

ALICE BOTA

# The Women of Belarus

Of revolution, courage and the pursuit of freedom

The revolution has a female face

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Alexander Lukashenko's plan backfired: the election that was meant to be a mere rubber-stamping exercise turned out to be a real one after all. The dictator had underestimated the female factor – not just the three reluctant female candidates, but virtually all Belarusian women. And now they are posing a threat to his power. In this book, Alice Bota retraces the events of the uprising. She tells the story of the three main protagonists and examines the question of why the West provided so little support. A compelling portrait of one of the most unusual protests in recent history.

- Commemorating the anniversary of the brave uprising in Belarus
- Exclusive access to the movement's female protagonists
- Written by the Moscow correspondent for DIE ZEIT



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alice Bota, *The Women of Belarus*

English sample translation by Caroline Waight

## A Brief User's Guide

I was a witness at the 2008 demonstrations against the then president of Georgia. I was present in Tel Aviv in 2011, when thousands of people cheerfully set up tents to protest against the housing shortage. I was following a coffin at the Maidan protests in Ukraine in 2014 when the first demonstrator was killed. I watched incredulously as the Velvet Revolution in Armenia brought about a peaceful transfer of power in 2018, and there was dancing in the streets. Protests in Moscow followed one year later, with Alexey Navalny taking part, and these were not quite so joyful. I thought I'd seen it all. Protest movements are nothing new to me – as a journalist, they're my bread and butter. But then came Belarus in 2020.

This protest movement kept me awake at night. I mean that quite literally. Most of the demonstrations took place at the weekend, and I kept my phone beside my bed, watching obsessively as the numbers of arrests ticked up and up. I messaged people I'd been talking to in Belarus: 'Hi, is everything okay?' Or: 'Do you know when your wife will be released?' Or: 'Can you talk? Are you injured?' Sometimes I'd wait for answers until dawn. If none came, I knew: they'd been arrested.

During those first months after the fraudulent election in August 2020, I couldn't sleep through the night. The issues at stake, the lives that hung in the balance, the dedication of those involved – it had got under my skin. For one thing, I couldn't believe this was all unfolding practically in Germany's backyard. There's something awe-inspiring about people overcoming their fear, and taking on an unequal battle even when they stand to lose everything. About seeing them remain peaceful, even in the teeth of violence. As I write this preface, the protests have been going on for nearly three hundred days.

They're smaller now, less visible, but they haven't quite disappeared. I'm reminded of an interview with the Ukrainian philosopher Mikhail Minakov, who examined the data on social protests over the past hundred and twenty years and found no comparable protest movement that had stayed peaceful as long as the one in Belarus.

On the other hand, it is mind-boggling to me how long it took for these images to filter through to the rest of Europe, how slow they were to prompt sympathy and solidarity – and how rapidly their impact faded. As though Belarus were some country far beyond our

borders. As though the events unfolding there were not about far more than the fate of a single nation. In fact, they represent a battle for fundamental rights. For freedom. For self-determination. It is a deeply European story.

This book is an attempt at translation. An attempt to take a society that seems distant and foreign and make it more familiar to readers elsewhere in Europe. I hope it will also appeal to people who know nothing about Belarus, but have been more aware of it since that summer. Even those with no interest in Belarus or its power struggles might still be gripped by the story behind it, which is a story of female empowerment. Of how three women took on a dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, and ultimately achieved greater visibility amid the broader protest movement – and how this movement helped keep the protests against Lukashenko peaceful.

In other words, this book seeks to do two things. Firstly, it introduces three crucial political players: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, a teacher and housewife, Maria Kolesnikova, a musician, and Veronika Tsepikalo, an IT manager. Secondly, it gives voice to countless unknown women – doctors, programmers, mothers, teachers, PR managers, housewives and feminists – who live in Belarus or in exile, and who describe how the summer of 2020 and the protests changed them forever.

Don't get me wrong: the movement is not, of course, exclusively female. It draws support from conservatives and liberals alike, from old and young, from women and men. But I don't want this to be a book about men. Not this time. I want it to be about women, about their stories of overcoming and self-empowerment. This is not a story that has been told much in Eastern Europe, and yet it is a universal issue. A song we've heard many times elsewhere.

Writing a book entails making decisions, and not all of these were easy. I had to make a compromise, for instance, in the terms I used for Belarus and Belarusian, a language that is still actively being suppressed. Should I write 'Belarus', although for decades it was known as 'White Russia'? That decision was straightforward – I simply followed the recommendations of the German-Belarusian Historical Commission. 'White Russia' is dated, and also makes the country sound like merely another western Russian oblast. But the next decision was a little more difficult: 'Belarussian' or 'Belarusian'? I chose the latter, because in English it is far more common.

Or take the names of the three key women – how should I write them? In Belarusian? In which case the trio would be Marya Alyaksandrauna Kalesnikava, Veranika Tsapkala and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Or should I use the Russian forms? Russian is Belarus's second official language, but is used by the vast majority of people. Unlike in Ukraine, disputes about language played no role in the uprising. Two of the three women speak better Russian

than Belarusian and nearly always use their Russian names. For this reason, unless the people I spoke to preferred otherwise, I chose to use the Russian variant. In this book, the three women are known as Maria Kolesnikova, Veronika Tsepka and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, since this is how they are generally referred to in the English-language media. It may not be an ideal compromise, but I hope it is one that my readers – and above all my contacts in Belarus – can live with.

The most painful compromise of all involved my research. My face-to-face meetings with Belarusian interviewees took place not in Belarus but other countries. In order to gather information and communicate with sources on the ground, I had to rely on online conversations and video chats. Over the past few months, I have conducted roughly a hundred interviews. I ended each one by asking whether I needed to change their name or alter their personal information for security reasons, so for the most part you won't find biographical details in the book – except for the three well-known women. Some of my contacts gave permission to use their full names, only to change their minds weeks later. In other cases it was necessary to withhold even their first names, and these instances are clearly indicated in the book. In the end, I decided not to use surnames at all, even when my contact did not object. It seemed to me that the dynamics of the political process in Belarus were too unpredictable and too dangerous to take the risk. What was innocuous enough yesterday might be a criminal offence today. Who knows what might happen tomorrow?

I had very much hoped to conduct my research on the ground, and made repeated attempts to contact diplomats and the Belarusian Foreign Ministry. But it proved impossible. My descriptions of the country are therefore drawn from earlier visits. To this day, I am still not allowed to travel there. In the autumn of 2020, the regime withdrew accreditation from all foreign press.

I am one of a group of journalists who have still not been issued new visas or media accreditation. Week after week, month after month, they continued to put me off. I know colleagues who were granted their papers ages ago. Eventually, I realised they were deliberately dragging their feet. I know that several European diplomats in Minsk have been working in the background to help me, and for that I would like to thank them. But the authorities in Belarus, which have largely ignored the COVID pandemic, did at long last come up with a reason why they couldn't issue my papers: the virus.

## 1. Living in Exile

### In the Control Centre

The door flies open and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya comes in – she’s barely recognisable. Confident, beaming, a consummate professional, but also cautious, tentative somehow. It’s extraordinary how six months can change a person, I think.

It’s a sleepy Saturday in Lithuania, February 2021. Less than a year earlier, last summer, in fact, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was a shy, retiring housewife from the Belarusian capital of Minsk who had been dragged into the spotlight by fate. She hated make-up, didn’t particularly care about clothes, and had no time for elaborate hairdos. Now she’s wearing a sober sheath dress and heels. Her face is carefully powdered, her brows perfectly drawn, her eyes accentuated with shadow. She has cut her long hair: her stylist recommended a chin-length bob. The same stylist also dresses her when she goes on business trips or meets with heads of state. A make-up artist taught her how to use cosmetics to her advantage.

Is it necessary to describe the external appearance of this thirty-eight-year-old woman in such detail? Yes, because power is always a question of perception. Tsikhanouskaya knows that all too well by now. Her appearance reflects the internal transformation that has taken place as she found her feet in her new life. It’s not a life she wanted. It is absurdly demanding. But Tsikhanouskaya is trying to rise to the challenge, to look the part of someone who is capable of meeting the expectations of this new role.

Clothes, cosmetics, interviews, meetings with powerful politicians across the world – none of that mattered to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in her former life. Back on 9 August 2020, her friends had to coax her into wearing make-up. It was the day of the election, the day that would change everything in Belarus – including her own life – irrevocably. Tsikhanouskaya cast her vote at School 137 in Minsk. She didn’t see the point in dressing up for it, but her fellow activists insisted: after all, hundreds of international reporters were waiting for her! Photos were important! Tsikhanouskaya relented.

In those days she spent most of her time alone with her children in their two-bedroom flat in Minsk, waiting for her husband to come home at the weekend. Today she heads a staff of roughly twenty people, occupying an entire floor of a modern office building in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. This is her control centre, the place from which she broadcasts her messages to the world: that she is the elected leader of a free Belarus; that the European

Union must do more to combat her opponent, the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko; that Belarusians need help, because they can't fight state oppression and violence all alone.

Tsikhanouskaya's offices are on the seventh floor of the building. A broad-shouldered security guard sits just inside. He glances up briefly, letting me pass without comment. The corridor forks, one hallway leading left and the other right. The one on my right is crowded with Belarusian students, coffee mugs in hand. Here, in exile, they are working on a democratic future for their homeland: researching, writing blogs, posting YouTube videos and staying in touch with Belarus.

To my left is the staff area, where only Tsikhanouskaya and her team are allowed. The first room along the hallway is her spartan office, which is closed today, a Saturday. Then there's a large open space filled with long rows of tables, which looks rather like a seminar room – this is where her team works. Beyond that is an open kitchen with an espresso machine and a stack of pizza boxes in the corner, then a glass-walled room with camera equipment and the red-and-white flag, which is used as the backdrop for interviews and online broadcasts.

Tsikhanouskaya now has an advisor on international relations, a communications expert who runs her Twitter and Telegram accounts in several languages, and a potential minister for education. There is a representative for future constitutional reform and one for foreign affairs. The latter, Valery Kavaleuski, previously worked as a diplomat for Alexander Lukashenko, but became disillusioned with Lukashenko's repeated rigging of elections fifteen years ago and left his position, joining Tsikhanouskaya's team in December 2020. 'My leader is Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. She is who I voted for,' he says. It's essentially a shadow cabinet, although Tsikhanouskaya doesn't call it that. They are preparing for zero hour: when Alexander Lukashenko steps down and there are finally fair elections in Belarus. 'Sooner or later we will have a new president. We don't know what Lukashenko will leave behind. Perhaps there will be nothing but scorched earth. Perhaps we will have to start everything from scratch,' says Tsikhanouskaya. She wants to make sure her country is prepared.

On this Saturday in February, while her mother looks after the children, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is posing stern-faced for the camera, carefully lit and in several different outfits. They're doing a professional photo shoot for her website and social media. After our conversation she disappears again next door, where the photographer is waiting for her. Her beaming press secretary, Anna Krasulina, stays with me. 'Wonderful, isn't it? That dreadful Lukashenko over there and our beautiful leader here!'

It feels like watching time-lapse footage of a previously apolitical woman metamorphosing into a politician – under exceptionally brutal conditions. As an inexperienced and



overwhelmed politician, Angela Merkel was once considered 'Helmut Kohl's girl', until eventually she became one of the most powerful women in the world. But while Merkel had years to transform, Tsikhanouskaya has months. As she reshapes herself, as she grapples with her new role, she sees every day the heavy toll exacted on Belarusians in Belarus: how they are imprisoned, humiliated, beaten. Belarusians, meanwhile, are watching in real-time as Tsikhanouskaya learns, changes and, yes, makes the odd mistake.

If you were asked to explain everything that happened in 2020 to someone waking from a deep, Rip-Van-Winkle-esque sleep, you would both be there a long time. Great Britain left the European Union. The entire world was paralysed by COVID-19. Donald Trump tried to seize back power by force after losing the election. Yet the most incredible story of all was playing out in central Europe, barely an hour and a half from Berlin by plane: in Belarus. A country of 9.3 million people, located between the EU, Ukraine and Russia, it has been ruled by a dictator for twenty-six years.

What happened in Belarus in 2020 sounds like something dreamed up by an overambitious screenwriter who got a little heavy-handed with the unexpected twists in her latest political thriller for Netflix. A blogger decides he wants to take on Alexander Lukashenko and become president of Belarus – but before he's even put forward as a candidate, Lukashenko has him locked up. The blogger's wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, then declares that she will run in her husband's place. She's ridiculed; after all, she's just a housewife, what does she know about politics? And because she seems so harmless, the authorities actually allow her to run in the presidential election.

Tsikhanouskaya is out of her depth, but she's aided by two allies: IT manager Veronika Tsepkalo, whose husband Valery similarly wanted to run but was not allowed; and musician Maria Kolesnikova, whose friend Viktor Babariko had also hoped to contend the election. He and his son were both arrested. The women campaigned in various cities in Belarus, addressing crowds ten-thousand strong. Despite facing persistent harassment by the state, they pulled off nothing short of a miracle: never before in the country's short history had so many people from so many diverse regions come together. All of them supported Tsikhanouskaya. Or, to put it more accurately: they opposed Alexander Lukashenko. Tsikhanouskaya simply represented the promise of an alternative. She made change seem like a viable option to many people – first she made it conceivable, then tangible.

But on 9 August 2020, the day that votes were cast, Lukashenko carried out the most brazen act of electoral fraud in the nation's history. He had rigged every re-election since being voted into office in 1994, making it look as though almost the entire population supported him. But this time the extent of his interference was unprecedented. Alexander Lukashenko

declared victory with 80.1 percent of the vote – a shameless lie. People began to protest in a way they never had before.

One day later, on the night of 10 August, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was forced to leave Belarus. Veronika Tsepkalo had already gone to stay with her family in Moscow on election day, casting her vote at the embassy there. Maria Kolesnikova decided to stay – no matter the cost. She has been in prison since 8 September 2020. She faces up to twelve years behind bars.

This is where a Netflix series would most likely end, with viewers left hanging. The three women have been defeated. They are either in prison or in exile. It's over. No happy ending.

But the story doesn't end there. There is more to say: about new beginnings, about wanting a normal future, about female empowerment. And Belarus has already been changed. Tsikhanouskaya, Tsepkalo and Kolesnikova have sparked something that the state cannot now extinguish, even with terrible violence. Belarus will never be the same, and nor will the lives of the three women. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is in exile, fighting two battles: one for the future of her country and another with herself, over who she wants to be. Tsepkalo lives with her family in Riga, Latvia, awaiting her return to Belarus. And Kolesnikova wrote her first letter from prison to her father on 17 September 2020.

Hello,

You cannot imagine how this feeling of injustice and helplessness gave me strength when they tried to remove me from the country against my will. Especially when you consider the choice the first representative from the interior ministry gave me: spend twenty-five years in the zone (camp) sewing boring shirts for the security people or leave the country. I have decided to stay. I don't regret my decision for a second! Freedom is worth fighting for. Everything will be fine! You are incredible!

Your Masha

Remand Prison Number 8, Zhodino

What a prospect: endlessly sewing shirts for Lukashenko's henchmen, a typical activity assigned to inmates in Belarusian penal camps. Maria Kolesnikova has made her decision.