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TRENDS IN BELARUS 2021/2

Quarterly analytic review

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Highlights

- The trends of the tightening and isolation of the regime, which were observed in the first quarter, continued in May–August. Despite growing pressure from the West, the regime continued to apply the fiercest means to clear the country's political field from any manifestation of protest and opposition.
- After cracking down on the forms of protest that still existed at the beginning of the year, the regime mounted a counter-attack on an alternative-minded society and the West. The forced landing of the Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius, the mass shut-down of NGOs and the media as well as the initiated migrant crisis indicate the regime's determination to take all possible measures to remain in power.
- Lukashenka's allusions of readiness to negotiate with the West without preconditions cannot be considered sincere. On the contrary, foreign policy is becoming completely mono-vector.



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- The migrant crisis, the unpredictability of the regime and its desire to cause problems for the West (especially Lithuania) in the context of the joint Russian-Belarusian Zapad military exercise and the Afghan crisis increase the likelihood of short-term provocations (even military ones).
- The economic impact of (Western) sanctions on Belarus is not yet significant, and the country's economy does not face substantial challenges in the short term. Possible stagnation of economic growth is projected in the second half of the year, with high levels of uncertainty remaining.
- The process of “improving” the Belarusian Constitution continues. On 21 July, the State Constitutional Commission presented draft amendments to the country's Constitution¹. Lukashenka sent it back for further improvement, and the new draft is to be presented in early September.
- Coercion and security agencies remain the main and only internal support factor of the regime.
- Russia continues to follow a wait-and see-tactic – integration processes are not particularly forced because Belarus has fewer and fewer alternatives in search of external sources to maintain the country's stability.

Internal Processes

The main events of the period under review were the landing of the Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius on 23 May, the resulting and following publication of the fourth (this time sectoral) package of sanctions, and the regime's response to these events – a sharp increase in the number of illegal migrants from the Middle East trying to enter the territory of Lithuania through Belarus. These events have been widely discussed in the Lithuanian and foreign media; therefore, in the review, we will try to look at less discussed but also important events.

The growth of the importance of the coercive factor in internal processes. In May, Lukashenka issued an order² releasing personnel of security agencies from liability for damage caused by the use of force, weapons and special equip-

ment to “crackdown on mass protests”. On 18 May, the largest independent on-line information portal tut.by was blocked. Journalists were also banned from covering events without government permission and it was also prohibit to collect funds to pay fines for participating in protests³. A targeted campaign to shut down NGOs was carried out in July – several dozen NGOs were outlawed during a day⁴. As of 23 August, the total number of non-profit and non-governmental organisations in liquidation was 174⁵. On 18 August, the activities of another large independent information channel, the BelaPAN news agency, were suspended⁶. 637 people are considered political prisoners (as of 23 August)⁷. As of 30 July, 4690 criminal proceedings against people who participated in protests against the regime were instituted⁸. On 6 July, the Supreme Court of the Republic

of Belarus sentenced former presidential candidate Babaryka to 14 years in prison, gave him a fine of USD 57,000 and ordered him to pay about USD 18 million as compensation for damages. Coercion against opponents allowed the regime to minimise the actual number of protests – a year after the manipulated elections, there were basically no visible or at least slightly larger protests (see Fig. 1).

Flagrant crack-down on all – not only active but also potential opponents of the regime – indicates that the regime is not ready to engage in any dialogue on an equal basis, seeks to create a space for fully controlled imitation of a dialogue (it is possibly related to the reform of the Constitution that was announced

long ago) and is reluctant to allow even the smallest germ of players alternative to the regime to emerge. On the other hand, such treatment of internal opponents means that coercion continues to remain the only instrument for the regime to remain in power. Under the conditions of external (Western) pressure, it is likely that persecution, coercion and retaliation will not decrease, i.e. maintaining the loyalty of the security forces will be the main leitmotif of the economic and social policy of the regime, finally transforming the type of governance of the country into a dictatorship based on the control of the security forces. Such trends are also confirmed by the order issued by Lukashenka on 11 June to expand the functions of the Security Council of Bela-

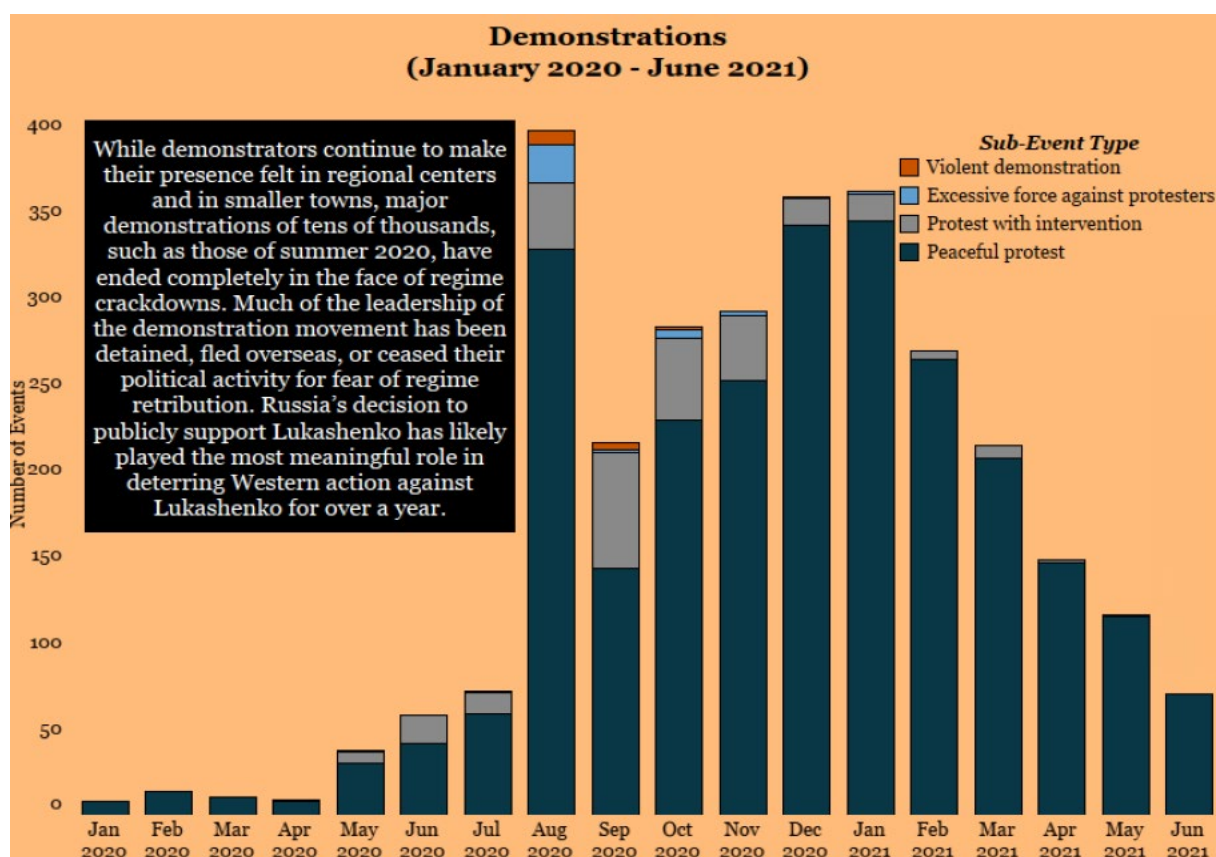


Fig. 1. Dynamics of demonstrations and protests in Belarus during the year after the Presidential election of 9 August 2020

Source: https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ACLED_MidYear-Update-10-Conflicts-to-Worry-About-in-2021_August2021_WebFinal.pdf

rus “in protecting the independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty and constitutional order of Belarus, maintaining civil peace and harmony in the country, countering extremism and combating terrorism”⁹. Such a regime can effectively preserve the power in the short term but faces the challenge of maintaining comprehensive control in the longer term. A crucial factor for the regime to survive is the economic situation – as long as (if) it is satisfactory, i.e. allows generating sufficient revenue to ensure the loyalty, for instance, of security agencies, the regime can exist. Under the conditions of an economic slowdown, such regimes face (at least) a double challenge: how to ensure control of society or opposing forces while maintaining the loyalty of security agencies that no longer receive sufficient annuity. In the cyber field, the balance of the regime is affected by regular data leaks, such as hacking of the passport database¹⁰ by so-called “cyber partisans”¹¹ in July.

The economy stays the course, but trends are unclear. The impact of the sectoral economic sanctions imposed by the EU on 24 June¹² on the Belarusian economy is not yet evident. Due to the specific nature of the sanctions (they do not apply to previously concluded contracts, do not cover the main Belarusian exports in the potassium fertiliser sector), their impact is virtually non-existent in the short term. In the first half of the year 2021, Belarus’s GDP grew by 3.3%¹³, although a slowdown in GDP growth has been observed since June. Even Lithuanian imports from Belarus increased by 58.3% in the first half of the year 2021¹⁴. According to current assessments, the more serious negative effects of the sanctions and related expectations may be felt at the end of this year or at the beginning of next year. It is forecast that Belarus’s annual economic growth will be about 1.3% in 2021, and in the economy will no longer grow at all (with a growth of 0.0%) in 2022¹⁵.

This is related to several factors. First of all, December is the time when the additional sectoral sanctions imposed on Belarus by the US on 9 August¹⁶, which also covers the entire production of Belaruskali, should enter into force. Lithuania has also stated that the export of all Belarusian fertilisers through the port of Klaipėda should be suspended in December¹⁷. The American sanctions (along with new restrictions imposed by the UK and Canada¹⁸) and restrictions levied by the EU on Belarus’s borrowing from Western financial markets will also have an indirect effect because they will increase distrust and risk in any transactions with Belarusian state-owned enterprises. A slowdown in projects funded by international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank, and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) in Belarus is already observed¹⁹. Although not finally confirmed, there is information that even the largest Western financial actor in Belarus, Austria-based Raiffeisen Bank International, plans to discontinue international transfers to the country’s state-owned banks²⁰. The sanctions imposed by the US caused Absolutbank to stop servicing Visa cards and offering transfers in foreign currency from 16 August. Even if such information is not confirmed, it reinforces the mistrust of all players carrying out transactions with Belarus and encourages them to rethink the sense of cooperation with the Belarusian regime. This means that Belarus will no longer be able to borrow abroad (in the West) on favourable terms and, consequently, its public debt will increase, gold reserves will decrease, and budget expenditures will have to be reduced. Other factors²¹ (also related to the effect of the Western sanctions) do make economic forecasts for Belarus more positive – the negative expectations of people about the growth of inflation, actual devaluation of money (projected inflation in 2021 is 8.7%), and more expensive borrowing (on 21 July, the interest rate of the

National Bank was raised from 8.5% to 9.25%). In addition, the persecution of large private businesses intensified during the reporting period – on 22 June, searches and arrests of management took place at 21vek.by, which occupies 37 % of Belarusian internet trade²². In the context of negative expectations, the growing trends of individuals withdrawing foreign currency deposits can become an additional problem – the amount of such deposits in Belarusian banks decreased by 13.4% during the first half of the year²³. In response to Lukashenka's criticism of individual business owners at the end of July²⁴, the registration of new privately-owned enterprises was suspended on 17 August. The registration procedure that was in effect by that date was introduced by Lukashenka's decree back in January 2009 and served as a catalyst for the development of the small and medium business sector in Belarus²⁵. The help of Russia remains to be a possible factor supporting the viability of the economy – in July, the Prime Minister of Belarus announced that Minsk together with Moscow was developing a joint plan to neutralise the effects of the Western sanctions²⁶ but its details and conditions have not been published. The regime speaks loudly that the effects of the sanctions on exports of potassium fertilisers will be smoothed out by diverting their export flows through Russian ports (Ust Luga and even Murmansk are mentioned). However, the significantly greater geographical distances, the lack of loading capacity in these ports and Russia's unpredictable behaviour make the political and economic costs of such alternatives difficult to estimate²⁷. Most of the mentioned trends do not allow for a more accurate forecast of the economic situation in Belarus in the near future because the unpredictability of the regime and Russia's behaviour remains the most important factor. It should be noted that despite the general Western pressure on the Belarusian regime, the International Monetary Fund, nevertheless, allocated 653.2 million

SDRs (Special Drawing Rights) to Belarus on 23 August²⁸. This is a very ambiguous signal because (a) the loan strengthens the financial situation in Belarus and, at the same time, (b) sends a signal to the international community that international financial institutions continue to work with Belarus (the regime).

Public attitude to the situation in the country. A survey conducted at the end of April 2021²⁹ shows that the proportion of the public who felt positive about the protests against the regime was slowly declining compared to the February survey, although a majority (72%) still supported a fair investigation into the crackdown on protesters and calls for a new fair presidential election and end to use of force (64%). The least supported protesters' demand was Lukashenka's resignation, which was supported by 48% and was not by 25% of the respondents (see Fig. 2).

A new draft of the Constitution of Belarus is being developed. So far, there is not much clarity on this issue. The published drafts offer some redistribution of powers – limiting the number of the President's terms of office to two, depriving the President of the right to issue decrees that would have the force of law, preventing the President from dissolving the Government or unilaterally annulling its decisions, and constitutionally enshrining the powers of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. However, so far Lukashenka only speaks that a referendum on the Constitution should take place by February 2022. In his speech on 9 August, Lukashenka mentioned two things: the new Constitution must provide for the supremacy of Belarusian laws over international treaties and the phrase about Belarus's neutrality, which is virtually non-existent, must be deleted.

Lukashenka's public talk about the virtual lack of neutrality is not a news from the West's point of view. However, this gives evidence that there are no more informal obstacles to

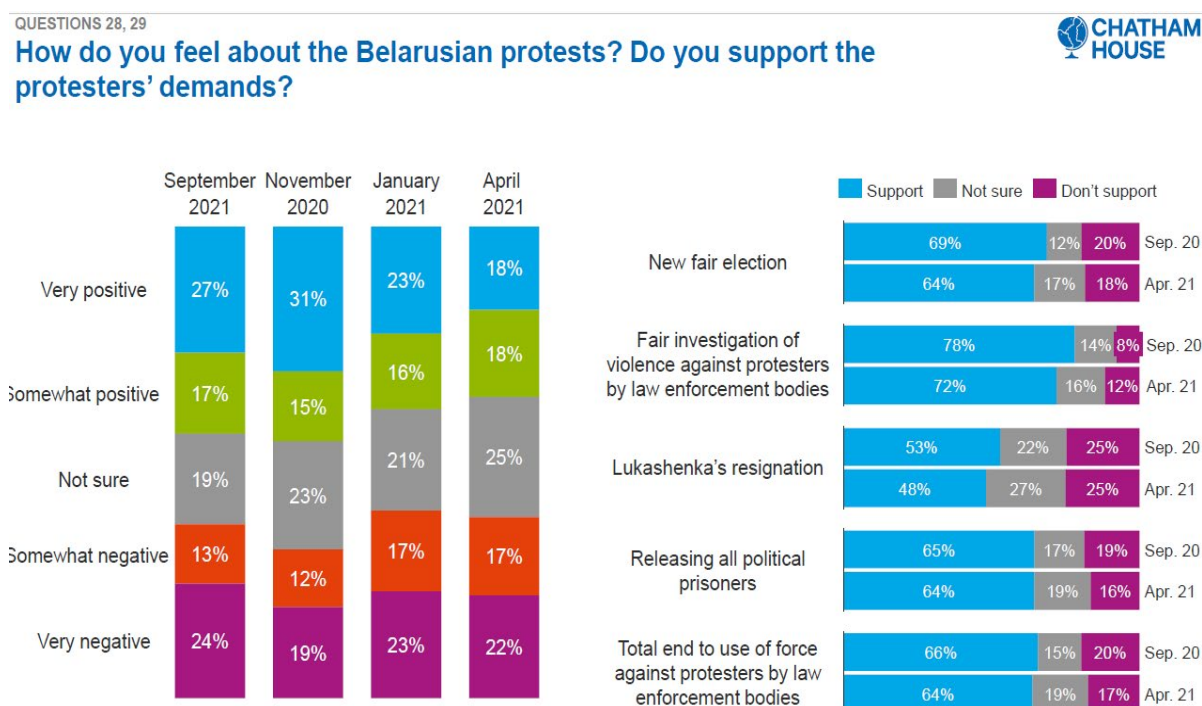


Fig. 2. Change of public attitudes to protests and demands

Source: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021-06-14-belarusians-views-political-crisis.pdf>

Minsk's full military integration with Russia (basically, the de facto emergence of Russian military bases with Russian troops on the Belarusian territory), which used to be a fear for Lukashenka himself. The abandonment of neutrality implies the end of the multi-vector foreign policy that was previously defended by Lukashenka. Having opted for coercion to remain in power and faced the Western sanctions, the regime actually itself has abandoned the Western vector of foreign policy, which has long been at least a small factor in the regime's limited room for manoeuvre in relations with Russia. Although the myth of Belarus as a neutral and "stability-guaranteeing Eastern European Switzerland"³⁰ outlived long time ago, now it has been finally exploded. An important thing is that by using such rhetoric, the regime is still trying to manipulate the factor of Russia as a major threat, which is quite common in

the West. This aspect can be described by the following logic (beneficial to the regime): the more you press on Lukashenka, the more you will push Belarus into Russia's embrace and will soon have to deal with a changed geopolitical environment but not solve the problem of the undemocratic Belarus. In such a "new" environment, Belarus would not play the role of a buffer between the West and Russia, which will directly increase threats and vulnerabilities to both sides. Lukashenka's rhetoric is a rather risky go-for-broke – an attempt to divert attention from the problems of Belarusian democracy by escalating the aspect of Russia's threat to the West, i.e. seeking to show that human rights problems in the country are insignificant compared to potential geopolitical problems for the West if the latter continues the policy of pressure on the regime.

External Relations

Relations with Russia are an attempt to use Moscow as a cover against Western pressure.

The abandonment of neutrality, the promise to sign 28 integration plans for the union state with Russia by the end of the year, and the promise to allow bringing the Russian armed forces if “opponents of the government go too far”, which were spoken out in Lukashenka’s speech on 9 August, suggests that, under conditions of complete external isolation and internal delegitimation, Lukashenka really feel threatened about the security of the regime (i.e. his own) and fears both further economic pressure from the West and possible attempts to put down him physically. The threat that sanctions could turn into the Third World War, into which Belarus with the Russians (sic!) are being pushed by the West³¹, and other praises to the Kremlin can be interpreted as an attempt by the regime to maximally involve Russia in the regime’s opposition to the West. The aim is simple and it is to show the West that by clashing with Lukashenka, it risks engaging in a much more dangerous escalation of the conflict with Russia, thus deterring the West from further pressure on the Minsk regime. Although the Kremlin is yet responding specifically to such statements – Moscow’s tactics remain wait-and-see and seeking to derive the maximum benefits at minimal cost, Lukashenka’s behaviour is increasingly widening the so-called “spiral of conflict”.

The spiral of conflict on the Belarusian-Lithuanian (EU) border. The regime’s attempts to escalate the conflict with the West are intensifying at both the rhetorical and practical levels. At a press conference held on 9 August, Lukashenka spoke especially strongly about relations (open conflict) with the West. The crisis of irregular migrants on the Lithuanian-Latvian-Polish border, which was initiated and is supported by the regime, is an additional factor in the increasingly escalating conflict between Belarus and the West. This conflict

has already moved from a rhetorical level to a practical one – cases have already been recorded on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border when armed Belarusian officers crossed the state border and found themselves on the territory of Lithuania³². At the same time, illegal smuggling of Belarus-made cigarettes into the EU continues. From the beginning of 2021, the quantity of cigarettes seized at the Lithuanian border increased to 17.7 million packs (in 2020, 16 million packs)³³.

In the context of the upcoming joint Russian-Belarusian military exercise Zapad-2021, when up to 13,000 (only according to official data) Russian and Belarusian troops will be concentrated at the Lithuanian border, provocations related to the movement of migrants are highly likely. It can be assumed that they would be beneficial to the Minsk regime for several reasons. First, any shift of focus from internal problems to an external threat is a well-worn tactic of regimes facing problems. Second, the emphasis on the external threat (the script of Zapad-2021 is training aimed at resolving a crisis at the borders of Belarus, which poses a threat to the country’s security; the cause of the crisis is an increase in the activity of illegal armed groups with external support³⁴) make it possible to further maintain and reason the high level of preparedness of security agencies (both the army and other services). Knowing that Lukashenko considers all opposition and people negatively thinking about the regime to be extremists and terrorists³⁵, the Zapad-2021 exercise also becomes part of further deterrence from internal competitors. It is very difficult to predict the forms of possible provocations – it could be a simulated accidental shot towards the Lithuanian side, a targeted injury of Belarusian officials with accusing Lithuanians of it or any other action. It is important that Lithuanian officers and partners must be prepared for provocations during military exercises, both directly and in terms of information (i.e. coverage of possible provocations).

Endnotes

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