

Parasites, Anarchists, and Other Rebellious Creatures

Two Months of Protest and Repression in Belarus

CrimethInc.

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A series of fierce protests broke out all around Belarus in February 2017, continuing throughout March and shaking the foundations of Lukashenko's decades-old rule. Anarchists were at the forefront, radicalizing both the street confrontations and the proposals advanced by the movement; anarchist tactics spread to many other participants, who joined anarchists in pushing back against aggressive police repression. We interviewed Belarusian anarchists who participated in the movement to prepare this full report.

The Belorussian president Alexander Lukashenko first came to power in 1994; he won his fifth mandate in Fall 2015. He has become notorious for violently suppressing social movements and any kind of opposition. The small yet vibrant anarchist and antifascist scene has endured grave repression for many years, with many comrades serving long prison sentences.

The Criminalization of Poverty / The Parasites Fight Back

Belarus has experienced a deep recession for many years now due to its strong economic ties to Russia; consequently, the government has made severe financial cuts in the welfare state. Yet this most recent attempt to criminalize and humiliate the most vulnerable parts of Belorussian society pushed people over the edge. In 2015, Lukashenko introduced a new law stipulating that everyone who has not held a job in the last six months has to pay a special tax to the state to cover the costs of public health care and education. The poorest parts of the population were described as "social parasites"; the only way to avoid the tax was to go through humiliating process of explaining their financial circumstances to a special government commission. According to some estimates, the law affected about half a million of people. Those who could not afford to pay the tax could be sentenced to 15 days of forced labor.

The first march against the new law took place on February 17 in the Belarusian capital city, Minsk. This demonstration was forbidden by the authorities, yet it attracted some 2000 angry people. Some opposition politicians participating in the protest tried to calm the others down, but loud anarchists remained ungovernable. The state responded immediately with repression, but the crowd showed considerable solidarity, rescuing everyone that the police sought to arrest.

Demonstrations spread from Minsk to the cities of Gomel and Brest; they also occurred in small towns that have not seen protest activity in decades, like Orsha, Bobruisk, Kobrin, and Luninec. Despite the fact that Lukashenko pulled back and promised to suspend the law, protests continued, calling for his resignation.

It appeared that what pushed people to the streets was, on one hand, the criminalization of poverty and, on the other hand, the gradual destruction of the welfare state. What do you think brought people over the edge?

Belarus is in an economic crisis right now and that is completely ignored by the state. The President of the country, Alexander Lukashenko, is trying to pretend that everything is better than ever. At the same time, salaries are in decline, factories are closing, and a wave of privatization is pushing people to the edge. To maintain itself, the state has to squeeze

even more money from the people—apart from talks about social parasitism, there is an attempt to blame society for the crisis. So the recent moves away from a welfare state have alienated a lot of people who were supportive or at least not openly opposed to Lukashenko to conclude that something has to change.

The protests were decentralized; in many cases, quite self-organized. Who were the people on the streets and how were they organizing?

In many cases, the protests were still called by opposition activists. However, they managed to mobilize everybody who is dissatisfied with the regime right now. The organization is currently taking place through social networks and some oppositional media platforms that are using their potential to spread news about the events.

It is worth mentioning that normally, protests are concentrated in the capital city of Minsk, but this time, most of the protests took place outside of the capital. People face worse conditions outside of the bigger cities, and this might explain why the protests have been so distributed.

Did any groups try to take over the narrative of the uprising, to centralize it, to control and neutralize dissent and the multiplicity of voices within the protests?

Each opposition party and group is trying to claim the protest. You can see that different oppositional platforms are depicting the protests in different way; they already struggling with each other for the influence. Unlike the first social demands, they are trying to push ideas of fair elections and reforms.

I think a lot of people are skeptical of the opposition parties—they have compromised themselves many times. Already in the protest, they had a split and mobilized only for their own actions, ignoring the actions of their opponents. At the same time, there was a chance that different opposition groups would try to take over the protest in different parts of the country, since different parties have influence in different cities. In the end, however, this didn't happen.

Were nationalists part of this movement?

Liberal-nationalism is a really important ideology among the Belorussian opposition, so you could see some nationalist flags and symbols in the protests. But so far, the socio-political part of the protest didn't give so much space to nationalist agenda.

People forced the regime to rescind the law that provoked the protests. Then they turned against the regime itself. But did they go further than asking for different politicians?

The first demand was to stop the “parasite law,” and then, further, to get rid of Lukashenko. Did people have any idea who or what they wanted to replace him with? I doubt it. This is not what you are thinking about when you are standing together against a dictator. For the revolt to embrace the idea of autonomy and other anarchist values—this is really far away from our society right now. It is also important to mention that eventually, Lukashenko denied that he had canceled the law, so even this small victory has been taken away from people.

The uprising in Belarus is yet another in a long line of Eastern European protests over the last few years. How do you understand the Belarus uprising in the context of hostility between East and West?

The demonstrations around the country didn't lead to any further activity. We hope that after repression, the wave won't subside, and perhaps in that sense, things will get rolling. For now, it is a long shot even to say that Belarus is close to some kind of bourgeois revolution.

However, if the people win and Lukashenko steps down, then opposition will move for sure towards the West and away from Russian influence. At the same time, this could trigger the Ukrainian scenario in which Russia intervenes to keep this territory—annexing it or establishing a puppet regime. The fall of the regime definitely will not contribute to the stabilization of this region in the short term; however, it might bring at least some liberal freedoms in place of the long-lasting rule of dictators from USSR to Lukashenko.

Under a Red and Black Flag

Anarchists were the key element in the protests and, consequently, the main target of oppression. The government went out of its way to argue that anarchists are provocateurs trying to create a “new Maidan” and to destroy peace in Belarus. The authorities issued statements, published videos, and began to prosecute and arrest all the radicals in the country. First, they went after anarchists after the demonstrations, sentencing them to short jail sentences; then they began re-arresting people before they were released from jail, prolonging their sentences.

The demonstration of March 25 was supposed to be one of the biggest gatherings of protesters, a culmination of struggle. Instead, it was the biggest show of police brutality in years. In the days leading up to it, police carried out raids under false pretenses such as calling the fire brigade to break into apartments, arresting everyone who had any prior connections to anarchism or previous political charges. They even broke up a small gathering of people who tried to collect food and money for detainees, arresting them and sentencing them to up to 15 days in prison. Of approximately 100 arrestees, between 30 and 40 were anarchists.

On the day of the March 25 demonstration, police occupied the capitol and started to arrest people as soon as they showed up. Without a clear indication of the final number, it is believed that up to 600 people were arrested. Most were released the same day, but about 100 stayed in prison.

It seems that both Western media and the regime in Belarus have been united in arguing that anarchists played an important role in this protest. What sort of presence did they have?

Anarchists participated in three protests and one failed attempt to join a protest in which they were arrested before reaching the gathering point on March 25. The role of the anarchists was to make the protests lively and to move away from traditional oppositional protests, and this was quite successful: there was a lot of positive feedback from other parts of society. The socially-oriented slogans and alternative proposals that anarchists brought to the movement were far more persuasive to other protesters than the old overused opposition slogans. In that sense, anarchists formed a political movement that could attract a lot of people.

At the same time, the groups of anarchists were never particularly large. Between February and March, the biggest mobilization saw around 30 to 40 people in the anarchist bloc. Yet even that was enough to show that we offer something completely different than the traditional opposition.

Lukashenko identified anarchists as provocateurs, warning of a “new Maidan” and trying to create a state of emergency. On the other hand, the opposition tried to impose the language of peaceful transition on the protest. What was the anarchist reaction to both of these maneuvers?

I don't think that there was a lot of reaction. In his delusions, Lukashenko is always blaming agents of the West that are supposedly planning to destroy his oasis; so for us, those attacks were not that important. Likewise, we didn't plan to react to the peaceful language of opposition; we have our own agenda, and there is no point in getting into discussions with those groups.

How did anarchists try to reach out to other participants in the protests? What lessons can be taken from these two months of participating in such an uprising?

Good slogans and new chants were used for each protest. The visual and audio aspects such as banners and drums brought people closer to the anarchists and increased their curiosity. The media was eager to transmit anarchist messages as part of the protest. We also brought leaflets to spread among people attending the demonstrations. It is hard to talk about the lessons that we got from this movement; the conclusions will be discussed when people are released from prison.

It seems that anarchists were the chief targets of repression. Why do you think that is? Did the state believe that the protests would die out if they cut out the most radical part of it?

The anarchists comprise the group that is most capable of going beyond state-tolerated protest. The bigger the influence of anarchists in protests, the bigger the potential of mobilizing others to go beyond those limitations. I think the police understand this clearly. Anarchists are a threat because they don't hold to dogmatic ideas about non-violent resistance or legality, and they don't have leaders that the authorities can “work with.”

Were anarchists a visible power in Belarus before the uprising? What has the situation been for anarchism in Belarus in the last couple of years?

I think anarchists were visible in Belarus before this. For the last few years, the opposition abandoned the streets in many senses, and anarchists were among the few who were still carrying out some illegal actions and bringing some social projects to society. Still, not so many anarchists were visible in the political arena of the country.

Despite repression, it seems that people have persistently struggled against the regime in Belarus for a long time—not just anarchists, but random people as well. How did other protesters react to repression in this movement? We heard stories about other protesters defending the black bloc and similar occurrences.

Indeed, some people were eager to participate in the demonstrations, even if they would be arrested. This was something that fascinated us: they were not hardcore political activists, but normal people fighting for changes despite the threat of repression.

The solidarity that other demonstrators displayed towards anarchists was incredible. Riot cops were trying to arrest anarchists at the very first demonstration, and some people who were going home from the protest started helping anarchists and pushing away the cops. They didn't expect that from "normal people"! After that, this sort of solidarity occurred again several times. We saw it again on March 15: when the police arrested 50 people, 15 or 20 of them were ordinary participants who had been helping anarchists to resist arrest.

The demonstration of March 25 was supposed to be the biggest protest so far, but Minsk came under police occupation, with the biggest wave of repression so far. What is the situation of those arrested? How many anarchists remain in jail?

Most people have been released from jail following short-term arrests. Unfortunately, one person was sent to jail for violating probation; he will serve two years now. Some arrestees expect to be expelled from the university or to lose their jobs. There is at least one case in which a landlord is evicting someone after the KGB pressed him to do so.

Anarchists from Belarus have called comrades around the world to show solidarity. What can people do to support the struggle?

There are many different ways to support anarchists in Belarus. You could carry out solidarity actions, collect money for legal support, or offer information about how to carry out protests, de-arresting, and any other knowledge that can be useful in such situations.

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