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# 2022 III Fourth Quarter **Belarusian Trends**

Analytical overview  
July – September



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The Lukashenko regime continues to persecute those involved in the protests during the 2020 presidential elections, as well as those who speak out against Russia's war in Ukraine. Belarusian military exercises continue to take place regularly on Ukraine's borders. However, the majority of Belarusians do not want Belarus to intervene in the war in any form and believe that even if ordered to cross the Ukrainian border, the army would not follow it.

# Highlights

- Belarus' gross GDP contracted by 5.2% in the first seven months of 2022, and the physical volume of Belarus' foreign trade fell sharply, although in monetary terms it remains close to its 2021 level due to inflation.
- The Lukashenko regime continues to persecute those involved in the protests during the 2020 presidential elections, as well as those who speak out against Russia's war in Ukraine. Belarusian military exercises continue to take place regularly on Ukraine's borders. However, the majority of Belarusians do not want Belarus to intervene in the war in any form and believe that even if ordered to cross the Ukrainian border, the army would not follow it.
- The International Civil Aviation Organisation has published its official findings on the grounding of Ryanair flight FR4978 in May last year.

## Economics

### Impact of sanctions on Belarus' foreign trade

In July 2022 (the latest month for which statistics are available), Belarus' monthly GDP fell by 10.1% and total GDP fell by 5.2% in the first seven months of the year<sup>1</sup>. Belarus' official statistics service Belstat no longer publicly reports on individual categories of foreign trade in goods and physical deliveries, only on price volumes, and the Belarusian Ministry of Finance has stopped reporting on the state of public debt and budget execution<sup>2</sup>.

According to Belstat, total exports of goods from Belarus in the first half of 2022 amounted to USD 17.1 billion. This is slightly below the 2021 figure (i.e. only 96.4% of the 2021 figure). The January-July statistics show a similar trend - USD 20.3 billion, even though exports in January-July 2021 amounted to USD 21 billion (96.5%). However, there is reason to believe that the drop in physical deliveries is much larger than the drop in export volumes at prices. The average price of Belarusian exports increased by

32.2% between January and May 2022, and if the total value of exports was 96.5% of the 2021 level, this means that over the same period, the physical volume of deliveries actually decreased to 27.7%, compared to a decrease of 3.5% of their value. This shows that the new sanctions related to the war in Ukraine have had a significant impact on Belarus' exports and have significantly reduced the real volume of exports, and that the maintenance of exports in monetary terms close to the level of 2021 can only be explained by rising prices.

Belarus' efforts to reorient its exports have somewhat mitigated the impact of sanctions, but the Russian market is the only one playing a key role in this process. In the first half of the year, exports to Russia accounted for \$9 billion, or more than half of all Belarusian shipments. In the same period in 2021, this share was 40%<sup>3</sup>.

According to Belstat, imports from non-CIS countries decreased by 13.5% in monetary terms in July this year compared to July last year, to USD 893.9. In the period from January to July, it dropped even more, by 20.8% (USD 6.9 billion)<sup>4</sup>. In the overall trade structure in 2022 compared to 2021, imports from 29 countries increased, imports from 1 country remained at the previous year's level and imports from 67 countries decreased. The biggest decrease in monetary

terms was observed for imports from Ukraine, while Russia was the leading country in terms of import growth (an increase of USD 459 million). However, in percentage terms, imports from Russia increased by only 4.4% over the seven months<sup>5</sup>.

Belarus' total foreign trade, including with CIS countries, has fallen accordingly. In total, Belarus sold USD 20.3 billion worth of goods abroad in the first seven months of 2022 (3.5% less than in the same period last year), and purchased USD 20.2 billion worth of goods (9.7% less than in the same period last year). As a result, Belarus' overall external financial turnover fell by 6.7% in the first half of 2022 to USD 40.5 billion<sup>6</sup>.

## Domestic Policy Trends

### Political repression and opposition activities, adjustment of the regime

More than 1,300 people are currently recognised as political prisoners in Belarus<sup>7</sup>, but the actual number is likely to be several times higher, as until July 2021, almost 5,000 criminal cases had been opened in Belarus on extremist charges alone<sup>8</sup>. Many of these Belarusians are still being persecuted for their activities during the 2020 protests. For example, Marfa Rabkova was recently sentenced to 15 years, along with 9 others who monitored protests in 2020, documented evidence of torture and other ill-treatment of detained protesters, and assisted political prisoners<sup>9</sup>. The Belarusian Investigative Committee indicated that it has created an archive of images used to identify "street terrorists" to date<sup>10</sup>, and reported that it has opened a total of around 11,000 criminal cases related to the protests following the presidential elections between 09 August 2020 and July 2022<sup>11</sup>.

The war in Ukraine has led to repression in Belarus, where the government and security forces are now cracking down not only on Lukashenko's opponents and former protesters, but also on those who oppose the Russian invasion and support Ukraine. For example, a resident of the Gomel region faces up

to seven years in prison for photographing Russian military equipment in Belarus<sup>12</sup>. In August 2022, the Viasna Centre for Human Rights reported that it was aware of 32 ongoing criminal cases related to the protests over Russia's invasion of Ukraine<sup>13</sup>.

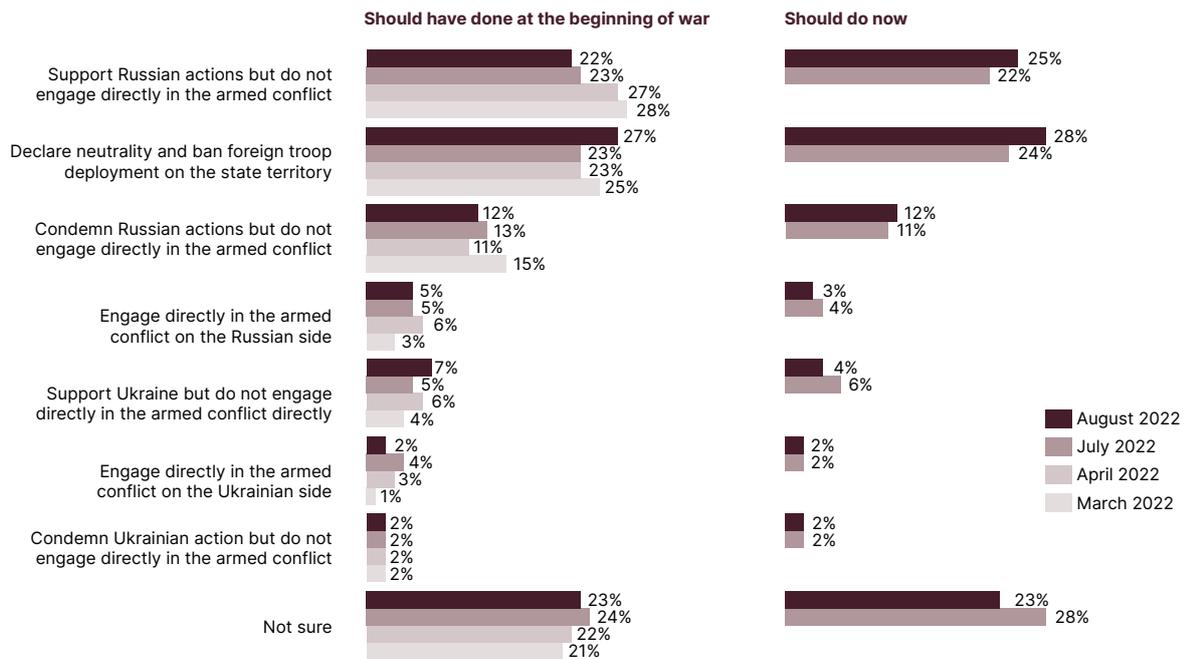
The Belarusian government is drafting legislation to strip emigrated political opponents of their citizenship, under which Belarusians who have emigrated abroad and have been identified as extremists could face deprivation of Belarusian citizenship and a ban on entry to the country<sup>14</sup>. In addition, in July this year, Lukashenko signed a law that allows Belarusian citizens who go abroad to be tried in absentia<sup>15</sup>.

## Social trends

On 4-21 August, Chatham House conducted an online survey on the attitudes of Belarusians towards the war in Ukraine and the situation in their own country. Around 30% of Belarusians support or tend to support Russia's actions in Ukraine (down 2% from April), but only around 15% think that the consequences of the war will be positive or rather positive for their country and for them personally, compared to 18% in April.

There is a dominant trend that Belarusian society in general wants to distance itself from the war in Ukraine, with an increasing need for the state to express neutrality in this conflict. The majority of Belarusians (56%) believe that Belarus itself will not take part in this war. Only 18% think that if an order to intervene on the Russian side were given, the Belarusian army would carry out the order. Similarly, Belarusian public opinion is consistently positive towards both Russia (71%) and Ukraine (65%). Lithuania and Poland are also viewed positively by 60-70% of Belarusians, while the USA is viewed positively by 51% of Belarusians, a significant increase from 40% in April this year. Support for Russia's actions in Ukraine correlates with the consumption of information provided by state-owned Belarusian media, state-owned Russian media and non-state-owned Russian media. This also determines geopolitical preferences, especially towards Russia and Ukraine.

In addition, the number of respondents in favour of a simultaneous Belarusian union with both Russia and the EU, or no union at all, has fallen over the half-year period. However, the number of supporters of an alliance with Russia remains stable (37%), although Belarusians perceive an alliance with Russia as purely economic rather than political or military<sup>16</sup>.



**Fig. 1.** Belarusian attitudes towards the military conflict: 1) “What should Belarus have done when the war broke out because of the military actions between Russia and Ukraine?”, 2) “What should Belarus do today because of the military actions between Russia and Ukraine?” Source: Chatham House, “Belarusian’s views on Russia’s war on Ukraine”, <https://belaruspolls.org/wave-11>

## External Relations

### Relations with Russia.

#### Military component

Belarus’ cooperation with Russia in the format of a Union State increased slightly in the third quarter of this year, mainly in the area of trade. On 12 September Lukashenko approved a project to redirect Belarusian exports from Baltic ports via Russian ports<sup>17</sup>. In addition, Belarus and Russia have finalised an agreement on the co-financing of import substitution projects<sup>18</sup>. In July, the Russian government also legalised the participation of Belarusian banks in the Russian state procurement system, making it much easier for Belarusian suppliers to obtain Russian state orders<sup>19</sup>.

On 25 June Lukashenko and Putin had a meeting in St Petersburg on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Belarus<sup>20</sup> (next one is planned for the SCO Assembly in September<sup>21</sup>). It focused on the economy and trade between the two countries against the backdrop of sanctions, but also discussed the military dimension. At the meeting, Putin also promised to hand over Iskander-M missile complexes to the Belarusian army “in the coming months”<sup>22</sup>, but as of early September it had not been announced whether this had happened. At the meeting, Lukashenko also asked Putin to accept Belarus’ Su-24 fighter jets for modernisation so that they can be equipped with nuclear warheads. On 26 August Lukashenko announced that the modernisation had been completed<sup>23</sup>, and then added that the nuclear warheads themselves had not been handed over to Belarus and that it would not ask Russia for them unless it was attacked or if nuclear weapons were deployed in Poland<sup>24</sup>.

Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus has been active recently. While direct Belarusian involvement in the war in Ukraine remains unlikely, the Belarusian leadership continues to provide indirect support for Russia's actions. The Belarusian Armed Forces continue to exercise on Ukraine's borders: in July, joint ground force exercises were held in the Gomel region<sup>25</sup>; in early August, a joint air defence exercise was organised with Russia<sup>26</sup>; in early September, an exercise on "recapturing enemy-occupied territory" was organised in the Brest region<sup>27</sup>. At the beginning of June, Ukrainian sources reported that up to 4,000 Belarusian troops are permanently deployed directly on its borders<sup>28</sup>. According to Ukraine, it is also likely that Belarus transferred ammunition stockpiles from its arsenal to the Russian army in June<sup>29</sup>.

In addition, Russian military personnel are still being deployed and treated in Belarus, and at the end of July, the Russian military resumed firing missiles from Belarusian territory on Ukrainian territory after a break of more than three months.<sup>30</sup>

## Findings of the official inquiry into the hijacking of a Ryanair plane

On 19 July, the Council of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) concluded its investigation into the May 2021 incident in Belarusian airspace involving Ryanair flight FR4978 and has unequivocally condemned the actions of the Belarusian government as an act of unlawful interference. Having considered the findings of the fact-finding presented, the ICAO Council found that the bomb threat on board Ryanair flight FR4978 was deliberately misleading and endangered the safety of the flight, and that it was communicated to the crew of the aircraft under the instructions of high-ranking Belarusian Government officials.

The representative of the Russian Federation in the Council was the only one to express his country's strong objection to Belarus being recognised as a source of illegal interference.

As regards follow-up, the Council instructed ICAO to communicate the findings of the report of the investigation into the incident of flight FR4978 to all ICAO Member States and to report on Belarus' violations of the Chicago Convention to the ICAO Assembly during the upcoming 41st Session of the Organisation (27 September - 07 October 2022) and to make the report publicly available on the ICAO website.

The President of the Council decided to forward the report of the inquiry and the related Council decisions to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, for appropriate action<sup>31</sup>.

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