

Belarus: Anarchists in the Uprising against the Dictatorship

An Interview

CrimethInc.

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Starting on the night of Sunday, August 9, in response to an election widely deemed to be rigged, a massive protest movement has broken out in Belarus against Aleksandr Lukashenko, the strongman who has ruled the country for over a quarter of a century. Police have arrested thousands of people, firing live rounds and murdering demonstrators. From Sunday to Tuesday, Lukashenko's government apparently shut down the internet and land-line telephones in hopes of dampening the protests, while claiming that the blackout was the work of forces outside Belarus. Belarusian opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanouskaya was detained and apparently forced to read a script declaring that Lukashenko had won the election and urging people to "obey the law" and stay away from street protests before fleeing to Lithuania. Despite this, the protests continue. In a context in which the state has cracked down on every form of political opposition, anarchists are among the only organized groups still capable of participating in street demonstrations. To understand the events that are unfolding, we interviewed multiple anarchists from Belarus.

This is not the first time we have had cause to correspond with Belarusian anarchists. In 2017, anarchists in Belarus participated at the forefront of a wave of protest against a law forcing the unemployed to pay a special additional tax to the government. Although some describe Belarus as the last socialist holdout of the Soviet era, the ruling class there is engaged in the same process of accumulating wealth and suppressing dissent that we see in the United States, the European Union, China, and elsewhere. We don't see the protest movement in Belarus as a reaction to a "backward" regime that can be resolved simply by introducing democracy, but rather as yet another flashpoint alongside Portland and Belgrade in a worldwide struggle against the consequences of capitalism and authoritarianism.

Of necessity, the new wave of protest in Belarus is decentralized and largely leaderless, adhering to anarchist tactics if not principles. We fear that even in a best-case scenario, this current horizontality does not guarantee a positive outcome. Largely horizontal resistance movements have repeatedly been coopted and channeled into reinventing the same authoritarian state structures—including the movements that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago. From our perspective, the most important thing that can take place in tumultuous moments like this is for people to develop a more thoroughgoing analysis of the structures of power and what it will take to bring about real liberation.

"We should not forget that anarchists are against not only this presidential election, but against any president in general. The Belarusian people have long known that power corrupts everyone. Lukashenko may be replaced by an opposition politician, who will keep power in the country and continue repression against his own population. We must rise up not to get a new president, but to live without presidents. Decentralization of power should be a key factor in the transition from dictatorship to a free society."

Authoritarian leftists have looked for the machinations of Western state actors in these events, seeking—like other conspiracy theorists—to explain them as the malevolent work-

ings of a single all-powerful shadowy entity like the CIA. Yet the uprising in Belarus is not particularly convenient for any of the geopolitical players involved. Although it gives Putin an opportunity to press Lukashenko for more concessions, it could also destabilize Russia. It interrupts attempts from the United States to gain more leverage in the region by establishing a more amicable relationship with Lukashenko. In a time when state violence, economic crisis, and a catastrophic pandemic have discredited governments worldwide, it threatens to set a precedent for mass revolt that could spread. Many commentators have noted that the events in Belarus could serve as a template for what might happen in the United States if the 2020 elections are contested.

Everywhere around the world, state structures are failing people and provoking rebellious social movements. Which political currents become influential in these movements will determine what is possible in the next generation of struggles. If there are not powerful anarchist currents involved—or if we immediately write off entire movements on account of the participation of some reactionary elements—we will make it inevitable that more of the disenfranchised and desperate will be drawn into ersatz movements organized by nationalists, neoliberals, and other authoritarians, with disastrous consequences. In the Gilets Jaunes movement in France, it was very important that anarchists got involved and fought to marginalize fascist and nationalist elements in it that were attempting to popularize their template for resistance against Macron's centrist government. Likewise, we should channel resources and solidarity to the anarchist elements in the struggle in Belarus.

Not all revolutionary activity is positive. When fascists gained the upper hand in the Ukrainian revolution, it was important to understand how this took place and to identify that the victory of the revolution did not represent a step towards liberation. But the future of the uprising in Belarus is yet unwritten—it could be suppressed, it could be coopted by neoliberal democrats or nationalists, or it could become a reference point for grassroots revolt. What happens next will be determined on the world stage, as struggles like this play out across six continents. We call for everyone who is concerned about the future of humanity to deepen international ties of solidarity, exchange tactics and resources, and understand these struggles in a global context.

We interviewed members of the Belarusian anarchist publishing collective Pramen and, to ensure that we obtained a well-rounded perspective, we also sought answers from another longtime Belarusian anarchist, who spoke on condition of anonymity. In the following discussion, they explore the background of the current crisis, describe how to organize under a repressive dictatorship, and reflect on the potential outcomes of the uprising.

Give us a brief overview of the history of the contemporary anarchist movement in Belarus.

Pramen: As some of you might have heard, the anarchist movement was destroyed in the Soviet Union. The rebirth of the movement took place at the end of the Soviet era. In the 1990s, anarchists played important roles in certain grassroots movements around ecology, labor struggles, and other issues. Since then, anarchists have organized in Belarus with various ups and downs. There are at least five organized anarchist collectives—the Anarchist Black Cross, Pramen, Food Not Bombs, Volnaya Dumka library, and the Really Free Market initiative. All of them handle different tasks within the movement—from anti-repression work and to organizing actions on the streets. Apart from these organized groups, there are several widely known blogs that support the anarchist movement. In addition, a small group of activists organized a printing cooperative that has existed for three years now.

There has been a lot of disappointment since 2017. At that time, expectations were high as momentum against Lukashenko was growing. But then the uprising was smashed and everybody went to normality. A lot of people who served time in jail came out broken; for many anarchists, normality wasn't possible, as raids, detention, and psychological pressure continued. Some active people had to leave the country due to problems with the state apparatus.

However, despite the disappointment and these hard blows, anarchists continued organizing. The movement is not massive at all—around the country, there might be more or less 100 organized anarchists. Add a couple hundred more people who are sympathizers and that's it—out of a country of 10 million people. However, the events of 2017 also struck a blow to organized liberal and nationalist groups; they were not strong before it and afterwards, most opposition parties ceased all street activity. Since 2017, anarchists are most probably the only active force still agitating on the streets.

In our collective, we were doing media and agitation work. Some other groups were organizing public events with an anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian direction.

It is also important to mention that in terms of class, the Belarusian anarchist movement doesn't include many students. It is mostly composed of different parts of the working class.

How have anarchists continued organizing in Belarus despite repression? Do you have any advice for anarchists in other parts of the world who have not experienced the same sort of repression yet—but may experience it in the coming years?

Pramen: Anarchists in Belarus have used a lot of interesting tactics over the last few years. First of all, most of the radical collectives went completely underground. Nobody is allowed to know who is part of our collective, for example. The same rule exists in other groups. We organize certain common actions together—the protests right now, for example—but

everybody is participating on the streets as individuals or affinity groups, not in an organizational structure. This makes inter-group cooperation complicated, but it protects us from ending up in a situation in which a snitch in one group knows the infrastructure of the whole movement.

Anarchist street actions have a time limit—the maximum amount of time we have before the police come is usually around 10–15 minutes.

Working underground makes it difficult to integrate new people into the movement. That's why some of the groups function as entrance points for the anarchists—for example, everybody can attend a punk concert and, through that, get to know the ways to enter the organized anarchist movement one step at a time.

However, it is also important to mention that certain people came out of the underground to function as public figures. They give interviews, talk to the media, and make youtube videos on different topics. They do experience troubles with the police from time to time, but it seems that there are certain things you can still express. Calling for revolution might be problematic, but calling for direct democracy and decentralization of power seems to be fine.

The longstanding existence of the Anarchist Black Cross in Belarus underscored an important point: you can rely on your comrades not only when you are doing direct actions or participating in protests, but also when you end up behind bars. This is an important psychological factor that makes the movement strong.

Of course, those who join the anarchists are aware of the possibility of repression from the first day. So they are not just your average students who decided to get involved in politics when they happen to have enough time. Participants are aware that they can go to prison even for small things. And you organize your life accordingly:

- You learn how to keep your flat clean, so that nothing in it can be used against you.
- You teach and learn security culture—both physical and virtual.
- You get to know your comrades in difficult situations and this creates bonds stronger than steel.

What is the composition of the movement around the August elections in Belarus? What are the political aspirations of the participants? What is the balance of power between them?

Pramen: This election round is a shitshow. Many opposition politicians actually opposed the main plan for the protests. They were calling on people to stay at home and wait for a better time to rise. Many from the older generations were instructed to stay at home and not follow any provocations.

On the other side, the vacuum that was created by this political decision filled up with bloggers, smaller groups, and Telegram channels. Consequently, agency shifted from po-

litical parties to the people. This summer, the movement against Lukashenko became so massive that anarchists represented just a tiny part of all the things that were going on.

And what was going on was not connected with clear political demands. There were no political or economic platforms built around the elections calling for privatization or nationalization or anything else of the sort. Instead, people were organizing against the dictatorship—to bring it down. It is this simple. And this simple push drew a lot of people to it. Today frustration with Lukashenko is greater than ever. Currently, no political groups, organizations, or parties have been able to ride to popularity on this protest.

So for now, the popular uprising against Lukashenko can still go in any direction depending on who is present on the streets.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that there are calls for direct democracy on some major media platforms. At least some people in Belarus do understand that Lukashenko is a dictator, but dictatorship is a complicated machine. If we just pass this machine into the hands of another president, the scenario may simply repeat itself.

Anonymous: The political life of Belarus has been devastated by the years of authoritarian power. The existing parties only exist for the sake of existing—people hardly know them and don't trust them.

Hence the classic joke: if you ever feel useless, just remember that there's a Prime Minister in Belarus. Political parties don't play any role here. Regular political models of decision-making don't work.

Probably one of the things that united people and helped them to create a powerful movement is the almost apolitical character of this struggle during the elections. People saw something different than usual buffoonery. Tikhonovskaya, the main rival of Lukashenko in this election, appeared from nowhere as a housewife who took over running after her imprisoned husband and whose only political program was to organize fair elections half a year after she becomes president. After 26 years of surviving in a "social state," people don't believe in socialism. After the long Soviet history and continuing pro-communist rhetoric on the TV and in daily life, people are skeptical about communism. What people want is to put an end to the years of oppression—both ideological and economic, but economic first of all. They are not politically engaged at all. There are some political actors in the background of these events, but they are nearly invisible.

Unfortunately, we can say almost the same thing about anarchists—due to the small number of anarchists and the focus on the inside of the movement, anarchists can't really take over and lead this protest. Though by no means do I want to underestimate the anarchist contribution—despite small numbers, anarchists have managed to influence the protests by bringing new approaches and techniques.

We have heard that, at least according to a reporter from Belsat TV, anarchists played an important role in the August 9 protests in Minsk. Is this true?

Pramen: Anarchists are playing quite an important role in these protests. We see organized affinity groups building barricades, trying to get bigger groups of people to move around the city and fight the police where it is necessary.

But even that is overshadowed by the creativity that the population is showing on the streets. What we call affinity groups in the anarchist movement is something that exists naturally in society—friends go together to the protest and quite often they talk about what they should do beforehand. So you can see a lot of young people not affiliated with any political currents on the barricades fighting the cops.

As for the strategy... The main goal is very simple—to bring down the dictator. By participating in the protests, to spread the ideas of horizontal organizing and decentralization. Even during the clashes, people are still spreading the leaflets to protesters at the back of the crowd. There is a belief that if people manage to bring down Lukashenko without politicians and big leaders, that will deal a powerful blow to authoritarian tendencies in the country. It will also give a huge boost to self-organization and solidarity in this society.

Everybody understands that this revolution is not going to be a libertarian one. We are not going to be able to bring the state down. However, as anarchists, we can try to push our ideas as hard as possible to come out on the other side with more momentum towards freedom.

What are the different scenarios for how this showdown between Lukashenko and the protesters could turn out?

Pramen: We hope only for one scenario—that Lukashenko is done. Depending on the level of violence, he could be killed, or people might just shave his mustache off. Or he might flee—this happened to most of his friends from East Block who were overthrown. This is the scenario that we are all fighting for.

There is another scenario: Lukashenko stays. In that case, there will be massive repression after the protests subside. Hundreds of people will be prosecuted and sentenced to many years in prison. The list of political prisoners will grow very quickly. Anarchists will be on it for sure.

Repression will destroy any political life in the country. Anything that can pose a threat to the government will be destroyed. It's not clear if the anarchist movement will survive this repression, as most of the groups are actually completely in it.

The collapse of the movement will send Belarusian society into decline. Many people will flee the country for sure. In the absence of political and social pressure, the economic crisis will drop people's income and create more challenges for the working population.

But we don't want to think about the worst-case scenario, because we are fighting for the best-case scenario—and we all know that there is no way back.

How will the departure of Tikhanouskaya affect the movement?

Anonymous: People are mostly struggling for themselves, for their freedom and life. Some people still regard her as a president in exile. Some never really cared. What everyone cares most about at the moment is the fate of those who are imprisoned and the responsibility for carrying on the struggle for those who sacrificed their life or health. So everything depends on the spirit of people, I believe—on whether they are ready to keep the struggle going despite all the violence and cruelty they are experiencing now.

We have seen that Russia has not wholeheartedly supported Lukashenko in this situation. How do you see Putin's strategy here? What would be the implications for Russia and elsewhere in the region if protesters force Lukashenko out of power?

Pramen: It is not clear what is happening in Putin's head. It might be that he is just waiting for Lukashenko to weaken in order to strike a deal that would reduce Belarus to some kind of vassal state. At the same time, Putin is really disappointed with what is happening in Ukraine and Syria—the plans of his political analysts are not working out as he expected. At the end of the day, nothing prevents him from marching the Russian army into Belarus and proclaiming that it is part of Russia.

Putin has been playing with Lukashenko for a long time with the goal of integrating Belarus back into the Russian state. This never worked out, so it might be that there is a political decision not to support Lukashenko, to try to navigate the events in a clever way. Right now, if Putin supports Lukashenko with everything he has and Lukashenko still loses, Belarusian society will turn completely against Moscow. So for Putin, it might be a good tactic to maintain distance until things are clearer.

Anonymous: Putin was one of the first to congratulate Lukashenko on his victory and to affirm the results of the elections. In his message, he called for them to strengthen the collaboration between the two countries. Lukashenko's position is very weak at the moment. With the brutality he used during the elections, he lost any support and diplomatic leverage with the European Union. Now he needs the support of his big eastern brother. This is a very favorable situation for Russia. Without further expense, Russia can spread its influence over Belarus. It seems possible that Putin will do everything possible to keep Lukashenko in power including sending military forces to put down the protests.

At the same time, if the protests force Lukashenko out of power, there are too many factors to take into considerations to make any forecasts. The scenario varies from military

intervention and invasion to Russia acknowledging the new situation in Belarus without intervening.

Is there anything you would like to say to self-proclaimed “anti-imperialists” in the West who support Lukashenko?

Pramen: Well... there could be a long answer. For example, we could explain that Lukashenko is part of the imperialist Russian project in this region. He is supported by Moscow for his loyalty to the Kremlin—and there is nothing “anti-imperialist” in a president who is in power by the will of the empire that holds power in the region. I believe the sort of critics you are describing also love the social benefits that the state allegedly offers in Belarus. However, if you do your research, you will discover that Lukashenko is actually the one who has been destroying social programs in this country for years while preventing people from engaging in any sort of self-organization. We could go on explaining things for hours and hours.

But you know what? Authoritarian leftists don't hear arguments. They are believers. They believe in their “truth” the same way some people believe in a religion. No matter how many good points you can bring, they will maintain their original position.

So we can shift to the short answer: “Go fuck yourself.” But you can still read more constructive things on our website :)

Anonymous: If Lukashenko had the chance, he would build his own empire. If you could understand his speeches, you would realize that he suffers from delusions of grandeur—or “suffers” is probably the wrong word, because he enjoys them. There's nothing anti-imperialist in this political figure in any possible way.

We have seen some “anti-imperialists” alleging that the movement in Belarus is comprised of fascists. There are allegations that the flag many demonstrators are waving is associated with the Nazi occupation of Belarus, for example.

Anonymous: The first documented usage of the white-red-white (WRW) flag goes back to the fourteenth century. It's used nowadays as a symbol of Belarusian self-determination in opposition to the modern state flag and in opposition to Lukashenko's Belarus, since Lukashenko was the one who ordered the creation of what is currently the official flag of Belarus.

I understand where the argument associating the flag with Nazis comes from. There was a very complicated situation during the occupation of Belarus by German fascists in the Second World War. Belarus was strongly oppressed by the Soviet government at that time, which was trying to destroy the Belarusian national identity. For example, in 1933, the Soviet government imposed a brutal and unjustified reform on the Belarusian language, in

which the alphabet was changed from Latin (an alphabet very similar to the Polish language) into Cyrillic. A lot of people experienced repression. In these conditions, when the German army was approaching and the Soviet government evacuated in a panic, some people tried to create a so-called Belarusian Central Council. They were collaborationists, though their motives were not to support and welcome the German Nazis but to seize a chance to create a national sovereign entity. The council existed for less than two years. People who use the WRW flag today are often not even aware of these historical events. The WRW flag is a national flag that has been used throughout history during various times of oppression by many revolutionaries and has nothing to do with the German Nazis in the mind of Belarusian people.

I would draw a parallel with Kurdistan. There's the state flag of Syria and the Syrian regime—and there's the flag of Kurdistan. In the same way, we have the statist flag of Lukashenko—which has only been used only during his presidency, so people avoid using it, especially in this struggle where everything is about deposing him—and the national and historical flag, which is white-red-white.

For sure, there are people in the demonstrations with a wide range of different political views. Most of them don't define themselves politically at all. When miners go on strike because they don't agree with the corrupt state government and the exploitation that their bosses are engaged in, do we try to determine their exact political identity as communists, anarchists, or liberals? Trying to define this huge crowd of hundreds of thousands of people who have suffered through humiliation, exploitation, and oppression for the last quarter of a century seems ridiculous to me. For me, there's one obvious fascist: Lukashenko.

What can anarchists in other parts of the world do to support comrades in Belarus? Are there concrete structures to support those facing repression now? Are there pressure points that international solidarity could focus on?

Pramen: Do solidarity actions. A lot of solidarity actions. Send us pictures of your solidarity actions. Support from outside inspires not only anarchist hearts but the hearts of everyone on the streets. People are seeing that they are not alone. After reading this text, just go paint a really simple banner, get your mates together, and take a picture. This will take couple of hours tops.

If you have more time and energy—be creative. Belarus is a capitalist state. There are a lot of embassies and other points that represent the Belarusian state. In 2010 in Russia, some daring anarchists occupied the Belarusian embassy. This can be one of the ideas on the table. Be creative—and through your creativity, we will know that you are honest in your solidarity!

And if you are tech savvy, start helping us out with problems with internet. In Belarus these days, people with money can access the internet way more easily than grassroots

activists. Free VPN and other solutions are not working and we need a lot of help with this as lack of internet prevents a lot of organizational efforts.

Anonymous: Though hardly realistic, the best support would be to come and to support by directly participating in the protests. We need courageous and decisive people at our side. Another way is by sharing experience and ideas with our protesters—we need your imagination and creativity!

We also need informational support—many people don't know much about Belarus and the real situation here. The reality, mentality, and way of thinking are different in the post-Soviet context that shapes the struggle here. Very often, people fail to understand the differences between political life here and in the West.

Last but not the least, you could organize mass protests in your own countries. We are all connected. What we need above all at any moment in time is the world struggle.

You can also support us through the Belarusian Anarchist Black Cross.

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