

A b s t r a c t s

Power, not Violence Belarus: Taking Steps towards Freedom

Or

Violence, not Power Belarus: Repression, Harassment, Terror

Helmut König

Power and violence

Passing remarks on basic principles in Belarus

Power and violence are political keywords. Max Weber canonised their use in a specific way and defined the state as the holder of a monopoly on violence. Hannah Arendt made a thorough examination of the relationship between power and violence. In the Eastern-central and Eastern European revolutions after 1989 and currently in Belarus, it has been demonstrated that the use of violence is not a sign of power, but is rather quite the contrary: a sign of the loss of power.

Astrid Sahm

Political stalemate in Belarus

Stages of a systemic crisis

The political crisis in Belarus is more than just a conflict between state and society. The protests and the violent measures taken by the security forces are shattering the self-image that people in Belarus have of their nation. The mobilisation, the solidarity and also the repression are unique in the history of the country. There is no force that could act as a broker and show the way to a compromise. Belarus thus finds itself in a political stalemate. The current dividing lines will continue to characterise Belarusian society for a long time to come.

Roland Götz

State capitalism à la Belarus

A special path, a diversion or a dead end?

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus followed a separate path. Nowhere else in post-socialist Eastern Europe did the state play such an important role in the
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economy. From 2007 onwards, this model reached the limits of its capacity, not least because Russia increased the price of crude oil and natural gas supplies to Belarus. The government in Minsk took out an increasing number of foreign loans. In 2015, the decision was made to pursue a new monetary and fiscal policy: the exchange rate was deregulated and the deficit in the state budget was reduced. However, all the large enterprises remained under state control. The country is more dependent on the preferential rates for energy imports from Russia, and for this reason, Belarusian economists are becoming increasingly vociferous in their demands for a restructuring or the closure of the large number of loss-making state-owned businesses. In the medium term, the emigration of qualified workers due to the political conflict within the country will curb economic growth.

Ingo Petz

“The mood is not the same”

Protest and protest culture in Belarus

Since the electoral committee claimed that the incumbent Aliaksandr Lukashenka had won the presidential election in Belarus on 9th August 2020, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets in protest, at first against the falsification of the election, and then against arrests and the excessive use of force by the police. Unlike on former occasions, the protests are not limited to the capital, Minsk, and have attracted broad sections of the population. The protest movement captures people’s imagination through its creativity and vitality. However, it is unclear whether it will ultimately succeed. The regime is attempting to secure its position using violence and force. Yet the protest movement, with its new self-assurance, highly imaginative ideas and use of non-violent partisan tactics, will play an important role in paving the way to freedom for Belarusian society.

Uladzimir Liakhoŭski

The white-red-white nation

A brief history of Belarusian state symbols

The protest movement in Belarus has chosen two historical national images as its symbols: the Pahonia coat of arms showing a knight on horseback, which was originally used for the Great Duchy of Lithuania, and the white-red-white flag of the short-lived Belarusian People’s Republic. Both are symbols of a troubled past. In the Soviet Union, they were forbidden as representations of a national, anti-communist desire for independence. Even today, they still have abhorrent associations with the parts of the Belarusian national movement that collaborated with the National Socialist occupiers during the Second World War. In 1991, the national emblems experienced a renaissance, and in 1995, the Soviet state symbols returned almost unchanged. The conflict over the political order is reflected in the dispute surrounding the symbols.

Violence, not Power

Fabian Burkhardt, Maryia Rohava
“Dictatorship is our trademark”

Belarus: power vertical vs. horizontal society

For a long time, Belarus was considered an exemplary case of a stable authoritarian regime. For 26 years, the country has been ruled by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The central organisational principle of the ruling elite is a single-pyramid network, with Lukashenka at the top. From this position, he was able to prevent rival factions from gaining access to power resources. Despite a major political crisis in the country and ongoing protests after the disputed presidential election in August 2020, Lukashenka has maintained control of the security organs and state institutions, but the crisis will become permanent. Although the authorities have succeeded in preventing the institutionalisation of the opposition inside the country, the mobilisation of society with its horizontal networks is continuing. For the Lukashenka regime, there is no going back, since any legitimacy it had claimed on the basis of the country's performance capacity and the elections has now been quashed. Popular support of the autocrat and international recognition have been lost. As a result, the most important supporting pillars of Belarusian authoritarianism are starting to show cracks.

Valery Karbalevich
Power fanatics

Aliaksandr Lukashenka's worldview and mechanism of rule

In Belarus, the authoritarian ruler Lukashenka has created a personality-based regime in which all political and social processes are controlled by him via a rigid vertical power structure. For him, power is a question of life and death. His worldview is dominated by conspiracy theories, and politics is a battle against his enemies. Lukashenka regards the state as being his own, and the people as his subjects. Due to his lack of communication with society, he failed to register the development of a revolutionary situation in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election. For Lukashenka, the only way of responding to the protests is to use repression and violence. Yet the fundamental social changes that have been set in motion are unstoppable.

Siarhei Bohdan
Monopolists of violence

The police, the secret services and the army in Belarus

In the conflict between the regime and the civic movement, which following the falsified election results disputes Aliaksandr Lukashenka's claim that he has the right to continue to rule the country, the state organs of violence are playing an important role. The regime is deploying special units such as OMON or Interior Ministry troops

against the demonstrators. However, although they are still following the orders of the contentious leader, their willingness to obey and the cohesion of the security apparatus should not be overestimated. In 2019, the regime created the legal conditions for the use of the army within the country. To date, it has almost never been deployed. Instead, it has another function: to secure Russia's Western airspace. As a result, the army has become a coin with a foreign and security policy exchange value in order to convince the Kremlin of the uses of its Belarusian ally.

Degraded, beaten, tortured

Reports by victims of police violence

Since the start of the violent deployment of OMON units and the police on 9-13 August 2020 in order to quell the protests against the fraudulent presidential election in Belarus, the human rights centre Vyasna, together with the World Organisation Against Torture, has collected reports from victims of police violence and torture. We document eight cases.

Christian Ganzer

“Prostitutes” and “fascists” all

Defamation of the protests in Belarus on Telegram

In its effort to suppress the protest movement, the Lukashenka regime used violence and repression on the one hand, and defamation and propaganda on the other, involving Telegram channels such as Zheltye Slivy (Fake) and YaMyBat'ka (IWeFather). These channels disseminate hatred against women in its most primitive form, as well as violent fantasies. At times, they characterise the opposition as being controlled by Poland, and at others as modern-day versions of the collaborators with the National Socialist occupiers. The base level of this propaganda is an indication of how far the regime has lost faith in its own power of persuasion.

Power, not Violence

Elena Gapova

Mobilisation in Belarus

Class, citizenship, gender

In Belarus, there was a civic revolution in the summer of 2020. The supporters of this awakening are members of a new social class: highly educated, mobile people who no longer work in the state sector and who have no paternalistic expectations, but who yearn for a life of self-responsibility, honesty and self-respect. They want to be state citizens in the emphatic sense. In this Belarusian revolution, women are playing the most important role. With an awareness that the personal is also political, they have become a decisive political subject that is shaking the rule of the old regime.

Petra Stykow
The long farewell from Bac'ka
Lukashenka's popularity and its decline

For a long time, the President of Belarus enjoyed the support of large sections of the population in his country. However, in recent years, his voter base has eroded as the economic and social capacity of the “Belarusian model” with which he is identified has started to reach its limits. In addition, the normative foundations of this model are regarded as being unattractive by many voters who grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even so, the extent of Lukashenka's presumptive electoral defeat and the mass protests that ensued are surprising. They can only be explained in terms of the dynamic that evolved from the coincidence of unforeseeable circumstances with equally unforeseeable decisions made by the various players involved.

Nikolay Mitrokhin
Between two stools
The Belarusian Orthodox Church

In the summer of 2020, the Belarusian Orthodox Church failed to adopt a clear position with regard to the conflict that had broken out in the country. Some priests and believers took part in the protests against electoral fraud and the violence employed by the state forces. Others supported the longstanding president, Lukashenka. The church leaders tolerated both positions – and did not change its stance even when the Russian Orthodox Church, to which the Belarusian Orthodox Church is affiliated as a semi-autonomous member church, replaced the head of the church at the end of August. The new exarch, who for the first time is a Belarusian, was not as supportive of the state as Lukashenka had hoped. The Moscow Patriarchate is also not willing to squander its authority in Belarus in order to win the approval of an unpopular dictator.

Volha Syakhovich
Gagged by crude power
The media and media policy in Belarus

In the Belarusian media landscape, the state has played a central role. However, the significance of the state media is declining as the Internet becomes an increasingly important source of information. Here, the field is dominated by independent media and individual bloggers. The louder their criticism of the Lukashenka regime, the more severe the measures taken in response became. The regime has now issued more stringent statutory regulations. Journalists are being threatened with the loss of their accreditation, politically motivated judicial proceedings, financial penalties, prison sentences and, to an increasing extent, with physical violence. The support of the independent media against such measures is increasing in society.

Olga Shparaga

Vertical or horizontal

On two conflicting social orders

The philosopher Olga Shparaga has experienced the Belarusian remand prisons from the inside. She talks about the dirt and the cold, about the interrogations – and the fear of the prison guards. In order to avoid the threat of legal proceedings due to the alleged organisation of mass unrest, she fled to Lithuania, where she became responsible for educational issues at the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power. Despite the enormous wave of repressive measures to which the regime is subjecting society, she remains optimistic: to date, no-one has succeeded in attempting to stop the progress of time.

Felix Ackermann

Vertical power structure and horizontal solidarity

The state and the protest in Hrodna 2020

In Hrodna, there were also spontaneous protests against the falsified presidential election. Hundreds of people were arrested. The power vertical in Minsk failed to bring the situation under control by these means. The size of the protests increased, and the city administration in Hrodna took matters into its own hands. It permitted the demonstrations to take place and announced the release of the prisoners. It placed its trust in the representatives of the protest movement and reached organisational agreements with them. This trust was bolstered by the fact that representatives of religious groups participated in the protests alongside workers from the large state-owned enterprises. This reinforced the societal “solidarity horizontal” against state violence. Four days later, Minsk intervened: the heads of the administration in Hrodna were replaced and the power vertical asserted its authority.

Domestic and Foreign

Maksim Samorukov

On the hook

Russia and Belarus

Since the country became independent, Belarus has been reliant on Russia as an energy supplier and a sales market. The two states also have close political ties, and formally are even a Union State with integrated defence and economic structures. Recently, President Lukashenka attempted to reduce Belarus’ dependence on Russia. The power crisis in Belarus resulting from the brazen falsification of the presidential election in August 2020 has international dimensions. The EU has its own concerns and is not interested in Belarus. Lukashenka has been discredited.

The outcome of the crisis therefore depends largely on Russia. The Belarusian regime is only able to survive with Moscow's support, with the Kremlin alone deciding whether Lukashenka will remain at its head, and if so, for how long.

Sabine Fischer, Janis Kluge, Astrid Sahm
Sovereignty, subordination, integration
Key issues between Moscow and Minsk

The key to solving the political crisis in Belarus lies in Moscow. The Kremlin is not only pursuing geopolitical interests, but also fears that there may be fallout from the Belarusian protests that will affect the domestic situation in Russia. For this reason, the Russian government is supporting Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the Belarusian head of state of many years, in his attempt to hold on to power. In return, Lukashenka is performing a U-turn with regard to integration policy and is abandoning his "see-saw policy" between the EU and Russia. If he succeeds in forming common supra-national institutions, Vladimir Putin would finally have achieved the aim of his Belarus policy after two decades. However, it remains unclear whether his tactics will actually pay off.

Kai-Olaf Lang
Alarm among the neighbours
The Belarus policy of Poland and Lithuania

Poland and Lithuania are following events in Belarus with a high level of interest. Many people are sympathetic towards the protest movement against the fraudulent election. They see the uprising against the Lukashenka autocracy as a continuation of their own fight against authoritarian Soviet rule. Poland and Lithuania are standard bearers of solidarity with the Belarusian civic movement. The governments of the two countries have opened their borders to citizens from Belarus and are asking the EU for support. If the discredited dictator is able to hold on to power, Warsaw and Vilnius will reduce relations with their neighbour to a minimum. However, there will be a dialogue with the executive in Minsk over technical issues such as transport, infrastructure and the safety of the Astravets nuclear power station.

Micro und Macro

Alexandra Murphy
From boom to brain drain
The Belarusian IT sector and the regime

Belarus has a high performing IT sector, which has developed into an outsourcing hub for software development. Several startups have become famous worldwide. In the past, this was promoted by the state through a favourable infrastructure, taxation policy and a lack of intervention, with the attitude that creativity needs freedom. This is no longer the case. The repressive measures taken by the state in the wake of the

falsified presidential election have hit the IT sector hard. The sector is regarded by the authorities as an incubator for dissent, and they are applying pressure accordingly. Countless companies are relocating their headquarters to neighbouring states, and IT experts are leaving the country. This not only weakens the IT sector, but also Belarusian society and the country's domestic economy as a whole.

Kamil Kłysiński

A poisoned chalice

The Astravets nuclear power station

Astravets is the site of the first Belarusian nuclear power station. In 2012, Belarus and Russia agreed that Russia would fund almost the entire project, and that it would deliver the necessary technology. The power station will produce enough electricity to cover half of today's consumption in Belarus. For the government, this is a strategically important project, which will significantly impact the energy industry and the political situation in the region. Originally, it was designed primarily for export to the EU. However, the refusal by Lithuania and Poland to purchase electricity from Belarus cut Belarus off from its most important potential electricity export markets. The government is therefore now looking for ways of using the excess nuclear power in its own country. The loan from Russia that was agreed in order to finance the project will place a burden on the Belarusian state budget for many years to come, and will provide the Kremlin with one more way of exercising leverage over Belarus.

Language and Poetry

Ilma Rakusa

Tear factory and transformation

Spotlights on contemporary Belarusian poetry

Contemporary Belarusian poetry is written in two languages. Some poets use Belarusian, which for them is the language of freedom and creative possibilities, while others write in Russian. Both are creating genuine Belarusian poetry – and in some cases also world poetry. International readers are already familiar with Ales Rasanau and Valzhyna Mort. He writes timeless poems in which he connects local themes with existential questions. She produces vehement litanies and angry ballads in which a vent is given to pain, fury and grief. Others, such as Julia Tsimafieyeva, Volha Hap-peevea and Viktor Zhybul are still waiting to be discovered.

Thomas Weiler
 Moving Mova
 Belarusian prose in motion

A closer look at the German translations of Belarusian prose literature written over the past ten years reveals an astonishing diversity. There are translations from Russian, Belarusian and Yiddish, contemporary literature and titles from the 1920s, which are published by tiny and well-known publishing houses alike. Despite their many differences, the texts can also be regarded as lines of connection and continuity. However, the translations still only give an incomplete insight into contemporary Belarusian literature.

Past and Present

Thomas M. Bohn
 More than war and Chernobyl
 Belarus in European contemporary history

For a long time, Belarus was a “blank spot” in public perception and in eastern European research. It was not until support was given to the country after Chernobyl, and when reparations were paid to forced labourers, that “White Russia” began to attract attention in Germany. Eastern European history as a discipline must allow the country to emerge from the shadow of the Soviet Union. The particular features of Belarus include its late territorialisation during the inter-war years and the process of urbanisation after the war. Historians have the task of explaining why, and how, the transformation of Belarus from an agricultural country to an industrial state led to a loss of national identity, and the cult surrounding the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War is still of constitutive importance for the regime today.

Anika Walke
 Historical sites as a cypher
 The protest movement and the culture of remembrance in Belarus

The conflict between the Lukashenka regime and the protest movement against the falsification of the presidential election is also being conducted in words. One rhetorical tool that is being used is historical comparison. It is used to reduce reality to a single concept, to mobilise supporters and to discredit the other side. Demonstrators compare the brutality of the apparatus of violence with Stalinist terror. Others compare the prison in Okrestin street with Auschwitz. The regime wants to turn “the entire country into a Brest Fortress” in order to ward off the protest movement. These historical comparisons and parallels, as untenable as they may seem, are an indication of just how ruptured Belarusian society has become. The Belarusian culture of remembrance is extremely polarised, as is reflected in the

Chelyuskinites Park in Minsk. The park has been created over mass graves. Only certain victims were commemorated. The issue of perpetrators among the Belarusian population is suppressed, and no mention is made of the murder of the Jews.

Sjargej Novikaŭ, Yuliya von Saal

Stilted commemoration in Belarus

Maly Trostenets, the Holocaust and the culture of remembrance

Maly Trostenets was one of the largest death camps of the National Socialist regime in Eastern Europe. It hardly featured at all in the European commemoration of the war in recent decades. Now, it is the site of a large memorial. However, it does not fulfil the role of either a commemoration site or a place of learning, and Trostenets is also not a European, transnational place of remembrance of the Holocaust. The original concept and the result are too far apart, and the engagement with the past is too strongly dominated by political factors and the ideology of "Belarusian statehood". The singularity of the Holocaust becomes lost in the representation of the suffering of the "peaceful civilian population". The commemorative landscape of Maly Trostenets mirrors the Belarusian culture of remembrance.