

# Automobile Rebellion in Belarus?

Yesterday, several hundred car drivers participated in a mass protest action called "Stop Gasoline" against the rising fuel prices in the Belarusian cities of Minsk, Homel, Brest and Mogilev. Following the call of the automobilist organization "Za-Avto", drivers [blocked](#) the central avenues in the country, pretending that their cars have broken down.

For hours, traffic jams and the blowing of horns made circulation on Independence Avenue in Minsk impossible. Gasoline prices were to rise about 30% on June 8<sup>th</sup> and they had risen by 25% just two weeks ago. In the aftermath of the protests, four activists have been arrested and sentenced to pay fines. The organizers of the rally have started collecting money to pay the fines.

It is a revealing characteristic of contemporary Belarusian society that the rise of fuel prices finally brought many apolitical people to the streets. This was a protest organized by an automobilist association and not by a political party or movement.

Over the last years, a very popular thesis among Western observers and diplomats in Belarus has been that the only thing that will make people take part in mass demonstrations will be an extreme deterioration of their living conditions. As long as Lukashenka can keep the relatively high living standards, low food and utility services prices, they were convinced, Belarusians would not care to take part in demonstrations.

What has happened in Belarus in the last two months is exactly the scenario that those observers predicted as a very serious

threat to the Lukashenka regime. However, during the last weeks it became clear that the galloping inflation and rising prices would probably not lead to the predicted mass protests. Instead of complaining publicly and going to the streets, Belarusians usually chose a typical, matter-of-fact way of dealing with the situation. They bought what was left of cheap products, organized a black market website for currency exchange and they had no other topic for conversation apart from the rising prices.

Whenever two people met, they discuss prices for bananas, buckwheat and cheese. Non-state media published leading articles dealing with the prices for food and electronic devices several days in a row while the state media largely ignore the crises. However, there was no feeling of discontent which reached the public sphere. Most people do not attribute the economic crisis to the mistakes of Belarusian authorities, but tend to repeat what they hear in the official propaganda: the resulting crises was the fault of those Belarusians who were buying cars abroad and also from the world financial crisis.

Until yesterday, most Belarusians refrained from expressing their discontent about deteriorating living conditions publicly. Being asked when they would finally start protesting against political repression on the one hand and pauperization on the other hand, they replied: "You see, we have gone through crises like this several times during the last 20 years. We are not like Tunisians or Egyptians; we don't go to the street and protest. It is not a part of our mentality."

Yesterday's car rebellion was the first notable protest event since the brutal crackdown of the post-election demonstration in December 2010. While non-state media already hope that they will lead to a broad protest against the regime, this may not happen.

Cars have become one of the most important status symbols in

Belarus during the last months. Belarusians were buying cars in the West before the custom fees on them will rise at the beginning of July. There are more cars, including very modern ones, on the streets of Minsk than ever before. Depriving the Belarusians of driving their new cars because they cannot afford fuel anymore hits their self-image. They have stopped buying imported products because they are just too expensive but many are unwilling to stop driving their cars.

Lukashenka has already demanded that fuel prices should decrease beginning Thursday morning. It appears that the Belarusian leader is quick to understand that he is on the verge of fighting a battle on too many fronts. He is fighting against the West, against Russia, against the opposition, against international media outlets, against the internet and now against discontented social groups.

The question is whether Belarusians will make a connection between the devastating economic situation and political situation. If this happens, the power of protesters will be too overwhelming to handle for the regime.

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