

Belarus: No Appetite for Revolution?

The political year for Belarusian opposition will begin with a traditional rally on the so called Freedom Day 25 March. This day, which celebrates proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918, in the past was bringing to the streets of Minsk thousands of people opposing the government of Alexander Lukashenka. This year, no massive attendance is expected.

Even the [November presidential elections](#) – unlike in 2006 or 2010 – will probably not cause serious post-election protests. Developments in neighbouring Ukraine seriously changed the calculus of political change in the Eastern European country. The Ukrainian crisis forced the government, opposition, Russia and the West to look differently at the power struggle in Belarus.

Maidan Cancelled

Addressing high-ranking police officers on 5 March, the Belarusian President said there would be no 'Maidan' protests (i.e. Colour Revolutions) in Belarus.

Two days later, the Belarusian People's Front, one of the nation's opposition parties, proposed to abandon its plans to hold 'Maidan' protests following the November 2015 presidential election.

Inspired by the success of the Colour Revolutions elsewhere, the Belarusian opposition has on multiple occasions tried to oust Lukashenka through post-election protests. They have failed, however, as the main prerequisite for it is a fragile and dysfunctional state.

This year, a successful anti-regime protest movement is even

less likely. Unlike in the past, no serious international players will risk a "revolutionary" scenario. Still, provocative actions by a few remain a distinct possibility. Were clashes to occur following the announcement of the election results, the situation in the country would only take a turn for the worse.

Why the West Supported Regime Change in Belarus in the 2000s

Lincoln Mitchell, who for many years worked for the National Democratic Institute in post-Soviet nations, has recently published a critical book on Colour Revolutions. He argued that "by the spring of 2006 Belarus was one of the few countries in the world, certainly the only one in the former Soviet Union," where Washington sought regime change.

Geopolitical calculations explain why Belarus gained reputation of the last dictatorship in Europe

Even though post-Soviet regimes such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, or Uzbekistan had greater problems with human rights and democracy, it is Belarus that was branded Europe's last dictatorship by the United States.

Geopolitical calculations explain why Belarus gained such a reputation. At the time, US interests were focused on the Middle East. Minsk aroused Washington's concern due to its active engagement with radical Middle Eastern governments, including its cooperation with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Mitchell writes, "[I]n the 'us versus them' framework of the early Bush years, Belarus had become part of 'them' and, by doing so, a target of the US."

Because Belarus possessed little strategic value to the United States, it was often dismissed as a murky Eastern European state under Russian control. The only purpose Belarus served was to showcase Western commitment to human rights, democratic freedoms, and nuclear non-proliferation.

The West's Change of Heart in 2015

As of 2015, the geopolitical situation has changed. As the Belarusian president is happy to boast, and the opposition readily complains, the West has viewed Belarus in a different light following the onset of the conflict in Ukraine.

Western governments are now telling Belarusians that independence should come before democracy

According to Yanukevich of the BNF party, Western governments are now telling Belarusians that independence should come before democracy. With the emergence of a new power constellation in Eastern Europe, the West has formulated a new strategic task for Belarus – to avoid a Russian takeover.

At the same time, Belarusian cooperation with the Middle East has become less of a problem for Washington both due to the changes in the Middle East, such as the multilateral negotiations with Iran, and thanks to the more cautious approach taken by Belarus with regards to its foreign policy.

In particular, in the early 2010s Minsk minimised its contact with Iran and Syria as these countries faced increased international isolation. Only after the international standing of Iran and Syria had improved and their talks with Russia and the West had resumed did Belarus reactivate its contacts with these states.

The recent United States' decision to lift sanctions on the Belarusian national oil company Belarusnafta is just the latest proof that Minsk has managed to sort out its Middle Eastern affairs.

Belarusians Will Take No Chances

When explaining his appeal to not flood Minsk's central square in November 2015, chairman of the People's Front Alyaksei Yanukevich said that few people would participate. According

to him, Belarusians fear a repeat of the Ukrainian scenario in Belarus. Yet the problem lies not only, if at all, in concerns about what happened in Ukraine.

All these years, the Belarusian opposition has misapplied the lessons of protests in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan

All these years, the Belarusian opposition has misapplied the lessons of protests in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan in Belarus. Belarusian circumstances were, and are, very different than the circumstances in the countries where the colour revolutions had "won". When the government effectively controls society and provides people with many essential services, post-election protests are unlikely to produce a change at the upper echelons of the state.

Mitchell lists four main premises for that have lead to these colour revolutions. First, an opportunity to effectively participate in an election and making a plausible claim about the opposition's victory. Second, the media should be able to anticipate election fraud, to inform the people when such fraud is inevitable as well as cover the ensuing protests.

Third, the population should not be intimidated by the state. Fourth, in cases where colour revolutions are successful, foreign and international donors and democratisation-oriented NGOs have "a degree of political access and involvement in the countries where they work[ed] that would never be tolerated in their own countries." None of these conditions apply in Belarus.

Sitting on a Barrel of Gunpowder?

To sum up, a successful colour revolution is impossible in Belarus. There is some probability that protests will occur, however, and this is not necessarily good news. As the Belarusian left-wing Prasnvet web-site has recently commented, all the recent talk about election fraud has led to the

opposition losing interest in working with the public. It lamented, "The mobilisation [of radical forces] still supercedes agitation, and popular support for opposition remains what it was five years ago."

The events in Ukraine has led many Belarusian activists to believe in the efficacy of radical rhetoric and methods, regardless of the mood of ordinary citizens. At the same time, the developments in Ukraine have influenced Belarusian law enforcement bodies and the state security apparatus. They may now be more willing than ever before to resort to extreme measures in order to defend the government. Russia may also be prepared to respond more radically to any new post-election protest in the former Soviet nations.

Were a radical provocation by a minority group to lead to a bloody clash in the wake of the 2015 presidential election, Belarusians would only suffer to lose from it. The political regime in the country would become more brutal, its politics more radical, and Belarus's relations with the West would deteriorate once more. Yet, the appearance of radical nationalist initiatives such as 1863x.com suggests that such a scenario may not be as far-fetched as it might appear.

White-Red-White Flag: The True Belarusian Symbol or a Sign of the Opposition?

Earlier this month the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) officially banned the White-Red-White flag and the heraldic symbol Pahonia from the 2013 Ice Hockey World Championship held in Sweden and Finland. Tony Wirehn,

Secretary General of 2013 Ice Hockey World Championship, commented that the IIHF cannot allow supporters to use any political symbols and signs in areas where matches are played.

Until Lukashenka came to power the White-Red-White flag served as the official symbol of Belarus. Now the Belarusian diaspora and nearly all opposition parties in Belarus consider it as the only true flag of Belarus. In Belarus it is largely banned by the authorities and Belarusian sport officials put pressure on the organisers of international sport events to eliminate the former state symbols from the stands, to prevent spectators from seeing “opposition” symbols on TV.

Rada (Council) of Belarusian Peoples Republic, the most influential political organisation of the Belarusian diaspora, condemned the decision of the IIHF. Many figures in Belarusian Civil Society along with Swedish human rights activists and even the former Swedish ambassador in Belarus, Stefan Eriksson, have spoken out against the prohibition. They argued that Belarusians should be given a chance to use what they consider as national symbols.

A petition against the ban quickly collected [over 3000 signatures](#). The petition argues that the IIHF “use political motives to prevent Belarusian supporters from using national symbols at the games of the championship. Ironically, the IIHF was also using the rationale of avoiding mixing politics and sports to ban the symbols.

Lukashenka vs the Flag

The White-Red-White flag and Pahonia have [a long history](#). When Belarus became a separate state in 1918-1919 these were the official symbols of the Belarusian Peoples Republic until replaced by a Communist government. The Belarusian minority in Poland actively used these symbols during the inter-war period. During World War II they were also used by Belarusian

organisations that collaborated with the Nazis who saw it as a chance to revive the Belarusian culture.

In 1991, when the country declared independence the flag and shield again became official symbols of Belarus. The draft law "On the State Flag of the Republic of Belarus" prepared by the Belarusian People's Front faction in the Supreme Council of Belarus, the main national political force in the country at the end of 1980s and in the beginning of 1990s.

In 1995, to consolidate his power Lukashenka initiated a referendum. One of the objectives of the referendum was to change the state symbols which were associated with the national movement against the USSR at the end of the 1980s. Lukashenka promised to revive the Soviet Union and by changing the national symbols to those associated with Soviet Belarus, he gained a symbolic victory over the Belarusian Popular Front.

Lukashenka's main argument to change the White-Red-White flag and the Pahonia symbol was that during [the World War II](#) Belarusian organisations that collaborated with the Nazis had used them. Propaganda movies which followed this initiative compared the Belarusian Popular Front, the main pro-democracy opposition party, to fascists. According to Lukashenka's logic those who use White-Red-White flag are ideological followers of Nazi collaborators. The referendum took place with gross violations of democratic standards and in the atmosphere of massive state propaganda. Nonetheless, the symbols were changed.

The Symbol of Freedom

Today most of the organisations of the Belarusian diaspora and Belarusian opposition refuse to use the official Red-Green flag and represent their country with White-Red-White flag. In late of 1990s and 2000s as Lukashenka's political regime consolidated its power, the White-Red-White flag became more

than a banned national symbol but also a sign of struggle against authoritarianism.

The current Red-Green official flag refers to the Soviet past of Belarus and corresponds to official historiography and state ideology praising the Soviet period. While the White-Red-White flag symbolises a brief democratic period of 1990s as well as an anti-Soviet tradition of Belarusian national revival it clearly confronts the official interpretation of the Belarusian history.

Not surprising that Belarusian authorities do not tolerate the former state symbols. It is strictly prohibited to fly the White-Red-White flag at sports events in Belarus and scores of democratic activists have been imprisoned for displaying the flag in public.

An illustration of this is the case of Siarhei Kavalenka. In January 2010, he placed a White-Red-White flag on the top of the Christmas tree in the centre of Vitebsk for which a criminal court sentenced him to a three year suspended sentence. In 2011, police arrested Kavalenka again, this time on the basis of violating the conditions of the suspended sentence, he was sentenced to 25 months in prison.

Using White-Red-White flag at Sports Events Abroad

Belarusian sports officials often try to put pressure on the organisers of international sport events to remove White-Red-White flags from the stands. The recent ban at the Ice Hockey World Championship is not an isolated case.

In 2011, the former Belarusian official flag was banned from FIBA EuroBasket Women's matches in Poland. Security searched for and removed fans with White-Red-White flags from the stands during the match Belarus played against Lithuania.

In October 2010 at the match of UEFA Europa League FC Dynamo Minsk played against Club Brugge K.V. in Belgium several fans supported Belarusian team with White-Red-White flag. An unknown man, introducing himself as a person “in charge of the Belarusian fans”, was trying aggressively to take away the flag from Belarusian supporters.

A similar story took place in Moldova at a match where FC BATE Barysau played against FC Sheriff Tiraspol – fans with White-Red-White flags and Red-Green flags started a fight with each other during the game. This resulted in the arrest of 15 people.

Many sports fans persist in supporting Belarusian athletes in international competitions using the White-Red-White flag, which in most cases the organisers tolerate. This irritates the Belarusian government: to them, this symbolizes not the country where they come from but the political opposition which they cannot tolerate.

Many Belarusians will continue taking the risk of using what they regard as their true national symbols. They cherish a rare sense of freedom and self-expression unavailable at sports events back home.

Changes in Belarus: The Task for the Opposition, not Foreign Powers

The recent release of two opposition activists is an important event but hardly a turning point for the political situation in Belarus. More than a dozen political prisoners remain

incarcerated. Even if Alexandr Lukashenka frees all political prisoners and welcomes EU ministers in Minsk, it will not be a turning point, either.

First, Lukashenka can very soon change his mind, take new prisoners and start the liberalisation game anew. Second, the release of opposition activists taken hostage by the regime may have humanitarian or personal significance but no political impact – as long as they do not undertake real work with people inside Belarus. The fundamental problem is that only three actors play this liberalisation game – the Belarusian regime, Russia and the EU. The Belarusian opposition's role is that of a ball with which they are playing.

Belarusian Opposition: Mission Possible

The reasons for the latest friendly gestures towards West by top officials are the same as before. Worsening of Belarusian relations with EU has narrowed options of Belarusian ruler to a pitiful role of Moscow's vassal. After Putin became the Russian president, he declared his intent to intensify building of Eurasian Union which can be dangerous for Lukashenka's power and survival.

No wonder, the Belarusian leader looked westwards again to return to his older model of multi-vector foreign policy. He is gradually accepting some demands of the EU as in 2008, when he also released political prisoners and began dialogue with the EU. The pressure on the opposition diminished – yet it did not result in strengthening opposition inside the country. Then came the 2010 elections, confrontation and suppression of the opposition within Belarus. The same happened in 2004 and 2006.

The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington

The vicious cycle will repeat again as the interests of stakeholders and power balance on the part of the EU, Russia and Belarusian regime remain the same. The situation can change only when the opposition inside Belarus emerge as an organised and self-conscious force. The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington.

True, Lukashenka's regime blocks many movement of his opponents but there are absolutely no grounds to compare it to Stalin or even Third World dictatorships. Working with the population in Belarus is possible.

Currently, many in the opposition are preoccupied with retaining their financial support without being able to produce any proof of their own efficiency and popularity inside the country.

Is Anyone Alive?

The year 2011 demonstrated that the opposition could not organise any serious political campaigns despite widespread anger at government policy displayed by Belarusians because of economic and social problems. The silent protest actions remained spontaneous mob actions without content, and "People's Assemblies" simply failed to attract any considerable numbers of people.

Apparently little has changed in this regard in recent months. The websites of oppositional parties – their main representation platforms given the current situation with media – demonstrate just that. The websites of three major oppositional parties – Belarusian People's Front Party, United Civic Party and Social Democratic Party – resemble internet news sites rather than outlets of political organisations.

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Parties usually reprint various news already available elsewhere on Internet and may occasionally publish their own analytical pieces or statements. Yet they give little indication of actual activities inside Belarus and work with people.

Of course, topics such as prospects of the Eastern Partnership, the role of the Belarusian People's Republic' government in exile and the Belarusian origins of Scarlett Johansson are very interesting. But they have little to do with the situation in Belarus or the parties' own activities.

The situation looks better with political movements. Both "Tell the Truth" of Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu and "For Freedom" of Alaksandr Milinkevich look more dynamic. Their sites demonstrate concrete examples of working with the Belarusians inside the country. "For Freedom" is organising public lectures and "Tell the Truth" is conducting a campaign on the newly proposed Chinese Industrial Park which seriously worries local residents. But their own reported activities still resemble the old parties.

What this means is that the problem of little work with the people have plagued all major oppositional political structures.

Belarusian "Cargo Cult"

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Anthropological insights help to understand activities of Belarusian opposition and society. Some South Pacific islanders, after seeing Western vessels with valuable items arriving to their lands, developed the so called "cargo cult". That was a form of religious belief that salvation shall come from foreign land on a ship or aircraft. That is a pattern to describe activities of Belarusian opposition in recent times.

Activity of most oppositional politicians concentrate on foreign governments and stakeholders. It is assumed that the opposition anyway cannot do anything within the country. That means that they need not undertake any efforts to improve their performance inside Belarus. Instead, the oppositional politicians put pressure on Lukashenka from abroad using the EU. But such behaviour is more likely to produce their further marginalisation inside the country rather than any real, albeit small, change.

The futility of such an approach is evident. The deputy head of the campaign "Tell the Truth" Andrei Dmitryeu speaking to Radio Liberty admitted, "The Belarusian opposition should stop looking for happiness in other capitals. It has to look for happiness here. [...] While Belarusian society is not willing to follow the Belarusian opposition, it does not matter what is happening around Belarus."

Need to Develop An Alternative

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed projects – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones

Tendencies to focus primarily on foreign advocacy lowered efficiency of opposition and their chances to achieve changes within the country. The gap between the opposition and reality in Belarus may end badly for all. Just one example.

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed new initiatives – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones. Mass media in Belarus should become much more vigorous, provide society with independent information about what is going on in the country, and serve as a discussion platform.

For instance, the only Belarusian-language TV channel Belsat is broadcasting original content under extreme pressure put by

Belarusian authorities on its journalists in the country. It has much better chances to help changing the situation in Belarus than dozens of websites. Nevertheless, Belsat is chronically underfunded even now.

And there is no such thing as too much funding for media, education, cultural and academic exchange projects. Of course, such a policy is more expensive than sanctions. Sanctions are an easy solution particularly when they are imposed against a relatively small country. They can nicely demonstrate how the EU can punish a dictator. But breaking the vicious circle requires not just sanctions but real work inside the country.

The opposition will have a hard time getting more money for this kind of projects. Finding money inside Belarus is virtually impossible. For foreign donors supporting real projects directed at Belarusian people could be more expensive and risky than supporting various exile opposition groups or yet another website.

But it is important to understand that only working with Belarusians rather than Brussels insiders can seriously increase respect for the Belarusian opposition. It should appear as a responsible and trustworthy political actor inside the country. Once the public opinion starts to change in the right direction, the question of changing the situation in Belarus will become a question of time.

Otherwise, the cycles of taking and releasing political hostages will be repeated again and again.