Facing to events in Ukraine: The Belarus opposition’s dilemmas

Description

Should the Belarusian opposition rejoice at the events of the last six months in Ukraine or see them as a threat to their aspirations to affect change in Belarus? The tired mantra of President A.Lukashenka -that only he can guarantee stability in Belarus- has become even harder to discredit in the eyes of ordinary Belarusians in the new geopolitical context.



For those familiar with the history of the Belarusian flag or the country’s contemporary music, the images of Belarusian rock bands performing in Kiev’s Maidan, and of the white-red-white national colours being waved at rallies there, must have been a pleasing sight. But that was the early stage of the revolution in Ukraine. Several months on, the initial euphoria that Minsk could soon witness similar scenes is being replaced by the realisation that the fragmented opposition in Belarus may have to unite not so much against their nemesis –president Aliaksandr Lukashenka- but more likely against a possible external threat from Moscow.

The narrow corridor left to the Belarus opposition by the authoritarian regime of A.Lukashenka as a result of a mixture of repression, intimidation and skilful propaganda over the last decade appears to have got even tighter after the latest events in Ukraine. The removal of the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych in February initially raised expectations that the opposition in Belarus could be galvanised into action similar to that in Kiev’s Maidan, only to give way to disillusionment and uncertainty after the amputation of Crimea from Ukraine in March. The unrest and fighting in eastern Ukraine that followed only added to this uncertainty. With the threat of the Kremlin tightening its grip on several CIS countries, including Belarus, the opposition may be facing an unwelcome prospect of partially supporting elements of A.Lukashenka’s policies, or at least being seen as neutral in the context of events in Ukraine.

The defaced picture of the Belarus opposition

President A.Lukashenka and his apparatus have worked hard to decimate, penetrate, discredit and divide the opposition in Belarus ever since they were able to do so without fear of effective outside censure. For those who refused to be cowed or intimidated there were cyclical bursts of short-term arrests or painful fines on trumped up charges; for those who resisted more, prison term convictions, or beatings often accompanied by confiscations, loss of jobs and livelihood, house and office searches and more. And there have been disappearances and several mysterious murders. For some opposition figures the only option was to leave the country. The result today is a largely marginalised, divided and partly disoriented assortment of political or quasi-political groupings, often centred on prominent individuals, whom the regime either allows to function, or prefers not to challenge directly. They no longer have any representation in Parliament, but interestingly enough, they still have an impact on the country and on A.Lukashenka’s policies, even if he would never admit that openly.

Long-term and consistent efforts by the President’s administration to discredit and belittle key opposition figures have inflicted considerable damage to their image both at home and abroad. Those who have congregated around exiled Belarusian figures in Poland or have been linked to the semi-oppositionist Belsat television broadcasting activities from Poland into Belarus have been portrayed in the Belarusian state media as representing foreign interests for Western money, or working to promote a Polish expansionist agenda in the East. Some opposition presidential candidates would be smeared with hints of being either Russian stooges, or agents on Western payrolls. With limited access to free, independent, or Western media, even most absurd conspiracy theories disseminated by often suspicious bloggers, but often replicated in the official media, would find considerable resonance among ordinary Belarusians. On top of that,

there is a lot of talk about how thoroughly the opposition is infiltrated and managed by the country's plethoric and powerful security apparatus -all this to communicate to the West that it is in fact quite pointless to try and engage with such "useless" people.

Just to make sure that such engagement does not take place on any meaningful level, any foreign funding for non-governmental organisations is forbidden. Only those approved or controlled by the government are exempted.The already restrictive and arbitrary legislation on setting up and registering civil society organisations in Belarus was further tightened up on October 2011 by targeting foreign funding or holding bank accounts abroad. Combined with the Article 193 of the penal code, which makes it a criminal offence to receive "*foreign funds in violation of the national law*", this has had a severe disabling effect on the functioning of NGOs, forcing some to go virtually underground. The net effect of all these measures is that most domestically-based opposition has to make do with pretty docile programmes and policies, limited opposition to the president himself or to his policies, simply to avoid a wholesale ban or reprisals and to be merely tolerated. It is no wonder that many Westerners perceive the opposition in Belarus as being weak and unfocused, or existing in a survival mode only. Few of them are fully aware of what it takes to survive and that wholesale opposition has proved very difficult, if not impossible, and that most opposition figures see limited and selective engagement with the regime as the way forward.

Who is in and who is out?

Recent releases from prison of the leader of the unregistered Malady Front [Young Front], Zmitser Dashkevish, and of one of the leaders of the Belarusian Christian Democrats, Pavel Sieviarynets, appeared to bring a new energy into the country's opposition, criticised in February by the leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), Aliaksey Yanukevich, as " *driven by apathy*". A.Yanukevich said at the time that the events in Kiev « *inspired many*« , and hoped that « *like-minded people in Belarus could be woken up* » by the events in Kiev[1]. Anatol Lyabedzka of the United Civic Party (OGP) called Euromaidan « *a battle against authoritarianism which could send a signal to neighbouring countries*« [2] –all cautious but hopeful hints that a similar scenario could be on the books for Minsk. But the leader of the leftist Spravedlivy Mir [A Just World] party, Siarhei Kalyakin, countered this even at that stage with the observation that the majority of the Belarus population –with its heavy reliance on the state media- did not seem to like what was going on in Ukraine. Being mostly exposed to the official spin, many ordinary Belarusians appear to have distanced themselves from the revolution taking place next door, and the opposition has had no other option but to take their views onboard.

After this timid « peak » in the revolutionary fervour things started to slide down as the Ukrainian crisis deepened. A lengthy and well-reported interview with President Lukashenka by the independent Ukrainian TV host and producer, Savik Schuster in late March[3] brought home to the opposition that he had been skilfully using the Ukrainian events to his own advantage –reinforcing his image also as a statesman and a regional powerbroker, and not only as a guarantor of stability and relative independence from Russia. Clearly, this had a cooling effect on any ambitious plans by the opposition, perhaps even more than the escalating instability and chaos in Ukraine. The expected preventive arrests of opposition leaders ahead of the annual Chernobyl march on 26th April –one of the few prominent opposition events in their calendar- did take place in the annually predictable fashion. The march itself attracted only about half of the participants compared to the year before, further dampening any hopes of a new energy, or a new direction in the opposition movement.

More radical voices on the way forward for Belarus have been coming from the exiled opposition, which either condemns the regime and demands genuinely free elections, or calls for the overthrow of the incumbent president. The former opposition presidential candidate, and a former political prisoner now based abroad, Andrei Sannikov, has again called for the removal of A.Lukashenka, saying that however tragic the events in Ukraine may be, they do constitute an opportunity to change the system in Belarus to align it with European values[4].

But back at home, such appeals may be falling on deaf ears. As things worsened in Ukraine, the perceptions of the impact of the crisis there on Belarus itself, on Russia, and on the CIS region as a whole, have changed from « inspiring » to worrying for many, and to frightening for quite a few. Several prominent opposition figures such as the leader of the Viasna human rights movement, Ales Byalatski, or another former 2010 presidential candidate, Mikalaj Statkevich,

remain in prison serving long term sentences, while recurrent short-term detentions and arrests of activists serve as a reminder of the statement repeated media-wide by Lukashenka: that Maidan will not happen in Belarus[5]. More than 30 opposition activists were subjected to such arrests ahead of the ice hockey world championships in Minsk in May. Several international human rights and democracy activists ostensibly travelling as ice-hockey fans had their entry visas revoked. All these actions have served as a manifestation that A.Lukashenka is fully in control of the political landscape.

Constructively resigned

The opposition is acutely aware that A.Lukashenka is nowhere near in control when it comes to the relations with Russia. They can see that he has combined to great effect the threat of a Ukrainian-style instability with Russia's potential drive to further ingest elements of Belarusian economy into its own system by stealth and blackmail as a way of presenting himself as the only figure capable of preventing any such scenarios. However inaccurate this image of the saviour of the nation may be, its logic appears to be irresistible to the Belarusian public increasingly scared by television images of armed violence and tanks right next door. It is no wonder that the opposition mantra has changed from admiration for EuroMaidan to reassurances that « *Belarus is not like Ukraine* » -strangely echoing the presidential line.

Clearly, A.Lukashenka has achieved a feat: a situation in which criticising or challenging him would be widely perceived as unpatriotic and detrimental to Belarusian sovereignty. The tight spot the opposition had already been in before Maidan has only got that much tighter -effectively forcing opposition parties into resigning themselves to support their adversary.

References :

[1] *Deutsche Welle* interview on 15.02.2014, retrieved from www.dw.de on 10.05.2014.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] "Svoboda Slova" [Freedom of Speech] programme on Ukrainian state TV channel *Pershyi Natsyonalnyi* (in Russian) on 23 March, retrieved from www.youtube.com on 10.05.2014.
[4] Interview with *France24* TV channel on 8.05.2014, retrieved on 10.05.2014 from http://charter97.org
[5] A.Lukashenka's speech at the annual reception for the Belarusian armed forces and the state security agencies on Fatherland's Defenders Day, as reported by www.tut.by on 23.02.2014, retrieved on 10.05.2014.

Translation in French

Picture : Pickets on Maidan in Kiev on 23 January 2014. Photo: Ilya Varlamov (zyalt.livejournal.com).

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