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Anarchists, the avangarde of social protests in Belarus

Alesia Rudnik

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In the words of anarchist Stas Pachobut to Radyjo Svaboda 'secret services have developed a system which is able to restrict political movements. And it does not work with the anarchist movement. Therefore, it was impossible to stop anarchists during the social marches against the 'social parasites' decree'.

Although the social parasites tax was postponed, authorities might be preparing the political arena before Independence Day and large anti-decree protests, which are to be held on 25 March. On 11 March, the authorities sentenced oppositional leaders Anatol' Liabiedzka, Juryj Hubarevič, Vital Rymašeuški, and Volha Kavalkova to 15 days of detention. The day after, police detained politician Paviel Seviaryniec and five independent journalists.

Anarchists have demonstrated that they are well-organised and, at the same time, not controlled by governmental structures since they have no legal status and rarely act in public. The regime draws an analogy between anarchists and the football fans in Ukraine who strongly resisted the government during Maidan. Recent harsh punishments of six football fans, who were sentenced to 4–12 years on 10th March, is evidence of this attitude.

Demonstrations on 25 March will become a test for the anarchist movement and show whether they are able to become a strong protesting power. Otherwise, anarchist activity could go underground until the next occasion triggers them to make an appearance on the political arena.

On 15 March, Belarusian authorities detained dozens of citizens protesting against the social parasite decree. Anarchists were one of the most noticeable movements at the protests in Brest and Minsk, causing an immediate reaction from the police.

Anarchists in Belarus, who have a long history, tend to participate only in particular political events. Their creativity and integration distinguished them from other groups during the last two weeks of protests.

The regime has put considerable effort into diminishing the influence of any uncontrollable and integrated group of dissidents, including anarchists. Independence Day on 25 March will show whether the anarchist movement in Belarus is ready for social and political protest or whether it will continue to operate mostly underground.

The anarchist movement in Belarus

Belarusian anarchism has a long history, dating back to 1905–1907 when anarchist movements appeared in Smarhon, Kouna, Hrodna, and Minsk. In Soviet times, anarchists focused their efforts resisting the upper class. In 1992, Belarusian anarchists formed a 'Federation of Belarusian Anarchists'. However, it soon disappeared because of problems with coordination. In 1999 anarchists published their first newspaper, *Navinki*, but it was shut down by the government four years later.

In the 2000s anarchist activism became restricted due to continued confrontation with the government. In 2003, anarchists created a group called Revolutionary Movement which, however, failed to unite Belarusian anarchists under one umbrella organisation. Repression against anarchists has created additional obstacles to their activity. Political prisoners such as anarchists Ihar Alinevich, Mikalai Dziadok, and Aliaksandr Frankievich spent five years in prison for torching a vehicle at the

Russian Embassy yard and throwing smoke grenades into the Ministry of Defence building.

There exist several main groups of anarchists, such as Pramien and Revolutionary action, but most of them are local and somewhat notorious. Their activities remain hidden and highly conspiratorial, and their membership is quite marginal. The anarchist movement over the last few years became more visible due to participation in particular events, such as Charnobylski Shliah (Charnobyl movement) or small-scale protests. In 2015, anarchists in Minsk protested against police and KGB brutality after a rock-concert at a club called Pirates.

Belarusian anarchists criticise not only the government but also the opposition for their desire for power and money. At the same time, they sometimes tend to support democratic ideas of the opposition by participating in social protests. During the 'anti-parasite decree' protests, anarchists were noted for their integration and social-oriented messages, such as 'The government is robbing the people, or 'Officials are the main social parasite'.

In an interview with *Kyky.org*, anarchist Dzmitry Palienka stated: 'People actively support our slogans because they were social and thematic...People have less and less trust, both to the authorities and to the opposition leaders. This, obviously, makes us happy'.

Uniting the protests

Anarchist became one of the most active groups fighting against the 'social parasites' decree. The march of angry Belarusians demanded the abolishment of the decree, which obliges unemployed citizens to pay an annual tax of €220. During recent protests, anarchists appeared right at the front of crowds and encouraged the demonstrators to maintain a spirit of protest.

Brest has become a hot-spot for 'anti-decree' protests. The demonstration on 5 March gathered between 1,000 and 2,000 people. Anarchists occupied leading positions in the protests' columns. Although during the marches the authorities did not employ force, violent actions started soon after.

Authorities blocked web-pages, such as *revbel.org* or groups on *VK.com*, a popular social media platform. Dozens of anarchists reported being beaten, detained or sentenced to short-term imprisonment after the demonstrations on 15 March.

This was the first time in a long period that so many Belarusian anarchists participated in social protests. Authorities aim to decrease public protest by putting a stop to a main source of protest messages – anarchists. At the same time, oppositional forces might be using anarchists to increase their support and heighten the chances of regime change.

Anarchists as scapegoats for the state?

Belarusian anarchists have draw the public's attention only in special cases related to anti-governmental protests or due to particular small-scale actions, such as the graffiti protest. However, in February and March during the 'social parasites' protests they appeared to be organised and attracted the attention of both citizens and the police.

The regime attempts to discredit anarchists and sees them as a threat. On 6 March, Belarusian national TV broadcasted a programme comparing the symbols and ideas of anarchism to those present during the protests in the former Yugoslavia and Ukrainian Maidan, which 'led to the war'. Today, in order to maintain an atmosphere of fear, authorities are repressing more than just the opposition, unlike previous protests. The state is detaining anarchists who appear strong, united, and leading.