



## REPORT I

# Belarus 2021: Perspective Of Change



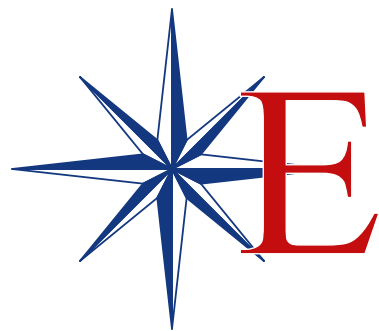
Warsaw, March 2021

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Report I: "BELARUS 2021: PERSPECTIVE OF CHANGE"

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Publication: March 2021

First edition. Revised issue

ISBN 978-83-67208-02-4

## INTRODUCTION

2021 may prove to be a breakthrough year for Belarus. Although the dynamics of the social protests have weakened when confronted with their - apparent - ineffectiveness and the unprecedented level of repression by the regime, their potential remains enormous. What is more, one may think that last autumn's events brought about a lasting change in social attitudes in Belarus. Democratic Belarusian politicians, who are trying to present a programme of action for a breakthrough, share this opinion<sup>1</sup>.

On the other hand, the political and economic system created by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, defined by one of our authors as (neo)patrimonial, seems to be on the wane, unable to respond to the challenges of the 21st century.

The Belarusian revolution is generational. Just as in Russia, and earlier in Armenia, it is an expression of the will of a generation that no longer remembers neither the communist era nor the economic collapse of the 1990s. A generation that is boldly calling for its civil rights and a vision of a decent life, comparing itself with the countries of Europe and not with the Brezhnev era. This generation uses the Internet as its main (and often the only) source of information and primary channel of communication. It is resistant to the propaganda and indoctrination tools used so far and much more oriented towards the West than their parents, which they know from their personal experience of travelling, studying or working, and from their constant contact with the Western infosphere.

The previous economic model of "Lukashenkaism", based on Russian financial aid and state or quasi-state (oligarchs entirely dependent on the president) ownership of key industries, is also being exhausted. On the one hand, the economic crisis in Russia, the permanent fall in the price of energy raw materials, the costs of the imperial policy and Western sanctions make it excessively burdensome for Moscow to continue subsidising the inefficient regime in Belarus.

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<sup>1</sup> *Стратегия Победы Беларусов*,  
([https://belarusvision.org/?fbclid=IwAR1suWUjXR6i9U5GIH3kK\\_VnVXpek1ghN1P1bQli7KEys8J7nqsu9RO\\_hSkbelarusvision.org](https://belarusvision.org/?fbclid=IwAR1suWUjXR6i9U5GIH3kK_VnVXpek1ghN1P1bQli7KEys8J7nqsu9RO_hSkbelarusvision.org)) (access: 23.02.21).

On the other hand, the IT sector's spectacular success in Belarus is linked to the West. Both phenomena make it impossible for the regime to keep following its current economic policy. Moreover, in A. Lukashenka's entourage there are no modernisation projects intended to revitalise the Belarusian economy. The citizens' standard of living has been stagnating for a decade, and it has been falling in absolute terms (e.g. given the prices of foreign goods).

Belarus is threatened by mass political and economic emigration, and the process of “brain drain” will have particularly severe consequences. State institutions are not responding in line with social expectations. Mass repression and intimidation of citizens are influencing the evolution of social attitudes. This evolution takes place both in terms of attitude to the authorities (in cities, hardly anyone uses the popular, until recently, term "Batska" - father) and in terms of geopolitical orientation or values. Two chapters of our Report analyse the dynamics of social transformations and changes in the information space. Another section attempts to describe the threats and processes related to emigration and “brain drain”.

The international situation in Belarus is also changing. A. Lukashenka, clinging to power, is making the country more and more dependent on Russia. This is a significant shift. In the past years, the regime tried to maintain a balance between Moscow and the West. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas seemed to make A. Lukashenka more cautious, compelling him to keep distance from Vladimir Putin's pressure to annex Belarus under the pretext of implementing agreements on the creation of the Union State.

In response, the regime allowed for a certain degree of limited “Belarusianisation” of culture and education. It has also tried to pursue a historical policy that would strengthen Belarusian national identity<sup>2</sup>. A. Lukashenka's resistance to the creation of the so-called federal state forced V. Putin to change the Russian constitution and left the Kremlin struggling with internal political problems. The Belarusian authorities have also undertaken a limited political dialogue with the West, culminating in a the visit of the US Secretary of State to Minsk. On February 1, 2020, Mike Pompeo declared the United States' readiness to ensure 100% oil supplies to Belarusian refineries. Commenting on this visit, Andrey Sannikau said:

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<sup>2</sup> K. Kłysiński, W. Konończuk, *Łączenie przeciwności. Polityka historyczna Białorusi*, Raport OSW, Warszawa 2020.

"Lukashenka is unable to defend the independence of Belarus and poses a threat to sovereignty himself. He needs independence to retain power. It was Lukashenka himself who created the model on the basis of which Russia wants to incorporate Belarus. He himself created this tragic situation and is not looking for a way out of it. He keeps repeating that there will be no reforms or modernisation, which means that he cannot defend the independence of Belarus. Therefore, it is good that the US stressed the importance of Belarusian sovereignty and earlier recalled the significance of the Budapest Memorandum<sup>3</sup>.

A. Lukashenka can be proud. He has achieved a success unattainable by the major powers - he has decisively influenced Russia's change of regime. But he was to pay for this with his own removal from power. During the Belarusian presidential campaign and the months of violent protests in Belarusian cities, the Kremlin more or less demonstratively distanced itself from A. Lukashenka. The smile that V. Putin's wore during the fireside talks in Sochi hid a short and hard message: "uhadzi" (go away). Well, not immediately, on velvet terms, but A. Lukashenko was to leave. A new leader, coming from the power elite but enjoying democratic legitimacy, should have appeared in his place.

The malice of Alexei Navalny, who did not want to stay in exile and chose the gulag (because he knew very well what awaited him after his return to Russia), turned out to be a lifeline for A. Lukashenka. The Kremlin was perfectly aware of the similarities between the Belarusian and Russian protests. The expulsion of A. Lukashenka could have proved too close and too contagious an example for the Russians. The Belarusian dictator no longer hears from Moscow that he must go. On the contrary, he is receiving more and more support. And he is paying for it with more pieces of his power and Belarusian sovereignty. However, after an expensive political reform, Belarus is no longer tasty morsel for Putin. He swallows it without satisfaction. Putin is faced with a devilish alternative: by supporting A. Lukashenka he will commit a "Ukrainian" mistake (and he is aware of it) - he irretrievably loses the sympathy of Belarusians and pushes them mentally westwards. But by not supporting A. Lukashenka, he supports A. Navalny or some Navalny-bis, who will snatch power from him.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.polskieradio.pl/75/921/Artykul/2447396.Pompeo-w-Minsku-B-wiceszef-MSZ-Bialorusi-wazna-zmiana-w-polityce-USA-wczesniej-Amerykanie-odwiedzali-tylko-Rosje> (access: 23.02.21).

At the 6th All-Belarusian People's Assembly, A. Lukashenka announced the adoption of a new constitution. He declared that he would leave, on condition that the protests cease, and that the presidential system remains in place. The timing of A. Lukashenka's departure is also unclear. Although he promises that this will happen after adopting a new constitution, neither the date of its presentation nor the date of the dictator's resignation were enunciated during the Congress. Nevertheless, there is one thing in which A. Lukashenka agrees with the democratic forces: the year 2021 will be a breakthrough for the future development of Belarus<sup>4</sup>.

On February 22, a meeting took place between A. Lukashenko and V. Putin in Krasnaya Polyana near Sochi. Messages after the meeting were highly scanty. Apart from the scenes that immediately became memes - with Alyaksandr Hryhorovich noting down the Russian president's golden thoughts like a diligent schoolboy or the two men on snowmobiles - more than six hours of talks took place. V. Putin received A. Lukashenka for the first time since their conversation in September 2020. That meeting gave the Belarusian politician hope that A. Lukashenka could leave office on his terms. This time, he fought for the opportunity to remain in the Presidential Palace in Minsk. Based on the scant information leaking from the Kremlin, it can be assumed that in the short term, Moscow decided that an ally weakened by protests and the economic crisis was the best solution to guarantee relative stability. However, it does not seem that A. Lukashenka is perceived in Russia as a long-term partner. Although the extremely brutal repressions against journalists and independent intellectuals may overshadow Putin's brutality towards Alexei Navalny's defenders, they are generally part of the image of the oppressive dictatorships system in Eastern Europe, which is unfavourable to Moscow. They also naturally direct Western leaders' thinking towards considering different models of sanctions rather than "doing business".

The tangible results of the meeting in Krasnaya Polyana will be seen in A. Lukashenka's actions. One of them seems to be the postponement of the trial of Viktor Babaryka and the relative subsidence of the wave of repression. According to the analysts of the Centre for Eastern Studies: "...one should not expect a significant increase in the currently limited subsidies to Belarus, which would unduly strengthen the regime and hinder a potential future

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<sup>4</sup> [Białoruś. Rozpoczął się Ogólnobiałoruski Zjazd Ludowy. Przemówienie Łukaszenki, Wiadomości \(onet.pl\)](#) (access: 23.02.2021).



renewed attempt to force regime changes in the Belarusian political system, ultimately ending with a change in the position of the president of the Republic, favourable to Moscow”. One can assume that, contrary to the declarations issued after the summit, A. Lukashenka was seeking additional Russian loans. Besides, the Belarusian leader's agreement to redirect part of the fuel exports to Ust-Luga port is not intended to be a sanction against the Baltic States but to allow the Russians to exercise greater control over the actions of the Belarusian authorities.

From Moscow's perspective, this year's key event is expected to be the “Zapad 2021” manoeuvres. At present, A. Lukashenka's power is almost exclusively based on the support from the structures of power. This explains his panicky reaction to the attempted military coup in Armenia. The revolt of the generals in Yerevan was interpreted by A. Lukashenka (it is a different question whether it was right) as a test of one of the models of seizure of power by force structures connected with Russia.

Comments on social media after the meeting in Krasnaya Polyana were relatively restrained. They pointed to V. Putin's limited trust in A. Lukashenka and Moscow's desire for stability in the face of Russia opening too many fields of confrontation with the West. Nevertheless, we can conclude that, by meeting A. Lukashenka, Putin made a choice. His policy will be focused on playing within Lukashenka's power elite, on slow rather than sudden dependence of Belarus on Russia, and not on even a limited dialogue with Belarusian civil society.

There is no doubt that the Belarusian question will be one of our region's most critical problems. That is why we have created an analytical team at the Centre for Eastern European Studies (SEW) at University of Warsaw to answer questions about Belarus's future. Geopoliticians generally call this area "the Baltic-Black Sea bridge", while Polish political thought perpetuates the name "Międzymorze" ("Intermarium"). Regardless of the terminology, Belarus is the keystone of an area of crucial strategic importance for the whole of Europe.

We want our experts to support all partners interested in the future of Belarus with their analytical knowledge. The "Report" presented below contains initial assumptions for an in-depth political, economic and sociological analysis; our team will develop these threads in subsequent studies. We have intentionally omitted issues related to prospects for the development of the economic situation and to Belarusian-Russian relations. Both topics will

be discussed in the following papers. The team appointed by SEW is to serve as a classical think tank. We assume that our work will help diplomats and politicians from Poland and Europe, Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya's team and democratic Belarusian circles, active in exile and in Belarus. Our task is to distribute knowledge without succumbing to political pressure and journalistic emotions, while at the same time preserving both the standards of intellectual honesty, belonging to the University, and the formula of the practical usefulness of the presented analyses - which is characteristic of the work of think tanks.

Over the last 30 years, the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw has proved to be one of the leading intellectual centres of Polish political thought. Drawing on this experience and the enormous potential of our colleagues from the whole region we want to actively participate in the conversation about the future of Belarus, with the best will and humility towards the activity of Belarusian civil society.

By presenting this opening report, we invite all those who care about the promising future of the whole Intermarium area to join us. And, of course, we hope for critical but sympathetic reception. Belarus, forgotten and marginalised for many years, is now back in the mainstream of European politics. Thanks to the energy of SEW's Director, Jan Malicki, and our Team Secretary Maxim Rust, we can present the first results of a group of analysts' work on this regard. Since the essence of both political and scientific thinking is critical debate - we cordially invite you to participate in it.

Finally, a minor editorial remark. We faced many technical problems, such as the unification of spelling and transcription. Therefore, we debated on the spelling of names, surnames and, finally, on the eternal question of whether to use 'on' or 'in' Belarus. We adopted a transcription of the surnames, closer to the Belarusian spelling, while keeping the preposition "on Belarus" rooted in the Polish language. We wanted to avoid being accused of a kind of paternalism. I believe that no one in our team of authors questions the sovereign status of Belarus. Finally, the last remark: the evaluations and opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. The debate I previously encouraged is also taking place within our Group.

*Jerzy Marek Nowakowski*

## **RADICAL CHANGE IN PUBLIC OPINION IN BELARUS IN 2020**

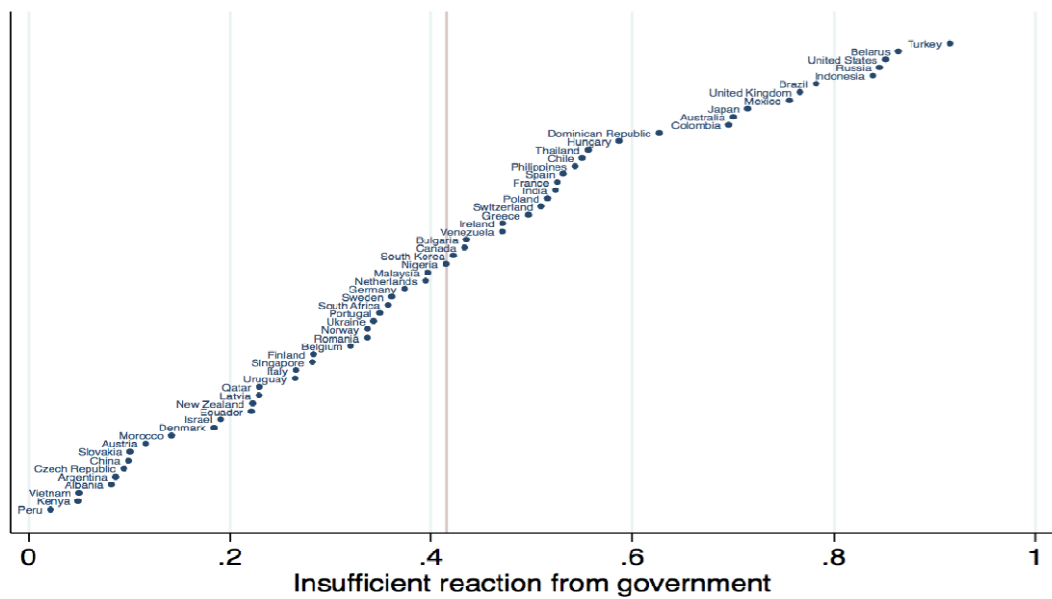
One can speak of four main reasons behind the changes in Belarusian public opinion, which have led to a historically unprecedented social mobilisation. These reasons are systemic, natural and internal. Here are their basic parameters.

### **1. Fighting COVID-19. *A deficient assessment of the Belarusian government's performance during the pandemic.***

Belarusian citizens rated the degree of effectiveness of government action during the pandemic as very low. Belarusians consider its activity to be highly insufficient. This inefficiency level was rated much lower when compared to indicators related to the opinion of other countries' citizens. Data from the most extensive international comparative study, conducted by 12 world-famous universities (including Oxford, Harvard and Cambridge), confirms the Belarusian's government low performance.

In evaluating the indicator "no reaction of the government", Belarus - among 58 countries - took second place, i.e. Belarusians were among the most dissatisfied (Figure 1). The Belarusian Analytical Laboratory also conducted research (fieldwork) on the territory of Belarus.

Figure 1: The 'lack of government response' rate to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Data from Caria, Fetzer, Fiorin, Goetz, Gomez, Haushofer, Hensel, Ivchenko, Jachimowicz, Kraft-Todd, Reutskaja, Roth, Witte, Yoeli (2020). Measuring Worldwide COVID-19 Attitudes and Beliefs, <http://www.covid19-survey.org>

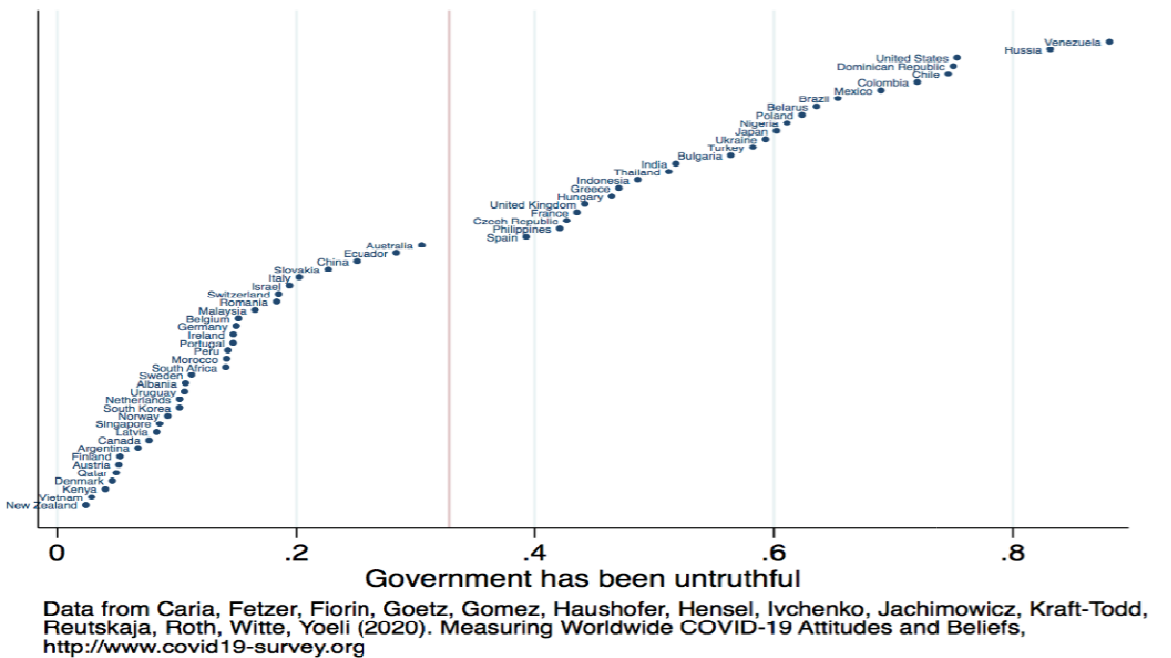
Source: [www.covid19-survey.org](http://www.covid19-survey.org).

This low performance was also the starting point of an intense revival of Belarusian civil society. As a reaction to the ineffectiveness of the government's actions, civic self-organisation processes began. Belarusians began to become active - assisting doctors and patients, buying and delivering medicines, protective equipment and food for medics. This activity then shifted to the political level. The evaluation of the government's activity as ineffective in the mass consciousness triggered a chain reaction process, namely the self-organisation of the Belarusian society.

COVID-19 represented a psychological stimulus for a change of public opinion and behaviour of Belarusians. It is crucial because it translates into the existence of individuals. If, on one hand, the officials claim that a salary has increased by 10%, it has decreased in reality - the citizen will survive it. If, on the other hand, one hears that there is no pandemic or coronavirus, but one's neighbours are dying, this changes mass consciousness. Hence, this psychological stimulus resulted from major discrepancy between individual experience and official information.

According to the criterion of government credibility among 58 countries, Belarus ranked 8th in the negative hierarchy. Thus, assessments of Belarusian public opinion stood out against global trends (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Government credibility level index.

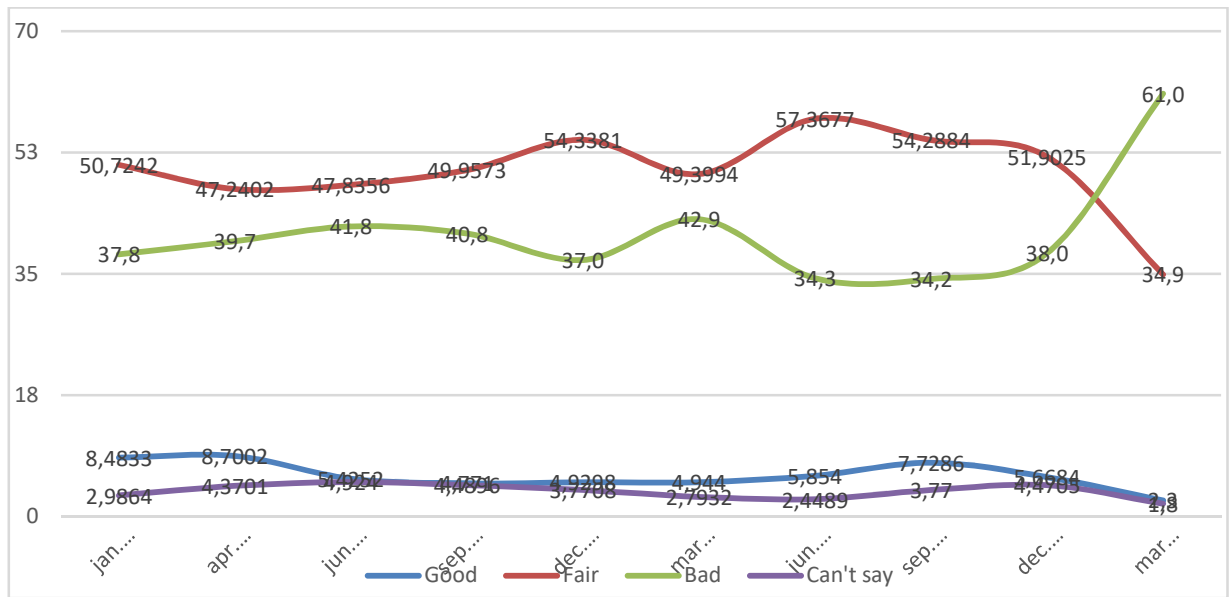


Source: [www.covid19-survey.org](http://www.covid19-survey.org).

## 2. The economic well-being of the nation

For a long time, the perception of the economic situation in the Belarusian society has been deteriorating. It was a natural consequence of the functioning of the so-called Belarusian economic model. However, between December 2019 and the beginning of April 2020, this notion declined significantly. If in December 2019, the country's economy's situation was assessed as “Bad” by 38% of respondents, then, already at the beginning of April 2020, the percentage increased to 61%. The number of people who considered it "fair" has drastically decreased (Figure 3). In this way, the economic situation acted as gunpowder, and COVID-19 was a slowly smouldering fuse. When combined, these two causes produced a cumulative,

Figure 3: Assessment of economic condition by Belarusians.



Question: "How would you assess the current economic situation in Belarus?"

Source: Belarusian Analytical Laboratory.

### 3. Fraudulent elections

The official results of the presidential election held on August 9, 2020, announced by the Central Electoral Commission, were considered as wholly falsified. The contradiction between what ordinary citizens saw when they voted, and the officially announced data was striking and glaring. Never before has the discrepancy between individual experience and the official results been so marked. This situation - the combination of the government's ineptitude on COVID-19 and the rigged elections - has led to a **TOTAL CHANGE IN THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE**.

Essentially, the level of trust in different sources of information has changed. This phenomenon develops as follows, considering that there are three main types of media in Belarus:

- Public media
- Non-state media
- Russian media

Previously, state and Russian media generally dominated the public trust rankings. In the summer of 2020, there was a complete change in this hierarchy - the level of trust in non-public media rose sharply. One could see this shift in the *Trust Media Index*, regularly compiled by the Belarusian Analytical Laboratory. The trust in non-public media increased

from 12.8% (March 2020) to 27.2% (June 2020). In contrast, the level of confidence in the public media fell from 17.1% to 4.2%. This phenomenon can be explained by the glaring discrepancy between individual experience and the official interpretation of events proposed by the authorities.

We have listed three leading causes: pandemic changes, deterioration of economic self-esteem and electoral fraud. However, these were not the ultimate cause of mobilisations and protests after August 9, 2020. The decisive reason ~~was~~ will be described in the following paragraph.

#### **4. Brutal violence on the streets**

In principle, people were ready for the peculiarities of the Belarusian official 'electoral maths' and, as it has been the case for the past 26 years, to return to work after minor protests. However, citizens noticed the cruelty of the uniformed services, unprecedented since the Second World War. It was then that the masses took to the streets, even those who hitherto had nothing to do with politics.

Thus, among the reasons we have listed for the change: COVID-19, deterioration of economic assessment, decrease in trust in public media and increase in faith in non-state media, use of violence against citizens. The most important in the hierarchy of the causes mentioned above is the fourth one - brutal violence against the public after August 9, 2020.

### **TWO MACRO CHARACTERISTICS**

→ Increase in the level of education of the Belarusian population.

If in 1999 there were 14.2% of people with higher education in Belarus, then in 2019 the percentage rose to 26.6%. One should remember that almost the same percentage of people with higher education is registered in Ukraine and Poland. The educational structure of the Belarusian society in 1999-2019 has changed to the point that the social group with higher education has almost doubled. And this takes the community to a completely different level of criticality and creativity, as well as to the need to participate in decision-making.

→ Qualitative change in the structure of the Belarusian economy

Chart 4: The changing structure of the Belarusian economy.



Source: IPM Research Centre calculations based on data from Belsat and the National Bank of Poland

The reasons mentioned above resulted in the extremely rapid formation of a political nation. They also led to the formation of a large, active group of dissident Belarusian citizens. One can distinguish five features motivating protest attendees. These are:

- **Shifting pain threshold.** Protesters show a high pain threshold, a high willingness to endure repression. The threshold of pain has shifted. What Siarhei Tikhanouski spoke about earlier, namely staying in a cell for 15 days, is not scary. It is seen as something acceptable and bearable. Something one can live with. There is even a meme - "every decent Belarusian has to go to jail". For women, the limit they cannot cross is rape or death. The other limitation is a criminal case. *"Are you ready to go out to protests and get fined, I am ready to go out to protests and get bludgeoned, I am ready to go out to protests and lose my job, but I am not ready to go out to protests and become disabled, I am not ready to go out to protests and lose my life, I am not ready to go out to protests to be raped somewhere in some "paddy wagon". Yes, these are such ordinary human fears"* (statement of one of the focus research participants carried out, October - December 2020).



- **Transforming fear into anger.** This process is the primary psychological process affecting people who came out to demonstrate. The outrage at what they saw on 9, 10 and 11 August was so great that the fear accumulated over the years was transformed into a completely different psychological reaction - anger. This threshold was not crossed in previous elections in 2006, 2010 and 2015. As many people did not overcome it as it has become now: *"Fear ... is instantaneous and can turn into rage. Pain and frustration subside in terms of personal emotions. Fear passes. What remains is rage. The only thing I feared was that I would be raped. I would not be able to live with it. Without tears and pain, it is impossible to look at it. For me, it's a rhetorical question. I can't help it because you have to. Nobody but us"* (statement by one of the focus research participants implemented focus discussion, October-December 2020).

- **Targeting long-term protest.** An essential new point is a focus on long-term demonstration. Failure on a particular day does not turn into apathy. Fear transforms into anger. If, in 2010, Minsk was empty after the 19 December protests, in 2020, daily protests began. The protesters focused on both medium and long-term approaches, and the temporary radicals represented the majority - up to 80 %. We can characterise their position by the statements of the participants in the focus groups carried out between October and December 2020.

- ★ *"I will walk until we win or until I am threatened with a criminal case and have to flee the country".*

- ★ *Recently, I watched a film about Ploshcha-2006 (mass protests and repressions after the rigged presidential elections). People there stood for a week without water, food, freezing, horrible, terrible frosts. They were able to do it, and I am worse!"*

- ★ *"Walk until at least the minimum requirements are met, at least let them obey their laws".*

- ★ *"How much are we going to walk? I think we still will. It seems to me that we don't have to stop there.*

- **Protest as a need.** Participation in protest actions has transformed the psychosocial fabric. It is no longer a defeat of self but an essential need. The protests come in waves, in such a way that on weekdays the tide recedes in a certain sense (in fact, it takes on a latent character), and at weekends it rises sharply. Sunday marches with impressive participation numbers are held regularly, the likes of which have never been seen in the history of

Belarus. Smaller scale actions also take place practically every day. Thus, a kind of sinusoid is formed. Inside this sinusoid, a process occurs when people receive damaging information about the regime's repressions - then the mood descends. The Sunday actions, on the other hand, take on a completely different psychological and mobilising meaning. They do not cause fear of being arrested during the demonstration, but on the contrary, they fill the participants with positive emotions, positive energy. In this way, in addition to expressing protest as such, marches acquire a completely different characteristic: they fulfil the function of charging social power. In this way, participation in a protest turns into a psychological need of an individual.

The protest function has evolved from expressing opposition to expressing indignation at something and has become a psychological need. It is a phenomenon akin to the desire to breathe fresh air. Participation in protests is not only about overcoming fear but also about gaining positive psychological stimuli. The participants of the focus research in October-December 2020 voiced this need:

★ *"I take part in the protest march because it is the only opportunity to get positive emotions. The twilight of the law in the country spoils the atmosphere a little bit, the mere act of going out on the street and seeing how many people are there inspire optimism".*

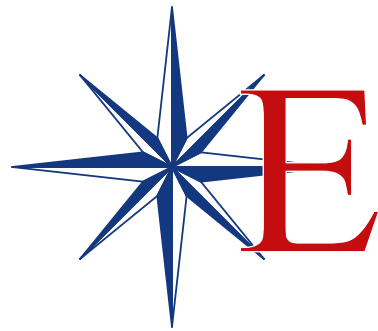
★ *When I see footage of older women, young girls, young men being beaten, grabbed. When I read interviews with people who were in Akrestina (a prison where detained demonstrators were oppressed)- I cry, I always cry. I watch the film - I have tears in my eyes. You cannot bear it. It seems to me that for most people now, this is the primary impulse to act."*

- **No need for a leader and self-organisation.** The need for a leader, described in all textbooks and characteristic of all revolutions, works entirely differently in the case of Belarus. The Belarusian reality is unique, having no previous equivalents. As a well-known humourist used to say: "forget about induction and deduction - give production". The fact that every new leader follows the same path and disappears into the bowels of the Belarusian legal system is well known to every Belarusian. This has led Belarusians to relate differently to the phenomenon of leadership as such. A completely different mental state of the protesters emerged, namely **ACCEPTANCE OF PROTEST WITHOUT A**

**LEADER AND NO PSYCHICAL DISCOMFORT WITHOUT A LEADER.** This is how the Belarusian SELF-ORGANISATION came into being:

- The column of protesters is led each time by a different leader. Before the start of the march, this leader did not know that he would take on this role and determine the route of the demonstration.
- New interest chats are popping up around the country every day.
- Courtyards, where people did not know each other, have more and more become centres of peaceful protest and mutual aid. These new forms are emerging with unprecedented creativity all over the country:
  - ★ *"And the point is that we don't need anyone, we can decide everything ourselves ... we have to win our freedom ourselves.*
  - ★ *"I am against the leader. I admire the situation that is happening, how much power people felt".*

In conclusion, we should note another critical feature of the Belarusian protests - the absence of a geopolitical element. This element distinguishes the Belarusian protest from the Ukrainian Maidan, where an anti-Russian motivation was crucial from the very beginning. None of the respondents who answered the question, 'what brought you to the streets?' mentioned a geopolitical reason.



## **THE WORLD IN BELARUSIAN PERSPECTIVE**

### **1. The 2020 presidential election and the changing Belarusian world perspective**

The presidential elections in Belarus in 2020 can be considered as a caesura, important not only for the country's domestic policy. Since then, the rift that characterises the Belarusian vision of the world, presented by official sources and accepted by society, has become clearly articulated in the public space. Two independent and disconnected narrative axes were emerged, around which discussions about Belarus's place and role in Europe and the world are taking place. The first is the anachronistic and dichotomous vision of international relations offered by A. Lukashenka's regime. The second is how the Belarusian society, antagonistic towards the state leader, perceives the outside world.

This division is primarily reflected in the construction and functioning of the Belarusian infosphere, in which dynamic transformations are taking place. However, they can hardly be considered as evident and unidirectional. Currently, Belarusians do not perceive the world through an ideological prism and do not declare readiness to choose between two poles, namely Russia and the European Union. The results of surveys confirm this non-binary view of the world. 41.6% of respondents believe that Belarus should act as a bridge between the East and the West and, at the same time, have good relations with both Russia and the EU, while only 9% are in favour of joining the EU and 26% support integration with Russia. The Belarusian leader, however, does not share such openness. On the contrary, the last six months have seen a clear tendency for the Belarusian authorities to abandon attempts to build a broad social consensus around a unified vision of international relations at the transatlantic and regional level. On the other hand, the official message is increasingly stereotyping the Western world. However, the definition of an external enemy that seeks to destroy security and stability remains vague and flexible. Depending on the needs, dictated by changes in Belarus's internal situation and the dynamics of the geopolitical context, Minsk attributes the role of the enemy to Poland, Lithuania or the USA.

A characteristic element employed within the Belarusian leader's communication strategy is the tactical use of narrative chaos in describing the international relations perspective. On the

one hand, the vision of the external world is strongly ideologised and still rooted in the bipolar balance of power, with the Russian Federation and the common Soviet roots of the region's countries as its focal point. On the other hand, Belarus' activity in the international arena proves A. Lukashenka's pragmatic stance of constantly looking for new directions to diversify its foreign policy. Attempts to emancipate Belarus' foreign policy, however, have not brought about any fundamental change. At present, we can only talk about a pretence of multilateralism in Belarus' foreign policy and the maintenance of good relations with countries characterised by a large democratic deficit. Minsk correlates these actions with a regular discreditation of the EU and the US. This approach is reflected in the narrative used by the regime for social mobilisation. In the framework of diplomatic activity, for instance, A. Lukashenka strengthened relations with Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, to whom he sent official greetings in November 2020. The choice of this diplomatic move was not accidental.

The situations of the leaders of both countries are analogous in many respects. The greatest similarity is the lack of readiness by the authorities to enter into dialogue with the opposition. Instead of discussing, they prefer to pacify and arrest the regime's opponents, attempt to censor social media and restrict Internet access. Above all, the de facto leaders of Belarus and Venezuela are not recognized by the democratic international community (the wider West). Then, on December 24, 2020, the leader of Belarus wished the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev a happy birthday, and an official communiqué issued by A. Lukashenka's press service stressed that Aliyev's "high professionalism, competence, extraordinary energy and wisdom" make him "an excellent example of a political leader"<sup>5</sup>. While on December 30, 2020, he congratulated Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel on the occasion of Cuba's national holiday, stressing that Belarus and Cuba were united by shared values such as the desire for independence, freedom and justice<sup>6</sup>. Through actions of this kind, Minsk intended to build an image of a country that is not an alienated state and finds cooperation partners in the international space who share its perception of the political system's fundamental values.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://ru.president.az/articles/49450> (10.01.21).

<sup>6</sup> [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/pozdravlenie-prezidentu-kuby-migelju-mario-dias-kanelju-bermudesu-i-pervomu-sekretarju-tsk-kompartii-kuby-25183/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/pozdravlenie-prezidentu-kuby-migelju-mario-dias-kanelju-bermudesu-i-pervomu-sekretarju-tsk-kompartii-kuby-25183/) (10.01.21); Лукашенко: Минск будет делать все необходимое для углубления сотрудничества с Гаваной, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/minsk-budet-delat-vse-neobhodimoe-dlja-uglublenija-sotrudnichestva-s-gavanoj-422443-2021/>.

## 2. "Twilight of the West"

Propaganda campaigns showing numerous threats stemming from Belarus's complicated international position are active both in traditional and social media. The main theme of the message is that Belarus is at the centre of a geopolitical, global conflict. In addition to the conventional political and economic area, media and cultural space became another confrontation field. In his message to the participants of the 14th Congress of the Belarusian Union of Journalists, A. Lukashenka called on Belarusian journalists to protect people from extremism and radicalism of the new era, which could destroy the hitherto stable state<sup>7</sup>. The Western world is hostile because it promotes a model of power, leadership and civic participation which is alien to the Belarusian regime, but above all, it expands an axiological area that is unacceptable to the Belarusian authorities. Among the "inadmissible" values promoted by the West appear tolerance towards sexual minorities and individualism.

One of the key tools for creating an anti-Western vision of the world is the Belarusian leader's speeches, which are publicly popularised, mainly by state agencies and news portals. Simultaneously, other communication channels are being used for this purpose, primarily employing propaganda and disinformation tools. The official messages are dominated by the vision of a West full of tensions, social conflicts, political chaos, cultural and moral disorientation. It is a world that is heading for towards inevitable collapse and degeneration.

According to Mr. Lukashenka, there is a growing threat to ordinary people's safety in the militarised world surrounding Belarus. Civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and colour revolutions are breaking out there. It is an unfriendly and dangerous place for every Belarusian citizen. In a speech delivered on December 30, 2021, during a visit to an OMON unit, the leader presented his vision of modern times. He said: "The world is rapidly changing, it is becoming less and less safe for the life of a normal person, and many countries have completely plunged into the abyss of civil wars and interethnic conflicts"<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the Belarusian service's foremost challenges include ensuring the country's independence and protecting its constitutional

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<sup>7</sup> Лукашенко - журналистам: вы в силах найти ответ деструктивному воздействию на сознание белорусов, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-zhurnalistam-vy-v-silah-najti-otvet-destruktivnomu-vozdjstviyu-na-soznanie-belorusov-417208-2020/> (15.01.21).

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K78uF0CyRnk&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K78uF0CyRnk&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21).

system<sup>9</sup>. The Belarusian leader also found some analogies between the riots on Capitol Hill and the protests in Belarus<sup>10</sup> and publicly called for these events to be considered a warning to Belarusian society. Earlier, he also spoke about the "yellow vests" demonstrations during which "democracy means for citizens tear gas, water cannons, not clubs, but rubber bullets"<sup>11</sup>. According to A. Lukashenka, chaos and conflicts will spread in Belarus, which may end up in regression, reverse modernisation and enslavement for the society: *"We will go back again to the way in which previous generations lived. After 1917, after the October Revolution, before it. Well, we don't want, I know for sure, our children to walk in bastard shoes and under the whip again."*<sup>12</sup>

According to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, the United States does not respect human rights. Minsk considered the fact that US President Donald Trump adopted the Act on Democracy, Human Rights and Sovereignty of Belarus an "unfriendly step"<sup>13</sup>. Western countries are also perceived as hostile because of the sanctions imposed on representatives of the Belarusian regime. The use of this instrument of political and economic pressure on Belarus is, according to A. Lukashenka, a proof of the phobia that the West displays towards the Belarusian political elite. Meanwhile, the West is a dehumanised place, where human life is not a supreme value. An evidence of this would be the actions taken during the pandemic, which Western countries cannot cope with<sup>14</sup>.

### 3. Russia - close, getting closer

However, the main points on the map of the Belarusian regime's propaganda interests correspond to the CIS area: While Russia is presented within a positive narrative, Ukraine,

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<sup>9</sup> Лукашенко: органы госбезопасности - одна из основных опор в обеспечении независимости Беларуси, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-organy-gosbezopasnosti-odna-iz-osnovnyh-opor-v-obespechenii-nezavisimosti-belarusi-420903-2020/> (access:15.01.21).

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLi64BaRrcs&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLi64BaRrcs&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21).

<sup>11</sup> Лукашенко высказался о реакции Франции на протесты „желтых жилетов“, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vyskazalsja-o-reaktsii-frantsii-na-protesty-zheltyh-zhiletov-338539-2019/> (access:15.01.21).

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnyjGBTYruc&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnyjGBTYruc&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21).

<sup>13</sup> Anatol Hlaz, MFA's press secretary presented this approach: zaprezentował Anatol Hlaz sekretarz prasowy MSZ: Белорусский народ сам сделает свой выбор, без подсказки "доброжелателей" извне – МИД, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/beloruskij-narod-sam-sdelact-svoj-vybor-bez-podskazki-dobrozhelatelej-izvne-mid-398463-2020/> (access:17.01.21).

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/poseschenie-6-j-gorodskoj-klinicheskoy-bolnitsy-minska-24959/](http://www.president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/poseschenie-6-j-gorodskoj-klinicheskoy-bolnitsy-minska-24959/)



Poland, the Baltic States and the USA are portrayed in a negative light. A. Lukashenka's speeches devoted to the neighbouring countries are usually characterised by high emotionality. In a speech delivered during a meeting of the Collective Security Council of the OUBZ, the leader spoke about the "furious behaviour of Poland and the Baltic States against Belarus"<sup>15</sup>.

A recurring theme in the political narrative is the reintegration of the post-Soviet space. However, this message is not coherent and consistent. A. Lukashenko has repeatedly postulated that this area's integration should be achieved with the respect for the sovereignty of all the involved states. As late as December 2019, he gave an interview to the "Echo of Moscow" radio station. In it, Belarusian president floated visions of diversifying the supply of raw materials to Belarus, which would be possible, among other things, by buying American or Saudi oil, transported through the Gdansk oil port<sup>16</sup>. In February 2020, speaking about Russian proposals for the de facto incorporation of Belarus carried out under the guise of integration with the Russian Federation, he stressed that there are still many interrogatives and doubts that question the legitimacy of incorporating Belarus into Russia<sup>17</sup>. He also repeatedly declared that the conditions for integration proposed by Russia were an unfavourable ultimatum, unacceptable for Belarus. "We are not going to keep crawling on our knees before our big brother and beg for some scraps"<sup>18</sup>. - said A. Lukashenka, at the same time announcing readiness for a constructive dialogue with NATO (which would not collide with the implementation of the assumptions of the joint Russian-Belarusian defence doctrine). However, last year's events, which the leader described as an "escalation of the situation", led to the acceptance of changes to NATO's strategic deterrence plan<sup>19</sup>. Before the 2020 crisis, A. Lukashenka frequently emphasised Belarus's sovereignty ("Belarus has its interests and these should be respected by partners"<sup>20</sup>), its flexibility and openness in the field of security and transparency in international relations ("We do not separate ourselves with a fence from

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<sup>15</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVVXBEMWKHs&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVVXBEMWKHs&feature=emb_title) (access:16.01.21).

<sup>16</sup> <https://echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/2559487-echo/> (access:15.01.21).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-v-rossii-namekajut-na-prisoedinenie-belarusi-v-obmen-na-edinye-tseny-na-energonositeli-379661-2020/> (access:15.01.21).

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoXno-gEFPg&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoXno-gEFPg&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21).

<sup>19</sup> *Лукашенко и Путин по телефону обсудили ситуацию в Беларуси,*  
<https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-putin-po-telefonu-obsudili-situatsiju-v-belarusi-403000-2020/>  
(access:12.01.21).

<sup>20</sup> <https://naviny.belsat.eu/pl/news/lukaszenka-gotowy-do-dialogu-z-nato/>.

anyone"<sup>21</sup>). In the last decade, however, there was a significant change in the regime's rhetoric. On December 18, 2020, at a meeting of the CIS leadership council the Belarusian leader stated that "integration of the former Soviet Union countries is an inevitable necessity"<sup>22</sup>. Thus, certain geopolitical nuances, hitherto present in the world perspective proposed by the Belarusian authorities, are being reduced.

Against this background, the image of contemporary Ukraine offered by the Belarusian state media is particularly unfavourable - it is one of the countries that were part of the CIS structures but took a different development path. According to Belarus's official narrative, Ukraine, after leaving the CIS, became a puppet, a colonial state, politically and economically dependent on Western countries. In this account, Ukraine's inevitable future was to become a federation. This is part of a much broader propaganda message, according to which the Baltic States and Poland are not equal members of the European Union. They have lost their sovereignty and decision-making freedom and play a subservient role to more robust protectors like the USA and the EU. According to the authorities' message, these forces are hostile to Belarus and oriented towards its infiltration by intelligence services<sup>23</sup>. To this end, according to A. Lukashenka's words, special centres have even been opened in Poland and Ukraine, where American services work to the detriment of Belarus. They are pursuing their main task - destabilising the Belarusian state - through social movements financed and stimulated by foreign agents. The narrative of external sponsorship of the Belarusian protests is very abundant and varied. According to this narrative, Western countries openly and openly inform about the transfer of funds in cash from "Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine" to the accounts of "protesters and militants"<sup>24</sup>.

According to the Belarusian regime's message, Poland and the Baltic States are also hostile towards Belarus. Minsk claims that these countries are the initiators of political provocations against Belarus's security, and that these actions have apparent links to the fascist past. The

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/integratsija-neizbezhnaja-neobhodimost-lukashenko-ozvuchil-priority-predsedatelstva-belarusi-v-sng-420767-2020/> (access:12.01.21).

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-poslednih-slivah-v-telegram-kanalah-poterpite-nemnozhko-na-sledujuschej-nedele-vse-416535-2020/> (access:17.01.21) oraz <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVee-t2DG10> (access:17.01.21).

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsoLTKN4gKY&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsoLTKN4gKY&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21).

picture is completed by A. Lukashenka's publicly declared conviction that nationalist and fascist movements are gaining strength in Ukraine, with OUN growing in popularity and "Banderysm" making a comeback<sup>25</sup>. According to the official message, hostile neighbours surround Belarus. NATO is strengthening its military potential on the country's western and northern borders.<sup>26</sup> According to the Belarusian leader's narrative, Poland, driven by a particular motivation, stands out against this negative background. Due to historical resentments, it seeks to annex the Grodno region ("In Grodno, they are already flying Polish flags", "They have set themselves the goal of annexing the Grodno region")<sup>27</sup>.

#### 4. Changes in geopolitical orientations of Belarusians

A sociological research conducted in the second half of 2020 revealed a decline in pro-Russian sentiment in Belarus, accompanied by a warming of the West's image. According to Professor Andrej Vardamatski's Belarusian Analytical Laboratory<sup>28</sup>, in November 2020, the percentage of citizens believing that Belarusians would be best off in an alliance with Russia was 40%, while supporters of European integration were 33%. This development is a significant change compared to September 2020. At that time, the alliance with Russia was preferred by 51.6% of respondents, while 27.6% preferred European integration.

According to both A. Vardamatski and political scientist Ryhor Astapenia, the author of a survey conducted by the British Chatham House<sup>29</sup>, the Kremlin's support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime has contributed to the lowering of pro-Russian moods in Belarus. In another Chatham House survey, also conducted in November 2020, 46% of respondents admitted that their opinion of Russia's leadership has worsened in recent months<sup>30</sup>. Over 71%

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K78uF0CyRnk> (access:17.01.21); *Президент: против Беларуси развязали информационную войну, устраиваются политические провокации*, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/prezident-protiv-belarusi-razvjazali-informatsionnuju-voynu-ustrajvajutsja-politicheskie-provokatsii-422285-2020/> (dostęp:15.01.21).

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjfKLiPGndU&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjfKLiPGndU&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21).

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgMXVHHgZps&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgMXVHHgZps&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21);  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APx4C2SatuE&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APx4C2SatuE&feature=emb_title) (access:17.01.21).

<sup>28</sup> Ю. Дракахруст, *Чаму ў Беларусі зьнізіліся прарасейскія настроі?*, Радыё „Свабода”, 25.11.2020, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30968865.html> (access:24.02.2021)

<sup>29</sup> *Исследование: Позиция России в период протестов меняет отношение белорусов к ней*, TUT.BY, 9.12.2020, <https://news.tut.by/economics/710617.html?c> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>30</sup> R. Astapenia, *Belarusians' views on the political crisis*, Chatham House, 30.11.2020, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VVEfr3raAikJrMRo-t\\_vkjOzNmrhDKvN/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VVEfr3raAikJrMRo-t_vkjOzNmrhDKvN/view) (dostęp:24.02.2021).

believe that Russia is influencing the situation in Belarus. It has not escaped the public's attention that the Russian Federation authorities have intensified their cooperation with Minsk, contrary to the expectations of 61% of Belarusians, who expect the Kremlin to remain neutral.

The trend of a slow decline in pro-Russian sentiment is more evident over several years. At the beginning of 2018, 63.9% of Belarusians showed a pro-Russian orientation, while only 20% showed a pro-European orientation<sup>31</sup>. According to A. Vardamatski, the decrease in pro-Russian sentiment in 2019 was an effect of the reduction of Russian energy subsidies and the Kremlin's attempts to impose integration with Belarus. Belarusian media, both pro regime and independent, perceived these attempts as a threat to the country's sovereignty<sup>32</sup>.

Another reason for disillusionment with Russia may be the Russian economy's stagnation<sup>33</sup>, which has continued since 2013. The Russian economic, political and social model is becoming less attractive than the Western one, - which is reflected in the change of migration flows<sup>34</sup>. Since 2016, Belarusians are increasingly looking for work in EU countries, especially in Poland.

## **5. Widening contacts with the societies of EU countries and change in the attitudes of Belarusians**

We do not have exact data on Belarusian labour emigration. The Belarusian Interior Ministry reports that only 9061 people left the country in 2019 to work abroad<sup>35</sup>. Household surveys carried out for the Belarusian Statistical Service estimated the number of migrants at 86,800<sup>36</sup>,

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<sup>31</sup> *бвальнае падзенне: колькасць прыхільнікаў саюзу з Расеяй знізілася на траціну*, Belsat TV, 2020.02.05, <https://naviny.belsat.eu/news/abvalnae-padzenne-kolkasts-pryhilnikau-sayuzu-z-raseyaj-znizilasya-na-tratsinu/> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>32</sup> *Социолог: Белорусы негативно оценили поддержку Лукашенко Кремлем*, „Deutsche Welle”, 30.11.2020, <https://www.dw.com/ru/sociolog-belorusy-negativno-ocenili-podderzhku-lukashenko-kremlem/a-55770686> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>33</sup> *Почему за 20 лет Россия так и не перешла от стагнации к развитию?*, „Ведомости”, 18.10.2019, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/articles/2019/10/08/813068-20-let-stagnatsii> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>34</sup> Е. Данейко, *Трудовая миграция из Беларуси в Польшу: динамика впечатляющая*, „Deutsche Welle”, 06.10.2018, <https://www.dw.com/ru/a-45777751> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>35</sup> *Эксперт: за границей работают около 1,5 миллиона белорусов. В каких сферах наши трудятся за рубежом*, TUT.BY, 14.11.2017, <https://finance.tut.by/news568530.html?c> (dostep:24.02.2021).

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

while some independent experts estimate the number at more than a million<sup>37</sup>. According to analysts from EAST Center and CASE Belarus research centres, the most realistic estimate of the number of labour migrants is around 400,000, which means that every tenth Belarusian of working age has left.

Before the pandemic, around 300,000 Belarusians worked in Russia<sup>38</sup> and 100,000 in EU countries<sup>39</sup>. EAST Center and CASE Belarus experts estimated the number of those working in Poland at 60,000. According to data from the Polish Social Insurance Institution, from 2015 to 2019, the number of Belarusians working in Poland increased fivefold<sup>40</sup>. If the pandemic will not cause economic stagnation in Poland and the Belarusian authorities will not drastically restrict freedom of movement, the migration of Belarusians to Poland will increase.

Even more clearly, the growth dynamics of the number of Belarusian students in Poland reflects the increase in the attractiveness of the EU's (and Polish) labour market for Belarusians. In the 2018/2019 academic year, 7,485 Belarusian citizens studied at Polish higher education institutions<sup>41</sup>. This is 2.3 times more than in the 2013/2014 academic year when 3,220 Belarusians studied in Poland. In the same period, the number of Belarusian citizens at Russian higher education institutions dropped almost twofold - from 24,916 to 13,216<sup>42</sup>. In 2019, a similar number of Belarusian citizens – 3,686 and 4,328 people - will be admitted to the first year of study in Russia and Poland. Belarusians are also actively going to Lithuania and the Czech Republic to study. We can conclude that in 3 to 4 years' perspective, the number of Belarusian students in EU countries will exceed the number of Belarusian

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<sup>37</sup> А.Рыбчинская, „Могут проходить двойным учетом”. *Существуют ли точные данные о том, сколько человек уезжает на заработки*, TUT.BY <https://finance.tut.by/news684382.html?c> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>38</sup> *Только в Россию — около 300 тысяч в год. Сколько белорусов на самом деле уезжают на заработки*, TUT.BY, 14.06.2017, <https://finance.tut.by/news546755.html?c> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>39</sup> Д.Бабицкий, *Трудовая миграция в ЕС и система социального обеспечения в Беларуси, Молдове и Украине: правовой анализ и оценка экономических взаимосвязей*, CASE Belarus, 2019, <https://case-belarus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FINAL-ANALYTICAL-REPORT-Labour-migration-and-pension-systems-RU.pdf> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>40</sup> *Rosnie liczba pracowników z Bialorusi*, Infor.Kadry, 14.09.2020, <https://kadry.infor.pl/wiadomosci/4683917,Rosnie-liczba-pracownikow-z-Bialorusi.html> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>41</sup> А. Перова, *Сколько белорусских студентов уезжают учиться в Россию и Польшу*, TUT.BY, 3.09.2019, <https://news.tut.by/society/648038.html?c> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

citizens studying in Russia. The strengthening of Belarusian youth contacts with the West already meets an adverse reaction in the Russian media<sup>43</sup>.

The wave of repression against participants in the protests may strengthen contacts between Belarus and the West's societies, paradoxically. According to estimates by human rights activists, between August 2020 and January 2021, up to 15,000 people may have left Belarus for political reasons<sup>44</sup>. A large number of them left for Poland and Lithuania. The increase in contacts between the European Union and Belarus's societies creates a severe barrier to the propaganda of A. Lukashenka's regime and the Kremlin, which is trying to create an image of the West as the enemy. Relatives in Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Western European countries provide Belarusians with first-hand information about the West's quality of life and allow them to verify the information disseminated in the regime's media.

The significant strengthening of contacts between the societies of the EU countries and Belarus, that has taken place in the last decade, may have been one of the factors that contributed to the crystallisation of civil attitudes in Belarusian society. Prof. A. Vardamatski noted that, when evaluating the political and economic situation in Belarus, the supporters of democratic changes compare it with neighbouring countries' current situation. In turn, for the regime's supporters, the main point of reference is Belarus's situation in the crisis years of the 1990s<sup>45</sup>.

However, the potential growth of pro-Western sentiment may face severe limitations. Around 30% of Belarusian society will likely maintain a firm pro-Russian orientation, regardless of Belarus's economic and political situation. According to a Chatham House survey, more than 40% of Belarusians still believe that the red-green flag should become Belarus's state symbol. Among the countries considered 'least friendly' to Belarus, 30.5% name Poland and 25.5% Lithuania, while 46.8% of the survey participants share the Russian nationalist thesis that

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<sup>43</sup> *Белорусскую молодежь уведут у России из-под носа*, KP.RU, 02.10.2020, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/217190.5/4297667/> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>44</sup> *Рождество в изгнании*, Belsat TV, 05.01.2021, <https://belsat.eu/ru/programs/rozhdestvo-v-izgnanii/> (access:24.02.2021).

<sup>45</sup> Н. Калинина, „Сутки” не пугают: люди готовы выходить снова и снова. Социсследование показало, почему протест не сдувается, TUT.BY, 1.12.2020, <https://news.tut.by/economics/709783.html?c> (access:24.02.2021).

Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians constitute one people; 19.2% believe that integration between Russia and Belarus is a "historical necessity"<sup>46</sup>.

At the same time, sociological studies show that it is practical experience, not ideology, that has a decisive influence on the attitudes of Belarusian citizens. The Kremlin's attempts to ostentatiously impose yet another pro-Russian authoritarian regime on Belarusians, or to preserve the current system of power, will result in severe problems in domestic politics: an increase in repression against citizens, a reduction of the population's income, and a progressive loss of citizens' influence on the situation in their own country. The practical consequences of the Kremlin's policy and A. Lukashenka's regime's actions may convince an increasing number of Belarusians to revise their previous geopolitical orientations.

## **6. The primary distribution channels of the regime's vision of the world**

What methods and tools does A. Lukashenka's regime use to propagate its hermetic vision of the world? The main channels are Russian-language and Russian traditional media. The exploitation of these channels enables A. Lukashenka's regime to use propaganda content created for the Kremlin's information space. At the same time, it forces Minsk to unify the message. Belarusian propaganda can attempt at nuancing the narrative only in media controlled by A. Lukashenka and during the president's public speeches.

According to A. Lukashenka, the primary source of threat to Belarusian sovereignty are new media not controlled by the regime<sup>47</sup>. However, their popularity is growing due to political issues, better access by citizens and the relatively low cost of these services. According to the Global Connectivity Index, access to ITC infrastructure and digital transformation effects are above the world average in Belarus; the country is also a leader among other CIS states. The directions of Internet traffic directed to Belarus are also changing; controlling the information flow is becoming increasingly difficult for the authorities. Only ten years ago, it was practically monopolised by Russian resources. Today it is divided almost symmetrically

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<sup>46</sup> R. Astapenia, op.cit.

<sup>47</sup> *Совещание с руководителями ведущих государственных СМИ*, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/soveschaniye-s-rukovoditeljami-veduschix-gosudarstvennyx-smi-23018/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveschaniye-s-rukovoditeljami-veduschix-gosudarstvennyx-smi-23018/), (access: 10.01.21).

between Russian and Western resources. At the same time, however, the number of Russian services active in Belarus is increasing.

It is worth noting that the surge in interest in new media was not accompanied by an increase in pro-Russian groups' popularity in social networks. The largest pro-Russian groups on VK.com (Zdorovaya Rus: Ukraine, Rossiya, Belarus; Politring; Adekwatnyi Vitebsk) in January 2021 counted between 4,000 and 9,000 Belarusians. They were slightly more popular in 2018<sup>48</sup>. There was no noticeable increase in the influence of dozens of little-known pro-Russian websites created en masse after 2015<sup>49</sup>. Trykatyazh - Telegram's largest pro-Russian channel, with 33,000 users - announced its closure in November 2020. Minskaya Siemiboyarshchina and Bulba prestolov increased their readership from 5-7 to 13 thousand during the protest period.

## 7. Discrediting the state media

After August 2020, Belarusian state media are disseminating increasingly radical, pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives. However, the decline in popularity of Belarusian government television may serve as further evidence of Belarusians' disillusionment with the ideas of Russian pan-nationalism. They do not provide answers to the questions that are troubling the society, and instead of showing the ways out of the economic crisis and creating a civic consensus, the state media, in their primitive propaganda message, talk about the fight with the West, Russia's victories in Syria and the situation in Ukraine.

According to the latest available poll, conducted in 2018 by the Information and Analytical Centre of the Presidential Administration and quoted by the independent Belarusian Journalists Association, the most popular TV stations among Belarusians with an audience of

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<sup>48</sup> П. Папко, *Інфармацыйны ўплыў Расіі ў Беларусі: асноўныя каналы і ўразлівыя групы*, „Наше Мнение”, 04.07.2018, [https://nmbny.eu/news/analytics/6649.html?fbclid=IwAR33Y\\_j6JHiXJdYF6mOyUu86rwRrTEg46AKrqqFd317cmjcdB4Y-lvAnlWk](https://nmbny.eu/news/analytics/6649.html?fbclid=IwAR33Y_j6JHiXJdYF6mOyUu86rwRrTEg46AKrqqFd317cmjcdB4Y-lvAnlWk) (access: 24.02.2021).

<sup>49</sup> *Российская пропаганда в Беларуси: средства доставки*, iSANS, 12.06.2020, <https://isans.org/analysis/policy-papers/rossijskaya-propaganda-v-belarusi-sredstva-dostavki.html> (access: 24.02.2021).



over 50% a few years ago were ONT, RTR-Belarus and Belarus 1<sup>50</sup>. The first broadcasts news programmes of Russian and Belarusian production. The second is an adapted version of Russian state television for Belarus. The third is the Belarusian state television. In January 2021, the proportion of news and entertainment content produced in Russia on ONT and RTR-Belarus TV reached 75% of broadcast time, while on Belarus 1 TV the percentage was lower - 35%.

Trust in the state media, especially television, has fallen sharply. According to Sociolytics data, in August-September 2020, 54.3% of Belarusians preferred independent press, with only 29.4% still opting for state media<sup>51</sup>. The remaining 16.3% used both sources. 43.3% of Belarusians declared that they never watch pro-government TV channels, ONT, STV, Belarus 1 or Belarus 2. The change is very substantial if compared with the data from April 2017<sup>52</sup>. At that time, 67% of the Belarusian Analytical Workshop survey participants declared that they trusted Belarusian government media. Independent media were credited by 73% of citizens, while 75% trusted Russian media. In spring 2017, the Belarusian state television was the primary source of information for 71.3% of Belarusians.

## **8. Main distribution channels for an alternative vision of the world: the Internet is winning the battle against television**

Over the past five years, there have been significant changes in Belarusians' media preferences, making it more difficult for the regime to brainwash the population. According to the Belarusian Communications Ministry, the number of households with internet access has increased significantly - from 61% in 2016 to 82.5% in 2020<sup>53</sup>. The number of internet users

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<sup>50</sup> А.Александров, А. Бастунец, *Медиа в Беларуси 2020. Рынок, законы и информационная безопасность*, Белорусская ассоциация журналистов, [https://baj.by/sites/default/files/event/files/2020/report\\_media2020\\_rus.pdf](https://baj.by/sites/default/files/event/files/2020/report_media2020_rus.pdf) (access: 24.02.2021).

<sup>51</sup> *Переломить оппозиционные настроения в Беларуси должен десант российских пропагандистов. Ну и как, получается?* MEDUZA.IO, 16.11.2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/11/16/perelomit-oppozitsionnye-nastroeniya-v-belarusi-dolzhen-desant-rossiyskih-polittechnologov-nu-i-kak-poluchaetsya> (access: 24.02.2021).

<sup>52</sup> *Соцопрос: белорусы все меньше доверяют госСМИ*, TUT.BY, 22.05.2017 <https://news.tut.by/economics/544272.html?c> (access: 24.02.2021).

<sup>53</sup> *Министерство связи и информатизации Республики Беларусь. Государственная программа развития цифровой экономики и информационного общества на 2016–2020 годы* <https://www.mpt.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvennaya-programma-razvitiya-cifrovoy-ekonomiki-i-informacionnogo-obshchestva> (access: 23.01.2021).

(real users) grew from 4.8 million people to 5.4 million between 2013 and 2020<sup>54</sup>. Most importantly, the way people use the Internet has also changed. More and more Belarusians have started to look to online media for information on politics and the economy.

In one of its latest surveys, the Information and Analytical Centre of the Presidential Administration of Belarus, liquidated in February 2019, noted that, in 2018, the number of citizens receiving news about Belarus and the world from online sources (72%) was significantly close to the number of citizens drawing information from television (60.4%)<sup>55</sup>. According to the state think-tank, the rapid growth of interest in news from the Internet, accompanied by a decrease in interest in television, began after 2015. In contrast, a survey by the US-based Pact Foundation, conducted in August-September 2019, found that 50.3% of Belarusians regularly get information about events at home and abroad from the Internet<sup>56</sup>. Television remains the primary source of information for 54% of respondents. Such changes allow us to forecast that soon the world's image for the majority of Belarusians will be formed by online media rather than television. According to a survey by Sociolytics, after August 2020, more than 50% of Belarusian citizens resorted to new sources of information<sup>57</sup>. In turn, the Gemius company's research in July-August 2020 shows that interest in online media has increased in the 25-44 age group<sup>58</sup>. Belarus' largest channel NextaLive had over 1.54 million users by the end of 2020. The number of people using Telegram doubled, and by November 2020, 10% of Belarusian internet users were already using it. Telegram has become the most crucial tool for the self-organisation of society indeed. It was largely thanks to it, that, within

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<sup>54</sup> *Топ-20 сайтов по охвату белорусской интернет-аудитории за май 2013 года*, TUT.BY, 25.06.2013, <https://42.tut.by/354714?c> (access: 25.02.2021); *Беларуские тв-зрители обращаются к Telegram. Компания Gemius рассказала о поведении интернет-аудитории в ноябре*, Marketing.by, 21.12.2020, <https://marketing.by/analitika/kompaniya-gemius-nazvala-itogovye-tsifry-o-povedenii-internet-auditorii-v-belarusi/> (access: 25.02.2021).

<sup>55</sup> *В Беларуси интернет по популярности догоняет ТВ. Что смотрят жители страны по телевизору?* TUT.BY, 8.02.2019, <https://news.tut.by/society/625075.html?c> (access: 25.02.2021).

<sup>56</sup> *What Do Belarusians Think? TV and Internet Compete for the Minds of Belarusians*, „Pact”, 28.02.2020, <https://www.pactworld.org/news/what-do-belarusians-think-tv-and-internet-compete-minds-belarusians> (access: 25.02.2021).

<sup>57</sup> *Переломить оппозиционные настроения в Беларуси должен десант российских пропагандистов. Ну и как, получается?* MEDUZA.IO, 16.11.2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/11/16/perelomit-oppozitsionnye-nastroeniya-v-belarusi-dolzhen-desant-rossiyskih-polittechnologov-nu-i-kak-poluchaetsya> (access: 24.02.2021).

<sup>58</sup> *Беларуские тв-зрители обращаются к Telegram. Компания Gemius рассказала о поведении интернет-аудитории в ноябре*, Marketing.by, 21.12.2020, <https://marketing.by/analitika/kompaniya-gemius-nazvala-itogovye-tsifry-o-povedenii-internet-auditorii-v-belarusi/> (access: 25.02.2021).

six months, more than 900 groups were created in the country, bringing together residents of courtyards, urban districts and participants of grassroots social initiatives<sup>59</sup>.

Even though today the Internet is becoming a dominant source of information, intergenerational differences are becoming apparent. In the age group of 18-45 years, 2/3 of people read and watch news mainly on the Internet, while among people aged 61-75 years, the percentage of active Internet users is only 14%. It is worth mentioning that the most active Internet users are not the youngest ones, but people between 30 and 45 years old are at the peak of their professional activity. According to EU Neighbours East research conducted in February-March 2020, 57% of Belarusians "always" and "often" get information from TV<sup>60</sup>. In comparison, "word of mouth" is an essential information source for 56% of citizens and websites for 50%. Social networks ranked in fourth place in terms of popularity. The interest in online media among women, previously the TV audience's nucleus, has also increased dramatically over the year<sup>61</sup>. If, in January 2020, women accounted for only 40% of pages viewed, in November 2020, they surpassed men in online activity.

According to SimilarWeb data, the most popular news websites in Belarus in December 2020 were: tut.by (68 million user sessions from Belarus), onliner.by (35.8 million), kp.by (4.8 million), news.mail.ru (4.8 million), sputnik.by (4.3 million), nn.by (3.9 million), rambler.ru (3.16 million), lenta.ru (3.14 million), belta.by (2.76 million) and rbc.ru (1.64 million). The Belarusian internet giants are still the portals of domestic production, such as tut.by and onliner.by. However, it is worth noting that six out of the ten most popular news websites in Belarus are Russian or controlled by the Kremlin. Meanwhile, according to a report by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the most popular social networking sites in February

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<sup>59</sup> <https://dze.chat/> (access: 25.02.2021).

<sup>60</sup> *OPEN Neighbourhood — Communicating for a stronger partnership: connecting with citizens across the Eastern Neighbourhood*, Annual survey report: Belarus 5th Wave (Spring 2020), EU NEIGHBOURS east, [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EUNEIGHBOURS\\_east\\_AS2020report\\_BELARUS.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EUNEIGHBOURS_east_AS2020report_BELARUS.pdf) (access: 25.02.2021).

<sup>61</sup> *Беларуские тв-зрители обращаются к Telegram. Компания Gemius рассказала о поведении интернет-аудитории в ноябре*, Marketing.by, 21.12.2020, <https://marketing.by/analitika/kompaniya-gemius-nazvala-itogovye-tsifry-o-povedenii-internet-auditorii-v-belarusi-/> (access: 25.02.2021).

2020 were VK.com (3.9 million user accounts), Instagram (2.7 million) ok.ru (1.6 million) and Facebook (0.7 million)<sup>62</sup>.

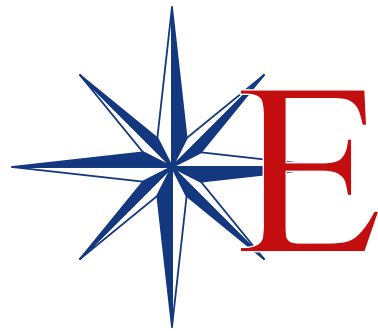
### **Conclusions and recommendations:**

- The protests that began in Belarus after the 2020 presidential election were preceded by several years of change in media consumption habits among Belarusians: an increasing proportion of the population is getting information about the country and the world from the Internet rather than from regime-controlled television.
- The protests motivated half of Belarusian society to seek new sources of information and led to a drastic decrease in state television trust. Simultaneously, there has been no marked increase in interest in Kremlin media or pro-Kremlin groups and channels on social networks.
- After the presidential elections, the Lukashenka regime hit out at the free media, but repression even affected state-run media journalists. Independent media and citizen journalism must be supported, by increasing their reach and promoting the content they offer through social networking sites.
- The independent media should propose economic and political alternatives to the model pursued by A. Lukashenka's regime to the Belarusian society. It is worth developing circles of experts to work out solutions, such as recruiting young Belarusians studying in the West.
- The long-standing economic crisis in Belarus is stimulating contacts between Belarusian society and Western countries. This also translates into an increase in the number of students and workers from Belarus in EU countries and may, to some extent, activate political and social change in Belarus shortly.
- The professional and social integration of political refugees from Belarus should be supported. Poland's experience with programmes supporting repressed people can be regarded as positive. An example of this type of initiative is the Belsat TV team building, which was primarily made up of young people who were forced to leave Belarus after the protests in 2006.

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<sup>62</sup> А.Александров, А. Бастунец, *Медиа в Беларуси 2020. Рынок, законы и информационная безопасность*, Белорусская ассоциация журналистов, [https://baj.by/sites/default/files/event/files/2020/report\\_media2020\\_rus.pdf](https://baj.by/sites/default/files/event/files/2020/report_media2020_rus.pdf) (access: 24.02.2021).

- We cannot ignore the fact that, despite the changes taking place in Belarus, around 30% of Belarusian society still supports authoritarian ideas, spread by propaganda channels loyal to Mr. Lukashenka and/or the Kremlin.



## **BELARUS IN THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

*Belarus's new political situation did not go unnoticed by its neighbours - Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania. The European Union has also reacted much more actively than during the previous presidential elections.*

### **1. Ukraine**

The protests that erupted in 2020 in Belarus laid the foundation for several strategically significant changes in its relations with its southern neighbour, Ukraine. The previous developments that characterised relations between these countries in 2014-2020 have now been replaced by new ones, that, it seems, will be valid both during the further rule of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime and in the situation of a possible change of authorities in Minsk.

A fundamental issue for the shape of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations today remains the question of Minsk's recognition of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Indeed, Belarus is among the eleven countries that in 2014 voted against the UN General Assembly resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine and non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (among the initiators of this resolution were Poland and Lithuania). Minsk also voted against resolutions on human rights in Crimea in 2016-2020. Thus, until this problem is resolved, the normalisation of bilateral relations will continue to be an obstacle in other areas. Therefore, the Ukrainian press has been closely following the stand of Belarusian opposition leaders (especially Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya) on the Crimea issue. Mrs. Tikhanouskaya's words about the peninsula being 'de facto Russian' were strongly criticised here. Ukraine, therefore, needs unambiguous and unconditional support from Belarus for its territorial integrity. Only such an attitude will serve as the foundation for the development of strategic relations in other areas.

The problem faced by Ukrainian diplomacy after the outbreak of protests in Belarus is the future of Minsk as a negotiating platform of the so-called Normandy Four (a group consisting of representatives of Ukraine, France, Germany and Russia, set up to settle the war in Donbas and the question of Crimea's belonging) and the so-called Minsk Format (the format of a

trilateral contact group with the participation of representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE). Petro Poroshenko's request to organise negotiations in Minsk in 2014 seemed a logical step for the then Ukrainian president. For Kyiv, Western allies and the OSCE, the Belarusian capital seemed a relatively neutral choice, also accepted by Moscow and convenient for A. Lukashenka. Thanks to this initiative, there was a warming in Belarus' relations with the EU and the US. In 2015, even the EU sanctions imposed on Belarus were lifted - initially for four months and eventually permanently.

Meanwhile, in February 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Belarus, which allowed A. Lukashenka to assess that the cooling in Minsk-Washington relations had ended<sup>63</sup>. Accepting the host's function for the talks thus enabled Belarus to break out of its isolation and reach its best position in the international arena in recent years. In part, this can also be explained by the fact that after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas, A. Lukashenka realised what his Moscow patron was capable of and sought opportunities to pursue a more multipolar policy. However, this period ended with intensifying the regime's mass repression against protesters in the summer of 2020. Minsk's role as a negotiating platform then became somewhat diluted as the COVID-19 pandemic saw talks take place online.

Nevertheless, a problem could arise here at any time. Despite the assurances of Leonid Kravchuk (the first president of Ukraine, a chairman of the Ukrainian delegation in the trilateral contact group) that it is not necessary to look for another place for negotiations<sup>64</sup>, it is difficult to imagine that in the conditions of suspended interstate contacts with Belarus, a representative of Ukraine would go to Minsk for talks<sup>65</sup>. This would be a gesture of recognition of A. Lukashenka as the legitimate president of Belarus. Thus, another meeting of the Normandy Four in Minsk is also impossible (although for this group, the Belarusian capital is not that important a place - out of six sessions, only one was held in Minsk). However, there remains the risk that Russian representatives will not agree with the online

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<sup>63</sup> Лукашенко: *Період холоду у відносинах Білорусі і США закінчився*, <https://mind.ua/news/20207342-lukashenko-period-holodu-u-vidnosinah-bilorusi-i-ssha-zakinchivsvya> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>64</sup> *Кравчук не вважає що Мінську вже треба шукати альтернативу для зустрічей ТКГ*, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2020/08/13/7262799/>(access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>65</sup> *Україна призупинила усі контакти з Білоруссю – Кулеба*, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3088886-ukraina-prizupinila-vsi-kontakti-z-bilorusso-kuleba.html> (access: 10.01.2021).



formula and will strive to organise the meeting in Minsk. The question of an alternative location is not simple either. Minsk was a kind of compromise for each side. It may be tough to identify a similar one in the future.

However, the situation may improve in the event of a possible change of government in Belarus. The informal agreement appointing Minsk as the negotiating venue does not depend on who is currently in Belarus's government. For the new authorities, this could be an opportunity to establish closer relations with European neighbours and states and enter European politics with determination.

One other issue that remains relevant today and which may serve as a backdrop for Ukrainian-Belarusian relations in the coming years is the status of Belarusians who flee to Ukraine from the persecution of A. Lukashenka's regime. This problem is not new - already in 2015-2016, Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine in the Donbas found it challenging to legalise their stay in the southern neighbour. Some of them, forced to return to Belarus, were even taken to court<sup>66</sup>. At the time, this could be explained by the Ukrainian authorities' reluctance to spoil relations with A. Lukashenka. This problem appeared in a new form after the outbreak of protests in Belarus. It turned out that Belarusian citizens residing in Ukraine do not enjoy similar preferences as in Poland or Lithuania: not being able to obtain a long-term visa or legalise their stay, they are forced to leave the country after 90 days of stay. On August 28, 2020, Tatiana Martynovna, a Belarusian opposition blogger, during her appearance on the Ukrainian political talk show "Right on Power" ("Pravo na vladu"), asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs, D. Kuleba, about the possibility of introducing such preferences. Still, she did not receive a concrete answer<sup>67</sup>. Some progress on the issue occurred only at the end of 2020. On December 23, a decree of the Ukrainian government on simplifying the legalisation of stay in Ukraine for certain Belarusian citizens was published. The document granted the right to apply for a shortened procedure for of the legalisation of stay to IT workers, entrepreneurs, highly qualified professionals and other groups of workers in demand in the Ukrainian economy<sup>68</sup>. However, the decree is not aimed at people threatened

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<sup>66</sup> Україна шість років воює з Росією на Донбасі. Більшість добровольців досі не можуть набутти громадянство, <https://zaborona.com/hromadianstvo-dobrovoltsiam/> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>67</sup> Право на владу. Білоруський Майдан: відкритий фінал, <https://youtu.be/kSHkftt937k> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>68</sup> Постанова КМУ, [http://materialy.kmu.gov.ua/f81760a2/docs/22a77085/Proekt\\_postanovi.pdf](http://materialy.kmu.gov.ua/f81760a2/docs/22a77085/Proekt_postanovi.pdf) (access: 10.01.2021).

by the repression of A. Lukashenka's regime. It seems to have been issued only as a quick decision based on economic demand. There is no mention of the Belarusian protests or political repression in the document. On the same day, another decree was issued and it appeared to be more logical from the point of view of defending Belarusians' rights. It extended the period during which Belarusian citizens may reside in Ukraine from 90 to 180 days (within 365 days)<sup>69</sup>.

Although the changes mentioned above are undoubtedly beneficial and necessary, one cannot get rid of the feeling that Kyiv is still very reluctant to talk about repressions in Belarus on an official level. What is more, the steps taken by the Ukrainian side tend to be long overdue, considering, for example, that between August and December 2020, some 70,000 Belarusian residents entered Ukraine<sup>70</sup>.

One more aspect of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations worth noting is the high popularity that A. Lukashenka enjoyed among Ukrainians until recently. Despite Belarus' votes in the UN and his openly pro-Russian stance, he was still considered the most popular foreign politician in Ukraine in 2019<sup>71</sup>. Of course, the rigging of elections in Belarus, brutal detentions and killings of protesters have significantly changed the situation, but Ukrainians' support for A. Lukashenka remains significant. According to polls conducted in September 2020, 31% of Ukrainians supported A. Lukashenka<sup>72</sup>. This may explain the still undecided attitude of the Ukrainian authorities towards the situation in Belarus.

One can partly explain this attitude of the Ukrainian authorities by the fear of undermining what both sides have achieved in recent years in the field of bilateral economic cooperation, which has been developing quite dynamically and at many levels. In the years 2015-2020

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<sup>69</sup> Постанова КМУ № 1302, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/npas/deyaki-pitannya-perebuvannya-v-ukrayini-gromadyan-respubliki-bilorus-i231220-1302> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>70</sup> *Політбіженці з Білорусі просять спростити їх легалізацію в Україні*, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3159318-politbizenci-z-bilorusi-prosat-sprostiti-ih-legalizaciu-v-ukraini.html> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>71</sup> *Лукашенко стал самым популярным зарубежным политиком по итогам соцопроса в Украине*, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-stal-samym-populjarnym-zarubezhnym-politikom-po-itogam-sotsoprosa-v-ukraine-336977-2019/> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>72</sup> *Кого поддерживают украинцы в ситуации в Беларуси: сентябрь 2020*, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=971> (access: 10.01.2021).

Belarus remained one of Kyiv's most important trade partners<sup>73</sup>. In addition to the continuous growth of exports and imports in both directions, new initiatives to further strengthen them appeared in mutual economic relations. For example, in 2018, both countries launched the Forum of Regions of Ukraine and Belarus. Its goal was to deepen cooperation between neighbours at the regional level and create a place for dialogue between both countries' local business. The first forum was held in October 2018 in Gomel with Presidents A. Lukashenka and P. Poroshenko's participation. The second such event, held in October 2019 in Zhytomyr, had a particular political significance, as the first meeting between A. Lukashenka with the new President of Ukraine, V. Zelenskiy. The third forum planned for October 2020 in Grodno was cancelled after the suspension of cooperation between Kyiv and Minsk.

The Ukrainian-Belarusian interstate commission meetings on trade and economic cooperation are another component of economic relations between the two countries. In December 2019, after another session of this body, the Ukrainian government website reported that Kyiv and Minsk are expanding cooperation in this area<sup>74</sup>. After the outbreak of the wave of protests in Belarus, economic cooperation was, for obvious reasons, narrowed down, but this did not mean, despite appearances, that it was going to end. On August 11, 2020, after the Belarusian elections and the first wave of repression against protesters, the Ukrainian minister for economic development and the Belarusian minister for trade met in Kyiv<sup>75</sup>. In October, the Ukrainian state enterprise "Kyiv Parktrans" purchased 200 MAZ buses for about UAH 1.67 billion<sup>76</sup>. In turn, in December of the same year, Ukraine's state commission for energy regulation cancelled restrictions on electricity imports from its northern neighbour. And at the beginning of 2021, it was reported that several Ukrainian companies are buying electricity

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<sup>73</sup> *Торговельно-економічне співробітництво між Україною та Білоруссю*, <https://belarus.mfa.gov.ua/spivrobotnictvo/345-torgovelyno-jekonomichne-spivrobotnictvo-mizh-ukrajinoju-ta-bilorussyu> (access 10.01.2021)

<sup>74</sup> *Україна та Республіка Білорусь розширюють торговельно-економічне співробітництво*, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/ukrayina-ta-respublika-bilorus-rozshiryuyut-torgovelyno-ekonomichne-spivrobotnictvo> (access 10.01.2021).

<sup>75</sup> *Ігор Петрашко зустрівся з Міністром сільськогосподарства та продовольства Республіки Білорусь*, [https://www.me.gov.ua/News/Detail?lang=uk-UA&id=5dbc2124-f251-49fe-a05c-052cd4333def&title=IgorPetrashkoZustrivsiaZMinistromSil'skogoGospodarstvaTaProdovolstvaRespublikiBilorus&fbclid=IwAR0R74H-FU1OMKcEi2o\\_unOWLYpeDN4S5oWI0ThwgjU341dAslwgauyV\\_vE](https://www.me.gov.ua/News/Detail?lang=uk-UA&id=5dbc2124-f251-49fe-a05c-052cd4333def&title=IgorPetrashkoZustrivsiaZMinistromSil'skogoGospodarstvaTaProdovolstvaRespublikiBilorus&fbclid=IwAR0R74H-FU1OMKcEi2o_unOWLYpeDN4S5oWI0ThwgjU341dAslwgauyV_vE) (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>76</sup> *Київ закупив 200 білоруських автобусів у лізинг без оголошення тендеру*, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/news/2020/10/22/666510/> (access 10.01.2021).

from Belarusian nuclear power plant<sup>77</sup>. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, D. Kuleba, when summing up the year 2020, stated that he sees no sense in adding to economic sanctions against Belarus because "the economy is an important sphere for both the Ukrainian and Belarusian people"<sup>78</sup>.

After a possible change of government in Belarus, it appears that, from the outset, the new administration will have a favourable potential for developing economic relations with Ukraine. On the other hand, it would consider it difficult to treat Kyiv as a reliable strategic partner, bearing in mind the passive attitude of Ukraine towards the defence of democracy and human rights in Belarus. Unfortunately, everything indicates that tactical and short-term economic decisions remain more important for the Ukrainian authorities than the long-term development of relations with Belarusian civil society, which - sooner or later - has a chance to take over the helm of state power.

Nevertheless, an important diplomatic step by Kyiv was the invitation of Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya to the meeting of the Lublin Triangle format, which took place on January 29, 2021<sup>79</sup>. This was the first official contact of the Ukrainian government with S. Tikhanouskaya and a clear indicator that Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania see a future for Belarus within this diplomatic format, as stated by D. Kuleba at a press conference after the meeting. He expressed hope that sooner or later, the Lublin Triangle will transform into the Lublin Four<sup>80</sup>. The Belarusian opposition should work to ensure Belarus a place in this format. Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania will be the most reliable partners for the new Belarusian government after its possible victory.

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<sup>77</sup> Україна почала закуповувати електрику АЕС Білорусі, <https://ua.korrespondent.net/business/financial/4313180-ukraina-pochala-zakupovuvaty-elektryku-aes-bilorusi> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>78</sup> Україні зараз недоцільно вводити економічні санкції проти Білорусі – Кулеба, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/3160675-ukraini-zaraz-nedocilno-vvoditi-ekonomichni-sankcii-proti-bilorusi-kuleba.html> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>79</sup> Міністри закордонних справ України, Литви та Польщі проведуть засідання Люблінського Трикутника, <https://mfa.gov.ua/events/ministri-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrayini-litvi-ta-polshchi-provedut-pershu-zustrich-lyublinskogo-trikutnika> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>80</sup> Dmytro Kuleby Press Conference, 29.01.2021, <https://www.facebook.com/UkraineMFA/videos/766611437603177> (access: 10.01.2021).

## 2. Poland

The years 2015-2020 in Polish-Belarusian relations saw a kind of 'reset', with economic issues coming to the forefront of bilateral relations and official contacts entering a period of the most significant warming in years. This was due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the recognition of Minsk's new negotiating role. Firstly, this allowed A. Lukashenka to reset relations with Poland and the entire European Union. Secondly, it showed the Belarusian president what his leading partner, the Russian Federation, could do. Belarus has therefore returned to a kind of 'multipolar' policy. In that period, Brussels and Warsaw could count on weakening the relations of the Minsk regime's dependence on Moscow and to maintain, for example, its relative neutrality towards Ukraine. For these reasons, Polish-Belarusian relations during this period can be described as the best since the beginning of the 21st century. Visits by high-level Polish officials to Belarus became more frequent during this period. In October 2016, Mateusz Morawiecki, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Development, and later head of government, visited Belarus. The president of the Institute of National Remembrance, Jarosław Szarek and the Head of the Cabinet of the President of Poland, Krzysztof Szczerski visited Minsk respectively in January and April 2018<sup>81</sup>. These visits de facto recognized the legitimacy of the Belarusian authorities, which translated into improved official bilateral relations and, to some extent, resulted in a shift away from the topic of democracy and human rights in Belarus. This reorientation of Poland's policy towards its eastern neighbour was particularly noticeable in 2017, when the Polish media publicised the issue of a planned cut in funding for Belsat TV or even its liquidation<sup>82</sup>. However, the situation changed after the rigging of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus and the outbreak of mass protests. The Polish side reacted instantly: already on the evening of August 9, the presidents of Poland (Andrzej Duda) and Lithuania (Gitanas Nausėda) issued a joint statement to the Belarusian authorities calling for full recognition and observance of basic democratic standards. The presidents called on the Minsk regime to refrain from violence and respect elementary freedoms, human, civil and minority rights and freedom of expression. This moment can undoubtedly be considered as the end of the period of 'reset' in

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<sup>81</sup> *Reset i kontynuacja. Polityka rządu PiS wobec Białorusi*, <https://www.batory.org.pl/2018/09/06/reset-i-kontynuacja-polityka-rzadu-pis-wobec-bialorusi/>(access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>82</sup> *Waszykowski: TV Bielsat nieatrakcyjna, więc może zostać zastąpiona przez TVP Polonia. Romaszewska-Guzy: To zaskakująca koncepcja*, <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/waszykowski-tv-bielsat-nieatrakcyjna-wiec-moze-zostac-zastapiona-przez-tvp-polonia-romaszewska-guzy-to-zaskakujaca-koncepcja>(access: 10.01.2021).

Polish-Belarusian relations and as a return of the Polish policy—to the fight for Belarusian society's rights and freedoms. At this new stage - a return to the policy implemented before the 'reset' - Poland faces several challenges, which may play a significant role in the relations with its eastern neighbour after a possible change of authorities in Minsk.

Forming a new EU strategy towards Belarus remains one of these challenges. The perspectives outlined by the Union and its Member States in the Eastern Partnership project undoubtedly need reform today. Furthermore, the Union's eastern neighbours now require a more individual approach. As the initiator of the Eastern Partnership idea, Poland can play a crucial role in working on a new, common EU strategy towards the east and Belarus. One of the most important initiatives in this field is creating a common EU fund to help Belarusian entrepreneurs to stabilise the Belarusian economy after a possible change of government<sup>83</sup>. This fund is part of the so-called 'Economic plan for a democratic Belarus', which the European Council has already adopted. Apart from economic aspects, it also includes the possibility of introducing visa-free travel to the EU for the citizens of Belarus<sup>84</sup>.

Warsaw would undoubtedly welcome Poland's role as a kind of EU representative in relations with Belarus (especially a democratic Belarus after a possible change of government) for several reasons. Firstly, it would open up the possibility of building a common EU eastern policy according to the Polish vision and national interests. Secondly, this fact would probably help to ease the tense relations between Warsaw and European structures and the countries of "Old Europe", strained in recent years. Also, the 'Economic plan for a democratic Belarus' could be extended to the whole of Eastern Europe and effectively replace the now obsolete Eastern Partnership.

The next challenge that Poland faced in the second half of 2020 was the question of the Polish minority's position in Belarus. Poles are the second largest ethnic minority after Russians (as

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<sup>83</sup> *Morawiecki: Fundusz dla Białorusi powinien wynosić co najmniej 1 mld euro*, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/1491182.morawiecki-plan-marshalla-fundusz-dla-bialorusi.html> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>84</sup> *Morawiecki: Polska polityka wobec Białorusi stała się polityką UE*, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/1492476.morawiecki-polska-polityka-wobec-bialorus-unia-europejska.html> (access: 10.01.2021).

of 2009, 294,500 Poles were living in Belarus<sup>85</sup>). During the period of the aforementioned 'reset', an improvement in the Polish minority and Polish organisations' conditions of functioning could be felt. For example, in 2017, the Union of Poles' headquarters in Belarus, led by Andżelika Borys and not recognised by the Belarusian authorities, was opened in Minsk<sup>86</sup>. However, the situation changed after the outbreak of post-election protests. According to A. Borys, in the period from August to the end of October 2020, various repressions affected approximately one hundred activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus, which is still unrecognised by Lukashenka<sup>87</sup>. Thus, as long as A. Lukashenka's regime remains in power in Minsk, Warsaw will have minimal possibilities of asserting Poles' rights in Belarus (especially those without Polish citizenship). After a possible change of authorities, a key element in this field would be a merger of two associations of Poles in Belarus. There have been two such groups since the Belarusian authorities did not recognise the election of A. Borys and, at a congress organised by them, led to the election of Józef Łuczniak, who was loyal to them. Therefore, the union under the leadership of Ms. Borys remains unrecognised by the government of Mr. Lukashenka. Thus, the recognition of A. Borys' association as "proper" by the new Belarusian authorities should be the first step on the road to the normalisation of Polish-Belarusian relations, which would make it possible to unite these two organisations.

After August 2020, another problem that Poland must face has emerged: how the Polish government would develop its policy towards the Belarusian minority in Poland under these new conditions. In May 2020, there were new rumours of a possible reduction in funding for Belsat TV. If Poland manifests its ambition to be an active player on the Belarusian minority it must (especially today) be surrounded by the maximum possible support from the Polish authorities. I am talking about providing further funding for Belsat TV, for scholarships for Belarusian students, and employment of Belarusian lecturers and specialists<sup>88</sup>. As long as the

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<sup>85</sup> *Reset i kontynuacja. Polityka rządu PiS wobec Białorusi*, <https://www.batory.org.pl/2018/09/06/reset-i-kontynuacja-polityka-rzadu-pis-wobec-bialorusi/> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>87</sup> *Andżelika Borys: Represje wobec działaczy Związku Polaków na Białorusi*, <https://www.tvp.info/50554399/protesty-bialorus-wybory-prezydenckie-andzelika-borys-represje-dotknely-stu-dzialaczy-zwiazku-polakow-na-bialorusi-wieszwiecej> (access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>88</sup> *TV Bielsat bez pieniędzy z budżetu państwa*, <https://www.press.pl/tresc/61686.tv-bielsat-bez-pieniedzy-z-budzetu-panstwa> (access: 10.01.2021).

Belarusian people are deprived of the possibility of safe development in their homeland, it should be in Poland's national interest to provide them with such conditions in Poland. After a possible change of government in Minsk, these people could serve as the foundation for a new quality in Poland and Belarus's relations. Our common goal would then be to ensure favourable conditions for their return to Belarus and the further development of both themselves and their country.

To sum up, Poland, together with Lithuania, is still the most active EU state in terms of its interest in contacts with Belarus. Prospects for the development of Polish-Belarusian relations and Poland's Eastern policy will largely depend on the unbroken activity of the authorities in Warsaw in this field and a desire to develop long-term relations with Belarusian civil society. The steps are taken so far allow us to look into the future with a certain degree of optimism.

*Andrzej Pukszo*

## **Lithuania**

In 1918, amid the struggle for independence, Belarusians' weekly magazine from Vilnius, *Homan*, wrote that “Minsk is the political capital of Belarus, while Vilnius remains the spiritual capital”. One hundred and two years have passed but the dilemmas are similar, and modern Lithuania's capital has once again become the centre of Belarusian aspirations for independence.

It happened on August 11, 2020, just two days after the presidential elections in Belarus, when Alyaksandr Lukashenka's main rival, Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya, crossed the Belarus-Lithuania border and found political asylum in Vilnius from the repression of A. Lukashenka's totalitarian system.

Vilnius became even more vibrant with Belarusian life. Every August and September - before the quarantine was imposed - protests were held in front of the Belarusian Embassy. Only during the funeral of the remains of Konstanty Kalinowski, Zygmunt Sierakowski, and other leaders of the January Uprising in autumn 2019, one could see such a large number of white-red-white flags in the Lithuanian capital.




Despite the holiday period, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania met for an unscheduled session. They unanimously adopted the decision not to recognise A. Lukashenka as President of the Republic of Belarus. Lithuania, along with Poland, has become the most active country in the European Union in expressing opposition to the falsification of presidential election results and human rights violations in Belarus. Soon, in the second half of August, Mrs. Tikhanouskaya appeared at a press conference, and Vilnius was regularly featured on screens, radio waves and newspaper columns of the most extensive media in the world.

Another significant symbol of Lithuania's support for Belarusian democratisation efforts - despite the epidemics and complicated sanitary conditions - was the human chain stretching from Vilnius Cathedral to Medniki Krolewskie on the border with Belarus. Its length was more than 30 km. It was organised in imitation of the Baltic Route of August 23, 1989, when the human chain connected Vilnius with Riga and Tallinn to commemorate the terrible anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Thirty years ago, this Lithuanian-Latvian-Estonian action heralded the collapse of the Soviet Union, as in six months, in March 1990, Lithuania announced the resurrection of its independence. On the same day, August 23, the Kalinowski Forum on Belarus was launched at Vilnius University, bringing together the representatives of the Belarusian opposition, Lithuanian politicians, political scientists and other experts. Anna Fotyga, Member of the European Parliament and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, headed the Polish delegation. On the same days, US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun visited Vilnius. The high American official held talks at the Government of the Republic of Lithuania and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and met with S. Tikhanouskaya. Thus, Washington sent a signal to the whole world that the United States will not be a passive observer of the processes taking place in Belarus.

Also, mainly due to the presence of S. Tikhanouskaya in Vilnius, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg paid an official visit to Lithuania (September 8). This event is essential for several reasons, including reminding Europe and the world that Scandinavian countries have always put human rights issues in the first place in their foreign policy. This will also be the case for Belarus.



President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Vilnius (28-29 September) echoed in Europe and in the Belarusian context even more. It was the visit of the head of the French Republic to Vilnius after a very long break. During the sojourn, President Macron called for dialogue with Russia. According to the French state leader, the future architecture of European security is impossible without Russia.

Then, Canadian Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne arrived in Vilnius (October 16). This was the first visit to Lithuania by the head of Canadian diplomacy in 24 years. Canada's voice in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is significant. Ottawa consistently links its foreign policy with human rights. This connection was also emphasised during the bilateral meeting with S. Tikhanouskaya.

From the enumeration of these foreign visits to Lithuania one cannot miss the arrival of the president of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, in Vilnius (November 16-17). During all the meetings - at the Presidential Palace, in the Government and the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania - representatives of both sides emphasised the priority of the unequivocal Polish-Lithuanian assistance to democratic Belarus.

We should not overlook initiatives of a different format, in addition to a political meeting. We should mention here the establishment of the so-called 'Lublin Four' in Vilnius. It was a September meeting of intellectuals from Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus's opposition in the Presidential Palace. At that time, the Lublin Four Declaration was adopted, which emphasised the unification of efforts for democratic changes, independent press and humanitarian aid for Belarus.

We should also add that a so-called Belarusian university-in-exile, the European Humanities University, operates in Vilnius. It is financially supported by Lithuania, the European Commission and the governments of individual European countries.

An important detail in the formation of Lithuania's foreign policy was the parliamentary elections in Lithuania, won by the opposition. The newly formed government (the centre-right coalition of three political parties) headed by Ingrid Šimonytė and the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gabrielius Landsbergis, has repeatedly emphasised that it will continue the

policy of the previous team regarding Belarus. He also intends to intensify the efforts for democratic changes in Belarus in European institutions.

In this context, one can count on more significant results from the part of Lithuania than from the government in Warsaw, due to Vilnius' better contacts with Brussels. Although Lithuania is a much smaller country than Poland, it has always advocated deeper integration into the European Union and cooperation with the so-called EU 'core'. The new government of the Republic of Lithuania is betting on intensifying cooperation with European institutions in Belarus.

To conclude the Lithuanian perspective analysis, let us add that Lithuania has prepared a list of high-ranking state officials in Belarus, responsible for the bloody clashes in Minsk and other cities. They will be banned from entering the Republic of Lithuania. In turn, the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior has prepared a plan to reduce barriers when crossing the border for persecuted people who would like to take refuge in the neighbouring country.

Lithuania, together with Poland, initiated the convening of an extraordinary meeting of the European Council on August 19, which adopted a declaration of non-recognition of the elections and condemned the violent crackdown on demonstrators.

Thus, tiny Lithuania plays a significant role in publicising and supporting the democratic changes in Belarus in the international arena. Both Lithuanian politicians and broad sectors of society have very clearly declared their solidarity with Belarus's persecuted people.

### **European Union**

For a long time, until the 2020 presidential election, the European Union pursued a two-track policy in Belarus - popularly known as the 'carrot and stick' approach (a similar form of European policy takes place with Azerbaijan).

On the one hand, Belarus was drawn into the Eastern Partnership Policy. Thus, there was cooperation with official Minsk, i.e. government institutions, and local governments in Belarus. In 2018-2019, border protection and migration projects were implemented. On July 1, 2020, a simplified visa regime and a readmission agreement entered into force. Discussions were held on multidimensional reforms in various fields, including the modernisation of the

Belarusian economy and public administration system, financed by EU funds. Belarus has also taken part in programmes to support study and science, including the widely known 'Erasmus' student and teacher exchange programme.

On the other hand, efforts were made to contribute to civil society's development by supporting various NGO initiatives. Since 2016, the Republic of Belarus's Government increased control over organisations receiving external funding: these grants had to be registered each time. Thus, support began to be given to individual opposition organisations unofficially.

It is crucial to distinguish six European Union instruments for NGOs support:

- Bilateral assistance programmes funded by the European Neighbourhood Instrument
- European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
- Development Instrument: support to NGOs
- European Endowment for Democracy
- Erasmus+
- Eastern Partnership multilateral cooperation (e.g. Civil Society Facility).<sup>89</sup>

We should also note at this point that the Belarusian opposition has repeatedly criticised the European Union for its ineffective support of democratic initiatives and the lack of political declarations and political will in the case of numerous human rights violations. There has also been criticism of over the lack of reaction from EU institutions to electoral fraud and the undemocratic way in which the elections were held.

One needs to point out that back in 2004, the EU banned four people of President Lukashenka's entourage from entering the EU or disposing of property in the EU, after it emerged that four of his widely known critics had disappeared under unknown circumstances in Belarus. That same year, the EU introduced an embargo on the supply of arms and the export of all technology used in the repression of Belarusian citizens.

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<sup>89</sup> E. Kaca, *Pomoc dla białoruskiego społeczeństwa obywatelskiego – wyzwania i potrzeby*, [https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Pomoc UE dla białoruskiego społeczeństwa obywatelskiego wyzwania i potrzeby](https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Pomoc%20UE%20dla%20białoruskiego%20społeczeństwa%20obywatelskiego%20wyzwania%20i%20potrzeby) (access:23.02.2020).

The package of restrictions in force within the Union was applied to 170 individuals and three companies for some time. The EU removed them on February 15, 2016 - a period of attempts to re-establish relations with A. Lukashenka. However, the embargo on the purchase of arms and technology for repressive structures was retained.

For several years (2016-2019 period), both in the west and east of the European Union, there was an opinion that cooperation should be developed, not only with representatives of the opposition but also with the official side. The EU believed that A. Lukashenka was putting his efforts to "win over" V. Putin and was one of the main guarantors of Belarusian independence. However, in the future, there are chances that he will agree to a democratic transformation of the country.

The process of registering candidates for the presidential elections and the election campaign has already shown how wrong the EU institutions were. We must add that Belarus did not admit election observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Let us also note that the newly elected European Parliament and the established European Commission have already declared, in the winter of 2020, their greater ambitions in terms of foreign policy and human rights than the leadership of the European institutions of the previous period.

Thus, when signs of falsification of election results emerged, and information about protests in major Belarusian cities arrived, EU institutions were not left on the sidelines. The European Union reacted to the events in Minsk operatively and at various levels, incomparably more actively than in 2015. Given the epidemiological situation, the EU heads of diplomacy convened a remote meeting without delay.

On August 13, the European Parliament President issued a statement in which he called for a halt to the violence against Belarus's demonstrators. Shortly afterwards, on August 19, reacting to Russia's reports, David Sassoli addressed the European Council, indicating that any foreign intervention in Belarus would not be accepted. On the same day, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the President of the European Commission,

Ursula von der Leyen, attended a remote meeting of the European Council and issued a statement on Belarus.

On September 16, during her annual address to the European Parliament, Ursula von der Leyen did not omit Belarus. She highlighted the undemocratic nature of the presidential elections and violations of human rights. One day later, this topic returned in a European Parliament declaration, in which, among other things, it was emphasised that the EP does not recognise Mr. Lukashenka as President. After four days, Ms. Tikhanouskaya was received in the European Parliament in the Foreign Affairs Committee. On October 21, the European Parliament addressed recommendations to the European Council on changing the strategy towards Belarus.

The EP's resolution to award the Andrei Sakharov Prize to the Belarusian opposition was also significant. This widely known prize is awarded every year to the most active defenders of human rights in the world. On December 16, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, presented the prize to S. Tikhanouskaya and V. Tsapkala.

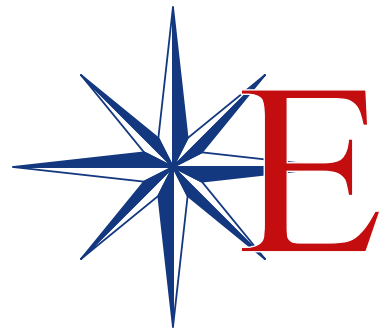
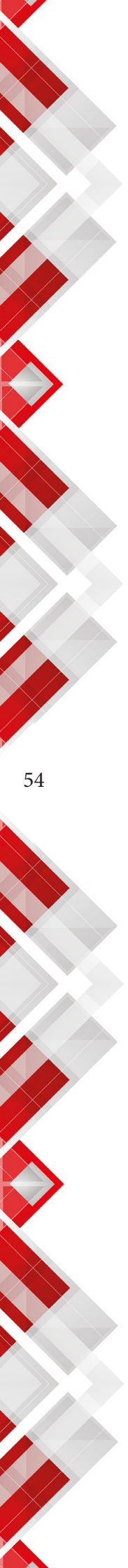
In parallel, on October 1, the EU Council declared the need to apply sanctions against Minsk. One month later, it was decided to extend the sanctions package, and on December 17, the third phase of tightening of the EU's policy towards the Belarusian authorities took place. At the end of 2020, the Union sanctioned 88 individuals and seven business entities. The sanctions list included A. Lukashenka, his son and national security advisor, Viktor Lukashenka, as well as several other individuals: representatives of the presidential administration, the government, the judicial system, the rule of law bodies, etc., who have contributed to the repression of the opposition, the media, or the ordinary demonstrators.

Individual politicians are regularly reminded that these sanctions are not enough. At the same time, there is also the opinion that this is a notable success for the EU Council, as it is not always possible to find agreement among the 27 EU countries. In September, while discussing the sanctions package against A. Lukashenka, Cyprus blocked the initiative. The Cypriot leader initially made his support dependent on the announcement of EU sanctions against Turkey.

In conclusion, we must say that the European Union has reacted as never before to the falsification of the elections in Belarus and is ready to support the democratic transformation in Belarus. It is not sure whether the EU will maintain the current level of interest in Belarus. The Union's engagement with the country is influenced not only by the pandemic situation in Europe but also by events in Russia. One can also expect specific changes in the democratisation process, which the Union is supporting. Added to this is the complicated situation in Ukraine, which is awaiting, among other things, more attention from the Union. Meanwhile, the new opening in transatlantic relations following the swearing-in of US President Joe Biden may positively impact the Union's involvement in Belarus.

**Conclusions:**

Poland and Lithuania promptly reacted to the presidential election results in Belarus. The European Union was quick to respond as never before. The Council of the Union, the European Parliament and the European Commission condemned the fraudulent presidential elections and severely criticised the use of force against demonstrators in Belarus. The EU strengthened sanctions introduced in October after two months. Against this backdrop, Ukraine's response may seem more restrained, but it is of great importance in the context of both Belarus and the whole region.





## **USA-BELARUS: HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS**

On January 9, 1961, on the eve of his swearing-in as President of the United States, John F. Kennedy spoke of an America that should be "a city on a hill". The US should serve as an example for all those who suffer above all from a lack of freedom. By recalling the New Testament words, he wanted to emphasise the United States' role in the world order. Kennedy mainly pointed out its role as a model and the guardian of the values that guided the Founding Fathers when they adopted the first modern Constitution in 1788. Through Presidents J. F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan's words, the US reminded its citizens and the world about its commitment. In previous times, this commitment had not always been pursued with pure intentions, and not always successfully, but invariably with the belief that the offer of democracy, the rule of law, free market and freedom of expression was a convincing answer to authoritarianism. How Joe Biden, sworn in as the 46th President of the United States on January 20, 2021, will shape his policy towards the populist and authoritarian rule's threats remains as yet in the realm of conjecture. Too many elements are still unknown, but two seem to be sure:

1. The US will not act unilaterally, but rather in a coalition of like-minded countries;
2. Belarus will be the first test of the US administration's intentions and effectiveness in promoting democracy globally.

### **1. Successes and failures of the mission of freedom**

After World War II, all American administrations conducted activities to weaken dictatorial regimes with more or less consequence. Simultaneously, they supported the pro-democratic movements that opposed authorities applying oppressive measures on the other. The US administrations implemented this pro-freedom attitude using a wide range of means, from decisions aimed at promoting fundamental values such as freedom of speech (radio broadcasting) to those aimed at weakening the economic and military potential of the system (individual and economic sanctions). In the diplomatic field, these measures amounted to a reduction in official relations, including the closure of foreign and own representations. The policy of expanding the area of freedom in the world brought results in the countries of the

Soviet bloc, where in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the political system changed, and free-market economies were established.

There has been less success concerning other countries considered undemocratic or even dictatorial, such as North Korea, Iran, Cuba or Venezuela. Moreover, sanctions policies, freezes in diplomatic relations and even economic blockades have limited external influence, and the ruling regimes, taking advantage of isolation, have virtually eliminated opponents from public life. US government agencies, such as USAID and NED, responsible for promoting democracy and providing material support to the opposition, have practically lost their influence.

Concerning the post-Soviet republics, the US State Department charted a different path. The assumption was that the progressing crisis of the USSR's leadership, the positive example in the neighbourhood, and the prospect of a rapid rise in the standard of living of the population, especially the elite, would induce the circles of power to embark on a path of reform. This reasoning, however short-sighted, was rational. The State Department assumed that the collapse of the Kremlin's prestige and Russia's shrinking responsiveness would be a permanent phenomenon and a natural incentive for the young republics' authorities to become independent. However, US experts did not foresee, or perhaps only underestimated, that while elites were interested in integrating post-Soviet economies into the global economic system, they were afraid of being subjected to a democratic referendum, such as free elections. Belarus was one of these countries.

## **2. A brief history of a protracted conflict**

A little more than two weeks after the collapse of the USSR, on 25 December 1991, the United States recognised Belarus' independence and, following this, established official diplomatic relations with Minsk. A month later, embassies of both countries were opened in their capitals. Contrary to Washington's expectations, however, Belarus did not follow the path of its northern and western neighbours, i.e. the Baltic States and Poland, remaining almost entirely within the sphere of influence of the newly formed Russian Federation. The abandonment of full sovereignty was influenced by the factors mentioned earlier and by the deep dependence of the Belarusian economy on the Russian market, especially in the military sector. It is also a fact that the West's ambitions did not reach beyond Poland's borders. The inclusion of Poland, the Baltic states, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the political, economic,

and military structures of NATO and the European Union was regarded as a border that could directly lead to an open conflict with Moscow.

Moreover, the West did not propose to Minsk a sufficiently attractive offer of political and economic support. Belarus was not even offered something on the level of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which the US, France and the UK guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in exchange for giving up to and dismantling its nuclear arsenal. Twenty years later, although the agreement was empty and the guarantees unprovable, it was concluded that it represented an essential step towards Kyiv's independence.

Belarus, significantly smaller, less populated and altogether little known in the West, did not have such an opportunity. After Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power in the same year, it abandoned its earlier aspirations for independence in favour of closer ties with the Russian Federation and of strengthening the role of its first authority only, namely the President.

Successive US administrations - democratic and republican - reacted to the multiplying abuses of power, human rights violations and persecution of opposition politicians by intensifying criticism and providing modest, mainly political, support to the Belarusian opposition. The US did so without conviction, assuming that Belarus functions as a permanent part of the Russian security system. The political system prevailing there, based on the Soviet model, is a derivative of this state. The 'Belarus Democracy Act' passed by both chambers of Congress and signed by President George W. H. Bush in October 2004 changed the situation to some extent. The US authorities declared their support for NGOs and free media to promote democracy and human rights in Belarus. A crisis in US-Belarusian relations occurred only in 2008, when the Belarusian authorities, responding to sanctions against, among others, the state-owned oil company Belneftekhim, withdrew their representative in Washington, which in turn led to the recall of the US ambassador in Minsk.

Over the next two years, the United States focused on monitoring the domestic situation in Belarus, responding with appeasement gestures of previously imposed restrictions to Mr. Lukashenka's displays of goodwill. By 2010, i.e. the next presidential election, most sanctions had been lifted. Washington conducted the policy of encouraging the liberalisation of the system in close coordination with the European Union, which resulted in a uniform and consistent position adopted by the entire West.

Hopes for gradual change in Belarus, including recognition by the authorities of the legitimacy of the opposition's activities, have been crushed by the election campaign and by violations of the primary international principles that define free elections, as confirmed by OSCE observers. Cases of intimidation and extortion were reported, as well as the complete lack of access to the media for A. Lukashenka's opponents, and finally, acts of falsification of the results. Opposition protesters were subjected to repression, and many demonstrators were beaten and arrested. In January 2011, in a coordinated move, the EU and the US reinstated sanctions on some companies considered key to Lukashenka's regime; besides, they introduced restrictions on entry into the EU and the US for some of the highest state dignitaries, considered responsible for the use of terror against civil society<sup>90</sup>. As in previous cases, the primary source of action in defence of the democratic opposition in Belarus came from the House of Representatives, where Congressman Christopher Smith initiated a new declaration. In January 2012, President Barack Obama signed an act that obliged the State Department to monitor Minsk's arms sales to embargoed countries and contact the International Ice Hockey Federation to deprive Belarus of the right to host the world championships, planned for 2014. Above all, the document called on the Belarusian authorities to repeat the elections on an equal and transparent basis.

### **3. Donald Trump's lukewarm water**

President D. Trump's opinions, as he took his seat in the White House in January 2017, expressed mainly through online messaging but also in official statements from the Press Office, left no doubt: the United States was not going to continue behaving as the primary reviewer and opponent of authoritarian regimes. Isolationism was coming back into fashion. Yes, the US wanted to remain a centre of influence, but more in a declarative than in a practical sense. The Trump administration instrumentalised its mission of spreading and strengthening constitutional principles of governance, subordinating it almost entirely to political goals. Actions supporting opposition circles or obstructing authoritarian systems have been treated in a utilitarian way, as a helpful propaganda element of confrontation in the broader context of struggles for influence and domination. This approach was applied to countries such as Cuba, Venezuela and Iran. Concerning post-Soviet countries, US diplomacy's attitude was far less firm and subordinated to the pursuit of a non-confrontational policy towards Russia. The only

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<sup>90</sup> *Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns. EveryCRSReport, 12.02. 2013. [www.everycrsreport.com](http://www.everycrsreport.com)*, (access: 23.02.2020).

exception was the decision to provide lethal weapons to the armed forces of Ukraine, which occurred mainly on the initiative of and under the pressure from the US Congress.

Belarus generally did not arouse emotions among the American political elite, except for a few politicians who had already established contacts with the Belarusian opposition and had a chance to see for themselves how A. Lukashenka's "democracy" functions. For most Americans, if it evoked any associations, Belarus was a post-Soviet land and a fossil not worthy of much interest. Situated on the other side of the world, where hockey is played well, it evoked somewhat positive associations. The Belarusian diaspora in the USA, relatively small and scattered, could not influence American politics and create an image of a country worth investing in economically and, above all, politically. For Trump's strategists, Belarus' road to democracy seemed long and without any real chance of a positive outcome; leaving in power A. Lukashenka, who occasionally sent friendly gestures to the West, was the optimal solution, especially given other conflicts of higher priority, such as the confrontation with China or Iran. Both embassies in Washington and Minsk operated at a reduced level and with limited staff. Belarus and the US kept their contacts at a low level and with low intensity. In this situation, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's unexpected first visit to Minsk in 26 years in February 2020 and the accompanying friendly atmosphere caused consternation not only in the US media but also among politicians, including Republican ones. The head of US diplomacy's words resonated particularly strongly: "Belarus does not have to choose between Russia and the US". There were also assurances that the United States is ready to support A. Lukashenka's efforts to achieve full sovereignty and independence from Russia. M. Pompeo also promised the return of the American ambassador to Minsk and the possibility of oil and gas supplies<sup>91</sup>. He did not raise the issues of democracy, human rights or persecution of the Belarusian opposition. The narrow range of talks between Pompeo and Lukashenka confirmed that US diplomacy assumes a scenario of top-down changes in Belarus's functioning, effectively dragging it towards the West without disturbing the power structure. Economic successes were to be an incentive, e.g. a chance to diversify the supply of energy resources and access to loans. The strategy of pardoning and diluting dictatorial regimes by maintaining relations and allowing economic benefits was nothing new. In essence, a similar

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<sup>91</sup> M. Lee, *Pompeo says US can supply Belarus with 100% of oil, gas*. 1.02.2020. [www.APNews.com](http://www.APNews.com), (access: 23.02.2020).

policy was pursued by Barack Obama, restoring diplomatic relations without conditions with Cuba and hoping for a gradual softening of the regime. But it was Donald Trump who nullified this idea under the banner of fidelity to the principles of democratic state policy towards autocrats. At that time, however, the lobby of Cuban émigrés, implacable enemies of communist Cuba and at the same time influential in the Republican Party in Florida, was active in the electoral struggle. Americans of Belarusian origin did not have such opportunities.

In an analysis published on the eve of the election by GMF and the Italian Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, Nicolas Bouchet wrote: "Barring a significant deepening of the political and security crisis, the Trump administration is likely to limit itself to issuing a critical statement, slightly tightening the sanctions screw, and leaving it to the next team to resolve the issue of long-term relations with Belarus"<sup>92</sup>.

#### **4. The twilight of hope**

The falsified presidential election on August 9, 2020, and especially the shocking scale of repression against the opposition, changed everything. The brutal scenes of the crackdown on demonstrators fell on fertile ground in America, where the last round of the fierce and evenly matched race to the White House was taking place. The European Union, the OSCE and the State Department have unanimously declared that they will not recognise the elections' result. Belarus's situation turned out to be the first opportunity in Trump's term to remind the community of the EU and the US's interests. At a press conference crowning a visit to Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Austria last September, Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun said: "We are working closely with our transatlantic partners, including on setting new, effective sanctions that target those responsible for human rights abuses and repression in Belarus". This was a change, but not a breakthrough.

While the authorities' unacceptable interference in the electoral process was not surprising in itself, the size of the social protests and the emergence of organised democratic opposition leadership was astonishing indeed. In the face of the protesters' massive and brutal repression,

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<sup>92</sup> N. Bouchet, *The Wheel May be About to Turn (Again) in US – Belarus Relations*. 6.08.2020. [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org), (access: 23.02.2020).

the West, including the US, could not remain indifferent. The dissatisfaction expressed in statements by the White House did not mean that the US President was prepared to take strict measures, even by freezing bank accounts. The White House decided to follow the old “wait and see” principle. The prevailing conviction was that a too decisive incursion into Putin's hard sphere of Russia's influence would definitively block the possibility of dialogue with Moscow after Donald Trump's expected re-election. The appointment of a US ambassador to Minsk was a symbolic gesture of restraint, as announced by Secretary of State Pompeo.

As usual, the battleground in this matter became the US Senate, part of which believed that raising the profile of relations would signal acceptance of A. Lukashenka's dictatorial methods and the Belarusian political system in general. The primary opponent, and at the same time an exponent of the Democrats' position, became the former chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Chris Murphy. He announced: "By sending an ambassador to Minsk right now, for the first time in over a decade, we are making it clear that the United States accepts what is happening. I am prepared to oppose the nomination in the Foreign Relations Committee unless the President withdraws his request"<sup>93</sup>.

Predictions that the street protests in Belarus would last at most a week or two, after which everything would return to normal, turned out to be wrong. In response to the brutality of the forces of law, order and attempts to silence the opposition leader, Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya, employing blackmail, there were further demonstrations and further mass repressions. Even in the prevailing conditions of the COVID- 19 pandemic, foreign countries could no longer remain passive. On October 2 the EU introduced sanctions against 40 senior representatives of the Belarusian authorities. The UK and Canada followed Brussels, and finally, the US, increasing the number of banned dignitaries from 16 to 24. The entire West unanimously refused to recognise A. Lukashenka as the President of Belarus. As the Atlantic Council stressed, unlike the US, the European sanctions model did not include the dictator himself, leaving open the possibility of communication and possible negotiations<sup>94</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> R. Gramer, A. Mackinnon, *The U.S. Was to Send an Ambassador to Belarus. Then Came the Crackdown*. *Foreign Policy* 12.08.2020. [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com) ), (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>94</sup> A. Aslund, *The West finally imposes sanctions on Belarus*. 6.10.2020, Atlantic Council, [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org), (access: 23.02.2020).

At the same time, a fierce electoral campaign was underway in America, which, while resulting in a settlement in favour of the Democratic candidate, at the same time brought confusion and uncertainty as to the clout of the White House and the future of American foreign policy in general. While public opinion in the US was focused on the pandemic disaster and the debate surrounding the approval of Joe Biden's victory by the Congress, Donald Trump decided to remind his citizens and the world that he remains an unwavering champion of democracy and an enemy of authoritarian regimes. On December 23, 2020, the Secretaries of State and Treasury, Mike Pompeo and Steven Mnuchin, simultaneously announced a new 39-person list of individuals involved in the Belarusian elections' rigging, included a ban on entry to the US and a freeze on funds held in the US financial institutions.

### **5. Joe Biden- the return to the politics of values**

On January 20, 2021, Joseph R. Biden was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States. His exhausting and challenging election campaign, not least because of the pandemic, was subordinated to two slogans: a return to the importance of truth and a return to the values underpinning the USA's foundation, namely democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In the context of social and racial tensions in America itself, these issues were becoming part of the domestic situation and not exclusively foreign, as it was before. Despite this, Mr Biden's first statement on the situation in Belarus came just two days after the rigged elections:

"Democracies are built on the simple principle that citizens have the right to choose their leaders, and their vote counts when the future of their country is decided", the Democratic presidential candidate wrote in a statement published on 11 August. "After 26 years of repression by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime, the people of Belarus are demanding to be heard".

"After a fraudulent election, the peaceful protests of citizens demanding a fair vote count are now being met by riot police, who are using rocket-propelled grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets against the demonstrators. (...) These are not the actions of a political leader who is genuinely convinced of his electoral victory. (...) I am with those calling for a fair, accurate vote count and the release of political prisoners. I call on President Lukashenko to respect the right to peaceful protest and to refrain from violence. My administration will never retract its support for democratic principles and human rights. Together with our democratic allies and partners, we will speak with one voice calling for these values to be respected."



Mr. Biden's words were all the more striking given that his rival, Donald Trump, has shown far-reaching restraint on this issue. A limitation, we should add - the sources of which can only be speculated upon.

A week later, on August 19., commenting on further beatings and detentions of opposition figures in Minsk, Joe Biden added: "The brave citizens of Belarus are showing that terror and torture will not silence their voices. The United States should support Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya in her call for fair elections. Russia should be urged not to interfere. This is not about geopolitics; it is about the right to choose a leader."

These are only two of many statements made by Mr. Biden during the election campaign referring to Belarus's situation. There is no doubt that the future President wanted to show that, even in the face of a political system crisis in a country of relatively low importance for American politics, he will uphold principles that bring back the best US traditions. Actions towards Belarus and A. Lukashenka will be a clear signal as to how the declared return to a policy of values will translate into specific action, that will not be a duplication of existing patterns.

Among the many emerging analyses and recommendations for the new President and his administration concerning foreign policy, a particularly noteworthy one is the insightful Atlantic Council report by four prominent experts: the previously cited Anders Aslund, Melinda Haring, John E. Herbst and former NATO Deputy Secretary-General Alexander Vershbow.

Apart from an in-depth study of Belarus's internal situation, the role of the democratic opposition and the support given by the neighbouring countries, the report presents an interesting analysis of Moscow's attitude. The report concluded that, on the one hand, the Kremlin discouraged A. Lukashenka from undertaking any dialogue with the opposition and probably encouraged a brutal crackdown on the opposition, and on the other, it refrained from giving unequivocal support to the Belarusian dictator. In the language of politics, this may mean creating a negotiating field where there is space for limited change and reform of the system in Belarus, including getting rid of A. Lukashenka - a symbol of terror and stagnation.

Like many analysts, the AC report authors suggest strengthening the pressure by extending sanctions - a well-known measure, repeatedly used and so often ineffective in a global world where borders are increasingly less constraining. The demand for an early (the 100-day deadline seems to be an exaggeration) meeting between J. Biden and S. Tikhanouskaya, on the other hand, appears legitimate and realistic, given the fact that the support provided by the administration of D. Trump was negligible.

In the current situation, material support for opposition circles in Belarus remains essential. The scale of repression and the practical lack of local, independent funding sources are making it increasingly difficult to carry out any opposition activity.

The new US administration seems ready to take up the challenge of freedom and sovereignty for Belarus. Still, it will not do so through unilateral action but close cooperation with the European Union. Instead of the previous administration's reactive gestures towards Brussels' decisions, we should expect a unified position and coordination. Biden confirmed the seriousness of his declarations made during the election campaign through the appointments to key posts in the area of foreign and security policy. Without exception, all those nominated or already confirmed have a long history of experience supporting the rule of law, gender equality, dialogue and building international support.

Instead of a conclusion, it is worth posing two questions, one of which we already know the answer to:

- Can Belarus count on the support from the United States? Certainly yes, and cooperation with the EU and the diplomatic skills of the new Biden team may prove decisive here;
- Will this bring an end to tyranny and freedom of choice for Belarus? We do not know, but if you want to win, you have to believe that this will happen.

## ***BRAIN DRAIN - SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES FOR BELARUS***

The International Organization for Migration defines "brain drain" as "the loss of human capital in a particular occupation or economic sector resulting from the emigration of skilled workers employed in that occupation or sector from their country of origin to another country (or from one region of the country to another - internal migration)"<sup>95</sup>.

Internal factors causing the so-called "brain drain" from Belarus in 2020 and early 2021 include:

1. **The political crisis, which has been the greatest for many years and is still deepening**, has resulted in permanent mass protests against the illegitimate rule of A. Lukashenka, the use of violence and rape against protesters and harassment based on political views. The presented consequences of the political crisis have an impact on mass dismissals or harassment in the workplace. The most vulnerable professional groups are doctors, university employees and university lecturers, or members of strike committees at workplaces. Owners and employees of service companies are persecuted, e.g. shops selling national historical symbols or the IT industry (the PandaDoc case), students and various youth groups are expelled from universities.

Harassment at the narrative level started even before the presidential elections on August 9, 2020. A. Lukashenka's rhetoric, which has directly impacted the flight of skilled labour from the country, became radicalised, especially after protests began. It affected Belarusian society as a whole, but certain groups were (and are) singled out by the ruling elite - such was the case with doctors' departure, among others. On 5 November 2020, A. Lukashenka ordered not to let back into Belarus those citizens who left during the pandemic and called to "not let into the country not only people with foreign passports but also those "wise" Belarusians who left

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<sup>95</sup> *Glossary on Migration. International Organization for Migration (IOM). Geneva 2019. [publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml\\_34\\_glossary.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf) (access: 07.01.2021).*

our country at this difficult time"<sup>96</sup>. Another professional group is comprises the workers of the Belarusian IT sector. In Belarus's case, the economy will feel the gradual 'loss' of this critically crucial professional group very shortly and in a very measurable way. The propaganda narrative, suggesting that IT personnel's flight will not affect the Belarusian economy's condition, is an ill-prepared and mismanaged hoax. According to specialists, the departure of one highly qualified IT employee usually involves the transfer of additional 5-7 jobs abroad.

**2. Deteriorating economic situation and falling quality of life** for most Belarusians. The deterioration results from tax increases at the beginning of 2021, including a tax on the income of residents of the High Technology Park (HSTP) or mobile communication operators' revenue. The Belarusian authorities' corresponding policy has led to the transfer of entire companies (the so-called relocation) to other countries, including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine. According to the Minister of Economy and Innovation of Lithuania, Aushrine Armonaite, at the beginning of 2021, more than 60 Belarusian companies were negotiating relocation to Lithuania<sup>97</sup>.

**3. The growing sense of instability among the population.** The combination of two major crises which Belarus experienced in 2020 - the so-called 'Corona-crisis' and the social and political turmoil after August 9 - has primarily contributed to growing uncertainty about the future and to the decline of trust in the state, which is unable to meet its essential obligations towards its citizens. This process affected not only politically conscious and socially active Belarusians but also all the so-called 'ordinary citizens', i.e. the previously non-political part of Belarusian society.

**4. Closure of land borders** for outgoing Belarusian citizens (officially due to the coronavirus) - restriction of movement across borders, in force since 29 October 2020 - meant, in fact, closure of borders for Belarusian citizens and foreigners with a permit for temporary or permanent residence in Belarus<sup>98</sup>. It is important to note that no (even preliminary) date was set to lift the relevant restrictions. The decision does not cover Russia-Belarus border (although Russia's epidemic situation is no better than in Poland,

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<sup>96</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/belorusy-ne-mogut-vernutsja-v-stranu-iz-za-prikaza-lukashenko-jeto-zakonno/a-55519202> (access: 28.01.21).

<sup>97</sup> *Более 60 компаний из Беларуси ведут переговоры о переезде в Литву* – Минэкономікі <https://interfax.by/news/biznes/businesses/1289721/> (access: 28.01.21).

<sup>98</sup> Постановление Совета Министров от 7 декабря 2020 г. № 705 (внесены изменения в постановления Совета Министров от 8 апреля 2020 г. № 208 и от 30 октября 2020 г. № 624). (Access: 18.01.21).

Ukraine, Lithuania or Latvia) and does not apply to airports. According to the decision, it is forbidden for Belarusian citizens and persons entitled to come more often than once in six months, even for work or study abroad. We can speak of the following characteristics of a police state: restrictions on freedom of movement (which is one of the fundamental human rights), preventing those who work abroad from returning home and making it difficult for those who want to find better employment or do business abroad, including doctors and IT specialists critical of the regime, to leave. This measure is also aimed at hindering contacts between the political opposition and circles operating abroad<sup>99</sup>. Closing the borders and restricting movement is an incentive to leave the country as soon as possible and while it is still possible.

The departure of victims of repression from the country also risks spreading information about the current situation of human rights violations in Belarus and, in the future, threatens to bring to justice those responsible for the repression. Lithuanian Prosecutor General Evaldas Pašilis announced on December 9, 2020 the initiation of a pre-trial investigation into the possible use of torture in Belarus, which is considered a crime against humanity<sup>100</sup>.

An essential factor stimulating the departure of highly qualified workers from Belarus is the creation of conditions that attract highly skilled immigrants in neighbouring countries. Such measures are mainly aimed at supporting individuals and enterprises that are victims of repression. In Poland, in the autumn of 2020, the programme "Poland. Business Harbour" was launched. It is described as "a complementary set of tools and services to promote building the success of Belarusians on the Republic of Poland's territory, based on knowledge, modern standards and close trade relations with neighbours and the world". The programme "Poland. Business Harbour" facilitates IT specialists, start-ups, small and medium entrepreneurs and large companies to relocate to Poland's territory. The programme is coordinated by the

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<sup>99</sup> P. Żochowski, *Zamknięte granice Białorusi*, Analizy OSW, 14.12.2020,

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-12-14/zamkniete-granice-bialorus>, (access: 20.02.21).

<sup>100</sup> After being brutally beaten by militiamen on October 13, 2020, businessman M. Khoroshin was forced to leave Belarus and turned to Lithuanian prosecutors. "The circumstances of the event indicated by the testifier and other data, which were provided to the prosecutor's office, were assessed as having the characteristics of a crime to which universal jurisdiction is applied in accordance with the Penal code of Lithuania », See: Litwa: Prokuratura wszczęła dochodzenie w sprawie represji na Białorusi. Cichanouska apeluje do innych krajów UE o podobne działania. <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/polityka-zagraniczna-ue/news/litwa-prokuratura-wszczela-dochodzenie-w-sprawie-represji-na-bialorusi-cichanouska-apeluje-o-podobne-dzialania-do-innych-krajow-ue/> (access: 20.02.21).

Ministry of Development and the Polish Investment and Trade Agency, in cooperation with GovTech Poland at the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development and the Startup Hub Poland Foundation<sup>101</sup>. The Polish Hotel Holding has also joined the programme<sup>102</sup>. The Software Development Association Poland (SODA) and the Polish Chamber of Information Technology and Telecommunications (PIIT) also participate in the project.

Individuals with an engineering degree or with experience in the IT industry can also benefit from this programme. Thanks to it, they will have access to a facilitated visa procedure and will be able to take advantage of job opportunities<sup>103</sup>. By October 18, 2020 119 people came to Poland as part of “Poland Business Harbour” programme and over 950 have been granted visas of the appropriate type<sup>104</sup>.

Following the start of protests in Belarus, well-known Belarusian companies such as Epm Systems, Wargaming, Flo Health, Coherent Solutions, Godel Technologies have announced plans to relocate to Lithuania. The head of the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency in Lithuania, Investuok Lietuvoje, Mantas Katinas, said that choosing Lithuania by well-known developers of smartphone gaming applications, such as Wargaming, gives hope for significant development of this industry in the country<sup>105</sup>. Ukraine has also offered assistance on relocation from Belarus to both IT business and qualified people<sup>106</sup>.

In September 2020, the Polish government also pledged support for Belarusians and announced the “Protection. Openness. Solidarity” programme, which includes assistance for repressed people, scholarship programmes for students and scientists expelled from Belarusian universities due to the persecution<sup>107</sup>. Polish universities, where Belarusians

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<sup>101</sup> <https://emn.gov.pl/esm/aktualnosci/15779.Poland-Business-Harbour-rusza-program-polskiego-rzadu-dla-przedsiębiorczych-Bial.html> (access: 20.01.21).

<sup>102</sup> <https://www.wnp.pl/rynki-zagraniczne/polski-holding-hotelowy-dolaczyl-do-rzadowego-programu-wspierajacego-bialoruskich-specjalistow,432270.html> (access: 20.01.21).

<sup>103</sup> <https://emn.gov.pl/esm/aktualnosci/15779.Poland-Business-Harbour-rusza-program-polskiego-rzadu-dla-przedsiębiorczych-Bial.html> (access: 20.01.21).

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C739927%2Cdo-polski-przyjechalo-ponad-siedmiuset-bialorusinow-ktorzy-skorzystali-z> (access: 22.01.21).

<sup>105</sup> *Более 60 компаний из Беларуси ведут переговоры о переезде в Литву*, Минэкономікі, <https://interfax.by/news/biznes/businesses/1289721/> (access: 20.02.21).

<sup>106</sup> <https://belaroustoukraine.com/en> (access: 20.02.21).

<sup>107</sup> <https://worksol.pl/pl/polska-przyjmie-uciekajacych-z-kraju-bia-orusin-w-i-da-prac/> (access:20.02.21).

constitute the second-largest group of international students, have also offered support to students from Belarus. The National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA), within the framework of the governmental initiative "Solidarity with Belarus", launches three activities to support students, scientists and teachers from Belarus: "Solidarity with Students", "Solidarity with Scientists", "Solidarity with Teachers". Universities also support Belarusians through their initiatives (e.g. Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Wrocław University of Technology, the University of Silesia in Katowice, University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów)<sup>108</sup>.

According to information provided by the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration, 707 Belarusians, among others, holding humanitarian visas entered Poland between August 18 and October 18, 2020. By October 18, 2020, 399 holders of humanitarian visas entered Poland. Still, many more visas of this type were issued. 170 Belarusians applied for international protection on the Republic of Poland territory, 74 persons declared to submit such an application, and 64 persons received an individual permit of entry from the Border Guard commander<sup>109</sup>. By December 1, 2020, the number of persons entering the Republic of Poland and declaring the need to obtain protection on its territory increased to over 1,200 persons, including about 800 people who entered with humanitarian visas<sup>110</sup>. As of January 4, 2021, 779 citizens of Belarus were allowed to enter Lithuania on humanitarian grounds, 355 of which have already arrived in Lithuania, and 76 have applied for asylum<sup>111</sup>.

According to information from the Office for Foreigners, Belarusian citizens come to Poland mainly based on visas, and then they obtain temporary residence permits or permanent residence permits. In 2020, 63% of Belarusians received temporary residence permits related to work, 22% based on family reunification and about 5% due to studies. In 2020, more than 13,500 applications for temporary residence, permanent residence and long-term EU resident permits were submitted by Belarusian citizens in Poland, of which 8,100 were for temporary residence, including 4,000 more applications after August 9 (for comparison: about 4,000 applications were submitted in 2017, 6,500 in 2019).

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<sup>108</sup> <https://nawa.gov.pl/nawa/aktualnosci/polskie-uczelnie-pomagaja-studentom-z-bialorusi> (access:23.02.20).

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C739927%2Cdo-polski-przyjechalo-ponad-siedmiuset-bialorusinow-ktorzy-skorzystali-z> (access:23.02.20).

<sup>110</sup> <https://tvn24.pl/biznes/z-kraju/zmiany-w-zezwoleniach-na-prace-skorzystaja-bialorusini-4765170> (access:23.02.20).

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.radio.bialystok.pl/bialorus/index/id/194645> (access:23.02.20).

Regarding other grounds for residence on Poland's territory, in 2017-2019, about 40 Belarusian citizens applied for international protection annually. In 2020, until the end of July, the applications of Belarusians concerned 30 people. From the beginning of August to the end of the year the situation changed, the number increased to 375 people. During 2020, Poland received 405 Belarusian citizens applying for international protection.

In 2017-2020, 271 decisions were issued in international protection cases against Belarusian citizens, including 22 persons granted refugee status, 79 granted subsidiary protection and 2 permits for tolerated stay. In 2020, 131 decisions were issued (including 8 giving the refugee status and 79 granting subsidiary protection). All substantive decisions issued on Belarusian citizens who applied for international protection after 9 August 2020 were positive.

In political asylum cases, Belarusians submit an average of 2 applications each year<sup>112</sup>. In 2020, 5 asylum applications were received<sup>113</sup>.

Even though the procedure for issuing a visa for humanitarian reasons is simplified, holders of this type of visa usually have many problems:

- difficulties in crossing the border again,
- problems of legal employment,
- they may find it difficult to obtain other types of visas in the future,
- they may be subjected to strict control by the Belarusian border guards and special services when leaving Belarus with this type of visa<sup>114</sup>.

Poland has made changes to its legislation on foreigners to ease the situation. From December, 1 2020, holders of humanitarian visas can take up employment in Poland<sup>115</sup>. As Tomas Bogdevic, CEO of employment agency Gremi Personal, notes: "Since the beginning of the mass protests in Belarus, we have observed an increase in interest in employment in

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<sup>112</sup> A form of protection issued under the Polish Constitution.

<sup>113</sup> *Raport Urzędu do spraw cudzoziemców na temat obywateli Białorusi (wg stanu na 31 grudnia 2020 r.)*, <https://udsc.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/RAPORT-NA-TEMAT-OBYWATELI-BIALORUSI.pdf>, (access: 28.01.21).

<sup>114</sup> <https://worksol.pl/pl/polska-przyjmie-uciekajacych-z-kraju-bia-orusin-w-i-da-prac/> (access: 28.01.21).

<sup>115</sup> Ustawa o cudzoziemcach z dnia 12 grudnia 2013 r. (2020). Dz. U. 1990 Nr 78 poz. 462 (t.j. Dz. U. z 2020 r. poz. 35, 2023).



Poland from citizens of that country. However, only in the last month, the number of applications has increased about ten times. At the moment, 20 per cent of applicants have humanitarian visas, and this number is constantly growing. Soon, we can foresee a steady increase in the number of Belarusian citizens who will seek employment in Poland". Such<sup>116</sup> a situation makes it easier for Belarusian citizens to stay in Poland, but the problem of returning to their home country remains. Besides, holders of humanitarian visas are often forced to leave their country and, at the same time, are not prepared to live in another country and take up employment in their profession because, for example, they do not know the language. In this case, even highly qualified people cannot get a job appropriate to their qualifications.

On December 4, 2020 a decision taken by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania entered into force: it provided for the possibility to issue free Lithuanian national visas to Belarusians persecuted by the regime. The exemption will apply to Belarusian citizens only if the application for a national visa is confirmed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania as being made for specific humanitarian reasons or meeting the objectives of development cooperation, foreign policy or national security<sup>117</sup>.

It should be added that soon, the 'brain drain' will affect the IT industry and ordinary workers. This flight will be not due to political reasons but to worsening living standards and increasingly palpable social instability. Due to the uncertainty about the future economic situation, more and more currently prosperous businesses will be faced with the decision of whether it would be safe to relocate to neighbouring countries.

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<sup>116</sup> *Medycy i informatycy z Białorusi mogą zmienić układ sił na rynku pracy?* (dostęp: 19.11.2020) <https://www.pulshr.pl/praca-tymczasowa/medycy-i-informatycy-z-bialorusi-moga-zmienic-uklad-sil-na-rynku-pracy,77894.html> (access: 20.02.21)

<sup>117</sup> <https://migracija.lrv.lt/en/news/changes-introduced-in-state-fee-rules-applicable-for-citizens-of-belarus> (access: 20.02.21)

## What could be the consequences of this process for the state and society?

Adverse effects include:

- **Economic effects:** they consist of hindering and "freezing" economic development due to skilled workers' departure, reducing foreign investment, "wasting" public funds invested in higher education and drying up taxable income sources<sup>118</sup>.
- **Demographic consequences:** Departure of citizens aged 20-40, who are the most economically active, depriving them of significant human resources<sup>119</sup>. People who leave do not always have the opportunity to confirm their professional qualifications (due to lack of knowledge of the country of residence's language, among other reasons). Immigrants are forced to work in jobs that do not require high qualifications.
- **Political consequences:** may cause a decrease in protest activity as the authorities persecute the most active participants, which are in detention, in prison or are forced to leave the country. On the other hand, the protests have been decentralised from the very beginning. After the dispatch of opposition activists from the state in August 2020, they have gained strength due to the authorities' activities. The authorities' attempt to disseminate in the media a negative image of the opposition's representatives – as people receiving money from foreign „sponsors” - also failed to bring the intended results. After 2020, the vast majority of Belarusian society no longer trusts the state on an institutional level, even less so the state media's official narrative.

Recently, only the negative portrayal of the effects of highly skilled workers' emigration from their country of origin has been partially challenged both by researchers of the phenomenon, analysts and by practitioners (business people themselves, economists, etc.): they highlight not only the challenges of offering employment to these workers at home pointed out, but also the positive impact of migration through "brain circulation", transit of knowledge and technology<sup>120</sup>. As a result, a more acceptable framework for discussing labour mobility has been established around the concept of "skills": skills development, matching, recognition and

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<sup>118</sup> S. Castles, M. J. Miller, *Migracje we współczesnym świecie*, Warsaw 2011, p.91.

<sup>119</sup> Ibidem, p. 89

<sup>120</sup> See: S. Castles, M. J. Miller, *Migracje we współczesnym świecie*, Warszawa 2011, p. 89; G. Gamaty, *Management of the brain drain and its relationship with democratisation and human development in Libya*, PhD thesis, London 2012.

transfer<sup>121</sup>. Examples include India and Taiwan, which experienced a significant outflow of skilled citizens in the 1950s and 1960s-70s. To counter this effect, governments applied policies to attract their citizens back from the US. The returnees, in turn, contributed to the rapid development of India's IT sector and Taiwan's high-tech industry.

In our opinion, a similar experience could be applied in Belarus in the future because the IT industry is already at a very high level, and the departure of its employees is not voluntary. Without any question, the representatives of the IT and other sectors, returning home with new experience and professional contacts – also favoured by an appropriate economic and tax policy, as well as by changes in the investment climate - will positively affect the future.

When analysing the possible positive effects of the migration of skilled workers from Belarus, one should note that we are witnessing an unprecedented multi-level activation of the Belarusian diaspora. Actions of solidarity with Belarusians fighting for freedom and democratic changes organised worldwide in 2020 and at the beginning of 2021 contribute to raising awareness and knowledge of citizens and governments of other countries about the political crisis and human rights violations in Belarus. Diaspora is systematically lobbying the EU's authorities and the USA, on adopting decisions on the introduction of sanctions against individuals and companies associated with them<sup>122</sup>. The activity of new political and social leaders in the international arena, S. Tikhanouskaya and P. Latushka, proves that the contemporary, democratic Belarus can be a much better actor in global dialogue and that its people fight for values and human rights. The initiation of proceedings in cases of torture and inhumane treatment of political prisoners by officials of an illegitimate power is also a result of the emigrants' activities. The priority is to hold accountable all the people who contributed

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<sup>121</sup> *Glossary on Migration*, vol. 34, International Organization for Migration, Geneva 2019, p.22.

<sup>122</sup> On November 6, 2020, in view of the gravity of the situation in Belarus, the Council (which Council) adopted Implementing Decision 2020/1650 (3), by which measures (which) were imposed on Mr. Lukashenko and 14 other persons, including persons close to him. On November 19, 2020 The Council decided to prepare further sanctions in response to the brutal methods employed by the Belarusian authorities and in support of the democratic rights of the Belarusian people. In view of the continued repression of civil society in Belarus, 29 persons and 7 entities should be added to the list of natural and legal persons, entities and bodies subject to restrictive measures as set out in the Annex to Decision 2012/642/CFSP (Council Executive Decision 2020/2130 of December 17 2020 r. on decision 2012/642/WPZiB concerning restrictive measures against Belarus(<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L:2020:426I:FULL&from=EN>) (access: 19.01.21) See Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/8438>) (access: 20.02.21).

to the killings, brutal detentions and torture, as well as to sentence those who participated in the so-called unsanctioned mass actions, falsification of election results in August 2020, etc.

An essential dimension of the positive effects of the “brain drain” from Belarus in 2020 is the sustainability of political activation internationally and within the country. Let us remember that the activity of new political leaders would not be possible from Belarus' territory itself. It would also not be possible to implement socially important solidarity and self-help initiatives. First of all, I mean such initiatives and campaigns as #BY\_help or BY SOL<sup>123</sup>. Thanks to such solidarity campaigns, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have not come out to participate in peaceful actions of protest. However, they know that they will not be left without help in case of repressions by the authorities (both political and economic).

Also, in the information dimension, coordinating the protests themselves and informing the international community about what is happening in the country would not be possible from within Belarus. An actual example of such activity's importance can be seen in some of the channels in internet messengers<sup>124</sup>. At the peak of the protest activation after August 9, 2020, when the Belarusian authorities decided to limit the network activity ('turn off the Internet'), some of the channels took on the role of protest coordination centres. By using, among other things, mirroring technologies and VPNs, they managed to circumvent the authorities' restrictions. Conducting similar activities, which turned out to be a critically important part of the Belarusian protest infrastructure as a social, political and economic phenomenon, would not have been possible in Belarus itself.

In the long term, the return to Belarus of qualified personnel with new experience and professional contacts abroad will help to create the conditions not only for the development of technology and enterprises but also a background of change in the approach to education at universities, in the structure of the state and local administration. The transition of power, reforms of administrative systems at all levels, and decentralisation will be possible with returnees' relevant experience. An excellent example may be the Belarusian IT sector, which, even beyond the political conditions, has proved that the structure of the modern economy,

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<sup>123</sup> <https://www.belarus97.pro/> oraz <https://bysol.org/> (access: 15.01.21).

<sup>124</sup> For example, NEXTA channel in Telegram.

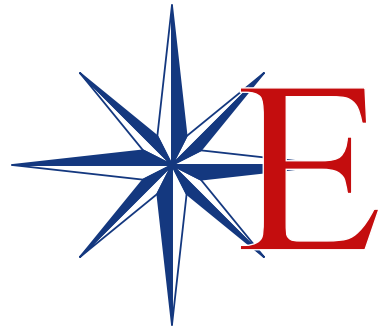
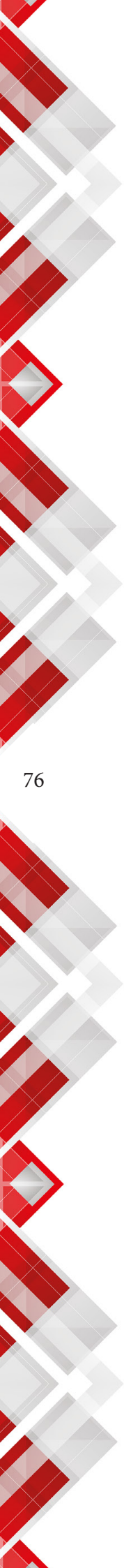
especially under the conditions of the new reality and in the era of the coronavirus pandemic is already completely different. In more and more industries, the importance of workers' physical presence in a given country is becoming less and less relevant. On the other hand, this will be a problem for the Belarusian economy itself, as the sources of funding of the budget will become increasingly scarce.

**Summary:**

Firstly, the current situation has proven that the 'brain drain' from Belarus is already a fact. This process has been accelerated by the various factors discussed above and, in many cases, is not voluntary. At present, it mainly concerns specific industries and social groups, while in the months to come it will increasingly affect broad layers of Belarusian society. The departure of skilled workers and workers in general, activists, students, and entrepreneurs will intensify in the nearest future. Due to the introduction of targeted programmes facilitating relocation, the “brain drain” process will receive a boost, especially towards Poland and Lithuania.

Secondly, for the Belarusian authorities, the “brain drain” has already proved to be a severe blow in social, economic, demographic and political terms. Stopping this process will be one of the most critical challenges for the ruling elite in the coming months. We should bear in mind that Belarus as a state experienced two severe crises within just one year: the crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-political turmoil following the presidential 'elections'. And according to many economists and analysts, the Belarusian economy has not yet begun to feel the effects of the “corona crisis” alone, so the deterioration of the economic situation and living conditions will be an additional factor stimulating a 'brain drain' from Belarus.

Thirdly, we should not regard 'brain drain' as a negative phenomenon in the long term only. The new Belarus, irrespective of when it will arrive, will face a considerable personnel shortage in all life areas - the economy, administration, politics and education. Therefore, those who were forced to leave the country after the second half of 2020 pose a significant threat to the illegitimate authorities. Still, at the same time, they are an excellent opportunity for a new, democratic Belarus.



## **TASKS OF THE BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT AT THE DUSK OF THE LUKASHENKA ERA**

### **1. General analysis of the current political situation: power and society**

A. Lukashenka's regime temporarily managed to stabilize the country's internal situation and pushed the protests to the periphery of Minsk. In the regions, however, the activity of citizens does not pose a threat to the authorities. A. Lukashenka's regime is systematically destroying the information and cultural-symbolic space of the protest movement. To a greater or lesser extent, those in power managed to preserve the stability of state structures, central and local administration, force structures, and to avoid economic paralysis due to the ultimatum announced by the staff of S. Tikhanouskaya and the national strike. All this allowed the regime to move from defensive activity to an information, ideological and political offensive.

As a result of the political crisis, following the elections on August 9, 2020 and the events of August and September, the regime has evolved towards a militarized government, with internal politics based exclusively on terror and repression. At this stage, the Belarusian state (as a set of political institutions) can be characterized as a personalistic-militaristic dictatorship; it relies on military units, whose primary objective is to secure the stability of A. Lukashenka's power through open and concealed terror.

In its nature, the policy of terror in Belarus does not mean the physical destruction of social or political groups in the country, but the organization of the systemic activity of all political and social structures (schools, universities) aimed at destroying any alternative political and ideological action. It is an extra-legal, constant psychological/physical pressure on citizens: intimidation, beatings, arrests, persecution, identification and catching of all people who took part in demonstrations, compiling a “special list” to show that no one will escape punishment.

The main lines of the policy of terror and repression are:

- Countering radicalization. Discouraging people from showing physical resistance to 'militants' who take part in attacks on protesters. Deterring radicalization is achieved through severe prison sentences, as the example of a Swiss citizen shows<sup>125</sup>;
- Maximum neutralization of independent information centres in Belarus, repression of journalists: press-club, tut.by, Belsat;
- Tightening of articles of the penal and administrative code concerning participation in mass protests;
- Restricting movement from across the national border (increasing psychological pressure). Closing the borders to people leaving the country (under the pretext of fighting coronavirus). Introduction of fees for travelling abroad by private transport;
- Purges within state and administrative structures and institutions, including state-owned enterprises;
- Pressure on the private sector: for example, A. Lukashenka's idea of creating trade unions in private companies;

In the short term, the authoritarian power will try to suppress any street activity before the General People's Assembly is convened. In the medium term, it will aim to prevent society's activation in the spring and summer.

## **2. The situation of opposition structures in the political crisis**

After a very heated period of street protests and socio-political activism in the summer-autumn of 2020, we observe a decline in activity on a state-wide scale. The "ultimatum" of S. Tikhanouskaya's staff, which fell on deaf years, became a particular breakthrough. The alternative movement did not have the opportunity for popular mobilization of society, which explains why the morale of the movement and the authority of S. Tikhanouskaya were weakened. Subsequently, it turned out that the political struggle was becoming long-lasting and "positional", which, in turn, brings threats to the alternative movement: internal disunity (segmentation and competition) and the so-called "grantoza" (grants and projectification

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<sup>125</sup> *Гражданка Швейцарии, которая сорвала балаклаву с омоновца, получила два с половиной года колонии, <https://news.tut.by/society/710403.html> (access:23.02.2020).*



phenomenon in organizations as an example of organizational pathology and influence on quality), which can quite strongly discredit the democratic camp.

Simultaneously, in recent months, we have observed distinct changes in Belarusian society at the symbolic and ideological level and in the sphere of values. In the beginning, the Belarusian movement for free elections did not have apparent national democratic features. And on the part of the main alternative political actors, there were very high expectations of Moscow's support for the transformation. This hope for Russia's engagement raised doubts and criticism of the alternative camp from the Belarusian national structures and was the subject of various political speculations. As a result of protests and clashes in the streets, a consolidation of society around national ideas and values took place. This process can be called as the second wave of national revival in Belarus.

Illusions and expectations that Moscow will support representatives of the alternative movement or intends to remove A. Lukashenka from power, have disappeared (The Kremlin, of course, may pursue a strategy of replacing A. Lukashenka, but this strategy suits only Russia's interests and not those of the Belarusian society). At this stage, any informal contacts with the Russian side are negatively perceived by most participants in the protest movement. This negative perception of relations with Moscow leads to a strengthening of the national democratic trend among the new opposition structures.

It is also worth noting that the primary feature of today's opposition movement is its new socio-political face. It does not consist of old opposition parties and organizations (coalitions) but of entirely new players and structures that emerged during the election campaign and post-election protests.

Yes, the representatives and activists of the old opposition organization are in the newly formed structures (both around S. Tikhonouskaya and in the Coordinating Council). Still, from a structural point of view, we are dealing with a new opposition movement.

For the most part, the new opposition structures are made up of new people who had no dealings with politics and political parties: marketing specialists, PR managers, programmers, bloggers, representatives of the nomenklatura, business people, former functionaries of power structures, etc. This new layer of activists is quite distrustful towards the representatives of the

old opposition. It is a continuation of the critical mood from the time of the election campaign when the old opposition criticized its participants' pro-Russianness. On the other hand, this group is relatively autonomous in its initiatives and activity.

At this point, three critical structures have emerged from the protest movement, which forms a common political and organizational platform and has legitimacy in the eyes of Belarusian society and the international community:

- Coordination Council: a collegiate body created on the orders of S. Tikhanouskaya (after she was expelled from the country) on August 18, 2020. The CC was located in Minsk and was tasked with coordinating protests and conducting negotiations with the authorities. As a result of repression, its activity was paralyzed, and key figures found themselves in prison or exiled;
- The staff of S. Tikhanouskaya: it was established in the second half of August 2020. The function of the team is to maintain the legitimacy of S. Tikhanouskaya's leadership, to work out strategies for further protests, to work on directions for political and economic reforms, which is what the REPRESENTATIVES do;
- National Anti-Crisis Management (NAU): created by the Coordination Council on October 26, 2020, its task is to work on the systemic reform strategy (crisis management during the transition period) and human resources policy.

In addition to the basic political structures, other initiatives cooperate to a greater or lesser extent with S. Tikhanouskaya, NAU and CC:

- Valery and Veronika Tsapkala (V. Tsapkala is a former candidate in the election campaign);
- BySol (Solidarity Foundation, which collects funds to support the repressed and their families), works in collaboration with S. Tikhanouskaya;
- Viktor Babaryka's staff;
- Digital platforms: "Voice", "Chestnye ludzi";
- By-pol (a structure that brings together former law enforcement officials, autonomous but in cooperation with NAU and S. Tikhanouskaya);
- Strike Committees;
- "Backyard communities" (they organize local marches);

- NEXTA (a stand-alone news channel);
- People's embassies (effect of the activity of the Belarusian diaspora)

The involvement of such a large number of Belarusian citizens in political activity for change creates favourable conditions for further structuring the democratic environment and, in fact, forming the institutions of the alternative state. The new level of political struggle will preserve the political alternative's authority, internal consolidation, and concentration of resources for the further struggle against A. Lukashenka's regime.

### **3. A strategy for the creation of an alternative government - the Network State concept**

The state is understood as the totality of political institutions that exercise power in a specific territory. In history, there are examples of the existence of a nation without a state (territory and political institutions), a state without a nation. Usually, these were colonial territories, where external, non-national political governments took shape. Can a state exist in the form of national political institutions outside a specific territory and at the same time express the interests, will and aspirations of a society? This is undoubtedly the case in Belarus, where the authoritarian state has degraded to the level of a terror state and serves to preserve the personal power of A. Lukashenka and his entourage. I believe that a network state's functioning is possible in the era of Internet domination, mobility of society, and a sizeable Belarusian diaspora. This belief is supported by the high level of activity of Belarusians at home and abroad and the high level of trust in the political structures that are fighting against A. Lukashenka's regime.

The Network State is the totality of sectoral structures (networks), for some reason located outside the national territory, supported by society and claiming to govern the country in the future. In other words, the Network State is a political and institutional matrix that, on the one hand, can influence political processes in a territory with a hostile political structure and, on the other hand, is ready to replace the government physically.

The most favourable conditions for the formation of a Belarusian network state have now emerged in Belarus:

1. Loss of legitimacy of the political leadership (ruling elite);
2. Lack of trust in state institutions;

3. The existence of an alternative legitimate political entity in the person of S. Tikhanouskaya;
4. High level of activity of Belarusians at home and abroad, ready to participate in the implementation of various political projects;
5. A large number of educated citizens (also abroad), specialists in various fields, ready to ensure the development of specific areas (industries) in the network state.
6. The openness of European countries to support the activities of various political structures of the opposition.

The structure of the Network State is no different from that of a normal state, except that it is not imposed on a specific territory to carry out a direct governing function.

Sectoral specialization plays a vital role in the Network State, the meaning of which is as follows:

- First, concentration of specialists in each sector (economics, finance, education, military, security, foreign policy, local government, agriculture, national and cultural policy, etc.).
- Secondly, creating a sectoral personnel reserve would make it possible to quickly solve personnel shortage and replace senior personnel (bureaucrats) after the change of regime in the country. At this stage, each sector would be responsible for a training programme aimed at the necessary personnel in European countries.
- Third, to develop and systematize strategies, scenarios and tools for the implementation of reforms in the future;
- Fourth, empowerment on the international stage.

The functioning of the Network State and the inclusion of many people in its work will contribute to the accumulation of theoretical (and sometimes practical) experience in state management. This engagement will lead to the emergence of a group of politicians and public managers responsible for each sector's work. Sectoral strategies will be joined into a general plan for Belarus of the future.

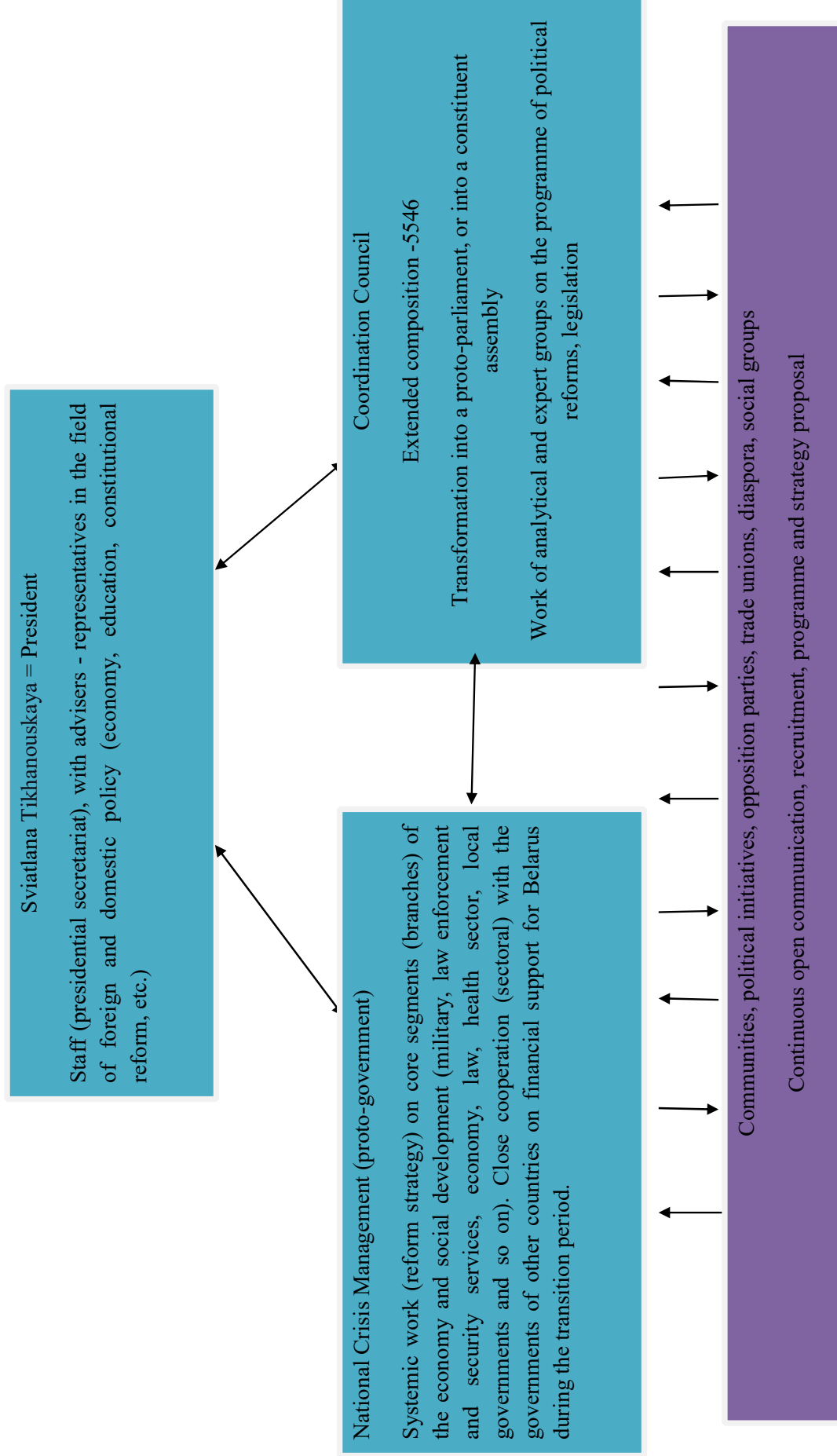
It is essential to point out that this systemic strategy should be developed now and not after the regime change. It is necessary to ensure the concentration of all the resources required to implement the transformation strategy. Above all, the Network State will allow for a rapid transfer of the management and personnel matrix to Belarus after the regime change. This approach will shorten the painful transition period and the related political chaos, especially new cadres' problem.

The Network State will also allow for further weakening of the regime and contribute to maintaining citizens' activity in Belarus. The implementation of the “Alternative (Network) State” concept will enhance the following processes:

- Transfer of legitimacy and political loyalty from A. Lukashenka's state to the Alternative State;
- Facilitating a 'staff drain' from the old system to the new;
- Strengthening the authority and influence of the democratic political movement headed by S. Tikhanouskaya;
- Creating a broad political platform capable of taking responsibility for the country's future;
- Laying the foundations for a public and open policy and countering the marginalization of the alternative movement;
- Strengthening and consolidating national democratic ideology;
- Strengthening of political and economic pressure on A. Lukashenka's regime from the West and further isolation of the regime (it is worth adding that the deconsolidation of the democratic movement may lead to the return of "realpolitik" in relations between the West and the authorities in Belarus, which prevailed in the period 2014- 2020);
- Undermining treaties or preventing the implementation of agreements between the Lukashenka regime and Moscow, aimed at limiting or dismantling Belarus's sovereignty.

It is necessary to finally structure the existing centres into a unified pyramid of alternative institutions (Graphic 1), expressing the political will of the leaders of the democratic movement - since they were created within the framework of a general social reflex, recognizing the legitimacy of the election of S. Tikhanouskaya. Confidence in S. Tikhanouskaya is so widespread that the transfer of legitimacy to the Network State structures could shortly result in severe political gains. The existing political configuration thus tells the logic of the Alternative State.

Graphic 1: Network State Pyramid



The transition to a new qualitative level will allow the national democratic movement to play a completely different role than before. It will be able to maintain the momentum against A. Lukashenka's rule and demonstrate its readiness to adopt real instruments of power quickly.

Otherwise, the new political movement, that emerged on the wave of protests against the rigging of the 2020 presidential election, will face the fate of the old opposition, with its segmentation, internal disputes and quarrels. The repetition of the history will mean that A. Lukashenka will retain power for another five years.





## **MINSK-WARSAW: A COMMON CAUSE**

Recommendation for Poland's actions in relations with Belarus  
in the first half of 2021

### 1. Introduction

The events of 2020 in Belarus have reopened the discussion on Polish policy towards this country. It seems to be framed by two texts: Jacek Bartosiak, "August 2020: Belarus - a turning point for Poland"<sup>126</sup> and Witold Repetowicz, "Realpolitik in Belarus and Poland"<sup>127</sup>.

J. Bartosiak states that Poland does not have essential assets in Belarus's structural forces, so it uses the 'instrument of universal values' to pull this country out of the Russian orbit. He stresses the need to build a solid Polish position in the Belarusian state. He also draws attention to the lack of unity around a European policy towards the Eastern European region. Bartosiak calls on Poland to refrain from military demonstrations, which A. Lukashenka could use as an invitation for Russia to intervene. He stresses that Poland should participate in a discussion between Russia and the West on the political transformation in Belarus. In his opinion, Poland should introduce, as postulated by Adolf Bocheński, the "Polish Monroe Doctrine" in Eastern Europe. J. Bartosiak claims that this will lead to a competition between Warsaw and Paris over the region's status.

W. Repetowicz compares the situation in Belarus with Armenia. He stresses that the West cannot remain passive - as it happened in the case of protests in this South Caucasus country. The lack of involvement on the side of the Armenian protesters allowed Moscow to completely control the situation and the process of political change. Repetowicz stresses that the fundamental shift that has taken place in Belarus is the rapid growth of the national consciousness of Belarusians and their support for changes in the country. He states that

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<sup>126</sup> <https://strategyandfuture.org/sierpien-2020-bialorus-punkt-zwrotny-dla-polski>, (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.defence24.pl/realpolitik-na-bialorusi-a-polska-opinia>, (access: 23.02.2020).

President A. Lukashenka's room for manoeuvre is minimal, while Russia cannot carry out a change of power in the country by completely ignoring the protesters' demands for democratisation. Therefore, in his opinion, supporting the Belarusian opposition is in Poland's interest. The protests have already changed the social face of Belarus.

The following proposals for Polish policy towards Belarus draw on both traditions in which the discussed articles fall. Like J. Bartosiak, we draw attention to the need to strengthen Polish presence in various parts of Belarusian administration. At the same time, we believe that we cannot ignore the changes that have taken place in the Belarusian society. Like W. Repetowicz - we suggest supporting these changes.

Before discussing Warsaw's proposed actions towards Minsk in the perspective of the first six months of 2021, it is necessary to define the objectives of Poland's foreign policy towards Belarus and to discuss the addressees of this policy. This overview will make it possible to determine the necessary tools for the implementation of these goals.

The situation inside Belarus and the current international context are characterised by significant instability and considerable dynamism. Therefore, it is necessary to define long-term objectives that would make it possible to conduct a long-term, well-established activity with far-reaching effects. The application of this strategic approach will break Poland's policy towards Belarus from the traditional 'fickle' approach, in which Warsaw only reacts to official authorities' actions in Minsk, without any strategic policy.

It is also necessary to understand that the 2020 protest movement has led to an increase in the number of Poland's potential partners in Belarus. The role of these various groups may change over time Poland needs to prepare different approaches for these different layers of the Belarusian society

## 2. Current objectives of Polish policy towards Belarus

Current strategic documents of the Polish foreign policy only mention Belarus superficially. In the "Strategy of Polish Foreign Policy 2017-2021", this country is mentioned in two

contexts<sup>128</sup>. In the first case, Belarus is noted in connection with the Eastern Partnership, that aims to “support partners in building their resilience to internal and external challenges”. In the second case, Belarus is discussed in the context of the consular policies "and above all, the protection (...) of the rights of Polish minorities in various countries, especially in Germany, Lithuania and Belarus. Flexible visa policy and local border traffic, confirming Poland's openness to cooperation with Eastern European societies, should also be counted among important activities in this sphere". These are, therefore, highly general goals without any benchmarks.

Unfortunately, in 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs did not present the "Information on the tasks of Polish foreign policy", which should update the assumptions of the "Strategy". The last "Information" was presented in March 2019<sup>129</sup>, i.e. before the start of mass protests in the country.

Nevertheless, one element of the speech of the then Minister Jacek Czaputowicz is worth noting, as it indicates how the Polish foreign policy establishment perceives Belarus. Minister J. Czaputowicz stressed that “we consider the existence of an independent Belarus to be the basis of the international order in Central and Eastern Europe, or in Europe more broadly”. This statement suggests that there is a real threat to Belarusian independence, naturally from the Russian Federation. In Polish analytical circles, this kind of statement usually leads to the conclusion that one should not put a pressure on President A. Lukashenka. Supposedly this would lead Belarusian president 'into the arms of Russia'.

After the outbreak of protests in 2020, Polish diplomacy's objectives, in the absence of an update of the aforementioned 'Information on the tasks of Polish foreign policy', can only be reconstructed based on official speeches or statements. Initially, Poland was also pointing out the need for new presidential elections. During the meetings with representatives of the Belarusian opposition, Minister Czaputowicz particularly stressed this point (see meetings of

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<sup>128</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/strategia>, (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>129</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/minister-jacek-czaputowicz-o-priorytetach-polskiej-dyplomacji-w-2019-roku>, (access: 23.02.2020).

Minister Jacek Czaputowicz with Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya on 17 August 2020<sup>130</sup> or with Weranika and V. Tsapkala on 19 August 2020<sup>131</sup>). However, in later speeches, Polish diplomacy representatives focused on human rights issues and dialogue with the opposition. They criticised the pacification of protests and brutal repressions, called for the release of political prisoners and the opening of dialogue with the opposition (see, for example, Deputy Minister Marcin Przydacz's speech on 4 September at the UN Security Council meeting on Human Rights in Belarus).

### 3. Proposal to modify the objectives of Poland's foreign policy towards Belarus

The changes in Belarus and the broader context of the regional situation call for a clearer definition of Poland's policy towards Belarus. Two changes are of crucial importance here. The first is the growing self-awareness of Belarusians as a community. The second is a significant weakening of interest in the Eastern Partnership region among European Union countries.

We propose the following four objectives:

→ Objective 1. Stabilisation of the internal situation in Belarus - to be achieved in 2021.

This stabilisation may occur in two cases: a complete pacification of protests in Belarus or the resignation of President Lukashenka. In the first scenario, the further radicalisation of Belarusian society (continuation of internal instability) is expected. While a decisive pacification may lead to the easing of tension for several months, in the case of a much violent one, social protest will take place in the long term.

In the second scenario, there are two possible developments. There are two different developments. In the first case, the change in the president's position, resulting from negotiations between the authorities and the opposition, will only lead to a minimal modification of the Belarusian system and preserve the internal conflict for several years, without resolving it.

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<sup>130</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/rozmowa-ministra-jacka-czaputowicza-ze-svietlana-cichanouska>, (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>131</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/minister-jacek-czaputowicz-przyjal-walera-i-weranike-capkalow>, (access: 23.02.2020).

In the second case, holding genuine democratic election would allow a gradual erosion of the existing structure of (neo)patrimonial power in Belarus and, consequently, lead to the end of the internal conflict and its transfer to the level of an ordinary democratic political struggle. However, these elections should be organised by an external entity (OSCE, UN) to avoid the possibility of falsification of their results. There are precedents of this type. These cases usually concern countries in conflict (e.g. Afghanistan in 2014), so one may argue that it is not applicable in Belarus. However, the counterargument would be that it is easier to conduct such a project in a peaceful environment. Such a procedure will be more transparent. Presidential elections would only be the first step. To maintain stability, the introduction of democratic mechanisms should concern all levels of the Belarusian state.

However, it seems more likely that a "negotiable transfer of power" will be pursued in the short term. This scenario seems more likely to unfold, especially since the partners (France and Germany) who would have potential tools to negotiate with Russia on the conduct of elections in Belarus are somewhat more interested in a quick solution to the "Belarus problem" than in long-term actions.

In such a case, Poland should advocate the scenario proposed by S. Tikhanouskaya - a transitional period during which new presidential elections will be prepared. Warsaw should seek direct involvement in transferring power and organising elections, also pressing for the organisation of elections at other levels.

→ Objective 2. To carry out reforms that create a structural basis for the country's stable functioning - 5-10 years after the current system's dismantling.

The characteristics of the current Belarusian system make it vulnerable to regulate economic crises. There are two main reasons for that: the lack of a stable basis for economic development and repeated aggressive negotiations with the Russian Federation about the extent of Russian support. This economic instability is a consequence of the (neo)patrimonial system operating in Belarus. In such structures, ownership of all the elements of the economy belongs to the ruler of the country. Decision-makers in economies of this type are not focusing on internal stability and development but on keeping the president in power. Short-term resource management aimed at ensuring the ruler's control leads to cyclical economic decline.

In order to maintain long-term social stability in Belarus, it is necessary to carry out internal structural reforms. Again, this will not be possible without changing the (neo)patrimonial character. Observations of past attempts at economic reforms in Belarus show that it has never changed its systemic foundations.

In drafting a reform of this kind, it is necessary to draw on the transformation experience in Central Europe after 1989 and recent trends in economic concepts. Instead of focusing on ensuring the highest possible economic growth, based on a fiscal stabilisation and austerity policy, it is necessary to prepare a plan securing the future of the poorest, rural residents, agricultural workers, and employees of large state-owned enterprises. Such a logic will make it possible to minimise the transformation's immediate adverse effects and avoid the emergence of protests, later stimulated by a sense of disappointment with the changes. So again - it will contribute to maintaining stability in the country.

→ Objective 3 Strengthening the Polish presence in Belarus - to be implemented together with Objectives 1 and 2.

For many years, Poland has been trying to build a 'pro-Polish party' in various circles in Belarus - both at the government level and across multiple opposition activities. A significant element of this activity was the attempt to promote Polish economic cooperation with Belarus.

However, the successes achieved are quite limited, due to several factors. In the perception of Belarusian authorities', the Polish potential in the international arena is low (e.g. they prefer contacts with Germany within the EU). Official Minsk does not see Poland's economic potential as beneficial, since it cannot offer support to match Russia's one. Finally, despite numerous declarations, the genuine interest of Polish entrepreneurs in the Belarusian market is low.

Again, a key factor here is the nature of the Belarusian system, which is too hierarchical to yield to the influence of soft power and, at the same time, is not economically rational enough to willingly ask for support for careful reforms". Another critical problem is the Belarusian government's approach to Poles in Belarus, who are perceived - like any community striving for autonomy - as a threat to the Belarusian system.

Drawing experience from the example of Belarusian-Russian relations, one might expect that a strict Polish policy towards Belarus, realistically threatening the power's economic situation, could strengthen Poland's position in the Republic of Belarus (RB) by increasing its economic presence. However, given Poland's economic potential, Warsaw would not achieve satisfactory results without the support of its EU partners.

However, the policy of pressure on Minsk works only in the short term. Poland should combine pressure with the support for internal changes in Belarus (goals 1 and 2) and Poland's broader promotion in Belarusian society, strengthening Poland's positive image in Belarus. This promotion should combine the already existing, relatively successful cultural promotion with support for the mass protest movement and policy towards Belarusians living in Poland.

→ Objective 4: Bringing Belarus closer to the European Union - a long-term goal.

At this stage, we may assume that the first step in achieving this objective would be to restore Belarus to full membership of the Eastern Partnership. Another step would be to establish relations between Belarus and the EU at the level currently enjoyed by Ukraine - some form of association agreement containing a programme of economic support and reform in Belarus.

However, the feasibility of such assumptions will depend on two factors. The first is the evolving view within the EU of its relations with Eastern partners. The second is Russia's future behaviour in the region. There is a fear that the EU will withdraw from the Eastern European region or at least that it will not be ready for more ambitious actions in this area. EU's departure will naturally result in strengthening Moscow's presence in the region.

Therefore, the Polish administration should maintain the EU's 'interest' in the whole region. However, it will be essential to develop a new concept of the organisation's cooperation with the countries of this area, reflecting the new reality.

#### 4. Target groups of Polish policy towards Belarus

The events of 2020 have given rise to several groups against which Warsaw should direct its actions. The first group consists of A. Lukashenka, his sons and closest associates. Naturally, this group primarily includes senior officers of the security services, a large body of

businessmen and senior officials. It seems that this group is still not ready to make concessions, as it is convinced that it can hold on to power. Russian support plays a significant role for them.

The second group consist of middle and lower-level officials, including regional elites. Most of them take a pragmatic approach to the situation. They observe how the situation develops and, depending on which way the scales tip, they will lean towards that side. The second group's liaisons with the opposition's representatives (the Coordinating Council) are Pavel Latushka and Valery Tsapkala - longtime, prominent activists of the Belarusian regime. Together with S. Tikhanouskaya, they are the core of the Coordination Council, slowly transforming into a formal democratic structure, striving for dialogue with the Belarusian authorities. However, as it seems, in contrast to S. Tikhanouskaya, they have political ambitions.

The last, largest and most important group, is formed by the Belarusian citizens who participate in grassroots protest actions. They seek the overthrow of Mr. Lukashenka, an end to repression and a self-organised movement.

##### 5. Proposed Polish actions towards Belarus

In the past, Warsaw frequently carried out the policies planned by other actors, primarily the US, in the region. Now, Poland should abandon the position of the executioner and begin to conduct policies of its own.

Moreover, taking the actions outlined below requires the unity of the Polish state. Both sides of the political scene, those forming the government and those in opposition, should agree on Belarus's policy. It is also necessary to coordinate actions between Warsaw and local authorities. The Belarusian administration regularly (and often successfully) pits various groups against each other, making it difficult to conduct a long-term policy. Using Belarusian issues in the current, intra-Polish political struggle will make it easier for Minsk to continue these activities.

##### **Actions towards Lukashenka and his inner circle**

The primary tool for putting pressure on A. Lukashenka is to instil in him the fear of losing financial liquidity. Poland individually does not have an effective tool for exerting pressure,



nor a sufficiently generous offer of economic support. Therefore, economic pressure on Belarus is only possible within the EU framework.

At this stage, there are 88 individuals and seven entities on the EU sanctions list<sup>132</sup>. Although the list includes the names of A. Lukashenka and his son Viktor, sanctions do not seem to have any effect.

This lack of impact is resulting from the complicated EU sanction's procedure. Immediately after the Member States finally agree on whom to put on the sanctions list and how to justify it, the Belarusian authorities rotate the sanctioned government official from one position to the other. Then, Minsk requests to remove the people from the sanctions list, since they no longer hold the position indicated on it. The problem of companies on the sanctions list is even easier to solve, since many of them have entities registered in tax havens, which they can use to hide their activities. Finally, some EU countries frequently invited Belarusian authorities' representatives to events convened by international organisations (e.g. UNESCO) - such visits are exempt from sanctions restrictions.

A way out of this situation is to introduce restrictions that would significantly reduce the influence of foreign currency in the country. The role of the whole EU is crucial here. Such an action requires coordinated sanctions on oil product imports (one of the currency's primary sources) by EU countries, including Germany, which also imports Belarusian oil. EU's action needs to be supported by non-EU countries such as Great Britain and Ukraine. Only such a combined action, sustained for an extended period, will make it possible to exert a real influence on the Belarusian authorities.

It would also be advisable to combine sanctions on importing petroleum products with sanctions on importing potassium fertilisers - another significant income source for the Belarusian authorities. Unfortunately, in this case, a tangible impact on the budget of the Belarusian president would be visible only after convincing China and India - the main buyers of this product - to participate in the sanctions.

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<sup>132</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-following-the-2020-belarus-presidential-elections/>, (access: 23.02.2020).

The third element of EU sanctions against Belarus should be the suspension of European financial support institutions' activity - the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank. Although opponents of this measure will emphasise that these institutions mainly work with private entities, the latter are often linked to entrepreneurs from A. Lukashenka's closest circle.

Some experts emphasise that structural economic sanctions will push Lukashenka into Russia's arms. Russia is Belarus' leading trading partner, the largest investor and supplier of credit. Without close cooperation with Russian businesses linked to the authorities, the Belarusian ruling elite would not derive any income from trade in oil products, armaments or dual-use goods.

Simultaneously, the Belarusian president is trying to maintain the necessary degree of independence and control over the Belarusian economy. By limiting his room for manoeuvre (but for a more extended period) by his European partners, to whom he constantly refers when negotiating support from Russia, may induce him to make concessions. The West has never thoroughly tested economic tool in relations with Belarus.

#### **Action towards middle/lower-level nomenclature and local authorities**

Activities in this field are already being carried out in principle by the Polish administration. They need to be continued but slightly modified. It is necessary to maintain as many contacts as possible with the Belarusian administration at middle and lower levels. This engagement level is not only about frequent personal connections but also about continuing Belarusian officials' participation in the Eastern Partnership Public Administration Academy. It would also be advisable to consider expanding this programme or creating a unique programme for Belarusian officials.

Regional and cross-border cooperation must continue. In the political sphere, this cooperation must occur without central authorities' official involvement, which will allow local authorities to emphasise pragmatic nature of this cooperation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should use its tools of development cooperation in this area. There is no development cooperation plan

for 2021 yet, but projects to build local authorities' institutional capacity to carry out regional development policy have been financed from these funds for many years<sup>133</sup>. However, these activities should be supplemented with projects concerning cooperation between local administration and civil society organisations. These projects should be harmonised with the tools for supporting self-organisation and cooperativism in Belarusian society outlined below.

Another essential tool in this respect is the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine cross-border programme - the most extensive cross-border programme in the European Union. Public consultations on the programme for 2021- 2027 are currently underway.

The use of all these tools will help to strengthen the basis of Polish-Belarusian relations at the lower and medium levels.

### **Cooperation with the Coordination Council**

Support for the Council should focus on making it more democratic. At present, however, its democratisation is disputable. There are currently three circles in the Council: Extended, Basic and Presidium. Any Belarusian citizen can apply to join the first one. Per the Council's regulations, the members of the core section of the Council are chosen by Maksim Znak (a lawyer in Viktor Babaryka's staff) and Olga Kovalkova (a lady of confidence of Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya), on the recommendation of Mrs. Tikhanouskaya. In turn, the Primary elects the Presidium from among its members.

The Polish administration should support all the activities that increase the transparency of the Council's decision-making process. The project of Collective Bodies of Territorial Social Self-Government<sup>134</sup> existing within the Council could serve as a medium for expressing Belarusian society's will, the postulates of which would then be discussed by individual levels of the Council.

It should also be suggested to broaden the Council's composition (e.g. only one representative of workers' organisations is present in the Presidium). The broadened Council would better reflect the variety of groups involved in the protests.

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<sup>133</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/polskapomoc/programowanie>, (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>134</sup> <https://rada.vision/rabochie-gruppy/iniciativa-kotos>, (access: 23.02.2020).

Finally, it is necessary to block all actions aimed at breaking up the unity of the Council - in particular, the present Belarusian authorities' possible attempts to negotiate individually with Mr. Latushka or Mr. Tsapkala.

The above proposals will strengthen the Council's mandate as a genuine representative of Belarusian protests. In this way, it will be able to serve as a vehicle for necessary changes in Belarus.

### **Support to the Belarusian society**

The "Solidarity with Belarus" package, presented by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on August 14, 2020, was created according to the principle of "the same, only more". Organisations and projects that have so far dominated Polish policy instruments towards the RB have simply received additional funding.

The programme, totalling PLN 50 million in the first year of operation, envisages the implementation of five points:

- support for repressed persons - expansion of Polish and Polish-American victim assistance programme,
- Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship Programme of the Government of the Republic of Poland - the programme aims at supporting students and scientists who were expelled from Belarusian universities as a result of repressions (they will be allowed to study and work in Poland),
- facilitation of entry into Poland and access to the labour market - the package will include exemption from visa fees, and in exceptional cases, exemption from the obligation to possess documents - and facilitation of access to the labour market,
- assistance to independent media - support will be provided to independent media and publishers in Belarus (TV Belsat, the Charter'97 website, Radio Racja),

- NGO Programme - a new International Solidarity Foundation programme for NGOs supporting civil society in Belarus and the Belarusian independent media<sup>135</sup>.

The first and second points do not seem contentious. However, given the nature of the Belarusian protests, the package needs some modification. In particular, this concerns support for the bottom-up character of the Belarusian protests.

Firstly, it is essential to support people repressed in Belarus. The support to the oppressed should be provided through the existing and well-functioning BY SOL Solidarity Fund or similar organisations, when identified<sup>136</sup>. The Fund operates in Belarus, where it can better assess needs and more quickly reach those in need of funding. It has additional sub-groups, dealing with support for striking workers, health workers, protesting sportsmen and sportswomen, repressed journalists and others.

Secondly, it is crucial to strengthen the workers' protest movement. While protests by the intelligentsia or students are not entirely new, workers' protests on such a scale as it occurred in 2020 are something new. As mentioned above, financial support for repressed workers should be carried out by BY SOL Solidarity Fund. At the same time, however, support must be provided to trade unions independent of the authorities (Belarusian Independent Trade Union, Free Belarusian Trade Union, Independent Trade Union of Radioelectronic Industry Workers, Free Trade Union of Metalworkers, Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions or National Strike Committee of Belarus, etc.). This support should concern the transfer of experience in self-organisation, legal disputes, methods of supporting protesters, etc.

Thirdly, the protests' grassroots self-organised nature needs to be supported by experience and knowledge. It is not only about transferring the expertise of self-organisation of demonstrations but also about the self-organisation of citizens at the local level to achieve social goals. Potential partners on the Belarusian side could be KOTOS - the initiative to

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<sup>135</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/plan-solidarni-z-bialorusia--polska-wesprze-represjonowanych>, (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>136</sup> <https://bysol.org/english>, (access: 23.02.2020).

organise elections to collective bodies of local self-governance<sup>137</sup>, and on the Polish side - urban movements or cooperatives.

### **Domestic policy**

The Polish authorities should also develop a new internal policy towards Belarusians living in Poland. This policy should be applied to the native population living in the border regions and incoming migrants. An appropriate approach supporting this community in Poland may turn the policy into a vital carrier of Polish 'soft power'.

### **6. The regional context of Polish policy towards Belarus**

The most crucial regional context for Polish policy towards Belarus remains the European Union. Within the EU, Warsaw has two specific tools to influence Belarus: the sanctions regime and cooperation development. The issues of sanctions are described in section 4. Below, a few words on development cooperation.

In the period 2016- 2020, EUR 30 million were allocated for this purpose. The cooperation focused, among other things, on supporting the accession of RB to the WTO, developing private entrepreneurship, twinning projects between the central banks of Poland, Germany, Lithuania and Belarus, stimulating scientific mobility, etc.<sup>138</sup>

At the end of 2020, the EU provided an additional support package of EUR 24 million. The new package is to focus on four spheres:

- Support for civil society and independent media, in particular local communities and citizens' group initiatives.
- Support for young people, in particular repressed persons, through a scholarship programme.
- Advice to SMEs to help them survive the current economic problems.
- Support to the health sector, in particular in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>139</sup>.

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<sup>137</sup> <https://rada.vision/rabochie-gruppy/iniciativa-kotos>, (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>138</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/belarus\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/belarus_en), (access: 23.02.2020).

<sup>139</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eu4belarus\\_infographic.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eu4belarus_infographic.pdf), (access: 23.02.2020).

As it can be seen, the modified version of the Polish 'Solidarity with Belarus' package is in line with EU proposals. The appropriate use of EU tools would allow for a more effective involvement of Polish resources, particularly in supporting Belarusian civil society.

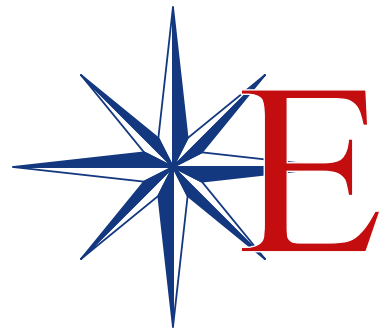
Activities within the EU should be coordinated within regional groupings. Agreeing on engagement plans in Belarus with the Visegrad Group countries will allow for a synergy effect. Poland should also convince the V4 members to support the sanctions programme against the Belarusian authorities outlined above. It seems that - at the present stage - there is no reason for fear.

The second significant grouping would be the Lublin Triangle, established by the foreign ministers of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. A particularly positive element of this format is that it links the two EU countries currently most involved in Belarusian issues (Poland and Lithuania) with Minsk's crucial economic partner, Kyiv.

The first sphere in which the Triangle could be used is traditional diplomatic action. The grouping may issue common positions on the situation in Belarus. It can also provide a platform for supporting dialogue between protesters and the authorities.

The second sphere of activity of this format should be cooperation development. Coordinators established within the format will allow ongoing coordination of support for Belarusian society. All three countries have perfect knowledge of the situation and contacts, enabling them to prepare appropriate projects. Poland and Lithuania, as EU members, can also take care of obtaining funding for these projects.

Finally, Belarusian affairs should also be included in preparations for the Polish Presidency of the OSCE in Europe in 2022. An ambitious plan would involve the organisation preparing and conducting elections in Belarus. The minimum programme would include the organisation of negotiations between the Belarusian authorities and the opposition, as well as to prepare a vital observation mission for the new presidential elections in Belarus.





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