

# Belarus: From Street Protests to Circle Activism

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**How has Russia's war on Ukraine been received in Belarus? What organizational methods is the Belarusian left using under conditions of total control? In this report Belarusian activists analyse the situation in the country**

## A general overview of the situation

The key event in the social and political life of Belarus in the last decade has not been Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but rather the mass protests following the presidential election in 2020. It was precisely these protests that divided the life of Belarusian society into "before" and "after." During the "before" period one could identify a low level of activity, albeit one taking place in the conditions of a particularly weak political culture, but in the 'after' period a silent vacuum has developed. As a result there are virtually no political actors left in Belarus who would be able to talk freely and clearly about the war and its direct consequences. Here we try to describe the circumstances surrounding the development, or more accurately the crisis, of left-wing politics in Belarus over the past two years. Naturally the regime's total purge of its opponents and control over any form of public activity has not helped the development of left-wing movements and initiatives. As a result, discussion groups have taken on particular significance. In contemporary Belarus they serve as a starting point for the political socialisation of those on the left, and their members often make their positions on current issues known in public.

The chronology of the protests in Belarus in 2020 has been described many times and we will not repeat this here. We will simply point out that the key factor in the growth of the protests was the unprecedented violence used against a relatively small group of people who were the first to go out onto public squares immediately after the presidential elections, at a time when the internet had been shut down across the entire country. It was in response to this violence and the unprovoked aggression committed by the security services that a huge number of people came out onto the streets of Belarus' towns and cities. The opposition, however, was unable to develop a strategic mechanism for putting pressure on Lukashenko and forcing him to abandon the presidential post – even with the support of the masses on the streets. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the main opposition candidate in the presidential elections, was in Vilnius from 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020 and had no established links to the protesters in Minsk. In October of that year Tikhanovskaya tried to announce a "general strike" which was ignored by the majority of people. By the end of 2020 the protest movement in Belarus had come to nothing.

So what had happened? Having let people blow off steam at peaceful public protests, Lukashenko went on the counter-attack: protesters were tracked down and subjected to criminal charges. People quickly began to flee Belarus despite the fact that crossing the border had become harder due to Coronavirus restrictions. In July 2021 Tikhanovskaya's office in Vilnius was awarded the status of an official diplomatic representation. This was a critical moment in terms of Belarus' democratic opposition: Tikhanovskaya became its official representative in the eyes of Western countries despite

the weak links between her office and her country's population. As a result the internal opposition in the country became superfluous to both Western countries and to Lukashenko. Many members and supporters of this opposition ended up either in jail or deep underground (according to the UN by the end of 2021 there were 969 political prisoners in Belarus). Outside of Belarus the diaspora organised numerous forums and conferences which had no impact on the lives of Belarusians who had remained in the country. Finally, the opposition developed a so-called strategic plan called "Victory" — after public protest became impossible in Belarus, the opposition turned to conspiracy theories and became preoccupied with creating a secret society. The idea was that one could join via a chat-bot on Telegram, after which participants would undergo regular training. At exactly the point when the Belarusian regime became fatally weakened they would receive instructions for actions designed to remove Lukashenko from the post of president. The Telegram channels of the Belarusian security services regularly reported the arrests of the latest participants in this "cunning plan."

Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not produce a major reaction amongst Belarusian society because there were no organised forces which could have articulated their position. Tikhanovskaya's office criticised the invasion and announced the creation of an anti-war movement, including the suggestion that volunteers should be sent to the front to fight on the side of Ukraine. On 27<sup>th</sup> February the only more or less significant anti-war protest took place in Minsk, involving almost a thousand people (more than 700 of them were arrested). It took place on the day of a referendum on introducing amendments to the Constitution which would mean that parliamentary and local elections would be delayed until 2024. In addition, the power structure was changed when a new unelected body with sweeping powers was established. Repression, the emigration of those sympathetic to the opposition, and the weakly formulated position of the latter did nothing to encourage the level of protest.

## **Society and social attitudes**

It is possible to gauge society's reaction to the war by using online surveys conducted by international research centres (in Belarus sociological research can only be carried out with the government's permission so state-funded sociological centres have not yet raised this question). The British research centre Chatham House and the Belarusian Analytical Association regularly conduct surveys of urban residents with access to the internet, with a sample size of up to 1,000 people. Although this methodology creates issues in terms of being representative, there is currently no other sociological method available for understanding the mood in Belarus.

According to the latest figures, two-thirds of Belarusians have relatives in Russia and nearly a third have relatives in Ukraine. According to a survey conducted at the beginning of March, i.e. immediately after the war broke out, 67% of the respondents were against Russia firing on Ukraine from the territory of Belarus and 52% thought that Belarus should not be used by Russia as a base for pursuing its war in Ukraine. The majority were also against having Russian military bases (44%) and Russian nuclear weapons (80%) located on the territory of Belarus. Almost a third of respondents thought that Belarus should support Russia's actions without getting involved in the conflict. A survey conducted by the Analytical Association which also took place at the beginning of the war demonstrated similar results: 61% came out against using the territory of Belarus for conducting the war in Ukraine and 50% disapproved of Russia's actions. Only 42% thought that Belarus was a participant in the conflict on the Russian side and only 22% thought Belarus was an aggressor country in the conflict. These figures are from March. Polarisation within Belarusian society took place immediately after Russia's invasion but thereafter the number of those undecided began to gradually increase. Furthermore, by August another pattern could be discerned: the number of those who thought that Belarus should in one way or another support Russia's actions after the war began became smaller and smaller.

In terms of government rhetoric and propaganda, throughout this period it maintained the narrative that Belarus was not a participant in the conflict. For example, when reporting on military developments, state media emphasised what was happening in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk which are located a long way from Belarus' borders. When at the very beginning of the war people began saying that Belarusian soldiers were being sent to Ukraine, Belarus' Ministry of Defense organised a campaign called "We are in Place" where conscripts recorded videos showing that they were on their bases on the territory of Belarus. After mobilisation was announced in Russia, government officials regularly stated that no such measure was planned in Belarus. Following the news that a contingent of troops from the Union State of Russia and Belarus would be formed, rumours about the possible deployment of the Belarusian army to Ukraine grew louder, all the more so since the authorities started checking the details of those obliged to do military service. As a result at the beginning of October the Parliament of Belarus passed new legislation restricting travel abroad for all military and security service personnel, conscripts will only be able to leave the country with the permission of the military enlistment office and Belarusian students who are studying abroad will receive an exemption from military service only if their studies were previously agreed with the government. From now on the security services can add anyone to the list of those not allowed to leave the country if they believe that their presence abroad might contravene "national security interests."

Against this backdrop resistance to the Lukashenka regime and the presence of Russian troops in Belarus became more noticeable. A movement of railway partisans emerged who would set fire to relay boxes so that the railways couldn't operate. The authorities responded to these partisans by granting permission to open fire on them in order to injure them during their arrest. As a result two partisans were injured during their arrest and were then charged with terrorism offences. The cyber-partisans were even more active in disrupting the functioning of the railways using cyber-attacks. A number of railway workers as well as residents of towns near the border with Ukraine or near military bases shared information about the location of land-based forces, military flights and the deployment of military hardware. Thanks to them word got out about military hardware (T-72A tanks) being sent from Belarus' reserves to Russian territory and the movement of trains of carrying supplies, hardware, troops and officers from Russia to Belarus. People who sent this information to opposition Telegram channels often end up being arrested and in areas near the border with Ukraine there have been a series of raids on opposition activists.

In terms of everyday life, the war had an immediate impact as the result of sanctions which led to an increase in prices for goods. Many businesses lost their European suppliers (as well as access to the European market) and were forced to quickly find substitutes in Russia or China. There was no sharp increase in unemployment (at least according to the dubious data provided by the Belstat state statistics agency which had unemployment at 3.7% in May 2022). The economic effects of the war are most obvious in Belarus in terms of inflation – in response to this the government has tried to control prices virtually by micro-managing them.

At the moment the regime is not worried about the possibility of protests as it has complete command of the instruments of force. At the same time Belarusian officials constantly use rhetoric about the supposed "external threat" of NATO countries acting against Belarus with the support of the "fugitives" (this is the offensive word used to describe those who have emigrated in recent years). The majority of the population feel at risk of being repressed so there has been no uptick in mass protest in relation to Russia's war in Ukraine. People are preoccupied with trying to survive and have gone into either real or internal emigration so it is not possible to point to any mass protests against the war.

## **Political parties**

Registered opposition parties still exist in Belarus. According to the law parties do not receive any material support from the government and do not have the right to receive such support from abroad so they depend on the donations of their members. The banking system in Belarus is tightly controlled so no donor inside the country would be brave enough to help opposition parties by giving them a significant amount. Opposition parties have to find resources for themselves and their parties which means they must work in areas not related to politics and their political activities are limited to whatever free time they have. As a result, the activities of opposition party activists are extremely limited: as a rule they make public statements, run social networks and occasionally organise party training or events. Renting an official office, having a legal address and other formalities have become an insurmountable obstacle in the context of a government which has disposed of the political opposition (except for the so-called “constructive,” i.e. paid-for opposition). There is not a single representative of any opposition party in the parliament or the municipal councils.

The Belarusian Green Party is one of the main centres of activity for left-wing activists inside Belarus. The Greens have organised assistance for refugees on the border between Belarus and Poland, have gathered proposals for changing urban planning in Minsk and have participated in local protests against excessive construction in different towns and cities in Belarus. The party's official programme may seem eclectic but the Greens have a feminist, pro-LGBT and animal rights agenda. The Greens put out a decisive statement in which they sharply criticised Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. A number of the party's activists put out a separate statement calling on Russia and Ukraine to hold negotiations.

[The Belarusian left-wing party “A Just World,”](#) i.e. the former Belarusian Party of Communists (PKB) is the oldest left-wing opposition party in the country and is the successor to the Communist Party of Belarus which was part of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In 1996 there was a split in the party caused by a referendum held by Lukashenka, as a result of which the opposition side of the party kept the party's name (PKB) while supporters of the current president founded the Communist Party of Belarus (KPB). In 2009 the PKB was renamed “A Just World.” The party's leader since 1996 has been Sergey Kalyakin and the party's position can be described as Eurocommunist, although the party periodically uses the language of Soviet bureaucracy and has participated in some dubious political alliances (e.g. Kalyakin was campaign manager for Aleksandr Milinkevich, the only opposition candidate during the 2006 presidential elections). The party includes amongst its ranks not only veterans of the Communist movement, but also young people. In relation to Russia's war in Ukraine the party made a statement based on the truism that “war cannot lead to anything positive” and called on both sides to negotiate.

In Belarus there are three social democratic parties which consider themselves to be the heirs of the [Belarusian Socialist Assembly](#) which disintegrated into a range socialist and democratic nationalist parties in 1918 [note: *each of the three social democratic parties kept the word “assembly” in its party name, which can be confusing*]. Only two of these are registered parties: the [Belarusian Social-Democratic Party](#) (BSDP, or simply “Assembly”) and the [Belarusian Social-Democratic Assembly](#) (BSDG). Both of these are members of the international confederation the Progressive Alliance. The third, unregistered social democratic party [People's Assembly](#) (NH) is part of the Socialist International. On the whole activists and supporters of these parties have limited ties to other Belarusian left-wing activists and also do not have widespread support from the population. Their party programmes more or less follow the traditions of social democracy but the BSDP has the aim of limiting the role of the Russian language within government while the BDSG has long since moved to the right in terms of economics. The BDSG made no public statement in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine whereas the other two parties criticised it in their own statements.

Belarusian political parties which are not part of the opposition (including the Communist Party of Belarus) have not permitted themselves to make any serious criticism of Lukashenka and his regime.

In terms of the war in Ukraine predictably they either refrained from commenting on it or expressed support for Russia.

## **Trade Unions and workers' movements**

As a rule authoritarian regimes tend to have their own trade unions which have control over the workers. Belarus had two confederations of trade unions: the [Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus](#) (FPB) — a mass pro-government organisation which was taken definitively under control during Lukashenka's consolidation of power in 2001 — and the [Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions](#) (BKDP): a confederation of opposition trade unions which was founded during the wave of perestroika and democratisation in newly independent Belarus at the beginning of the 1990s. The workers' movement began to fade away in the early days of the current regime. Labour legislation passed by Lukashenka in 1999 inflicted a major blow against the movement. New laws transferred all labour relations to a contractual basis, giving employers the ability to effectively combat any self-organisation by their workers. Given that in Belarus the state sector has long been a key employer and all big business has been connected to the state, independent trade unions found themselves in a defensive position, having to spend more time on legal consultations than trade union work which could achieve concrete victories. Up until 2020 the authorities used administrative and, more rarely, legal, measures to combat the independent trade unions although the international links with [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) and the grassroots organisations based at strategic enterprises made mass, open repression of members of independent trade unions impossible. It was for this reason that independent trade unions retained more members in comparison with other opposition organisations.

In the run-up to the elections in 2020 the FPB supported Lukashenka's candidacy and partially financed his campaign, while the head of the FPB was his trusted ally. The FPB also sent a large number of its members to the election commissions. The BKDP did not take part in the elections but in its statements it supported the opposition. After the protests started, independent trade unions began to observe a huge influx of new members as they were openly opposition organisations (at the same time the pro-regime FPB started to lose members). New grassroots organisations sprung up although the local authorities blocked them from legalising their status. In this way a key motivating factor for those joining a trade union was the wider pro-opposition mood — sometimes even owners and managers of different enterprises declared that they were joining these trade unions.

At major state-owned enterprises the most radical workers who supported Tikhanovskaya organised strike committees. Due to the fact that for the most part trade union leaders were somewhat suspicious of Tikhanovskaya who had appeared very suddenly on the political scene, relations between these strike committees and trade unions were complicated. They were pursuing different aims: whereas the trade unions were focused on a lengthy struggle and protecting the rights of workers, i.e. keeping their most active members, Tikhanovskaya's team needed radical action and a media splash. When Tikhanovskaya's team later lobbied in favour of sector-wide sanctions, trade unions came out against these because such sanctions would lead to job losses. However it is important not to set the strike committees and the independent trade unions definitively against each other. Depending on the enterprise in question, members of a trade union could be on a strike committee and even lead it. Nonetheless, independent trade unions chose a more long-term strategy while the strike committees tried to act in a more radical way since they calculated that the regime would soon collapse. It was these strike committees that became the first to be subjected to legal persecution.

After the war began, independent trade unions made statements in support of Ukraine. Soon after this, in April of this year, [a campaign began](#) to liquidate the independent trade union movement. Some [union organisations were designated extremist](#) while others had their registration revoked.

The [leaders of independent unions](#) were arrested and a propaganda film was made about how they supposedly received money from international trade union organisations. In June 2022 at the request of the Prosecutor's Office the Supreme Court revoked the registration of all independent trade unions in the country.

## Media projects

After the protests in 2020 many left-wing media outlets gained a new audience. Without openly supporting either side during the protests, they often focused on this subject. [The Poligraph.Red](#) blog was particularly noteworthy in this respect. It is a continuation of the currently defunct Belarusian project Prasvet [*Ray of Light*] which at the moment presents itself more as a video channel (texts are published there much less often). The content of their broadcasts is limited to criticism of Belarusian nationalism and the democratic opposition to Lukashenka (and harsh criticism of the regime itself); general lectures on Marxist theory of a fairly orthodox type; and occasional interviews with representatives of left-wing initiatives. The blog's authors sarcastically call themselves "pro-regime homo-Stalinists" and this label is a telling one in terms of explaining their position. In their video-clips about the war no sympathy is expressed for Russia but the activists claim that the first catalyst for the war was "Zelenskiy's betrayal of of his own electorate."

The [Left.by](#) is one of the oldest Belarusian media outlets, having begun publishing before 2014. It is an aggregator which gathers material about the Belarusian political left which the editors supplement with translations and material borrowed from other resources. From 2014-2015 this resource was the most-visited of the Belarusian left-wing sites, its editorial team included representatives of different parties and movements, and new material appeared on the site on a daily basis. However the complete lack of financing and internal conflicts mean that now the project is run by a small group. This has also influenced the editorial policy. The resource tries to present different positions from a broad left-wing spectrum in Belarus but this does not always work: the editors have at times allowed themselves to make harsh and unacceptable comments which many left-wing activists do not subscribe to. At present the web-site lacks original material and from the perspective of political pragmatism it is hard to agree with the material that is there. For example, one piece criticised the leaders of Belarusian trade unions, many of whom are currently behind bars.

Against the backdrop of the increased popularity of Telegram channels during the protests in 2020 a new anonymous channel called Zabastbel [*Belarusian Strike*] emerged which focused on preparing workers' strikes against Lukashenka with both economic and political left-wing demands. The channel quickly gained several thousand subscribers and at the mass protest rallies in August 2020 activists gave out leaflets promoting the channel. Zabastbel's call to Belarusian workers to strike was translated into English and published on the Progressive International website. However there were no "organic" links (in the sense of Gramsci's "organic intellectual") between the channel's organisers and ordinary workers so when the government began using repression this initiative came to nothing.

## Study circles

[Circles](#) [*kruzhki*] became a popular form of organising in Belarus after the protests in 2020. The idea that there was a civil war going on between the opposition (represented by Tikhanovskaya) and Lukashenka which was "not our fight," as well as sympathy for the Soviet modernisation project drew quite a number of participants to these circles. The work of the circles is for now limited to reading the Marxist classics (along with Marx, Engels and Lenin this even includes the authors of Soviet textbooks on dialectical materialism); publishing video clips on their YouTube channels; and holding open lectures and seminars (the speakers are the same people who appear on Belarusian



left-wing YouTube channels). This kind of activism is relatively safe since it is very rare to hear any criticism in these groups of the current socio-political situation given that it does not fit the formula of “capitalists everywhere are deceiving the workers.”

The most popular and significant study circle in Belarus at present is KrasnoBY which was established a few years ago as the Belarusian branch of the Russian public radio and video channel Station Marx. This circle tries to combine its YouTube channel with off-line study of the Marxist classics. The growth in the number of subscribers and participants again took place after the protests, during which a video clip was made which criticised both Lukashenka and the opposition. Thereafter the circle often used the approach that “both sides were ambiguous” which helped to draw the same new audience to its reading groups. In terms of the war in Ukraine the circle released at least three video clips. In the first of these they released an appeal from the “Workers’ Front of Ukraine” and talked about “capitalists carving up the territory of Ukraine.” At present the circle cannot choose between the two strategies of the media project and the educational project but their political tactics and the content of their activities will depend on these.

The oldest study circle in Belarus is Obshee Delo [*Common Cause*]. It differs from KrasnoBY only in the technical quality of its videos and its attempts to give its material a more “scientific” character. If KrasnoBY uses various popular themes in order to attract a wider audience to its circle, Obshee Delo is more academic. The subject of Russia’s war in Ukraine has not been discussed very much with the circle limiting itself to one long post which stated the most pressing aim for Communists in the context of the war: “To spread propaganda, educate the workers on their class interests, reveal what capitalist society is really like and organise the workers.”

It seems that this circle model emerges and functions precisely during the most challenging times. It is worth noting that the pro-regime KPB is trying, albeit in a very clumsy way, to join this wave of circles by announcing a Marxist group in Gomel which has been set up by the head of their youth wing. In terms of the activism of these circles at present this mostly involves reading the classics of Marxist Leninism. This attracts a certain number of grassroots left-wingers who in time start to look for new ways of organising. The peak moment for circles in terms of growth has already passed — it was particularly acute at precisely that moment of grassroots politicisation of the population that took place after the protests in 2020. At that time, while the security services were hunting down those who had participated in the protests, young people who had a more sceptical attitude towards the main opposition gravitated towards circles. However, due to the ongoing repression it is not easy to find new participants. Their unclear position on Russia’s war in Ukraine and the fact that they do not discuss the war enough has not helped their popularity. When there is an active conflict which is claiming multiple victims, the brave call to “read Marx in order to understand the underlying causes” needs to be corrected in order to address the realities of the situation.

## **Conclusions and future opportunities**

As we can see Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has not yet had a significant impact on the internal political situation in Belarus. The second half of 2020 was incredibly inspiring but this was followed by a grim 2021. At the start of 2022 a significant proportion of the opposition were either in exile or in jail. Left-wing initiatives and movements inside the country started to function as new media outlets which in one way or another touched upon the subject of the war in Ukraine. The audience of viewers or listeners for these new media outlets is nonetheless quite small, at least for now. There is little point in talking of opportunities for a grassroots democratic left-wing movement to emerge in Belarus. Given the circumstances of constant repression no grassroots political initiative is capable of lasting long enough to increase the popularity of discussion groups and educational video channels.

It is interesting that pro-regime political experts have recently begun using a new trope of “Belarus’ Eurasian socialist path.” No doubt we can expect that in the near future the regime’s mouthpieces will switch to using “left-wing patriotic” rhetoric. One can also presuppose that this move to the left will be promoted with the help of Russian stars of the left-wing patriotic internet for their audience of discussion groups. It is unlikely that this ideological substitution will be successful: Lukashenka’s regime has always avoided clear ideological positions, relying instead on more speculative concepts (including even the meaning of a “welfare state”).

In one way or another Lukashenka’s regime will be weakened as a result of Russia’s war in Ukraine given that Belarus receives major geopolitical support only from Russia. Whether it leads to Russia’s defeat or unconvincing victory, inside the country Lukashenka can only rely on his own powers. In the worst-case scenario Belarus would see a civil war: the huge number of political prisoners serving lengthy jail terms makes any rapprochement between the opposition and Lukashenka’s allies impossible. Tikhonovskaya’s office is also lying in wait. As soon as Russia’s geopolitical power, and therefore its support for Lukashenka, begins to weaken, her office will use any diplomatic and media instruments available to overthrow the regime inside Belarus. Time will tell.

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Posle Media

<https://posle.media/language/en/from-street-protests-to-circle-activism/?s=09>