



# STRATEGIC FILE

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## After Ukraine: Are Russia and Belarus Ripe for Revolution?

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*The revolution that rocked Ukraine and removed President Yanukovich from power at the beginning of 2014 has raised the question of whether similar revolutionary moods are present in Russia and Belarus. The likelihood of civil disobedience in these countries is related to the similarities and differences between their societies, the presence or not of motivations comparable to those that led Ukrainians to protest on Maidan Square in Kyiv, the perception or not of real potential alternatives to presidents Putin and Lukashenka, as well as their economic prospects. Ultimately, it seems, all these factors indicate revolution is not to be expected in Moscow or Minsk anytime soon.*

As Ukraine gears up for its presidential elections on 25 May and the east and south of the country are rocked by instability, it is worth examining what led to the current situation and whether similar developments can be expected in its authoritarian neighbours, Russia and Belarus.

### What Caused the Ukrainian Revolution?

After the Eastern Partnership's Vilnius Summit in November 2013, at which President Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union—despite previously indicating he would do so—mass demonstrations began on Maidan Square in Kyiv. The protests, which began as a largely apolitical show of opposition to the change in the country's international course away from the EU, changed in January 2014. Following repression of protestors by the government, calls for European integration were replaced by slogans against corruption and appropriation of the state by Yanukovich's team (Ukraine ranked 144 out of 177 countries in terms of corruption perception, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index 2013<sup>1</sup>). Following unsuccessful attempts by the government to break up the protests on Maidan using Berkut special forces, in February deadly force was deployed. Almost 100 people were killed during an operation by snipers intended to disperse the protestors.

This violent repression of protestors in Kyiv precipitated the process of political transformation. On 21 February, Yanukovich signed an agreement with opposition leaders. The next day, he disappeared from Kyiv and protestors took over presidential administration buildings. Parliament voted to remove the president from power and set a date for presidential elections. It named parliamentary Speaker Olexander Turchynov as interim president. With Russia and its sympathisers in the east and south of the country disgruntled by the situation in Kyiv, pro-Russian gunmen and protestors occupied government buildings in Crimea and later in the eastern part of Ukraine, including Slavyansk, Donetsk and Lugansk.

<sup>1</sup> Corruption Perceptions Index 2013, [www.cpi.transparency.org](http://www.cpi.transparency.org).

But the recent revolution in Ukraine is not the first time a former Soviet republic has undergone a revolutionary change of its political system since the fall of the USSR in 1991. So-called colour revolutions have taken place in Georgia in 2003 (the “Rose Revolution”), Ukraine in 2004 (the “Orange Revolution”), and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (the “Tulip Revolution”). Similar attempts at regime change have also taken place—though unsuccessfully—in Belarus and Russia.

## **The Belarusian Experience: Ploshcha<sup>2</sup> and Revolution through Social Networks**

Despite characteristics that could be expected to stymie any revolutionary potential—such as an atomised society and lack of a real alternative to the current regime—Belarus has seen attempts at revolution in the past. So far, all have been unsuccessful. But recent events in Ukraine, which itself underwent a revolution in 2005 that did not lead to proper systemic change, raise the question of the possibility of further revolution in Belarus.

### *A Society Repressed and Divided*

Belarusian society is highly atomised and characterised by a high degree of distrust of both state institutions and the opposition, as well as fear of the authorities in general. This is the result of serious and prolonged repression by the Belarusian state since Aleksander Lukashenka came into power in 1994.

The Belarusian political regime is a stable autocracy, characterised by a state presence in and control of almost all spheres of life. As a result, any potential sources of political instability in the country are liquidated as soon as they appear. Moreover, the implementation of “one state” ideology serves to limit the probability of the emergence of any potential opposition: membership in pro-regime organisations such as the “Pioneers” or “Belarusian Republican Youth Union”<sup>3</sup> are, for all intents and purposes, compulsory and serve as the launch pad for careers in state administration, creating closed political networks and a homogenous approach to government. In fact, the power vertical is so strong that even attempts to create a party in power (“White Rus”) failed because President Lukashenka wanted to prevent the emergence of a centre of power outside the presidential administration. Moreover, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate) also cooperates with the authorities<sup>4</sup> and does not provide room for independent activity and discussion, unlike the Catholic Church in Poland during communism.

The lack of both confidence in the state and access to political elites means that interest in politics is low. According to Belarusian polls, only one-sixth of respondents are interested in the activities of the political parties.<sup>5</sup> Only 9% of Belarusian society trusts political parties, while 39% does not trust them.<sup>6</sup> This is a result of a lack of any party system in the country: there are no parties in parliament and opposition parties are small, divided and have no practical influence. Very little information about political parties reaches the public and the level of political culture in the country is extremely low. Moreover, as a result of the poor state of the economy, Belarusians are focused on finding and keeping work and earning money, rather than on fomenting revolution. This is exacerbated by their inability to rely on social support from the state.

What is more, despite their disapproval for the current political system, surveys show that most Belarusians are uninterested in enacting regime change. A poll by the Belarus-focused think tank ISEPS found that almost 55% consider the country to be going in the wrong direction. Just 13% believe that the economic situation will improve in the near future. A 2014 survey found that 44% of Belarusian society distrusts President Lukashenka. Despite all this, almost 40% of Belarusians declared they would vote for him,<sup>7</sup> largely as a result of the lack of any real or strong alternatives to the current president and because people see him as the only guarantor of stability, which is perceived as a priority in Belarus.

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<sup>2</sup> The Belarusian name for the square in Minsk analogous to Kyiv’s “Maidan.”

<sup>3</sup> The organisation is the successor of the Leninist Communist Youth League of the Belorussian SSR.

<sup>4</sup> Belarusian Analytical Workroom, “Belarus’. Real’nost’” no. 12, March 2014, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Belarusian Telegraph Agency, “Interest of Belarusians in political parties increases,” [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by).

<sup>6</sup> Belarus News, “Political parties in Belarus: myth or reality,” [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by).

<sup>7</sup> ISEPS, “Press-reliz po rezul’tatam natsional’nogo oprosa v marte 2014 g.,” [www.iiseps.org](http://www.iiseps.org).

As well, the public mood regarding the country's international integration is changing. Support for the idea of integration with the European Union is decreasing and support for the idea of integration with Russia is rising. In 2011, 50% of Belarusians supported the idea of integration with the EU, but in 2014 this figure had fallen to just 30%. Meanwhile, the level of support for integration<sup>8</sup> with the Russian Federation increased from 24% in 2013 to 29% in 2014, in line with the policy of the current regime.<sup>9</sup>

### *Poor Prospects for Revolution*

The majority of Belarusians are not proponents of revolution or protest. Before Russia's annexation of Crimea, the level of public support in Belarus for the Ukrainian Maidan protesters was less than 50%.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in response to the question "Would you like to see protests similar to those happening in Ukraine take place in Belarus?," only 3.6% said yes.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, 61.2% of Belarusians do not see any prospects for such events in their country.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, during the last decade, Belarusians have been on the streets twice. Both times—in 2006 and 2010—the protests came after presidential elections. In 2006, following a deeply flawed campaign period, 10,000 to 15,000 protesters gathered in Minsk's October Square after the announcement of falsified election results that claimed Lukashenka had won a third term with 82.6% of the vote. After several days of protests, the authorities sent in OMON, special police units, which detained and beat many activists and jailed opposition leaders Anatoly Lebedko, Alaksandar Milinkievic and Alaksandar Kazulin, who was sentenced to five and a half years in prison.<sup>13</sup>

In December 2010, Lukashenka won a fourth term as president (with a reported 79.7% of the vote, according to official tallies), again in a severely falsified fashion. Even though the campaign was relatively more democratic than in previous elections. Moreover, several presidential candidates, as well as 15,000 protesters, were arrested while protesting after the closing of polls on election night. Many were later sentenced by the courts for taking part in "unsanctioned activities" and were subject to administrative arrests and fines. Although almost all the detainees were released, including former presidential candidates (such as Dzmitry Us and Vital Rymasheuski), it was the most brutal action in the modern history of Belarus.

The last attempt at protest was the so-called revolution by social network, which took place in 2011. It included a wide range of actions in Minsk and several other big cities. In particular, "silent marches" were organised using social networks such as V Kontakte and Odnoklassniki. Nevertheless, these actions were not very popular—the biggest marches attracted about 1,000 people, while many others gathered only about 20 participants. Moreover, all were broken up, and none of the actions managed to last longer than one week. Since the protests, the majority of their initiators have been made redundant from their workplaces or forced to agitate for Lukashenka and the regime. Following this "cyber revolt," the Belarusian authorities increased control over the internet.

The characteristics of Belarusian society and the country's revolutionary experience so far suggest that it is not ready to initiate anything similar to the Ukrainian revolution. The next potential flashpoint for unrest is the 2015 presidential election. But following the events in Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities are likely to do all they can to counteract such moods, including increasing the already-strict control of media, further restricting election campaigns, arresting opposition activists and artificially increasing salaries to boost support for the regime.

## **Russian Protest Attempts: The Chances for a Bolotnaya II**

Mass protests in Russia, which began in 2011 and continued through 2012, raised the question of whether a "colour revolution" would be possible in the country. Tens of thousands came out to protest on Moscow's Bolotnaya Square in December 2011 following seriously flawed legislative elections, and stayed

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<sup>8</sup> It has to be underlined that the question touches only on economic integration, not on national sovereignty.

<sup>9</sup> IISEPS, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> A. Yaroshevich, "Ploshcha 2015 might not happen," [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by).

<sup>11</sup> IISEPS, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2013" (Belarus), [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

put despite freezing weather and the Christmas holiday in a show of protest not seen in the country since the 1990s. The protests continued sporadically throughout the winter and into the spring of 2012, when Vladimir Putin was inaugurated as president for the third time in March. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested in several major cities, and state repression ramped up in response.

### *Conflicted Attitude towards the State*

Large swathes of the Russian middle class, which benefitted economically during Putin's tenure, now feel uncomfortable with the level of electoral fraud, corruption and repression of free speech in the country. A survey by the independent Russian polling organisation Levada Centre shows that in January 2014 Putin's popularity was at rock bottom, and his average approval ratings had fallen to an all-time low of 24%.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, there still is a huge group of people who are prepared to support the Russian president: although his average popularity was low (due to the growing number of people declaring they do not approve of his activities), in January, 65% of respondent still answered that they support the president (34% said they do not). Moreover, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March, the average approval rating for President Putin rose to 65%, and the portion of respondents who support him grew to 82% (while just 17% declared they do not approve of him).<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, support for other political institutions in Russia is not comparable to the president's approval levels. Public support for the government has remained at 30%, or the same level from 2011 to 2013,<sup>16</sup> though public confidence in the State Duma has increased from 20% in 2011 to 25% in 2013. These are low levels for a society bombarded with pro-government and pro-system messaging by the country's media and suggest that in Russia it is only President Putin who has strong public support. This is largely due to the country's authoritarian regime, which concentrates power in the presidential post, according to which all important decisions are taken by the president and almost every institution is subordinated to him. It also reflects the high levels of perceived corruption in the country (Russia ranks 127 out of 177 countries in terms of corruption perception<sup>17</sup>), which alienates the population from the state bureaucracy.

Despite this less-than-rosy perception of the current regime, Russians are largely conservative when it comes to their political aspirations for their country. Polls show that 39% would like to see a return to the pre-1991 Soviet system, something that the Putin regime is arguably doing, and certainly harking back to in terms of official rhetoric. A further 19% support the current system, and only 21% consider Western-style democracy to be the best political regime for Russia (January 2014 data).<sup>18</sup>

### *Past Protests: What Clues as to the Future?*

Russian society has a long tradition of protest and civil disobedience: in 1825, the Decembrists revolt against Tsar Nicholas I; in 1917, the Bolsheviks overthrew Nicholas II. In 1991, Russians went to Manezhnaya Square in Moscow to press for democracy, show their support for Boris Yeltsin and demand the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1993, they stormed the White House during the constitutional crisis. Russians have protested during Putin's tenure, too. In 2010, people in Kaliningrad hit the streets in response to the cancellation of gubernatorial elections there. Around the same time, the "Strategy-31" movement was established in response to new legislation limiting Russians' freedom of assembly (ensured in Article 31 of the constitution) and organised a series of marches, mainly in Moscow.

These localised demonstrations served as a precursor to larger-scale activities. These bigger protests began on Bolotnaya Square in December 2011 (more than 100,000 people took part). The size and vigour of the protests led the authorities to implement strict sanctions against protesters, such as fines and arrests, including the high-profile arrest of opposition politician Alexei Navalny. Nevertheless, surveys show that in 2013 more than 60% of Russian society had no idea about the actions on Bolotnaya Square or the sanctions against its participants.<sup>19</sup> The latest wave of demonstrations took place in March 2014, when around

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<sup>14</sup> Levada Centre, "Indeksy odobreniia Vladimira Putina i Dmitriia Medvedeva," [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Corruption Perceptions Index 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Levada centre, "Luchshaya politicheskaya i ekonomicheskaya sistema," [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

<sup>19</sup> Levada centre, "Bolotnoye delo," [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

100,000 people took to the streets of Moscow and St Petersburg to protest against Russia's annexation of Crimea and for fair and honest mass media. However, these actions were again localised, and limited to the country's major cities, as the majority of Russians support the Kremlin's foreign policy (note the increase in Putin's approval rating following the annexation of Crimea) and 43% believe that the protests in Ukraine were instigated by Europe.<sup>20</sup>

The characteristics of Putin-era protests in Russia suggest that there is appetite for revolt among the liberal elite of the country. But it is also apparent that the conservative tendencies of the majority of the population—and the likelihood of severe repression of demonstrators—mean that for the time being any protests would be unsuccessful in enacting any meaningful change, let alone in overturning the government.

## Conclusions

Although Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were all part of one state less than a quarter of a century ago, they have taken different paths since the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is because of these various paths of development and the resulting systemic differences that the three countries do not present the same prospects for revolution today.

The authorities in Minsk are trying to maintain a Soviet-style institutional system and prevent any democratisation or emergence of a meaningful national identity in Belarus. Belarusians have very limited possibilities to learn and use their own language (Russian is the country's primary language), media underline the country's common history with Russia, and the same national holidays are celebrated. Moreover, the political and economic continuity that is maintained with the Soviet past (also prominent in state symbolism) hinders the creation of a nation-state in Belarus. These facts, combined with the increasing level of public support for the Belarusian president, decreasing support for European integration, and the negative attitude towards the Maidan protests in Ukraine, indicate that Belarusian society today is not ready for a Kyiv-style revolution.

Moscow, meanwhile, has established an authoritarian system marked by mass-media control, human-rights violations and repression that makes any attempts by the opposition-minded middle class to bring about change through protest futile for now. Nevertheless, this situation could change with internal and external developments. In particular, any economic difficulties that bring about the deterioration of the financial situation of the middle and upper class as a result of Western sanctions, capital flight, and lack of reform might initiate a wave of protest.

Of the three countries, Ukraine was the only one to abandon almost all the symbols of the Soviet past. Since independence, the Ukrainian education system has supported the development—particularly in the Western parts of the country that were incorporated into the USSR later than the east and south—of a new generation for whom the Ukrainian language, culture and history are of significant value. It is this generation that carried out the revolution on Maidan in the winter of 2013–2014. But as events in the east and in Crimea show, Ukrainian society is by no means monolithic, and many Ukrainian citizens would prefer to join Russia than build a democratic, European Ukraine.

So far, Ukraine is the only country of the three in which revolution has led to systemic change. Demonstrations in Russia and Belarus, meanwhile, have proved counterproductive and have only contributed to the worsening of the situation for civil society institutions. In both cases, the propensity for revolution is likely to depend on how the situation in Ukraine develops, particularly in light of the presidential elections on 25 May and calls for Russian annexation of the eastern Ukrainian territories.

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<sup>20</sup> Levada centre, "Otnosheniye zhitel'ey Ukrainy i Rossii k sobytiyam v Ukraine," [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).