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# Silencing the Voice of a Nation: Belarus' Descent Into Totalitarianism

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After crushing an uprising in 2020, the Belarusian authorities have been transforming the country's authoritarian regime into a totalitarian one. Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his entourage have banned all independent media outlets, forced tens of thousands of political refugees and hundreds of public organizations into exile and imprisoned thousands of political dissidents. Moreover, the Lukashenka regime has declared war on Belarusian history and national culture, leaving a void that is now being filled by ideas of "the Russian world". This has left the Belarusian people increasingly isolated, subjected to harsh repressions and bombarded with endless aggressive propaganda, which in turn has had a profound impact on the dynamics of public opinion.

The war in Ukraine is a critical factor in both foreign and domestic policy in Belarus. The Lukashenka regime's dependence on Russia and its criminal international activities has placed the whole country on a path of gradual erosion of sovereignty and independence. Belarus is increasingly reliant on Moscow in all areas. Economic ties to the Russian market and Russian infrastructure are becoming vital for maintaining macroeconomic stability and integration agreements between the two countries are further cementing this dependence at the institutional level.

Under Lukashenka's leadership, Belarus has become an aggressor state in the war against Ukraine. The Russian troops stationed in the country are not under the control of the regime but are directly subordinate to Moscow. Belarus now serves as a production and training hub for Russia. The most recent manifestation of the egregious partnership between the two regimes is Russia's announcement to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.

## Totalitarian Reform

At the same time, Lukashenka's regime is pursuing a process of internal transformation that is referred to as "reforms in the public sphere". Sweeping changes are under way in all areas of social, political and economic life. These changes are not what Belarusians had hoped for when they voted for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya or when they took to the streets in protest in the summer of 2020. Despite massive public demand for democratic reform and improved relations with the West, the Belarusian government has chosen to take the directly opposite course. Lukashenka recognizes the existential threat posed to himself by the evolution of Belarusian society towards Europe and has refused to make any concessions. Instead, he relies on the loyalty of his close entourage as well as the support of Russia and transforms his authoritarian regime into a totalitarian one through violence and international isolation, redirecting the trajectory of societal development in the opposite direction.

### 1. Constitution

The Belarusian authorities are using legislative changes to alter the architecture of the political system in Belarus. In February 2022, a rigged referendum led to changes to the Constitution. This new architecture of political power maintains Lukashenka as the only decision maker in every sphere. The constitutional reform creates a legal framework for a potential succession

process if initiated by the current ruler, but Lukashenka will be shielded by a multi-layered defence even after he leaves office.

The reform weakens the presidency and introduces an All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA), which is a new constitutional body with broad powers that include impeaching the president, appointing key government officials (such as the heads of the highest courts and the central electoral commission), declaring a state of emergency and even approving the election results. However, these powers exist only on paper unless and until Lukashenka decides to relinquish his unlimited authority. Lukashenka is currently the only person entitled to hold both positions of president and Head of the ABPA, and he will likely to do so. The current wording of the Constitution enables him to retain the presidency until 2035, when he turns 80 years old, and he can remain head of the ABPA even after that.

## 2. Legislation

Meanwhile, the Belarusian authorities are altering the rules on how political parties and non-governmental organizations can function in the country. The new laws stipulate that the activities of opposition parties are deemed illegal. The laws impose stricter requirements on the number of party members and the regional network of offices, and oblige party founders to be physically present in Belarus, complicate party financing and allow political parties to be disbanded by the state in situations where “activities harm the state or public interest”. All registered political parties must undergo a process of re-registration by July 2023. This means that the new party landscape is likely to be entirely sterile. Opposition parties will be dissolved and only state-controlled structures will be able to maintain their registration.

The fate of NGOs in Belarus is no different. The new legislative framework enables the dissolution of any public organization for “inconsistency between its activities and the main directions of domestic and foreign policy”. This legal framework allows only pro-government organizations or GONGOs to exist, and this law only formalizes the practice that has already been in place. Since 2020, the state has disbanded over 3,000 public associations in Belarus, almost 30% of the total number. Moreover, the government prohibits any uncontrolled activity, regardless of its direction or nature, of cultural organizations, educational institutions, human rights groups, professional associations, environmental organizations or trade unions. As a result, many NGOs fall victim of the Lukashenka regime's repressive machinery. In 2022, for instance, “APB/BirdLife Belarus”, which was involved in the preservation of birds and wildlife biodiversity, was disbanded, and its director arrested. The same fate befell organizations fighting for gender equality or the rights of people with disabilities, and even amateur theatres.

The authorities are targeting not only political opponents, but also those who are formally aligned with them. The protests in 2020 revealed that a significant number of officials were critical of the government and supported popular demands. Although a split in the elites did not occur, the regime is seeking to eliminate the potential for such threats in the future. All critics were fired, exiled or jailed and the new legislative changes now treat disloyalty or criticism by civil servants and military personnel as treason. Moreover, the new legislation also establishes the death penalty as a possible punishment for such “crimes”.

## 3. Media

A major threat to civil society in Belarus is the total cleansing of the country's media market. The government is cracking down on press freedom by simply blocking websites and

revoking journalists' accreditations, as it did in 2020. In 2021, the authorities escalated their efforts by closing independent media outlets. In May of that year, the largest independent portal, TUT.by, was shut down and its leaders and journalists were arrested. They were later sentenced to 10–12 years in prison. Similar attacks have occurred on other independent media outlets. Some journalists managed to flee Belarus to continue their work from abroad, but the authorities label independent information resources as extremist or even terrorist. In total, 491 independent media websites and 1324 internet resources have been included on such lists, which are so broad that they even encompass a children's book of poetry that the authorities deem dangerous. Accessing these resources, which are the only source of objective information, is punishable by long prison terms. Meanwhile, the authorities are improving their production and delivery of propaganda through the internet and significantly radicalize it.

Public calls for the liquidation of government critics and the cleansing of the country of what are described as "rats" and "parasites" have become the norm on state television and in the press. Propagandists receive state awards for such work. The algorithms of international corporations such as Google and YouTube, which promote sites, resources and videos that are most frequently opened by users in a particular country, present one of the most difficult challenges in the struggle for media freedom. After independent media, which had always previously dominated the internet, became dangerous to access, Belarusians were forced to unsubscribe, but many have continued following them using VPNs. As a result, the algorithms of the tech corporations now display state propaganda materials that spread social hatred, call for politically motivated assassinations and promote war, among other things, in their top recommendations. Meanwhile, propaganda resources have benefited significantly from injections of government financing and are investing large sums in the purchase of advertising to promote their products on international digital platforms.

#### **4. Culture, History and Religion**

The Belarusian authorities are targeting the country's national and linguistic identity. The government is removing busts and memorial plaques honouring Belarusian cultural and political figures, such as freedom fighter Kastus Kalinouski and poet Larysa Hienijus. Performances, exhibitions, national holidays and film screenings are also being subjected to censorship. Instead of promoting Belarusian culture, literature and historiography, the authorities are increasingly promoting elements of the "Russian world", emphasizing Russian culture, language, history and religion. There have even been cases when public use of the Belarusian language ultimately led to arrest.

At Lukashenka's instigation, school history textbooks are being rewritten. The new version of history portrays Poland as a historical enemy of Belarus that committed ethnocide against the Belarusian population. Belarus is presented as part of a single cultural civilization with Russia and the Russian world, downplaying or removing the European component that has been a dominant influence on the history of Belarus. The authorities are closing printing houses and bookshops that produce and sell books in the Belarusian language, and their management and employees are being sent to prison. Literature that does not conform with the official ideology is confiscated. Works by Nobel laureate Sviatlana Aleksievich have been removed from school books and libraries due to her criticism of Lukashenka and Putin. The authorities have accused Pavel Belavus, founder of Symbal.By, a shop which sells national symbols, of "treason against the state" by "promoting unconstitutional change of state power

under the guise of cultural and historical development". Street signs written in the Belarusian Latin alphabet are also being replaced.

Pro-government activists are often at the forefront of combating manifestations of Belarusian identity and Europeaness by writing complaints and threatening officials if their demands are not met. "Patriotic classes" have been introduced in educational institutions, where schoolchildren are taught militaristic ideology and the basics of military drill, such as marching, assembling and disassembling assault rifles, and so on. Curricula are becoming more ideological, one recent example being a requirement that schoolchildren and students must watch Lukashenka's hours-long speeches.

The Belarusian authorities have been destroying not only Belarusian but also Polish historical artefacts. In the past two years, several cemeteries of Polish soldiers, monuments commemorating their burial sites and frescoes depicting joint Belarusian-Polish history have been destroyed. The Catholic Church and its clergy are coming under pressure. Some have been arrested or forced to leave Belarus. The Church of Saints Simon and Helena has been closed down. Associations of Poles in Belarus are also being persecuted and some of their members have been imprisoned. Lukashenka has recently offered to release one of them, Andrzej Poczobut, in exchange for the extradition of opposition politicians who had been given asylum in Poland.

## **5. Political Prisoners and Anti-war Resistance**

As of May 2023, there are 1,495 internationally recognized political prisoners in Belarus, but this is not an exhaustive list. Many prisoners refuse to adopt this status, fearing that it may further complicate the conditions of their imprisonment. A recent trend is for pressure to be applied to or the arrest of relatives of political prisoners. Similar methods are also applied to opponents of the authorities in exile and volunteers fighting for Ukraine. The authorities are effectively taking family members of politically active Belarusians hostage. The Belarusian KGB has recently arrested and later placed the 15-year-old brother of a blogger who runs a telegram channel about the Belarusian railway in a psychiatric hospital. The Belarusian special services set the removal of his blog and cessation of any future activity as a condition for his brother's release.

Partisan resistance persists despite the unprecedented level of repression and reports of the torture of political prisoners in Belarusian prisons. Human rights activists report that political prisoners are marked with special yellow tags. In the first few months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as the so-called rail war unfolded in Belarus, Belarusian partisans disabled railway equipment, and hacked into electronic systems and other infrastructure used by Russia to deliver troops and equipment to Ukraine. In February 2023, Belarusian partisans claimed a successful attack on the flagship of Russian aviation, the A-50 aircraft, which played a key role in the bombing of Ukrainian cities from Belarusian territory.

The Belarusian Hayun monitoring project regularly receives information from tens of thousands of people from Belarus about the movement of Russian troops, fighter take-offs, missile launches and other activities taking place inside the country. Belarusians share information that might be useful for analysing the actions and plans of the authorities, including conscription into the army, recruitment to private military companies, schemes for circumventing international sanctions and train reservations. This activity by Belarusian

insiders from all regions is essentially providing anti-war intelligence. It has already saved many Ukrainian lives and helped Ukraine to better prepare for attacks from Belarus. However, the price of such activity is high. Under new laws, people now face the death penalty for such actions.

## Policy recommendations

- **Existing civil society structures in Belarus need adequate, long-term foreign funding.** The brutal repression by the Belarusian authorities has resulted in the entire civil society of Belarus being exiled, ranging from the media to human rights activists cultural, sports, environmental and other organizations. They have been labelled extremist in Belarus, and their existing business models have been destroyed. The provision of sustainable funding would enable them not only to survive, but also to find ways to develop and maintain their potential to bring democratic changes in Belarus.
- **It is essential to complement Western sanctions, which primarily affect Belarusians rather than Lukashenka, with openness and solidarity towards the Belarusian people.** Under current conditions of isolation from the Western world, repression and aggressive propaganda, public opinion in Belarus has become extremely vulnerable to harmful external influences. Belarusian society still demands change, has a negative attitude to war and does not support the deployment of nuclear weapons. However, sociologists record a steady negative trend on less sensitive issues, such as a growth in pro-Russian sentiment, scepticism towards the EU and the US and an increase in the level of support for the authorities. An important way to mitigate the negative consequences of Western restrictive measures is to advocate for a regime of maximum favourable visa conditions for citizens of Belarus while of course observing all security requirements.
- **Information isolation is one of the most acute problems in Belarus. The European Union must collaborate with Belarusian democratic forces to support and facilitate their attempts to build a dialogue with the tech giants.** Algorithms that ultimately prioritize propaganda and “hide” independent media must be tailored to work in authoritarian states. This problem extends beyond the informational isolation of Belarus. Successful resolution could help prevent the use of similar practices to suppress media freedom in other states.



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