, there is no damage; if anything is broken it is just what the police does pushing people around. Otherwise everything is clean, no windows are smashed. Protesters leave no garbage behind. Where else can you see this? We sometimes hear that Belarusians are too obedient to push through. Yes, we are orderly, and this is a virtue. This doesn’t give the president another opportunity to insult the opposition as disorderly rioters. His brutality *is* against peaceful and conscientious people.

On fear:

Fear is what Lukashenko is counting on by closing theaters and factories, arresting activists, and expelling journalists—many of them Russians, by the way, which should not make Putin happy. And, yet, he seemed to have decided to side with Lukashenko for now. Still, no one is fearful here even if they are afraid. Lukashenko is pushing for civil war; he really is at war with his own nation, running around with a gun to scare the people, but he is the one afraid of the majority. He says he is not going to negotiate with the street. But what about the greatest revolution of all, the French Revolution? The street spoke then, and it is speaking now. Every day, he brings [columns of tanks](#) into town to intimidate the demonstrators. They roll along our beautiful avenues, retreating at night only to come back in the morning.

The crowds are so many—hundreds of thousands—that the government doesn't have enough special troops to suppress them. So, they dress up policemen in the more terrifying OMON uniforms [of the Rapid-Response National Guard Units]. At least some police are glad to masquerade, because OMON wears helmets and masks and those they arrest can't recognize them. Many neighborhoods have hung policemen's portraits on buildings and fences, so the officers and soldiers want to hide from being shamed.

On the future:

There is a lot of talk about Putin bringing troops here in support of Lukashenko. In perhaps, there are already some small amount of Russian forces around. But Lukashenko is too politically damaged in my view. If/when things calm down a little, I think the Kremlin will offer Lukashenko some sort of exit and will allow for another, less illegitimate candidate to take the reins. Perhaps it will be Victor Babariko, the main opposition contender, who Lukashenko arrested in June, accusing him of fraud and of being Russia's hand no less. Babariko, a millionaire, headed Belgazprombank, which is affiliated with the Russian national corporate giant Gazprom. He surely has liberal views—he even funded publications of my books in Belarusian when others didn't. But he also understands Belarus' special position: Not only is the country close to Russia, most people want to keep it that way. Even if Putin, so far, has not been on our side.

Svetlana Alexievich is the 2015 Noble Prize Laureate in Literature and the author of many books including *The Unwomanly Face of War*, *Zincky Boys*, and *Secondhand Time*. The widely popular and award-winning HBO series "Chernobyl" was partially based on her book, *Voices of Chernobyl*.

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