Kurapaty memorial in danger: business versus historical memory

On 24 February 2017, Siarhej Palčeuski chained himself to a truck to protest the construction of a business centre in the vicinity of Kurapaty – a commemoration site for the victims of the 1930s Soviet repressions. Palčeuski's great-grandfather was among the thousands of Belarusians who disappeared in 1937.

In 2014, the Belarusian authorities re-drew the boundaries of the protected area surrounding Kurapaty to accommodate several construction projects. Belarusian civil society and oppositional activists argue that the state is thinking only of profit, disregarding transparency, public discussion, and proper historical research.

When the construction of a business centre in the contested area began in February 2017, protests flared up immediately. Local residents and civil society activists confronted workers on the site, setting up a 24/7 watch to protect the memorial.

The modern history of Kurapaty

Kurapaty is the site of NKVD-led mass shootings in a forest on the outskirts of Minsk, where thousands of Belarusians perished as a result of the Stalinist purges in the 1930s. Belarusian society learned the truth only in 1988, after Zianon Pazniak and Yauhen Šmyhaliou published the article 'Kurapaty – the Road of Death.' It sparked the first anti-Soviet mass demonstration in Belarusian modern history.
Kurapaty continue to feature prominently in Belarusian national discourse – every year the traditional Dziady demonstrations head there to commemorate the victims. However, Belarus has yet to recognise the true scope of the Soviet-era crimes.

Even though the authorities of independent Belarus granted the status of memorial site to Kurapaty as early as 1993, its history remains under-researched. The current political regime is reluctant to discuss Stalinist repressions. The school curriculum does not focus on the Great Terror at all, while historians are still denied full access to relevant archives to reveal the whole truth of the Kurapaty tragedy.

Thus, the exact number of victims remains unknown. Historians estimate that anywhere between 40,000 and 250,000 were killed there. Due to the lack of proper archaeological excavations, it is equally hard to determine the boundaries of the mass shooting and burial site.

Construction vs. memory

The current construction controversy surrounding Kurapaty is not the first of this kind: 15 years ago, opposition activists held a 24/7 watch of Kurapaty in a tent camp for 8 months. From September 2001 to June 2002, they protested against the ring road project, which was to cut right through the memorial site. They erected wooden crosses to mark the site and eventually managed to divert the highway away from Kurapaty.

The site continues to suffer from vandalism, while the authorities remain indifferent, consistently trying to extract profit by selling adjacent land plots. For instance, in 2012,
Minsk city authorities approved the construction of an entertainment centre bearing an insulting name, “Bulbash-Hall” (“Bulbash” is an epithet for Belarusians), in the protected area of the memorial site.

As the controversy over the inappropriate project was intensifying, the Ministry of Culture started re-drawing the boundaries of the protected area around Kurapaty, cutting it down from 100 to 50 metres. It ignored criticism from historians and civil society and proceeded with the construction of the entertainment centre. However, even though the project was completed in 2015, it remains closed.

Kurapaty 2017: the fight continues

The current conflict in Kurapaty originates in 2013, when Minsk authorities auctioned the land plot in question. At that time, it was still located within the boundaries of the protected area of the memorial site. Any construction required consultations with the Ministry of Culture, as well as the public, but this did not take place.

The person in charge of the construction company, Ihar Aniščanka, is one of the most successful Belarusian real estate moguls. In a comment to Radio Svaboda, he claimed that his company was acting according to the laws and permits granted by city authorities.

Construction commenced on 17 February. When local residents raised the alarm after seeing the workers, leader of the Young
Zmicier Daškevič launched a campaign to protect Kurapaty from a new incursion. However, on the night of 23 February, a group of 15 masked individuals attacked the tent camp, harming one of the activists, Ales Kirkevič. Tensions resumed again on 24 February, when another group dressed in black provoked a fight with the activists.

So far, the Young Front activists enjoy support from local residents, civil society groups, the Belarusian Christian Democrats, the United Civil Party, and the movement For Freedom. A leader of Tell the Truth, Andrej Dzmitryeu, supported the campaign for Kurapaty, yet hesitated to confirm his party's active participation. Belarusian social-democrats remained aloof, claiming they were not invited.

**Confrontation or dialogue?**

The head of the Belarusian Voluntary Society for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments, Anton Astapovič, noted that business centre construction violates the law 'On the Protection of Historical and Cultural Heritage.' Astapovič has already sent complaints to the KGB and the Main Construction Expertise Agency. He questioned the legitimacy of the current project, suspecting corruption.

The Roman-Catholic archbishop Tadevuš Kandrusevič also made a statement on the current conflict over Kurapaty, commenting that the roots of the controversy lie in the lack of sufficient research and a clear delineation of the burial boundaries. He called for an open dialogue between officials, local residents, and civil society to avoid further escalation.

Independent researchers and civil society activists have been
leading the way for greater public awareness of Kurapaty. On 22 February 2017, in the midst of the newest construction conflict near the memorial, the civil society initiative Experts for the Protection of Kurapaty opened an exhibition entitled 'The Truth About Kurapaty' in Minsk. A follow-up to the first such exhibition in 2015, it showcases rare oral history testimonies and focuses on identifying victims and perpetrators.

It is up to the authorities to de-escalate the unfolding tensions surrounding Kurapaty. Incidentally, on 24 February, the major official newspaper Belarus Segodnia held a round-table discussion on the need to turn it into a national memorial, dedicated to the victims of Soviet repressions. The outcome of the current construction controversy will prove whether these debates represent serious intentions or yet more empty promises.