

Do mass protests have any prospect in Belarus?

After this spring's mass protests, which resulted in [forceful reactions from the authorities](#), criminal cases, and detainments, protest activity in Belarus has died down. At present, anti-government protests gather few supporters. At the same time, opposition politicians and their organizations are unable to capture the attention of the media and society.

The opposition mainly concentrates its activities in Minsk. The Belarusian provinces appear largely forgotten. The result is low levels of trust and support for opposition parties and movements among many Belarusians. Still, some actors in the Belarusian political field attempt to organize mass protests. Indeed, these actors appear to demonstrate ambitions to take over this sphere of social life and even brand it their own.

Radical agenda becomes repulsive

Ex-presidential candidate and former political prisoner [Mikalaj Statkievič](#), after the hardcore suppression of protests on March 25 this year, promised to organize new and even larger demonstrations. He predicted the growth of discontent in society by the autumn, so decided to organize the second "Angry Belarusians' March" in October. The first march in February 2017 gathered around 3,000 people in Minsk.

Unfortunately for Mr. Statkievič, his recent efforts have failed to attract many participants or any serious media attention. On 21 October, only about 200 people attended the event called "Angry Belarusians' March," which lasted less than an hour and failed to gather much attention from media

and society. Seven days later, Statkievič helped organise another street demonstration near the KGB (the national security agency) headquarters, which brought out fewer than 30 participants.



“Angry Belarusians’ March” in February 2017. Source: nn.by

Several reasons explain the small scale of these October protests. Firstly, protest sentiments in society have ebbed. This is also due to the partial stabilisation of the economy. In addition, the authorities suspended the highly unpopular Decree No. 3 (commonly known as the “[anti-parasite decree](#)”) and announced other steps for liberalization of the economy.

It should also be noted that Statkievič has confined his mobilization campaign only to Minsk. For some reason, the provinces, where the economic and social situation is much worse than in the capital, have been left out. It would appear the provinces have a much greater protest potential than Minsk. The experience of spring events confirms this statement.

Secondly, the fear of a violent state response still holds a strong influence over Belarusians. After the brutality Belarusian law enforcement agencies showed at this spring’s protests, as well as the criminal [cases against activists and independent trade unions](#), people are less eager to take part in protests.

Indeed, the demonstrations that took place on 21 October were also characterized by preventive detentions of opposition activists. At the same time, the loss of a job after participating in protests is a common story in Belarus. Taking into consideration growing unemployment—despite a stabilising economy—the prospects are not too attractive for anybody.

Thirdly, the only organisers of this October's street protests were Mikalaj Statkievič and his Belarusian National Congress. Other political organizations did not lend their support. Certain opposition groups have recently switched to promoting an "evolutionary way" and consider dialogue with the authorities possible, at least on some topics. Meanwhile, Statkievič remains more of a hardcore revolutionary.

Most of the political establishment in Belarus considers Statkievič's slogans extremely radical. For example, during the march on 21 October 2017, participants raised a banner reading, "Lukaşescu – you are a monster! Stop robbing our people!" The slogan compared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka with the Romanian communist dictator, Nicolae Ceauşescu. This, along with other provocative slogans, appeared to do more to repulse rather than attract support. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a situation where many organisations, such as Tell The truth! with their main credo "For peaceful changes," will support Statkievič's radical statements.

So far, people react most to campaigns dedicated to local problems or concrete pressing issues, rather than global ones. For example, the rise of prices for communal public services, gas, public transport tickets, and the elimination of "green spaces" in cities, etc... In times of economic downfall and a constant decrease of living standards, social slogans, and not political ones, are what really bring people together.

Why so unpopular?

The above-given points characterize Belarusian protests as a whole, not only those organized by the Belarusian National Congress. At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to the overall state of protest sentiments in the society as well as to the factors influencing them.

First, one should take into consideration the lack of media exposure given to the Belarusian opposition. In fact, there are no political media in Belarus, which can transmit the messages of this or that political power. The coverage of political events can openly be called miserable. Opposition political activists inconsistently receive media attention, and sporadically appear on-air only during major occasions.



The banner comparing Lukashenka to Ceaușescu.

Source: nn.by

But the opposition politicians also suffer from a common problem: they try to reach their audiences only on major occasions, too. Sometimes, it seems that the political powers only come in the lead-up to some big event (a national holiday) or to some egregious failure of government.

In the meantime, people become unaware of the opposition activities if politicians do not stay in touch with them. In turn, the political powers lack feedback from the people and sometimes are ignorant of real problems and concerns within society.

Here, one should pay attention to the way protest organizers promote their events. Usually, their outreach efforts are limited to rallying cries on social networks and rare diatribes in the media. For the first time in recent years, Minsk residents saw leaflets and stickers all over the city calling people to join protests—coverage seemed quite large-scale, at least in the capital. Such a grass-roots approach is important for enlisting the older population, who are not active internet users and tend to consume media 100 per cent under state control.

The spring events once again demonstrated the protest potential of the Belarusian provinces. Unfortunately, the

political opposition still focus more on the capital. The economic situation in these regions is much worse than in Minsk. This would logically make Belarusians in the provinces more willing protesters. Moreover, the provinces experience an extreme lack of media attention, too. This is why anyone who brings attention to provincial problems becomes labelled a local hero. Any wide, national protest movement needs to be in touch with all the Belarusian regions, not only with Minsk.

Branding protests — Statkievič™

The largely negative, radical protest agendas are deficient in ideas for how to change the country for the better. Audiences have grown tired of them and have started to lose interest, which plays a big role in the small scale turn-outs at mass protests.



The second “Angry Belarusians’ March”. Source: nn.by

Still, the authorities consider the protests a serious threat. At times, [state propaganda](#) has claimed Statkievič was the leader of all “radicals” and street protests actions in the whole country.

Preemptive detentions before 21 October demonstrations, as well as attempts to disrupt the march by blasting loud Soviet music over Independence Square (where the marchers planned to gather) confirm this opinion. Finally, Statkievič himself was detained on 30 October 2017.

The number of protesters out on 21 October is not so important—what holds greater impact is the manner of the protests themselves, and the substance of the anti-government

statements. Statkievič's long-term goal appears to be to become the undisputed leader for any protest event of any scale in the country.

Street protests will be in demand in any state with any political system. At the moment, demand for radical slogans and street protests appears to be low among Belarusians. But as one can see, the situation in Belarus can change quite quickly, and in the event of a systemic crisis in the country, protest sentiments can grow and result in truly unpredictable consequences.

Slow Release of Political Prisoners – Politics & Civil Society Digest

Under pressure from the West, Belarusian authorities have begun to release political prisoners. It appears that Lukashenka is prepared to take a long time to release all prisoners to reap as many benefits as possible. Over a dozen protestors and three former presidential candidates have been in custody since 2010.

POLITICS

Lukashenka negotiates release of political prisoners. Reuters reported that Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov met Lukashenka in Minsk last week. According to Mladenov's letter [obtained](#) by Reuters, Lukashenka has agreed to release at least four prisoners by the end of this week and drop charges against another two. All remaining political activists would be released by the beginning of October.

Pardoned political prisoners. On 1 September Lukashenka [pardoned](#) four more people convicted on the mass riot case of the Ploscha events on 19 December 2010. They are Ales Kirkevich (Young Front), Andrey Protasenya (Romanchuk' election team), Oleg Gnedchik and Dmitriy Doronin (civil activists). Earlier, on 11 August, nine other participants of the Ploscha events [were](#) pardoned. All of them had to write a pardon letter to Lukashenka.

Charges dropped. On 23 August criminal charges against seven people on case of mass riots in Minsk on December-19 were dropped due to lack of evidence. These people are [Ryhor Kastusiou](#) (ex-presidential candidate), [Natalia Radina](#) (journalist), [Oleg Korban](#) (United Civic Party (UCP) youth organization), [Anatoly Lebedko](#) (UCP Chairperson), [Anatol Paulau](#) (UCP member), [Ales Arestovich](#) (Statkevich's election team), and [Vladimir Kobets](#) (Sannikov's election team).

Key figures remain in prisons. Around 15 people remain in prison convicted under articles of the Criminal Code for organization or participation in the Ploscha events on December 19, including three ex-presidential candidates: Andrey Sannikov (5 years), Nikolay Statkevich (6 years), Dmitriy Us (5.5 years). Ales Byalyatsky, chairperson of the Human Rights Center Viasna has also been in prison since 4 August on tax evasion charges.

Ihar Sluchak sentenced to 3 days imprisonment. On 30 August, Gomel District Court found Ihar Sluchak guilty of using obscene language in public and [sentenced](#) him to 3 days imprisonment. Ihar Sluchak was detained on 26 August, when he was going to his press-conference to discuss ways to translate the Ministry of Internal Affairs' paperwork into Belarusian.

KGB questioned EHU students. Several students of the Vilnius-based European Humanities University were [questioned](#) by the KGB across Belarus last week. Interrogations have been reportedly held in Minsk, Svetlahorsk, Slutsk, Homel. The

secret services inquired about the EHU structure.

Russian human rights activist is announced persona non grata in Belarus. On 27 August, at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border crossing, Jury Zhyblade, a member of the Russian Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights, [was](#) denied entry to Belarus. From March 2011, ten more people – citizens of Russia and Ukraine, involved in the work of the Committee on International Control, – were deported from Belarus or not admitted, receiving a ban on entry into the country for several years.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Initiative against the nuclear power plant. On 30 August, the civil initiative "Astravetsk plant is a crime" [held](#) a press conference in Minsk. Head of the initiative Mikalay Ulasevich said that the Belarusian nuclear power plant project is "a military-political project... which Russia launched in order to economically incorporate Belarus".

Roundtable in the lobby. On 31 August, the non-profit institution "For Auto" had [planned](#) to hold a roundtable "Fuel and Energy Complex of Belarus: prices for fuel and linkages with other economic sectors" in the lobby of the Minsk Hotel "Orbita". The day before, the hotel administration abolished booking the conference room due to "technical reasons". As a result, civil activists had a conversation with two government officials in the hotel lobby.

Model program for training of andragogies. On 8-9 September, the final international round table "Long-life education: a model program for training of [andragogies](#)" will be held in Minsk. The event is implemented jointly by «Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband eV» (German Adult Education Association) in Belarus and The Academy of Postgraduate Education. The project was funded under the German Support Program for Belarus and was aimed at improving the quality of

educational services in Belarus.

People Journalist. The NGO Assembly, Belarusian Movement and other organizations have [announced](#) a call for local leaders, journalists and active people. The participants should describe problems in their communities and offer solutions. The best texts will be issued and distributed in leaflet form. The two winners will get a MacBook, the other participants – prizes such as satellite television sets to watch Belsat. The best ten participants will be awarded a trip to Poland.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Bargaining for Political Prisoners Has Begun? – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Belarusian analysts began discussing the reasons why Lukashenka pardoned nine participants of protests against falsification of elections in December 2010. Others analyze why those protests have not materialized in political changes and what comes next as the economic crises deepens.

Official Minsk starts bargaining for political prisoners? Alexander Zaitsev, a columnist of naviny.by, [examines](#) the possible reasons for Lukashenka's pardon of nine participants of Ploscha events on December 19, 2010. The journalist

believes that the first batch of the amnesty "is likely to be a trial balloon, an attempt to assess the reaction of the West, to throw the hook for a possible dialogue". Over thirty people, including several presidential candidates, remain in Belarusian prisons.

What is happening in Belarus [explains](#) Alexander Feduta, political analyst who works for Vladimir Nyaklyaeu's team. According to him, the crisis in the Belarusian economy is payback for populism, and the violent suppression of silent protests linked to the authorities' fear of any public expression of discontent. Unlike in Ukraine during the Orange revolution, there is no independent television in Minsk, nearly anybody can be dismissed from work for political reasons and no rich people who could support the opposition. Feduta hints that they will come up with an alternative strategy to combat the crisis in September.

Delayed revolution. Moscow-based Andrey Suzdaltsev [writes](#) about the completion of the Internet revolution in Belarus. He considers silent protests campaign successful, because it demonstrated the protest potential of ordinary Belarusians. Political analyst predicts that suppressing peaceful protests, the government thus could provoke people protests of force format.

The dangerous passivity. Sergei Nikolyyuk [disagrees](#) that protests will revive to the autumn: "We still observe the reverse process: authoritarian regime is not "crumbled" under pressure by people on squares, but on the contrary, the people come out to the squares after the regime is "scattered". The cornerstone of a contemporary state regime can only constitute active citizens who are ready to bear responsibility. The economic crisis, however, makes Belarusians to distance themselves from the state and they become very passive. At some point the quantity of those who distance themselves from the state will turn into quality and

the state will start crumbling. This is when according to Nikolyyuk squares in Belarus will be filled with protesters.

Vain hopes on the German-Russian agreements on Belarus. Mikhas Ilyinsky [points](#) out that the Belarusian issue was not on the agenda of German-Russian consultations at the highest level in Hanover, held on July 18-19. In any case, the analyst is sure that “the hope for the advent of democracy from the East (Russia) is at least dangerously naïve, and intentionally or not – in fact, encourages Belarus to the loss of state sovereignty”.

Public Councils in Belarus. Olga Smolyanka, director of Legal Transformation Center, [writes](#) on legal regulation of the formation and activities of the public councils in Belarus. These councils function under auspices of state institutions, such as ministries to reflect public opinion in decision-making by official bodies. She concludes that the lack of clear regulation of activities of public councils and the possibility of state organs to ignore recommendations hinders their effectiveness.

State of gender policy in Belarus – Lyudmila Petina [analyzes](#) the state of gender equality and women's rights in Belarus. She thinks the Belarusian experience of recent years has no significant positive changes. Moreover, the last period should be called “the time of missed opportunities and the destruction of gender education”. There are no legislative mechanisms to address domestic violence against women and no attention to gender issues on the labour market. Prosecution of a number of NGOs, including working on gender issues, absence of transparency and civil dialogue affected position of women on the labour market.

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The Weapons of Mass Information

In his Independence Day speech today, Alyaksandr Lukashenka described "information intervention" as the main danger to independence of Belarus. According to him, external enemies of the country deploy the weapons of mass information to manipulate public opinion in Belarus. He has a peculiar understanding of independence. For Lukashenka, independence of Belarus means the same as his personal independence from other institutions and forces.

At the military parade today, the authorities should have also demonstrated the modern tools which help them remain independent. At least three important things were missing – giant police trucks designed to transport detained protestors, plain-clothed security service agents who grab people in the streets and Internet warfare specialists, who block web sites and combat protestors on social networks. But these units were busy today fighting for independence of Belarus rulers from their people.

The police trucks were patiently waiting for their passengers who were delivered to them in hundreds by plain clothed security agents during the day. Men in black promptly detained those who looked suspicious or tried to clap. The state IT specialists were busy with denial of service attacks on independent internet media. They also succeeded in blocking

all large Belarus protest groups on the Russian social networking service Vkontakte.

Despite their rhetoric and military parades, Belarusian authorities understand that controlling the spread of information is the key to their political survival. In today's Europe, using military force to unseat a ruler of another country is very unlikely. Fortunately, these times are long gone. Even Russia stopped short of using its army to unseat Georgia's president Saakashvili in 2008. The main threat for autocratic rulers comes from their own people who need to be kept either loyal or at least fearful. Mass media is the main instrument to achieve that.

The protests organized by means of Internet only engaged a limited number of people. Most in Belarus gather their information from television and radio. Nothing can beat their hypnotic effect. State television and state radio are available in virtually every Belarusian flat. As a result, people learn political news from these easily available sources. They may also prefer not to watch the news at all or watch Russian channels, which are available in Belarusians a part of the standard package.

Russia often criticizes and even offends Belarus authorities. However, the official Minsk learned how to filter such broadcasts. This filtering is not always effective, which undermines the state's nearly complete TV and radio monopoly. Russian media have their own agenda. For instance, they like to hint that if Belarus replaces its national currency with the Russian ruble, the economic problems of Belarusians will soon be over. They do not mention that it will also be the end of the country's independence too. Many analysts agree that Russia wants to weaken Lukashenka, but not interested to unseat him.

The only alternative television channel for Belarusians is Poland-based Belsat. This satellite channel is primarily

financed by the Polish Government, is structurally a part of the Polish public television but employs many Belarusian journalists. The channel's reach in Belarus is limited. Because of the lack of finance, they can only prepare less than an hour of daily Belarusian news coverage and cannot be watched without a satellite dish. Because of the economic crises, the satellite dish became a luxury unaffordable to many in Belarus. Belsat still does not have live internet broadcast. An effective improvement of its reach could be trans-border broadcasts to cover at least large border towns such as Brest and Hrodna. However, this has not yet been done.

The role of Internet in Belarus is steadily increasing, but it is far from being the dominant source of information. According to a May survey of the Independent Institute for Sociological and Political Studies, 33% of the adult population in Belarus received information from the Internet and only 2.2% – from social networks. This 33% include those who never read any political news on Internet as well as strong supporters of the authorities. And the 2.2% using the social networks, even assuming if they all want to protest, cannot do much against the army of security agents. The state security services block social networks and fill Twitter and Facebook feeds with false and misleading information to disorient and intimidate protesters.

As a result, the authorities are winning the information battle and Internet does little to dilute the effect of the state propaganda machine. As long as state propaganda succeeds in making Belarusians either loyal or fearful – it will take a long time before real changes will take place. However, if the economic decline continues, even the most aggressive brainwashing and sophisticated security services may fail.

YK