

Belarus: Lukashenko's struggle against the opposition and the new Cold War

Martin Suchanek, Neue International 256, Berlin, June 2021 Sun, 30/05/2021 - 20:28

Martin Suchanek, Neue International 256, Berlin, June 2021

The forced landing of a Boeing 737 on 23 May represents another reckless blow by Belarusian President Lukashenko. On the basis of an alleged bomb threat, the plane was forced to turn around and make an emergency landing in Minsk by a MiG-29 interceptor, a brazen, and also thinly veiled, act of state-organised air piracy. Initially, the regime tried to blame the alleged bomb threat on Hamas. Hamas quickly denied it, and Lukashenko's despicable attempt to fuel anti-Islamic Western resentment for his own purposes came to nothing. This lie was just too obvious.

Crushing the opposition

The real purpose of the manoeuvre quickly became apparent: the arrest of the opposition member Roman Protasevich. He has been living in exile in Athens for years and runs the video and Telegram platforms Nexta and Nexta-Live from there. During the mass demonstrations against the rigged presidential elections, they functioned as important sources of information and networking tools independent of the regime. Therefore, they are accused of "terrorism" and incitement to sedition by the Belarusian secret service, KGB.

The arrest; forced confessions as published by state television; a possible public show trial and the threat of a long prison sentence are intended to send two main messages.

First, the regime is showing that it is prepared to use any means to crush and silence the opposition. Forced confessions and remorse are meant to demoralise others, to convince them of the hopelessness of further dissident activity and thus to persuade them to give up. Above all, they are meant to signal that no one is safe from the regime, even abroad and even a young 26-year-old who was not a well-known opposition leader.

Secondly, the arrest is also meant to deal another blow to the remaining opposition news networks. A few days before the forced landing of the Boeing 737, the last opposition news portal, TUT.by, in Belarus, was stormed by police units and several journalists were arrested. Finally, the arrest and interrogation of Protasevich is also aimed at dismantling correspondents' networks and communication structures in Belarus itself, in order to seal off the country from the influence of opposition media and organisations.

At present, Lukashenko obviously feels in a position of strength. For example, the opposition politician Svetlana Tikhanovskaya recently expressed her desire to negotiate with the regime in Vienna. Lukashenko sees no reason for this. Now that the mass movement itself has died down, he is trying to crush the opposition once and for all, relying on an oversized, powerful and loyal state and repressive apparatus. He accepts a confrontation with the Western, imperialist countries, the EU, Germany or the USA, and sanctions for this and relies on the support of Russia. Russia, in turn, is trying to use the situation to bind

Belarus even more closely to itself as a semi-colony, even though at enormous financial cost.

Character of the regime

Propagandistically, the Belarusian regime is also trying to portray Lukashenko's actions as acts of self-defence against growing Western European or US-American influence. The opposition is also demonised, even to the point of insinuating that people like Protasevich are actually "extremists". He is accused of having been a member of a nationalist organisation at the age of 16 and of having fought as a right-wing volunteer against the Republic of Donbass, on the side of Ukraine, at 17.

However, these accusations miss the point. Firstly, Protasevich, who is certainly not a leftist, is reproached for his past in order to distract from the regime's real accusation, the legitimate and progressive character of the movement against Lukashenko, which is supported by the masses. For this, an unjustified parallel is constructed between the reactionary Maidan movement and that in Belarus.

The Lukashenko regime is a reactionary, Bonapartist system that is primarily interested in maintaining its own power. The opposition, in turn, is fundamentally different from the Maidan movement and the fascist militias that acted as its storm troopers. In Belarus, we are dealing with a democratic mass movement against an authoritarian regime, which is supported by the mass of the population, including the wage-earners. The regime itself fears any form of opposition but, above all, that the working class could become its leading force.

Therefore, in March 2021, not only were online portals like Nexta declared "extremist" and "terrorist" organisations. At the same time, workers' rights were further restricted. Workers who call for political strikes or work stoppages can be summarily dismissed. In March 2021, activists from strike committees in the Soligorsk potash mine or at the Grodno Asot fertiliser plant were also arrested.

The current attacks on the opposition, the decline of the mass movement and its lack of anchorage in the working class admittedly favour Lukashenko's intention to break it.

Therefore, it is all the more important that the working class in all countries solidarise with the workers, students and intellectuals in Belarus in their struggle against the regime.

Nobody should be distracted by the fact that the dictator Lukashenko demagogically tries to take advantage of the fact that quite a few opposition leaders who fled to the West are orienting towards the EU or the USA and politically pursuing a liberal or conservative orientation. Just as the Belarusian regime in its crisis is more and more dependent on the support of Russia and Putin, there is of course a real danger that liberal and conservative opposition leaders in exile will become pawns of Western imperialism. But we can only effectively counter this if we show solidarity with the victims of repression and with the over 1,000 political prisoners, demand their immediate and unconditional release and support the building of an independent political party of the working class.

Mendacious criticism and sanctions

The governments of Belarus' neighbouring countries, as well as Germany, the EU and the USA, have been presenting themselves for days as selfless supporters of the opposition and have tightened sanctions against the regime. As in the past, these are mainly of a symbolic character, but in some areas, suspension of flights to Belarus, threatened import ban on potash, its most important export commodity, they are beginning to go beyond that.

The scandalous forced landing of the Boeing 737 and the arrest of passengers are rightly criticised. However, the practice of kidnapping alleged opponents is deliberately concealed as it embodies a long

tradition of all imperialist powers and several reactionary semi-colonial regimes. First and foremost, since the beginning of the "war on terror", the USA has carried out so-called "extraordinary renditions" on a large scale and transferred the extradited persons to Guantánamo, for example.

Even aircraft hijackings or forced route changes are not unprecedented. In 2013, for example, the plane of Bolivian President Morales was forced to land in Vienna because a whistleblower, Edward Snowden, wanted by the US intelligence services, was allegedly on board.

For Merkel, von der Leyen, Macron or Biden, it is ultimately never about human rights or democracy. These merely serve as means to an end in the larger confrontation, especially with Russia. The sanctions against Belarus and the Western policy towards the opposition pursue several goals. The country, one of the last semi-colonies in Europe dominated by Moscow, is to be wrested from Russian influence in the longer term. Until then, the price is to be driven up as high as possible, because after all, saving Lukashenko's regime does cost Russia billions to support the country's economy and prevent further economic and social destabilisation. The 500 million euros in emergency aid that Putin pledged to the regime in Sochi at the end of May are only a small part of the support money that will be needed in the longer term.

At the same time, the West is also intensifying the pressure in other ways. In the EU, for example, there are more and more voices calling for an arms build-up in Ukraine. The most recent example of this is from the leader of the German Green Party, Robert Habeck, who called for the rapid delivery of defensive weapons for Kiev, thereby overtaking the German government on the right.

Perspectives

The hypocrisy and mendacious criticism of Lukashenko by the Western imperialist states must in no way prevent us from continuing to support the working class, students and intellectuals in Belarus. However, we must also expose and reject the hypocritical support of the opposition by the Western powers for what it is: a means to push through their own geostrategic and economic interests in the competition with Russia.

The working class and the left must therefore combine solidarity with the movement in Belarus, and support for workers' organisations independent of the regime, with a rejection of any imperialist interference, whether from the West or Russia.

For the moment, Lukashenko may think himself relatively safe. In the longer term, however, his rule is fragile, built on sand. Socially, his government relies almost exclusively on the state and security apparatus and the support of Russian imperialism. In the long run, such a social basis cannot be sufficient to stabilise the country. On the contrary, even the massive repression, adventurous kidnapping and intimidation operations do not only intimidate the people. They also involuntarily reveal the weakness of a regime that apparently fears a 26-year-old blogger so much that a plane is hijacked to get hold of him.

The small but active Belarusian left and working class must assume that a new outbreak of the mass movement in the country is not imminent. Sooner or later, however, its return is to be expected, and indeed inevitable, in view of the regime's unbroken crisis of legitimacy and the social and economic distortions. The left and the working class and their international supporters must prepare for this by building oppositional workplace and trade union structures, youth and student organisations and above all a revolutionary workers' party today, under conditions of semi-liberty and illegality.