

Belarus Today

Peter Liesegang, Member of the Association “Human Rights in Belarus” attended the demonstration of Belarusian citizens on public squares in Minsk in the evening of December 19, 2010 – the day of the Presidential Elections in 2010.

He sums up his observations as an eye-witness:

If anything at all, the Belarusian authorities (whoever they might be) really succeeded in one thing on and after 19th of December 2010: they surprised.

I would not know anyone, inside or outside of Belarus, who would not have been surprised, baffled, deeply shocked as to what happened in Minsk starting near the close to the polls and ongoing up to now.

From all sides I hear that now thousands and thousands of people are trying to ponder the question, what actually happened on the 19th, who decided what at which time, what – if any - was the Russian part in everything, who has what to gain by what happened and is ongoing? The simple answer is: for the time being, we will not know.

So, let us concentrate on the facts:

- The past months it seemed as if Belarusian authorities were interested in more recognition from EU and US, wanted at least a slightly improved relationship.
- Within the run-up to the “elections” there were some minor, mostly cosmetic improvements (without real effect on the regime’s possibilities to organize the result).
- E-Day itself, as usual, almost up to the end of the voting period appeared to the outside to be orderly and well organized.
- Already before the end of voting, around 7.15pm, one of the candidates, Uladzimir Nyaklyayew, while moving in the direction of October Square, was brutally beaten by state servants and had to be taken to a hospital, where later on he was arrested.
- Starting at 8pm demonstrators were able to gather on October Square without any difficulties. Except for the traffic police there were no uniformed security troops visible (although behind two adjacent building complexes they were massively present).

- Around 9pm (by this time to my estimation there were about 10.000 demonstrators present on the square) the leaders of the demonstration “broke out” of October Square, went onto the Prospect, thus blocking traffic (by the way, at this point my greatest admiration to the professional work of the traffic police, who did everything to ensure that there would not be any chaotic situation during the blocking of the traffic), and took the demonstrators with them down the Prospect, crossing the main intersection, into the direction of Independence Square.
- There was no attempt whatsoever by state security to block the demonstration’s movement neither from October Square onto the main Prospect nor from the main Prospect to Independence Square.
- During the 20-30 minutes moving along the Prospect and gathering on Independence Square the size of the demonstration increased greatly; to my estimation the demonstrators numbers reached its peak at about 9.30 to 10 pm, shortly after arrival at Independence Square (25.000 to 30.000).
- A first attempt at provocations was made shortly after the crowd arrived in Independence square. At this stage, organizers managed to isolate the provocateurs who were trying to open the doors of the government building.
- It took until about 10.30 pm for the core demonstration to fully gather around the Lenin monument, and an amplifier system having been brought into place. During this time, besides the gathering of the core demonstration, people were scattered out all around Independence square, quite a few already again leaving.
- The second “breaking of windows” took place with loads of OMON troops inside the government building and evidently without any connection to the bulk of the demonstration. By now it has to be seen as a fact, that these “attempts to storm the government building” were orchestrated by the authorities.
- Behind the government building there were masses of state security troops, and on the left side in front large groups of them started getting ready. About 200 young soldiers who were positioned at the rim of the square towards Prospect in the end turned out not to have any role in the happenings except for at the beginning adding their part to an aggravated, hostile atmosphere.
- Around 11.15 pm the crack-down started and state security troops (OMON, SpezNas, and whatever else there might have been) “cleaned” Independence Square, and battled down what had been a totally peaceful demonstration. Although in total there were less people arrested than after the “election” in 2006, this time the state used more direct brutality and force.
- After Independence Square had been more or less cleaned, arrests started in the immediate area, also of people who had not been involved; almost as if there was an order to arrest a certain number of people that evening.
- During the night from 19th to 20th and since then ongoing there is a total crack-down on seemingly all organizations engaged on the non-state side of society. The massiveness of this crack-down is unprecedented in the time of this regime.

- During the crack-down it became evident that not all divisions of state security were acting on the same orders; one example for this is the presence of the army, which was not used at all.
- About 700 people were jailed for up to 15 days; at the moment 31 people are charged with organizing mass disorder, which can be punished with up to 15 years in jail.
- Notwithstanding the question, who gave when which orders, it is more than evident that the reigning leadership, including and foremost the acting president, are supportive of all measures taken by the state so far. This becomes very clear through the words of Lukashenka during his official press-conference on 20.12.2010.

In order to answer the question “who is to blame for what happened and is happening?” it is thus irrelevant who actually ordered what. The reigning leadership with the acting president up front is through daily deeds and words taking full responsibility for everything occurring. *(This argument is similar to that of the unprecedented resolution of the Council of Europe on the cases of those disappeared in Belarus, stating that based on the given facts, only two conclusions are possible; either the uppermost leadership of Belarus is itself directly involved in the disappearances, or they are doing everything in order to cover up these cases.)*