

There's a Problem with the Belarus Protest Movement: Svetlana Tikhanovskaya

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Politologist Georgii Bovt gave an [interview](#) recently in which he said: 'A movement which doesn't have a leader, program, or strategy, will die'. In fact, the expert gave the Belarus protest movement one more month at best. A pessimistic prognosis no doubt for the thousands who protested against the re-election of Alexander Lukashenko over the weekend; but nonetheless it remains to be seen how long the Belarussian opposition can encourage people out on to the streets. As the colder, autumnal weather sets in, will the people of Minsk be as keen to venture out in support of opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya?

This remains to be seen. For as Georgii Bovt aptly put it, this is an opposition movement which is lacking all the necessary components to enforce change. In any political or ideological campaign, one of the most important factors is leadership, and indeed the personality of the leader. As German political and social theorist Max Weber noted, a charismatic leader is vital for the success of political movements; in this case it is essential if one is intent on unseating an incumbent president of 26 years together with the system he has in place. It has been [identified](#), for instance, that the success of the Bolshevik revolution was down to, in part, the immense role played by Vladimir Lenin. Charisma, energy, and drive are necessary traits of an effective leader, and typically, such charismatic individuals emerge at times of change, like the one Belarussians are experiencing now.

However, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is lacking all these qualities. In fact, her presentation is so poor it's cringeworthy to watch. She looks positively bored when interviewed and has this annoying habit of sighing before answering the question, as if she genuinely can't be bothered. In addition, she is nervous and unsure of herself, seeming incapable of answering questions without reeling off scripted answers. Her press conference last week was a prime example of this; in answer to two very separate questions she gave an identical response, which did not in fact answer the question. The only reply which appeared to reveal her own genuine thoughts was her answer to the final question asked, to which she expressed that she very much hoped that the President would listen to the Belarussian people:

'You know, what I want to say is...I very much hope and I believe that the leadership will listen to its people, and the fact that we are always told that the President loves his people and country and what he sees just now will show him that people want change. And I hope he will come to his senses and the people will be listened to and he will come round to holding new, transparent elections.'

After these words, her [press conference](#) was abruptly, and unexpectedly cut short. It was as if she had strayed off target, had said something she wasn't supposed to. And indeed she

had. For the reality is that in this statement Tikhanovskaya reveals to us that she does not consider herself leader of Belarus, and has no interest in the position. She is simply a puppet; it's just not clear who is pulling the strings. The very fact that she acknowledges the 'leadership' contradicts her assertions that she, not Lukashenko is the elected President. Her reference to the fact that Lukashenko 'loves his people and country' contrasts with her movement's message that he is a brutal dictator. It is an extraordinary statement from an opposition candidate attempting to oust the President. It plainly contradicts her other, scripted, sleek videos in which she adopts a defiant, authoritative tone and doesn't hold back in condemning Lukashenko.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is the most reluctant leader there ever was. But others are determined to push her into the limelight. Maria Kolesnikova, for example, who was at Tikhanovskaya's side during the election campaign, is quite a different character, and much less modest. A musician and arts manager, she lived for 12 years in Germany and is described as having a '[certain affinity for the West](#)'. She has been involved in protests in Belarus for over a decade and was campaign manager for former presidential hopeful Viktor Babariko (arrested by the authorities on corruption charges and therefore unable to run in the election), with whom she worked at Belgazprombank. As she said in one [interview](#): 'I share his values completely — they're exactly the same as mine'. Recently she presented a [video](#) instructing Belarussian civil servants and military personnel to reject orders, saying that they would be handsomely rewarded for doing so. Just exactly where the funding is coming from for such 'bribes' is not clear. But given her clear ideas, defiance and motivation for change in Belarus, it's not clear why Kolesnikova herself is not presenting herself as a candidate. Is it because, unlike Tikhanovskaya, she lacks good spoken English, a desirable skill for communication with western diplomats?

Who knows. But the opposition will no doubt live to regret their decision to choose Tikhanovskaya to head up the movement. After three weeks of protests in Belarus, the government has made no concessions and no promise to hold new elections. Emmanuel Macron was in a weaker position in France back in 2018/19 when he was forced to concede to the Yellow Vests with promises of raising the minimum wage and cutting taxes. The momentum of the post-election demonstrations in Belarus has been lost. In one interview Tikhanovskaya was asked why people were not listening to her demands to strike; she responded by saying that people were striking. She isn't in touch with reality, and the reality is that people need to put food on the table, and therefore need to keep working. Lukashenko knows this and so has the upper hand. Although he is unlikely to last in the long-term, Alexander Grigoryevich is going nowhere soon.

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