

The Chernobyl Way 2013

On 26 April 2013 Belarusian authorities and the opposition marked the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster: each in its own way. Alexander Lukashenka went on a trip to the polluted areas as did opposition leaders Anatol Liabedzka and Vital Rymasheuski.

The Belarusian opposition also gathered around one thousand of its supporters in Minsk under antinuclear energy slogans, protesting against the new nuclear station erected close to the border with Lithuania. Since 1989 it is a tradition for many Belarusians to commemorate the event in the form of street manifestation on the 26 of April called the Chernobyl Way (Čarnobylski šliach in Belarusian).

Lukashenka's visit resulted in an extensive coverage in all state media while the opposition event was covered by independent media, including detentions by plain clothed individuals which followed the opposition event.

What Is the Chernobyl Way?

The number of participants this year seems low compared to many previous rallies. Today it is hard to believe but in 1996 over 30 thousand Belarusians manifested in the Chernobyl Way. In 1996, the police forces brutally intervened in the rally and dispersed it arresting dozens of people.

The Chernobyl Way is no longer associated solely with the events that took place in 1986. Nowadays it has a much wider meaning. Political slogans always intertwine with the economic and social ones. For others the rally on 26 April is the only opportunity to express their disapproval for the erection of a nuclear power plant in Belarus.

Participants usually carry the white-red-white flags of

the pre-Lukashenka Belarus and banners mocking the president or raising up the current political issues. Almost all the previous rallies ended up with the police intervention and detention of a number of activists.

The organisers and participants learned their lessons how to deal with the city authorities to obtain permission. In 2011, after presidential election protests aftermath which a few oppositional leaders remained in prison, the Chernobyl Way took a form of a gathering only, without a procession. This year it was a rally from the centre of Minsk to a designated location equipped with loudspeakers.

Video: The Chernobyl Way-2013 opposition demonstration.

It seems that Minsk are prepared to tolerates this already traditional Chernobyl Way. Each year the organisers receive the required permission for a public gathering. The state, however, wishes to maintain a monopoly over the marking the anniversary. With the full support and loyalty from the state media, it is much easier to achieve it.

'Invisible Catastrophe'

Belarusian authorities refrain from initiating public discussion of the Chernobyl disaster consequences. The Chernobyl disaster still remains an 'invisible catastrophe' in Belarus with little information or discussion in the official public space.

The state media serves its role here. For example, the state TV channel reported only on the official memorable events that took place in Belarus. The journalists presented Lukashenka's visit to Homel and the official event in Minsk. The reporters did not mention a word about the Chernobyl Was as it did not take place at all.

Aleksandr Lukashenka marked the anniversary in his own way.

Traditionally, he decided to appear 'closer' to the ordinary people and visited the Khoyninskii district in the Homel area. In accordance with the established tradition, Lukashenka met with the local people, publicly criticised officials and praised achievements of the state in the region. He also demanded production of only 'clean' products in the contaminated area. These 'spontaneous' meetings with people and officials are subsequently covered in detail on state TV channels.

Video: Belarusian State TV covers Lukashenka's visit to the contaminated area.

Chernobyl through the Prism of Belarusian Politics

The truth about the consequences of the radioactive explosion remained a top secret in the Soviet times. With the years and Lukashenka coming in power, the commemoration of the event became difficult, but possible.

During the Friday rally many people protested against the [construction of a nuclear plant](#) in the city of Astravets close to the Lithuanian and Polish border. It makes sense that people express their protest in the streets because the Belarusian authorities initiate no public debate on this issue. The Chernobyl Way remains a rare opportunities to express their 'no' to the state's plans.

Aleksandr Lukashenka clearly dislikes the idea of the Chernobyl Way and mocked it in public at some occasions. For example, in 2011 he said 'they want with this fascist-minded rally walk on the street, demonstrate. Go to demonstrate to the zone'. However, every year Belarusian authorities give permission the organisers to the opposition rally in the centre of Minsk.

But as most other opposition events yesterday the Chernobyl Way ended with detentions, mostly made by people in

plain clothes. Several people were released while others, including journalists were charged with disobeying police and are now awaiting their trials.

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