When the Belarusian leaders decided not to postpone the presidential election in August 2020, although it would have been entirely possible with reference to the ongoing global Coronavirus pandemic, they made a fatal mistake. They expected Alyaksandr Lukashenka to be reelected for the fifth time, in the usual order without major complications. They could not have been more wrong. Previously, politics had largely been a nonissue for most Belarusians and most of the population was accepting the political status quo despite being acutely aware that democratic standards were lacking in their society. Elections, especially after the harsh crackdown on the protesters in 2010 (Ash 2015; Padhlo and Marples 2011), had been followed by an atmosphere of “resigned acceptance,” no matter how dishonest they were (Ge’lman 2010: 55).

This time was different. The inability of the authorities to address popular expectations and needs during the pandemic, growth of grass-root solidarity and mobilization untypical for Belarusians, and appearance of new election candidates different from the traditional opposition created an unusual context for the 2020 election (Bedford 2021). As a result, formerly apolitical residents actively participated en masse throughout the whole electoral process, openly expressing their desire for change and support for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who became Lukashenka’s main contestant. Stunned observers witnessed the emergence of a massive protest movement as more than 200,000 people met at Stella Square in Minsk on 16 August 2020 to contest the official election results, according to which Lukashenka was reelected. Besides, not only in Minsk but also in cities, towns, and even villages all over the country Belarusians took to the streets to openly show their desire for change. Many of them for the first time ever (Douglas 2020). The mass protests lasted till approximately November 2020, when they were largely suspended because of, among other reasons, severe pressure from law enforcement and increasingly cold weather. However, the dissatisfaction of Belarusians with the current leadership has not disappeared, and localized protest activities continue, albeit on a much more limited scale (Narodny opros 2021).

What circumstances contributed to this unexpected development? How did the electoral process in 2020 go from meaningless to meaningful? In retrospect, this development can be understood as the outcome of what Andreas Schedler (2013; 2006; 2002) has called the “politics of uncertainty” in electoral authoritarian regimes. He describes authoritarian elections as a two-level game: the electoral

DOI: 10.4324/9781003426080-4
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competition is embedded with the meta-game over the “rules of the game,” e.g., institutional change. To appear credible, these elections cannot be mere window dressing; they must have some degree of autonomy, which opens a small window of opportunity for oppositional actors to use the electoral process to expose and attack vulnerabilities of the authoritarian regime and thereby challenge and sometimes even change the status quo.

The purpose of this chapter is to generate new knowledge about what “politics of uncertainty” in an electoral authoritarian regime can look like in practice and what consequences it can have, through an in-depth analysis of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election. To this end, the chapter aims to generate an understanding of the roles that ontological uncertainty can play in political developments. In relation to the conceptual framework outlined by Matejova and Shesterinina in the introduction to this volume, the chapter proposes that three different types of uncertainty in particular – inherent, routine, and extreme – contributed to the processes which gave the 2020 election and its aftermath its remarkable character.

The rest of the chapter proceeds as follows. As a theoretical point of departure, the chapter starts with an overview of the literature on authoritarian elections as arenas for struggles over inherent and routine uncertainty. The next part looks at latent threats to Lukashenka’s legitimacy and the inherent uncertainty of authoritarianism that made the regime unpopular in a society that yet remained ignorant of these threats. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to the election. It describes how until 2020 the regime managed to neutralize any electoral insecurity and why this time they failed. This is followed by the conclusion.

**Authoritarian elections as struggles over routine and inherent uncertainty**

In electoral autocracies, the regime is characterized by the ruling elite’s monopoly on political power, but unlike in a dictatorship, regular elections are an important part of the democratic facade (Lindberg and Teorell 2013; Morse 2012). The literature on electoral authoritarianism suggests that by holding these elections, the authoritarian leaders make themselves vulnerable. Although such elections are eternally asymmetrical power struggles, they offer an opportunity, of sorts, for the regime’s challengers to try to make the predetermined outcome of the vote a little less certain.

On the other side of the fence, the regime strives to ensure the political status quo by ‘undermining the defining components of liberal democracy’ (Haggard and Kaufmann 2021: 55) and applies manipulative strategies that prevent long-term challenges to the authoritarian rule as well as comprehend short-term risks arising from the electoral situation (Beaulieu et al. 2007; Haggard and Kaufmann 2021; Beaulieu and Hyde 2009; Hyde 2011; Schedler 2002; 2013; 2009). In this sense, authoritarian elections can be seen as a struggle for the regime that attempts to contain the “routine uncertainty” (Matejova and Shesterinina in this volume), rendered by regularly occurring election, and to ensure that elections remain ‘a mode of regime reproduction’ rather than ‘a mode of transition’ (Lindberg 2009a: 330).
At the same time, regime challengers try to exploit and intensify this uncertainty by using the election as a focal point for the channeling and voicing of popular dissatisfaction with the current system.

The regime’s effective marginalizing of political opposition and democracy activism often make electoral authoritarianism seem institutionalized to the point that the regime would likely win even competitive elections. Nonetheless, authoritarian leaders rarely take the risk to find out if this is really the case (Bernhard et al. 2020; Frear 2018; Silitski 2005). Their ambition to hold elections that are at least superficially legitimate comes at a cost – it makes it more difficult for them to ensure that the electoral process is truly noncompetitive.

One specific case in point is the ‘opacity of citizen preferences’ (Schedler 2013: 126). While both the opposition and the current rulers suspect the outcome of the vote to be the result of authoritarian influence, nobody knows for sure. Genuine citizen preferences are notoriously unknown, precisely because of authoritarian manipulation and lack of public transparency. Consequently, voters can never be considered completely predictable (Schedler 2002). Clearly though, their votes are cast not only based on their individual choices but are also influenced by state decisions, repression, and other maneuvering. Thus, if those who challenge the regime manage to convince the citizens that their personal choice matters, they may become active participants in the electoral process and, possibly, divert the election from the beaten path staked out by the current rules. Consequently, the unpredictability of the voters is seen as something that has the potential to activate the routine uncertainty of the election and disrupt the authoritarian flow (Lindberg 2009b; Morse 2012; Schedler 2002).

As there are no other platforms for political interaction in these contexts, authoritarian elections, by default, become the arena for a battle between the regime and its contenders that is more about changing the status quo than winning the votes (Schedler 2013). To this end, the opacity of citizen preferences also reflects the existence of and contestation over the overall inherent uncertainties of the authoritarian regime.

**Twin problem of uncertainty in authoritarian regimes**

Knowing citizen preferences is vital for the regime because it suffers from an inherent institutional uncertainty, stemming from the fact that authoritarian leaders know they lack a democratic mandate (Schedler 2013). As a result, they risk forceful removal from power because there is no procedure in place for their dismissal (Wintrobe 1998). However, relying on control and repression to stifle dissent, authoritarian regimes also suffer from inherent informational uncertainty, which makes it impossible to find out what the citizens think (Schedler 2013). Ronald Wintrobe (1998: 20) describes this as the “dictator’s dilemma” – authoritarian leaders cannot know whether the population ‘genuinely worships them or worships them because they command such worship.’ The more repressive the regime, the less likely their population is to reveal how they really feel about it. Andreas Schedler (2013: 21) describes it as a ‘twin problem of uncertainty’ related to both
‘security’ and ‘opacity.’ The rulers must constantly try to detect and prevent challenges to their power, but they cannot generate enough knowledge to know they are successful – that they truly identified and eliminated all the threats to their position. At the same time, as long as citizens keep their opinions to themselves, they do not pose an acute threat. But, if they are somehow triggered – by, for example, a global event, an economic crisis, a societal emergency, or similar – to cross their “revolutionary threshold,” that is, to make their personal preferences public, this might inspire others to do the same. This in turn may ‘generate a revolutionary bandwagon, an explosive growth in public opposition’ that can altercate the prevailing balance of power (Kuran 1991: 20). Importantly, because of the “opacity of citizen preferences,” e.g., informational uncertainty, until it happens, nobody will see it coming. This is why consolidated autocracies appear unassailable despite the existence of severe latent threats to their stability (Garfias and Magaloni 2018; Kuran 1991; Schedler 2013). From this also follows that widespread dissatisfaction with an authoritarian leader or system is not enough in itself to mobilize a large number of people to enforce change. For this to happen, other factors are needed as well, such as a trigger of sorts, and/or someone to start the bandwagon (Kuran 1991: 16).

**Latent threats to Lukashenka’s legitimacy and inherent uncertainty of authoritarianism**

The longevity of Lukashenka’s rule has often been explained by him enjoying genuine support from his citizens (e.g., Frear 2018; Klymenko and Gherghina 2012; Leshchenko 2008; White 2011). When he came to power at only 39 years of age, he was ‘viewed as an active sportsman and a strong man who could get things done’ and an excellent orator (Frear 2018: 65). As time passed, he became ‘a benevolent father of the Belarusians’ (Rohozinska 2020: 4). It has been suggested that Belarusian authoritarianism survived and prospered because it is adaptive. Matthew Frear (2018: 84) compares Lukashenka to a chameleon who can change his rhetoric and strategies according to the circumstances to stay in power unthreatened. Why then did those hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets to protest his continued presidency, both before and after the 2020 election, seem to see Lukashenka as a symbol for everything wrong with the authoritarian system? The message they were sending – that not only had he lost his popularity, but he also even disgusted his population – seemed to indicate that a shift in people’s preferences had occurred overnight (Bedford 2021).

Whether this was truly the case is difficult to prove. According to Klymenko and Gherghina (2012) and others referenced above, surveys show that the popularity of the Belarusian president remained high at least until 2010. After that point, there are no reliable data as the country’s only independent polling center, Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), was forced to first reduce their activity and finally stop their work in Belarus altogether in 2016 (Douglas 2020; Frear 2018). Nevertheless, Matthew Frear (2018:11) suggested that the continuity of Lukashenka’s rule was ensured through ‘the ability to adapt
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and change as necessary’ and he also predicted this adaptive authoritarianism was ‘likely to guide the country through the upcoming 2019–20 election cycle.’ At the same time, Astapova’s (2021) anthropological research conducted between 2011 and 2018 shows a vast gap between the everyday reality and state-promoted narratives about the president and the Belarus he rules.

In retrospect, it is evident that already before the election, there were large pockets of the population who were unhappy with the kind of system their president represented and the services it was providing. This made the regime ‘substantially more vulnerable than the subservience and quiescence of their populations made them seem’ (Kuran 1991: 33). Below I outline the two long-term processes and one unforeseen event that analysts have suggested made the population shift from accepting Lukashenka and the authoritarian regime to seeing them as the problem: the erosion of the social contract, the modernization of society, and the authorities’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic. After that, I discuss the inherent informational insecurity of the Belarusian regime that made this already widespread disapproval invisible until it became impossible to miss.

The end of popular cooptation: Erosion of the social contract

A common explanation for Lukashenka’s authoritarian system being accepted by its citizens is the existence of a so-called social contract, which guaranteed the people economic stability and security in exchange for loyalty (Haiduk et al. 2009; Manayev et al. 2011; Wilson, 2016). By now, it is also established that due to the deteriorating economy during the last decade, there were fewer resources to maintain the extensive general social and welfare policies, which were the backbone of the social contract (Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė and Maksimiuk 2012). Attempts to reform the social security system in response to internal and external challenges led nowhere, and the current system has been described as ‘fragile and miserable’ (Chulitskaya and Matonyte 2018: 543). This led to a stagnating economy and an erosion of the social contract – Belarusians no longer trusted the authorities to deliver what they had promised (Bornukova et al. 2019; Douglas 2020; Guriev 2020; Kazharski 2021a; Krawatzek and Langbein 2022; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021; Sjimanovitj 2017).

Some indicated that Lukashenka did not implement the reforms necessary to strengthen the economy because such reforms would have weakened his own position or even refused because he personally finds the market economy ideologically unacceptable (Astapenia 2020; Ivanou 2019; Klysiński 2016; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2017). Even more so, as Lukashenka had come to embody the regime, regularly demonstrated his personal involvement in the resolution of social problems, and often spoke out against economic reforms and privatization, it seems inevitable that he would be blamed for the country’s economic problems (Astapova 2021; Goujon 2002; Kazharski 2021a; Marples and Padhol 2020).

A changing population but an unchangeable president

In parallel, analysts have suggested that the system that Lukashenka represented was increasingly seen as outdated and archaic among a generation of citizens who
had benefited from new travel, education, and work opportunities and therefore nursed less paternalistic societal values (Gapova 2020; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2019; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021). One recent study conducted by Krawatzek and Langbein (2022) found that Belarusians, regardless of age, had become more liberal, both in political and economic terms. Most other research points to especially young Belarusians increasingly rejecting Soviet traditions, adhering to democratic values, and expressing a lack of trust in the societal and political institutions and the legitimacy of democratic processes of their own country (O’Loughlin et al. 2020; Sianko 2019). In addition, Lukashenka became particularly unpopular among young people by introducing the infamous so-called parasite law (a tax on unemployment), making legislation on drug possession stricter, and restricting young men’s right to postpone their compulsory military service (Douglas 2020).

Women were another group that was growing increasingly frustrated with the president because of his open male chauvinism and his habit of publicly trying to diminish women (Navumau and Matveieva 2021). This became obvious from women’s active participation in the protests, but it was also clearly visible in their activities in social media during (and before) the electoral campaign. For example, after Lukashenka in July 2020 (once again) proclaimed that women are not suitable to become presidents, 42 Belarusian women made a video dismissing some of his most infamous comments. ‘A woman’s calling is to decorate the world,’ and ‘If you weigh down a woman with the constitution, she will fall over – the poor thing’ are two of the phrases addressed in the video that quickly became viral.²

Uncertainty as a lack of information and a lack of meaning

So, society was changing, but it appears that Lukashenka was oblivious to this. The “dictators dilemma” discussed above is an important part of the explanation. Citizens, in fear of repression, tend to keep their personal preferences to themselves until they are sufficiently compelled to make them public. Another side of the story, however, is the impact of the authoritarian government’s attempts to establish total control over the flow of information. The regime has established a highly constricting media landscape and continuously made work more difficult for any independent actor, and more dangerous for those seen as sharing oppositional views. This has led to widespread practices of self-censorship among journalists (Herasimenka 2016). The access to quality national surveying and polling data was severely reduced when, after many years of harassment, IISEPS was forced to stop their work in Belarus in 2016, out of safety concerns for their contributors (Douglas 2020; Frear 2018). The few organizations still doing this kind of work are under tight state control and closely monitored to ensure that they are not asking the “wrong questions” about the “wrong topics.” If they do, they risk being closed (Gross 2017).

By only allowing political discourses and realities that fit their own hegemonic narrative, the authoritarian leaders create an information vacuum – a severe lack of real knowledge about the political and social situation that affects them, as well. As the opposition tries to get their political agenda across, they too tend to contribute
to this ambiguous informational situation where nobody really knows what is true, ‘everyone is playing theater, and everyone is watching theater and is trying to make sense of it’ (Schedler 2013: 50). Therefore, it is possible to see uncertainty in this context as both a lack of information and a lack of meaning (Matejova and Shesterinina in the introduction to this volume). This becomes an especially fitting description of the Belarusian context in light of Anastasiya Astapova’s (2021) stories about “potemkinism” – special preparations taking place before President Lukashenka’s official visits in different parts of the country. Basically, although they describe it as absurd, her respondents talk about their participation in the construction of a temporary reality that matches the way the president thinks it is or would like it to be.

Interestingly, the data she collected support the notion of Lukashenka’s waning legitimacy. The stories she gathered make it abundantly clear that Lukashenka already for many years prior to 2020 was not taken seriously as a political leader by many of his subjects – even though they did not publicly contest his leadership. Clearly, he no longer enjoyed the level of popularity among the population ascribed to him by previous research – if he in fact ever really did. Notably, the mere existence of this discontent was not enough to mobilize resistance against or convincingly raise the question about changing the status quo on a public level. This development was first activated by the COVID-19 pandemic and further triggered and facilitated by the election.

**Extreme uncertainty as a trigger for mobilization**

Against the background of a widespread – but not yet publicly noticeable – dissatisfaction with the current regime, the mishandling of COVID-19 crisis has been referred to as the straw that broke the camel’s back (Douglas 2020; Marples and Padhol 2020; Rohozinska 2020). To not put more stress on the already weak economy, Belarusian leaders chose to keep society open during the pandemic. Moreover, Lukashenka was joking and calling the pandemic a psychosis, which indicated to the people that he was not taking it seriously. ‘It is better to die standing than to live on your knees,’ he explained to a journalist when asked why he decided to participate in an ice hockey game during an ongoing pandemic. While he was recommending his citizens to take a shot of vodka every day, visit the sauna, and drive a tractor to stay safe, many of them saw the virus as a threat. Numerous joined the “People’s Quarantine,” initiated by the political opposition and civil society leaders, encouraging citizens to stay at home (Kulakevich and Augsburger 2021; Shingaryov 2020).

That the authorities were perceived as ignoring the situation gave rise to vast community mobilization. There were citizen initiatives like #byCOVID19 (a crowdfunding platform) collecting and distributing protective clothing and equipment to healthcare workers all over the country, neighborhood support platforms, and crowdfunding initiatives to garner funds for vulnerable groups and those affected by the disease (BelsatTV 2020; DW 2020; Petrova and Korosteleva 2021). Volha Kananovich (2022: 245) suggests the pandemic
became a critical juncture after which the defunct social contract became invalid, as it showed the state’s inability to live up to its end of the ‘authoritarian bargain.’ Following the analytical framework outlined in this volume’s introduction, the pandemic can be seen as an extreme source of uncertainty that took Lukashenka (like political leaders all over the world) by surprise and therefore made it difficult for him to predict which effect his actions, or rather non-actions, would have. It became the catalyst for a new feeling of Belarusian community that was essentially anti-Lukashenka (Petrova and Korosteleva 2021) and a revitalization of civil society that became crucial for the electoral campaign that followed (Astashova et al. 2022).

From elections for the sake of elections to a vote that made all the difference

In light of the discussion about uncertainty as both a lack of information and a lack of meaning, it is telling that in the midst of what many Belarusians saw as a major crisis, Lukashenka announced that the presidential election would be held on August 9. This was two weeks earlier than previously stated even though he could have easily postponed the voting with reference to the global pandemic. He simply did not foresee any problem. Since he came to power, elections had become “potemkinism,” held with the sole purpose of reinforcing authoritarianism and the stability of the state system (Bedford 2017).

Below I focus on how Lukashenka’s regime for 25 years successfully managed to neutralize any electoral insecurity and therefore did not see citizen opacity as a threat. Then, I explain why this time was different, by showing how a civil society reborn by the COVID-19 crisis and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s charismatic campaign managed to intensify and exploit the routine uncertainty of the authoritarian election. They did so by reducing the inherent informational uncertainty of the system by publicly revealing the true level of discontent with Lukashenka’s rule and capitalizing on the unpredictability of the voters by managing to convince them that this time their electoral participation could make a difference.

The “election game”: elections without electoral insecurity

Belarus is a prime example of what in the literature is called an “electoral autocracy.” Not only was the outcome of the elections known beforehand – because the current rulers control the counting of ballots and can ensure the result is correct – but since long-term systematic and extensive violations of the citizens’ fundamental liberal democratic rights and freedoms had stripped the vote of all credibility, the electoral process at large gave a strong impression of being a democratic illusion (Lindberg and Teorell 2013; Schedler 2013; 2006). The marginalization of political opposition is an important aspect of how electoral authoritarianism is sustained. Any party that opposes Lukashenka’s continued rule is described as opposition. Since he took office in 1994, no party has ever had power in the government or more than symbolic representation in the parliament.
Opposition parties operate under more or less constant repression and lack access to legal channels or platforms where those in power could be challenged (Charnysh and Kulakevich 2016; Minchenia 2020). The electoral campaign is the only time they are allowed access to the public space – because their participation is needed for the democratic facade. By joining the “fake” elections, their participation was deemed “fake” as well, and opposition became perceived as symbolic rather than relevant. Elections, in turn, became seen as a reoccurring game or a play with little relevance to most, except the initiated players, e.g., the state and the opposition (Bedford 2017).

The political opposition’s struggle against the authoritarian regime was also negatively affected by its close links to the struggle over Belarusian identity. Lukashenka’s civic version of Belarusian nationalism was skillfully juxtaposed against the ethnic one, promoted by the political opposition. Thus, the latter was at a constant disadvantage – by default seen as working against the state (Bekus 2010). Lukashenka could portray the opposition as threatening not only to the political order but also to the country’s national identity, and his rule as the antidote to this threat (Astashova 2021: 91). This development translated into a negative perception and a distrust of oppositionists and a feeling that there were no better alternatives to Lukashenka (Ash 2015; Korosteleva 2009; Marples 2006).

Society in general became increasingly disconnected both from elections and politics at large. In addition, by selective repression, targeting only those who openly wanted to change the status quo, the regime efficiently discouraged anyone else from engaging in political activism. At the same time, a certain controlled openness allowed individuals to act independently and actively participate in social activities within, for example, academia, the cultural sphere, or environmental movements – as long as these were seen as apolitical (Bedford 2017; Dinerstein 2019; Poleschuk 2015).

Not surprisingly politics became considered unattractive and meaningless and, importantly, something only the notorious opposition bothered with. Over the past 25 years, the authorities have successfully managed to turn politics into a “nonissue” for large sections of the population. This is why Lukashenka did not expect any threat from the 2020 election. Because people did not see how elections or politics mattered, they did not care about changing the government (Bedford 2017). Lukashenka thought that this political apathy would usually keep him safe. The problem, for him, was that this time, the dynamics changed. There were more latent threats against his legitimacy than maybe ever before, many people were already mobilized and in an antiregime mood after the pandemic, and, finally, Tsikhanouskaya’s campaign set mobilization further in motion, starting a fast-moving revolutionary bandwagon.

**Routine uncertainty of the election: The Tsikhanouskaya effect**

Before the election, the opposition parties had grand plans to hold “primaries” across the country to democratically elect a united candidate who would represent all oppositional actors. These were canceled due to the risk of infection, but few
seemed to care. The candidacies of Viktar Babaryka, former chairman of the board of Belgazprombank, and Valery Tsapkala, former ambassador to the United States (later founder of High Technologies Park in Minsk), and popular video blogger Syarhey Tsikhanouski were however received with anticipation. They were not associated with the conventional opposition that, for the reasons outlined above, was neither trusted nor respected by the population at large. This made the candidates more credible and relatable to many (Gapova 2021).

Unsurprisingly, the authorities tried to make sure that the threat these candidates posed was neutralized, by not approving their candidacies and even arresting Tsikhanouski and Babaryka. As they still needed someone to play “the election game,” Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Syarhey Tsikhanouski’s wife who took over his campaign, got the approval to register as a candidate. This was surprising, as already during the collection of the signatures needed to submit her application it became obvious that there was strong support for her and her husband’s campaign across the country. It appears that Lukashenka’s administration underestimated her. Because she was a woman who lacked previous political experience, they assumed that they would be able to control the process – as usual. However, after Tsikhanouskaya had been allowed to formally enter the race, the administration lost control over the electoral process. Her campaign managed to take advantage of the routine uncertainty of the election to the extent that no opposition candidate had been able to do previously. She capitalized massively on the various instruments provided by the electoral platform: the collection of signatures, the campaign, and the voting. Her campaign reduced the informational uncertainty about Lukashenka’s position by confirming that ‘his popular image as either benevolent autocrat or acceptable “evil”’ was no longer enough for a large part of the population to support him’ (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021: 161). The dynamics that evolved from this made the election regain its meaning for society.

**Informational cascades starting a revolutionary bandwagon**

The momentum that made Tsikhanouskaya’s campaign a success story was the collaboration with Maryia Kalesnikava (Babaryka’s campaign manager) and Veranika Tsapkala (Tsapkala’s wife). When they, in the words of Timur Kuran (1991: 18–20), openly crossed their ‘revolutionary thresholds,’ they started a ‘revolutionary bandwagon.’ Together they formed a photogenic and seemingly invincible trio that made it easy for citizens to be sympathetic to their struggle and to follow their conscience and support them in public. This determined the future of the protest movement (Garfias and Magaloni 2018). One important aspect was that they highlighted, both in images and action, that Belarusian women were ready to take the lead in the transformation of society. Thus, their messages and appearance especially encouraged and inspired other educated young women to take their civic responsibility and become politically active (Gapova 2020). The gender aspect subsequently became an important and integral part of the conflict between the protest movement and Lukashenka, which is not surprising given the underlying dissatisfaction with his chauvinism. Both the official campaign material
and unofficial images flourishing online convincingly presented the three ladies as beautiful, strong, smart, and invincible in contrast to Lukashenka who was compared to a cockroach and depicted as out of touch with reality, weak and lacking popularity (Shkliarov 2020).

After independent Belarusian media published the results of an informal election poll indicating that his support among the population was extremely low, the internet was filled with memes mocking Sasha 3% or Psycho 3% (a reference to Lukashenka’s insistence that coronavirus is only a psychosis). As there is no reliable information on the level of support the authoritarian system has or does not have, these memes filled an important function besides making people laugh – they were reducing informational uncertainty, in this regard by conveying the message that the president’s supporters were a minority. In fact, every step of the way Tsikhanouskaya’s election campaign, on social media as well as in the streets and squares, served to counter the perception of Lukashenka as a popular president. During the collection of the 100,000 signatures to officially register for the presidential race, Belarusian voters were lining up in unprecedented numbers all over the country to sign for her candidacy and show their support for the campaign. When more than 60,000 people gathered in a park in Minsk on 30 July for one of her rallies, it was the largest political event in Belarus since 1991. This record was broken a week later when as many as 200,000 people met at the Stella Square in Minsk to oppose the election result (Navumau and Matveieva 2021).

It appears that Tsikhanouskaya’s participation in the election helped overcome collective action problems by releasing an ‘informational cascade’ (Lohmann 1994: 44; Tucker 2007). When it became public knowledge that a large part of the population was unhappy with the political status quo, this spread hope that political change was within reach, which severely undermined the regime’s position by making a large number of people take action against it.

Citizen agency wither the opacity of voters

Just as the other segments of the election process in 2020, the voting on election day saw much more activity than any other election in the country’s history. Long queues wound up at the polling stations (in Belarus and at the embassies abroad) and a sizable number of those waiting were wearing the white bracelet that had become a symbol of support for Tsikhanouskaya’s campaign. In some stations, the voting closed before everyone got to cast their vote. Still, the official election result gave Lukashenka 80% of the vote, compared to Tsikhanouskaya’s 10%.

No independent international election monitors were present, and, in many cases, national observers were not even allowed in the polling stations, officially because of the pandemic. Despite this, there is no doubt that massive election fraud, as usual, occurred (Benedek 2020). Data from the various platforms where Tsikhanouskaya’s supporters were asked to register their vote, such as Golos (Voice), Zubr, and Chestniye Lyudi (Honest People), show both that Lukashenka could not possibly have received 80% of the votes and that it is likely that Tsikhanouskaya was supported by a majority (Voice of Belarus, 2020). This
independent polling to some extent confirms that in this case, the ‘opacity of citizen preferences’ worked in Tsikhanouskaya’s favor (Schedler 2013: 126).

Still, the intensity and resilience of the protests are an even stronger indicator. One important distinction between 2020 and other elections is that since previously most people tended not to care about politics, they did not necessarily take part in the election. As a result, while those elections were no doubt fraudulent, they are unlikely to have featured a serious challenge to Lukashenka and that’s why the protests after those elections were much smaller in scale. This time, because people voted, they knew, for a fact, that their votes were stolen. As noted by Tucker (2007: 543), ‘electoral fraud, and especially major electoral fraud, can be a remarkably powerful device for solving the collective action problems normally associated with preventing citizens from taking action against a regime towards which they hold serious grievances.’ Elena Gapova (2021) even proposes that through the election and its aftermath, the Belarusians emerged as self-aware citizens and political subjects – free agents acting ‘exclusively of their own volition,’ not because someone else was trying to convince them to do so (Gapova 2021: 50).

To sum up, this outlook highlights the impact of what Matejova and Shesterinina (in this volume) call “human sources of uncertainty” on authoritarian political dynamics. Even more so, even though President Lukashenka played an important role in the story, the focus has mainly been on how ordinary people – the citizens of Belarus – became both subjects and agents in uncertain events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and elections. Since true voter preferences were unknown, the major reason that this election became different from any other since Lukashenka came to power was that instead of shrugging their shoulders citizens became active voters. To explain why individual Belarusians decided to do so is beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, it is important to note that when their votes did not count, they protested to demand recognition of their voice and rights (Gapova 2021). The chapter shows how the hidden, and therefore unexpected, agency of the Belarusian voters turned the uncertainty of a usually predictable authoritarian election into a serious challenge to the political status quo – that until then appeared permanent. The 2020 developments have even been described as an awakening of society that made Belarusians ‘break with the very foundations of their cherished stability for the sake of dignity’ (Kazharski 2021a; Petrova and Korosteleva 2021: 128).

The future in Belarus is lined by uncertainty. Lukashenka refused to resign, and even to compromise, but his electoral autocracy has suffered heavy defeats both at home and abroad. The election result is not recognized by the European Union and many European leaders refuse to accept his presidency (European Council 2020; Joint Statement 2020). Events such as the enforced landing in Minsk of an international Ryanair Flight and the increased flow of irregular migrants into Poland and Lithuania from Belarus have contributed to a new European perception of Lukashenka as a regional security issue rather than just a local human-rights one (Kazharski 2021b). In addition, Lukashenka’s open support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has made any reconciliation with the West impossible for the foreseeable future.
Also, at home, Lukashenka has painted himself into a corner. He launched a campaign of mass intimidation against the protesters because he needed to demonstrate that he was in control. Now he cannot risk stopping the repression because he has no other way to handle the situation. Repression is an effective but not a sustainable strategy. Using violence against its own people has severely damaged the regime’s legitimacy and will likely continue to do so (Krawatzek and Sasse 2020). Moreover, the electoral process contributed to altering the fundamental dynamics and power relations between the regime and society. It is hard to imagine both that those who protested in 2020 would ever again accept the election game in its previous form, and that Lukashenka would risk exposing himself to the routine uncertainty of an election.

Conclusion

Until 2020, Aleksandr Lukashenka’s authoritarian regime had ruled Belarus for 26 years without major challenges. The popular mobilization in connection to the 2020 Presidential Election came as a major surprise. It was by no means the first time an election was not fair, but it was the first time that a large part of the population openly reacted to it. Looking at the developments through the lens of uncertainty helps us better understand this unexpected outcome.

The Belarusian regime was haunted by inherent uncertainty – both institutional and informational. The lack of openness and mutual trust between the authoritarian rulers and society made it impossible to gauge the level of genuine support among the population in any credible way. This is what made the popular mobilization so unexpected and so impactful. Regularly occurring elections created routine uncertainty. In their attempt to make such elections seem democratic the authorities lost the ability to totally control their process and outcome. This time, the electoral situation opened the window of opportunity for latent threats to authoritarian hegemony to surface and become the backbone of antiregime mobilization largely triggered by Tsikhanouskaya’s campaign. Most likely none of this would have happened – at this time – without extreme uncertainty generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The perceived lack of governmental response to the crisis intensified the impact of the inherent and routine uncertainty to the extent that the situation resulted in an astonishing mass mobilization and repoliticization of society.

The Belarusian developments clearly illustrate what the “politics of uncertainty” in an authoritarian election can look like in practice. They highlight that the authoritarian leaders’ ambition to uphold a democratic facade affects their ability to control the electoral process. The changing circumstances which led to a mobilization and politicization of society, in combination with the appearance of new credible players in the election game, managed to activate and intensify the uncertainty of the electoral process, transforming it from meaningless to meaningful.
Notes

1 It should however be noted that overall relying on survey tools of research in authoritarian contexts is notoriously difficult (Sadigov and Guliyev 2018).
2 The video is available on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/CDn1ixSniWy/. Two other interesting examples are an ironic test where the reader, according to the editorial staff of Studentskaya Dumka, can check how much he/she knows about the president’s view of a modern woman: https://dumka.me/test/lukashenko. Another is a text produced by the NGO Nash Dom (Our House) where the word “women” is replaced by “men” in some of Lukashenka’s most infamous statements: https://nash-dom.info/58678.
3 Examples of some of his most memorable commentary can be found on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqH41yL64m8; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqH41yL64m8
4 Widespread political apathy is common in authoritarian post-Soviet countries. See, for example, the edited volume by Erpyleva and Magun (2015) about this phenomenon in the context of the 2011 protest movement in Russia.

References


