

Rethinking anarchism

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Contents

- 1. No Lukashenko 3
- 2. Developing positioning 3
- 3. Cut out the irrelevant 4
- 4. Develop the best 5
- 5. What about the market? 5
- 6. Democratise everything! 6

The idea for this text came to me during a “trial” that refreshed my memory of old anarchist publications and actions over more than a decade. At this point, a significant part of the movement has either emigrated or ended up behind bars. But it seems to me that it is already worthwhile to consider in what form the movement can be rebuilt after the overthrow of the dictatorship in Belarus. What has been written is rather oriented towards internal use from anarchists for anarchists. My initial version is corrected to take into account the comments of several comrades. I invite members of the movement to join in the discussion as well.

1. No Lukashenko

The coming to power of the opposition will be the beginning of large-scale reforms in Belarus. Absence of democratic “experience”, appropriate institutions, stagnant bureaucracy – these and other obstacles will stand in the way of the Belarusian society. So the process of democratisation is unlikely to be easy. The anarchists, who are under the constant control and repercussions of the siloviki, are likely to have access to public spaces and activities.

In order to gain a foothold in previously inaccessible niches, it is important to review previous successes and mistakes, as well as to abandon restrictive dogma. The current prison sentences and emigration could be a good reason to restart.

The aforementioned lack of working institutions can be an advantage, a kind of ‘low base’ effect. In order to have practical experience, direct democracy and its instruments should be promoted by one’s own efforts (following the example of Murray Bookchin). It is also worth taking the opportunity to institutionalize direct democracy. For example, its consolidation at constitutional level or at local government level.

It will also be important to find a place for NGOs, such as human rights advocacy with access to information of the law enforcement system (similar to the PMC in Russia), environmental work and – in an area of more “power” – protection of journalists and other social activists. The question of the prospects of creating their own media is also separate. Repeatedly we have seen that the non-state media has ignored the brightest news stories from anarchists by the standards of the country. Without access to a wide audience, the effect is minimal.

All the aforementioned projects require material and human resources to be consolidated (grants, etc.), and contacts with people with whom one can establish a relationship of trust in prison can be useful.

2. Developing positioning

I see one of the main trends in anarchist resources in recent years as a move away from left-wing discourse and terminology. The focus has shifted to promoting direct democracy and its prospects in the information age. Too much time and energy has been wasted on pointless polemics with all sorts of leftists. Although left-right political coordinates poorly reflect the correlation and diversity of views and ideologies, anarchists are often presented as left-wing radicals. The classics of anarchism, Bakunin and Kropotkin, criticised Marxists and Bolsheviks, but from a modern perspective their views are perceived as typically leftist. Similarly with the symbols, the images with which the movement associates itself. The Paris Commune, the Kronstadt

Uprising, the Makhnovshchina, the CNT-FAI, the Paris Spring of 68, the Zapatistas, antifa, the anti-globalisation movement, etc.

Even without the left, anarchists are associated with punks, troublemakers and hedonists. Why bother explaining why that's not what our ideas are about? The same goes for the eternal arguments and reproaches about the non-canonicity and un-truthfulness of certain personalities and groups. Many here have made sure that the old questions have mostly fallen away on their own.

What matters is not what we call ourselves, but what attitudes and values we hold.

The "post-Lukashenka" period can be a chance to reach beyond the usual audience and supporters to the broader masses. It is therefore worth rejecting confusing anarchist self-identification in principle. And to make direct democracy, self-governance and the struggle for human rights the basic position.

3. Cut out the irrelevant

The majority of participants of the Belarusian protests and, on the whole, the active part of the society have an extremely negative attitude to the USSR and its successor regimes. No one is attracted by the images of queues with vouchers, unprofitable state enterprises and lack of quality services and goods. Global left-wing projects have failed all over the world, except in authoritarian China and the Russian Federation, or in poor, backward countries like Cuba. The left, the communists, apart from the Greens and some socialists, have discredited themselves. As has already been said, the media distinction between ourselves and the Bolsheviks, the CPSU and Putin only complicates our progress.

The struggle for the rights of industrial workers, who have proved (quite predictably) passive and conservative, also does not seem worthy of much effort. In the absence of a trade union movement, dependence on the workplace and credit, no far-reaching bets can be made on workers. It seems more appropriate to help restore justice in conflicts that have already erupted.

The basic values for us, of course, are unchanged. Globally, it is solidarity, equality and justice, and interpersonally, the humanist "not to betray", "not to exploit" and so on. But the personal self-restraints of anarchism, such as not serving in the army, not cooperating with the state, not owning one's own business, seem stifling and superfluous.

We need to be opportunists in a positive sense and frame the agenda in terms of the prevailing discourse. Take for example the white-red-white flag and the slogan "Long Live Belarus". They originally belonged to the nationalists, but now they are general protest symbols, and it's not worth fighting them. Managers and businessmen, with whom anarchists usually confront, often have much more progressive views and sympathies for radical democracy. I think that given the work ethic of these people, there is no reason to refuse to engage with those who are sympathetic to us.

(-) communism, capitalism, oppressors, bourgeoisie/proletariat;
classes -> social stratification;

4. Develop the best

Perhaps the above suggestions may seem radical. However, anarchism has inherently relevant and demanded concepts. It is these that should be taken as the basis for future positioning.

In Western countries, “critical citizenship” — an active society whose demand, consciously or not, is akin to that of anarchists — has become widespread in recent years. Critical citizens distrust the established political elite, believing that democracy functions well if people make decisions directly. Examples of such movements are the Yellow Vests in France, the anti-COVID protests (as a reaction to rights violations, not anti-vaxxerism), Occupy Wall Street a little earlier. Broad participation in politics is important to them, they self-organise into horizontal structures, respond sharply to restrictions of rights and freedoms, although at the same time they rarely take part in elections.

In particular, the Belarusian protests were distinguished by a high level of horizontal organization and grassroots initiatives (courtyard/district chats). Apart from a basic understanding of the need for change, in my experience, many of the protesters have a strong interest in and demand for direct democracy. Widespread informatization and the absence of established democratic institutions make Belarus a promising place for the spread of direct decision-making processes. Civil society, which has been formed at the grassroots level, will play an important role in case the opposition wins, forming new institutions and principles of democracy.

Separately, I would mention the activist ethics and information security that set anarchists apart from other political forces. These elements will remain necessary for the most active participants.

(+) society, direct democracy, self-government; law, horizontal structures, ecology, cosmopolitanism, direct action, freedom of speech, decentralisation.

5. What about the market?

The criticism of the market economy as incapable of ensuring justice and avoiding extreme forms of inequality without regulation is well founded. In fact, this is why anarchists are sceptical about the market, to put it mildly. But nevertheless, it is not possible to put forward an effective and realistic alternative at this stage. The centralised bureaucracy of the USSR was unable to cope with planning in the face of growing information and trends and new initiatives. The anarchists’ proposed decentralisation and the use of modern technology to process data cannot overcome the asymmetry of information.

We can propose futuristic schemes for possible alternatives, but since the task of building an alternative here and now is not yet possible, I think we should explore how we can promote democratic practices in existing realities. And the market, in turn, does not exclude such tools: blockchain representing peer-to-peer communication and decentralisation, crowdfunding (Kick-starte, Ulej), crowdsourcing (joint discussion and evaluation of strategies and projects), open-source, cooperatives, etc.

With proper infrastructure (software, services), ordinary citizens can directly participate in the economy without any experts (crowdfunding). As an example, the story of GameStop. The game shop chain’s shares went down in price with the advent of the online platform era. Hedge funds, i.e. professional financiers, took advantage of this. The fans of the GameStop chain had

teamed up on Reddit, and began buying the shop's stock without any intermediaries, thus driving speculators into losses.

6. Democratise everything!

Politicians and pundits are deservedly distrustful. In his study, Philip Tetlock polled 284 people who earn money for commentary, advice in politics and economics. The respondents were asked to assess the probability of events in the near future (the outcome of the putsch against Gorbachev, the US war in the Persian Gulf, which country would become an emerging market, etc.) as well as the probability of three alternatives (growth/progress, status quo or decline). The results of more than 80,000 such predictions showed that the experts should have simply divided the probability into three equal parts in their predictions. That is, their results were worse than an elementary division of 100 by 3.

A critical view of the status quo, politicians and experts trying to monopolise decision-making, ignoring the public good; a desire to introduce democracy wherever possible; not to erect new idols and charlatans, and to include as wide a section of society as possible in political life — such ideas of radical democracy could form the basis of a movement in the “post-Lukashenko” period. Without squabbles and dogmas, in a broad consensus of all those who want to fight for justice and progress.

Akihiro Hanada-Gaevsky, September 2022

About the author: Akihiro Hanada-Gaevsky is a Belarusian anarchist. In the case of the “international criminal organisation” Revolutionary Action, Akihiro was sentenced to 16 years in prison on 6 September 2022.

From Akihiro's last words in court:

... sometimes states return to their roots. They unleash conflicts to prove their necessity, resort to plunder to wage war on external and internal enemies. Here we have “hybrid warfare” with the “collective west” and the “fugitive” opposition, “unprecedented” pressure from the “Anglo-Saxons”. By this logic, the Russian Federation invades Ukraine, abolishes rights and freedoms in the name of illusory spirituality; by similar considerations, the Republic of Belarus squeezes Kommunarka, Motovelo or imposes a tax on “parasitism”. For two years I have witnessed a repression on a different scale by the state. For two years I have seen the repressive apparatus grind people down. Retention of power by unconstitutional means, total repression of dissenters, impoverishment of the people and support of a mad war... What is not this organised crime wrapped in the shell of the state?

We join Revolutionary Action in calling for a broad discussion of this article among anarchists and would be happy to publish your contributions on the themes raised in the article.

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