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Quarterly analytic review

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Highlights

- In September–November, the regime-initiated migrant crisis at the eastern borders of the European Union became the key event in Belarus. It has overshadowed many other processes in the country and became a major item on the European Union's agenda with regard to Belarus. The regime managed to divert attention, at least briefly, from its internal problems, but this did not prevent it from further sanctions.
- Along with the migrant crisis and attempts to resolve it, the external events of greater importance during the period under review were the Zapad-2021 military exercise and the approval of the integration programmes of the Belarusian-Russian Union. Hostility (so far rhetorical) and threats against Ukraine from the Belarusian regime deserve special mentioning.



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- Repression against dissidents continues in the country and the outline of the referendum on the new constitution of the state to be held in February 2022 is becoming clear. Opposition organisations in exile continue to try to maintain the focus and attention of both the international community and the Belarusians themselves.
- During the period under review, there were quite a few new public opinion polls (conducted at the end of the summer) indicating a decline in support for Lukashenka and his policies.
- Trends in the domestic economic situation remain unchanged compared to the previous quarter. Although statistics of economic growth are still positive (GDP grew by 2.4% in January–August 2021¹), overall growth rates are slowing down. Any forecasts for the coming year in the current volatile situation involve a high degree of uncertainty² and range from an increase of 2.9% (government forecasts) to a drop of 0.7% (S&P) in GDP. Apart from rapidly rising inflation, other economic indicators in Belarus remained quite good in 2021³.

External relations

Migrant crisis (hybrid aggression) on the border with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Alyaksandar Lukashenka has received a great deal of international attention in provoking and escalating the migrant crisis. In this respect, he really managed to achieve an effect. Although the crisis in the West had been described almost exclusively as a “hybrid aggression” against the EU during the first few months, the situation took on an additional dimension as Belarus tried to push several thousand migrants across the Polish (and Lithuanian) border.⁴ Faced with a strong policy of “rejection” and having failed to break through, the regime added pressure from the humanitarian point of view, launching large-scale propaganda about Polish and Lithuanian “atrocities” at the border and suffering migrants.⁵ The aggressive escalation of the humanitarian aspect and the fact that some 10,000 migrants entered Germany illegally from Belarus since the beginning of the year⁶ are likely to provoke ad-

ditional German (and EU) reactions: outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel phoned the Belarusian dictator⁷, and Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei also had a telephone conversation with EU Foreign Policy Commissioner Borrell⁸. It should be noted that the internal problems of Europe’s communication about the talks were used very effectively for the regime’s propaganda. It can be mentioned that after the introduction of the state of emergency and related restrictions on journalists to cover the events from Poland and Lithuania directly, Lukashenka allowed the Western media to do so from Belarus⁹. Accordingly, the information being provided was purposefully shaped by the regime’s efforts and could form quite a one-sided picture of the situation. The situation improved later on.

The exact content of Lukashenka and Merkel’s conversations remained completely undisclosed, with both parties submitting their own

versions. Belarusian propaganda was prompt to announce that Germany had promised to take in 2,000 refugees, and Lukashenka had promised to organise the repatriation of the remaining 5,000 to their countries of origin. The German side denied such agreements, but confirmed that it had been agreed to enter into “technical talks” for crisis management¹⁰. Interviews with the dictator were broadcast by major Western media channels, CNN¹¹ and the BBC¹². All these events sparked off a debate on the existence of Western unity and a coherent strategy towards the Belarusian regime. There was also a wave of discussions in Lithuania, prompted by the statements by the President’s Office about supporting Merkel’s attempt to talk to Lukashenka¹³. However, the West later tried to consolidate their position: Germany voiced support for Poland¹⁴, and the European Commission President and the NATO Secretary General visited Lithuania and Latvia. Pressure from the EU caused a number of Middle Eastern airlines that had transported migrants to Belarus to decide to suspend their flights to Minsk¹⁵.

Looking at the short-term consequences caused by the migrant problem and the attempts to fix it, it can be said that Lukashenka has managed to divert attention, at least briefly, from internal problems and complement the Western agenda with the issue of the humanitarian crisis (alongside the regime’s crimes and security challenges). However, this had only a short-term effect because the European Union was quite quick to reconcile its position and supported it by the reasonable assumption that Lukashenka himself was the main initiator of the crisis and that further pressure (new sanctions) on the regime and no concessions were the ways to resolve the crisis. The EU and NATO demonstrated solidarity with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, while the sharp rise in the number of migrants from the Mid-

dle East in Belarus could become a problem for Lukashenka himself in the medium term¹⁶. However, it is still very likely that the migrant crisis will become a long-term problem. Although it was said in the last days of November that almost two thousand migrants had been returned to Iraq¹⁷, there are still at least a few thousand left in Belarus, and Lukashenka himself suggests that the number of migrants could rise again due to Afghan refugees¹⁸. Although in smaller quantities than on November 8–10, at least a few dozen migrants still attempt to illegally cross the border with Poland and Lithuania every day. A new tactic is also observed as there are attempts to traffic migrants using freight vehicles crossing the Belarusian border. It cannot be ruled out that this could cause one more problem: tightened control of the border or even its complete closure¹⁹, which would inevitably lead to new economic challenges. Another notable trend is the exploitation of the migrant crisis for increasing military tension at the border with Ukraine, both from Belarus and Russia. Security experts are already saying loudly that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is a “very real possibility”²⁰, and this also adds much uncertainty to the development of the situation in Belarus. On November 29, Lukashenka told bluntly that in the event of Russia’s conflict with Ukraine, Belarus would not stand aside²¹.

Belarus–Russia relations. On September 10, in Minsk, the Prime Ministers of Belarus and Russia signed the main guidelines for implementing the provisions of the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State in 2021–2023 and 28 sectoral Union programmes, which were later (on November 4) signed by the heads of state of the two states, Putin and Lukashenka. Although deserving to be regarded as yet another formal confirmation that Belarus’s integration with Russia continues to move forward, so far this step cannot be considered the

end of talks between Lukashenka and Putin. The Belarusian dictator, while having less and less room for bargaining manoeuvre, he is not ready, at least in the near future, to move beyond formal commitments. On the other hand, nor is Moscow interested in recklessly putting pressure on Minsk as it is enough for the Kremlin to have formal guarantees that Belarus will not change its geopolitical and geoeconomic orientation if Lukashenka loses his power as president of Belarus. Lukashenka's own statements (see the section on Constitutional Reform) also suggest that preparations for such a scenario (Lukashenka's formal resignation) are under way. The last time the dictator stated so was at a meeting of the so-called "Constitutional Commission" on November 25²².

Putin's (indirect) call on Lukashenka to start talks with opposition forces inside the country expressed on November 18 had some resonance in Moscow–Minsk relations²³. Lukashenka reacted to the proposal quite tempestuously, saying that he could do so "as soon as Putin sits down at a negotiating table with Navalny"²⁴.

Summarising the dynamics of Belarus–Russia relations during the period under review, it can be stated that Russia prefers to use the problems of the Belarusian dictator for serving its own interests (which are primarily geopolitical and strategic–military). At the same time, Moscow is trying to keep a certain distance from Lukashenka to be able to use the leverage of its influence and play a mediating role between the West and Belarus, thus strengthening its importance in the region.

Tensions between Belarus and Ukraine. Although the Zapad-2021 exercise went without unexpected moves, the very fact of the exercise and Lukashenka's particularly aggressive attitude and rhetoric during and after the exercise mainstreamed another aspect: the growing tension between Kyiv and Minsk. During

the period under review, relations between Belarus and Ukraine developed rapidly in a negative direction, especially in the area of security. Lukashenka emphasised the importance of the threat posed by Ukraine and the need to avert it²⁵. The solutions to the problem voiced by him loudly – the deployment of Iskander missile defence systems on the Belarusian–Ukrainian border²⁶ and patrolling by Russian strategic bombers²⁷ – clearly echo Russia's discourse on the Ukrainian issue. Although there have been quite many attempts in the Western information field to link the migration crisis in Belarus itself to Russia's efforts to disguise the planned military operation against Ukraine, there is no direct evidence of Russia's involvement in the migration crisis. This does not rule out the possibility that Russia is seeking to take advantage of the current situation to mount tension in Ukraine. It is most likely that Moscow has taken advantage of the problems Belarus is creating and may try to achieve its interests under the guise of Lukashenka.

It is a paradox, but in the economic sphere, relations between Belarus and Ukraine remain viable, albeit experiencing some shocks. The most striking example is the supply of electricity from Belarus to Ukraine. As Kyiv faces a major energy crisis²⁸, Belarus has resumed electricity supplies to Ukraine²⁹, despite the fact that Ukraine has launched a special operation related to strengthening the security of the Ukrainian–Belarusian border³⁰. It should be noted that the attitude of Ukrainians towards Lukashenka has significantly changed for the worse (over the last two years, his positive rating among Ukrainians has dropped from 67% to 34%, with the negative rating reaching 59%).³¹

Belarus–EU relations. Despite several contacts with representatives of the Belarusian regime and attempt to resolve the migrant crisis, the EU's attitude towards the Minsk regime

remains relatively tight. It is the concentration of migrants at the EU border what prompted the EU Foreign Affairs Council to agree on the new criteria for imposing sanctions on Belarus on November 15³². On December 2, it was announced that EU Permanent Representatives in Brussels agreed on 5th package of sanctions against the Belarusian regime³³. It lists 17 new individuals and 11 entities, including Belarusian state-owned Belavia Airlines and such companies as GrodnoAzot, Belshina, BelarusNeft and Grodno Chimvolokno³⁴. Such an extension of sanctions can be viewed as an additional quantitative step to crank up the pressure on the regime. It is still difficult to assess whether the new sanctions will be a new qualitative step in increasing the effectiveness of the sanctions. The talks that have already started on the sixth package of sanctions³⁵ are likely to mean that the EU is determined to go a path of gradually increasing pressure rather than seeking qualitatively different measures to influence the regime. Other countries, such as the United States³⁶, the United Kingdom³⁷ and Canada³⁸, have also announced the extension of sanctions.

Some time earlier (on October 14), the Belarusian side adopted a law suspending the implementation of the country's obligations under the EU–Belarus Readmission Agreement³⁹. In response, on November 9, the EU announced the suspension of the Visa Facilitation Agreement for Belarus regime officials⁴⁰.

Domestic policy trends

Referendum on the future Constitution. Preparations for the so-called referendum on the state's new Constitution are under way. On November 4, an improved version of the draft Constitution was presented to Lukashenka. It can be assumed that the proposed draft Constitution envisages a “Kazakh” version of the transition of power – it is planned that the Con-

stitution will establish a much meaningful role of the National Assembly of Belarus (NAB). According to Lukashenka himself, this will allow this institute to play a role as a certain safeguard until it becomes clear how the new President will behave. Lukashenka says that he will not run for presidency any more himself, and all further movements will depend on what the new leader will be. To prevent the new leader from “making stupid things”, great power (it is unclear whether temporarily or permanently) will be granted to the NAB. Lukashenka himself is likely to take serious positions in the composition/leadership of the NAB⁴¹.

The opposition is also preparing for the “referendum” being organised by the government and is looking for ways to make it as illegitimate as possible. Opposition organisations in exile have drawn up a strategy on how to act during the forthcoming referendum⁴². The essence of the strategy is to participate in the referendum, but to spoil the ballot paper (to cast votes against all proposals). However, there is general consensus that it will be very difficult for democratic forces to find a good and workable strategy in this respect⁴³.

Along with preparations for the referendum, there are further efforts to keep the Belarusian issue on the international agenda and to consolidate forces of democracy promoters in exile. With these objectives in view, a fairly large-scale international conference on Belarusian issues was held in Vienna⁴⁴ on November 22, and Vilnius hosted a conference of the Belarusian diaspora on September 24–25⁴⁵.

During the period under analysis, results of as many as several public opinion polls of the Belarusian population were announced. One of them was performed by Chatham House⁴⁶ (this year's was already the third). Another opinion poll, whose data is not publicly available, was conducted by VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Centre)⁴⁷. It is announced that the

poll was conducted at the commission of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to find out the public sentiment in Belarus in the context of creating the Russia–Belarus Union. VCIOM itself does not confirm that it conducted such a poll.

Both polls show that the most favoured politicians in Belarus are opposition activists, while

Lukashenka is assessed more negatively than positively (see Table 1). On September 6, the most favoured politicians – Marya Kalesnikava and Maksim Znak – were sentenced to 11 and 10 years in prison, respectively⁴⁸. Before that, Viktor Babaryka was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Table 1: Assessments of Belarusian politicians based on public opinion polls

Politician	Chatham House (confidence index – the difference between those who trust a politician and those who do not)	VCIOM (Assessment index – the difference between those who assess a politician positively and those who negatively)
Maksim Znak	+ 51%	N/A
Marya Kalesnikava	+ 14%	+ 27%
Viktar Babaryka	+ 18%	+ 25%
Pavel Latushka	+ 18%	+ 19%
Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya	- 4%	+ 10%
Syarhey Rumas	- 7%	+ 4%
Alyaksandar Lukashenka	- 19%	- 25%
Uladzimir Makei	- 40%	- 30%

Process of repressions. The process of internal repressions and persecution of any beginnings of the opposition continues. On October 2, the Belarusian government passed a resolution authorising the Ministry of the Interior and the KGB to legally recognise groups of citizens (including those active on social networks) as carrying out extremist activities and prosecute them. On October 29, NEXTA and NEXTA LIVE, which are among the most popular Telegram channels covering Belarus, were recognised as extremist⁴⁹. The full list of organisations that are considered as extremist by the regime is available [here](#).

Not only Belarusian and Western media, but also a number of Russian ones are among those closed and persecuted. The best-known Russian news channels, access to which has been blocked in Belarus, include Regnum.ru, Komsomolskaya Pravda and others⁵⁰.

As of November 29, there were 891 political prisoners in Belarus⁵¹. Among the last on the list is Maria Uspenskaya, the wife of programmer Andrei Zeltser. Andrei Zeltser was an EPAM Systems employee who was killed on September 28 in his apartment⁵² when he began to shoot KGB officers, who did not identify themselves and tried to search his apartment. Uspenskaya has been charged with complicity in a terrorist act as she filmed Zeltser trying to defend himself from the KGB agents attacking him.

Endnotes

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