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CAN MAIDAN HAPPEN IN BELARUS?

Recent events in Ukraine have been a cause of concern to both politicians and the public. During the Maidan revolution and with the start of Russian aggression, many analysts questioned whether something similar could happen in Belarus. This issue of Bell attempts to answer this question.

Lukashenka's response showed that he will make every effort to ensure that neither of these things happen here under his rule. However, internal economic problems and the fact that Belarus is dependent on Russia for solutions to these problems hinder his actions. Even though it is too early to expect Maidan in Belarus, the increasing Russian influence, which may manifest at any time in more radical steps, seems more and more real.

In the first article Dzianis Melyantsou analyses how the Belarusian government responded to events in

Ukraine. By providing his assessment of Maidan he reviews Lukashenka's statements on the issues in Ukraine. Finally, Melyantsou acknowledges that events in Ukraine could have been a signal for the Belarusian government to strengthen its own influence in the country to avoid a similar scenario here.

In the second article Andrei Yeliseyeu reviews the response of the Belarusian public to the Maidan revolution. Comparing various indicators he reveals that Ukrainians took to the streets for a variety of objective reasons. The absence of such reasons is the main obstacle why such events would not happen in Minsk. Finally, Yeliseyeu concludes that the attitude of Belarusian society to the events in Ukraine was passive.

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS AS SEEN BY THE BELARUSIAN LEADERSHIP

Dzianis Melyantsou, BISS

What happened in Ukraine?

Many opinions and interpretations are available about the Ukrainian events. The only thing most analysts and observers agree on is that these events cannot by any means be called another "coloured revolution". In fact, it was not a revolution. Classical revolutions, according to the standard created by the French Revolution, result in demolition of the old social construction and introduction of a new political and public system. But this is not the case in Ukraine; the system has survived. What has changed is the ruling clique, but only partially. The reasons that forced Ukrainians to Maidan – pro-EU aspirations, massive corruption and unjust oligarch power system – have not been resolved because of Yanukovich's dethronement. It leaves the revolutionary scenario possible.

Developments in Ukraine during the last half-year have served as a stark illustration of the

immaturity of post-Soviet political elites, their incapability of statesmanlike thinking and compromises. Rather than adhering to agreements with the authorities and choosing a peaceful transition, the Ukrainian opposition – both the old one and the new one, generated by Maidan – opted for an anti-constitutional scenario, resulting in a disaster, such as riots in the country's south east and the alienation of Crimea.

After a series of mistakes from the very beginning, the new government is facing massive problems and has little time to focus on reforms.

First, the radical wing was allowed to become too strong; having got possession of weapons, they started to terrorise the population and re-divide property.

Second, the new government failed to suppress or disown radical statements about the

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A reason for Belarusian authority's interest in Maidan is both the close neighbourhood with Ukraine and the fact that Ukraine and its choice is a key factor for further scenarios of Eurasian integration.

Belarus has refrained from engagement in an informational and economic war against Ukraine.

export of revolution to eastern and southern regions and the changing status of the Russian language. This failure resulted in anti-Maidan counteractions that served as fertile ground for Russian propaganda and actions to destabilise the situation.

Third, rather than explaining their plans and addressing the fears of East Ukraine and Russia's leadership, the new authorities stepped up their populist rhetoric on NATO membership and revision of Kharkiv agreements on the status of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. This naturally concerned Moscow who felt its interests were in danger.

Fourth, refusal to resist the blockage of Crimea by Russian-controlled units demonstrated the powerlessness of Ukraine's army and, for many observers, legitimised the passing of control of the peninsula from Kiev to Moscow: Ukrainians did not defend their land and did not proclaim a military emergency. A lack of resistance must have been an argument for a decision about full annexation of Crimea, since it hardly could have been an initial plan.

Glance from Minsk

Belarusian authorities observed developments very closely from the very beginning of the confrontation in Kiev. A reason for their interest is both the close neighbourhood with Ukraine and the fact that Ukraine and its choice is a key factor for further scenarios of Eurasian integration.

Despite their strong factual interest, the Belarusian leadership consistently refrained from publicly focusing on Ukrainian developments. Lukashenka's statements were scarce, and the state media covered Euromaidan as marginal news, without any judgment. Still, in his rare comments, Lukashenka was negative about Maidan, as a phenomenon of instability and disturbance, which undermines the fundamentals of statehood. The state propaganda used Maidan as a background to emphasise social stability and justice in Belarus. For example, Lukashenka stated on 21 January: "Events in Ukraine are a nightmare, a disaster. No revolutions, please. Do we need a massacre such as they have in Ukraine? Come on, we are civilized people"¹.

The Belarusian President also commented on the causes of the Ukrainian disturbances: top-level corruption and instigation of foreign forces, with Poland being the usual suspect. "Ukraine

is such a lovely country with lovely people. But the so-called open market has brought this mess, with clans dividing the country. This is what you get as a result. It is a bad sign when you see the President's children starting their own businesses. It is a bad sign when you see wives and girlfriends with crowns on"².

In his interview to Savik Shuster, a Ukrainian TV-host, on 26 March 2014³, Lukashenka even called Maidan a manifestation of people's legitimate dismay over corruption and lawlessness. This means that, in fact, he expressed his *post factum* solidarity with the protests, but also stressed stability and social justice in Belarus and explained that such shocks are impossible in Belarus, because there are no causes for them.

Mr Lukashenka was very negative about the escape of Yanukovych and his inability to oppose the coup d'état. He articulated it clearly both after the change of the regime and especially in his interview to Shuster, where he said: "The President has to stand with his people, no matter how hard it is, no matter what happens to you, even if you might be shot dead"⁴. But this has not prevented Lukashenka from quick and unambiguous recognition of the new government in Kiev, with a reference to the former President's self-elimination and the effective control of the new government over the country.

Manoeuvring virtuoso

Many observers, especially from Ukraine, were very positive about the Belarusian President's self-restraint and his unwillingness to support Russia on Crimea, until the UN vote on Ukraine. Belarusian TV looked much more balanced and professional than their Russian colleagues on events in Kiev and Crimea; the Belarusian leadership stressed the importance of Ukraine's integrity and avoided comments on Russia's blockade of Crimea for as long as possible. Minsk also recognised the new Ukrainian authorities.

However, the airdrome in Babrujsk, Belarus, saw new Russian jet fighters arriving. Lukashenka stated on 23 March that "de facto, Crimea is a part of the Russian Federation today; one can

¹<http://euroradio.fm/ru/lukashenko-o-kievskom-maydane-esli-vozmut-vlast-eto-nadolgo>

² <http://euroradio.fm/ru/lukashenko-kak-tolko-u-zhen-ilyubovnic-poyavlyayutsya-korony-zhdi-bedy>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzmo0uKGtQs>

⁴ http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/interviju-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-aglukashenko-programme-shuster-live-8387/

There are no reasons in Belarus yet for social protests, and the government is not so weak as to allow massive disorders on the model of Kiev to break out.

accept it or reject it, but nothing changes”⁵. In the UN General Assembly, Belarus was among the few states supporting Russia and voting for international legitimisation of Russia’s actions in Crimea. Many stated then that Lukashenka has not resisted the pressure by Russia; Ukraine’s only choice was to recall its ambassador. Days after this, in an extensive interview for Ukrainian TV, Lukashenka reiterated his recognition of the Ukrainian government and criticised Putin. He offered mediation services and met the acting President of Ukraine Turchynov three days later in Belarus. What stands behind these manoeuvres? Whom does he support in the end, and whom does he not?

The Ukraine-Russia conflict forces Lukashenka to fulfil three tasks today:

First, to confirm his status as Russia’s closest ally without direct involvement in the conflict. As a member of the Union State, Belarus is obliged to support Russia at international platforms, such as the UN. The military union obliges Belarus to scale up force grouping amid a growing foreign threat (re-grouping of NATO air jets to Poland and Lithuania was seen this way). But Belarus has refrained from engagement in an informational and economic war against Ukraine.

Second, to maintain relations with Ukraine as an important economic partner with about USD 6 billion volume of trade and surplus for Belarus, and with close intercultural and people-to-people ties. This is why Lukashenka did his best to disown all his steps or words, potentially seen as anti-Ukrainian. For example, the interview for the Ukrainian audience served as an explanation for the re-grouping of Russian jets and the tough statement on Crimea, while his public recognition of the Ukrainian government and quick meeting with Turchynov came as compensation for the pro-Russian UN vote.

Third, to search for gains and promote the significance of Belarus in the region. Minsk’s balanced position on Ukraine where it was possible and the suggestion of mediation came as a solution to this task. This is also a message for the West from Minsk about its independent status of a player capable of its own role and sharing a goal with Europeans to prevent further destabilisation in the region.

Lessons learnt by the Belarusian leadership

Maidan has hardly scared Lukashenka as much as some Belarusian opposition media are claiming. There are no reasons in Belarus yet for social protests, and the government is not so weak as to allow massive disorders on the model of Kiev to break out. On the contrary: there are some reasons to believe that instability in Ukraine is positive for the rating of the Belarusian President, with the idea of “Square” even more discredited in Belarus. However, it is too early to judge as long as new opinion polls are not available.

What looks more certain is the concern of the Belarusian leadership about Russia’s methods in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. For sure, they must imagine a possible scenario of “protection of Russian-speakers” against themselves, too.

So, Lesson number 1 is: **Russia is ready and able to defend its interests by tough measures** even in “brotherly nations”, showing creativity and unconventional approaches. So, any attempt to turn to the West or threaten Russia’s interests can result in the repetition of the Crimean scenario. The only way to outweigh this threat is to strengthen the consolidation of society around national ideas and values, and to gradually get rid of Russian informational influence channels.

Lesson 2: the Belarusian leadership has taken very close notice of the actions of the EU and the US, and probably concluded that the **West is not ready to provide real support for a country, which would like to get out of the Russian sphere of influence**. At least, for a country unready to militarily defend itself. Therefore, even if Belarus opts for a manoeuvring stance, it will be very cautious to avoid undermining the whole project of Eurasian integration.

Lesson 3: a **lack of significant interests of major global actors in the region** made the peaceful and rather calm change of Ukraine’s borders possible. So, the Belarusian leadership and Belarusian society should spend time thinking about how to make Belarus a place where influential interests meet. This would make it an impossible target for destabilisation, leave alone annexation. Learning from the mistakes of others would be a good idea.

⁵ http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/otvety-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-aleksandra-lukashenko-na-voprosy-predstavitelej-smi-23-marta-2014-g-8342/

The share of the population in Belarus which is ready to stand up for their rights and economic wellbeing in protest action is about half that of Ukraine.

Objective economic data and authoritative corruption monitoring show that Ukrainians had poorer economic wellbeing and faced larger corruption than ordinary Belarusians and Russians.

PROTEST ACTIVITY IN UKRAINE AND BELARUS AND BELARUSIAN PUBLIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS MAIDAN

Andrei Yeliseyev

Protest activity in Ukraine and Belarus and Belarusian public attitude towards Maidan

Recent events in Ukraine pose a number of important questions regarding the public mood in Belarus. First, what factors contributed to the rise in protests in Ukraine and are these factors in place in Belarus. Second, what is the Belarusians attitude towards Maidan and the recent power change in the southern neighbour.

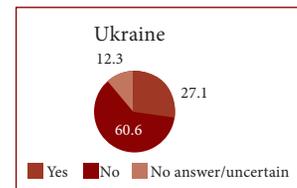
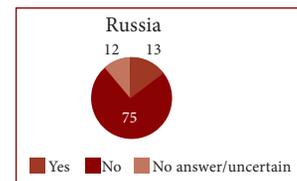
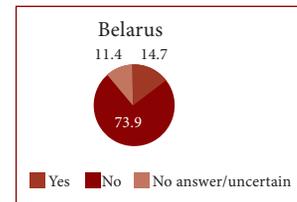
What explains the increase in protest activity in Ukraine

Sociological surveys show that protest activity in Ukraine has been considerably greater than in Belarus or Russia. Asked if ready to take part in protest actions in case of deterioration of wellbeing or for the protection of their rights, 27.1% of Ukrainians responded positively.¹ In comparison according to Russia's Levada-Center, throughout the past two decades a similar level of protest activity was observed in 2004/05 (23%) in Russia, in the crisis years of 1998/99 (24%) and back to 1995 (26%). In 2012/13 the share of the population which was ready to take part in protest activities was 13-14%, or half that of Ukraine.²

Similarly, the share of the population in Belarus which is ready to stand up for their rights and economic wellbeing in protest action is about half that of Ukraine. Even in the crisis year of 2011 – when the annual inflation rate reached 108.7% and Belarusian rouble depreciated by 171.7% – 14.7% of Belarusians were reported to be ready to protest against the deterioration of their economic wellbeing.³ Indeed, monitoring carried out throughout 2013 showed that the protest activity in Belarus in terms of the number of protest actions was five times lower than that in Ukraine. Out of 64 public actions observed in Belarus throughout 2013, 49 public

events were attended by just one or a few persons. Only 3 actions attracted from 50 to 100 participants, and four gathered more than 100 persons.⁴

Graphs showing the level of protest activity in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia in the pre-Maidan period. Responses to the question: Are you ready to take part in protest actions in case of deterioration of your economic wellbeing or for the purpose of protection of your rights?



Source: author's compilation based on the survey data of Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (Ukraine), Levada-Center (Russia) and the IISEPS (Belarus).

But why is the level of protest activity in Ukraine so much greater than in neighbouring Belarus or Russia?

One objective reason for the greater public discontent in Ukraine seems to be the poorer economic wellbeing of ordinary Ukrainians compared to Belarus and Russia nationals. In 2013 the average monthly wage in Belarus exceeded USD 500, and was about USD 800 in Russia. In Ukraine it was less than USD 400, even before

¹ See survey was carried out by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in the first half of 2013, <http://dif.org.ua/ua/publications/press-relizy/protestni-nastroi-v-ukraini.htm>

² Протестные настроения россиян. Левада-центр. 22.01.2014, <http://www.levada.ru/22-01-2014/protestnye-nastroeniya-rossiyan>

³ Политическая апатия как фактор стабильности, 01.12.2011, IISEPS [in Russian], <http://iiseps.org/analitica/94>

⁴ Таццяна Чыжова. Пратэстная актыўнасць у Беларусі ў 2013 годзе: масавыя акцыі, палітычныя перформансы, сацыяльныя канфлікты. Political Sciences Institute Palitychnaja Sfera [in Belarusian], pp.1- 4, http://palityka.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Pratestny_u-Belarusi-2013.pdf

According to the recent survey, almost 90% of Belarusians followed the Ukrainian events, 35.4% of which daily.

the gradual depreciation of the Ukrainian hryvnia. In 2012, GDP (PPP) per capita in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine was 23,500, 15,300 and 7,300 current international dollars respectively.⁵ Furthermore, the level of corruption in Ukraine was higher than in neighbouring Belarus and Russia, as the Corruption Perception Index suggests. In 2013 Ukraine was ranked 144th in the world, between Papua New Guinea and Guinea. Belarus and Russia are not doing good in terms of anti-corruption measures either (123rd and 127th, respectively), but they still look better.⁶

Therefore objective economic data and authoritative corruption monitoring show that Ukrainians had poorer economic wellbeing and faced larger corruption than ordinary Belarusians and Russians. Belarusian and Russian authorities maintain an unwritten social contract with the population, distributing social and economic advantages in exchange for the public's consent with the oppression of civic and political liberties. In Ukraine, authorities were unable to secure a comparable economic wellbeing. Furthermore, 30 November 2013 – when a peaceful student action was dispersed at Maidan – served as the starting point of the authorities' intention to tighten civic liberties, which effectively tore up a previously existing social contract between the larger public and those in power.

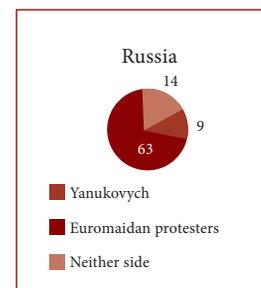
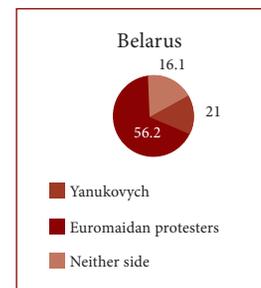
However, this is just part of the explanation for the greater Ukrainian protest activity. There are a number of other explanatory socio-political factors and circumstances which contributed to the decisive turn in the Kyiv events. Although the level of public trust in political parties has been rather low in Ukraine, a strong opposition presence in the parliament, coupled with quite a diverse media market, is a fertile ground for more liberal and diverse public discourse. In contrast to the Belarusian consolidated authoritarian regime with no opposition in the legislative organ whatsoever and dominant state-controlled media, the Ukrainian public has had permanent access to a variety of political views and good-quality media product about the authorities' policies. There are good reasons to believe that the political history of Western Ukraine, which had been a part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire with more liberal political traditions than the Russian empire had, left some imprint on the larger prevalence of democratic values of the present-day inhabitants of the region. Finally, counterproductive measures taken by the ex-Ukrainian authorities, such as student action

dispersal on 30 November 2013, adoption of repressive laws in January 2014, the delay in the resignation of the Minister of Interior and of the Prime Minister, to name just a few, contributed to the development of protests.

Public attitude towards Maidan in Belarus

According to the recent survey, almost 90% of Belarusians followed the Ukrainian events, 35.4% of which daily. The figure for Belarusian support for the new Ukrainian authorities and the Euromaidan is 21%, while 16.1% are in favour of Yanukovych, and 56.2% of respondents remain neutral.⁷ Interestingly, the poll carried out in Russia in late February, showed that only 9% of Russian respondents supported the protesters, while 14% were in favour of Yanukovych and 63% of Russian nationals supported neither side.⁸

Graphs: Public support of Yanukovych and Euromaidan protesters in Belarus and Russia.



Source: Levada-Center (February 2014) and the IISEPS (March 2014) data.

The Belarusian public is divided over speculations about the further developments of the situation in Ukraine. Slightly more than a third

⁵ See the World Bank data at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>

⁶ Corruption perceptions index 2013, Transparency International, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>

⁷ IISEPS press-release on the most important results of the national poll of March 2014.

⁸ Отношение жителей Украины и России к событиям в Украине, 03.03.2014, Levada-Center [in Russian], [http://www.levada.ru/03-03-2014/otnoshenie-zhitelei-ukrainy-i-rossii-k-sobytyam-v-ukraine?fb_action_ids=685516224834447&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_source=other_multiline&action_object_map=\[595573180532094\]&action_type_map=\[%22og.likes%22\]&action_ref_map=\[ja](http://www.levada.ru/03-03-2014/otnoshenie-zhitelei-ukrainy-i-rossii-k-sobytyam-v-ukraine?fb_action_ids=685516224834447&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_source=other_multiline&action_object_map=[595573180532094]&action_type_map=[%22og.likes%22]&action_ref_map=[ja)

of respondents (36.4%) think the situation will stabilise after the election. An almost equal number of Belarusians (34.9%) speculate that Ukraine will disintegrate, and 17.3% of respondents are of the opinion that civil war is likely to follow, the IISEPS reports. Unfortunately, no distribution of opinions over the annexation of Crimea by Russia has yet been reported.

What are the reasons behind the Ukrainian Maidan? There is no consensus either among the Belarusian or Russian public about this question. More or less equal shares of Belarusian respondents diverge in their opinions on whether the Kyiv Maidan was a product of Western political technologies and weakness of Yanukovich's power (36.9%), or was it rather an objective process provoked by public discontent towards the authorities (36.8%). Among the Russian public, 43% of respondents believe that the Euromaidan developed as a result of West-

ern efforts to pull Ukraine towards its sphere of interest, while 17% point at the public outrage over Yanukovich's corrupt regime.

Only 14.1% of Belarusian respondents agree with the assertion that the bloodshed is justified for a better future. IISEPS surveys show that Belarusian public attitude towards Euromaidan deteriorated after the events took a bloody turn. As a result, 54.7% of respondents consider Yanukovich's removal a coup-d'état, while only 27.7% find the ousting of Yanukovich "a fair retribution for the bloodshed that occurred". At the same time, a rather large percentage of Belarusians (15.5%) – taking into the account the comparatively low protest activity in the country – answered affirmatively on whether they would take part in events of a hypothetical Belarusian Maidan. At the same time 10.7% of respondents say they would side with the authorities, while the rest (65.3%) would remain neutral.



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