

Belarus Independence Day: Reviving the Soviet Myths

Today Belarus celebrates its Independence Day. Yesterday, the Square of the National flag opened next to the new building of Residency of President with great pomp.

Veterans of the WWII, famous Belarusian sportsmen, officials and youth swore allegiance to the national colours in the presence of 6,000 students and schoolchildren.

Despite financial difficulties the government spends huge amount of budget money to celebrate this holiday, which has particular significance for Alexandr Lukashenka.

Unlike most other official Belarusian holidays with roots in the Soviet Union, 3 July Independence Day is an invention of the current political regime. But efforts of officials, most Belarusians demonstrate indifference to the official holiday and leave the city instead of celebrating.

The date of 3 July refers to the myth of Great Patriotic War which became the main historical myth of the country during the rule of Alexander Lukashenka. Authorities introduced the 3 July as Independence Day in 1997, when it substituted previous official Independence Day – 27 July, which referred to the Declaration of Sovereignty of Belarus proclaimed in 1990.

The Day Which Irritates Inhabitants of Minsk

The Independence Day in current Belarus is the biggest large-scale event which is supposed to demonstrate stability and strengths of Alexander Lukashenka's political regime. Every year the state budget spends huge money for celebrations. According to an independent economist Leanid Zaika the military parade alone costs at least USD 300,000.

The main action takes place in Minsk and very much resembles the celebrating of official holidays in the Soviet Union. The parade of military vehicles, aviation and products of leading enterprises (agricultural machines, heavy trucks, fridges) follows the procession of sportsmen. After the parade Lukashenka usually gives a speech on the subject of progress of Belarusian state and current geopolitical situation of the country.

Preparation for the parade starts several weeks before the performance. Manoeuvres of tanks and armoured vehicles in the city centre causes havoc in public transportation. Ordinary Minsk residents cannot even cross the street for half an hour or longer to get home. It is no wonder that such inconvenience irritates most of the population of the city.

Unlike the residents of Belarusian capital, Minsk authorities refrain from publicly discussing their attitude to the parade. But every year after the celebrations finish, municipality has to invest substantial funds to repair city roads broken by heavy tanks and other military machines.

Genealogy of 3 July

It is difficult to imagine more artificial holiday in Belarus than the official Independence Day celebrated on 3 July.

In the early years of his rule Lukashenka gained a huge popularity promising to return the Soviet Union by creating the alliance with Russia. To gain popular support he used the nostalgia for the USSR of the majority of the population of Belarus which became the most rich and successful republic in the Soviet Union.

To legitimise the political regime which aspired to revive the USSR, Lukashenka returned Soviet holidays to the official calendar. From 1995 – 1996 Belarus revived the celebration of the Day of October Revolution of 1917 – 7 November and the Defender of the Fatherland Day – 23 February. During that

period authorities also increased their attention to the [Victory Day – 9 of May](#). Established in 1991, the Independence Day of 27 July did not correspond to this semantic range. It referred to the day when Belarus declared its sovereignty from the Soviet Union in 1990.

For that reason Belarusian political elites decided to move the Independence Day. The question of moving it to 3 July was put on the 1996 referendum together with several others questions. According to the official referendum results, 89.4% of voters approved the change of the date of national holiday. OSCE, Council of Europe and European Union did not recognise the results of referendum saying that the procedure failed to meet democratic standards.

Prior to 1996, on 3 July Minsk was celebrating the anniversary of its liberation from the Nazi invaders and “Day of the City” – annual holiday in most of big cities of USSR with bear-garden, concerts and fireworks. Minsk city authorities moved the Day of the City to September only in 2002.

As a result, between 1997 and 2001 on 3 July Minsk inhabitants celebrated three official holidays on the same day. At that period celebrations did not differ much from the feast on Day of the City. The “ideologisation” of the holiday starting in early 2000s when the Belarusian regime started to develop its own ideology.

Evil Fate of 3 July

3 July refers to the mythology of Great Patriotic War which became the main historical myth in Belarus. Unlike the second holiday which glorifies the heroism of Belarusian nation in Second World War, the Victory Day, 3 July is the invention of current Belarusian political elites. On several occasions the celebrations went wrong.

In 2008 during night concert in the centre of the city a bomb exploded. Forty persons were injured. Alexander Lukashenka was

several hundred metres from the place of attack. The explosion became the pretext for the taking of fingerprints of almost entire male population of Belarus. But KGB and the police failed to find those responsible for the crime. But following arrests for the bombing of Minsk metro in 2011 suspect Dmitry Kanavalau was found guilty of attack on 3 July and executed shortly after.

Second time the celebrations spoiled Minsk inhabitants. During the summer 2011 "silent protests" against Lukashenka regime took place. In most of the cities of Belarus demonstrators were protesting against the authoritarian regime with clapping on the main squares of the cities. For that reason after the annual speech of the President on the parade the police prohibited audience to applause. During the protests on 3 July in Minsk the police arrested 210 persons.

After the celebrations in 2012 at night of 4 July an airplane, chartered by the Swedish citizens, illegally entered the airspace of Belarus and parachuted hundreds of teddy bears with notes carrying pro-democracy messages. That resulted in international scandal and closing of Swedish embassy in Minsk.

It looks like in recent years in spite of early preparation and huge money spent for the celebration bad luck haunts the official Independence Day. Many Belarusians prefer not to participate in political show of current elites.

They use the official day off to enjoy sunny summer day out of the city. Unlike the Soviet Union Lukashenka regime has very limited resources to force regular citizens to take part in official holiday and thereby to approve the political system.

The holiday exists for the prestige and legitimisation of the current political regime. For that reason most likely the annual performance on 3 July will stop shortly after the current political regime will become history itself.