

Dazhynki Festival: Belarusian Tradition or Lukashenka's Propaganda?

Seventy years ago, on 4 October 1942 German authorities organised Dazhynki festival in Minsk. It was the first time the festival took place in Belarus with the highest level of state support.

On 21 September 2012 Aleksandr Lukashenka was opening a Dazhynki festival in Gorki, a small town in Eastern Belarus. Dazhynki is a traditional Eastern European celebration of completion of the harvest season. The Thanksgiving Day or Harvest festivals can be regarded as Western equivalents to Belarusian Dazhynki.

But today only Belarusian authorities celebrate it with such pomp. For Lukashenka, it is not just a holiday but also an important political show.

Lukashenko uses Dazhynki to demonstrate how much he supports agriculture. Belarusian towns compete for the right to host the holiday, as Dazhynki remains the best opportunity to improve their wellbeing.

Huge Costs for The Budget

State-level celebration of Dazhynki takes place in a new town every year. The state provides huge financial subsidies for urban reconstruction in the framework of the holiday. Comprehensive reparation works start a year before Dazhynki. The authorities build new roads, remove old and place new tiles, renovate residential buildings. Thus, it is not just an honour for local officials and residents to host Dazhynki, but also an opportunity to improve the welfare of their area.

The 2012 host of the festival is Gorki. The town with the population of 34 thousand people received around \$110 mln for reconstruction. The money went mostly to refurbishment of roads and railway stations, construction of a 3D cinema and an amphitheatre.

Also, the local authorities refurbished Gorki Agricultural Academy, where Lukashenka used to study. They also built an Ice Hockey Palace, which has become an important element of Lukashenka's Belarus.

Of course, there was not enough money for a proper refurbishment for everyone. The authorities promised several town residents to repair their houses before Dazhynki. The houses looked as if they went through a war – there were holes in the floor and cracks in the walls.

The residents of the houses complained that there was an urgent need to change water pipes and sewers. The authorities really got down repairing, but they did not conduct the work they promised inside of the houses. Instead of that, the workers painted the houses from the outside, replaced the windows and cleaned the area. It was more important that the building looked nice from outside.

Struggle for the Right to Host Dazhynki

Belarusian towns compete for the right to host the holiday to receive additional funding. Each year a real “war” for the right to host the festival starts among the Belarusian officials class. Traditionally, the festival takes place in small towns, but now, after the financial crisis, big cities are also trying to get funding.

Previously, government appointed Rahachou as the host of the festival in the upcoming year. Today Rahachou remains a rather neglected town even by modest Belarusian standards. However, the Homel Regional Executive Committee was able to negotiate with Lukashenka to ensure that the following Dazhynki would be

held in Homel.

Rahachou civil society activists community collected 2,500 signatures for returning the right to be Dazhynki host town. The attempts were in vain, but the authorities promised that they would fix Rahachou the following year anyway.

How the Regime and the Opposition Perceive Dazhynki

Dazhynki in Belarus is not simply an agricultural festival, but also a political one. On the one hand, the Belarusian regime is trying to show how much it cares about the Belarusian village. On the other hand, independent media often mock the rural grandiosity of the event. Interestingly, both sides are right here.

Lukashenka really loves Belarusian village. As a former director of a state-owned agricultural farm, he believes that the Belarusian village can be successful and he helps it. However, Lukashenka appeared to be stuck in his own past and simply refuses to see a reform path in the agricultural sector.

Independent media notice that just pro-regime musicians sing at Dazhynki in Belarus and the main aim of the event is to promote Lukashenka. The festival itself looks more like a drunken orgy for ordinary people and has little in common with Western festivals.

This year's Dazhynki was held on September 21-23, during the parliamentary election. In order to settle the guests of the festival, the authorities decided to expel students from the dormitories for a few days.

University authorities "strongly encouraged" students to vote on the first day of early voting and go home. The result looked amazing – 71% of voters in the area where dormitories were located voted 6 days before the primary election day.

The Untold Story of Failing Belarusian Agriculture

Certainly, it is good that the authorities reconstruct cities, care about the prestige of agriculture and keep Belarusian traditional holidays. However, the grand pomp of the festival amid backwardness and poverty of Belarusian village looks out of place.

During 2001-2011 the Belarusian authorities spent \$40 billion on agriculture. Despite massive subsidies, even the subsidised Belarusian export production often remains more expensive than in Western Europe. Weak material and technical base and high energy consumption do not allow Belarusian agricultural workers to make cheap products of high quality.

Although the state may provide [free housing](#), people in villages have to struggle surviving on low salaries and [suffering from alcoholism](#). A monthly salary lower than \$190 is not rarity in Belarusian villages.

The main problem of agriculture is the lack of reforms and nearly complete dominance of state management. Today the Belarusian village has not improved much in comparison with the village of the former Soviet Union. Private investor still remains a rarity in Belarusian villages.

Rather than seriously dealing with these problems Belarusian authorities prefer to organise expensive political shows to create an appearance of wellbeing.

Ryhor Astapenia

Lukashenka's Youth

Last month ended the trial against former leader of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union Leanid Kavalyou.

Police caught Kavalyou with a major bribe. The sentence was harsh – seven years of imprisonment in a maximum security colony with property confiscation. The criminal case represents a telling example of how good the "new governing elite" in Belarus is.

In 2012 Lukashenka surpassed Brezhnev with regard to the term of reign. A new generation appeared in Belarus during this time period, the generation that does not remember the country being governed by someone else. Pro-government youth in Belarus is corrupt and opportunistic while opposition-minded young people have to work in extremely difficult circumstances.

Two Ways To The Politics

The overwhelming majority of Belarusian young people are not interested in politics or private business. Belarusian state started creating favourable conditions for the business and this has somewhat started to attract the youth there. But politics still remains an almost closed sphere. In today's Belarus, the youth politics has only two forms: pro-Lukashenka associations or opposition organisations, which function in the regime of permanent repressions. It is worth mentioning that neither of them influences the society much.

The consequences of membership in these organisations may be diametrically different. On the one hand, there's Usevalad Yancheuski. He used to be the First Secretary of the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union in the middle of the 90s. Today he works as the closest assistant of Lukashenka and is the youngest official who forms the state ideology in Belarus.

On the other hand, there's Pavel Syevyarynets, who headed the opposition Young Front. Today, he is serving his second criminal term. The first one was for organisation of mass protests after the referendum-2004, when Lukashenka changed the Constitution and got the right to run for President for as many times as he liked. The second sentence was for the mass protest after the latest presidential election. At present, the politician is serving the punishment in the form of forcible hard labour – the prisoner is obliged to live in the special facility and to work at the enterprise appointed by the authorities.

The “For Lukashenka” Youth

Authoritarian regimes often create youth organisations which do their best to support the regime and prepare new personnel. The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (Belarusian abbreviation BRSM) performs this function in Belarus.

The BRSM was founded 10 years ago. Then the government decided to unite the two biggest pro-authoritative organisations. The first one was the Belarusian Youth Union, the successor of the Lenin Communist Union of Belarusian Youth, and the second one was the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union. It is worth mentioning that the BRYU is often called Lukamol in Belarus, as if to compare it with the old Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth).

Lukashenka pays the BRSM for the support open-handedly. For example, in 2011 the BRSM received 20.5 billion Belarusian roubles (approximately 6.6 million dollars). This makes 98% of all the finance which is provided to the youth politics in Belarus in total.

In the reality, the BRSM gets even more. On 13 January 2003 Lukashenka signed a decree which required that the BRSM local branches were financed by the local authorities' budget. The government was also responsible to repair the organisation's

main office. It is obvious that the authorities created very favourable conditions for the development of a strong loyal youth organisation in Belarus.

However, there appeared no strong organisation, although half a million Belarusians are already members of the BRSM. A large number of members does not mean that all of them support the current regime. The majority of people signed up for the BRSM either forcibly or because it gave an opportunity to get a place in the hostel for the term of study in the university or technical school.

The BRSM also uses the so-called "secret recruitment". The mechanism is simple: an order comes "from the above" that new members should join the organisation. A head of a branch (usually this is a school employee who has even his own office at school) takes a list of school students and sign them all up to the BRYU.

The BSU student Kryscina Karcheuskaya came across such situation when she found out that she had to pay the membership fee to the BRSM on graduation of the university, otherwise they would not give her the diploma. When these facts become known and Krystina demand to investigate the case, the BRSM refers to "technical problems" and hushed up the matter.

Despite the great financial support, administrative resource and half a million members, the BRSM failed to become a strong organisation. In the first place, it is connected with the lack of new ideas. The BRSM, as well as other branches of the regime, realises more and more that the social-economic model which Lukashenka's regime praised for so long has no future. The second reason for the BRYU's weakness is the absence of competition. The pro-Lukashenka youth lives in the conditions when the organisation exists by itself and has no contacts with other organisations or the independent media.

The “Against Lukashenka” Youth

Although the Belarusian youth takes no genuine interest in the BRSM, it does not mean that the opposition movements are popular. On the whole, the Belarusian youth is not as opposing as many would think. Just think about administrative detentions, fines, expulsions from universities make the daily routine of the youth opposition activists, it becomes clear why the opposition youth movements are not so popular in Belarus.

For example, the Young Front activist Raman Vasiliev, has been detained many times during this year and has spent 69 days in the Akrestsina Street detention centre. Besides, Young Front is the only organisation in the country which can compete with the BRSM with regard to popularity.

However, the conditions in which the Young Front and the BRSM conduct their activity are totally different. Several Young Front activists are serving criminal sentences today (including leader of the organisation [Zmitser Dashkevich](#)). Any activities on behalf of the organisation is banned by the Criminal Code because it was not registered. Activists do not have offices and often serve administrative detentions.

The Bleak Future

The only thing that the Belarusian Republican Youth Union and the Young Front have in common is absence of new ideas. The Young Front is coming through a crisis, the same as the whole opposition, and cannot offer anything new to the society in order to attract new adherents.

Belarusian youth does not want to live in a country with no political and economic reforms and no long-term opportunities. They also do not believe that they can change anything in Belarus. For many the only way out is emigration. The research of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies showed that 65 % of young people want to leave the

country. It is interesting that not only the democratic youth emigrates, but the officials' children as well.

Ryhor Astapenia