

# Zhyve Belarus!

## Analyses and perspectives

### Two years since the 2020 Belarusian uprising

A special section dedicated to understanding the current situation in Belarus in cooperation with the Analytical Group “BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION” at the University of Warsaw’s Centre for East European Studies

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DEAR READER,

In the next pages of this issue we present to you articles written by members of the Analytical Group called "BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION". The name of the group was chosen for a reason. It was formed at the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw in the autumn of 2020, right after huge demonstrations in Minsk and across Belarus were organised against the rigging of the presidential election and against the Minsk regime in general. Meanwhile, the year 2022 brought a new and significant development in the region, namely Russia's unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine. Since this moment, Belarus ceased to be the most important topic in analysis of the region. Even more, it turned into a participant in the aggression by making its territory available for the gathering of Russian troops before the war. The country then allowed the aggressor to attack Ukraine from its territory at the outset of the war.

Today, just like Belarus two years ago, Ukraine has become the centre of attention, not only for us, its closest neighbours but also for the whole world. As expected, the ongoing war is covered by media all over the globe. In the democratic world the interpretation of this aggression is quite straightforward, as it points straight to the source of this conflict. Conversely, the Russian media, but also official state media in Belarus, offer a completely different explanation of what has been taking place in Ukraine. In Russia, for example, the war is not called a war, but a "special military operation". As a result, the Russian army is not presented as an aggressor but a saviour. In the same vein, Ukraine is not shown as a victim of the invasion but a country that has been ruled by a fascist regime that has been persecuting the ethnic Russian population.

Before February 2022 our experts and researchers focused on what we agreed to call "Belarus-2020". By this term we refer to a multi-dimensional process of political and social change taking place in Belarus since 2020, that is the last presidential elections and the protests that were organised in reaction to their forged

results. Thus, the reports and analyses that we prepared in regard to this development focused on these events' many different aspects. They include "classical political science" analyses of change in the political system, its actors and the elite, as well as analyses of the economic situation, Belarus's foreign policy and new methods of propaganda. Naturally, we did not avoid looking into topics such as identity, culture and the media. The presented texts reflect that as well.

Significantly, the war in Ukraine has pushed us to once again pursue wider reflection and offer some new interpretations of the events in the region. This has been the case mainly because the outbreak of the war has in fact corrected a number of misjudgements that were once popular regarding what a modern war looks like. But this war has also confirmed the esteem of some European and world leaders. In other words, while some politicians, through their reactions to the war, have proven to be true statesmen, others have shown terrible weakness and thus proved to be insignificant. More than anything else, this war has shown us the great value of human solidarity that we saw when so many people across the world offered help to the countless refugees who were escaping the horrors of Russian aggression.

Finally, this war has shown us that no country, or its people, live in isolation from others. That is why, it is not only our region, or Europe, but truly the entire world that is affected (in one way or another) by this conflict. For our Analytical Group this too meant a change in focus, by including Ukraine in the area of Belarusian studies and academic investigation. We thus expanded the scope of our research area and included in it this new angle of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. We probably do not need to convince the readers of this magazine that the future of Belarus also depends on developments in Ukraine.

Last but not least, I would also like to encourage you to engage with our other reports, which you can access on our website. This can also be accessed through the QR code that is provided in this special section.

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# Belarusian political elites

## New, imagined, lost?

MAXIM RUST

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The reality in today's Belarus is that of **decreased enthusiasm and less social mobilisation**. The ruling elite of the Lukashenka regime is still wielding power and a large part of the society that was active during the 2020 protests is now living abroad or imprisoned.

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When today we reflect on the protest movement that started in Belarus in 2020, we can see that one of its distinguishing features were the so-called new faces of the opposition that the whole world focused on and admired. Namely, the world became fascinated by the new Belarusian political leaders who were expected, and hoped for, to change, or fix, the country's political system, drawing on the then enormous social energy that translated into political mobilisation unprecedented for Belarus. Assessing the situation from today's perspective, I would argue now that neither the public opinion nor the expert circles in the West have accurately estimated the change that has taken place in Belarusian politics, which in fact took place as a result of networked mobilisation and the digitalisation of communication.

### **Little did we know**

In hindsight, this wrong estimation by foreign analysts, as we can see it today, can be explained in several ways. First, it was rather naive to put all bets on one person, namely Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, even though she indeed was the main face and symbol of the protests. Second, there was an assumption, popular indeed,

which suggested that the protests had shown that the authoritarian Belarusian regime was weak and in its dying days. Unfortunately, in this regard the analysts were wrong again. In 2022, Belarus is still ruled by exactly the same elite that was there in 2020.

For the sake of honesty and academic rigour, we should now admit that in many of our observations and conclusions about the protests we were taken by the revolutionary mood and as a result underestimated the adaptability and flexibility of the Belarusian authorities. This was not the first time that such a thing has happened either. Third, it is quite clear that until this year most analysts, or the general public, did not think that anything worse than what we have seen in Belarus since 2020 could happen in our region. Little did we know. Russia's aggression in Ukraine not only proved us wrong, it also redirected everybody's attention, overshadowing the already decreasing coverage of Belarus in international media, day by day.

Enriched by today's perspective, we should again take a look at Belarus, its main political actors and the overall social and political framework which – for analytical reasons – we decided to call “Belarus-2020”. Only then will we see that those who now constitute the Belarusian political elite can be divided into three groups: 1) representatives of the old opposition (the old counter elite), 2) the authorities (the ruling elite), and 3) the new opposition (the new elite). For proper understanding of the situation as well as the formulating of any hypothesis about future developments, these three groups should be analysed from an empirical position, without succumbing to the temptation of normative “wishful thinking” or an attempt to revive the social energy from 2020.

And the reality that we have today is that of decreased enthusiasm and social mobilisation. The ruling elite of the Lukashenka regime is still wielding power, and a large part of the society that was active during the protests is now living abroad or imprisoned. In addition, the Russian aggression in Ukraine has created great uncertainty regarding the future of all these actors. Therefore, an analysis of each of these groups and the change they have undergone in the last two years may bring us some new conclusions.

### **Unmet great expectations**

As stated before, the first group is that of the old counter-elite. It includes representatives of the oldest Belarusian opposition movements and parties. With regards to this group, I do not see anything that in some way would surprise me. Already back in 2019 and 2020 I was predicting that these two years would be decisive for their existence as a full-fledged actor on the political scene. And indeed

today, two years later, we can see that the old counter elite is more of a historical phenomenon than today's reality. Its representatives either disappeared from the political scene (for all kinds of reasons) or joined the new elite. Some yet, like the prominent Zianon Pazniak, the icon of the Belarusian national movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, have been strongly and harshly criticising both the ruling elite and the new opposition leaders. This fact, despite being discussed in public debate, did not yet lead to any significant change.

The second group is the current ruling elite. Or to put it simply – the power elite. This group is not limited to Alyaksandr Lukashenka's closest circle, that is the government and the heads of ministries. Such an interpretation would be too narrow and simplistic. This group also includes a vast array of officials. Not only do they form the Belarusian establishment but they also heavily depend on the current system of power. In fact, everything that they have has been provided to them by Lukashenka's regime. Thus, any system change could shake their positions and threaten their stability. Both their own and that of their families. Whether they follow their conscience or not is a secondary issue; of primary concern is their official and demonstrative loyalty to the system. There is a quite popular opinion, both in the West and in Belarus, that representatives of this group are not legitimate holders of power. Regardless of the validity of this viewpoint, it does not change the fact that this group does wield political power in Belarus.

One of the greatest hopes of 2020 was that the Belarusian system and its ruling elite would begin to crumble from within. At that time, we were pointing to all the scratches appearing on the system's foundation, stating that they would soon become cracks and that the regime would fall apart. It was also hoped that some officials and representatives of the security forces (*siloviki*) would move to the protesters' side and form a new critical mass which in the end would change Belarus. Today, we know that such a course of events did not take place.

The power elite, although clearly weakened after 2020, had nonetheless learned their lesson and carried on. Not only did this group not collapse, but in many ways it consolidated its power. In this consolidation we see a greater role played by the military, which is increasingly more active in political and decision-making processes, as well as more authoritarian tendencies in government decisions and activities than before. As a result, the Belarusian state has turned into a "besieged fortress", while members of its ruling elite have been continuously showing that they would not give a single inch. Hence, they have used massive and brutal repressions against their opponents, as well as a complete purge of the political and media field. These tactics deprived the opposition which remains in the country of the tools that would allow it to reach its audience and operate. The tightening of freedoms by the power elite will still be observed for a long time to come.

As stated before, the power elite has also learned lessons from the 2020 protests and has responded to them in a their own way. The best example here is the “constitutional referendum”, which was held in late February of this year. It allowed for yet another system change in Belarus (referenda with an aim to change the political system have been organised by Lukashenka since 1995). It empowered the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly, an extra-parliamentary body dominated by government supporters, by turning it into the highest representative body. As a result, we will quite likely see a rearrangement of Belarus’s political scene in favour of those who are in power. Expected amendments to the legislation on political parties will most likely mean the possibility of forming a wide, pro-government, quasi-opposition. The aim of this change will be to give the impression of a multiparty system.

Lastly, it should also be noted that in the last two years the Belarusian authorities have finally recognised the power of digital and social media and have started using them to their advantage. As a result, the quality of state propaganda has significantly improved, following the example of Russian propaganda.

### How not to repeat mistakes?

The third group I choose to call the new elite, which is, of course, not an objective term. Looking at this group as a whole, we can say that although it is still a very “young” player, its influence is considerable. Most importantly, the great expectations that were expressed regarding Belarusian political developments in 2020 were precisely related to the emergence of this new elite. As a group, it is made up of the representatives of democratic forces consolidated around one leader – Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. However, it should also be admitted that this group does not only have one face, even that of Tsikhanouskaya. It is made up of many politicians and organisations that were formed in 2020. They include the Office of Tsikhanouskaya, the National Anti-Crisis Management, the Coordination Council and many other initiatives. All these organisations generated huge public enthusiasm, however all of their leaders had to opt for working from abroad. In Belarus, they were doomed to lose their freedom.

The activity of the pro-democratic forces did not bring much-expected **change** within Belarus.

From the perspective of the last two years, we can see that the activity of this group, although impressive and respectable, did not bring much-expected change within Belarus. Instead, we see a certain disconnect in the activity of the new elite, who operate mainly in the realm of international relations and, very importantly,

in the digital sphere given the deterioration of political activities inside Belarus. This situation resulted in a decrease in protests, as well as brought on a wave of despair regarding the new leaders. Objectively speaking, such a course of events was unavoidable and resulted in the “internal migration” of many who were active in 2020. Not to mention those who were arrested or had to flee the country.

Unfortunately, we can also see emerging new conflicts within the new elite. They most often take place between Warsaw and Vilnius, which are the largest centres of the Belarusian political diaspora now. What is most worrisome, however, is that because of these conflicts some people have already started to believe that the new democratic elite may soon cease to exist. The risk of such a scenario is stressed now even more when everybody is more focused on Ukraine than Belarus.

Fortunately, the scenario of divided and marginalised new democratic forces did not come true. This is something worth noting. The aforementioned leaders and organisations, understanding the situation, decided to return to the conceptual assumptions of the common goals agreed in 2020. In August of this year, they established the United Transitional Cabinet with an aim to bring together various

The Belarusian reality means a country where the **status quo** of the political system has been preserved.

democratic organisations that share a common goal. The main question that evidently arises with regards to this body is whether it was formed too late? The answer of course can always be that it is better late than never. The leaders of the new elite have also repeatedly said that they are glad that constructive criticism has emerged within the opposition, that there is an “opposition to the opposition” that acts as a normal mechanism in democratic systems. While it is impossible to

disagree with such a statement, we should also keep in mind that these forces do not operate in a democratic and competitive system. Therefore, the new elite is faced with the challenge of not repeating the “mistakes of the old opposition” by marginalising its potential inside the country and becoming simply another Belarusian organisation in exile, operating from abroad.

### **An uncertain future**

These issues offer a general outlook of the Belarusian elite from today’s perspective. They show that at the moment the two most active and important actors are the ruling elite and the new elite. While making this statement, I try to refrain from the trap that analysts often fall into when analysing the situation in Belarus. This trap is simply a mismatch between our perceptions and the reality on the ground.





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One of the greatest hopes of 2020 was that the Belarusian system and its ruling elite would begin to crumble from within. At that time, we were pointing to all the scratches appearing on the system's foundation, stating that they would soon become cracks and that the regime would fall apart.


And that reality means a country where the status quo of the political system has been preserved.

Keeping this in mind, I distinguish three major factors that will affect the Belarusian elite in the near future. First, brutal as it may sound, we have to admit that life in Belarus goes on. As stated before, we underestimated the flexibility and adaptability of the ruling elite. Whether we like it or not, it is the group with the most influence in the domestic scene in Belarus, and it is the power elite that still holds all the cards. Second, it is important to keep in mind that political developments, after all, do not take place in a vacuum. For Belarus this means parliamentary and presidential elections in the next few years. No one doubts that the power elite is preparing for them and will do whatever it takes to maintain authority. That is why the new elite cannot ignore these “elections” and must prepare for them accordingly.

Third, we need to think about political life in the post-“constitutional referendum” Belarus. The “referendum” indeed passed somewhat unnoticed, mainly because it was held in February this year when everybody’s attention was on the war in Ukraine. This does not mean that we should no longer follow political develop-



ments in Belarus, especially once the stipulations of the “new” constitution take force. In this regard, it is important to pay attention to whether or not this new legal arrangement will indeed lead to the formation of a “controlled” opposition, with the old political parties gradually abolished. Such a scenario would clearly further narrow the possibility of their legal operations. Evidently, the system is moving in this direction. However, earlier speculation that the regime, through constitutional engineering, is preparing the ground for a planned transition of power, is rather unlikely to come true.

The war in Ukraine will be crucial for further developments and the actors that play key roles in them. The future of both the power elite and the new elite may depend on how Belarus manoeuvres between Russia and Ukraine, and especially whether it officially enters the war or not. Given what took place in February 2022, this last question points to great uncertainty indeed. 

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# From utopia to dystopia

JUSTYNA OŁĘDZKA

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In August 2020 the whole world learned that **there are two “Belaruses”**. One is the utopian imaginary of “Lukashism” headed by a soft dictator, and the other is a dystopian, oppressive state in which the greatest enemy of power is a society fighting for their rights. From the term “the dictatorship of prosperity”, only “dictatorship” remained and “prosperity” was enjoyed only by members of the power elite who show absolute loyalty to the leader.

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Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s retention of power for 28 years was widely regarded – even considering the standards known from other post-Soviet states – as a phenomenon of its own. There is no place for any deep philosophy in his leadership because the only goal of this politician was to survive at any cost. For the story of Lukashenka is not the tale of a politician of great stature, whose political career is a streak of success translating into an increase in state power and the well-being of citizens. On the contrary, the last three decades of Belarus’s history have been that of mental, economic and political stagnation and regression, which were supposed to be compensated for by a propaganda narrative oozing from the monopolised media. It was the media’s power and effectiveness that made it possible to create the image of a utopian state with a society without aspirations satisfied with its leader. It was through propaganda that the “Imaginarium of Lukashenka” was built – a symbolic universe that the leader shared for many years with his devoted supporters and politically indifferent citizens.

## Authoritarian coma

What was Belarus created by Lukashenka like? In short, it could be defined as a maximally simplified world in which the key dogma states that the foundations of the socio-political order are determined only by the leader, and that the role of society is reduced to passive acceptance. For years, the pillars of “Lukashism” were determined by a key triad of ideas: the primacy of state identity over national identity, neo-Soviet historical policy and social conservatism. At times, these ideas were joined by a feigned “Belarusianisation”. Utopian Belarus turned out to be a state full of appearances, in which the leader only pretends to be great while enduring numerous humiliations and affronts from his closest ally. In order to preserve power, he even agreed effectively to be a “potato dictator” and “meme” his image. While there was a semblance of reformist readiness to follow the changing social and geopolitical circumstances, in reality the measures used in political practice were neither revealing nor innovative. On the contrary, they could be counted among the already tried-and-tested arsenal used by other satraps. This includes the marginalisation of the legislature, the subordination of power, the zeroing or abolition of term limits, the ritualisation of rigged elections, and pseudo-constitutional referenda. All the instruments used by the Lukashenka regime have previously been tested in Russia, Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan. Over the following decades,

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the instrumentalisation of law progressed in Belarus and its authority, like that of the state, virtually ceased to exist. However, this was only one manifestation of the widespread destruction of a political system that was gradually but systematically degenerating.

Throughout the years, the core of Lukashenka’s leadership legitimisation strategy was to continually convince Belarusians that, due to the peculiarities of the country’s geopolitical position and the nation’s dramatic history, the main understanding between the leader

and society should be based on stability. To be clear, this does not include prosperity, concerns for human and civil rights, or the possibility of individual self-fulfilment. Stability should be maintained at any cost. However, this fixation on stability, in reality, meant a conscious effort by the authorities to create permanent political and mental stagnation in society. As a result, Belarus slowly became the leader’s personal fiefdom and opposition protests became fewer and weaker. It was as if the belief that anything can ever change was gradually fading among Belarusians. They have learned how to live in a state without prospects, and how to survive in Lukashenka’s phantasmagoria. Some of them enthusiastically accepted this reality,

some in their powerlessness passively waited for change, and some chose a better life in exile or paid for their resistance with arrests and imprisonment.

A pervasive sense that there were few alternatives allowed Lukashenka to put the country into an “authoritarian coma”, in which all democratic tendencies were effectively halted. Another thing is that after 1994 this was relatively easy, as there was a lack of socio-political projects competing with Lukashism. Most worthwhile initiatives were short-lived and after a while swallowed up by the ideological vacuum left by the bankruptcy of communist ideology. In turn, the authorities deliberately perpetuated beliefs in society that all forms of political participation should be channelled into state-controlled organisations. Minsk also promoted the idea that elections are only ritualistic and plebiscitary and that the key to the happiness of Belarus and Belarusians is the survival of the personalist regime, in other words: Lukashism. Thus, a project of gradual modernisation without democratisation was pursued, which in practice meant the creation of a whole system of interconnected political and economic vessels, the bloodstream of which was the redistribution of wealth carried out at Lukashenka’s own discretion. The beneficiary of successive tranches of credit support from Moscow, the IMF, the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, or the EU was not the Belarusian people, but the power elite headed by the president. Intensively promoted activities in the international field, such as the mock multi-vector nature of Belarus’s foreign policy, in fact helped to prop up the personalist authoritarian regime. The propaganda-generated construct of a “dictatorship of prosperity” in a stable patrimonial state, has been reinforced for years by myths circulating in the public space (effectively fuelled by the president himself) about the extremely high level of legitimacy Lukashenka’s leadership has managed to maintain in society thanks to his economic successes.

## Two Belaruses

In August 2020, not only Belarusian citizens, but the whole world learned that there are in fact two Belaruses. One is the utopian imaginary of Lukashism headed by a soft dictator, and the other is a dystopian, oppressive state in which the greatest enemy of power is a society fighting for their rights. From the term “the dictatorship of prosperity”, only “dictatorship” remained and “prosperity” was enjoyed only by members of the power elite who show absolute loyalty to the leader.

The deliberate exclusion of individuals or entire social groups from this Imaginarium created by Lukashenka is characteristic of the erosion of legitimacy, which indicates a short-term or permanent break in the legitimacy chain. By consciously

ceasing to internalise the values, beliefs or standards of behaviour imposed by the leader, an increasing number of Belarusians are building an autonomous space resistant to Lukashenka's propaganda. As a result, they stop engaging with power-controlled groups and structures. It is now not uncommon for them to create with others alternative spaces for political participation, both within Belarus and in exile. The most advanced expression of such activity is the creation of a Belarusian government-in-exile. Today, some part of the Belarusian diaspora even believes that their homeland has ceased to be independent and has, in fact, been annexed by the Russian Federation.

The high level of oppression by the Belarusian regime is largely preventive – they use blind terror, hoping for a chilling effect.

The regime learnt relatively quickly how to respond to such outbreaks of legitimacy erosion, and significant adjustments to Lukashenka's survival strategy emerged. One of the key instruments to minimise the risk of delegitimisation has been the repression of the opposition civil society. This high level of oppression enforced by

the regime is largely preventive – the authorities use blind terror, hoping for a chilling effect. A wave of arrests, Bolshevik-style show trials and long prison sentences followed. To this day, physical, psychological and economic violence is used against citizens. In addition to beatings, intimidation or rape, severe financial penalties are also applied. Those who are “inconvenient” to the authorities are dismissed from their jobs, removed from their destroyed and/or confiscated property, prevented from running private businesses and threatened with the termination of their parental rights. Overall, they have their professional and personal lives destroyed. Whoever is not with Lukashenka has become a “traitor”, “fascist”, “extremist”, “terrorist”, “servant of the West”, or a neo-Soviet “enemy of the people”. Further, the state police fight against all manifestations of “extremism” – opposition websites, stickers with the slogans “Sasha 3%” or “Luka” and any object in white-red-white colours. Even pairs of socks can now be considered “extremist”.

### **No longer a land of milk and honey**

One of the ways that the authoritarian system is consolidating itself is the growing implementation of multiple parallel social engineering projects. The belief that a perfectly obedient, controllable society can be created from the top down stems directly from the mentality and experience of the leader himself. Therefore, almost everything is normatively defined in Belarus today, and a constitutional referendum even adopted a legal obligation for citizens to take care of their health.


However, the Belarusian leader still lacks a new opening that would allow him to genuinely strengthen his position both in the power system and society. The successive ideological proposals he promotes document this conceptual regression. Indeed, it seems that Belarus is increasingly reverting to the past in its political, economic, historical and symbolic spheres.

Meanwhile, Lukashism, in the midst of a post-election internal crisis and an external crisis such as the Russian aggression against Ukraine, is trying to survive by simulating changes to the state's political system in a constitutional referendum. This is being done by introducing a new legislature that does not change the actual balance of power. The propaganda message promoted by the authorities is factually shallow and lacks finesse in its form. This is the newspeak according to which the state has to "overcome negative trends in the economy" and achieve a "stable, dynamic pace of development". Society also has to carry out tasks in a "comprehensive" and "responsible" manner. Power calls for inclusive social mobilisation in which citizens are presented not as passive elements but as full-fledged political subjects. However, Lukashenka declares "Mobilise everyone!" The state's harvest campaign, which includes potato and sugar beet digging and a corn and flax harvest, awaits eager Belarusian citizens – civil servants, students and schoolchildren – ready to be re-educated through hard work. As a reward, the leader prohibits further price rises and introduces "the obligation to unconditionally saturate the domestic market with goods and services". Such a message is of course reminiscent of the traditions of Soviet propaganda, but this is not the first time the Belarusian leader has sought to lower social tensions by serving Belarusians with empty promises.

In 2016, Lukashenka declared his willingness to implement structural reforms in the economy alongside the need to adapt the constitution to the changing geopolitical environment. All this appeared in the form of vague visions and was simply an attempt to buy time. This time, such a mechanism for escaping real change in the political, economic and social spheres will not work because, after 2020, Belarusian society completely lost confidence in the government-controlled mass media, especially as the Belarusian infosphere has become a Kremlin-controlled field of information confrontation. By exploiting the multifocal, cross-border, networked structure of the propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, Minsk has risen to become the main regional distributor of the Russian message. A similar process of subordination to the Russian narrative is taking place with the rapid securitisation of Belarus's historical policy. History is once again becoming a field of confrontation – according to the nomenclature used by Minsk and Moscow –

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played out on the “historical front”. No one will believe in the future of the utopian Imaginarium of Lukashenka anymore. Today’s Belarus is not a land of milk and honey, a peaceful land of conservative farmers and programmers. This is a country whose symbols have become the state detention centre on Akrestsina Street and the BELARUS 1523.3 MTZ tractor, given – like the country itself – as a birthday present to Vladimir Putin. 

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# The re-Sovietisation of Belarus

ALIAKSANDR PAPKO, KACPER WAŃCZYK

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The nature of the crisis in Belarus is the same as in other countries of the region, with the collapse of old Soviet structures in the economy, society, politics and ideology. Alyaksandr Lukashenka does not understand the urbanised modern society he is trying to rule. In order to re-establish control, his regime is trying to **move the society backwards**. Repressions will be extremely costly for Belarusian society, but Lukashenka's goal is unlikely to be achieved.

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The past two years saw growing pressure from western sanctions on the Belarusian regime. Each move Alyaksandr Lukashenka took since 2020 has further limited his room for manoeuvre. After each of his decisions – the brutal crackdown of the 2020 protests; the repressions that followed; the grounding of the Ryanair plane; and finally, the support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine – a new wave of sanctions was introduced. The World Bank assesses that Belarusian GDP in the first half of 2022 diminished by 4.2 per cent, and by the end of the year it will contract by 6.2 per cent. Lukashenka's answer to this loss of legitimacy and economic crisis is a re-Sovietisation of the economy and society. State interventions in the functioning of enterprises have increased. Mass repressions have imprisoned thousands of people and many have now fled the country. Indoctrination in schools is on the rise. Will all these measures reshape Belarusian society and make it loyal to the regime?



Photo: Ruslan Kalnitsky / Shutterstock

According to one estimate, the number of post-2020 Belarusian emigrants is around a quarter of a million people. This means that up to one-third of those who took part in the 2020 protests were forced to leave the country.

### Cutting ties with the West

After the European Union's sanctions in June of this year, the Belarusian economy can only count on the Russian market. At least in terms of the things that matter. The export of the essential elements of Belarus-EU trade, such as oil and metal or chemical products, is almost entirely blocked. Moreover, the sanctions have blocked traditional export routes of oil products and fertilisers through the Baltic states since the beginning of the year. Finally, the state's participation in the aggression against Ukraine closed the single largest market for Belarusian oil products. Kyiv had not restricted this import, even though it verbally supported EU sanctions against Minsk. Lukashenka's support for Russian aggression was thus the last straw that finally changed the Ukrainian position.

Not surprisingly, Minsk's reaction was to turn to its only ally – Moscow – as Lukashenka frequently does. Russia has always been Belarus's crucial economic partner, yet the post-2020 developments have brought the two countries even closer together. Despite the fact that they both recently restricted the publication of detailed trade exchange data, some information suggests that Belarusian exporters are using Russian Baltic ports to transport goods that were earlier sent through Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia. In this way, some oil products found their way to the Russian market.

According to Belarusian statistical data, Russia is the destination for around 58 per cent of Belarus's foreign trade. This information indeed gives the impression of a return to the old days, when Belarus was a part of the Soviet Union. According to Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko, Russia is also about to loan over 1.5 billion US dollars to finance import substitution projects in Belarus. According to him, seven projects worth about 330 million US dollars will be launched in the machine industry before the year's end. This indicates that Moscow counts on Minsk's help in replacing imported goods that Russia has lost due to the sanctions.

Yet, it is still difficult to assess whether this policy will be enough to compensate for the loss of the traditional market and the growth of transport costs. While Belarusian electronic appliances have the potential to expand their share of the Russian market, another important product – Belarusian trucks – is losing ground to Chinese ones. Equally important is that Belarusian agriculture, being the source of most exports to Russia, has been in crisis for many years. Therefore, a rise in their exports is also unlikely.

### **Hope for new markets?**

In the past, Lukashenka frequently tasked his subordinates with seeking new foreign markets for Belarusian goods. These attempts never resulted in substantial changes in the geographical structure of Belarusian exports. One reason is the tight connection to the Russian market described above. The other is the limited range of goods that Belarus can present to new partners.

To extend its foreign trade reach, Minsk has recently applied for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. However, the organisation rather focuses on security and political cooperation and does not support economic collaboration between its members. At the same time, as long as, for example, China remains interested in buying Belarusian fertilisers, one should not expect a meaningful growth in Belarusian machinery exports to other Asian countries.

Another project that the Belarusian authorities are advertising is the substitution of high-technology products currently under sanctions in Russia. In September this year, Lukashenka famously presented the "Belarusian laptop". However, he admitted that the machine was made with only 12 per cent of components produced domestically.

Minsk has always been known for its manual command of the economy. Yet, for a long time, Lukashenka was at least trying to keep up appearances and pretend that he is not the sole decision maker in this regard. In 2022 the gloves were taken off and now everything is clear, including the fact that Lukashenka introduced price

limits and blocked exports to stop food prices from rising. In addition, the authorities have continued to increase all kinds of taxes, especially those aimed at influential private companies (in Belarus these are the ones that actually make a profit).

Other ways of tightening control over the economy are connected to the domestic political situation. The ongoing repressions against those who oppose the regime and Belarus's participation in the Russian aggression in Ukraine further led the authorities to introduce some new forms of supervision over society. Lukashenka hoped that this would help him better control the domestic economy. In October 2022 he ordered local authorities to start controlling the movement of highly qualified employees of state-owned farms, where a lack of skilled labour is acute. As a result, no manager or specialist in these places can quit their job without the permission of a local executive. Lukashenka believes that such control should also be introduced in the education and healthcare sectors.

The authorities have also been restricting the functioning of private social services. As a result, many private schools have been closed or forced to renew their educational certificates. Parents whose children attended such facilities have thus been told to move their kids to state institutions. The rationale behind these decisions has been explained by the Minister of Education Andrei Ivanets, who stated that many private schools had relations with "countries unfriendly to Belarus". A similar process has been taking place with regards to private medical services. The authorities began to conduct more frequent and thorough controls of such places, aiming to close as many as possible. To justify his deeds, in June this year Lukashenka said that "No one is going to make money on people's health". He claims that more resources could be directed to other parts of the economy by limiting private social services.

### **Back to Soviet times**

The level of repressions that we are seeing in Belarus now has not been recorded since the time of Stalin. Based on the estimations of the human rights centre *Viasna*, in October 2022 there were more than 1,300 political prisoners jailed in Belarus. Every day police forces detain around 14 people for political reasons. Between one to two of them are subsequently punished under criminal law and are sentenced to several years in prison. The scale of these repressions is so large that even the human rights activists admit that they are able to register only up to half of all "political" detentions. Therefore, the true number of political prisoners in Belarus could even be as high as 4,000. This would mean that dissidents account for more than 12 per cent of the entire Belarusian prison population.

A survey conducted in August 2022 by the Centre of New Ideas among the opponents of the regime has shown that six per cent of respondents had relatives and close friends in prison. One-third of the respondents had prisoners among more distant colleagues. According to another study conducted by the sociologist Andrei Vardamatski, every fifth Belarusian has a close or distant friend among those who had to flee the country. Vardamatski estimates that the number of post-2020 emigrants is around a quarter of a million people. This means that up to one-third of those who took part in the 2020 protests were forced to leave the country. This is not surprising given the large purges that took place in the public sector and mass layoffs that took place on political grounds, affecting up to 200,000 people. This is every tenth person employed in public administration, schools and universities.

After the mass protests which took place in reaction to the 2020 elections, Lukashenka's regime banned the activities of about one thousand NGOs. This was a clear attempt to move Belarusian society back to Soviet times, where only initiatives serving state power were allowed. The remnants of the independent trade unions still existing in 2022 were abolished in July of this year. The Supreme Court liquidated the last existing organisations of this kind.

The regime has declared almost all independent media "extremist organisations". As a result, the majority of journalists have moved to neighbouring countries and restarted their work from abroad. More than 30 media employees remain imprisoned. The same is true for the majority of independent social and economic research centres. In addition, the authorities have introduced a series of regulations that have also strengthened control over various professions, especially those that have large social impact.

In addition, many Soviet practices have been reintroduced in public schools. For example, newly adopted instruction on extracurricular activities requires classroom teachers to monitor their pupils and "cultivate their feeling of patriotism". In line with this concept, at the beginning of each week pupils are obliged to listen to the national anthem. Military and patriotic education is now a school subject taught by newly hired teachers. As part of this education, pupils attend classes on "patriotic subjects" once a month. These lectures are often given by invited police officers or state officials. Finally, in 2023 another Soviet tradition will be restored. Schoolchildren will have to start wearing uniforms.

### **Are the repressions working?**

Repressions on such a large scale have indeed weakened society's ability to oppose the authoritarian regime. Research conducted in 2022 by the Centre of New



Ideas shows that more than half of regime opponents try to escape from their traumatic experiences, focusing on work and family life. One-third have decreased their consumption of news.

Sociologists gathered around another research project called the Belarus Change Tracker point out that two years after the early stage of the protests, the dividing lines within Belarusian society have stabilised. As a result, we can see that less than half of Belarusian citizens are now willing to accept the existing authoritarian system, while slightly more than half remain sceptical or opposed to the regime. Similar “stabilisation” is also visible in the world of mass media. Thus, in August 2022 Belarusian state-owned TV and Moscow-controlled media had the same popularity as independent Belarusian media working from abroad.

Nevertheless, about 60 per cent of regime opponents admit that they still discuss political developments with their friends. This means that the social networks built in 2020 are still in place. People do not regret their participation in the protests. They perceived the events which took place in 2020 as the emergence of a new Belarusian political nation. They do not believe that the revolution has ended. Moreover, while in 2020 less than five per cent of Lukashenka’s opponents accepted violent methods as a means of political struggle, two years later more than half of them see violent protests as acceptable.

### **The challenge of re-Sovietisation**

To re-establish Soviet social and economic structures, Lukashenka is looking for new resources. He would probably like to have 75 per cent of citizens employed in the public sector, as was the case 30 years ago. However, currently only half of Belarusians are employed by the state and that is mainly in healthcare, education, the police, the military and public administration. The number of employees in state-owned factories is in constant decline. Furthermore, since 2020 we have not seen state-owned enterprises recruiting new staff. Truth be told, these Soviet-era enterprises are not designed to make profits and in order to expand they need enormous funds. And this is something the Belarusian authorities have been seriously lacking.

There is one more element which was crucial to the existence of the Soviet system and which Lukashenka is missing: the much-developed Soviet social engineering which could provide a tempting ideology and a vision of the future. Lukashenka has clearly lost this charm as evidently today the Belarusian people no longer understand his speeches about the greatness of the long-dead USSR, “best management practices” from the communist times or his advice on how to manage collective

farms. The majority of Belarusians now represent a very different generation. They grew up after the fall of communism, in big cities, in independent Belarus.

Attempts to brainwash the younger generation and “strengthen discipline” in the public sector will thus have limited effects. For the moment, the additional “ideological” work has fallen on the shoulders of low paid, stressed-out and therefore increasingly scarce and incompetent personnel. Attempts to get people “attached” to agriculture, education or healthcare by forbidding them to quit their jobs will only have the opposite effect. The university admissions for these professions will gradually go down, increasing the deficit of highly skilled employees. Mass layoffs on political grounds may have produced some career opportunities for those who want to work in state media, schools and universities. However, the young careerists who get hired there do not seem to demonstrate talent and competence. Most of the “monitoring” and patriotic events that they are assigned to organise turn into senseless, routine activities which bring nothing more than increased paperwork.

Certainly, mass emigration has weakened the protest potential of Belarusian society and this has been a huge blow for the country’s human capital. Yet, at the same time, the migration of hundreds of thousands of entrepreneurial Belarusians to countries such as Poland and Lithuania has dramatically increased the people-to-people contact between the EU and Belarus. Belarusian NGOs and media also quickly learnt to work from abroad and help civic activists functioning almost clandestinely in Belarus. The same can be said about business. About four thousand Belarusian firms, which is one per cent of those functioning in Belarus, have registered in EU countries since 2020.

By cracking down on civil society and business, the regime is in fact fighting the supply of modern products, services and ideas. No matter what, Lukashenka cannot eliminate the demand for them. This issue continues to appear wherever the old Soviet system cannot meet the needs of a non-Soviet society. This includes the need for high-quality medicine, modern education, interesting recreation, independent media and an attractive national identity. The response to all these desires is thus offered by private companies and civic initiatives. Accordingly, in providing their services, they act either openly or without the knowledge of the regime.


### **How to help Belarusians?**

The nature of the crisis in Belarus is similar to what we see in other countries of the region. It is the long-term process of the collapse of old Soviet structures, be it in the economy, society, politics or ideology. Lukashenka does not understand the modern urban dwellers that he is desperately trying to rule. In order to re-es-

establish control over people, his regime has been trying to move the society backwards. Thus, even though repressions will be extremely costly for Belarusian society, Lukashenka is unlikely to achieve his goal. Terror can last for years, but the regime will exist only as long as it has financial resources for the security forces and the support of the Kremlin. What it will not have is the support of the people.

Clearly, the future of Belarus is also being decided on the battlefields in Ukraine. This fact does not mean that western governments and societies should wait for the end of the war to act in support of the Belarusian democratic forces. It is necessary to act now in order to help Belarusians build a new economy, a new political culture and a new identity, one that is not based on the Soviet past.

We should also do what we can to constrain Belarusian state-owned enterprises that serve the regime. It is thus necessary to simultaneously invest in human capital and the further development of the private economy in Belarus. It is already quite well known that the democratic upheaval which Belarus experienced in 2020 would not have been possible without a dynamic private sector and its developed contacts with the West. It is thus necessary not to build additional visa barriers, but rather facilitate the employment of Belarusian healthcare workers, IT specialists and entrepreneurs in the European Union. Assistance should also be given to Belarusian youth so they can receive quality education in Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and other countries. There is no doubt that we should support Belarusian companies in the EU, especially if they plan to establish connections with people who are still in Belarus.

It is almost certain that even though Lukashenka's regime will try to break all ties with the West, relations with those who are in the country will still be possible because demand for contacts with the EU is high in Belarus. As stated before, Belarusian society has already outgrown its ageing Soviet-era authoritarian leader and craves a bright, new future. It wants nothing to do with the Soviet past. 

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# Belarusian language and culture

## Is the patient more alive than dead?

KATARZYNA BIELIAKOWA

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One of the ways to save the **Belarusian language** is to maintain courage in preserving and displaying the Belarusian identity. This includes pride in Belarusian history and language, which should be used especially in everyday life. Since it is nearly impossible to do this inside the country, perhaps the best place to start is within the Belarusian diaspora.

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The consistent and managed destruction of the Belarusian language and culture has become one of the hallmarks of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule and a distinctive feature of his regime's activities since 1996 (together with the increase in Russian influence). As a result, in today's Belarus, people who use the Belarusian language in their everyday life are discriminated against, while representatives of the Belarusian culture are persecuted. Belarusian citizens can be arrested for displaying their Belarusian identity in the streets of Minsk even when they speak Belarusian while offering guided tours, or wear socks with white-red-white stripes. This is the Belarusian reality today. Why is this happening and is it possible to stop these processes are questions asked by everyone who cares about the future of a sovereign Belarusian state and the freedom of the Belarusian people.

## Short renaissance

Belarus remains one of three post-Soviet countries (together with the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan) where the Russian language still has an official status. After centuries when (old) Belarusian was the language used on the territory of present-day Belarus under the rule of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it was replaced by Russian in the late 18th century when the area was taken over by the Russian Empire.

In more contemporary times, Belarusian became the official state language only in 1990, when the Supreme Soviet of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic passed a law on languages to gradually increase the prestige and use of Belarusian. This was followed by the creation of a National Language Programme to support this endeavour. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Belarus's independence, the status of the Belarusian language was further reinforced by the 1994 Constitution (Article 17). This declared it to be the sole official language of the newly independent state, though Russian was given the status of the "language of inter-ethnic communication". In addition, article 28 of the 1992–94 Law on Language in the Republic of Belarus proposed that the Belarusian language be used in the sphere of culture. Thus, we can say that the early 1990s was an exceptional period for the Belarusian language renaissance but, unfortunately, it proved to be too short.

The controversial 1995 referendum organised by Lukashenka not only altered the system of separation of political power in the country but also introduced an "insignificant" change with regards to language. Namely, as a result of this law Russian became the second official language of Belarus. Since then, the two languages

The early 1990s was an exceptional period for the **Belarusian language** renaissance but, it proved to be too short.

are considered equal, however only in theory. It is indeed quite symbolic that the first referendum which expanded the powers of the president also deprived the Belarusian language of its status as the sole state language. In the same way, the main symbols of Belarus's independence – the coat of arms (the *Pahonia*) and white-red-white flag – were replaced with Soviet-era symbols which represent the times of autocracy and repressive ideology.

The Belarusian people, who had no earlier experience of participating in political life, voted for the return of the Russian language largely because the usage of Belarusian was often looked down on in society (it was rather spoken in the villages than by the urban elite). In the same way, they opted for the return of the Soviet-era symbols that were better known to them compared to the old emblems from the times of the Grand Duchy. Evidently, symbols are not just meaningless

images – their selection can also offer an insight into social sentiments, in this case Soviet nostalgia. However, we cannot say that in this regard Belarus is alone in reassessing the past. Indeed, it is sufficient to take a look at other countries in the region, including Belarus’s neighbours (specifically Latvia and Lithuania) and their decommunisation attempts.

There is no doubt that the stipulations of the 1995 referendum presented the first serious barriers to the development of the Belarusian language. As a result of this popular vote, Belarusian ceased to be used in legislation, even though it is stated in the law that at least 50 per cent of the state’s legal acts should be written in Belarusian. So far, the republic’s 2006 Code on Culture has been the first and only legislative act written in Belarusian (out of 26 codes) and only eight codes in total had been officially translated into Belarusian by April 2021. Indicatively, the 2006 code emphasises the “priority of development of the Belarusian national culture and recognition of the Belarusian language as one of the factors shaping national mentality”. Practice yet shows that these are empty words, even if the authorities attempt to show some recognition of the importance of the Belarusian language and culture by proposing a list of organisations responsible for its development. These groups include museums, educational institutions, theatres, etc. Yet again, these organisations also use Belarusian very rarely, and this can be noted even by looking at their official webpages.

Between 2012 to 2018, as many as 482 Belarusian language schools were closed down.

### **The challenge of preserving language and culture**

The situation in the educational system is very dire. Between 2012 to 2018, as many as 482 Belarusian language schools were closed down. Russian thus remains the primary language of education and is used even to teach courses on Belarusian history. The situation in academia is even worse. In fact, there are only a few places in the whole country where Belarusian is the language of instruction. The majority of them are actually the departments of Belarusian language and culture. Thus, an overwhelming majority of students, even if they obtained secondary education in Belarusian, have no choice but to use Russian at universities, no matter which degree they decide to pursue. Russian is also the language used by the academic staff. All this shows that Belarusian academia still carries the legacy of the Soviet times and does not participate in European structures or models of higher education. Instead, the point of reference is Russia and its academic institutions.



The publishing market also reflects the difficulties faced by speakers of the Belarusian language. A mere 12 per cent of books published in Belarus are in Belarusian. These are mainly school textbooks. Since 2020, publishing companies that printed Belarusian-language books have been shut down. Many owners and workers of private bookshops have been persecuted by the authorities and have been forced to leave the country and re-open their businesses abroad. There is also no state policy on translating books into Belarusian. Thus, in recent years all translations of popular foreign literature into Belarusian have been financed by community collections. This fact also illustrates the divide that exists between civil society and the state regarding the Belarusian language and culture: people are trying to save what is being destroyed by the state.

The preservation of Belarusian art remains another challenge, which can also be explained by economic factors. In other words, many artists know all too well that there are not too many opportunities for them to earn money (in Belarus or abroad) by performing in Belarusian. In this context, it is indeed quite noteworthy that some rock bands still write their songs in the Belarusian language.

### **Unprecedented political pressure**

The political and social processes that have taken place in Belarus since 2020 have demonstrated a growing disconnect between the Belarusian people and the regime. The Belarusian authorities have become more hostile towards everything Belarusian. As a result, there have been unprecedented repressions of prominent artists and educators, who fight to preserve the national idea, national symbols, Belarusian language and overall – freedom.

Despite the fact that because of the repressions the protests ended in the second half of 2020, layoffs of cultural workers have continued to take place, and in the second half of 2021 they intensified. Many employees in cultural institutions were fired for political reasons, although this was done in a very underhanded way. Officially, it was declared that there will be no mass layoffs. Instead, employees were terminating their contracts (in agreement with the employer). Throughout this process, special “attention” was paid to Belarusian-speaking cultural activists.

Other forms of discrimination against cultural representatives include searches, raids, the confiscation of electronic devices, administrative and criminal prosecution, detention in poor pre-trial facilities without access to correspondence and communication with relatives and friends, the creation of a cultural activists “black-list” (people on such a list cannot organise concerts or any other cultural events), and the removal of anti-regime writers from school curricula. Books by authors

who speak and write in Belarusian have also been added to lists of “extremist materials”. Among them is Anatoly Tarasau’s *Short Course on the History of Belarus*. There are also books about Belarusian symbols on these lists, as well as those authored by writers who were forced to leave the country and publish their books abroad (e.g. *Dogs of Europe* by Alhierd Bacharevič).

As of October 2022, there are 1,344 political prisoners in Belarus. Many of them are cultural activists, poets, writers, musicians, actors, artists, teachers, dancers, literary scholars, librarians and culture managers. Most of them were sentenced to imprisonment for a period of one to 14 years. In addition, since 2020 we have seen unprecedented pressure put on non-governmental organisations active in the cultural field. Many of these organisations have already been shut down – as of September 2022 at least 77 have suffered this fate. Among them was the respected Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society. It was one of the oldest NGOs in Belarus whose mission was the revival of the Belarusian language.


### **Invisible occupation**

The most recent large wave of repressions began after February 24th 2022, which is the day when the Russian Federation began, also from the territory of Belarus, its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These repressions were directed against those Belarusian artists, cultural figures and activists who opposed the war in Ukraine and the role Belarus has played in this war. These people recognised that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is actually an implementation of Russian policy against both Ukraine and Belarus. This policy has been made clear, on many occasions, by Vladimir Putin, especially when he stated that Ukraine and Belarus are not “real nations” and as such do not deserve to be independent states. In this viewpoint, Russian language and culture should dominate and replace those of its two neighbours. If we can say that in Ukraine this idea resulted in a war, in Belarus it is taking the form of an invisible occupation, where Russian language and culture are supported by Lukashenka’s regime.

However, since the outbreak of the war more and more Belarusians have started to come to an understanding that they are in the same position as their southern neighbour. Therefore, they are now convinced that it is worth preserving what has not yet been destroyed by the regime and the “big brother”.

In my view, one of the ways to save the Belarusian language is to maintain courage in preserving and displaying the Belarusian identity. This includes pride in Belarusian history and language, which should be used especially in everyday life. An example to follow could be that of the Belarusian diaspora. Its representatives

organise concerts but also promote films, performances and TV programmes for children that are in the Belarusian language. They have also opened (or re-opened) Belarusian book shops and publishing houses of Belarusian books abroad, as well as established language clubs. They do this to help preserve and promote the Belarusian culture, but they also do it for themselves.

Naturally, all of the democratic forces should pay special attention to cultural and language issues, which will be of key importance once the country is free again. The rebirth of the Czech language in the 20th century will offer a good example for the new democratic authorities. Once the new Czechoslovak republic was established after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech language returned to the public sphere after centuries of German language domination. This was thanks to the political will of the republic's political class but also that of Czech society. This example also shows that there can be no "choice" when it comes to what should come first: regaining freedom or preserving the native language and culture. We cannot and should not choose between these three elements. We need them all. 

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# Neo-totalitarianism as a new political reality in Belarus

PAVEL USOV

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The large shift that has taken place within Belarusian society has illustrated both a high demand for change and the loss of broad support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka. This has led the ruling elite to realise that the **regime can no longer operate in the same conditions** it had pre-2020. Serious restructuring was thus necessary to ensure that the regime maintains its overall control of the state and counters any form of anti-system civic activity.

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The political system in Belarus has undergone a series of changes since Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994. Over this period of 28 years it has evolved from a hybrid regime, which included elements of façade democracy, to a neo-totalitarian one. This transformation was possible because of changes that had taken place within society and the state, and which in the end allowed for the formation of new authoritarian institutions, practices and methods. It also resulted in the restriction, or complete destruction, of democratic participation and the elimination of people's autonomy in the political process. By 2022, the Belarusian system of state power has reached the level of absolute control, while the regime adopted a model which we call neo-totalitarian.

## **(Neo)totalitarianism**

The definition of (neo)totalitarianism refers to the form of the highest political supervision by the state over its institutions and social groups. It is aimed at strengthening the existing power structure through the elimination of internal threats. This can be achieved with legal (from the point of view of those in power) and illegal tools. These instruments can range from court hearings to direct physical violence applied by state structures against citizens or social groups that are perceived as threats to the regime.

(Neo)totalitarian supervision is also inclined to a long-term policy of ideological expansion and information control. It thus envisions the dismantling of non-governmental organisations and opts for the maximum restriction of civil liberties. In line with these assumptions, the Belarusian regime has embarked on the process of eliminating all kinds of civic activities that it perceives to be unfavourable to the legitimacy and stabilisation of the political system. This process, in turn, has led to a visible simplification of political life and social reality. In other words, the fewer social and political activities or initiatives that are organised, the easier it is to exert control over political life. In this situation, it is also easier for the regime to steer the society towards a preferred type of political behaviour and emotions.

Belarus's fast transformation in the (neo)totalitarian direction can be also explained by the course of the most recent crisis (first electoral, then political). It started during the 2020 presidential elections, when it became evident that Lukashenka decided to forge the results of the vote. This crisis, which started with mass mobilisation and protests, clearly showed that there is a real threat to Lukashenka's power. The response of the regime at that time was to apply military methods against those who opposed it.

The militarisation of politics which took place in the aftermath of the August 2020 elections marked the beginning of a transition towards the new political model. By then, it was already clear that with the high level of social discontent the regime could no longer rely on its earlier semi-democratic mechanisms. Lukashenka knew all too well that the only way to keep the situation under control was to engage with the repressive security apparatus and use violence against those who protest. These new methods of state control over society were eventually legalised by the referendum organised on February 27th 2022.

It is evident that despite the repressions and widespread terror, Lukashenka is a weak leader and there is a deep disconnect between society and the state. This is also why he opted for a systemic restructuring of the state and its institutions. However, practice shows that authoritarian systems, despite their reliance on force, repressions and forgeries, need some form of social support. It is said that the level

of guaranteed support should equal around 30 to 40 per cent of voters. In addition, they need devoted loyalists in the state's bureaucratic and security apparatus.

### **Façade democracy and hybrid practices**

Under Lukashenka, Belarus has seen a number of crises which have made a serious impact on the structure and functions of its political system. Almost all the presidential elections that took place in Belarus in this century (2001, 2006, 2010) were accompanied by protests against vote fraud. The reaction of the authorities has always been repressions against the participants and civil society at large. The noose around non-governmental organisations and the opposition as a whole was tightened as a result. These actions were followed by an increase in the politicisation and “ideologisation” of the education system, as well as greater control of labour unions and restrictions on independent media and the information space.

Throughout almost the whole period of Lukashenka's presidency, the majority of society remained indifferent to politics, also treating the opposition with great distrust. The crises that occurred in reaction to subsequent elections did not seriously affect Lukashenka's position nor the integrity of the system. Therefore, the regime did not need to abandon its “democratic tools” and continued to pursue the so-called façade democracy. The lack of systemic change also allowed Minsk to avoid pursuing repressions and state terror. Once the crises were over, a return to some form of hybrid practices was possible.

Thanks to these few elements of democracy, even if they were used for propaganda and manipulation purposes, a bit of freedom and autonomy was afforded to civil society. Also faced with a favourable geopolitical context, the Belarusian regime was soon described as “authoritarianism with a human face”. Thanks to all this and the myth that Lukashenka is the guarantor of the country's stability and independence, the regime was allowed to engage in dialogue with the West.

These aforementioned democratic elements of Lukashenka's authoritarian rule not only served as a basis for the legitimacy of his power but also gave the illusion that political participation and justice were present in Belarus. This allowed for the model of façade democracy to become rooted in the system for a long time. It allowed opposition parties to operate and participate in elections at all levels even though it is also true that they were used by the authorities as part of their political manipulation. Such was the case with Tatsiana Korotkevich, the pseudo-op-

Throughout almost the whole period of Lukashenka's presidency, the majority of society remained **indifferent** to politics.

position candidate with the “Tell the Truth” organisation, who participated in the 2015 presidential elections.

In the country’s façade democracy, civil society organisations were allowed to operate alongside some independent media outlets (for example Radio Svaboda, European Radio for Belarus, Belsat, the opposition publishing houses *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva*, etc.), which even enjoyed some degree of editorial freedom. There was unregulated access to various alternative internet-based resources, especially the website *Tut.by*, which was an online publication that did not necessarily position itself as an opposition medium but which, nonetheless, played an important role during the last political crisis, especially in its early phase. Blogs were another form of online activity that proved effective in the consolidation and coordination of protests. There was some freedom in the area of culture and ideas as well as some degree of pluralism in political and ideological debates. As a result, we had Lukashenka’s Soviet ideology, a pro-Russian (that of the “Russian world”) outlook and the national-democratic discourse of the opposition. Finally, but also importantly, some degree of private initiative in the economic sphere was permitted.

### An unprecedented year

As argued above, until 2020, despite the obvious political and ideological control of the state, there was some degree of freedom in Belarus. This was especially true with regards to the circulation of alternative information. As a result, opposition politicians could be heard by society and could even access, albeit unsuccessfully, the procedures of the “façade democracy”. Additionally, in crisis situations, such as the spring and summer of 2020, all of these instruments and processes al-

Until 2020, despite the obvious political and ideological control of the state, there was some degree of freedom in Belarus.

lowed for a fairly rapid mobilisation of society against the regime. As such, they led to the destabilisation of the entire system.

In fact, the 2020 protests and crisis differed significantly from all previous ones for many reasons. First, the political activity that was observed in Belarus in 2020 went beyond the boundaries of an exclusively “opposition electorate”. Second, the protests were a result of rapid politicisation and the involvement of a large part of society in political events. Third, political activity and mobilisation moved outside Minsk and reached peripheral localities. Fourth, mass protests took place in many cities throughout Belarus. Fifth, broad support for opposition candidates was visible at every stage of the election pro-



cess: registration, signature collection and voting. Sixth, the ideological sphere of the state eventually started to disintegrate following open criticism of the regime by reputable religious organisations. Last but not least, the bureaucracy and power apparatus also began to disintegrate as a result of disloyalty, sabotage or simply the outflow of personnel.

Thus, the large shift that had taken place within Belarusian society that illustrated its high demand for change, on the one hand, and the loss of Lukashenka's broad support, on the other hand, led the ruling elite to reach the conclusion that it can no longer operate in the same conditions. Its survival now required a complete rejection of any (including façade) forms of democratic participation and autonomy within civil society. Serious restructuring was thus necessary to ensure that the regime maintained overall control of the state. To achieve this, it would have to apply repressions to counter any form of anti-system civic activity.

Many institutions created during the 28 years of Lukashenka's rule were meant to support and cement the political system. They included agencies of the bureaucratic and repressive state apparatus, the so-called ideological and political "vertical", many pro-government organisations and the state's entire system of indoctrination. Altogether, they allowed for a rapid defence against the crisis in 2020 and subsequent restructuring and readjustment of the state. Needless to say, the Russian Federation played an important role in this process. An assessment of the Kremlin's role and influence in Belarus's political crises is worth an article in its own right.

### **Terror and repressions**

All non-democratic regimes rely on methods of violence and repressions against political opponents and critical citizens. Lukashenka's regime is no different in this regard. It also resorts to repressions during political crises, however before 2020 they were not on a scale that we are seeing now. In fact, we can say that from 2020 to 2022 the functioning of Lukashenka's regime was almost entirely based on the implementation of repressive practices against citizens. Looking to the future, we can also say that all available indicators suggest that the authorities have no intentions of abandoning their current policy of terror.

Matter-of-factly, terror and repression have become the key instruments of domestic policy in Belarus. This is evidenced both by the functioning of the repressive state and security structures, which use all available resources to destroy the political opposition, and the further restrictions within criminal and administrative legislation. The purpose of these new laws is to create a formal basis for the implementation of repressions. As a result, a large infrastructure of terror has al-

ready been created in Belarus. This includes the state security committee, the ministry of internal affairs (the main directorate for combating organised crime and corruption), the prosecutor general's office and the investigative committee. The goal of these institutions is to eliminate all political threats. In addition, a network of provocateurs and informants has been created and is actively involved in identifying and eliminating all kinds of threats to the regime.

The widespread political terror is designed to ensure the following: an atmosphere of fear in society in order to prevent the potential mobilisation of citizens; stop certain groups and individuals from undertaking political and intellectual activities through arrests and demonstrative long-term imprisonment; push out the passionate part of the population, which grew in number in 2020, and which constitutes a threat to the regime also beyond the state borders; and create an information vacuum to isolate society through the destruction of the internet, which is the main tool of internal communication and societal mobilisation. Here the point is not only to block and take down websites and online publications, but also to control the use of information. Restrictions also help to consolidate the bureaucracy and law enforcement apparatus through the identification and elimination of disloyal employees.


### **“Re-ideologisation”**

The direct result of the introduced policy of state terror is the consolidation of the political space. If earlier the regime allowed for the existence of some form of civil society to show its “managed democracy” in action, in the current (neo)totalitarian system there is no place for such elements. The (neo)totalitarian system allows for the existence of only those political actors who strengthen it. It is also worth noting the changes which are taking place within the system itself. Specifically, we can now observe a profound psychological and mental transformation among all representatives of the power structure. This is translating into a complete abandonment of basic moral norms, as we can see in their direct calls to murder political opponents. These calls for violence are also evidenced in the unmotivated destruction of people's premises and living spaces.

Another element that clearly serves the consolidation of totalitarian practices is the intensified process of re-ideologisation in political and public institutions. The term re-ideologisation refers to the formation of a unified information and ideological space within society, as well as forcing citizens to accept the official interpretation of both historical facts and current events in Belarus and the world. Examples of this process include the authorities' attempts to destroy all alternative

sources of information, ideas and organisations. Thus, along with journalists and politicians, victims of repressions also include the intellectual elite. In this way, Lukashenka's regime seeks not only to achieve an information monopoly, but also the complete control of thought in order to hinder the process of building a new ideological system.

Through this intensive process of re-ideologisation, the regime is attempting the following: to provide a theoretical base for the new political system and create a need for maintaining order; introduce an ideological compass for the ruling elite and bureaucrats; rebuild Lukashenka's image as the protector of the country and its people; recharge the ideological vertical by including the education system within the indoctrination strategy; and create a new group of the so-called "state-people" (referring to state functionaries, employees of militia units, state employees, teachers and others) who work directly for Minsk. Speaking about institutional changes in the country, it is necessary to understand that neither the policy of repressions nor the reformatting of the system would have been possible without a certain amount of loyalty among a considerable part of the population. These people continue to serve the state apparatus and have joined the process of establishing the new system.

All said, it should be noted that at the moment the political system in Belarus is in the process of reformatting. New institutions and mechanisms, as well as forms of management that will serve the stability of the regime, are being used to achieve this. The war in Ukraine has contributed to the acceleration of this process, but also generated some new threats to Lukashenka's regime. This, in turn, is leading to the tightening of an already extremely limited number of freedoms. 

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# In anticipation of a new world

OLEKSANDR SHEVCHENKO

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Despite being neighbours, the **societies of Ukraine and Belarus** know very little about each other. The Kremlin's use of Belarusian land in its invasion of Ukraine suggests that this divide may persist into the future. However, it is clear that the two countries' democratic populations will have great potential for cooperation in the years ahead.

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The analytical group BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION was established at the end of 2020 at the University of Warsaw. At that moment it was already quite clear that the Belarusian revolution of 2020 would not lead to a quick change of power in Minsk. There was also not yet much talk of a full-scale war in Ukraine, which is Belarus's neighbour. In fact, analysts and observers who spoke about such a threat in 2021, or even early 2022, would usually add a disclaimer that in their view, the breakout of a war was a very unlikely scenario.

## **Not to irritate Lukashenka once again**

It is thus not surprising that in 2021 also for Ukraine the most important issues regarding Belarus were the further development of relations with the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the status of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her office. Throughout 2021 the authorities in Kyiv had maintained some ambivalence with regards to both. Thus, despite not recognising Lukashenka as president, the Ukrainian government refused to limit economic cooperation with his regime and

did not join all of the European Union's sanctions against Belarus as they could "harm Ukrainian-Belarusian economic relations".

In a similar vein Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the Belarusian opposition, was never invited to Ukraine, neither by the cabinet of ministers nor the office of the president (although invitations were sent by the Ukrainian parliament). Not a single meeting between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Tsikhanouskaya has ever taken place. Until the end of 2021, this behaviour by the Ukrainian authorities towards Minsk was explained as Kyiv's desire to maintain Belarusian-Ukrainian economic cooperation, which required not irritating Lukashenka.

These various issues were the main topics of inquiry for the Ukrainian members of our analytical group. We were trying to determine the economic importance of Belarus for Ukraine, looking for opportunities to build dialogue between Ukraine and the Belarusian democratic society. At the same time, we recognised the unwillingness of the Ukrainian authorities to aggravate relations with the Lukashenka regime.

The real turning point in our understanding of the situation came on November 30th 2021. On that day, Lukashenka recognised the annexed Crimea as legally Russian. To us it was a clear indication that the red line in Ukrainian-Belarusian relations had been crossed and that from now on relations with the Belarusian dictator would not be accepted by Ukrainian society. In the context of growing military tensions, caused by the accumulation of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border (including also in Belarusian territory), such a "burning of bridges" by Lukashenka looked ominous.

Today, knowing what happened on February 24th 2022 and later on, we can say that by November 2021, the decision to invade Ukraine had already been made in Moscow by then. Thus, Lukashenka, by recognising the annexed Crimea as Russian, speaking sharply against the Ukrainian authorities and later refusing to sell electricity to Ukraine, played the role that was assigned to him by the Kremlin. Lukashenka's destructive behaviour towards Ukraine at that time should have obviously raised additional questions among the Ukrainian authorities and society.

Not a single meeting between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has ever taken place.

### **The curse of war**

On February 24th 2022, all of the above issues became irrelevant. The entry of Russian troops into Ukraine from the territory of Belarus changed everything completely and likely for a very long time. It is also what will predetermine the na-



Photo: Julia Kireychik / Shutterstock

Ukraine's relations with a democratic Belarus should be seen as something that will determine the future of Eastern Europe.

ture of relations between Ukrainians and Belarusians for generations to come. Evidently, the nature of these relations will, in one way or another, be marked by the curse of the current war.

The reaction of the analytical group BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION to this new stage of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations included the publication of two texts. The first one is titled *From Silence to War*. It analyses the evolution of the Ukrainian government's policy towards Belarus. The second one, titled *Exiting Point Zero*, is an attempt to find the ground and foundations on which Belarusian-Ukrainian relations can be built in the future. The second of the two articles gained a significant amount of attention as it was republished by one of the most popular Ukrainian foreign policy websites, *Evropeyska Pravda* (Європейська правда).

There is no doubt that the further development of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, although it is difficult to predict during the still very active phase of the war, is one of the key issues for the future of the entire region of Eastern Europe. Based on numerous testimonies, it is now known that in the first hours of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many western heads of state were certain that Kyiv would fall rapidly, and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who had been offered an escape would indeed do just that. The majority of foreign diplomats stationed in Ukraine quickly left the country, with the notable exception of the Polish ambassador and a few others. This fact suggests that at the moment of the outbreak of the war, the

western world was mentally prepared for Ukraine to return to Russia's sphere of influence, a place where Belarus currently resides.

That is why it can now be argued that the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people to the Russian invasion has not only altered Russia's plans. It has also changed the scenario on which many western leaders internally agreed. In other words, the war in Ukraine has created a new geopolitical reality in Europe. A reality for which neither the East nor the West had been prepared.

### **A huge responsibility**

Regardless of how the situation develops further, this new reality has changed Europe and the world for a long time to come. Evidently, there is no return to the status quo before February 24th. For those of us who work in the world of academia, science or journalism, this entails a huge responsibility. There is no doubt that the future is also in our hands. Unlike before, we cannot only aim at predicting it but also attempt to shape it.

Further relations between Belarus and Ukraine, as well as the place of these two countries in the region and on the world stage, is thus one of the most important topics we should focus on now. As it has been already said, in late February and early March 2022 the Ukrainian people created a new geopolitical reality, for Europe and the world at large. As a result, they will continue to be the co-creators of the future world order and one of its most important participants. Their moral right to this role will be determined by their own deeds, but also by the esteem towards Ukrainian courage expressed by the societies in most European countries.

The situation of Belarusian society is completely different. The truth needs to be told that their biggest asset and hidden force is the large Belarusian diaspora spread throughout Europe (with their primary places of residence being Poland and Lithuania). Also importantly, although the 2020 protests showed us the true desires of the Belarusian people, Lukashenka, thanks to Russian support, has nonetheless managed to suppress the protests using ruthless methods.

We can thus assume that once the Russian influence in Belarus gets weaker (which could be the result of a political crisis within Russia after its defeat in Ukraine), those who are now in exile will take over power in Minsk. A truly independent, democratic Belarus thus will also further change the geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe and the continent as a whole.

In such a situation, Ukraine's relations with democratic Belarus should be seen as something that will determine the future of Eastern Europe. If this alliance is established with the aim of joint integration with the EU and NATO, its economic



and political potential will be comparable to that of the Visegrad Group. A strong commitment by the two countries to regional integration will further strengthen already existing trends and could provide further influence to regional leaders such as Poland. In such a case and against the current distrust of Ukrainians towards Belarusians, which arose after the invasion of Russian troops from the territory of Belarus and could last for quite a long time, the objective geopolitical interests of Ukraine and the democratic society of Belarus would at such a stage coincide.

### A new hallmark

Overall, the primary interest of both countries is the existence of each other as independent countries, outside the Russian zone of influence. For this reason, it is clear that some kind of a Belarusian-Ukrainian alliance, or maybe even a union, will eventually be established in the years to come. The level of its integration and specific foreign policy goals will depend on different external factors, which are unknown today. However, what is already known is that such an alliance will augment the political and economic influence of the Eastern European region and its position in the common future of Europe. It can now be stated with great confidence that this will be one of the hallmarks of the new geopolitical reality.


From this perspective, the task of the “Ukrainian” part of the work pursued by the analytical group BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION has been to find, or even create, the fundamental prerequisites for future Belarusian-Ukrainian cooperation. We have already identified great potential for such change in the future based on

The first challenge to overcome is the current **distrust** that the Ukrainians feel towards Belarusians.

the analysis of geopolitical, historical, cultural, social and economic factors. Evidently, the first challenge to overcome is the current distrust that the Ukrainians feel towards Belarusians.

Secondly, there needs to be an increase in the currently low level of knowledge among Ukrainians and Belarusians about each other. This is still a legacy of the Soviet times, when Belarusians and Ukrainians communicated with each other “through Moscow”

and got to know each other not through direct contacts, but through books, films and songs that were approved by the central Soviet authorities. At the same time, the 28 years of Lukashenka’s regime in Minsk explain why the majority of Ukrainians perceive Belarus as a pro-Russian country ruled by one dictator. The Belarusian culture has been systematically suppressed by the regime and remains little known in Ukraine.

Thus, referring to the potential of the Belarusian diaspora and its presence in many countries throughout Europe, we stress the need to create a framework for future cooperation between the two countries. This can already take the form of platforms for negotiations between the Ukrainian and Belarusian democratic societies today. This goal may look very ambitious and go beyond the political analysis of the current situation, as was the case at the beginning of our group's work. However, it reflects the spirit of the present time, which is a time of change and challenges. This era is a time of anticipation for a new world. A world whose shape also depends on our work now. 

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# *Gudijos istorija* for the 21st century

ANDRZEJ PUKSZTO

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With regards to Belarus, it is difficult to ask Lithuanians, or actually any other neighbouring society, about how they perceive Belarusians. The truth is that in this country we are **dealing with two entities**: the official Belarus and the Belarus of the opposition.

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At first glance, in the autumn of 2022, Vilnius has enjoyed a normal life. The capital of Lithuania has finally almost returned to its pre-pandemic pace of life. The majority of institutions are now working like they were before. The same can be said about small shops, coffee shops and restaurants. Even though the prices that you pay there are much higher. It is also not difficult to notice that some new places have been set up. For example, on Gediminas Avenue there is a bar called *Pahonia*, while Vilnius Street is now home to the Belarusian House, which is located near the main government building.

There are many flags and Ukrainian symbols around the city as well. But a careful eye will also spot the white-red-white Belarusian flags. Compared to the situation from two years ago, when words such as COVID-19 or SARS were completely unknown here, we can say that the Russian language is much more often heard in the streets and public spaces. Its users are usually Ukrainians, for example the refugees who have fled from Kharkiv, or Belarusians, who – in large numbers – arrived here from Minsk. But there are also representatives of the Russian minority in Lithuania.

Thinking about this new ethnic mosaic, I cannot help but think of an online post that was made by a well-known Lithuanian professor, the women's rights researcher Dalia Leinartė. In it she complained about the new reality, which in

her view, has been pushing the Lithuanian language out of the public space. As a remedy, she proposed that the language of communication with Ukrainian and Belarusian migrants in Lithuania should be English.

### Ukraine in focus but not instead of Belarus

To say that Ukrainian refugees and support for Ukraine have pushed the Belarusian issue out of the media agenda in Lithuania would not be true. For sure, there is less space for Belarus now, especially when we look at the situation from before February 24th 2022. First and foremost, the Vilnius office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya does not allow us to forget about our neighbouring state. Also importantly, the threats that Lukashenka poses towards our country do not leave us indifferent. In the summer he even encouraged all of Belarus's democratic neighbours (Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians and Ukrainians) to come to his state if they want to buy kasha grains and salt. By uttering these words, he was trying to say that the situation in these countries, which are either current or aspiring members of the EU, is now very dire and that they subsequently require help from neighbours. Also, the difference in prices between these countries and Belarus is significant and that is why people living in Poland and Lithuania are apparently flocking to the border to do their shopping in Belarus.

Lukashenka's anger with Lithuania is actually not ungrounded. Not only did our country take in Tsikhanouskaya in August 2020, after she had fled from Belarus in fear for her safety and life, but we also cut the majority of our economic ties with Belarus. The most painful for the Belarusian ruling elite was the halting of the transit of mineral fertilisers produced by Belaruskali, which is one of the biggest state-owned chemical producers in Belarus. Before, exported fertilisers from this plant were transported by Lithuanian Railways to the harbour in Klaipėda, thereby significantly enriching the Belarusian state coffers for many years.

To complete the picture, let me add that in early October of this year an individual named Mantas Danielius, who introduced himself as a lawyer and business consultant, was detained in Lithuania on charges of espionage. He was suspected of passing information he had been collecting among Belarusian refugees to the Belarusian KGB. Danielius's case is an illustration of the fact that Lukashenka's regime has not forgotten about Lithuania and despite reduced diplomatic relations it remains active with regards to our state.

To say that support for Ukraine has pushed the Belarusian issue out of the media agenda in **Lithuania** would not be true.

## Two Belarusian anniversaries

In autumn 2020, Lithuania became a destination for many Belarusian refugees, especially those who work in the IT and new technologies sectors. In a way, we can say that our country saw an opportunity in hosting world-famous firms from Minsk. However, we do not know to what extent these techies are supporting the Belarusian opposition. If they are, they are doing it quietly and secretly.

Understandably, the activity of Belarusian firms in Vilnius and other Lithuanian cities is less known to the public eye than the political activities of the representatives of the Belarusian opposition. For example, in early August of this year a conference called “New Belarus” was hosted in Vilnius. Its aim was to unite different opposition groups that are now active in Vilnius, Warsaw and other European cities.

Most importantly, by creating the government in exile, Tsikhanouskaya wanted to prove that her intention was not to waste time and that she has plans for Belarus’s future. At a banquet organised at Vilnius’s City Hall on the occasion of the second anniversary of the protests in Minsk, Tsikhanouskaya thanked the diplomatic services from the main European states and the US – but above all Lithuanian politicians and diplomats – for their support of democratic Belarus. On the other hand, the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the European Humanities University, which is often called a Belarusian university in exile, was poorly reported on by the media and stayed, in a way, in the background. This academic centre, which Lukashenka closed down back in 2004, found its place on Belarus’s opposition map. However, it does not have a good reputation among the Belarusians, even though the number of students attending it has increased in the last two years.


## Belarusian studies

The rapid changes in international affairs have made it fashionable to survey the residents of one country on their perceptions of those who live abroad and especially in their neighbouring states. With regards to Belarus, it is difficult to ask Lithuanians, or actually any other neighbouring society, about how they perceive Belarusians. The truth is that in this country we are dealing with two entities: the official Belarus and the Belarus of the opposition.

In regards to the opposition, it is worth mentioning the Congress of Belarusian Researchers, which has been active for ten years now. This international gathering of scholars specialising in Belarus is held every year in Kaunas, which was Lithuania’s interwar capital. It was only organised in Warsaw for one year. In 2022, like before, the event gathered a few thousand specialists from different academic ar-

eas, including linguistics, sociology, economics and others. They arrived in Kaunas from all over the world. The conference is organised by a small team of academics who work at the Vytautas Magnus University and researchers with a Belarusian organisation called Political Sphere. Initially criticised by the Lithuanian ministry of foreign affairs and Lithuanian media, in recent years this event has gathered the support of all of Lithuania's most important institutions.

One of the congress's organisers is historian Rūstis Kamuntavičius, who in 2021 published a now very popular book. It is the first concise history of Belarus in Lithuanian. Before him, nobody dared to prepare such a publication. In fact, many Lithuanian researchers were simply of the opinion that the history of Belarus overlaps with Lithuania's history, while others simply claimed that this was a topic that was not worthy of much attention.

Kamuntavičius provocatively called his book the *History of Gudia*, not Belarus, referring to the Old Lithuanian geographic term. There have already been two editions of the publication and new ones can be expected in the future. This shows that today Lithuanians are more and more interested in Belarus and are united in the conviction that without a democratic and pro-western Belarus, there can be no safe Lithuania. 

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