DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 29.08.2023 | Artyom Shraibman

Fighting for survival

Belarus' democratic forces recognise the sad reality: the connection between them and the majority of Belarusians inside the country is broken

On the third anniversary of the fight against the Lukashenko regime, the Belarusian democratic forces have become more relevant to the Western world and less fragmented than sceptics might have expected after the end of the street protests in the country. But this has not saved the opposition from a shortage of ideas on directions for moving forward.

On 6 August, the democratic forces of Belarus held their regular annual conference in Warsaw. It showed that a relatively stable configuration of forces has developed in the opposition, based since autumn 2020 on the pivotal role of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her office. Under Tsikhanouskaya is her transitional cabinet, a 'government in exile'. In the course of the last year, the Cabinet successfully avoided wallowing in scandals but along the way lost two 'ministers' – Tatyana Zaretskaya, tasked with seeking funding for this body, and Alexander Azarov, the leader of BYPOL, the now split-apart organisation of former security officials.

Alternative centres of power

The cabinet was a good coalition solution for the crisis brewing in the opposition a year ago. This format brought one of the alternative and ambitious opposition leaders, former Belarus Minister of Culture Pavel Latushko, into an alliance with Tsikhanouskaya, and also brought new and, in 2020, little-known faces into opposition politics, such as 'defence minister' Valery Sakhashchik, as well as Olga Gorbunova, who deals with the problem of political prisoners. But at the same time, the body still lacks a stable apparatus, funding and political achievements.

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In parallel with the office of Tsikhanouskaya, the 'administration of the elected president' and her government-in-exile, a proto-parliament – the Coordinating Council (CC) – has appeared

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in the ecosystem of democratic forces. At the beginning of this year, it was resurrected from the lifeless state in which the CC had been since autumn 2020 when its entire top and active members were either imprisoned or pushed out of the country. Now, the Constitutional Council has become a place to which almost all prominent political structures and NGOs that so wish can appoint their representatives. CC members assume control functions. For example, Azarov lost his post in the cabinet precisely as a result of their vote of no confidence in early August.

From the end of 2022, an alternative centre of power in the opposition also began to take shape. For this centre Tsikhanouskaya is not an unconditional authority, but rather an indecisive leader who engages in diplomacy while the present situation calls for a change of power by force in Belarus. These views are held in the leadership of the largest of the Belarusian volunteer units in Ukraine – the Kastus Kalinouski regiment, as well as a number of uncompromising structures that have joined it, like the 'Cyberpartisans'.

The emergence of an alternative opposition centre around the most irreconcilable and militant structures, with a different view of the path to the liberation of Belarus, was symptomatic of the fact that the rest of the opposition had problems with such a vision.

Dependent on Moscow's approval

After the Belarusian regime turned from a metaphorical into a full-fledged Russian military foothold, it became obvious that regime change in Belarus would be inextricably linked with the outcome of the war in Ukraine. As long as Russia has not suffered a serious defeat in it or has not weakened under the weight of the war, the Kremlin will have a clear motive and readiness to spend resources to keep a pro-Russian regime in Belarus. Loyal power in Minsk is needed to maintain the potential threat in the north of Ukraine, to keep the eastern flank of NATO in check and now also to ensure the safety of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus. Even if Lukashenko dies before Russia weakens, the chances are high that only someone approved, if not chosen by Moscow, can take his place.

What can the opposition do in such a situation? Any attempt to coordinate protests or underground activity 'on the ground' is shattered by the prohibitive risks of participation for people inside the country. It

only takes one person who is unreliable or inaccurate with digital security, and your entire hand-sewn protest chat turns into an arrest list. Torture conditions in prisons, Stalinist terms for protest leaders, mass dismissals of disloyal people – all this pushes active Belarusians who have not yet been arrested into emigration.

There is no one to carry out the forceful liberation of Belarus from the outside. Hundreds of lightly armed volunteers from the Kalinouski regiment and other formations are not enough to defeat the Belarusian power machine. NATO does not engage in such adventures after the failed invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, especially given that Lukashenko still has nuclear power behind him. And the Ukrainian army has plenty of its own fish to fry on its territory.

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The sanctions, which the opposition has been calling for for a long time and which the West has been imposing against Lukashenko and various sectors of the Belarusian economy for more than two years, remain. However, a problem with sanctions is the fact that they have almost never changed regimes in history. In the Belarusian case, it is similar to blocking one small pipe to the pool, which is filled from another, much wider pipe. Satisfied with Lukashenko's behaviour, Russia willingly helps him both with discounts on energy resources and instalment plans for old loans, as well as with logistics to circumvent Western sanctions. The Belarusian economy has, of course, been hit hard by the sanctions and the war, and has also become even more vulnerable to shocks coming from Russia, like the weakening of the rouble. But there is no question of any collapse capable of destabilising the regime.

At the same time, the sanctions menu looks largely exhausted. One of the latest truly tough measures – the complete shutdown of road and rail links with Belarus by its Western neighbours – is already being discussed in Riga, Vilnius and Warsaw. But for now, they want to keep a blockade as a tool to deter Lukashenko from provocations using the 'Wagnerites' rather than to introduce it preventively.

As a result, the opposition has been deprived of leverage on what is happening in Belarus and is very limited in its ability to put pressure on the regime, at least to the point of destabilising Russia or its relations

with Lukashenko. The vector of opposition plans and initiatives has begun gradually to shift towards the interests of the Belarusian diaspora.

Diaspora politics

A good portion of the diplomatic efforts of Tsikhanouskaya and her team are spent on fighting discrimination against Belarusians abroad to ensure that Western leaders do not forget that the latter are not to be punished for the actions of the regime in Minsk. The new initiatives at the Warsaw conference even betray a geographic shift in the priorities of the work of the democratic forces.

First of all, plans are being made to hold online elections to the Coordinating Council this winter to make it more legitimate. This vote is conceived as an alternative to the parliamentary and local elections in February 2024 in Belarus, where no one expects even a symbolic opportunity for the opposition to come forward and campaign. But given the risks of participating in even virtual oppositional elections and the depoliticisation within Belarus, all candidates for the Constitutional Council and the vast majority of voters will be from the diaspora.

Another ambitious initiative is the New Belarus passport. The democratic forces have prepared an outline of their travel document, which, in theory, should help Belarusians who have left the country and whose passports have expired to solve their travel problem. An enormous effort lies ahead to convince Western governments that this document will be issued according to a reliable procedure and should be recognised. But it is already obvious that the target audience of this project does not live in Belarus.

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Finally, by the time of the conference in Warsaw, the opposition had decided on its geopolitical orientation. Now, the official democratic forces position is as follows: Belarus should join the EU and withdraw from all alliances with Russia. The symbolic importance of this declaration is that this is the first time the opposition has deliberately moved away from the ambition to represent the opinion of the majority of Belarusians. Positioning Tsikhanouskaya as the winner of the 2020 election meant that she avoided positions that were not popular in society.

But support for joining the European Union among Belarusians has

fluctuated at 15-25 per cent in recent years. In taking a step towards the position of an active minority, the democratic forces recognise the sad reality: the connection between them and the majority of Belarusians inside the country is broken, and there will be no need to fight for their votes in the foreseeable future. The long-term calculation is made for the same wind of history that ought to weaken the regimes in Moscow and Minsk. What the mood of Belarusians will be in this new reality is unknown. But until this reality comes into being, the opposition's path to its homeland is still closed, and, therefore, the losses from the orientation towards European integration are not so great.

However, the conceptual crisis in the opposition does not go away here and now, because it is necessary to answer in one way or another the question 'what should we be doing?'. The democratic forces have already begun to lower the bar of their initiatives and ambitions, but so far, it is difficult for them to admit out loud that the only options remaining to them are to remind the world about the problems of Belarusians, to solve their humanitarian problems and self-preservation until better times.



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