10 Minutes On... Belarus (11.02.2021)

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**SPEAKERS**

James Bolton Jones, Alex Figurski

**Alex Figurski** 00:03

So we're just trying to open a bottle of Kvass here, smells good.

**James Bolton Jones** 00:11

Yeah.

**Alex Figurski** 00:12

Yeah. Yeah. здоровье! [za zda-ró-vye].

**James Bolton Jones** 00:16

Even if it is from different parts of the country.

**Alex Figurski** 00:19

Yeah, it'd be nice to see your face but I can imagine you're enjoying this always a little bit of great. So welcome to the 10 minutes podcast series. I'm Alex Figurski. I'm joined here by James Bolton Jones Hello. And we're both editorial assistants of the post Soviet press Group, a new discussion group of the School of Slavonic and East European studies at University College London, and otherwise known as SSEES. As a press group, we focus on the current affairs of the countries of the former Soviet Union. So that's 15 countries from Estonia in the north, through Tajikistan in the south, and all across Russia to the Far East. That's some distance covered.

**James Bolton Jones** 00:55

Yes, it is. And in each episode of this series, we'll be focusing on one of these 15 countries in detail. To give you all the basics you need to know. We'll be covering things like language, culture, history, and the biggest news stories affecting the country today. And we'll be cramming it all into around 10 minutes per episode.

**Alex Figurski** 01:11

So this week, we're starting this series with Belarus, a very important nation, which suffered perhaps more than any other in the Second World War, often referred to as Europe's last dictatorship, and currently in the midst of one of the biggest protest movements in the 21st century.

**James Bolton Jones** 01:24

That's right. And to take us through this episode, we've got a bottle of Kvass, which you heard us opening at the start of the show. It's a famous better Belarusian drink made from fermented bread, and at 0.2%. It's technically classified as non alcoholic, so hopefully, UCL will be okay with us drinking it here.

**Alex Figurski** 01:42

Well, it goes all the way back to at least the 10th century, doesn't it? And nowadays, you can get lots of different flavors. Can't you? In Belarus, you can have blackcurrant raspberry or even vanilla but we've got the classic plain one here, James, what do you make of it? Yeah,

**James Bolton Jones** 01:55

it's pretty good.

**Alex Figurski** 01:56

Yeah, it is isn't it. It's Sainsbury's fine and simple, I believe. Right. Let's crack on with the rest of the episode.

**James Bolton Jones** 02:02

Yes, let's pour the glass and get going.

**Alex Figurski** 02:09

So first things first, what would you say some basic facts about Belarus that everyone needs to know.

**James Bolton Jones** 02:14

Okay, so Belarus is in Eastern Europe. Nestled in between Poland and Lithuania to the west, Ukraine to the south, Latvia in the north and Russia to the east. It has a population of just under 9.5 million, which mostly speaks Russian with speakers of Belarusian in the minority. A poll from 2009 indicated that fewer than 8% of Belarusians actually used the better Russian language regularly

**Alex Figurski** 02:35

And at risk of you butchering the pronunciation. Can you maybe say anything in Belarusian?

**James Bolton Jones** 02:40

How about Chavajsia ŭ bulbu

**Alex Figurski** 02:42

Nice and what does that mean?

**James Bolton Jones** 02:44

Well, it's a saying that literally means hiding your potatoes. But you say it when something bad has happened. Like, oh no, that's not good. Better go hide some potatoes.

**Alex Figurski** 02:54

Okay. Speaking of which, we're drinking this Kvass which is really going down very well. And if we were in Minsk, what food would we be having to go with it?

**James Bolton Jones** 03:02

Well, for snacks here with the drink, we might have be having syrup, Ricky. Think potato crickets, but finding a lot, although a theory once again, wrangled the pronunciation But anyway, for a more substantial meal, it will still probably have potato in it. But there's a huge variety. It's not just about potato pancakes.

**Alex Figurski** 03:20

Okay, but potato pancakes are still delicious.

**James Bolton Jones** 03:23

Yeah, of course.

**Alex Figurski** 03:24

Okay, we can move on history then. If most Belarusians speak Russian, presumably that means Belarus was part of Russia at some point?

**James Bolton Jones** 03:31

Not exactly. So Belarus gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. And before that, the territory of what is now Belarus was part of the Russian Empire. But it would be a big mistake to think of Belarus as some kind of extension of Russia. Before today's Belarus became part of the Russian Empire, near the end of the 18th century, it was part of the policy known as the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, and before that it was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, also known as Litva. We should also note that the term Belarus was not used at this point with the local Slavic populations of Litva who would later become Belarusians and Ukrainians, known then as ravines.

**Alex Figurski** 04:05

That's a lot of names and dates James.

**James Bolton Jones** 04:08

Unfortunately, it doesn't stop quite there. Belarusian nationalists often refer to the city of Polotsk, which today is a small town in northeastern Belarus as the place where Belarus began. It was first mentioned by iconoclast in 1862.

**Alex Figurski** 04:21

And how about religion in Belarus? I know that Roman Catholicism is popular in Poland and Russia has a lot of Orthodox doesn't it so if Belarus has been under both Russian and Polish influences in the past as it falls somewhere in between the two.

**James Bolton Jones** 04:33

Yeah, that's pretty much it, so Belarus has always had several religions competing for its populous's favor. We don't really have time to get into the fascinating history of religion and Belarus here. But to give a very brief overview on Polotsk, which I mentioned just earlier, which many use as a founding myth for modern day Belarus. Adopted orthodoxy around the end of the 10th century AD. But when the Belarusian lands came under the control of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Roman Catholicism gradually became more popular, especially after the kingdom of Poland started to exert more influence over the Grand Duchy. An important event to remember is the Union of Brest in 1596 when a new church was created called the union church, this basically incorporated elements of Roman Catholicism and orthodoxy, and became increasingly popular during the course of the next 200 years or so. However, when Belausian lands came under the control of the Russian Empire, many Union believers were forcibly converted to Orthodoxy. And the Union church was finally completely banned in most of the Russian Empire by 1839.

**Alex Figurski** 05:33

And religion was outlawed during Soviet times. Right. So how is it fared since independence?

**James Bolton Jones** 05:39

There's been an orthodox and Roman Catholic resurgence, in fact, with the president Alexander Lukashenko, enthusiastically promoting Belarusian orthodox credentials in the early 2000s, partly to emphasize historical ties with Russia. And he remains pro orthodox to this day. Roman Catholics are the second biggest religious denomination, though they are often portrayed by the regime as a kind of Polish fifth column.

**Alex Figurski** 06:03

So obviously, the history of Belarus is long, complex and nuanced. And we've inevitably had to gloss over a lot of the detail just there. But we should very quickly mention an important event the Second World War.

**James Bolton Jones** 06:14

Yeah, we really should. And it absolutely devastated Belarus, leading to, by some estimates the death of a quarter of its population. Belarus was not only the main route for the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, but also the way that they left as well, which was during the Soviet operation migration, which finally succeeded in expelling the Nazis from Soviet territory. Belarus also once had a thriving Jewish population, with one of its most famous members being the painter Marc Chagall. But this was almost entirely wiped out during the Holocaust.

**Alex Figurski** 06:46

So what happened after Belarus gained independence in 1991? Did Lukashenko come to power straightaway?

**James Bolton Jones** 06:51

No, the first three or four years were pretty chaotic. But no one leader managed to consolidate their power. This changed in 1994 when Alexander Lukashenko who is actually a former pig farmer, ran for the position of presidency, which have been created in 1994.

**Alex Figurski** 07:09

So is this the point in which Belarus becomes a dictatorship?

**James Bolton Jones** 07:12

Not quite though the 1994 election was certainly the only one which Lukashenko wins fairly. After that Lukashenko then set about targeting opposition figures with a number disappearing without a trace in the late 90s. Before winning all the subsequent presidential elections through a combination of election fraud, using the power of the status of your votes, stymieing the opposition and supporting fake opposition candidates who ended up supporting Lukashenko once they were elected.

**Alex Figurski** 07:38

And that brings us up to the current day, doesn't it And right now, Lukashenko is facing mass protests, which have been going on for many months. So what happened?

**James Bolton Jones** 07:46

So key dates, remember, is the ninth of August 2020, the day of the presidential election, when a dubious exit poll gave Lukashenko 80% of the vote, and the main opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, only 10%. Some then went out into the streets to protest peacefully. But sadly, they were met with really shocking police brutality. And when people saw the violence the state was using on its own citizens. That is supposedly the moment everything changed. And every day after that more and more people came out onto the streets. And so every weekend, there were hundreds of 1000s of people protesting in multiple cities.

**Alex Figurski** 08:18

Yeah. And in those first few days, it was so inspirational how it seemed like every time they beat up a certain number of people that only made more come out the next evening. So you said people did not believe the official election results? How do they know is that been proven?

**James Bolton Jones** 08:30

Well, this time around a group of tech savvy civilians set up a website called Golos or Voice asking people to take pictures of their ballot papers and send them in for independent count. This is pretty clever as obviously, no one can stop you taking a photo in a private voting booth. And then out of the million votes that they got sent Tsikhanouskaya got 95% and Lukashenko just 1%, which they reckon is enough to prove that Lukashenko couldn't have got his 80%, which he claimed he'd got even if he had won every other vote possible.

**Alex Figurski** 09:01

Yeah, that does seem like pretty damning evidence. I guess the question then is why now? Why have people suddenly decided that they have now had enough of Lukashenko after so many elections like this already?

**James Bolton Jones** 09:12

So there are several reasons. First, is probably the weak economy. And many say that Lukashenko has been losing legitimacy for many years now. Second, the pandemic Lukashenko his response to COVID became notorious worldwide. As Belarus was one of the only countries not to go into any kind of lockdown.

**Alex Figurski** 09:31

Yeah, didn't he tell citizens something like drink vodka and go to the sauna instead.

**James Bolton Jones** 09:35

Yeah, he did. And unsurprisingly, this is this is widely thought to have alienated his support base. We should also mention the role of some inspirational individuals like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is a former school teacher, whose husband was jailed for trying to run for president and so she decided to run in his place. There's also Maria Kalesnikava, one of the key opposition figures who heroically tore up her passport when the authorities tried to force her out of the country so that they had to let her stay. But most of all, this has been a people's movement triggered by seeing and hearing about mass arrests, beatings, and horrendous torture used by the police on peaceful protesters. They simply had had enough and in Tsikhanouskaya's words that they are not afraid of anything anymore.

**Alex Figurski** 10:20

Right and looking to the future now. What has the reaction internationally been to all of this?

**James Bolton Jones** 10:24

So the EU has imposed personal sanctions on Lukashenko and other individuals linked to the regime, and Tsikhanouskaya, having been expelled from the country is now traveling around campaigning for greater sanctions. Another important one to watch is the role of Russia. So far, the protests haven't really been anti or pro Russian, just purely anti Lukashenko. But for now, Russia seems to be backing Lukashenko, even if Putin doesn't have a particularly great relationship with Him.

**Alex Figurski** 10:50

And what about any other issues facing the country?

**James Bolton Jones** 10:53

Well, I think we're running out of time, so I'll keep it fairly brief. There are lots of reasons Belarus is important irrespective of whether Lukashenko is in power it is positioned at the border between the EU and Russia. And it remains to be seen whether it can develop close ties with both at the same time. It's also crucial to the environment. It has a huge amount of forests, known as the lungs of Europe, and Belarus is still suffering from the legacy of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, which contaminated huge areas and there are fears it still affects the country's food supply today.

**Alex Figurski** 11:25

Okay, we are really running out of time now. So I think we'll have to call it a day but before we do, we should also say a huge thanks to Andrew Wilson for his help in putting this episode together. Andrew is an expert on Belarus at UCL and his book on Belarus 'Belarus, the last European dictatorship' is getting a new edition published imminently. So definitely, definitely worth checking out if you want to know more.

**James Bolton Jones** 11:46

Yeah, perfect reading over bottle of Kvass I'd say

**Alex Figurski** 11:48

Exactly James. Right. Bye. See you next time.

**James Bolton Jones** 11:51

Bye.