



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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Belarus - In the Tight Embrace of the 'Russian World': Belarusian Reactions to Events in Ukraine

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Belarus.

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Events in Ukraine are currently drawing the attention of the whole world, but some aspects of the crisis have gone unnoticed: the Ukrainian crisis is far more than a domestic struggle of Ukrainians with their oligarchic rulers or tensions in Russian-Ukrainian relations. The entire balance of power and the rules of the game in the region are changing, and these changes are highly significant for all neighbouring countries. This article focuses on Belarus. Firstly, I will analyse the reaction of the Belarusian regime to the events in Ukraine and then explore the possible consequences of the unfolding of Ukrainian crisis.

The Neutral Reaction of the Belarusian Regime

Recent developments in Ukraine revived discussions of the different paths taken by Belarus and Ukraine in the transition from state socialism. Earlier, especially in the 1990s, the successful national and democratic development of Ukraine was often contrasted with Belarus' status as a "Communist reservation" and a "Russian vassal". Subsequent political developments in the two countries altered this black-and-white picture, but a fundamental difference remains: the regime in Belarus is very stable and capable of retaining power in an economic and political crisis, while the government of Ukraine rotates constantly. The two neighbours watch each other closely and try to understand the benefits and costs of each model.

Many Ukrainians envy the Belarusian way with its stability, order and familiar populism. This was clear in the interview given by Alexander Lukashenka on the TV programme "Shuster LIVE" on 28 March 2014. During the programme, the level of audience's support for the Belarusian president's statements at times reached one hundred per cent.^[1] We should remember that when Yanukovich started to consolidate presidential power and restrict democratic freedoms, he was said to be copying Lukashenka's political style.

For the Belarusian regime the permanent political protests and revolutions in Ukraine (which are successful to the extent that they force a change of leadership) represent a symbolic threat near the border. The Belarusian authorities were especially nervous about the situation in the Ukraine during the Orange Revolution of 2004, when the spirit of a triumphant march of revolutions across the post-Soviet space hovered in the air.

This time, the overall tone of official media reports during the recent Maidan demonstrations was unemotional and the keyword "neutrality" dominated among the experts. The Belarusian analyst Paŭliuk Bykoŭski from the independent newspaper *Belarusy i Rynok* (Belarusians and the Market) studied the reporting on the Ukrainian events by Belarusian information agencies. He concluded that Belarusian media of various political orientations managed to maintain its neutrality and did not slide into information war tactics like spreading false information and stereotyping. Vadzim Hihin, one of the main representatives of the official line and editor-in-chief of the *Bielaruskaja Dumka* (Belarusian Thought) journal expressed a similar view about the representation of the events in Ukraine events in the Belarusian media: "Few media in the world managed to preserve their neutrality when presenting the Ukrainian events. It was an honour that the Belarusian media, both official and unofficial, managed to do this."^[2] The behaviour of the official media - fully controlled by the state and often accused of political propaganda - was, of course, more surprising. The caution shown by official newspapers and television,

which avoided radical statements and refused to implicitly support Moscow's actions, stems from the position of the country's political leadership. This time, Belarusian authorities do not have a tangible fear of a new Maidan^[3], and one can reasonably wonder why this is so.

Belarus' Strategy

Despite the joyful response of democratic activists in Belarus to the protests in Ukraine, it is unlikely that mass protests and political transformation will spread to Belarus. For that to happen, public discontent with the regime does not suffice. Competence in political struggle is also needed, and that has practically disappeared in the long period of stable authoritarian rule in Belarus. So while the Belarusian democratic opposition rejoices at the Maidan's success and supports the transformations in Ukraine, the transfer of the revolution to the north is already out of the question.

We should also consider the change in relations between the political elites of Ukraine and Belarus. After the Orange Revolution, Lukashenka quickly managed to establish friendly relations with Viktor Yushchenko despite all outer ideological controversies. Meanwhile, with Yanukovich he could not get on good terms from the very start of his presidential term. Maybe the criminal habits of the latter provoked a personal conflict again. That is why with all restrained and watchful estimates of revolutionary events in Ukraine, Belarusian authorities did not lend even a formal support to Yanukovich. But as soon as new government was formed in Kyiv (importantly, not yet recognised by Moscow), official Minsk declared its intention to cooperate with Ukraine.^[4] The meeting of Lukashenka and Turchynov on 29 March 2014 on Belarusian territory demonstrated that this intention was indeed serious.^[5]

Clearly, Lukashenka sees the revolutionary overthrow of the Kiev regime as the lesser of two evils. But what is the bigger evil then?

Russia's intervention in Ukraine and active destabilization of the situation there has profoundly changed the balance of power. Before this turn of events, Lukashenka publicly stated that Belarus is interested in maintaining Ukraine's territorial integrity (23 February 2014). As the conflict escalated dramatically and the economic and political situation became more unstable, the neutrality of the official media evidenced the Belarusian regime's strategy of striking a balance between competing interests and avoiding coming out in support of one side.

This might appear ridiculous, given Belarus' close relations with Russia in all spheres: economic dependence on cheap energy resources; the Customs Union; the Union State of Belarus and Russia; agreements on military cooperation; and Russian military bases on Belarusian territory. And the way to the West for Lukashenka was blocked long ago.

The reluctance of Belarus to recognize the 'independence' of South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the Russian-Georgian War of 2008 already demonstrated Lukashenka's efforts to pursue a foreign policy independent of Russia. In the present case the stakes are even higher since the conflict is developing near the Belarusian border and the pressure from Russian side to determine the position of Belarus in the conflict became more evident. Moreover, the argument of the existence of a "Russian world" - a Russian-speaking population that must be defended - which was used to legitimize Russian intervention in the Crimea, may also be employed in the case of Belarus. The prevalence of the Russian language in the Belarusian public sphere would not be of great significance here. In the last three years, the Russian news agency "Regnum"^[6] has continuously published sensationalist reports of forced Belarusianisation and the violation of the rights of the Russian minority in Belarus. Such reports were not given any

credence inside the country since they distorted reality and grossly exaggerated existing problems. However, now it has become clear that a propaganda campaign can provide grounds for military actions. The Kremlin's political engineers also fabricated the violation of Russophone rights in the Crimea.

Belarus cannot engage in an open conflict with Russia because the same claims of the violation of the Russian-speaking population's rights could be used in Belarus and lead to another extension of the 'Russian world' at the expense of lost territories of the North-Western Territory.^[7] But at the same time, Lukashenka does not want to support the annexation of the Crimea, because that would be tantamount to surrendering under Kremlin pressure and would downgrade Belarus' status in Russian-Belarusian relations. Both the rhetoric and the concrete steps taken by Belarusian authorities are characterized by ambivalence and inconsistency. Concrete and irreversible steps are avoided. A good example of this was seen in Alexander Lukashenka's interview of 23 March 2014, after which the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine recalled its ambassador. Driven into a corner by journalists, Lukashenka formulated his position as follows: "Ukraine should remain whole, but the Crimea is today de facto a part of Russia." In the same breath, he repeated all the well-known clichés about Belarus' historical brotherhood with its Eastern neighbour and its determination to remain on the Russian side in all conflicts.^[8] So, the rhetorical strategy of the Belarusian regime combines invocations of a brotherhood with Russia and promises of support for Russia in a difficult situation with the most cautious analysis of Ukrainian events. Unequivocal statements are avoided at all costs so as not to slide into an information war.

Information War

Here we should take another factor into account - the vast spread of Russian mass media in Belarus, which has a strong impact on the Belarusian population. The Belarusian authorities recognized this threat early on and took it under control, but pre-moderation^[9] of Russian informational and analytical programmes focus on criticizing the Belarusian regime. This was crucial during the trade wars with Russia. Reporting on Ukraine is not censored in Belarus, so popular and influential Russian media (which the public polls confirm) fuel the Crimean hysteria and an anti-Ukrainian mood in Belarusian society beyond the control of the Belarusian authorities.

In the information war between Ukraine and Russia, appeals to history and especially to the Bandera myth have become a most dangerous weapon, because they reinforce long-lived stereotypes from Soviet times. In some cases, support for the ideals of the Maidan has converged with the heroization of Bandera and the OUN/UPA. The same development can also be observed in Belarus - at a demonstration on Liberty Day on 25 March 2014 the oppositional organisation Youth Front carried a banner with portraits of Shukhevich and Bandera to demonstrate its symbolic support for Ukrainians in the fight against Russian imperialism.^[10] However, neither the general public nor the opposition interpreted this as a positive step.

The official Belarusian media are cautious about engaging in the politics of history. Apart from reprinting a few Russian stories, the most influential newspaper "Belarus Segodnya" (Belarus Today) published only two articles on 3 and 4 March 2014 under the headline "A Bloody Trace That the Ukrainian Insurgent Army Left in Belarus".^[11] However, even here the journalist based his story on historical research, and despite the obvious influence of Soviet sources, the style of the piece was much more reserved than those of Russian journalists, who tend to demonise the UPA and speculate about human tragedies.

The unfolding of the Ukrainian crisis and especially the Russian annexation of the Crimea put numerous issues on the agenda that had previously been ignored: Lukashenka's desire to reduce the country's

dependence on Russia, and the inability to resist the pressure exerted on Belarus by Russia (also in the form of information). Belarus finds itself in a situation where the rule of the gun has returned to international relations, and international guarantees are a delusive defence in potential conflicts. Without any help from the West, Belarus has to maintain the ambivalence of its official position and maximise the neutrality of reporting by mass media. Yet it is unclear how long it can keep up this balancing act since the 'Russian World' seems to be on an expansion course.

Footnotes

1. Interview with Alexander Lukashenko, retrieved 18 May 2015, URL: www.youtube.com/watch.
2. Yuras Uskou, Vadzim Gigin asudziu "Nasha Nivu" za adnabakovasts u asvyatlenni ukrainskikh padzey, Nasha Niva (5 March 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=124145>.
3. For example, see these publications in "Belarus Today": Nina Romanova and Reyter, Getman ischez, U pobediteley pir goroy, Belarus Segodnya (24 February 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: <http://www.sb.by/post/159853/>; Nina Romanova and Reyter, Krimskie chaci nachali otoschet novogo vremeni, Belarus Segodnya (18 February 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: <http://www.sb.by/post/160917/>; Reyter and Vsevolod Shimov, Na Yugo-vostoke kholodno, Belarus Segodnya (7 April 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: <http://www.sb.by/post/161965/>.
4. Lukashenko, nikto ne dolzhen razderbaint Ukrainu, Naviny.by (23 February 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/02/23/ic_articles_112_184685/.
5. Vladimir Matveev, Vctrecha Lukashenko s Turchinovim dlilac bolee trekh chasov, oni "nashli ponimaine po vsem volnuyoshchim problemam", tut.by (29 March 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: <http://news.tut.by/politics/392889.html>.
6. Webside of the Russian news agency Regnum, retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: <http://www.belarus.regnum.ru>.
7. North-Western Territory is a term for Belarusian lands in former Russian Empire.
8. Tatstsya Karavyankova, Lukashenka: Ukraina pavinna zactravatstva nepadzelnay, ale Krim de-fakta – chactka Pasii (dapounena), Belapan (23 March 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: belapan.com/archive/2014/03/23/689822_689823/.
9. Russian TV channels are not shown in live format. Belarusian editorial office uses recorded programs sent from Moscow.
10. Radiyo Svaboda, Maladi Front tlumachits, kago lichits geroyami, Radiyo Svaboda (28 March 2014), retrieved 28 May 2015, URL: <http://www.svaboda.mobi/a/25312763.html>.
11. Sovetskaya Belarussiya No 62 (24445), Gore ot UPA, Belarus Segodnya (2 April 2014), retrieved 3 June 2015, URL: <http://www.sb.by/obshchestvo/article/gore-ot-upa-161764.html>; Sovetskaya Belarussiya No 63 (24446), Gore ot UPA, Belarus Segodnya (3 April 2014), retrieved 3 June 2015, URL: <http://www.sb.by/obshchestvo/article/gore-ot-upa-161840.html>.

