Why Belarus is not Ukraine

Last weekend many Belarusians came to Kyiv to support the pro-European demonstrations. Social activists, politicians and even the famous rock band Liapis Trubetskoy expressed their support for Ukrainians with their pro-European choice.

They came to take part in the truly massive political protests – something which they are unable to do back home in Belarus. Though Belarus and Ukraine have a long shared history, the two countries differ significantly in many ways.

While Belarusians have not yet gone through a true nation-building process, in many ways they live better than Ukrainians. Unlike Lukashenka's regime, Yanukovych's regime has many democratic attributes that make mass peaceful protests possible.

The private sector also makes up a larger share of the economy and Ukraine's oligarchs play a significant role in its politics. They use their own money to finance other centres of influence, in addition to the authorities.

Belarusians Reach the Maidan

On 7 December, the famous Belarusian rock band Liapis Trubetskoy performed on Maidan – the epicentre of the Kyiv protests. A week earlier the Belarusian band gathered over ten thousand Belarusian fans at a concert in Vilnius. The leader of the band, Siarhei Mikhalok, stated at Maidan: “We are here to send you a big hello from Belarus. We, Belarusians, look at you with respect and admiration.”

Not everybody who wanted to actually managed to get to Ukraine from Belarus. On 6 December, KGB agents and traffic police stopped 53 activists who were travelling from Minsk to Kyiv by bus. Law enforcement officials explained that they could not
let the bus continue on to Ukraine due to the poor weather conditions and the danger it posed to the health of the bus' passengers. As a result, the bus had to return to Minsk, and the activists got off the bus before it turned back and got to Kyiv by hitchhiking.

Belarusian opposition leaders, including Uladzimir Niakliajeu of the Tell the Truth campaign and Yuri Hubarevich of the Movement for Freedom took the floor to share words of solidarity with the thousands of Ukrainians who were gathered on Maidan. It is not the first time that activists from Belarus have come to rallies in Ukraine. In 2004, hundreds of Belarusians with white-red-white flags took part in the Orange Revolution.

**Why Belarus is not Ukraine**

Many people in Belarus and in the West try to draw parallels between the rallies in Kyiv and those that have taken place in Minsk. Some are wondering why Belarusians cannot organise something similar in their own country. To understand this, one must remember several aspects in which Belarus differs significantly from Ukraine.

Some are wondering why Belarusians cannot organise something similar in their own country.

First, unlike Ukrainians, Belarusians have not yet completed the process of nation building. Belarusians are much more like Russian-speaking Ukrainians in eastern Ukraine than the western Ukrainians or residents of Kyiv – who are the main participants in the protests.

But even the residents of eastern Ukraine use its national flag, emblem and anthem while Belarusians still use Soviet symbols. Yanukovych, the President of Ukraine, while coming from the east of Ukraine and having Belarusian roots, consistently speaks the Ukrainian language in public.
In Belarus, even opposition politicians remain mostly Russian-speaking. All that makes it easier for Russia to influence Belarus.

In terms of economic well-being, Belarusians live better than Ukrainians. The average salary in Belarus hovers around $600, while in Ukraine it is about $400. At the same time the level of inequality between the rich and the poor in Ukraine remain much higher in Ukraine than in Belarus.

One of the Belarusian participants of EuroMaidan, Mikalai Dziemidenka, said that when compared to Belarus, Ukraine looks like a flourishing democracy. The opposition is well represented in parliament, and there is real and constant political struggle in Ukraine between different political forces. Representatives from opposition parties actually run several cities – a scenario that remains entirely unrealistic in Belarus. In Belarus, real politics rears its head out only once every five years during the presidential election.

According to the Constitution of Belarus, Lukashenka has vast powers which make other political institutions meaningless. Yanukovych must keep a watchful eye on what is going on in parliament and monitor its activities. Albeit imperfect, Ukraine's separation of powers and the reality of divisions within the government itself is further evidence of the differences between the country. The head of the presidential administration and many other Ukrainian officials resigned after the recent brutal crackdown on demonstrators in Kyiv. After the Minsk protests in 2010, all Belarusian officials either maintained their silence or condemned the demonstrators.

Moreover, President Yanukovych and his government have long been negotiating Ukraine's european integration. Lukashenka's regime cannot even begin such negotiations as it prefers to remain financially and
politically dependent on Russia.

On 9 December, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski publicly spoke out against impeaching Yanukovych, which is technically and politically feasible, though remains totally impossible in Belarus. Consider the fact that Yanukovych is the fourth president of Ukraine and recently met with his predecessors to discuss the crisis. Belarus has only one president it gained its independence in the 1990s.

**The Real Power in Ukraine**

Another key difference is that Lukashenka's power relies on police and law enforcement agencies while Yanukovych relies heavily on those oligarchs who are willing to provide financial support. Many people call the Ukrainian oligarchs the real seat of power in the country and for good reason. They financially support the existing political structures and determine the amount of airtime politicians get on TV.

Lukashenka's power relies on police and law enforcement agencies while Yanukovych heavily relies on the oligarchs

For example, the channel 1+1, which is owned by oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi, gives more airtime to Arseniy Yatsenyuk, from Yulia Timoshenko's party. Another channel Inter, owned by Dmytro Firtash, likes to invite Vitali Klitschko as a guest on its programmes. Not a single TV channel in Belarus can promote opposition politicians.

Several Ukrainian oligarchs, such as Vadim Novinsky and Kostyantyn Zhevago, are members of parliament. Each of their respective wealth is estimated to be about $1.5-2bn. Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man whose personal wealth is estimated to be about $15.4bn, is claimed to control Yanukovych's party in parliament.

Belarusian oligarchs remain much poorer than their Ukrainian counterparts. Uladzimir Peftiev, the richest man in Belarus,
whose personal wealth is estimated to be about $1bn, would have a spot on a list of the top 10 richest people in Ukraine. What's more, they do not have any real political power in Belarus. Belarusian "oligarchs" are little more than managers who can be replaced and stripped of their property at any moment. There is no rule of law in Belarus, so all businesses remain at mercy of the regime.

Although private philanthropy for social and non-political projects in Belarus is slowly developing, Belarusian entrepreneurs shy away from openly political projects. They fear that the government may take away their business and punish them personally. That is precisely what happened to Andrei Klimau in 1998, one of the most promising entrepreneurs of Belarus at that time, who supported the opposition. Klimau has since already served several jail terms for his perceived political involvement.

In the 1990s Andrei Zhukavets had a successful business in Belarus and gave money to the Youth Front. In 1999 the authorities started a criminal case against him, so he decided to emigrate to Poland. To this day the Belarusian authorities are still seeking Zhukavets’ extradition. Having seen a few examples like those described above, business people are afraid to be openly involved in politics.

**Ukrainian Lessons for Belarus**

Will the recent events in Ukraine affect Belarus? Lukashenka's regime is closely monitoring the situation, although the state media and officials do not speak much about the events transpiring in Kyiv. It seems that the authorities have not yet developed their strategic ideological approach to the Ukrainian protests.

On the one hand, if Ukraine drifts to the east, Lukashenka may lose his status as Russia's only loyal ally in the west. On the other hand, if Ukraine strengthens its ties with Russia, Belarus will look more "normal" to the West and its own people, thus justifying the status quo.
If the protests in Ukraine go devolve into turmoil, the Belarusian state propaganda machine will use it to praise Belarusian stability and condemn the dangers of an uncontrolled democracy. If it ends peacefully and leads to positive developments, this will give hope to Belarusians that changes – perhaps slower and through a different route – will also come to Belarus.