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The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic

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On 25th March in the centre of Minsk a concert was held in order to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) which is an important symbol of Belarusian statehood for the country's independent circles. The concert was approved by the government. The celebration was organised by a social committee composed of representatives of the Belarusian opposition and independent civil society organisations. According to various estimates, as many as 20,000-30,000 people in total may have attended the concert and side events, which lasted several hours. The proclamation of the BPR was also celebrated, albeit on a much smaller scale, in other Belarusian cities, including: Hrodna, Baranovichi, Slutsk, Homel and Brest. As in the capital, all the events held were approved by the Belarusian government. At the same time, on 23rd March the law enforcement forces detained many members of the opposition's radical wing who did not accept the legal format of the celebrations of the anniversary that had been agreed upon with the government and urged others to take part in an illegal march to be organised in the centre of the capital on 25th March.

The fact that the government approved the legal celebration of the anniversary of the establishment of the BPR, which is not officially recognised, is unprecedented and indicates a gradual and cautious modification of the historical policy which has been pursued to date. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which has been ongoing since 2014, and growing pressure from Moscow have led Minsk to strengthen its own historical narrative based on symbols not linked to the Russian domination. On the other hand, the Belarusian government has been trying to maintain the activity of national and opposition circles within set limits, fearing the destabilisation of the system and Moscow's reaction, and not to deny the USSR's legacy or Belarus's close cultural ties with Russia.

The softening of the government's policy

The annual anniversary of the proclamation of the BPR in 1918 (which is celebrated on 25th March and called the Day of Freedom) is, for the Belarusian opposition, the main occasion to publicly demonstrate views which are different to the government's official narrative. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime has previously completely ignored this celebration, even more so that the country's official Independence Day, the anniversary of the liberation of Minsk from Germany by the Red Army in 1944, falls on 3rd July. Furthermore, in previous years the government not only hampered the organisation of celebrations of consecutive

anniversaries of the establishment of the BPR but also employed a series of repressions against their participants. In 2017 direct coercive measures were used against the protesters which were disproportionate to their behaviour.

Also the very proclamation of the BPR used to be unequivocally criticised in official historiography as a pro-Western attempt to oppose the will of the people who eventually sought to make Belarus part of the USSR. For this reason it is an unprecedented decision for the Belarusian government to allow a mass event to be organised in the centre of Minsk with the informal (not written in an official document from city hall) consent for the use of symbols which are legally prohibited, including white-red-white flags and the Pogon coat of arms (which, before 1995, functioned as official symbols of independent Belarus). It is also worth pointing out that the celebrations were allowed also outside the capital where the government usually tries to curb the activity of independent circles as it still remembers the mass protests held the previous year which unexpectedly spread to the majority of the country.

A serious change has also occurred in the narrative of the government and historians affiliated to the regime. In a speech he made about the BPR on 20th March, President Lukashenka for the first time did not unequivocally condemn its founders and, in a measured manner, pointed to difficult circumstances in 1918 when a failed attempt to establish an independent Belarus was made. On 15th March, during a conference on the establishment of the BPR held at the National Academy of Sciences, a member of the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament, the House of Representatives of Belarus, historian professor Ihar Marzalyuk recognised the BPR as one of the stages of building Belarusian statehood in the 20th century, on a par with the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) as part of the USSR. This view was not met with opposition from the remaining participants of the conference, which indicates that this may be a sign of a fundamental shift in the assessment of the BPR in Belarusian historiography.

Setting the limits

However, the softening of the government's position on the anniversary of the establishment of the BPR (which is an important event for the opposition) had its limits. Despite the demands that independent circles have been making for years, the 25th March has not been recognised as a national holiday and none of the government representatives attended the celebrations. Those who attended the concert in Minsk and who were in possession of illegal symbols were in many cases asked to show their ID cards and detained after they left the gated area of the concert. Furthermore, repression (typical of an authoritarian regime) was used against proponents of the traditional (illegal) march, such as preventative detentions – beginning on 21st March – of the main activists of radical opposition structures (among them former candidates in the 2010 presidential election – Uladzimir Nyaklyayew and Mikola Statkevich). The government wanted thus to clearly show that opposition activity was possible only within the boundaries set by the government. The tactic the regime used of softening the course while maintaining the repression has led to a serious deepening of the already existing chasm within the opposition between proponents of dialogue with the government and more radical opposition members. It is certain that this will make it easier for the government to play the Belarusian opposition circles off against

each another.

Contradictions in the regime's historical politics

The currently observed softening of the rhetoric and the fact that the government allowed the celebrations in the agreed format prove that the Belarusian regime is making corrections in its historical policy. Undoubtedly, Russia's aggressive politics in the area of the former Soviet republics – manifesting not only in the case of Ukraine but also Belarus, although in a different form – has provided the main impetus for these changes. With regard to this Alyaksandr Lukashenka deemed it necessary to strengthen elements which underline Belarus's distinctiveness in the context of all its neighbours, most importantly Russia, in the state's ideology. In the longer term it could lead to the consolidation of national awareness in Belarusians, who are massively influenced by the Russian media, which the Belarusian government considers to be a potential threat. At the same time, the popularity of emblems (e.g. printed T-shirts) linked to the white-red-white flags, Pogon, and Belarusian folk patterns (embroidered shirts) has grown and represents a sort of fashion, in particular with young people.

Nevertheless, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has not decided to make larger changes in historical policy but has only supplemented it with a more balanced approach to the BPR, due to the ever-strong cult of the USSR in Belarus and the related sovietisation of society, as well as the fear of an excessive strengthening of national-opposition circles. The fear of how Moscow will react, given that it is rather sensitive about Belarus presenting a different historical narrative, is another important factor. Therefore, the Belarusian government continues to maintain the narrative which makes a direct reference to the tradition of the USSR. This could be seen, for example, in the much-celebrated 100th anniversary of the law enforcement forces in December 2017, the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the internal armed forces in March or the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Komsomol – the official Soviet youth organisation – planned for October. The contradictions in Belarus's historical policy, due to both the nature of Belarusian authoritarianism and the general state of relations between Belarus and Russia, will pose a great challenge for the Belarusian government. It remains an open question whether such an incoherent narrative may lead to the consolidation of national identity and the unification of a divided society, also in the face of potential external threats.