

Has Makei cast a spell on Western diplomats?

Ever since it released important political prisoners in August 2015, the Belarusian government has rarely resorted to outright violence against dissidents. This paradigm shift facilitated the removal or suspension of most Western sanctions against Belarus. The parties were able to move from confrontational rhetoric to positive dialogue.

The Belarusian authorities' resolute return to large-scale repression against opposition in March 2017 took the West by surprise. European and American diplomats have failed to rapidly formulate a coherent response to this policy change.

Is the Belarusian government taking the West's toothless reaction as tacit consent for a 'temporary' backslide on democracy?

The West rejoices at short-lived respite from violence

Over the past year and a half, Belarusian political activists became used to a softer, more restrained approach by law-enforcing bodies to oppositional street activities. The police refrained from dispersing incidental opposition rallies and beating or detaining its participants.

Preference for fines over arrests was better for public relations while increasing budget revenue for the Belarusian government

In 2016, the Human Rights Centre *Viasna* recorded only a single administrative arrest related to freedom of assembly.

Meanwhile, they learnt about 484 cases of fines for alleged administrative offences related to freedom of assembly or speech. This was a seven-fold increase compared to 2015.

For the authorities, this new approach meant less bad publicity which detentions inevitably caused, but also more budget revenue from fines.

The change in the Belarusian government's behaviour initially gladdened the West. The 'peaceful re-election' of [Alexander Lukashenka](#) provided Europe with sufficient grounds (actually their only basis besides the earlier release of political prisoners) to remove Belarusian companies and officials from the sanctions list.

A return to repression

On 9 March, Lukashenka sent the first clear signals that his tolerant policy on public rallies would come to an end. At a government meeting dedicated to dealing with unexpected rallies in provincial towns, Lukashenka ordered his government 'to pick out provocateurs like raisins from a roll' and punish them according to 'the fullest extent of the law'.

To put an end to the increasingly popular protests, the authorities decided to decapitate them by arresting oppositional leaders. Large-scale arrests and [criminal proceedings based on farfetched charges](#) of 'terrorism' and 'provocation' aimed at instilling fear in potential participants.

Return to old tactics: violent detention, farfetched charges, arrests

Within a few days, over 300 people were detained for peacefully [protesting the 'parasite tax'](#). Even though protesters put up little resistance, many detentions were

violent. Some were carried out by people in civilian clothes who refused to identify themselves or state the charges.

A perfect illustration of the authorities' strategy was the action they took against the leaders of the centre-right coalition of [Anatol Liabiedzka](#), [Yury Hubarevich](#) and [Vital Rymasheuski](#) on 10 March. Unidentified plain-clothed people detained the activists by force when they returned from a peaceful rally in Maladziecha and threw them in an unmarked bus. Liabiedzka streamed the detention on Facebook.

On the next day, a judge sentenced the leaders to 15 days arrest – just enough for them to miss the rallies on 15 and 25 March which they co-organised.

Repression fails to disrupt dialogue with Europe

On 13-16 March, with the repression in full swing, many [high-level European officials visited Belarus](#). Most of them met with Lukashenka and paid visits to Belarus's puppet parliament.

At meetings with the press in Minsk, few Western officials spared more than a couple carefully worded expressions of concern over the ongoing wave of repression. Germany's Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth went the furthest, calling for the 'immediate release of all detained'.

Belgium's Deputy Prime Minister Didier Reynders downplayed the importance of mass detentions, insisting on 'a very clear difference between administrative arrests... and real prosecution for criminal facts'. Reynders repeated this mantra three times as if he was trying to convince himself of the veracity of his position.

Progress on gender issues upstages arbitrary detentions

Christine Muttonen, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, praised her 'colleagues' in the Belarusian parliament for the country's progress on gender issues but failed to intercede for Belarusian women jailed for peaceful protest.

The European External Action Service waited a week after the large-scale repression started before issuing their first formal statement. On 17 March, the EEAS's spokesperson called for the immediate release of detained peaceful protesters but stopped short of condemning the Belarusian authorities.

Certainly, there were a few exceptions. Joseph Daul, President of the European People's Party, spoke about brutal arrests in Belarus already on 11 March. Børge Brende, Norway's Foreign Minister, as well as the foreign ministries of Poland and France, also issued their statements of concern closer to the decisive day of 25 March.

Naivety and ignorance of the European rapporteur

Many social network users in Belarus were enraged by statements made by Andrea Rigoni, rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on Belarus, during his visit to Minsk on 24 March.

PACE rapporteur on mass detentions: 'We were told they were legitimate'

Asked by journalists whether he would mention large-scale detentions in Belarus in his report to PACE, Rigoni said, 'We do not have such information. We hope that they are not so numerous'. 'We were told that the detentions were purely

administrative and fully complied with current legislation', the rapporteur added.

Moreover, Rigoni admitted that he knew nothing about the forthcoming rally on Freedom Day in Belarus before coming to Minsk. The rapporteur's ignorance of the main events of Belarus's political calendar has demonstrated his lack of competence in Belarusian affairs.

Falling under Makei's spell

Rigoni's case, as well as the wording of statements of a few other European diplomats, have shown that some Western officials tend to trust hypocritical or outright deceitful statements of their Belarusian counterparts.

Some Western diplomats apparently bought the official story about provocations and possible violence during unauthorised rallies. Andrea Wiktorin, the Head of the EU Delegation to Belarus, emphatically stressed on 14 March that 'all parties should refrain from violence', thus indirectly confirming the authorities' tall tale about the violent intentions of the opposition.

Europe fails to contest comparison between actions of Belarusian and European police

Some EU officials chose to believe that the violence during the arrests was merely the result of excesses of over-zealous police officers. They also never contested the dubious comparison between actions of Belarusian policemen against peaceful demonstrators and the European police's response to violent outbreaks.

Belarus's foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) reassured his EU partners that the situation would resolve itself after the administrative terms expire. Probably, their hope was that

Belarusians, deprived of their usual leaders, would fail to show up for the rally on Freedom Day – thus sparing the government from using force.

Only after the detention of over 700 peaceful protesters and mere bystanders on 25 March did most Western governments and institutions harden the tone of their statements on the Belarusian government's actions. However, the Belarusian government has only continued to follow the course it adopted much earlier. Increasingly numerous arrests and sentences over the past two weeks should have warranted a stronger and earlier reaction.

While a more outspoken [Western reaction](#) from the very beginning would hardly have prevented the authorities from reverting to their tried-and-true tactics on discouraging dissent by brute force, it could still have softened the repression. Besides, it would have provided much needed support to the protesters, showing that during times of [necessary pragmatism](#), the West still remembers its values.