

# Public Protests in Belarus: The Opposition is Changing Tactics

While in Ukraine large scale political demonstrations are just a regular instrument used to influence the authorities, democratic activists in Belarus are prosecuted for nearly any kind of public political action. Trying to adapt to the current conditions, the opposition is changing its protest tactics.

Evidence of these new tactics has been described in a new analytical paper "[Protest activity in Belarus in 2013: manifestations, political performance and social conflicts.](#)" The Institute of Political Science "Political Sphere" published this report at the end of February. The report shows that individual picketing and flash mobs have become the most common forms of political protest in Belarus.

Political protests have been seriously affected by open repression of democratic activists, a process which has steadily intensified after the political activism of 2010-2011. Most political protests end with arrests and fines, regardless if they are officially sanctioned or not.

Meanwhile, the participants in social protests rarely face any reprisals. Moreover, entrepreneur strikes, as well as housing and labour conflicts very often conclude with positive outcomes for the protesters.

## **Minimising repression**

Out of 64 political protests that have occurred, only 24 have successfully been carried out without the Belarusian authorities going after protesters.

To penalise activists, the police typically employ arrests and fines as their primary means of dealing with protesters, though they have also been known to turn to violence and beating activists to disperse them.

The police have not shied away from using repressive measures at sanctioned demonstrations such as Chernobyl Way or Freedom Day – the anniversary of Belarusian National Republic establishment.

political organisations have switched to organising political performances and individual pickets

To minimise the likelihood of repressive measures being used against them, political organisations have abandoned traditional forms of protest and more often than not organise political performances and individual pickets. These tactics help them to achieve the primary goal of having a protest – to attract the attention of media and the wider world. At the same time, it is a rather pragmatic approach, as it results in fewer activists facing the risk of being arrested.

The Belarusian Christian Democrats and Belarusian National Front parties have been the most active in organising protests. It should not, then, be surprising that most of political protests in the country have been tied to historical issues – the proclamation of Belarusian independence, Stalinist repression, the anniversary of the Chernobyl tragedy etc. While these issues remain prominent, another reason for protest has also been popular – solidarity rallies with political prisoners.

Most protests in Belarus have taken place in the capital, Minsk. The Institute of Political Science “Political Sphere” report, through monitoring political protests, has revealed a very small number of political protests in other large Belarusian cities. In Hrodna – a sizeable city

near the border of Poland, protests have not occurred at all in recent years.

## **Social protests**

The report documented 39 instances of social protests. Mainly these protests come as reaction to housing policy conflicts, or labour and entrepreneur-led strikes. Assemblies, walkouts, hunger strikes, and the collection of signatures were reported to be the most widespread forms of social protest utilised.

Unlike political activists, participants in social protests very seldom faced any kind of repression. In their report, the Institute of Political Science "Political Sphere" took note of only a few episodes where protesters were suppressed. Moreover, more than half of social protests that were carried out can be viewed as successful insofar as they achieved some or, occasionally, all of their goals.

Protestors have often been successful in getting their demands met: from enterprises have been able to eliminate wage arrears to entrepreneurs have managed to achieve postponing of the introduction of new trade regulations that would effect their operating costs.

Unlike political actions, social protests have not exclusively taken place in Minsk, but in different regions throughout the country. Minsk has led social protests in one area, however. It leads the nation in the number of housing issues that citizens have had with the authorities. All other forms of conflict that have led to protests have unfolded mostly outside of the capital.

Protesters often prefer not to attract journalists or media to their demonstrations, since they feel it can only end up being a source of interference and not allow them to achieve their goals.

In contrast to typical labourers, small business owners

willingly communicate with the media and are interested in articulating their interests publicly. At this point in time small entrepreneurs represent the most highly organised group in Belarus that is able to carry out a strike and protect their own interests.

### **Protest lull?**

Just two protest demonstrations with over 500 participants took place in 2013 in Belarus. This figure is significantly lower than in Ukraine where in 2012 a documented 131 demonstrations occurred with 1,000 or more participants attending each.

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The largest political protests in Belarus occur during presidential elections. Even taking into account the fact that there were no elections in 2013, a total of only two large scale demonstrations is a significantly small number. Between the 2006 and 2010 election campaigns, 6 to 8 large scale demonstrations were taking place every year.

Political repression, it would appear, is the culprit in the diminishing level of political protests in Belarus. Clearly, in the intervening years the level of repression used against democratic activists grown and its nature has become more intense.

After the demonstrations that occurred between 2010 and 2011 the authorities took a hard line against demonstrations and any form of protest. For that reason small pickets have become a substitute for large demonstratoins. This phenomenon has led Tatiana Chyzhova to call 2013 the year of individual protests.

In most cases individual protesters hold membership in a

political party or an NGO, and frequently their protests are planned in advance. Using the tactics of individual picketing, the protest actions of political organisations will maintain their current strategy in the lead up to the presidential election campaign of 2015, when it should be expected that an increase in protest activity will occur.

The growth of grassroots initiatives against construction projects in Minsk was also a notable trend in 2013. Most likely the number of protests related to housing will not see a noticeable decrease in 2014. Housing and retail space construction in Minsk continues to be carrying on at an intense pace.

Labour strikes have seen an increase following the country's steady economic deterioration, beginning back in 2011. Due to Belarus' poor economy, it is quite likely that the number of conflicts related to labour disputes will keep growing.

A contentious issue, however, is buzzing in the air: will the revolution in Ukraine influence potential protests in Belarus? Confidently, it can be predicted that the reaction of the Belarusian authorities to any protests will be unforgiving.

Tatiana Czyzhova admits that it is very likely that over the next few years the level of repression against participants in political protests will intensify. According to her, any kind of political protests on the streets of Belarusian cities may soon become completely prohibited.