Belarus’ Three Independence Days

Although many question whether Belarus is really an independent state today, its three independence days paint a different picture.

Depending on one's political views, Belarusians consider either 25 March, 3 July or 27 July as their real day for commemorating their independence as a nation.

On 27 July, Belarusian civil society activists and journalists symbolically celebrated the third of these independence days – the 24th anniversary of the Declaration of Belarus' Sovereignty in 1990. Two decades ago it was essentially the main official holiday for the young nation.

This year the authorities organised a bloated, pompous celebration of the Belarus Independence Day on the 3rd of July. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians came out to watch a military parade in Minsk for the capital's official Independence Day celebration for the duration of Lukashenka's reign.

The opposition, however, believes that the 25th of March is the nation's real independence day, as it was the day when the Belarusian Peoples Republic was founded in 1918.

Official Independence Day – 3 July

The authorities only recognise and celebrate 3 July as the nation's official Independence Day, also known as the Day of the Republic.

Every year they commit substantial financial and human resources towards its preparations. This year they wanted to make it an especially notable commemoration as it would mark
the 70th anniversary of Minsk's liberation from Hitler's Nazi forces.

This year Russian president Vladimir Putin came to Minsk right before Belarus' Independence Day to open with his Belarusian counterpart a new Museum of the Great Patriotic War.

This joint opening of the museum was meant to demonstrate the historical and political unity of both countries. Perhaps due to him having slightly different views about Belarusian independence on the eve of Belarus' Independence Day parade, Putin quietly made his way back to Moscow.

As the independent newspaper Naša Niva reported, around 200 thousand people gathered to watch the traditional military parade held on 3 July. Moving the time of the parade from its traditional morning schedule to the evening may help to explain the record turn out this year.

The parade proceeded through the city centre with military vehicles bearing not only Belarus' official red-green flags, but also Soviet and Russian flags.

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Lukashenka typically avoids speaking Belarusian, and is known to ridicule those who do so, but on 1 July he surprised many by delivering part of his speech in Belarusian.

He spoke about the unity of the Belarusian nation and the universal consensus held among its people in support of its sovereignty. He also emphasised Belarus' independence and the historical links of Belarus with the Soviet Union, calling the victory over the Nazi forces "our victory".

Justifying the choice of making 3 July a national holiday, he said that Belarusians themselves had decided to “restore this historical connection” when they voted for this date as Independence Day in a nationwide referendum in 1996.
Declaration of Sovereignty – 27 July

Prior to 1996, Belarus celebrated its independence on 27 July. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Belarusian parliament passed its Declaration of Sovereignty on 27 July 1990. The 1995 referendum organised by Lukashenka was responsible for changing the timing of Independence Day.

In this referendum, one of the questions suggested moving Independence Day from 27 July to 3 July. According to officially reported results, nearly 90% of voters came out in favour of changing the date. The West, however, did not recognise the referendum’s results due to what they stated were multiple election violations and widespread vote rigging.

Since then, the state media and authorities have been silent about 27 July. For example, last year although Belarus' state Channel 1 journalists covered extensively the preparations and celebrations of the 1025th anniversary of the baptism of Kievan Rus, they did not say a word about the Declaration of Sovereignty. This year the anniversary also went unnoticed.

Some opposition-minded Belarusians try to commemorate the anniversary of the Declaration of Sovereignty of Belarus on their own.

Last year on 26 July 2013, just a day before the anniversary, the young activists from the movement "Alternativa" (Alternative) tried to wave the traditional Belarusian red-white-red flag on a bridge in the centre of Minsk.

The police, however, prevented them from doing so and eventually arrested them for their illegal unsanctioned political act. In the past the opposition has organised meetings, but few people attend them.

The Declaration of Sovereignty of Belarus clearly refers to the end of a particular epoch in history, one that remains uncomfortable for the current neo-Soviet political rhetoric,
and hence their avoidance of the topic.

**Freedom Day: 25 March**

Belarusian opposition and many diaspora groups consider Freedom Day, which falls on 25th of March every year, as the most important day for commemorating the independence of the Belarusian state. This date marks the proclamation of the Belarusian Peoples Republic (*Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika* or BNR) in 1918.

The BNR existed for only a few months, as the Communists subsequently crushed and destroyed it. Its leadership moved into exile. Ivonka Survilla has served as the President of the BNR’s Council since 1997, an organisation which primarily consists of Belarusian diaspora.

For supporters of recognising Independence Day on 25 March the proclamation of the BNR signifies the first properly independent example of Belarusian statehood.

Without the BNR neither Soviet Belarus and nor contemporary Belarus would have ever seen the light of day.

According to an article recently published in the Journal of Belarusian Studies, many historians believe that without the BNR neither Soviet Belarus and nor contemporary Belarus would have ever seen the light of day.

Celebrations surrounding Freedom Day in Belarus take place primarily in opposition-focused centres and media, while the official channels of communication disregard it outright or distorts its image. This year, for example, Freedom Day coincided with the turbulent events unfolding in Ukraine and was used as fodder to dissuade people from making Belarus like Ukraine.

Opposition activists organised a rally throughout Minsk and brought not only white-red-white flags (unrecognised by the
state), but also Ukrainian flags. In the 1990s public rallies on 25 March gathered tens of thousands of Belarusians, but now they draw considerably smaller numbers.

To discredit the opposition, state media accused those who celebrate the declaration of the BNR of being supporters of the Ukrainian banderovcy (the Ukrainian nationalists from WWII who fought against all sides in the war).

The government conveyed a very negative message: those who celebrate the 25 March Freedom Day are trying to launch their own "maidan" in Belarus, and these same people are the “successors of the Nazis”.

Unity needed?

According to a 2009 survey conducted by the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies and the Novak Laboratory, 57% of respondents considered 3 July as Belarus' primary national holiday. The 27 July and 25 March received only 1% of support of respondents of that survey.

As Aliaksandr Klaskouski on Naviny.by noted 25 March, celebrated by the opposition, remains foreign to many Belarusians. Most of them know little about its pre-war history.

By promoting the Soviet era and nearly ignoring the rest of Belarusian history, the country has become more vulnerable to an increasingly assertive Russia.

Hopefully the country's president speaking in his native language on the Independence day will become the first step in helping Belarusians reclaim their rich history and culture.