



Belarus Brief

Message in a Bottle: the spirit lives on

March 30, 2007

Executive Summary

March 25th proved to be a day to remember in Belarus. A year after the wave of protests that followed the 2006 presidential elections, Belarusians were out in numbers, demonstrating that the spirit of opposition lives on. Special forces (OMON) may command the streets, but the country remains elusive.

A crowd estimated at five to ten thousand (even the Minsk police admitted the attendance of up to 3,000 participants) turned up on March 25th to celebrate the Day of Freedom. The celebration was intended to mark the anniversary of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic of 1918, the first independent Belarusian state, later crushed by the Bolsheviks. This day stems from the Day of Unity originally put forward by the team of Alexander Milinkevich and others, but later only Charter 97, to suggest cohesion with the authorities.

The significant police presence gave a clear answer to those who believed a positive reaction to this initiative from the ruling regime might be forthcoming – the center was completely sealed off, thus preventing demonstrators from proceeding freely. However, the effort of the police force to avoid brutality was apparent. As a result, the number of arrests (prior to and during the event) was less than last year. Nonetheless, human rights activists indicate that forty cases of violence is still significant. As such, it is doubtful whether or not this 'performance' will be good enough to maintain ongoing dialogue with the EU.

On the other side, the opposition has proceeded as usual - there was no visible plan for the event and no clear message delivered. However, the young people of Belarus did make the day worthy of the label 'celebration'. The spontaneous reaction of so many and the intense interaction leading up to the event via the internet has re-shaped this national holiday, creating a day for Belarus that is both symbolic of the past and indicative of the potential for change. This new generation of grass roots revelers, celebrating in the streets of Minsk, is for the moment a greater threat to the regime than the formal opposition.

Nevertheless, even if the new generation continues to demonstrate their spirit in such a lively manner, the responsibility of not only sustaining, but building on this momentum, will rest with the currently divided opposition. Opposition leaders will have to decide whether they will persist with an internal power struggle or exhibit a strong interest in reaching out to Belarusians, providing alternatives and explaining the necessity of transition through reforms. Since the Belarus regime is likely to accelerate transition before the upcoming Russian and Belarusian elections in 2008, it is about time for the United Democratic Forces (UDF) to consolidate and re-emerge as a functional alternative. The success of the demonstration, regardless, may push the various opposition factions toward a new agreement.

The Regime: divide et imperia

The strategy of the regime toward the Day of Freedom has been twofold: to avoid a repetition of last year's events, but also to steer clear of repression, focusing instead on preventive measures. The police detained around thirty activists in Minsk and nearby regions before the event, but in most cases detainees were merely warned that they might be punished under administrative law if they took part in the March 25th event. The total of 40 activists imprisoned throughout the day of the event is certainly lower than last year. However, the abduction of Krystsina Shatsikava (picked up by police at her friend's apartment in Minsk, driven in a minibus with tinted windows back to her home in Mogylov, questioned by the KGB and even held in a mental hospital) was brutal, bizarre and remains troubling.

Similarly strange was the behavior of the authorities toward the opposition's plan to celebrate. Two days before the event the official organizers of the demonstration, Ihar Shynkaryk of the United Civic Party and Anatol Levkovich of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada, led by Alexander Kazulin), were warned against the initiation of unsanctioned action. However, as a result of further discussion the city police chief agreed that compromise was necessary and ordered his deputy to meet with organizers at the main square before the scheduled time, while allowing a rally at the Academy of Sciences.

In contrast, sealing off Oktobrskaya Square (metro stations and shops, including McDonald's, were closed) sent a clear message to both the opposition and to Europe upon which terms the regime is willing to carry out further dialogue. The rather strange police behavior was enough for the Soc-Dem Levkovich to withdraw his signature from the official application for the demonstration, stating that his party "has never played according to the authorities' scenario". The same approach, differentiation from other opposition factions, might have led to the Communist Party decision to not take part in the demonstration. The Kazulin-led Social Democrats and the Communists are leading the way toward a united left under the project of the Alliance of Leftists Forces.

As ironic as it may sound, the only activist facing criminal charges for staging the demonstration in Minsk on March 25th is Vyacheslav Shivchyk, who was arrested in Minsk the evening before the demonstration took place. His name is not among the official organizers, but he has been one of the true leaders of the ongoing protests following the fraudulent presidential elections last year.

Another 'soft' pre-emptive measure prearranged by the regime to counter excessive participation in the Day of Freedom took the form of a series of events organized by the youth affairs department of the Minsk City Executive Committee and the state-funded Belarusian National Youth Union (so-called Lukamol) under the slogan "For Independent Belarus!" According to observers, concerts at the National Library and the old Minsk airport attracted large crowds.

Meanwhile, the regime is focused on generating additional income. Some believe that the partial privatization of large enterprises is imminent. According to unconfirmed sources, the presidential administration is drafting a list of enterprises to be privatized. Further, the regime may use oil and arms profits to attract foreign investment. The main portion of these profits is believed to be transferred through Belarusian and foreign accounts to the United Arab Emirates. According to the claims of a few Belarusian analysts following the income generating efforts of authorities, Bulgarian and Slovak companies might be used as intermediaries in the sale of Belarusian weapons to Africa and Latin America. Some indirect evidence suggests that Austrian companies also took part in money-laundering deals.

In order to hide privatization plans and maintain a successful 'manager of the state image', Lukashenko undertakes official visits with carefully designed outcomes. Meanwhile, Lukashenko could basically take back Belarusian funds from the Emirates for privatization purposes under the guise of Arabic investments into Belarus. Thus, the Belarusian regime may produce another miracle – privatization under the full control of the president.

Lukashenko's newly promoted son, a fresh and powerful member of the Security Council, is rumored to be heading these efforts. It may sound unrealistic, but a scenario suggesting that the regime has started its own transition should not be disregarded. The pressure is high, as even Lukashenko admitted, commenting on his 'habit' of disappearing around the Day of Freedom. Before making a statement on March 28th he last appeared on television on March 10th. His absence also suggests that the demonstration was not a bad event for democratic forces after all...

The Opposition: keeping the fight

Like Lukashenko, the opposition has changed little since last year. The UDF, for example, 'forgot' to develop significant strategies for the Day of Freedom. The organization committee of the UDF seems to have followed the old Central European political proverb – if you don't want to achieve any results, set up a committee. The lack of a clear message, insufficient equipment and the rather confusing range of purposes underlying March 25th (celebrate freedom, unity or simply protest) certainly indicate an inability on the part of the UDF to manage opposition efforts effectively. Thus, the opposition carried on as usual. Only the turnout and the large number of old Belarusian and EU flags made the opposition appear competent. It seems to have been "pure dissidence" as one Belarusian analyst put it bluntly, as there was no serious desire to challenge the current government.

The current disputes within the UDF are reflected in several ways. The failure of the Communist leader Kaliakin and his comrades to even show up to the event and the United Civic Party suggesting on their website that Anatolij Lebedko was behind everything that happened on the Day of Freedom are typical. The Milinkevich team, which perhaps put in the greatest effort to mobilize support, may claim a leadership role as a result. The Communists failure to appear illustrates the historical dimension of the divide within the Belarusian opposition: this is not simply a holiday for the Communists, just as the October Revolution will never be a holiday for the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF). Still, the turnout on this Day of Freedom was larger than the last one, which certainly adds to its importance, creating a fully recognized national day (similar to communist-era Czechoslovakia's Student Day, November 17) full of meaning. Other events from communist-era Czechoslovakia are helpful in demonstrating that such creations provide effective challenges for the dominant regime.

After the Day of Freedom the opposition will have to decide whether or not it will continue to deepen its focus on internal power struggles or finally show an interest in reaching out to Belarusians with a message that emphasizes alternatives and explains the necessity of transition through reforms. Building on the spirit of the new generation and starting regime changes before the upcoming Russian and Belarusian elections in 2008, as well as consolidation of the UDF as a functional party, could be key development factors.

The next congress of the UDF remains the single biggest issue. There is hope that the success of the demonstration will push opposition leaders toward a resolution. The major problems behind a united congress are the selection of participants and the agenda. Since the opposition did not keep its previously promised conditions (300 signatures collected during the local government campaign) organizing a congress that would not be attacked by either faction will be hard. As such, transparency is essential to both avoid the organization of a congress restricted to the involvement of the leaders and to institute a common direction that all can agree on. The issues on the agenda look a bit more promising as the Lebedko-driven National Committee made efforts to draft the so-called 'Minor Constitution' and a new economic program. This, however, was made without any engagement from the Milinkevich side, which clearly shows the contrast between Lebedko and Milinkevich – the former pursues program development through the National Committee (with no serious effort toward public awareness) and the latter is the symbol of grass roots mobilization. Sergei Kaliakin, architect of the Union of Left Forces, is the third contender.

Nevertheless, the main question is whether the main focus will be personal (e.g. dethroning Milinkevich) or centered on reforming the UDF and developing alternative policies.

Society: keeping the faith

Perhaps the best news from Belarus after March 25th is the re-affirmation of the spirit shown by the new generation. Not only unafraid, they have been developing a more affirmative attitude toward the regime (and to some extent to the opposition) which exhibits the attributes of a new power on the rise. Driven not by structures (youth organizations), but various civic initiatives empowered by a clear, Belarusian national identity (picked up in schools in Belarusian language) and the internet as a potentially effective political tool they have started to challenge both the regime and the opposition.

This challenge from the new generation, if further reinforced, is a crucial element that has so far been missing in Belarus. Most of those who participated in the events of the Day of Freedom were young. These people showed courage last year and sent another strong signal to the regime: it is not winning the battle over the youth. Neither has the opposition, with boring speeches and a general lack of initiative, won any favor with the Belarusian youth. Listening to "thank you for coming, we will win, *Zhivie Belarus*" is not enough for these youthful supporters. The opposition, however, need not lose this generation entirely, for the youth of Belarus could be major contributors toward change, not necessarily in the way of new, defining structures, but as a refreshing drive within the society.

The days following March 25th contributed another important aspect – humor. Internet users found a favorite with a picture published by Nasha Niva depicting Lukashenko's favorite singer in a piquant pose. Not dressed appropriately for her concert at the official celebration, the wind revealed a side of the performer that photographers were all-too-pleased to capture. Needless to say, she was the butt of many a joke following the performance. The picture attracted large attention and increased the overall feeling of satisfaction with the demonstration.

Meanwhile, a majority of Belarusian society feel rather downtrodden. The government altered the country's 2007 external economic targets last week and there is growing dissatisfaction with increasing prices. Even "*Sovetskaya Belorussiya*", a Belarusian daily, ran articles on controversial energy-saving measures taken at kindergartens and schools across the country. Many have been ordered to reduce electricity and heat consumption by 10-15%. The consequences of the Russian effort to decrease economic support for Lukashenko has already been felt as real average wages are down 9% while inflation is up. As Belarusian bloggers have put it, this is balanced by the fact that the production of alcoholic beverages is up. This could turn the famous Belarusian stability into stagnation, which would contribute to a shift in public mood and increase the willingness of the majority to listen to alternative plans.

Last but not least, any transition attempt by the regime, or even just an increased role for Viktor Lukashenko in state affairs, is likely to increase the possibility of unrest and subsequent change. Now is the time to send a message to the Belarusian people about the real situation of the country and to provide alternative policies in a popular way. Such a focus would be a large step toward making change a distinct possibility for the majority of Belarusians.