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I-ST QUARTER, 2022 TRENDS IN BELARUS

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Analytical overview
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Highlights

- The Belarusian army is strongly opposed to military involvement in Ukraine, and its commanders are keen to avoid sending ground troops to Ukraine.
- The new Belarusian constitution abolishes Belarus' status as a neutral state and creates new mechanisms to allow Alexander Lukashenko to retain power even after his presidential term ends.
- The crisis of illegal migration has been contained and is no longer a priority on Lithuania's security agenda, but cases of illegal migration at the border with Belarus are still being recorded.
- The new sanctions packages imposed on Russia and Belarus are expected to trigger an economic recession in these countries.
- Belarus is increasingly restricting freedom of expression and media freedom by banning alternative sources of information and the ability to speak out on the war in Ukraine.



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TOPIC:

Belarus' involvement in the military conflict with Ukraine

Alexander Lukashenko *de facto* turned Belarus into an aggressor country by using its territory as a staging ground for an attack on Ukraine. As early as 2021, A. Lukashenko has publicly stated that he would side with Russia in the event of a military conflict, and the exercise "Allied Resolve", which took place on 10-20 February 2022, was accompanied by statements that, if necessary, the exercise could also be used "against Ukraine".¹

Since the outbreak of active hostilities against Ukraine on 24 February, Russian troop movements and rocket launches in the direction of Ukraine have been repeatedly recorded from the territory of Belarus. However, Lukashenko himself has denied any active involvement in the conflict and has said that the Belarusian army will only be deployed if "the need arises"².

Belarus' logistics infrastructure is being used for military purposes, wounded Russian soldiers are being treated in Belarusian hospitals³. Killed Russian soldiers are also transported en masse to Belarus and buried in morgues⁴.

Belarusian troops were expected to become actively involved in the war in the direction of Kiev, especially when Russia suffered more losses than planned. According to reports from the Belarusian opposition, it was thought that the Belarusian army might join the Russian offensive immediately after the referendum on the new Belarusian constitution (27 February). However, until mid-March, no direct participation of Belarusian ground forces in hostilities in Ukraine was recorded. This is due to several important factors: the low morale of Belarusian troops, their poor training, and the divisions within the Belarusian army itself, which is absolutely opposed to Russian hostilities. This is reflected in the fact that Belarusian troops, at one point stationed near the border with Ukraine, were withdrawn after a while, even despite heavy losses

by Russian troops⁵. According to the Belarusian opposition, some high-ranking officers in the Belarusian army have also protested and left their country, and some of the remaining officers are pressuring the leadership not to take a decision to participate directly in the conflict. The resistance of Belarusian officers is motivated by the fear that there could be widespread dissatisfaction within the army and a threat to their own security⁶. The ambiguous perception of the war in Ukraine in Belarus is reflected in the fact that some Belarusians answered Ukraine's call to fight on its side.

The divisions over the war in Ukraine are also evident in Belarusian society. According to a Chatham House poll conducted in February, in Russia between half and two-thirds of the country's population support military action in Ukraine, while in Belarus only around 11-12% of the population support military action, and in Belarus only around 5% of the population support the direct involvement of the Belarusian military in the conflict.⁷

There are also doubts about the readiness and capability of the Belarusian Armed Forces to make a real and effective contribution to the Russian military action. The effective use of the Belarusian army is also hampered by cases of deliberate sabotage. Of the 47,000 Belarusian troops nominally available for deployment, only about 17,000 are currently ready to take part in actual combat operations⁸. The Belarusian opposition also claims that fleeing soldiers from Belarus could have been spotted as early as 2020, but due to heavy controls, closed borders and flight restrictions, it was and still is difficult to leave Belarusian territory.

However, the scenario of Belarusian military involvement in Ukraine remains possible. Although Lukashenko has said that the Belarusian army should not be directly involved in hostilities, this

depends to a large extent on Russia's continued losses and its willingness to meet its military objectives. It is likely that the meeting between Lukashenko and Putin on 11 March focused on the involvement of the Belarusian armed forces in the war. Lukashenko has already created an alleged pretext to engage in military action, because, according to him, Ukraine was planning to attack Belarusian territory and the Russian strike is a pre-emptive strike.

External Relations

Integration with Russia and the Belarusian Constitution. The effects of the comprehensive economic and military integration program signed between Minsk and Moscow in November 2021 are already visible in early 2022. Belarus' international isolation has given Putin new opportunities to force Minsk to accept the deployment of Russian troops on the Belarus-Ukraine border, just 80 kilometers away from Kiev. This situation has made it easier for Russia to attack Ukraine in three directions at once, including a direct assault on Kiev.

According to a sociological survey conducted by independent Belarusian sociologist Andrei Vardomatski, there has been a clear change in the attitude of the Belarusian population towards Russia⁹. When asked what they thought Belarus-Russia relations should be like, the majority of respondents said that the countries should be independent, but as friendly as possible - with open borders, no visas and no customs duties. Only 4.3% of respondents supported the option of Belarus joining Russia. In addition, the number of people who consider Crimea's annexation to Russia legitimate has fallen by 16% (in 2014, around two-thirds of Belarusians considered Russia's action legitimate). The orientation of Belarusians towards Russia is also weakening, with only 45% of respondents saying they would like to live in a union state with Russia. In 2018, the figure was 60%.

The new Constitution of the Republic of Belarus no longer states that nuclear weapons cannot be deployed in Belarus and that the country itself is neutral¹⁰. These former constitutional

provisions have been replaced by a much narrower definition. It states that "the Republic of Belarus prevents military aggression from its territory against other states". This formulation leaves more room for interpretation, as it is not clear in which case and at what level of intervention is aggression. The constitutional amendments also pave the way for the creation of a union state with Russia. The change in the neutrality status of Belarus opens up the possibility for Belarus's allies, first and foremost Russia, to deploy nuclear weapons in the country, to station their troops in Belarus, to use its infrastructure, but the Constitution does not explicitly mention this.

The new Belarusian Constitution reflects a clearer ideological orientation of the country, linking it more closely to the narratives of the Great Patriotic War promoted by Russia, stating that the state "*shall ensure the preservation of the historical truth and the remembrance of the heroic deeds of the Belarusian people during the Great Patriotic War*".

According to official Belarusian sources, 65.2% of all Belarusian voters voted in favor of the amendments to the Constitution (during the referendum, citizens could not disagree – the "disagree" option was simply not on the ballot paper).¹¹ The new document became generally effective on 15 March, but some articles will enter into force later. For example, the ban on a head of state holding the presidency more than twice in a row only after the next presidential election - no doubt this is how Lukashenko established the longevity of his presidency and postponed the need to cancel his terms, as Putin has done.¹²

The referendum on the new Belarusian constitution has been described by the West as a set-up, quoting EU diplomatic chief Josep Borrell¹³. Concerns arise, first and foremost, from the abandonment of Belarus' status as a non-nuclear-weapon country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania has stated that it does not recognize the results of the referendum and has encouraged other countries to do the same¹⁴.

Contrary to what the official authorities claim, the amendments to the Constitution will in no way weaken the powers of the President, let alone strengthen representative bodies such as the Parliament or the General People's Assembly. The constitutional amendments introduced are symbolic in nature, simulating systemic reforms, but the main power will remain in Lukashenko's hands¹⁵. Only the Presidium of the Assembly, chaired by the dictator himself, will play an important role. This decision shows his desire to hold on to power at all costs.

Western sanctions. In February 2022, the European Union published a list of sanctioned individuals. It includes natural and legal persons from Russia and Belarus responsible for the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and the resulting aggression against Ukraine¹⁶. The list totals 670 individuals, including the unrecognized President of Belarus, A. Lukashenko. These sanctions include the freezing of assets held in the territory of the European Union.

The US has also announced targeted sanctions against specific individuals (including 24 Belarusian natural and legal persons) for Minsk's support and assistance to Russia during the invasion of Ukraine¹⁷. They target Belarus' defense sector and financial institutions, areas where Belarus has close ties with Russia. The sanctions list also includes two large state-owned banks, "Belinvestbank" and "Bank Dababyt", as well as other companies working in the defense sector¹⁸.

The new package of European Union and US sanctions imposed on Belarus in March 2022 is the broadest in the history of Belarusian statehood. The new sanctions block most of Belarus' exports to the European Union. The embargo regime on the sale of Belarusian oil products to the European Union is expected to be enforced much more strictly than under the previous sanctions package. Belarus risks disrupting a large part of its logistics chains. The effect of sanctions is not only seen in their implementation, but also in the way they are talked about. Although the sanctions against Belarus are much lighter than those against Russia, many

suppliers are experiencing severe insecurity and this situation is causing significant damage to the Belarusian economy. Belarus's trade with Russia also suffers, as Belarusian suppliers are not assured that their Russian partners will be sufficiently solvent, resulting in financial losses for Belarus. The current economic and geopolitical situation may lead to the already started offshoring of the Belarusian IT sector. As a result, very rapid price increases, wage delays and wage cuts are expected¹⁹.

Starting 1 of February, Lithuania bans the transit of Belarusian potash fertilizer through its territory. "The transit of "Belaruskalij" from Belarus to Klaipėda port has been going on for more than a decade and has been terminated after the Lithuanian Government confirmed that the contract between "Lietuvos geležinkeliai" (Lithuanian Railways) and "Belaruskalij", which was due to expire by the end of 2023, does not meet the country's security interests.²⁰ Similar US sanctions come into force in December 2021. Belarus responded with similar counter-sanctions²¹. Klaipėda bulk terminal has announced redundancies following the suspension of transit²².

Migration crisis. In the second half of 2021, the migrant crisis on the Belarusian border has subsided and almost disappeared from the security agenda of both Lithuania and Poland, but the crisis is not yet definitively over. In January, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein announced that Iraq had recovered up to 4 000 of its nationals who were still trapped on the Belarusian border with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2021. Iraq has made 10 flights to recover citizens. However, in February this year, the Polish Border Guard recorded almost 500 attempts to cross the border illegally. The situation is said to remain unstable²³, and has escalated since the beginning of March, with dozens of attempts to cross the country's border illegally recorded in a few days. The Lithuanian Border Guard also periodically reports violations on the Lithuanian-Polish border, with both countries reporting constant shots from the Belarusian side²⁴.

Poland and Lithuania continue to strengthen border security with Belarus. Almost half of the total planned length of concertina (barbed) wire

has been laid on the Lithuanian border with Belarus, and 90 kilometers of protective fencing have been built. In addition, surveillance cameras are planned to be installed along the entire border area²⁵. A barrier is currently being built on the Polish border to provide both technical and electronic border protection²⁶.

“Ryanair landing investigation. At the beginning of the year, a report published by the UN Civil Aviation Agency on the Ryanair flight incident concluded that a bomb threat allegedly received by Belarus to justify the forced landing of the plane was “deliberately fabricated”. However, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) team investigating the incident was unable to identify any person or state as the source of the illegal deception²⁷.

Domestic Policy Trends

Referendum. The constitution’s newly formed Belarusian authority, the General People’s Assembly of Belarus, essentially duplicates existing authorities and does not create new decision-making levers for other branches of government. Although the powers of this authority are quite broad, its functions remain undefined, which means that the agenda of the General People’s Assembly of Belarus will depend on the chairman of the Assembly or the President of the country. This institution can also be used as an opportunity to continue to keep real power in Lukashenko’s hands, even after he leaves the presidency, as the General People’s Assembly of Belarus includes a seat for the former President.

An important function of this institution is to preserve the position of the President. The new Belarusian Constitution establishes the principle that only members of the General People’s Assembly of Belarus can remove the President from office: they organize an investigation into the allegations against the President and take a decision to remove the President after the Constitutional Court has issued a conclusion on the President’s systematic or flagrant violation of the Constitution. A resolution of the General People’s Assembly of Belarus on the impeachment of the President shall be deemed to have

been adopted if a majority of the members of the Assembly vote in favor of it. Any other way of removing the President from office would therefore be unconstitutional. It also provides that the President retains his or her immunity when he leaves office. This would mean that Lukashenko could not be tried in Belarus for the physical repression of protesters and other crimes.

Economics. The war in Ukraine poses a major challenge to Belarusian exports, 70% of which are oil products. Before the outbreak of hostilities, most of these exports were to neighboring Ukraine, but Belarus now hopes to redirect these flows to the Russian market²⁸. However, it remains unclear whether oil products produced in Belarus would be marketable in Russia, which has enough producers of its own. This competition would be exacerbated by a drop in Russian oil exports if Western companies continue to actively reduce their share of Urals-type oil orders. In addition, Belarus’ trade relations with Ukraine are characterized by a large trade surplus (i.e. exports to Ukraine are significantly higher than imports). In 2021, the trade surplus amounted to more than €3.9 billion. USD 1.6 billion, money that will be lost if Ukraine refuses Belarusian goods.

Similarly to Russia, the Belarusian authorities have started to regulate the prices of certain products (sunflower oil, wheat flour and baby food)²⁹. A Russian ban on exports of cereals and sugar to Belarus and other countries of the Eurasian Economic Union will remain in force until 31 August 2022, in an attempt to avoid domestic shortages of these commodities³⁰. This ban applies to another 200 product groups, including agricultural machinery³¹.

The Belarusian ruble has come under considerable pressure from its close ties with the Russian economy, and has depreciated against all foreign currencies (around 25-30% of its mid-February value). The Central Bank of Russia announces emergency monetary policy measures and imposes restrictions on foreign exchange operations. However, the National Bank of Belarus has so far reacted rather restrainedly: the refinancing rate has been raised to 12% per annum and standard risk calculations have been suspended³².

With Russia at war with Ukraine and the West imposing unprecedented sanctions, analysts and economists are increasingly making statements about the possibility of a default (default) by both Belarus and Russia. On 9 March, the rating agencies Fitch and S&P downgraded Belarus' credit rating to CCC, citing a "real possibility of default"³³.

Political repressions. Belarusian opposition activist Maria Kalesnikava, sentenced to 11 years in prison, was transferred in January 2022 to the women's penal colony in Gomel³⁴. "According to Viasna, more than 1 000 political prisoners are currently serving sentences in Belarusian prisons (i.e. in March 2022)³⁵.

In recent weeks, Belarusian police have detained a number of people for publicly expressing support for the Ukrainian people³⁶. Not only symbols of historical Belarus, but also Ukrainian symbols or slogans referring to war are now unacceptable. Media restrictions continue, with Deutsche Welle being suspended in Belarus for distributing content deemed "extremist" by a court ruling³⁷. Dissemination or transmission of information from this source may result in fines or administrative detention.

The attempts to deal with dissenting voices in the world of sport did not end with the story of Kristina Timanovskaja. In early 2022, athletes Sviatlana Andriyuk and Darya Dalidovich announced that the Belarusian Ski Union had cancelled their individual registrations in December last year, which meant that they could no longer take part in official competitions organized by the International Ski Federation, including qualification for major international competitions such as the Beijing Olympics³⁸. Later, Russian and Belarusian athletes were denied entry to the Beijing Paralympic Winter Games because their countries are involved in a war with Ukraine. The International Paralympic Committee has taken this decision.

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