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Belarus and Soviet Authoritarianism

Interview with Ihar Alinevich

Yavor Tarinski

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Introduction & questions: Yavor Tarinski

Ihar Alinevich is an anarchist from Belarus (a country which still lives in the Soviet era) who has paid dearly for his ideas by going through the hell of the Belarusian penal system. We had the rare opportunity to meet him and take an interview for the Greek anti-authoritarian journal Babylonia regarding the situation in his country and the libertarian movement there. What is being described below happens in real life and in 21st century, in a country which nowadays is being considered as “civilized European state”.

Ihar Alinevich is one of the victims of the 2010 wave of repression in Belarus against anti-authoritarians. As an anarchist and active participant in demonstrations, Ihar had to leave the country in order to avoid persecution, thus fleeing to Moscow. On 28 November 2010, however, he was kidnapped by Belarusian KGB agents and brought back to Belarus, where he underwent farce trial and was found guilty of arson attacks on Belarusbank and casino “Shangri La”, as well as for throwing a flare at the General head-

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quarters of the Belarusian armed forces during an anti-militarist demonstration in Minsk. He was sentenced to 8 years in a corrective labor colony with reinforced regime. Demonstrations in solidarity with him and other Belarusian political prisoners were organized in cities all around the world.

After his release, Ihar was forced by the authorities to leave Belarus permanently. He has written a book called “On the Way to Magadan: Prisoner’s Diary” (2014), in which he describes the Belarusian regime, his nightmarish experience in prison, as well as, elaborates on his libertarian ideas.

Few notes on the current political reality of Belarus

After Belarus gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, social democrat Stanislav Shushkevich became head of state until 1994, when he lost from the communist Alexander Lukashenko. Lukashenko remains in power until today – winning consequently 5 presidential elections, with around 80% of the vote each time. A trusted cadre of the Communist Regime, he was a director of a kolkhoz, served in the Soviet Border Troops and was a deputy political officer in the Soviet Army. Lukashenko was the only MP to vote against the independence of Belarus from the Soviet Union in 1991. The Communist Party of Belarus is fully supporting Lukashenko’s presidency.

Nowadays Belarus continues to be run in a soviet manner: in strongly authoritarian manner. Still the largest part of the economy is under state ownership. It is the only country where the KGB continues to function after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. On symbolic level, the national coat of arms maintains its soviet aesthetics with wheat ears and a red star, with only the hammer and sickle, that used to be at the middle of the symbol, to be replaced by a red map of Belarus. It is also the last country that officially celebrates the October Revolution Day: The only other country where this holiday has been observed until recent years was Kyrgyzstan, where since 2017 it was replaced by the ‘Days of Ancestral History and Memory’.

Modern Belarus has been labelled as “Europe’s last dictatorship”. As Ihar writes in his book: “there is no possibility for public political expression. Absolutely all peaceful political initiatives in Belarus are harshly suppressed: it is impossible to carry out a legal picket or demonstration, an open discussion or meeting – people are detained even at punk concerts.” Tens of thousands of people are being held in prisons and in labor colonies. But its extreme authoritarian system does not stop the US and EU countries to do business with it.

Belarus’s geographic position makes it an important place for the transportation of huge amounts of natural gas, oil and other raw materials from Russia towards Western Europe. In 2016 EU even lifted most sanctions it had imposed on the regime, due to Brussels’ increasing economic interests in the country, which led to intense protests by human rights organization.

The Interview with Ihar Alinevich:

How long did you stay in prison, and when did they let you go? What was like the experience of a 21st century communist prison?

Ihar Alinevich: I spent almost 5 years in prison. During this time, I changed two remand prisons and two penal colonies. The arrest and stay in the KGB detention center are described in the book “Going to Magadan”. Conditions were constantly downgrading, not only for political prisoners, but in general for all prisoners. I spent 126 days in the punishment cells, and 80 of them – during the last year of detention, when authority sent me to special “red colony”, which was supervised by the KGB.

Despite the fact that the number of prisoners in Belarus is one of the highest, people know very little about prisons, although the mass culture is deeply infiltrated with prison jargon and concepts. Apparently, this is a psychological defensive reaction of the people who have passed through the mass repressions of communism.

What I saw was a shock to me. I expected something quite different: the usual rude and violent attitude of the guards, as well as

threats from criminals, like in the films. In reality, the main threat was the scientific system of suppression of the masses, introduced by the Communists and brought to perfection in 90 years.

Modern camps differ from GULAG by 4 features: there are no more deaths by hunger (but there is a half-starved existence), the temperature in the barracks has been improved (but you still need to sleep in clothes and cover yourself with a quilted jacket), there is no exhausting work (but the prisoner is still brought to industrial zones to work and does not receive money), the practice of killing prisoners for no real reason has been terminated (although sometimes exceptions are possible).

However, basically this is a real concentration camp, aimed at destroying a person morally, spiritually and making it unfit for society. Therefore, most of the liberated (56 %) return to the camp again and again.

A few days before my release, I was charged with accusations of criminal violations of the prison order. This meant up to 2 years in addition to my term of imprisonment. To some prisoners, including political ones, such a measure was indeed applied. But during the years I have already spent inside I got used to the idea that I will spend in prison exactly as much as the authorities decide. I was repeatedly offered to sign a petition for clemency and release, but of course such an act would be absolutely unacceptable for anarchistic entity and personal dignity.

However, before the presidential elections in 2015, Lukashenko released 6 political prisoners, in an attempt to show humane face. KGB put an external surveillance to me and demanded from me to leave the country, otherwise they threatened to accuse me of preparing a terrorist attack against the president. I decided not to check the credibility of their threat and left Belarus. Police is still going to the home of my parents with formal verification.

Tell us few words about the authoritarianism and surveillance in modern Belarus. The KGB still exists?

There is a lot of controversy regarding the “social parasitism” tax in Belarus, which enforces unemployed people to pay for being “useless” to society. What has happened with this law?

IA: The real reason for the introduction of the tax is that a large number of Belarusians (0.5–1 million) work abroad and don't pay taxes. It seems to me that the government itself did not expect such a reaction, it did not expect how badly it would hit the truly unemployed. For the first time in 20 years, the country saw a truly social protest. And at first, the authorities didn't know what to do with it, because to use the police would mean complete destruction of the image of “people's government”. Before, police were used to smash opposition or students, but never common workers.

Now the authorities are applying a new approach: a person working abroad receives a notification that he is a “parasite”, and in order to prove the opposite, you must provide your personal data, in particular, an employment contract. I would call it a new instrument of totalitarianism: method of control citizens not only inside the country, but also outside.

is a profitable business. Belarus occupies a leading position in the world in the number of police. What will they do without a huge mass of people annually condemned?

Tell us few words about the Belarusian libertarian movement: what are its roots, when the first Belarusian anarchists appeared and was it existent during the Soviet era?

IA: The roots of the anarchist movement go back to the days of the tsarist empire. In general, the revolutionary movement was much stronger on the imperial outskirts: Latvia, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, the Caucasus. In the first Russian Revolution of 1905, anarchists in Belarus became a very formidable force. The movement was originally international in nature: many Jews lived in Belarusian cities (often more than half of the population), as well as Poles. The main impulse was given by the Federation “Bread and Will”, formed in Switzerland and connected with Kropotkin.

In the course of radicalization, the „Black Flag“ Federation appeared, whose strategy combined the labor struggle, expropriations and terror. Due to the fact that terror was aimed mainly at representatives of the government and the bourgeoisie, the “Black Flag” quickly gained a lot of support from the workers. The youth of the socialist parties (Jewish, Polish, and Belarusian) massively began joining the anarchists. The authorities reacted with immediate executions, because anarchists often escaped from prisons or attacked convoys. The average age of the anarchists was 16 years, around 70% died or got in jail.

Those who survived hard labor and emigration later returned and played a significant role in the Revolution of 1917. In general, Belarusian anarchism was distinguished by its international character and radicalism.

After the revolution, Belarus was divided between the USSR and Poland. The NKVD quickly neutralized the anarchists, because Bolsheviks knew them well by the underground armed resistance during the German occupation of the First World War. The revival of the movement from absolute zero began only in the 80s.

IA: The KGB couldn’t be absent, because the Belarusian system is the best-preserved fragment of the Soviet Union. More than Russia and Ukraine. The same people who were in power before the collapse of USSR remained at the helm of the country. Bureaucrats and “red directors” only changed the flag and portrait of the governor on the walls of their offices. Almost everything is concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite. Political competitors were killed back in the 90s. Instead of many oligarchs, we have one superoligarch. Apart from Lukashenko, there are no other politicians, there are no debates, no one dares to contradict him. Even the liberal opposition is reduced to decoration, so that the regime can talk behind a democratic facade. Any minister or general can easily get behind bars. This clearly reminds of Stalin’s management style. Ideology — the patriotism of the Second World War, while huge statue of Lenin stands right on the central square of Minsk.

What made you and your comrades become anti-authoritarian? What was the influence of the December 2008 revolts in Greece among Belarusian radicals?

IA: The base of my generation of anarchists was the punk subculture. It was a nihilistic protest against society and anarchism was perceived as a continuation. Along with that, we were formed at the time of the rise of the national liberation movement, when the streets were shaking by demonstrations with tens of thousands of people and clashes with the police. Many anarchists in their 13–16 years appeared in this environment, including me.

In the 2000s, two wings were designated in the Belarusian libertarian movement. The first one, let’s call it “Eurolie”, wanted to repeat the western experience: subculture, squats, antifa, ecology, feminism, LGBT, gender. The other, “social revolutionary”, was based more on classical anarchism. After all, we could get the old books of Bakunin and Kropotkin, and learn about the history of the revolutionary movement in tsarists times. Moreover, since the 1980s, several anarchist theorists have remained in Russia; they have published articles and books about the Spanish civil war, the

Russian revolutions, the International etc. It was our source of examples. At the same time, there were almost no books about post-war anarchism, we didn't experience the 60-80s. All we knew were some simple articles concerning German autonomous scene and alterglobalism. It was very... different from Makhnovshchina.

Many of us wanted to break out with the subcultural ghetto, we wanted a mass labor movement. Now I can't even believe it, but I considered myself an orthodox anarcho-syndicalist who honored the CNT as an ideal. Back then I didn't know that anarchists are also creating their own mythology. Anyway, the workers were passive, there was no even moderate trade unions, completely nothing. There was political silence and this silence was unbearable.

Events in Greece in 2008 became the guiding star. It was a signal for many, many groups located over the vast space of the ex-USSR. We got a hope to break through the wall of indifference and to apply ourselves in a real attempt.

Why anarchists are considered by the Belarusian regime as main enemy? Which other groups are being repressed?

IA: The irony is that anarchists do not pose a real threat. The police are very well-versed in the movement, instantly suppressing every new approach and conduct punctual repressions. The matter is different: the anarchists were appointed by the government to the role of scapegoats.

Authoritarianism cannot exist without the image of the enemy. Previously, the propaganda of the government was based on anti-western rhetoric, the main enemy was the opposition as a "fifth column". Today, the opposition has a miserable existence, it is difficult to be presented as a real threat. In addition, after the beginning of conflicts with the Kremlin, the regime flirts with the West. Therefore, authority switched the image of the enemy from external to internal one.

Not only anarchists were declared enemies, but football hooligans and fascists as well. Now representatives of these movements in prison have to wear special yellow nametags, which stand

for "prone to extremism". Government was frightened by the Ukrainian Maidan, so it was determined to neutralize all informal youth movements. Anarchists were simply assigned the role of front man.

However, the main social group who faces real massive repression are junkies. In 2015, the media incited anti-drug hysteria and Lukashenko demanded creation of special prison camps for junkies and "such a regime that will make them beg for death penalty". I personally saw those changes in penal colonies when all the junkies were moved into one overpopulated hut.

How many are the political prisoners in Belarus today? Are there separate prisons for political and non-political prisoners?

IA: Authority don't recognize the existence of political prisoners, so they are detaining them together with other prisoners. But the pressure on the prison administration from above is clear indicator of who you are. Conditions for political prisoners are always worse than for regular prisoners (except for ant-regime detainees) and usually downgrade with the time. For example, the administration may forbid to prisoners to talk with a political one. Or constantly throwing the political prisoner into the punishment cell for no real reason. Such approach is even more evident than the public opinion, because society endlessly debates whom to consider political prisoner, and whom not.

The question of political prisoners in Belarus is very similar to the situation during the GULAG. Of the many millions of people, condemned under political articles, only very small amount had relations to political groups. People were simply assigned to the role of political actors in order to justify the existence of mass repressions. The goal was to create an overstressed atmosphere for eliminating competitors in the struggle for power, as well as creating a huge labor army for industrialization.

Now there is no need for industrialization, but the retention of power is still relevant. In addition, such a number of prisoners