

Belarus Since the Rigged Presidential Elections

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In 2020, following the rigged elections, Belarus experienced the largest protests since the 1990s. Thousands of people went on the streets of Belarusian cities to protest, first against the electoral fraud and later against the brutality of the police breaking up the marches. The Belarusian authorities then unleashed a spiral of repression. Moreover, in exchange for security guarantees from Putin, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka agreed to deepen the military and economic integration with Russia. This, together with the collapse of relations with Western countries, resulted in a significant limitation of Belarus's sovereignty.

Elections 2020

There were many expectations and concerns about the presidential election in 2020. The 2018-2019 period could be considered one of the best in Belarus's relations with Western countries, as evidenced by visits of high-ranking U.S. officials and talks with Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the Americans on security issues, including energy. Cross-border, social and historical cooperation between Belarus and its neighbours from the EU was also developing.

The first blow was the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to suspended international contacts. Moreover, the pandemic had a significant and negative impact on the public mood in Belarus. Belarusian society rejected the government's policy of pretending that there was no pandemic, and despite the lack of any restrictions inside the country, it was significantly affected by the closing of borders and informal isolation, which was associated with a decline in the income of many industries, such as transport, tourism, and gastronomy.

The second blow was connected to the course of the campaign before the presidential election and the decision of the Belarusian authorities to prevent several of Lukashenka's rivals, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Viktor Babaryka, and Valery Tsapkala, from participating in the elections. It had serious consequences as Belarusians jointly supported Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who decided to run instead of her husband. Her rallies were a clear sign that people wanted change. Lukashenka, who was losing his political instincts, did not seem to see it. He disregarded her campaign and suggestions not to falsify the election results to an extent that would cause public anger. He did not heed this advice and as a result, he had to confront the public's anger as tens of thousands of Belarusians did not believe the official

results that Lukashenka had won over 80% of the votes and took to the streets in peaceful protest. The size of the protests caused Lukashenka to panic, possibly for the first time in his political career. Instead of seeking resolution with his own people, he sent a police force against it and called the Russian president for help.

Repressions.

Such massive protests were a shock for Lukashenka and forced him to draw the wrong conclusions about the situation in the country. He did not seem to wonder what actually led to them, but rather tried to mask his horror at the prospect of losing power by unleashing the brutality of the police forces. Tens of thousands of people have been detained since the start of the mass protests. In addition, most were beaten or even tortured at police stations. The brutality of the police against the demonstrators was only the beginning of a wave of repression that fell on independent NGOs, media, and ordinary citizens who did not agree with the government's policy.

According to the Viasna Human Rights Centre, more than 1,300 people have the status of a political prisoner. Among them are analysts, artists, members of independent NGOs, and ordinary people. People have been arrested for basically anything seen as a protest—wearing white and red sneakers (colours of historical Belarusian flag and the opposition), a plain white card hung in a window, or a photo of tomatoes with mozzarella (red and white) published on social media.

All independent media were closed, dozens of journalists were arrested, and plenty of them were sentenced to long prison terms. However, many journalists, experts, and NGO activists fled the country to work in neighbouring states, such as Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine (until the outbreak of the war). Moreover, many ordinary Belarusians decided to emigrate mainly to Poland or Lithuania, where they live without everyday fear. Some of them have established anti-regime organisations while others have joined groups operating in Poland or Lithuania for years. Nevertheless, it means that many Belarusians still in their home country have lost access to services provided by numerous foundations and easy access to independent sources of information. What is more, all manifestations of social activity that are not the initiative of organisations related to the state have been limited. And the dominant social feeling is fear.

Collapse of Relations with the West.

While the protests were still ongoing, Lukashenka blamed Western countries for provoking and sponsoring them. He charged the EU and the U.S. of fomenting a coup. He also accused Poland of wanting to take over the Hrodna Region by force and NATO of trying to confront Belarus. These claims were part of a narrative needed to prepare for Russia to agree to help the Belarusian authorities through political, military, and economic support. It was also an obvious attempt to shift the responsibility for the regime's mistakes onto others.

At the same time, Lithuania and Poland accepted thousands of political refugees from Belarus. Together with Estonia and Latvia, the former states also lobbied for the imposition of sanctions on Belarus in connection with the policy of its authorities. Moreover, the Lithuanian authorities helped Tsikhanouskaya after she was *de facto* expelled from Belarus by the secret services and gave her the opportunity to continue her political activities. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia broke off all types of cross-border cooperation with Belarus, including the multi-annual EU programmes.

In response, the Belarusian authorities—in cooperation with Russia—initiated a crisis on the EU border using migrants mainly from the Middle East who were encouraged to come to Belarus with the promise of safe transit to Germany. Instead, they were used as a weapon against Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland so severely that all three countries had to strengthen the protection of their borders using military units and by building special walls. The border crisis was a perfect example of a hybrid warfare action fomented by Belarus, together with Russia, against the West. Poland and Lithuania also have become larger targets of disinformation campaigns waged by Belarus in cooperation with Russia. In it, Poland and Lithuania are accused of supporting Nazism and Poland of occupying western Belarus during the interwar period. Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland are also presented as countries struggling with serious economic difficulties such that their citizens have to come to Belarus for basic food products.

Relations with Russia.

The growing dependence of Belarus on Russia, though, means that for now, it is difficult to expect a change in the current policy pursued by the Belarusian authorities. The price that Lukashenka paid for Russian support during the mass protests in 2020 included expanding economic and military integration with Russia. In November 2021, Belarus and Russia agreed on 28 economic integration programmes. In practice, this means the increasing dependence of the Belarusian economy on the Russian economic system and the need for Belarus to adopt many Russian solutions that are not favourable to it. In many cases, this also means the need to amend Belarusian legal codes and unify the judicial system. What is more, both states agreed to deepen military integration, and in February 2022, a few weeks before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they published the new Military Doctrine of the Union State. Changes in the attitude towards the West, as well as Ukraine, were also visible in the scenarios of two major drills organised by Belarus and Russia—*Zapad* in September 2021 and *Allied Resolve* in February 2022.

However, the main price Belarus has been paying so far is allowing Russian troops to be stationed on its territory where they carry out activities against Ukraine. The military operations conducted by the Russians from Belarus show how limited its sovereignty has become, and means that it, in accordance with international law, it too has become an aggressor state. The present status also gives Russia a more empowered position in all political and economic spheres. Although this does not mean that Russia will incorporate Belarus (because the current status is convenient for Russia), it does indicate that Belarus should be treated as part of the Russian military space, which NATO countries must take into account in their defence planning.

Where It Goes from Here.

By calling on Putin for support in August 2020, Lukashenka made probably the biggest mistake in his political career. Russia granted his request but issued a hefty bill that Belarus and Belarusians will have to pay for years. Even the most optimistic analysts do not see the possibility of rapid changes in the country, which partially undoes the results of the protests in the summer and autumn of 2020. The only scenario that could guarantee this would be a change in Russia itself, which now seems just as unlikely. However, this does not mean that all is lost. Western countries should still support the actions of the Belarusian opposition and Belarusians—both those who fled the country and those who stayed behind—towards the democratisation of their country and building their own identity. Only this will guarantee that in the future, when a window for change in this country opens, the opportunity will not be lost.

Policy Recommendations

- ❖ The EU and other Western states should maintain the sanctions policy towards the Belarusian regime.
- ❖ The EU and other Western states should continue to consistently implement the policy of support for civil-society institutions, independent media, and Belarusian political emigration—towards the democratisation of their country and building their own identity.
- ❖ Western countries should also ensure access to independent information for Belarusians, including through social media such as Telegram.
- ❖ Belarus should be treated as part of the Russian military space, which NATO countries must take into account in their defence planning.
- ❖ NATO's response should include appropriate adaptations of operational plans, exercises, and the command structure and forces on the Eastern Flank.
- ❖ NATO and the EU should expand their capabilities to counter disinformation campaigns, prevent cyberattacks, and build resilience to hostile hybrid activities. Moreover, EU and NATO members should take steps to build the resilience of their own societies.



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