

One Hundred Years of Belarus Independence Proclamation: Uniting the Nation or Dividing the Opposition?

On 1 March 2018, Minsk municipal authorities granted a permission to install a memorial plaque on the historical building, where on 25 March 1918 Belarusian independence was proclaimed. On the following day, Belarusians crowdfunded the project, promptly collecting € 2500 in just 3 hours.

Out of those states that gained their independence after the fall of the Russian Empire, Belarus remains the only one that does not officially celebrate this date. In the modern Belarusian history, the Belarusian Democratic Republic (Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika or BNR) anniversaries antagonised society – while the opposition made a specific point on public celebrations, the authorities usually marked 25 March with violent crackdowns.

This year, as the centennial of the Belarusian statehood approaches, authorities and opposition seem to agree on the importance of the date, in a stark contrast to the previous years.

What happened on 25 March 1918?



The BNR government in 1918. Source: bnr100.by

As Germany and Soviet Russia signed the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty without Belarusian participation, Belarusian national elites finally realised the need to take responsibility for their homeland. After the proclamation of the Belarusian Democratic Republic on 9 March 1918, the [declaration of independence followed](#) on 25 March 1918.

In reality, the BNR lacked many formal attributes of a state and heavily depended on German toleration. Yet, more importantly, it [created an important historical precedent](#). Ten months later, the Bolsheviks appropriated the idea of Belarusian state and (mis)used it for their own political ends, but the BNR established a continuous statehood tradition. It survived throughout the 20th century, serving as a basis for the creation of the independent Belarusian state in 1991.

The BNR did not disappear with the arrival of the Bolsheviks and continued to exist within the Belarusian diaspora abroad. Its government – the BNR Rada – derives its legitimacy from

the democratically elected All-Belarusian Congress and is famous for being the oldest government in exile. The BNR Rada considers the current political regime in Belarus undemocratic and refuses to hand over its mandate.

Freedom Day in Lukashenka's Belarus

Celebrations of 25 March, also known as Freedom Day, resumed in 1989, yet it did not become a public holiday. Instead, the authorities opted for 3 July as the official independence day, marking the date of the liberation of Minsk from the Nazis in 1944. This date does not bear connections to the re-establishment of the statehood or its independence whatsoever.

Under the current political regime, 25 March usually antagonises official authorities, ending in violent clashes and arrests. The Freedom Day represents the very opposite of the regime's Soviet-based sentiments. In 1996, it coincided with a political crisis, threatening the annexation of Belarus by Russia and bringing 30.000 people to the streets. In 2000, authorities used military equipment and riot police units against the peaceful demonstration.



Freedom Day 2017 in Minsk. Source: svaboda.org

In 2017, the [same trend was still in place](#): the authorities brutally detained over 700 persons out of a few thousand, who dared to gather in the centre of Minsk for the demonstration. Mass [protests over the infamous 'social parasites' decree](#) last spring fuelled the authorities' repressive reaction.

However, with the exception when Freedom Day celebrations were reinforced with similar political or social crises, the usual scenarios stabilised at two-three thousand participants. Often without a clear plan of action, opposition kept struggling to revive the Freedom Day, while the authorities effectively prevented it from becoming a unifying date.

The BNR centennial and the

regime: the limits of passive toleration

By contrast, this year might offer something fresh, as the Minsk municipal authorities permitted a rally and a concert on 25 March in a downtown location, near the Opera Theatre. Moreover, they also promised that the [unregistered national white-red-white flags and 'Pahonia' coat of arms](#) could be used without restrictions.

Few other concessions include several BNR-themed exhibitions at major Minsk museums and marking BNR-related spots in the urban space. On 13 March, a memorial plaque was unveiled in Janka Kupala Park, memorialising the brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič, the leading ideologists of the Belarusian national movement. Another plaque should appear on the building at Valadarskaha Str. 9, where the BNR proclaimed its independence.

In regard to the [soft Belarusisation](#) trends, the centennial of the BNR might present the regime with an opportunity to abandon the dominant [Soviet version of Belarusian history](#). Yet, according to the political analyst [Aliaksandr Klaskouski](#), Belarusian authorities face two major obstacles – giving up their Soviet-defined identities and a fear that public celebrations might turn unpredictable.

In this context, Belarusian authorities want to appear benevolent on the issue of the BNR centennial, yet distanced themselves from celebrations on the official level.

Divide and rule: the

opposition and its dilemmas

Civil society and opposition took over the planning of the BNR anniversary, launching a crowdfunding initiative to fund the concert and coordinating volunteers for the information campaign. However, the authorised concert and small concessions from the regime immediately revealed that there is no common ground within their ranks as to the format of the Freedom Day.

The organisational committee split between those who prefer festive celebrations to the more traditional political protest. United Civic Party, movement *For Freedom* and Belarusian Popular Front along with civil society activists, including [Pavel Bielavus](#) and blogger [Eduard Palčys](#), opted for the concert. They argue that the BNR centennial should become an occasion for a national holiday with the appropriate festivities.



Mikalaj Statkevič. Source: svaboda.org

Their adversaries, [Mikalaj Statkievič](#), Viačaslau Siučyk,

and [Uladzimir Niakliaeu](#) support a traditional demonstration through the streets of Minsk. Statkevič pointed out that festivities might discredit the authority of the opposition, achieved during the social protests last year.

“We face a number of social and political issues [...] People always come out to these events with their problems and needs. A demonstration gives them an opportunity to express these, while the guarded concert does not,” commented the uncompromising Statkevič.

Thus, the roads of the opposition activists might part on 25 March 2018, allowing the regime to keep the face with the concert and prosecuting the participants of the unauthorised march.

The opposition’s lack of unity reminds of the similar divisions that tormented national elites in 1918, when they debated independence of the BNR in the early hours of 25 March one hundred years ago.

The centennial of the BNR coincides with a period when Belarusian regime shows interest in a stronger national identity. It also does not mind to compromise with the opposition, albeit on specific terms. A sizable part of the opposition, in turn, appears eager to use the warmer attitude of the authorities.

Holocaust Discourse Raises Controversy in Belarus

During her speech on 12 June 2016 in New York, Belarusian Nobel laureate in literature Sviatlana Alexievich criticised

Poles for actively murdering Jews during World War II.

The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately reacted with a protest note demanding explanation and an apology from Alexievich. Sviatlana Alexievich had to elaborate on her position in an interview with a Polish journalist later. In the meantime Belarusian bloggers and journalists condemned her words.

On 8 July 2016 vandals poured paint on the "The Pit", a memorial sculptural complex devoted to the liquidated inhabitants of the Minsk ghetto. This issue was not widely reported by the Belarusian media and was ignored by the state as well.

This was the first time people desecrated the Holocaust memorial in central Minsk in years. However, it reflects the problematic nature of memory politics in Belarus. It also shows that the Belarusian public remains unprepared to fully reflect on the Holocaust and would rather speak out when the discussion focuses on neighbouring countries.

Memory of the Holocaust in independent Belarus

Traditionally marginalised and suppressed in the Soviet Union, Holocaust discourse had a chance to emerge in independent Belarus.

However, in the early 1990s Belarusians seemed too preoccupied with their own identity, economic problems, and nation and state building to begin discussing the Holocaust. Belarusian historians were busy trying to research and fill the numerous blank pages in Belarusian national history. Politicians were involved in political and economic problems accompanying Belarus's transition to an independent state.

History textbooks for schools and universities provided little information about the Holocaust, and scholars had other. The authorities did not speak much about that episode of Belarusian history despite the revival of the Great Patriotic War cult in the official ideology following the election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

The politics of memory under Lukashenka

Lukashenka made the Great Patriotic War one of the [key elements of the state ideology](#). Two of the main official holidays in Belarus commemorate the Great Patriotic War – Victory Day and Independence Day. The [Independence Day celebrations changed](#) from the day Belarus became independent from the USSR (27th of July) to the day Minsk was liberated (3rd of July) as a result of a referendum in 1996.

A subject called “The History of the Great Patriotic War” entered syllabuses at all universities in 2005 following Lukashenka’s order. The same year, the authorities opened “Stalin's Line,” a historical-cultural complex “to become a symbol of a heroic struggle of the Soviet people against German-fascist invaders,” as the complex’s web-site states.

The Holocaust was practically excluded from the new politics of memory in Belarus. The massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews on Belarusian territory by Nazis and their collaborators – often local – is muted during official speeches by the president on Victory and Independents Days.



This topic has still not entered mainstream public discourse, although some positive steps have been taken, including the erection of bronze statues at "The Pit" memorial in 2000. "The Pit" was initially founded in 1967 and was first visited by Lukashenka in 2008.

The erection of 45 new Holocaust memorials between 2005 and 2010 and the participation of Belarusian officials in the 65th and 70th anniversaries of the liquidation of the Minsk ghetto also mark an improvement in Holocaust memory politics in Belarus.

However, during his presidency Lukashenka afforded himself being derogatory when speaking about Jews. One of the latest incidents was in April 2016 when the Belarusian president publicly asked the then Head of Hrodna region [Siamion Shapira](#) "to take all Jews under [Shapira's] control". This request stemmed from the fact that tut.by, an independent news portal owned by the Jewish [Yury Ziser](#), published articles criticising a new law "on social parasites."

Lukashenka later explained that the year before Shapira had been asked to take control over Jews in Belarus, but Ziser's independent behaviour was not acceptable to the Belarusian president. Later Shapira said that this situation was not insulting to him although many other Belarusian Jews and Belarusians expressed their dissatisfaction with Lukashenka's words.

The prospects of Holocaust

discourse

Overall, the problem of silence surrounding the Holocaust in memory politics remains relevant in Belarus both on official and unofficial levels. Both the Belarusian state and the Belarusian public are very much distanced from that part of their history due to current historical discourse. Anti-Jewish clichés occasionally are articulated even on the official level since Soviet Union times.

Belarusians seem to be unready and unwilling to uncover the dark sides of their past. The fact that the Jewish population in Belarus decreases with each census means that it is unlikely that local Jews will force Belarusians to answer uncomfortable questions about the Holocaust.

At present, writer and Nobel Prize winner Sviatlana Alexievich is one of very few Belarusians willing to publicly discuss the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. Her intellectual status and popularity might finally attract some public attention to historical memory problems in Belarus.

However, Belarusians appear to be more eager to discuss Alexievich's words regarding Polish attitudes towards Jews during World War II in her New York speech than to pay attention to her interview with The Voice of America four days later.

The writer named the liquidation of the Jews in Belarus during the WWII as one of the reasons for the lack of elites in Belarus today. In her opinion this is also to blame for the longevity of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's rule.

Veranika Laputka

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.

Lukashenka typically avoids speaking Belarusian

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.

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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.

Celebrating Lukashenka's 20th Anniversary in Power, Liberation from Nazis – Belarus State TV Digest

Last week on Belarus state TV was a week of historical anniversaries.

The 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus, Belarusian Independence Day and, finally, the 20th anniversary of election of Alexander Lukashenka all were presented to demonstrate the success of Belarus' current leadership.

Commenting upon the situation in Ukraine, journalists often made reference to the situation using terms like “slavic unity”, “refugees from Ukraine”, but also readily noted Kiev's reluctance to paying off arrears to Gazprom.

Domestic Affairs

[20 years ago, on 10 July Lukashenka became the President of Belarus](#). Casting their votes for Lukashenka, “Belarusians voted for sovereign politics and independence”, one state TV journalist narrates. According to the report, people voted then for “real independence” not the one just on paper.

The reporter covering the story also commented upon the political rivals back in 1994: [Viačaslau Kiebič](#), the one “from nomenclature”, [Zianon Pazniak](#), a “nationalist” from the Belarusian Popular Front, and finally, Alexander Lukashenka, a “deputy from the people, without a party affiliation”. “Today they call him a “pro-Belarusian candidate”, then he was just “ours”.

[The mysterious victory of Lukashenka](#). The coverage states that

Lukashenka's victory remained an interesting phenomenon up until the present day. He explained further that the 1990s was a time of "romantics and euphoria", a period that lasted only until the first serious economic difficulties arose.

These times lasted up until 1994 and had their own colourful charm, with the reporter reminiscing about "coupons for pasta and vodka, delays in paying salaries, a soap opera of endless disagreements in the Parliament". Lukashenka offered solutions to these problems and won the support of Belarusians.

The coverage also commented upon the opposition from the 1990s and positively evaluated the shift towards a "monolith in politics" as it gave Belarus a chance for its economy to develop.

Closing, the reporter concluded that today Belarus remains a place where bilinuguism and inter-confessional peace are a norm.

Symbolic opening of a war museum with Putin. Just a day before Belarus' Independence Day, both Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin opened the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk.

During the opening ceremony, the Belarusian leader spoke about the importance of the unity of the Soviet republics that fought together against the Nazis. According to Lukashenka, instead of the West showing their gratitude for their Soviet ally's sacrifices, "we see a dictate of sanctions".

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, praised the bright future of Belarus-Russia co-operation within the Eurasian Union.

Kupalle: uniting the Slavic people. Belarusians again gathered in the village Aleksandryja in the Shklov district (Lukashenka's home region) to celebrate the midsummer festival, Kupalle. Lukashenka also attended the event and in

his speech explained what coming back there meant to him personally. He also argued that the situation in “brotherly Ukraine” should be resolved as soon as possible.

In their coverage, state TV narrates that festivals such as Kupalle in Aleksandryja and Slavianski Bazaar in Viciebsk had played an important role in history – they reunited the Slavic world. This is particularly important, according to the report, after the events in Ukraine.

According to an old legend, the main goal of the Kupalle festivities was to find a fern flower and, should one be successful, it would bring them happiness and prosperity. “We would like to believe that it will bring peace and prosperity to all Slavic nations”, the reporter concludes.

Less help from the state for Belarusian enterprises' modernisation. At a special meeting, headed by the prime-minister [Michail Miasnikovič](#), officials discussed new approaches for pushing for modernisation. The country is in need of a fairly comprehensive “complex modernisation, and the management must be responsible for their companies' efficiency”.

“At present, every company should increase its efficiency on its own”, the reporter clarified. “It is time that the state alone stops financing modernisation, but should just focus on supporting the most highly prioritised enterprises”, he concluded.

A new task for the Belarusian army – increase its mobility. Lukashenka visited the 103rd Independent Guard Mobile Brigade of the special operations forces of the Belarusian army. The coverage notes that the Belarusian leader personally evaluated the battle readiness of the brigade.

During his visit, Lukashenka argued that Belarus would need to acquire more equipment for mobilisation “in case we would have to wage a war on our own”. He also visited a local canteen

which can feed up to 240 soldiers. The reporter covering the event was keen to point out that all of its equipment was made in Belarus and all of the food came from local producers. The head of state ordered a meal in the military canteen.

Ukraine

[The Association Agreement is signed, but is all of the EU ready to support Ukraine?](#) “Although the EU summit was called historical, it was no bombshell”, states a state TV journalist analysing the event. Following up on this thought, the reporter asks rhetorically whether all of the EU was really ready to support Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

The coverage described the ceremony for signing the Association Agreement as pompous and full of optimism. The EU leadership pointed out throughout the event how historical it was. This co-operation with Brussels will, however, cost Kiev \$8bn, which the country will lose due to Russian taxation on goods exported from Ukraine. “Experts explain that Russia will have to protect its market from re-exported European goods”, the journalist explains.

In the same report the journalist also discussed Kiev’s arrears in payments to Gazprom, the controversies surrounding the South Stream and the issue of refugees from Ukraine. She cited Vladimir Chizhov, the Russian Ambassador to the EU, who stated that “the project does not satisfy those in the West who want to take control of the gas transportation system in Ukraine”. “But thinking Europeans understand that the South Stream will serve in the interests of energy security of the EU”, reporter emphasises.

[Refugees from Ukraine are invading the EU countries?](#) In another report, state TV reports that according to the European agency in charge of refugees, ten times more Ukrainian immigrants have come to the EU after “the coup d’etat in Kyiv”. Štefan Füle, the European Commissioner for

Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, confirmed the arrival of a number of refugees from the east of Ukraine.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.