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Belarus

Regime intensifies repression, but struggle continues

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For 25 and 27 March 2021, the leaders of what is being called the new opposition in Belarus announced a return of street demonstrations. These would show the level of mobilization of protests and indicate whether the people were ready to continue their struggle against the Bonapartist regime of President Lukashenko.

This question concerned all opponents of the authorities, for the mass actions on these days would make it clear whether the regime's repressive measures had worked and whether the political revolution was going to have a prolonged character.

Police violence

It should be noted that by the end of November 2020, protest actions had started to acquire a local and ad hoc character, having moved from the central streets of the cities to the dormitory towns and suburbs. The latest event that prompted the masses to take to the streets and sparked an outbreak of police violence was the murder of opposition supporter Roman Bonadrenko by law enforcement officials. On 11 November 2020, he was beaten by plainclothes law enforcement officers for asking them not to destroy the symbols of protest in the courtyard of his apartment building. The next day, Roman died in the hospital emergency room. A spontaneous popular memorial formed in this courtyard, and the police have repeatedly assaulted it. After the brutal repression of popular demonstrations linked to Bonadrenko's death, the regime, taking advantage of the ebb of the wave of protest, launched a repression and set out in search of the most politically active citizens: civic and trade union activists, human rights activists, leaders of the "neighbours' committees" which had been formed in buildings in the most contested areas and all those who took the most active part in the events of August-September 2020. On 17 March, the Belarusian Prosecutor's Office reported that 468 criminal cases had been opened against 631 people because of their participation in protest activities, and that more than 270 people had the status of political prisoners. The Investigation Committee says more than 2,300 criminal cases related to "extremist" activity have been opened since last summer. At the same time, not a single law enforcement officer has been prosecuted for abuse of power - even protester Gennady Shutov, killed in August, was posthumously found "guilty" of resistance and use of violence against a state official - and the police officers who confessed to the murder were tried as victims.

All of these figures are important for understanding the state of Belarusian society as the protesters prepared to return to the streets: an atmosphere of frightening terror, the real possibility of receiving a prison sentence for coordinating protests in your apartment building or workplace, and even being tortured or killed.

In addition, the penalties provided for by the Code of Administrative Offenses for participation in an unauthorized mass event have been tightened - measures such as warnings have been removed, the amount of fines and the duration of administrative arrest have been increased. At the same time, it is impossible to organize a legal protest rally in Belarus, as all decisions are taken by the authorities. There are plans to strengthen the law on the procedure for the organization of massive events (which was already repressive in nature) and to give the executive the exclusive right to grant their authorization.

Dictator's victory not recognised

On 25 March, the Interior Ministry press service reported isolated instances of protest activity, but the facts say otherwise. Because Belarusian police said more than 200 people were arrested for participating in protest actions. On that day, the main opposition media reported that protests were “back in the streets”, but after a long, politically glacial winter, people were unable to organize and take to the streets in droves. Nevertheless, small spontaneous “chains of solidarity” formed in the centre of Minsk. After that, the format was instantly changed: opposition media called on drivers to honk their horns in support of the protests and protesting citizens to fire fireworks at 9 p.m.

In Minsk and other cities across the country, the sky trembled under fireworks for at least half an hour, and car horns could be heard even several kilometres from the city centre. Everything was very clear: nobody recognized the victory of the dictator, nobody forgave the terror and the repression, but all these beautiful actions were rather gestures of revolutionary impotence. Of course, KGB policemen, and Lukashenko himself in his pink palace, probably had to grit their teeth when they saw the Minsk sky lit up with thousands of bursts of protest and heard the howl of hundreds of car horns. But however beautiful the performances, one thing deserves to be understood: Horns, fireworks and other symbolic acts of defiance do not overthrow dictatorial regimes or even bring victory closer.

On 27 March, the residents of Minsk again attempted to rally for street action, but the increased concentration of the forces of order and military equipment in the city did not give the opportunity and at least 240 people were arrested. According to more precise data, from 25-27 March, more than 500 people were detained. This attempt by people to support each other and declare continued resistance in difficult times of reaction cost the protesters 15 days in inhumane conditions.

Form and content

Why were the actions scheduled for 25 March? Unfortunately, some “Marxists” put form over content and categorically refused to support the protests as a whole, especially because of the date. For it was on 25 March 1918 that the independence of the “Belarusian People's Republic” (BPR) was proclaimed. Every year this day is celebrated by the national democratic Parties, including the social democrats. Those who participated in the proclamation of the BPR were left-wing socialists by conviction and were members of the Bielaruskaya sotsialistichnaya Hramada (Belarusian Socialist Community) party. The announcement of the establishment of the BPR became possible thanks to the October Revolution and Lenin's national policy, for, as we know, Lenin, in his article “Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?” (September 1917) was probably the first politician in history to put forward the idea of complete independence for Belarus, and not just autonomy.

Thus, the BPR was initially founded on good principles, in particular the reduction of the working day, the socialization of the means of production and the confiscation of land holdings without compensation. Nevertheless, the BPR was in reality a stillborn project: having no citizenship, monetary system, or army. This “republic” existed in the territory occupied by German troops and was in fact an organ under the administration of the occupier. Over time, the BPR increasingly became an affront - a fact recognized even by its leaders - and the project itself acquired an anti-Bolshevik character. At the end of its existence, the BPR leadership sought the support of various reactionary forces, from the German Kaiser to the White Guards. As a result, on the territory liberated from the Germans, on 1 January 1919, the real Belarusian state - the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic - was founded.

As one might expect, for the Belarusian left the date of 25 March is questionable: the social democrats see it as a failed socialist project and the national democrats appreciate it for its subsequent anti-Bolshevism. As for Marxists, they have always distanced themselves from this date. Every year on this day, authorized and unauthorized actions were organized by part of the Belarusian opposition. The authorities tolerated the holding of a rally or march on that day, although there were usually arrests. This year, the authorities refused to organize a legal event, arguing that it could be used “by destructive forces to destabilize the situation in the country”. In fact, the right to freedom of

assembly has been violated without any reason, as is always the case in Belarus. But part of the left has adopted an openly sectarian position and thus approved the actions of the authorities, refusing to participate in the protests or remaining silent on the torture and detentions. All this solely for the historical reasons described above related to the date of 25 March.

Analysing the situation from a Marxist perspective, our party, "A Just World", understands that form cannot define content and that we must support the democratic demands of the people, which coincide with our political program. This is why the Minsk committee of our party condemned the actions of the authorities aimed at intimidating the citizens and creating an atmosphere of a state of emergency in the capital. Our party also said that all detainees should be immediately released while those responsible for using violence and restricting citizens' rights to freedom of assembly should be punished and publicly apologize to all victims. Furthermore, it is no exaggeration to say that most of the protesters were unaware of the historical and ideological background of the day the protest was to take place. The fact that people take to the streets on dates other than those associated with the history of the labour and communist movement only demonstrates the left's lack of systematic work with protesters and the snobbery of most left groups, which place "ideological purity" above support for the just demands of the masses.

New repressive laws

Although the actions of 25 and 27 March were repressed and took place in a "clandestine" manner, the authorities have grasped this indication of the will to continue the struggle given by the majority of Belarusians and have announced a new package of repressive laws. On 16 April 2021, the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus adopted at second (last) reading a bill "on the modification of the fight against extremism". Among other things, this draft broadens the definition of "extremism" and "extremist activity", effectively allowing the Interior Ministry to decide who is extremist. In addition, under the new law, the police now have the right to use force "at their own discretion, taking into account the development of the situation" and are no longer liable for any damage resulting from the resort to force. Of course, there are some caveats in the law, such as the fact that when using means of restraint or other devices, a police officer must strive to cause as little damage as possible, but it is clear that they are simply formal, because such reservations existed previously without preventing the police from using brutality and torture. But it is the amendments to the Penal Code that are most important in this package of repressive laws. They provide for the criminal prosecution of a person who has allegedly been administratively sanctioned twice in the name of the Law on the Organization of Mass Events. In other words, if a person is caught by the police at a rally for the third time in a year, they can be handed a prison sentence of several years. The new edition of the law "on mass events" also introduces repressive innovations: from now on, political parties are responsible (!) for each member of the party who participates in an unauthorized rally. This creates a legal basis for the liquidation of opposition parties, because if a second warning is issued within a year, according to the law the party can be dissolved by the Supreme Court.

However, despite the passage of repressive laws and the massive sentences of a political character, we must remain optimistic. Despite all these frightening things, the left opposition and all those who are against the dictatorship are not weakened. Just a year ago, few people would have imagined that support for the regime would be so low and interest in politics so high. Only a year ago, no one could have imagined that even under conditions of severe repression, independent trade unions would develop, and Belarusians would actively join existing opposition political parties and talk about the creation of new political structures. Despite repression of a magnitude comparable to that of the Stalinist era, the grassroots initiatives and strike committees, created at the height of the protest mobilization, continue. As for the other tactics of socialists, it is impossible to say anything new, as there are no magic recipes that will set the masses in motion and destroy the fear that has been sown by the regime in these long and difficult months. Our tasks remain the same: to strengthen ties with the labour movement, try to maintain the structures of our parties and unions and to carry out the explanation of our socialist program as much as possible under the existing conditions.

Popular discontent inevitable

Of course, there is now an atmosphere of demoralization and pessimism. However, the political crisis has not gone away, and the dictatorship has received a severe blow, the regime continues to be afraid and operates under conditions which are an existential threat to it. Many civil servants, police officers, teachers, medical and cultural workers left public service in 2020 in protest, and the dictator has reason to doubt the loyalty of those who still continue to work in the public sector. The number of opponents of the regime has not decreased since last autumn but has increased following the repression and threats against all those who voice criticism. The living conditions of citizens continue to deteriorate: wages have continued to fall for several consecutive months, the real amount of pensions reached its lowest level in February, there are cases of wage arrears, prices increased significantly, and inflation was much higher than expected by the National Bank. In addition, there is information about the preparation of mass layoffs and the lack of funds in the budget.

A massive explosion of popular discontent in the near future is not only possible, but inevitable. The only question is what the trigger for a new wave of mobilization will be. It is worth recalling here one of the laws of dialectics: the passage from the quantitative to the qualitative. An event in itself may not be the cause, but it may be the last necessary element in the chain of other events that lead to social explosion.

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