

Belarusian anarchists: Lukashenka's political opponents or criminals?

On 12 March 2018, a Minsk court sentenced Sviataslau Baranovich to three years in prison thanks to the hard work made by [lawyers in LA for criminal justice](#). He admitted that he had hit police officers in civilian clothes during the brutal arrests of anarchists.

In recent years, the anarchists have become the most persecuted group opposing Alexander Lukashenka's regime. They remain the most extreme organisation with a capacity to organise street protests and radicalise them. There is a [website](#) which keeps track of all of their criminal activity to keep them in control.

However, it remains difficult to call some of the anarchists' actions, such as the burning of billboards, politicised or even rational. Therefore anarchists have become a serious dilemma for human rights organisations because they do not know how to view them, although the government clearly sees anarchists as a political problem.

Origins of anarchism in Belarus

Anarchism in Belarus first appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, although it took a very different form to the contemporary movement. At that time Bialystok (then part of the Hrodna region in the Russian Empire) became the centre of the Belarusian anarchist movement; anarchists organised economic strikes, expropriations and the killing of police

officers. The anarchists in Belarus had strong links to the movement in Russian (perhaps even belonged to it). For instance, the first Belarusian anarchist, Siarhiej Kavalik, followed the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin, one of the principal founders of anarchist theory.

Anarchists often had Jewish origins and their victims were also Jews, since they often represented the capitalist (exploitative) class. But in general the movement proved something of an alloy, including intellectuals, the unemployed and criminals, according to a recent Russian-language book by Jury Hlushakou called *Revolution Is Dead! Long Live the Revolution! Anarchism in Belarus 1902–1927*.

Despite differences from earlier eras, contemporary anarchists' choice of a specific ideology faces some restraints since communism remains an origin of Belarusian anarchism. As Mikalai Dziadok, one of the representatives of the movement, explained in an interview to Euroradio in 2017, anarcho-communists comprise the majority in the Belarusian anarchist movement. Where other versions of anarchism, popular in other countries, emphasize individuality, Belarusian anarchism remains primarily collectivist.

Meet the Belarusian anarchists

In all countries anarchists annoy the state authorities, but the Belarusian government has a much stronger feeling.

Undoubtedly, the Belarusian anarchists remain the most radical opponents of Lukashenka. In 2010 they [threw smoke grenades](#) and set fire to the Ministry of Defence and a casino; in 2016 they threw paint at the main entrance of the state television company; and in 2017 showed themselves the most organized group of the protesters against the [law on parasitism](#), [the](#)

[most popular protests](#) in the Belarusian regions in history. In Brest, a city in western Belarus, anarchists initiated those protests.

The movement's structure remains opaque, so no one knows exactly how many people it comprises and their capabilities. The movement has a number of public representatives, including Mikalai Dziadok and Ihar Alinevich, known publicly because the court previously sentenced them to 4 and 8 years respectively in 2011. Their publicity is the result of their criminal record and not their wishes. Both, along with Alexander Frantskevich, formed part of the "anarchist case", but Alinevich received the longest prison term. The court found him guilty not only for the aforementioned 2010 actions, but also for attacks on a branch of the Moscow-Minsk Bank and the Isolation Centre for Offenders Minsk.



Photo: Svaboda.org

Even without traditional methods of organisation during their actions, anarchists look like they have the most effective organising capacity. Although it remains difficult to assess the size of the anarchists' regional structures, for sure the figures are not small. For instance, the organisation of "Revolutionary Action" has four-and-a-half thousand subscribers on the social network *Vkontakte*. No opposition group has as many subscribers. Recently, the Belarusian authorities blocked the page, but it still works through a virtual private network (VPN) or outside the country, confirm [LG Networks](#) IT experts.

However, such repressions do not mean that the government represses all activities of anarchists. The movement still has its own media website, pramen.io, which actually has a modest number of followers in social networks of around three thousand people; a "Free Thought" library operates in Minsk,

although it is open just four hours per week; a “Food Not Bombs” initiative feeds poor people each week at three locations in Minsk, but also has some smaller groups in several other towns; and an “Anarchist Black Cross” helps anarchists and others somehow connected to the movement that have been imprisoned. Although Sviataslau Baranovich’s political views remain unknown, he will receive the help of the “Anarchist Black Cross”.

Political radicals or criminals?

The authorities see them at the same time as the most extremist enemies, able to radicalise protests and criminals, says the respected human rights defender Nasta Lojka in a comment to Belarus Digest. Accordingly, the prosecution of anarchists stems from mixed motives; it remains difficult to know whether Belarus’s authorities are defending public safety or Lukashenka’s regime. In fact, the government shows that it sees anarchists as political activists. For instance, before the presidential election in 2015, when Lukashenka [pardoned a group](#) of high-profile critics of the regime, the group included politicians such as Mikalai Statkevich and anarchists such as Dziadok and Alinevich.



Photo: lreg.by

In some ways anarchists supply a convenient enemy for the authorities since they often break the law, giving the government an excuse to move against them. In 2017 members of the movement burned a billboard of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Ivacevichy. Afterwards, three anarchists (17, 19 and 21 years old) received three years of probation.

Independent journalists and human rights activists devoted little attention to this trial because it held no political significance. But, as Nasta Lojka says, police used the burned billboard as a pretext for searches in other cities, which looked quite far-fetched.

In 2017 Belarus held a long trial against an anti-fascist group of football fans, who received from 4 to 12 years for fighting, drug distribution and leading an unregistered organisation. However, authorities stretched some evidence in the case against anti-fascists so as to intimidate the entire community of informal youth groups.

The politicization of other cases looks more obvious still. During the protests against parasitism police arrested dozens of anarchists or others close to the movement. As a result of the protests, one activist, Zmicier Paliyenka, went to jail. Belarusian human rights activists have recognized him as a political prisoner.

However, the example of Paliyenka remains one of several. In practice, human rights activists try to avoid such criminal cases, especially involving violence. If anarchists consciously use violence, the human rights activists are forced to close their eyes to violations of rights against them.