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AGENCY FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EXPERT APPRAISAL

BELARUSIAN YEARBOOK 2022

A survey and analysis of developments
in the Republic of Belarus in 2021

Vilnius 2022



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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Belarusian Yearbook 2022 presents a comprehensive analysis of developments in the key segments of the state and society in the year 2021, which served as a transition from the political crisis of 2020 in Belarus toward the global security crisis of 2022 in the region. The forced landing of the *Ryanair* aircraft at the Minsk airport and artificial migration crisis on the border with Poland and Lithuania, the de facto war with civil society and “foreign trade miracle”, the regime’s counterrevolution and social polarization, relocation of social activists and business – these are the factors that shaped the sociopolitical agenda of the period under review.

Main trends of the year:

- escalation of the political crisis on the back of initiatives undertaken by the Belarusian authorities and loss of control over that escalation, which led to unprecedented harsh sanctions imposed by Western countries;
- transformation of the Belarusian political meltdown from a predominantly internal development to a regional crisis, which constitutes a direct threat to other countries, mostly neighbors;
- ostentatious approximation with Moscow in the military sphere, the marked emphasis on the militarization of relations with a clear prospect of Belarus turning into a military and strategic platform for Russia;
- increased weight of security officials at all levels of the political system. The Security Council has strengthened its influence, including as Lukashenka’s political headquarters, and

entered into a nomenklatura competition with the leadership of the Council of the Republic and the government. Increasing numbers of civilian executive positions in the government and local authorities are filled by former members of the security services;

- growing securitization of education, regular repressions of independent culture, which, combined with the reprisal against public organizations, can be referred to as *internal occupation*;
- destruction of the legal framework for the operation of uncontrollable civil society organizations in Belarus, as well as redoubled activities of state-controlled pseudo-NGOs. However, this hardly breaks the pattern of public sympathies: independent civil society organizations retain public support, whereas independent human rights organizations and independent trade unions still top the trust list of all Belarusian institutions;
- a surge of economic growth in the wake of the “foreign trade miracle” — extremely favorable terms of trade caused by the growth in demand and prices resulting from situational factors beyond Belarus’s control. However, accelerating inflation and institutional setback, dramatic deterioration of the environment for long-term growth combined with the lagged effects of the sanctions will eventually outweigh the “foreign trade miracle”.

Since 2003, the *Belarusian Yearbook* project has evolved as a joint endeavor of the Belarusian expert community to compile, conceptualize, and deliver a chronicle of Belarus’s contemporary history. Contributing to *Belarusian Yearbook 2022* were independent analysts and experts, as well as specialists representing various think tanks, including Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), Center for New Ideas, Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC), Belarusian

Institute for Public Administration Reform and Transformation (BIPART), School of Young Managers in Public Administration (SYMPA), Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, Ostrogorski Centre, *Belarus Security Blog* analytical project, Institute of International Relations (Warsaw, Poland), European Humanities University (Vilnius), Agency for Social and Political Expert Appraisal (Vilnius), *Ejednevnik* newspaper (ej.by) and the website of the expert community of Belarus *Nashe Mnenie* (“Our Opinion”).

STATE AUTHORITIES

PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION: DOWNSHIFT IN THE NEW ARCHITECTURE OF POWER

Nikolai Burov

Summary

In 2021, the Presidential Administration (PA) was in a state of intense competition with the Security Council and its State Secretariat, Council of the Republic Speaker Natalia Kochanova and Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko. The country's leadership is looking more and more like a military junta, whose rule and personnel purges it initiates objectively diminish the PA's importance. Although the Presidential Administration copes with all the assigned tasks, its real status is becoming uncertain in the new system of governance enshrined in the updated Constitution.

Trends:

- Further increase in the political heft of the Security Council and the entire security bloc, which acts as the president's political headquarters, which had previously been a prerogative of the Presidential Administration;
- Increasing competition between the Security Council, Council of the Republic Speaker Natalia Kochanova and Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko;
- Uncertain place and role of the Presidential Administration in the architecture of power after the adoption of the new Constitution;
- Persistent staffing problems (a short bench of substitutes) exacerbated by purges and de-professionalization.

Factional strife: loss of influence

The year 2021 was marked by a decrease in the political and personnel policy role of the Presidential Administration compared

with the State Secretariat of the Security Council, and the retained influence of Natalia Kochanova on personnel policy, which used to be one of the priority functions of the Administration.

Alexander Lukashenko's meeting with the Administration leadership on October 1 was a key event for the latter. Lukashenko rebuked the PA for poor strategic planning and scheduling of presidential events, inadequate responsiveness to changes, incoherent personnel policy, ideological shortcomings, and reproachful groundworks for political decisions.

The meeting was in many respects aimed at summing up the first results of the PA restructuring in line with presidential decree No.147-dsp of April 16, 2021. It has become typical that the composition of the Administration was previously available in the public domain in the most general terms, while now, this information is for official use only.

One of the main innovations was the formation of the Central Department for Information Policy and Social Development headed by Tatiana Shendik, former member of the Belaya Rus ("White Russia") NGO and former deputy director of the Belarusian State Institute for Strategic Research (2019–2021). Judging by the criticism, this institution has nothing to boast about.

In April, the Presidential Administration was tasked to comb up civil society, and so was the Ministry of Justice with a focus on political parties.¹ Also, the presidential chief of staff was ordered to 'optimize' Belarus' diplomatic missions abroad in cooperation with the KGB and Foreign Ministry.

The State Secretariat of the Security Council used to play an important role in personnel appointments, and its influence on the selection of candidates increased even more in 2021. Decree

¹ «Совещание по вопросам деятельности политических партий в Беларуси.» *Портал Президента Республики Беларусь*, 09 Apr. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosam-deyatelnosti-politicheskikh-partiy-v-belarusi>.

No.2 'On Protection of Sovereignty and Constitutional System' of May 9, 2021 considerably strengthened the State Secretariat. Its role in public administration was discussed at the session of the Security Council held on May 18. Decree No.214 'On the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus' of June 11, 2021 approved a new wording of the provision on the Security Council.

Among other things, the State Security Council was given the status of a state body and a number of functions previously largely performed by the Presidential Administration, in particular, forecasting, identifying, analyzing and assessing risks, challenges and threats to national security, working out response measures, assigning state agencies and officials to implement such measures, and strategizing. The main function of the Security Council is to prepare proposals to the president for making decisions on domestic and foreign policy matters aimed at safeguarding national security and national interests of Belarus. Essentially, the State Secretariat of the Security Council has become the second political headquarters alongside the Presidential Administration. Previously, the latter was almost exclusively in charge of strategic development aspects.

The government became the fourth center of power after the Presidential Administration, State Secretariat and Kochanovna. In the official "State for the People" bulletin presented by the Presidential Administration, Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko was the absolute leader last year in terms of presence (eight separate columns); Economy Minister Alexander Chervyakov was second (six columns); Deputy Prime Minister Igor Petrishenko and Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin shared the third place (four columns each); Presidential Chief of Staff Igor Sergeyenko was fourth (three columns) together with Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei, Industry Minister Piotr Parkhomchik and some other officials.

This was done, to some extent, to withstand the impact of the sanctions, which, certainly, is a function of the government,

rather than the Presidential Administration, although during the previous period of cooling in relations with the West, the PA played a greater role in this than it does today. It is characteristic that, according to aforementioned Decree No.2, the prime minister chairs the Council of Ministers, which would take over the country in the event of the assassination of the head of state, an act of terror, external aggression, or other violent acts.

Ideological contradictions and the vague future

Significant changes took place in the ideological narrative. The state ideology, which has always been quite incoherent, lacking worthwhile ideas, turned into a hair-raising mix of “enemies all around,” “stand vigilant, brothers [against traitors]” and “the Year of National Unity” annunciations combined with the declaration of September 17 the Nation’s Unity Day (predominantly in the foreign policy dimension).

To a certain extent, the emergence of these ill-compatible ideas was caused by different approaches to the resolution of the political crisis in Belarus. The Presidential Administration, on the one hand, proposed the Year of National Unity, while, on the other hand, Chief of Staff Igor Sergeyenko was directly instructed to conduct a political housecleaning in the state apparatus to get rid of “traitors”.

The Presidential Administration diligently organized the 6th All-Belarusian People’s Assembly in February 2021. Despite the fears of a possible disruption of the event, in concert with other state bodies and organizations, the PA demonstrated its capability to conduct pseudo-political campaigns. In many respects, the Assembly was the first rehearsal of a referendum on amendments to the Constitution.

The preparation of the updated Constitution and the referendum on its adoption was among the most important political

events of 2021. At first, the Presidential Administration was not publicly involved in this process, although the Administration employs well-known lawyer Olga Chupris as a deputy chief of staff. Not a single representative of the Administration was on the list of the 36 members of the constitutional commission appointed on March 15.

Officially, the Administration pitched in with the preparation of the new Constitution as late as autumn, when an ad hoc group was formed to finalize the draft. The group included Chief of Staff Igor Sergeyenko and Presidential Aide Alexander Kosinets. The first meeting of the group attended by Lukashenko was held on October 21. It is worth mentioning that Natalia Kochanova was both on the constitutional commission and the ad hoc group. Since then, the group was actively working on both the draft Constitution and the constitutional referendum scheduled for February 2022.

One of the key points of constitutional reform was a redistribution of powers between the president, government, governors and, possibly, a new state body (according to the public version), so that Lukashenko retains full power, despite possibly stepping down as president (not quite public version). The first session, during which the All-Belarusian People's Assembly was not mentioned yet, took place on March 30. After that the idea of the Assembly as a permanent government agency began to trickle down into the media landscape of Belarus.

The Assembly's status in the future constitutional structure of the country was discussed most openly after the enlarged session of the constitutional commission on September 28. Since then, the future status of the Assembly remained rather unclear, but its future place in the new configuration of power was not publicly discussed during the rest of the year.

Although there had been much talk about a delegation of some presidential powers to other state bodies and organizations, nothing was well pronounced either in the public space

or at the legislative level. Only during the “Big Talk with the President” on August 9, Lukashenko said that a part of his powers in the area of control and regulation of humanitarian activities had been delegated to the Department of Presidential Affairs and the Presidential Administration. Apparently, he meant the task given to Sergeyenko to “cleanse civil society”.

Personnel policy: personnel pool in the security bloc and new purges

Several important personnel decisions were made in 2021. Viktor Lukashenko was relieved of his position of presidential assistant for national security on March 1. This can be interpreted in two ways: as a vague beginning of the transit of power, or as an increase in the role and heft of the State Secretariat of the Security Council (which is to a greater degree in line with the trends of the second half of 2020 and 2021).

The dismissal of Viktor Sheiman on June 11 was a landmark event. The head of the Presidential Property Management Directorate, who, however, continued supervising the international projects and contacts, which are particularly important to Lukashenko personally, among other things, the nontransparent relationships with Zimbabwe and Venezuela, was replaced in July with Valery Ivanov, Chairman of the Belarusian Republican Union of Consumer Societies.

No less important was the April appointment of Information Minister Vladimir Lutsky as deputy presidential chief of staff in charge of ideology. Lutsky replaced Andrei Kuntsevich, who was demoted to first deputy minister of information. This reshuffle is symptomatic. As a deputy chief of staff, Kunzevich was expected to increase the presence of the state on the Internet and social media, promote the penetration of modern technologies in Belarus' information policy and ideology. Apparently, in late 2020,

the authorities decided that this was less promising than total censorship, declaration of media outlets extremist on a large scale, and application of more primitive propaganda methods. It is noteworthy that Kuntsevich was the only deputy chief of staff who was removed from his office after the events of 2020.

Among less significant personnel decisions were the appointment of Nikolai Rogashchuk to the vacant position of assistant to the president, chief inspector of the Gomel Region; Alexander Butarev as assistant to the president, chief inspector of the Minsk Region (replaced Igor Yevseyev), and the promotion of Alexei Guida to the Administration HR chief. Butarev was replaced by KGB Deputy Chairman Vladimir Kalach as soon as July 29.

The year 2021 was the first year of the work of presidential assistants/chief inspectors. Decree No.503 issued on December 29, 2020 significantly expanded their powers (a new wording of the regulation on presidential assistants was also prepared). In fact, the assistants/inspectors were given virtually the same powers as the governors in identifying 'threats to national security' and involving state agencies and organizations in the performance of the president's assignments.

We wrote in the previous Yearbooks more than once that Lukashenko sought to increase the role of his assistants/inspectors to counterbalance the powers of the governors.² In 2020, he introduced the positions of regional presidential envoys (as a rule given to security officials). However, in 2021, only one assistant/inspector—former Interior Minister Yuri Karayev, who was appointed to the Grodno Region—acted in a governor-like manner, which is quite problematic for the region from the political viewpoint, as Governor Vladimir Karanik lacked relevant experience.

² Буров, Николай. «Администрация президента: перетекание полномочий к Совбезу.» *Белорусский ежегодник 2021*, Vilnius, 2021, с. 23–32.

During the period under review, state personnel policy encountered the increased chronic problem of a small personnel pool. This was, basically, a result of personnel purges and increased requirements for potential appointees in terms of ideological purity and reliability.

At the February session of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, Lukashenko made an unambiguous statement about the necessity to rely on sitting and former security officials, especially those who retired before reaching 50 years of age. He also touched upon amendments to the Law on Public Service, which had been actively worked on in 2019. Among other things, it was proposed to tighten conditions and requirements for public service even more. However, this topic did not evolve in 2021.

At the meeting with the Presidential Administration leadership in October, Lukashenko criticized personnel policy for insufficient rigidity. The purity of the staff was not achieved, purges remained incomplete in 2021, vacant positions remained unfilled unacceptably long, and they should have been given to retired security officers.³

Conclusion

The trend towards the strengthening of the Security Council and the entire security bloc, including their traditional role as a president's political headquarters, which had been observed since late 2020, continued in 2021. The purposeful sharp increase in the number of security officers among new appointees (which weakens the Administration and Natalia Kochanova personally), which began in 2021, will also continue.

³ «Совещание с руководством Администрации Президента.» *Портал Президента Республики Беларусь*, 01 Oct. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-s-rukovodstvom-administracii-prezidenta>.

The influence of Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko has increased, probably, because of his behavior during the 2020 crisis and the need to minimize the effects of sanctions, and this is not directly within the scope of the Presidential Administration's functions.

The place and the role of the Administration in the architecture of power remain vague, as it must be formed in accordance with the new Constitution. Information policy remains in the state of a sharp degradation which is associated with the failure to create effective ideological narratives.

GOVERNMENT OF MILITARY DISCIPLINE

Polina Makarova

Summary

Although the government entered the year 2021 with personnel and reputational losses, it, nevertheless, remained united and loyal to the regime, in many respects thanks to the extensive and systematic political housecleaning under control of the security bloc. Despite the drastically changed environment, in which the Roman Golovchenko Cabinet had to work last year, i.e. the legal default, severe sanctions, coronavirus pandemic, signing of integration maps with Russia, and preparation for a referendum on amendments to the Constitution, the government remained committed to the *business-as-usual* stand, and behaved as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

Trends:

- Reinforcement of the government with security officials;
- Enforced military discipline in the Council of Ministers, which leaves no room even for minimum disagreements between the political leadership and the Cabinet over the expediency of one or another way of achieving the desired goals;
- Increasing subordination of state policies to ideological guidelines;
- Loss of the feedback from the independent expert community, discontinuance of the public discourse on government policies;
- Mass liquidation of civil society organizations that played an important role in the implementation of government plans in relation to vulnerable groups.

Usual work in unusual circumstances

Despite the increasing subordination of state policies to the ideological guidelines laid down by the political leadership, the government continued working as routinely as possible. The beginning

of the year was marked by the preparation for the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which was held on February 11–12.

It remained unclear how the Golovchenko Cabinet would account for the completely failed 2016–2020 Socioeconomic Development Program, as its key objectives had not been achieved. However, this point was not touched upon at the Assembly, and the government officials and representatives of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), who took the floor during the event, were mostly eager to demonstrate their complete political loyalty and keen willingness to adhere to the ideological guidelines set by the Lukashenko Administration. Lukashenko many times engaged in controversy against his opponents, who were not there in the hall, and repeatedly underlined the main criterion for the functioning of the economy and the social sector: loyalty to the incumbent leadership.

Throughout the year, the government was performing one of its key political tasks: to complicate to the uttermost the registration, operation and taxation of private entrepreneurs, who were among those accused the most of supporting the 2020 protests. Entrepreneurs and society as a whole did not get a plausible explanation of what economic sense the changes made, apart from the need for higher tax revenues and the alleged use of the status of individual entrepreneur for evading taxes.

According to the Minsk Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers, the total additional costs incurred by entrepreneurs (not just taxes, but also administrative expenses) resulted from the innovations will be around BYN 1 billion, and many will have to shut their businesses down. The effectiveness of this measure for covering the budget deficit was questionable, while it may well deny one of the most affordable opportunities to start a business.¹

¹ Анисович, Надежда. «Налог вырастет в три раза? Что ждёт частный бизнес в Беларуси.» *Deutsche Welle*, 15 Oct. 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/chto-izmenitsja-dlja-ip-v-belarusi/a-59495432>.

IT companies were penalized the same way. In early 2021, the income tax relief promised to the High-Tech Park residents for the period to 2049 was abolished, since, as was said, extra money was needed to cope with pandemic challenges. IT specialists were also criticized for participating in the protests.

There were other ideological calls for action in the economic sector, which previously seemed to be abandoned, i.e. price regulation, tougher penalties for economic crimes, and pressure on big business. However, there was no public discussion on this point, as any public disagreement with government policy was de facto criminalized. Society stakeholders were not asked for an opinion, although consultations used to be held before.

Many of the planned innovations were eased by exceptions for a transitional period, though. At the same time, the fact that the officials dived without objection into the preparation of the innovations, which were obviously fully based on ideology and totally senseless from the economic viewpoint, shows that the Council of Ministers no longer played the role of an opponent to the Presidential Administration performed by the previous Cabinets.

The security bloc was thus becoming more and more powerful in shaping state policies. In 2021, it initiated a number of legal innovations as part of the so-called “fight against extremism,” which led to repressions on even a larger scale, while law enforcement agencies watched with Olympian calm the most outrageous violations of the law, provided that they were sanctioned by the political leadership, such as the migration crisis.

With the same Olympian calm (see below for possible underlying reasons) government officials observed the demolition of civil society announced by the foreign minister. Despite various attempts (some of them successful) to involve officials in civil society projects in the pre-election period, civil servants did not publicly raise their voice in defense of the organizations that had cooperated with the government for years in social,

environment protection, or any other areas. It can be assumed that some officials feared being suspected of disloyalty by sympathizing with the organizations that had been declared instruments of a *coup d'État*. Yet it is also possible that many officials felt relieved by the removal of troubling partners, who sought to participate in government decision-making.

Personnel policy: securocrats and purges

During the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, Lukashenko set out the main direction of personnel policy for state administration bodies. "Today, we addressed the law on civil service. There will be a statute, a code, just like in the army, and certain requirements for public officers. Yes, they will be raised to unprecedented heights, but the state will demand more from them than from the military".² Reputable persons were needed, he said, and advised right away where to find them: "We must look at those coming from the security and law enforcement agencies, who, as you know, retire from the force before 50 years of age. We should not lose them".

A new version of the law on civil service was not adopted before the end of 2021, but former security officers took a number of crucial and not so crucial positions in state agencies and organizations. According to *Belorusy i Rynok (Belarusians and the Market)* newspaper³, Belarus is ahead of both Russia and

² «Лукашенко: В ближайшее время в Беларуси будет принят новый закон о госслужбе.» БелТА, 11 Feb. 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-v-blizhajshee-vremja-v-belarusi-budet-prinjat-novyj-zakon-o-gossluzhbe-428229-2021/>.

³ Свиридович, Алесь. «Погоны решают всё. Сколько силовиков в правительствах Беларуси, России и Украины?» *Белорусы и рынок*, 22 Dec. 2021, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-48726.html>.

Ukraine with respect to the number of security officers in executive positions: out of the 37 sitting members of the Council of Ministers of Belarus (including the prime minister, his deputies and heads of ministries and state committees), more than one-third (13 people) have been one way or another affiliated with security and law enforcement agencies. The Belarusian prime minister is the only former security officer in the *three* countries.

Former Deputy Interior Minister Sergei Khomenko, who was in charge of extra-departmental security and has no legal education, was appointed minister of justice in October. Also in October, Oleg Chernyshov, former deputy head of the KGB, former commander of the KGB Alfa task force, was appointed deputy chairman of the Presidium of the National Academy of Sciences.

A number of high-ranking security officials were transferred to regional administrations together with several retired military officers fully in line with Lukashenko's guidelines. These appointments are both supposed to ensure loyalty of civilian bodies, and provide former ranking servicemen with honorary and not much burdensome positions away from the capital until their final retirement.

Disloyal civil servants were combed out in order to ensure unquestioned obedience of the state machinery, and barriers were posed to their careers in public offices. Questions about the attitude to the incumbent government, participation in protests, etc., were added to the recruitment checklists. According to new amendments to decree No.6 "On Higher Requirements for Senior Officials and Employees," recommendations from previous employers and information from the unified state database of offenses against candidates for managerial positions are required now.

The recommendations must now include not only information about the professional qualities of a candidate for public

office, but also his or her attitude to “state and public institutions”. Provision of false information is punishable by law.⁴

Spontaneous purges in the state apparatus took place throughout the post-election period at the discretion of the heads of government bodies. The purges became systematic in the autumn of 2021, following Lukashenko’s call for the purity of personnel, which was a “matter of paramount importance”. Now, one does not even have to make any public appeals or openly sympathize with protesters to lose the job. Even those who only signed up for an alternative candidate during the 2020 presidential campaign are to be combed out, and when it comes to high-ranking officials, a signature of a family member for a wrong presidential candidate is enough to be disqualified.

It is hard to count the public officers, who lost their jobs for ideological reasons, since concurrent purges took place in state organizations and at state-owned enterprises. The minister of culture once admitted that 300 people had been fired from the ministry and its subordinate organizations for their “destructive position”.

It came as a no surprise that in late 2021, the Presidential Administration, which is in charge of staffing, discovered a shortage of qualified personnel for the state apparatus. “There is a paradox: the succession of generations, rejuvenation of the senior staff is going on”, said Chief of Staff Igor Sergeyenko, “Vacancies are filled, but there is a shortage of competent managers and specialists”. He called for “brainstorming” to find out what was hindering the talent capacity development. It is quite possible that the ranking officials may find out that they are the reason.

⁴ «Руководителей госорганов обязали при приёме граждан на работу запрашивать характеристики с предыдущей работы.» БелТА, 12 Oct. 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/rukovoditelej-gosorganov-objazali-pri-prieme-grazhdan-na-rabotu-zaprashivat-harakteristiki-s-464116-2021>.

Conclusion

The year 2021 saw the continued trends in the government's work, which had been observed back in the crisis year 2020. The power vertical continued the transition to the wartime footing, and not only because security officials were taking civilian positions. Government bodies now submit to military discipline, and any attempts to challenge ideological guidelines are regarded as betrayal of the living principles. No such attempts have been made, though. Civil servants, who have long learned to quickly understand spoken and unspoken demands of their superiors, have instantly adapted to the tightened rules of the game.

New rules have also been established between the state and society: criticism of government policies is now considered extremism, if not treason. This makes it unnecessary for the country's leadership to reckon with interests of the business community or civil society as a whole, to publicly justify any decisions, or to adopt international experience. From this point of view, state administration practices have been set back many years, and all the achievements of the period of liberalization have been nullified.

It is worth noting that during the whole year, Lukashenko did not use his favorite method of motivating the government: the threat to dismiss it together with the prime minister. There were no high-profile dismissals of ministers, although before the 2020 election, it used to be a routine during Lukashenko's inspections of enterprises subordinate to their ministries. Probably, he wanted to ensure loyalty without a split in the power vertical.

The practice of selecting loyal executives instead of professionals for top positions will most likely continue in 2022. This may not lead to some overnight collapse of the vertical, but the quality of decisions will definitely deteriorate. How quickly this deterioration will result in a decline in living standards,

the quality of public services and the entire economy depends on many other factors. However, the fact is that the lack of professionalism and officials' willingness to snap a salute to any, even the most absurd political stance is generally incompatible with economic growth and social prosperity.

PARLIAMENT: INSTRUMENTALIZATION AND LIMITED FUNCTIONALITY

Tatiana Chulitskaya

Summary

The proposed amendments to the Constitution of Belarus formally expanded the powers of the parliament, yet they could not bring about real changes in its role. The parliament still rarely acts as a subject of lawmaking, mainly serving the executive branch and the president. At the same time, parliamentarians passed a number of laws in 2021, which restricted civil and political rights of the population.

International activities of the parliament in the relationship with the West are significantly limited, and are mainly focused on Russia and the post-Soviet countries.

Trends:

- Formal expansion of powers of the parliament and somewhat limitation of some other of them in the new version of the Constitution in the absence of real change;
- Passing of bills following Alexander Lukashenko's public statements; Expansion of the practice of passing bills that toughen the criminal liability of political opponents and public activists;
- Willingness to use the remaining venues for contacts with the West, primarily the OSCE and UN.

Parliament in updated Constitution

Amendments to the Constitution, which formally expanded the powers of the parliament and extend its term limit from *four* to *five* years, were actively worked on in 2021. Following Russia's example, Belarus set a single day of voting (the last Sunday of February). It is worthy of note that the latter innovation in

the draft amendments, although it was only under consideration, mothered the idea to cancel the local elections previously scheduled for January 2022¹, apparently, because the authorities did not want to open even a smallest window of opportunity for the political engagement of society, even in a campaign as insignificant as local elections.

It was decided to call both the next local and parliamentary elections simultaneously in 2024. Until then, both parliament chambers and local councils will continue working in the old composition and according to the previous regulations.

A new provision was adopted to regulate the status of MPs: a member of the House of Representatives cannot be a member of the government (Art. 92). Art. 95 provides for *one* session instead of two. The requirement for the number of MPs for a session quorum was changed (Art. 103): a simple majority may be required, instead of 2/3 of the lower chamber.

The new version did give some additional powers to MPs. For example, a paragraph was introduced on considering bills on the national budget and reports on its execution in the House of Representatives. Among the topics that were widely debated in the expert community and media was the prior consent of both chambers to appoint a prime minister (previously only the House of Representatives had the right to support a candidacy even post factum). At the same time, the president has the right to dissolve the parliament if it refuses twice to approve the appointment of the proposed prime minister.

Accordingly, in practice, the changed wording is unlikely to lead to a more proactive position of the parliament in appointment matters.

¹ «Обращение палат Парламента – Национального собрания Республики Беларусь к Президенту Республики Беларусь.» Палата представителей Национального собрания Республики Беларусь, 25 May 2021, <http://house.gov.by/ru/news-ru/view/obraschenie-palat-parlamenta-natsionalnogo-sobranija-respubliki-belarus-k-prezidentu-respubliki-belarus-63430-2021>.

Also, there is an innovation about hearing reports to be made by the prosecutor general and heads of the State Control Committee and the National Bank in the parliament. The powers of the Council of the Republic (the upper chamber) in relation to local councils were expanded: in addition to the revocation of their decisions, there is a possibility to assess their activities and “take measures to develop local self-government” (Art. 93.5).

The parliament no longer has the power to bring charges against the president for committing treason or other grave crimes (it is now vested in the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly), and the Council of the Republic has no power to elect judges of the Constitutional Court (previously Art. 98.3) or members of the Central Election Commission (Art. 98.4).

Additional restrictions are also set for activities of the House of Representatives: according to Art. 99, an opinion of the government on the bills related to changes in public expenditures is required now.

Art. 91 of the new wording says, “a former president shall become a member of the Council of the Republic for life by his consent”. This means that Alexander Lukashenko will become a parliament member, should he step down as president for any reason.

In general, it is safe to say that the updated Constitution will not give the Belarusian parliament any real new powers and, in some cases, even abolish some of them.

Non-priority: parliament’s lawmaking functions

The year 2021 showed again that the Belarusian parliamentarians were not proactive lawmakers.² Over the year, the MPs only

² Казакевіч, Андрэй. “Парламент: вырошчванне новага палітычнага поля.” Белорусский ежегодник 2020, Vilnius, 2021, с. 41–50.

put *four* projects on the legislative agenda. One of them concerned health care regulation, particularly the introduction of gratuitous organ donation.³

Three other bills initiated by the MPs aimed at toughening criminal and administrative responsibility. Perhaps the most high-profile one was the bill “On the Genocide of the Belarusian People” introduced by former Minister of Information Lilia Ananich at the end of the year. Officially, the bill is meant to “preserve the historical memory, enhance national security, and counteract falsification of the events and results of World War II”.⁴ In practice, it provides for criminal liability for the “denial of genocide of the Belarusian people”, which carries a prison term of three to 10 years. The House passed the bill quickly and unanimously, and so did the upper chamber.

The next punitive initiative of the Belarusian parliamentarians was the bill “On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus” passed by the House of Representatives on November 9, 2021. It is characteristic that it was introduced by retired army officer Oleg Belokonev.

The proposed and quickly adopted amendments concerned criminal liability for appeals to sanctions against Belarus. This bill logically followed the statements and instructions given by Lukashenko⁵, and toughened the liability under all paragraphs

³ «Новая редакция закона о донорстве крови и её компонентов внесена в Палату представителей.» БелТА, 11 June 2021, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/novaja-redaktsija-zakona-o-donorstve-krovi-i-ee-komponentov-vnesena-v-palatu-predstavitelej-445523-2021/>.

⁴ «Единоголосно. Парламент в двух чтениях принял закон “О геноциде белорусского народа.”» *Зеркало*, 14 Dec. 2021, <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/7203.html?c>.

⁵ «Встреча с парламентариями, членами Конституционной комиссии и представителями органов госуправления.» *Президент Республики Беларусь*, 26 May 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-parlamentariyami>.

of section 361 of the Criminal Code (calls for actions aimed at harming national security of the Republic of Belarus). In the spirit of the Cold War rhetoric, the MPs justified the passing of the bill, saying that it was needed to “pose a legislative barrier to calls for sanctions against the country as one of the elements of modern hybrid warfare”.⁶ This enables Lukashenko and his Administration to open new criminal cases against any political opponents.

In a similar way, at the end of the year, the MPs developed and passed in two readings at once the bill “On Amendments to the Codes”, adding section 193-1 to the Criminal Code, a reincarnation of liability for activities on behalf of an unregistered organization, which was abolished in 2019. The return of this provision is obviously linked to the wave of repressions against organized civil society and new grassroots initiatives that emerged in 2020.

The liability for fundraising and application of funds was an important component, which provided an additional tool for limiting crowdfunding practices, which were very popular during the period of liberalization in Belarus, and, among other things, were used to pay fines on behalf of the victims of repressions.

Apart from these clear examples, on the whole, the Belarusian parliament remained prone to passivity, and only followed the line established by the executive branch.

MPs’ initiatives and responses

In 2021, the parliament remained passive in terms of lawmaking initiatives, and only livened up when supporting Lukashenko’s

⁶ «Об изменении Уголовного кодекса Республики Беларусь», Палата представителей Национального собрания Республики Беларусь, 09 Nov. 2021, <http://www.house.gov.by/ru/zakony-ru/view/ob-izmenenii-ugolovnogo-kodeksa-respubliki-belarus-1153/>.

proposals. His decree No.2 “On Protection of Sovereignty and Constitutional Order” was widely discussed and quickly supported by parliamentarians. The decree changed the configuration of the state administration system and the distribution of powers in case of the president’s death, and expanded the powers of the Security Council. These changes were basically introduced as just a notification, and were expectedly supported and approved.

Also, MPs came out with politically-motivated initiatives aimed at discrediting Lukashenko’s political opponents. Vyacheslav Orlovsky of the organized crime and corruption police unit proposed in October to terminate citizenship of the opponents of the regime, who left the country. This idea was well received by the parliament. In particular, it was seconded by Deputy Chairman of the Standing Committee of the House of Representatives for National Security Igor Martynov and Chairman of the pro-government *Belaya Rus* (“White Russia”) NGO Gennady Davydko.⁷

Andrei Savinykh, Chairman of the Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs was one of the most publicly active members of the lower chamber in 2021. Obligated by his position, he commented on the most pressing issues, and rebroadcasted the main international agenda narratives (in particular, during the acute phase of the migration crisis). His comment on the recognition of Crimea by Belarus as a “de facto and de jure Russian territory”⁸ stirred up the public the most. Russia thus pointed at Savinykh’s low political status. Putin’s Press Secretary Dmitry

⁷ «Депутаты и представитель МВД выступили за лишение белорусов гражданства. За что предлагают его отбирать?» *Зеркало*, 21 Oct. 2021, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/4584.html?c>.

⁸ «Депутат Савиных: И де-факто, и де-юре Крым давно признан белорусской стороной российским.» *Reformation*, 05 Nov. 2021, <https://reform.by/274453-deputat-savinyh-i-de-fakto-i-de-jure-krym-davno-priznan-belorusskoj-storonoj-rossijskim>.

Peskov said that such statements were expected from the formal head of state (president), rather than the parliament, as setting the political course is beyond its jurisdiction.⁹

MP Oleg Gaidukevich, Chairman of the pro-governmental Liberal Democratic Party, was also among the newsmakers. He claimed in summer 2021 that Molotov cocktails were thrown at his house, and it was “pure luck” that none of his family members was injured.¹⁰ This story was widely covered by the media, both pro-government and independent, and for the latter, it was a subject of many jokes. Because of their initiatives and the peculiar narrative and arguing style, the Belarusian audience tends to find many parliamentarians bitterly entertaining, rather than worthy of respect as real political figures.

The appointment of former head of the Belarusian Ice Hockey Federation Dmitry Baskov to the upper chamber was a high-profile piece of news. Baskov was previously disqualified by the IIHF for discriminating against athletes, and, as many believed, he was somehow involved in the murder of Roman Bondarenko in 2020. Lukashenko personally appointed him to the Council of the Republic, apparently, in gratitude for his loyalty.

International single-vector activities

Due to the overall political cycle and a sharp reduction in international contacts with the Lukashenko regime, international activities of the Belarusian parliament were limited both

⁹ «Песков прокомментировал слова Савиных о признании Минском Крыма.» *Sputnik.by*, 05 Nov. 2021, <https://sputnik.by/20211105/peskov-prokommentiroval-slova-savinykh-o-priznanii-minskom-kryma-1057700099.html>.

¹⁰ «Гайдукевич заявил, что в его дом ночью бросили бутылки с зажигательной смесью.» *Зеркало*, 11 July 2021, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/210.html?c>.

geographically and thematically. The Belarusian MPs had to focus on the few international organizations and national governments they were still able to communicate with, such as the UN and OSCE. Contacts with the UN were merely tokenistic, like the participation in seminars on pandemic relief measures.¹¹ The MPs, however, managed to organize events of their own at the UN. For example, on July 9, Andrei Savinykh took part in the online discussion titled “Human Rights in the West: Lack of International Monitoring and Response to Human Rights Violations”, organized by Belarus in Geneva as part of the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

The OSCE was the main international venue for the Belarusian parliament. Throughout the year, parliamentary delegations in various compositions took part in meetings and sessions, being most active in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, where Belarusian MPs sat in different committees, including the General Committee on Political Affairs and Security (mostly via videoconference).

There was virtually no activity in the European direction, except for the Cold War-style rhetoric of condemnation of the “collective West”. The February 23 online meeting between Austrian parliamentarians led by Helmut Brandstätter and a Belarusian delegation headed by Valery Voronetsky was one of the few exceptions. BelTA state newswire reported that the meeting was initiated by the Austrians, but no other details were available in open sources.¹²

¹¹ «29–30 июня 2021 года депутаты Палаты представителей приняли участие в виртуальном семинаре Межпарламентского союза и Управления Верховного комиссара ООН по правам человека», *Палата представителей Национального собрания Республики Беларусь*, 30 June 2021, <http://www.house.gov.by/ru/news-ru/view/29-30-ijunja-2021-goda-deputaty-palaty-predstavitelej-prinjali-uchastie-v-virtualnom-seminare-63564-2021/>.

¹² «Австрийские парламентарии проявили интерес к опыту Беларуси по борьбе с COVID-19.» *БелТА*, 23 Feb. 2021, <https://www.belta.by/society/>

Iran was among the countries, with which Belarusian MPs maintained intensive bilateral contacts. In August, House Speaker Vladimir Andreychenko attended the inauguration of President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi.

Russia and the post-Soviet republics thus remained among the very few directions of international activities of the Belarusian parliament amid the limited contacts with the West, following the significant deterioration of the situation with civil and political rights in Belarus. Belarusian MPs participated in sessions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Belarus-Russia Union and other joint activities with the Russian authorities. The speakers of both chambers met with Russian officials, the Russian ambassador among them. MPs were invited to observe the parliamentary elections in Russia as members of the CIS observer mission.

Conclusion

The proposed amendments to the Constitution of Belarus have not fundamentally changed the role and position of the parliament in the national political system. The MPs still have limited powers and functions. The formal changes do not really affect the powers of the parliament or its dependence on the president and the executive branch. This trend will most likely continue in 2022.

The Belarusian parliament still rarely acts as a lawmaking entity. And yet, several initiatives promoted by the MPs in 2021 significantly restrict political rights and freedoms of the population. Without a black swan event, this activity (or rather inactivity) will continue.

[view/avstrijskie-parlamentarii-projavili-interes-k-opytu-belarusi-poborbe-s-covid-19-429957-2021/](https://www.beltsp.gov.by/en/view/avstrijskie-parlamentarii-projavili-interes-k-opytu-belarusi-poborbe-s-covid-19-429957-2021/)

Being essentially limited in contacts with foreign democracies, Belarusian parliamentarians, nevertheless, try to use the few available international venues to promote government narratives and criticism of Western democratic institutions. Contacts with Russia will remain highly intense for long.

ARMY: INCREASING DEPENDENCE ON RUSSIA AND DEFICIT OF DOMESTIC RESOURCES

Andrei Porotnikov

Summary

The military-political situation in Belarus sharply deteriorated in 2021. The Belarusian regime chose ideologically motivated confrontation with the neighboring countries, hoping that the West would be unprepared for this kind of behavior. This actually ruined the years long play of “situational neutrality” and “donor of regional stability”. At the same time, the sufficiency of domestic resources required to safely maintain this behavior is doubtful. Meantime, Moscow is giving a demonstration of the gradual loss of the military autonomy by Minsk.

Trends:

- Confrontational statements and actions taken by the Belarusian authorities towards the political and military leadership of the neighboring countries;
- Increasing shortages of resources for defense without a clear strategy for tackling this issue;
- Demonstrative military cooperation with Moscow, while Belarus' status of the sole partner of Russia is degrading.

Military-political aspects

Early in the year, the Belarusian authorities officially renounced the aspiration to be a neutral state, which is enshrined in the Constitution. Alexander Lukashenko and his generals toughened the already belligerent rhetoric in relation to the European neighbors, including Ukraine, regularly accusing them

at the highest level of preparing for an aggressive war against Belarus, its destabilization, and provocations at the border to force Minsk to take up arms.

It was said among other things that Russian nuclear weapons might be given back to Belarus, should American nukes be placed in Poland¹, and that “several squadrons” of the “Iskander” missile systems would be deployed at the western and southern border of Belarus, i.e. aiming at Poland and Ukraine. Belarus did deploy the “Iskanders” in the south in early 2022.

Lukashenko called the neighboring countries “enemies”, and stated his willingness to join Russia in the war against Ukraine.² He seconded the Kremlin, which claimed that Ukraine was going to provoke Russia by attacking separatists in Donbass. In response, Ukraine accused Minsk of rebroadcasting Russian propaganda and turning “entire Belarus into a Russian military base”. However, as the events of February 2022 showed, Kyiv did not draw any conclusions other than rhetorical.

Meanwhile, Minsk continued to deny any plans to expand the Russian military presence in Belarus. Both Lukashenko and Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin made statements on this point.³

The tightening of Belarus’ official position can be explained by the following reasons:

- to ensure Russia’s support by highlighting common external threats and concurrence of opinions on them;

¹ «Лукашенко предложит Путину вернуть в Белоруссию ядерное оружие при одном условии.» *Lenta.ru*, 30 Nov. 2021, https://lenta.ru/news/2021/11/30/uslovie_yad/.

² «Лукашенко: Беларусь стала звеном в цепи обострения военной обстановки в регионе.» *БелТА*, 29 Nov. 2021, <https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-stala-zvenom-v-tsepi-obostrenija-voennoj-obstanovki-v-regione-472027-2021/>.

³ «Положение в области национальной безопасности Беларуси (ноябрь 2021 года).» *Belarus Security Blog*, 16 Dec. 2021, <https://bsblog.info/polozhenie-v-oblasti-nacionalnoj-bezopasnosti-belarusi-noyabr-2021-goda/>.

- to force the West to enter into dialogue on conditions favorable to the Belarusian regime under the threat of destabilization of the region;
- to demonstrate the ideological anti-Westernism in the Belarusian highest ranks.

Cuddling up to the Kremlin

As the confrontation with the neighbors intensified, Belarus expanded its military cooperation with Russia. The agreement on two Russian military facilities in Belarus (the 43rd communication center of the Russian Navy and the radio-radar missile warning center) was extended for whole 25 years, just as Moscow wanted.

The Defense Ministries of Belarus and Russia adopted a strategic partnership program for the next five years. A new military doctrine of the Belarus-Russia Union State (which both parties had been waffling on since late 2018 because of Belarus' reluctance to accept it) was finally agreed upon.

During the period under review, *three* centers for joint training of military personnel were set up. The one in the Grodno Region is for Su-30SM crews and Belarusian specialists working with Russian anti-aircraft missile systems. In August-September, Russian units with S-400 surface-to-air missile systems arrived in Grodno, and Russian Su-30SM fighters were deployed at the airbase in Baranovichi.

The second center in the Nizhny Novgorod Region of Russia is intended for ground troops training, and the third one in the Kaliningrad Region trains divers and crews of the BTR-82A armored personnel carriers. The legal status of the centers remains unknown, since no agreement has been made public.

The Belarusian Defense Ministry said in November that flights of Russian strategic bombers along the country's border

would be regular. This and all further actions were presented as a response to the military activity in the neighboring countries. During that time, two long-range Russian TU-22M3 bombers flew over Belarus, and then two Russian Tu-160 strategic bombers simulated bombing raids at the Ruzhany airfield.

Belarusian and Russian combined airborne battalion tactical groups practiced landing at the Gozha training range, capturing and holding a bridgehead, and destroying facilities. Belarusian and Russian aircraft began patrolling the Belarusian border in late November.

New weapons: modest implementation of immodest plans

In 2021, Minsk repeatedly revisited the idea of buying new weapons from Russia. It was reported that Belarus had signed contracts for supplies of the Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters and the second batch of the Su-30SM fighters, and that a contract for the purchase of the S-400 SAMS and Pantsir-S air defense systems was negotiated.⁴

Lukashenko said in March that he had discussed with Vladimir Putin the purchase of Russian weapons for the part of the Russian money, which was lent to Belarus for the construction of the nuclear power plant and remained unused.⁵ In September, he also said that a large batch of weapons from Russia would soon be delivered to Belarus, and that he planned to buy

⁴ «Беларусь заключила контракт на поставку второй партии СУ-30СМ.» *Belarus Security Blog*, 15 Jan. 2021, <https://bsblog.info/belarus-zaklyuchila-kontrakt-na-postavku-vtoroj-partii-su-30sm/>.

⁵ «Совещание по вопросу белорусско-российского сотрудничества в военной сфере.» *Президент Республики Беларусь*, 02 Mar. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosu-belorussko-rossiyskogo-sotrudnichestva-v-voennoy-sfere>.

Russian weapons worth USD 1 billion by 2025.⁶ Russia did not comment on these statements, although it used to be the main source of information about supplies of aircraft and air defense hardware to Belarus.

The only notable supplies were *two* battalion sets and Russian BTR-82A armored personnel carriers (upgraded Soviet BTR-80). The only advantage of the latter vehicles is that they are relatively cheap and can be used in Belarus without the preliminary crew training. The plan to buy the BTR-82As goes as far back as 2015, when Lukashenko criticized the idea, instructing to buy Belarusian products, even if they were of lower quality.

Development of a missile for the “Polonez” multiple-launch system (300-km range) and a medium-range anti-aircraft missile remained the largest projects of the Belarusian defense industry. However, nothing is known yet about any achievements in both projects.

No money, no manpower

Belarus’ armament projects were not supported financially. The 2021 budget of the Defense Ministry was originally planned at BYN 1,626 million against BYN 1,645 million in 2020, i. e. there was a reduction even in nominal terms. The announced BYN 1 billion for purchases of Russian weapons in the next *five* years fell within the spending range of the previous years. Taking into account that prices of Russian weapons were constantly rising, the Belarusian Defense Ministry is not expected to be able to spend more.

⁶ «Беларусь планирует закупку российского вооружения более чем на \$ 1 млрд.» БелТА, 12 Sep. 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/belarus-planiruet-zakupku-rossijskogo-vooruzhenija-bolee-chem-na-1-mlrd-459424-2021/>.

The number of draft dodgers was steadily increasing. Slightly over 10,000 young men bound to military service joined the army during the spring draft of 2021⁷, while about 5,000 were reported as dodgers, and 3,000 were booked by the police.

West-2021: unagreed internationalization

The format of the traditional Belarusian–Russian joint strategic exercise West-2021 underwent considerable changes. First of all, without notifying Belarus, Russia invited Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members to participate in the exercise. After that, it was announced that about 200,000 servicemen would be involved, of whom only about 12,800 would be practicing in Belarus.⁸ Previously, Russia used to hold its own strategic exercises of a much larger scale simultaneously with the joint Wests. In 2021, it was officially announced for the first time their actual integration.

In this way, Russia transformed West-2021 from a landmark bilateral exercise into a multinational one, in which Belarus is only one of a dozen participants, albeit the second in order of importance. About 94% of the West-2021 events were planned to take place on the territory of Russia, and the Belarusian part was kind of auxiliary. Furthermore, the scenario of the Russian part of the exercise envisaged an interstate armed conflict, while the Belarusian part remained a traditional rehearsal of anti-terror and anti-extremist operations in a low-intensity conflict.

⁷ «Массовый забег от военной службы в Беларуси.» *Belarus Security Blog*, 15 June 2021, <https://bsblog.info/massovyj-zabeg-ot-voennoj-sluzhby-v-belarusi/>.

⁸ «В “Западе-2021” примут участие порядка 200 тыс. военнослужащих.» *Belarus Security Blog*, 21 Aug. 2021, <https://bsblog.info/v-zapade-2021-primut-uchastie-poryadka-200-tys-voennosluzhashhix/>.

The exercise did not have a unified management, because local commanders conducted their local parts separately, which actually was a result of Russia's unilateral actions to take over and internationalize West 2021. This came as a surprise to Belarus. Apparently, after the corresponding statements, neither party could not or did not want to manage the exercise jointly, since it could only be Russian in the new format.

The Belarusian authorities thus explicitly used the exercise as an element of its anti-Western policy. All the locations selected for the exercise were in the southwest of the Brest Region, i. e. close to Poland and Ukraine. For comparison, only two locations in the west of the country were used in 2017.

In fact, during the exercise, the military practiced a number of elements that were later used by Russia during the invasion of Ukraine, namely assault across rivers, air strikes by long-range bombers, various types of landing (at night, from helicopters, etc.), and breaking through anti-aircraft defense zones.

Conclusion

In 2021, the Belarusian regime turned into a direct threat to the neighboring countries of the European Union and Ukraine, as it seized to pursue its long-standing strategy of not posing threats to its neighbors (the so-called “donor of regional security/stability”). By aligning itself with the Kremlin's regional security stance in the toughest manner possible, Minsk took the narrow path of inevitable confrontation with the neighboring states, and this is unlikely to change before the end of the active phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

For Belarus, the expansion of defense cooperation with Russia is significant in two ways: (1) as a demonstration of loyalty to the Kremlin with the hope to exchange it for concessions in other, civil matters; (2) as an instrument of pressure on the West,

the actions of which are presented as forcing Lukashenko to get closer with Russia in its anti-Western policy.

Observers see the Belarusian-Russian joint air force and air defense training center as a camouflaged Russian military base. From a detached point of view, Russia's unilateral actions to take over and internationalize the West-2021 exercise can be interpreted as the loss of Minsk's military autonomy. Taking into account the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, it is possible to speak about a significantly narrowed space for foreign policy maneuvering for the Belarusian regime.

The extension of the agreement with Russia on the lease of the military facilities in Belarus creates a long-term challenge for a post-Lukashenko Belarus. The country will have to take an attitude to the unacceptably long term of the Russian military presence approved by the regime. This could be a reason for Russia to interfere with domestic affairs of Belarus. To maintain its military presence in Belarus, Russia will support the political groups that will not question the above agreement.

It can be expected that Moscow will continue downgrading the status of its military security relationship with Belarus from an exclusive partner of Russia to just one of peripheral partners in this field, the importance of which is determined by the situation in the region. This knocks out most effective leverage of the Belarusian regime in matters not directly related to security, thus nullifying the value of Minsk as an actor capable of influencing Russia's foreign policy due to the special nature of bilateral relations.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES: THE YEAR OF VERTICAL UNITY

Dmitry Kukhlei

Summary

The year 2021 was marked by massive purges and ideological events aimed at consolidating local authorities around Alexander Lukashenko. The top leadership was strengthening control over the regional administrations, placing high-ranking law enforcement officers in senior positions in the regional executive committees as some sort of supervisors. Local authorities are forced to terminate mutually beneficial relationships with civil society organizations and lose foreign funding under the pressure from the central government. The political schedule has changed since the local and parliament elections. The local elections campaign initially scheduled for 2021 was postponed. The government decided not to take a risk by combining the local elections and the referendum on amendments to the Constitution, considering, among other things, that the approval rating of the local administrations remained low, although it went up a bit over the year, most likely thanks to the outreach measures aimed at building direct communication and receiving a feedback from the population.

Trends:

- Severed ties with civil society organizations and international programs on support for regional development and local governance;
- Tighter law enforcement and ideological control over the local and regional authorities on the part of the central government, which greatly undermined the independence of the former;
- Increased presence of security officers in local government bodies.

Local councils: two more years of peace before the elections

The local elections were supposed to be held in late 2021 or early 2022, but were postponed. The parliament expanded powers of local councils of the 28th convocation in May, and, in October, amended the Constitution and set the single voting day.¹

The local vertical gets some extra time for ideological filtering and selection of candidates for the councils. This is especially important in a situation of the crisis of loyalty to the Lukashenko Administration, even among officials and employees of public sector and state-owned companies, who constitute a significant part of the parliament.

The ratings of the local authorities fluctuated insignificantly during the year and remained low. According to a Chatham House poll, they were trusted by 17 to 22% of respondents.² However, the measures taken by local officials and council members to interact with the population yielded fruit, as the percentage of distrust decreased from 62% in January to 50% in November. The shrinking of Lukashenko's electoral base is a long-term phenomenon and, consequently, it causes staffing problems in the regions, including with the selection of loyal candidates for local councils, given that some council members condemned the brutal crackdown on the 2020 protests and even sided with the protesters.

The top leadership was worried about a possible new outbreak of protests, which was the main reason for the postponement of

¹ «Закон Республики Беларусь от 12 октября 2021 года № 124-З “Об изменении Конституции Республики Беларусь”» *Эталон Онлайн*, 12 Oct. 2021, <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=h12100124>.

² «Взгляды белорусов на политический кризис. Результаты социологического опроса, проведенного с 1 до 10 ноября 2021 года.» *Chatham House*, 2021, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bDHca-ENJw71VuGVR8cok-jruhFPr2yVg/view>.

the local elections. By postponing the local elections and combining them with the parliamentary elections, the Belarusian leadership sought to extend the electoral cycle and reduce the periods of politicization of society in the context of low ratings of trust in state institutions, including local administrations.

Political housecleaning and manual control of local administrations

During the 2020 protests, the head of state justly complained of shaky local governance, saying that there were many of those hungry for change among local officials.

An opposite trend was observed in 2021, which the Belarusian leadership declared the Year of National Unity. A targeted ideological campaign was initiated to restore the partially collapsed vertical. In response to the growing number of advocates of change in the state apparatus, the central authorities reduced even the minimal independence and autonomy of local administrations in decision-making and interaction with independent civil society institutions and foreign foundations.

Alexander Lukashenko held meetings with local officials in an attempt to strengthen vertical ties and regain trust, personally conveying the main theses and positions on the current agenda. Such large-scale meetings with local executives are planned to be held on a regular basis. The local authorities comb out those suspected of being reluctant in supporting government policies. The regional administrations are expected to be totally submissive and obedient. They mobilize public sector employees in support of the state ideology, which should testify to the unity of the people and the authorities. State-controlled trade unions protested against Western sanctions, which was also part of the public sector consolidation efforts.

As a result of ideological initiatives and pressure from the central government, the local administrations that show any signs of independence are swept away. A number of local officials were even fired for refusing to sign a trade unions' letter of protest against the sanctions.³

Personnel policy: reinforcement with security officials and homefront buildup

'Patriotism,' i. e. total loyalty to Lukashenko, is the main criterion for selecting members of the local executive branch. In turn, the distrust of the top leadership towards local elites is manifested in strengthened control over them. Law enforcement officers are being appointed to the regional administrations across the country. At the same time, officials from the agrarian sector make up a significant proportion of the regional and district leadership.

In 2021, Lukashenko replaced four out of seven governors in the eastern and southern regions: Brest, Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Gomel. In the last three regions, the leadership was replaced in December 2021, i. e. before the Belarusian-Russian military exercise of February 2022.

The regional leadership was further reinforced in December by officers from the security bloc. KGB General Alexander Terekhov was appointed to the Minsk Regional and Minsk City Executive Committee. Police Colonel Alexander Shastailo entered the Gomel Regional Executive Committee. A week prior to that, head of the Brest Regional Office of the KGB Maxim Radkov took a seat in the local executive committee, and head of the Mogilev

³ "Намеснік старшыні гарвыканкаму быў вымушаны сысці ў адстаўку праз праўладны зварот." *Белсат*, 03 June 2021, <https://belsat.eu/news/02-06-2021-ya-zahavau-pavagu-da-syabe-namesnik-starshyni-garvykankamu-vymushany-systsi-u-adstauku-praz-prauladny-zvarot/>.

Regional Office of the KGB Igor Pavlushchenko was appointed to the Mogilev Regional Executive Committee.

The intensity of personnel rotation at the local level remained virtually the same as in the election year 2020. In 2021, Lukashenko replaced 23 heads of district and city executive committees (18%), appointed 17 new high-ranking officials to the regional executive committees, and six to the administrations of the capital and other major cities. Officials continue to be moved to equivalent positions between districts, or promoted within the same region. The government is also tasked to renew and rejuvenate local staffs.

Local administrations and civil society: cooperation in the opposite direction

Activities of the local administrations become less transparent and more closed to feedback from civil society. The space for cooperation between state bodies and society is narrowing mainly due to the increased pressure from the top leadership. Nevertheless, cooperation and trust between the administrations and the public sector gradually expanded in the regions, among other things, thanks to financial assistance coming from foreign partners. At the same time, the local authorities perceive civil society organizations as sources of additional grants for social projects.

The country's leadership thus sees a threat in the horizontal ties and social contacts between the local authorities and civil society organizations. During one of his meetings with local activists, Lukashenko spoke about the curtailment of cooperation between the local authorities and the third sector and liquidation of non-profit organizations formed by uncontrolled activists.

Local self-government bodies are forced to terminate relations with public associations, with which they had been

cooperating for years, and established trust-based relationships. Officials have to liquidate local NGOs that used to help them perform their social functions.

The official registration of the Lev Sapega Foundation, one of the oldest NGOs that promoted local self-governance, was revoked. The Foundation had enjoyed public trust for decades, having established fruitful cooperation with the regional authorities, implemented dozens of projects with them, and supported local initiatives.

As a result, many projects with independent NGOs, which had been backstopped by the European Union, were suspended, and this must annoy the local government stakeholders. However, no public statements were made to oppose the severance of long-established ties and interaction with civil society under the central government's pressure.

International projects enabled the local authorities to update their approaches to regional governance in accordance with international practices. For example, the Mogilev Region adopted a concept of sustainable development for the period to 2035. It involved more than 200 experts and was supported by the UNDP. Today, the local authorities are reconsidering their policies towards choosing grassroots initiatives through international programs of cooperation between local administrations and civil society.

Officials and council members resume direct communication with the population through group meetings, telephone hotlines, community outreach measures, etc. In 2020, many local councils suspended communication with those who wanted them to state their position on the presidential election and police brutality as a matter of public trust.

The Belarusian leadership sees the representative vertical as an additional channel of communication with the population to convey official policies and mold public opinion. Alexander Lukashenko constantly emphasizes the importance of contacts

between the councils and local communities aimed at building awareness of the current agenda and initiatives of the higher authorities. In a situation of budget cuts, the local administrations try to reach resourceful activists, who may help improve the quality of life and promote community commitments, considering this to be part of territorial self-governance, which, however, is basically limited to raising extra funds and attracting manpower for minor events, such as outdoor cleaning or landscaping.

There are associations of local councils in the Grodno, Mogilev, and Vitebsk Regions, and one is underway in the Gomel Region. In recent years, they have held contests to stimulate public activity and interaction between grass-roots projects and local administrations for tackling local issues. They expand public engagement and households' co-financing to improve the quality of life in residential areas. Territorial self-governance events aim at encouraging local communities to contribute to landscaping and public amenities.

Local self-government reform (mainly of rural and township councils) is on the agenda of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament, state media, and meetings between senators, local council members and voters. Reforms at the lowest local self-government level are being addressed at MPs' meetings with Lukashenko, who thus keeps advocating the principle of "noting old to drop, nothing new to introduce". As a result, the discussions about reforms in the local governance system do not lead to any generally expected changes.

Local budgets: saving money,
looking for additional sources

The authorities take measures to increase incomes of local budgets. Councils have been given additional powers to raise

taxes and fees, and grand tax reliefs. However, over the first nine months of 2021, the share of households' incomes in local budgets dropped to the past few years' lowest of 74.6% (Table 1).

Table 1. Household incomes in the composition of local budgets, 2017–2021

	2017	2018	2021 ⁴	2019	2020
Share of household incomes in local budgets, %	79.6	79.0	74.6	77.8	75.7

Local councils raise the property tax rates to cover budget losses. In the border areas, a fee is levied from vehicles at border crossing points. The councils may thus grant reliefs on all taxes and fees, not just those paid in full to the local budgets.⁵

The local administrations also take measures to save funds and recharge budgets at the expense of households, as well as through the updated procedure for selling unused state property, which particularly concerns vacant houses in rural areas. Among other things, the objective is to encourage people to buy real estate in rural areas and invest in construction there.

Budget cuts force the local authorities to seek communities' co-financing and labor inputs for development of infrastructure or raising the living standards, even if these efforts are not enshrined in the current legislation. The administrations lobby

⁴ «Бюллетень об исполнении местных бюджетов за 2020 год.» Министерство финансов Республики Беларусь, 2021, https://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/bp/bulletin/2021_3/2021_3.pdf.

⁵ «Закон Республики Беларусь от 31 декабря 2021 года № 141-3 “Об изменении законов по вопросам налогообложения”.» Министерство финансов Республики Беларусь, 04 Jan. 2021, https://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/np/acts/zakon_311221_141z.pdf.

amendments to the regulations in force, for example, to update the legislation on public-private partnership.⁶

Conclusion

The regional authorities are likely to continue using their powers to raise taxes and fees in order to compensate for the decline in budget revenues. The local councils and executive committees will strengthen support for local state-run enterprises, providing benefits and, possibly, limiting competition not only with imported products, but also with goods from other regions of Belarus.

The “optimization” of the administrative-territorial division will most likely continue towards a merger of rural councils, as the rural population decreases. The number of members of local councils will also decrease, while officials will tighten ideological requirements when selecting candidates to representative bodies.

Security officials and farmers will retain or even increase their influence on local government agencies. Appointments of security officials to regional executive committees with a view to ensure ideological discipline and loyalty of the local authorities will continue.

⁶ “Аповед старшыні сельскага Савета пра ‘папяровыя’ перашкоды, якія замінаюць самастойна вырашаць на месцы пытанні, што ставяць у сваіх зваротах грамадзяне.” *Звязда*, 27 July 2021, <https://zviazda.by/be/news/20210722/1626966564-apoved-starshyni-selskaga-saveta-pra-paparyovyua-perashkody-yakiya>

FOREIGN POLICY

BELARUS — EUROPEAN UNION: FROM SMOLDERING CONFRONTATION TO HOT ESCALATION

Arseny Sivitsky

Summary

The confrontation between Belarus and the European Union escalated sharply in 2021. The forced landing of the *Ryanair* plane took it to a new level, and made the Belarusian issue on Brussels' agenda a global problem and a source of hybrid threats.

The European Union continued the step-by-step increase of the sanction pressure on Alexander Lukashenko to force him meet a number of conditions. The latter's attempts to make the EU contact him directly and recognize him as a legitimate leader through bargaining over constitutional reform, as well as escalation of tensions in the region by provoking the migration crisis and making other threats predictably led to minor tactical concessions. Strategically, Belarus only spurred a new round of sanctions imposed by the European Union and its Western partners in the form of the air blockade and two additional packages of restrictions, including targeted sectoral sanctions.

Trends:

- Abandonment of the idea to engage the Belarusian authorities in dialogue on matters of critical importance to the European Union, which chose the gradual and comprehensive expansion of sanctions instead;
- Further rejection of Lukashenko as a legitimate and independent political actor by the EU, which shifted the focus onto cooperation with Belarusian democrats in exile;
- Loss of control over the escalated situation by Belarus, which resulted in unprecedentedly tough sanctions;
- Deferred effects of the European sanctions against the Belarusian economy and trade with the European Union.

Diplomatic contacts: *no business as usual*

Belarus' relationship with the European Union strongly worsened in 2021, in many respects, as a result of the political crisis in Belarus that arose in 2020. The high-level political dialogue was put on hold, and so was the EU's technical assistance and inter-sector cooperation, except for nuclear and radiation safety matters.¹

The smoldering Belarus – European Union confrontation continued in the first half of the year. Both parties were publicly exchanging verbal attacks, and that was pretty much it, mostly because Minsk sought to retain at least few communication channels, and started bargaining over constitutional reform in exchange for the lifting of sanctions and returning to *business as usual*.

Although Minsk emphasized the prevailing importance of Russia to Belarus' foreign policy, the concept of multi-vector policy did not go anywhere. Lukashenko said at the 6th All-Belarusian People's Assembly that Belarus was interested in well-balanced and diverse relations with the outside world, including with the European Union. Although the authorities tried to make the assembly look like an inclusive dialogue with the opposition and civil society, it was met with harsh criticism from the European Parliament, which called it in a special statement a mockery of democracy devoid of legitimacy, and demanded that the repression and human rights violations stop, and a genuine national dialogue leading to a smooth transition of power begin.²

¹ “ENSREG approves the preliminary report on the Astravets nuclear power plant.” *European Commission*, 04 Mar. 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/ensreg-approves-preliminary-report-astravets-nuclear-power-plant-2021-mar-04_en.

² “Joint Statement ... on the convening of the so-called All Belarusian People's Assembly.” *European Parliament*. 11 Feb. 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/229873/R.BIEDRON_P.AUSTREVICIUS_Joint_

Since Minsk kept ignoring Brussels' demands and continued repressions against civil society, the opposition and independent media (*tut.by* case), the EU began preparing a *fourth* package of sanctions in May.

The forced landing of the *Ryanair* plane on May 23 in Minsk in order to arrest opposition blogger Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega, who were on board, sharply strained Belarusian-European relations. This incident prompted the EU to drop the idea to engage the Belarusian authorities in dialogue. The EU rejected Lukashenko as a legitimate and independent political actor, and switched to cooperation with Belarusian civil society and the opposition.

On May 28, the European Commission presented a brief version of a comprehensive plan of economic support for Belarus. As soon as Belarus embarks on the path of democratic transformation, the EU will activate the EUR 3 billion package, which is a combination of grants and loans involving public and private investments to help the country reform its institutions and increase the sustainability of its economy.³

The second half of the year was marked by a rapid escalation of tensions between Belarus and the European Union. For the first time in recent history, in coordination with the United States, the United Kingdom and Western allies, the EU imposed targeted sectoral sanctions (the *fourth package*) on June 21 and 24, starting the transition to a common strategy with regard to the Belarusian crisis that followed the 2020 presidential election. The strategy provides for increasing pressure on the Lukashenko regime until a number of demands are met: to stop violence against civilians, unconditionally release all political

statement_11_February_on_convening_of_so-called_All_Belarusian_Peoples_Assembly.pdf.

³ “The European Union outlines a €3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus.” *European Commission*, 28 May 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2685.

prisoners, stop politically-motivated criminal prosecution, start a dialogue with society, and hold a new presidential election under the supervision of the OSCE and other international organizations.

On June 28, head of the European Union Delegation to Belarus Dirk Schuebel was summoned to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, where he was strongly advised to leave for Brussels for consultations. The Foreign Ministry said that Belarus suspended its participation in the European Union's Eastern Partnership initiative, began the procedure of suspending the readmission agreement with the European Union, and banned the entry to the country for "representatives of European institutions and individuals who contributed to the introduction of restrictive measures". Belarus' Permanent Representative to the European Union Alexander Mikhnevich was also recalled to Minsk for consultations.

Although the orchestrated migration crisis at the Belarusian border with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland in June and its escalation in October and November led to some communication with the EU on technical issues at the level of experts, Lukashenko still did not achieve his legitimization by the West. Instead, the sanctions intensified, and new ones were added to the list. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry had to acknowledge the failure of the tactics applied, accused the EU of the unilateral freezing of cooperation in border management and ignoring signals from Minsk.

Meanwhile, Minsk also continued to ignore signals sent by some European countries, which offered mediation services to normalize relations. Belarus sharply criticized the initiative of the Austrian Foreign Ministry to hold an international conference in November in Vienna to discuss the situation in Belarus (although it was initially willing to send experts there). Lukashenko continued to insist on direct contacts with the European Union without any involvement of the Belarusian democratic

community in exile. A constitutional referendum and the possible consideration of the abolition of the death penalty in Belarus were used as bargaining chips in exchange for eased sanctions.

The European Union adopted on December 2 the *fifth package* of sanctions in connection with ongoing human rights violations and the use of migrants as a political tool. The EU stated that the reason for the contradictions with Belarus stemmed from “the cruel, repressive and illegal nature of the Lukashenko regime”.

Shortly before the 6th Eastern Partnership summit (December 15, 2021), a delegation of Belarusian democrats in exile met with High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and President of the European Council Charles Michel to discuss Belarus – European Union relations at the current stage and after Lukashenko’s resignation, including national dialogue on new elections and implementation of the EU assistance plan for a democratic Belarus.

Minsk’s response: escalation, blackmail and threats

Striving for the EU’s attention, the Belarusian authorities combined usual diplomatic tools with the “escalation for de-escalation” strategy, blackmail and threats.⁴ At first, Minsk threatened to completely sever diplomatic ties with the European Union by closing its embassies, and hinted at continued repression and destruction of civil society if the European Union and other Western countries did not lift the sanctions.

⁴ «Беларусь: от донорства стабільности і безапаснасці к “эскаляцыі для дээскаляцыі”. В чым стратэгічны расчёт і прасчёт Мінска?» *Belarus Security Blog*, 09 Sep. 2021, <https://bsblog.info/belarus-ot-donorstva-stabilnosti-i-bezopasnosti-k-eskalacii-dlya-deeskalacii-v-chem-strategicheskij-raschet-i-proschet-minska/>.

Right after the incident with the *Ryanair* plane, the Belarusian leadership began translating into action the previously voiced threat to stop protecting Europe from illegal migrants, and to liquidate non-governmental organizations. The migration crisis escalated on November 15–16 at the Belarusian-Polish border, which was a kind of success for the Belarusian authorities, since the EU had to reopen anti-crisis channels of communication with Minsk. During negotiations with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who acted as an intermediary between Belarus and the EU, Lukashenko put forward *two* conditions: the sanctions must be lifted, and he must be recognized as legitimate president. The European Commission agreed to talk with Belarus, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration about the repatriation of migrants. The EU also allocated EUR 700,000 in humanitarian aid to the migrants massed at the Belarusian-Polish border.⁵

However, the very fact of the negotiations did not mean that the EU was going to make concessions to Lukashenko. Josep Borrell stressed that bringing migrants to the European Union's border would not help the Belarusian government resume direct political dialogue or divert attention from the internal crisis. The dialogue would be resumed if the authorities stopped violations and started respecting human rights.⁶ The EU thus continued dismissing the Belarusian government as a partner, preferring to work directly with the countries from where the migrants were coming to the border (the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia) to stop their inflow via Belarus and combat human trafficking.

⁵ "Daily News." *European Commission*, 17 Nov. 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex_21_6082.

⁶ «Боррель назвал условия возобновления диалога с белорусскими властями.» *Reformation*, 15 Nov. 2021, <https://reform.news/278010-borrell-nazval-uslovija-vozobnovlenija-dialoga-s-belarusskimi-vlastjami>.

Looking for a joint resolution, the EU put the Belarusian issue on the agenda of European Union – Russia relations, which was another unexpected outcome of the migration blackmail. Brussels also asked the Kremlin to put pressure on Lukashenko. Contrary to Minsk’s hopes, the migration crisis did not lead to a breach of solidarity inside the European Union or an altercation between Warsaw and Vilnius on the one hand, and Brussels on the other. On the contrary, it contributed to an unprecedented consolidation of the EU and increased sanctions pressure on Belarus.

Having failed to achieve its goals, in response to the *fourth* package of sanctions and the preparation of the *fifth* one, Minsk continued threatening the EU with:

- a new migration crisis (this time with Afghan refugees);
- counter-sanctions and pressure on European businesses in Belarus;
- cutting off Russian gas supplies through the Yamal-Europe pipeline;
- surrender of its independence and sovereignty to Russia due to continuing sanctions;
- placement of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus;
- new challenges to global regional stability and security, including the risk of World War III.

In practice, Minsk intensified repressions against civil society, launched transit wars with Lithuania, adopted counter-sanctions, expelled European diplomats, etc. The European Union responded by preparing the *sixth* package of sanctions.

European sanctions and Belarusian counter-sanctions:
business as usual

In its sanctions policy, the European Union was guided by a step-by-step approach: Brussels was ready to consider the possibility of imposing additional sanctions should the situation in Belarus

continue to deteriorate. However, the sanctions are reversible, and can be lifted, provided that the Belarusian authorities stop the repressions, release and rehabilitate all political prisoners, and engage in a genuine inclusive national dialogue with civil society.

The *fourth* package of sanctions against Belarus was supposed to be adopted as soon as January, but was repeatedly postponed, apparently, because of both the lack of coordination of positions of the member states, and the retention of tools in case Minsk stopped fueling the confrontation. The *Ryanair* incident accelerated the process, and sanctions became tougher.

At the May 24 session, the European Council vehemently condemned the forced landing of the *Ryanair* plane in Minsk, demanded the immediate release of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega, and recommended that the EU Council promptly impose additional sanctions. On June 4, the EU Council banned all Belarusian air carriers from European airports, and called for expanded sanctions.

On June 21, the EU Council met with leader of the Belarusian democratic community Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. On the same day, European Union foreign ministers approved the *fourth* package of sanctions against Belarus, which applies to 78 individuals and eight companies.

On June 24, targeted economic (sectoral) sanctions against the oil, potash, tobacco, banking and some other sectors of the Belarusian economy were approved separately, yet with a delay in their full entry into force until early 2022.

On November 15, the Council amended the sanctions criteria to allow the application of targeted restrictive measures against individuals and entities, who organized or participated in activities of the Lukashenko regime, facilitating the trespassing of the European Union's border.

Due to ongoing human rights violations and the use of migrants as political leverage, the European Union adopted on

December 2 the *fifth* package of sanctions against another 17 individuals and 11 legal entities, targeting prominent members of the judiciary and propaganda organizations that contribute to the ongoing repression of civil society, the opposition, independent media and journalists, as well as the companies that helped provoke and organize illegal migration through the EU border for political purposes.

Overall, by the end of 2021, the European Union sanctions against Belarus applied to 183 individuals and 26 legal entities. Their assets are to be frozen, and citizens and companies of the European Union are prohibited from lending money to them. Individuals are also subject to a travel ban, which prevents them from entering or transiting the territory of the European Union.

In response, Belarus announced counter-sanctions, which included:

- a ban on imports of some Western commodities into Belarus, including a food embargo against the European Union and other Western countries in the first half of 2022 (USD 500 million in imports in total);
- expansion of the list of persons banned from entering Belarus and the Union State;
- continued implementation of the Union State programs and closer economic cooperation with Russia, partners in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and outside the EEU;
- restrictions on EU and UK air carriers, following the sanctions against Belavia;
- a number of other steps of a non-public nature.⁷

The biggest problems for the Belarusian authorities were caused by the US sanctions, which affected relations with European countries, especially Lithuania and Latvia, which stopped

⁷ «Заявление МИД об ответных мерах Республики Беларусь на незаконное внешнее санкционное давление.» МИД Республики Беларусь, 08 Dec. 2021, https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e09607cfe7591a5e.html.

the transit of Belarusian oil products and potash fertilizers at the end of the year.

Despite the unprecedented EU sanctions pressure, Minsk did not feel its significant impacts on trade and economic relations in 2021. The European Union remained the second largest economic counterparty of Belarus after Russia. The trade turnover with the EU amounted to USD 16.3 billion (up 36.5% from 2020). Belarus' exports to the EU reached USD 9.5 billion (up 74.4%, by USD 5.5 billion); imports stood at USD 6.8 billion (up 4.5%). Belarus' surplus in trade with the EU was at USD 2.75 billion, crude oil and oil products, wood products, and ferrous metals topping the list of export items.

Export of services amounted to USD 2.74 billion (+7.3% against 2020); imports – USD 1.85 billion (+20%); surplus – USD 0.89 billion. The Netherlands, Poland, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Italy were the main trade partners of Belarus.

EU's direct investments totaled USD 545.98 million, showing a little decrease against 2020 (USD 583.34 million).⁸ This resulted mainly from the deferred effect of the targeted sectoral sanctions, which were scheduled to come into full force in early 2022. This delay was caused by the need to give European business time to substitute Belarusian goods with those from alternative sources in the supply chain.

Conclusion

The year 2021 was a turning point in relations between Belarus and the European Union. After a series of escalatory steps taken by Minsk, it became clear that a return to the status quo that

⁸ «Торгово-экономическое сотрудничество.» Посольство Республики Беларусь в Королевстве Бельгия и Великом Герцогстве Люксембург, https://belgium.mfa.gov.by/ru/bel_eu/economy/.

existed before the 2020 presidential election in Belarus was impossible. The Belarusian authorities must change their behavior, which is an essential prerequisite for a revision of the sanctions policy.

In particular, the European Union expects the release of political prisoners, putting an end to repressions and human rights violations, and establishment of a broad dialogue with the democratic opposition and civil society with international mediation. If these conditions are met, the EU will be ready not only to lift the sanctions, but also to resume dialogue with Minsk. However, to fully lift the sanctions, the Belarusian authorities will have to hold new free and fair elections, which is the difference between the previous and the current lists of requirements.

Since these conditions and requirements are unacceptable for Alexander Lukashenko, further intensification of pressure and isolation of Belarus by the European Union in coordination with other Western partners seem to be the most likely scenario.

BELARUS – RUSSIA: HUNGER GAMES. THE KREMLIN’S PRICE LIST

Anatoly Pankovski

Summary

The year 2021 saw a dynamic combination of *three* options of Belarus – Russia convergence and, consequently, the Kremlin’s support for the Alexander Lukashenko Administration with a pronounced momentary emphasis on one of them – constitutional reform, economic integration, or military cooperation. In an attempt to avoid significant concessions on these points, Lukashenko maneuvered in a narrow space shaped by both the Western political pressure and sanctions, and insistent ‘advice’ from Moscow.

The rapid deterioration of investment and transit opportunities and, therefore, weaker negotiation position in disputes with the ally actually turned the Lukashenko regime into a passive observer of a big integration game. Signs of a gradual erosion of the Belarusian sovereignty have become visible behind the political bargaining facade.

Trends:

- Moscow’s deep involvement in Belarusian affairs;
- Escalated integration games within the Belarus-Russia Union State;
- Pronounced emphasis on the militarization of relations with a clear prospect of Belarus turning into Russia’s military-strategic foothold;
- Significant increase in the trade turnover with outstripping growth of imports from the Russian Federation.

Three basic values: transit, integration, militarization

The year 2021 was a period of phenomenally active contacts between the Russian and Belarusian leadership, which is natural in the setting of the international isolation of Belarus

and avalanching degradation of foreign policy alternatives. Contacts between the top leadership, interdepartmental meetings and consultations, including those under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, CIS, Eurasian Economic Union and Union State, took place throughout the year. Lukashenko and Putin set the pace for the entire political establishment. They contacted dozens of times during the year, and met six times in person. Russia replaced its ambassador to Belarus twice in 2021. Boris Gryzlov, who arrived in Minsk on a new 'special assignment,' took over Yevgeny Lukyanov's office.¹

In retrospect, there were neither acrimonious disputes over price terms and volumes of oil and gas supplies, nor political flare-ups like in the previous years, including the first half of 2020. The past year may be written down in the history of the Belarusian-Russian relationship as relatively conflict-free, although tensions between the allies, which accompanied the hard political bargaining, remained.

Three basic scenarios for the preservation of the Lukashenko regime at Russia's expense took shape by the end of 2020:

- economic integration under the aegis of the Union State of Russia and Belarus, which implies a convergence of macroeconomic policies, harmonization of tax and customs legislation, etc.;
- political (constitutional) reform, which would guarantee Russia continuity and expansion of its influence on Belarus through a redistribution of presidential powers in Belarus among a wider range of institutions;
- a closer military-strategic alliance than within the CSTO.

¹ "A new stage of the relationship? Let's start with donation and safety." *Belarus in Focus*, 20–26 Dec. 2021, <https://belarusinfocus.info/the-ruling-elite/state-apparatus-consolidates-eve-referendum-security-forces-expand-repressions/>.

The above *three* scenarios are not mutually exclusive. There is always a dynamic combination of these options with an opportunistic emphasis on one of them.

Constitutional adjustments (the transit of power) and integration programs are associated with institutional changes. Political transit means a transition from an individualistic regime to a political system that implies a lesser concentration of powers, hence being unacceptable for Lukashenko.

Institutional changes through the implementation of Union programs do not suit Minsk either, because they imply a redistribution and streamlining of economic powers (including stronger private property protection) according to Russian models without guarantees of a stable economic rent for the ruling group.

Also, Minsk, perhaps, considered close military cooperation and the actual passing of the Belarusian armed forces under Russia's control as the least harmless integration option. (Except for Alexander Nevzorov and some other observers, no one seriously talked last year about the coming war). It is a different matter that military cooperation did not directly affect other terms disputed by the parties (for example, energy or loans). Although Russia suggested that Belarus' security and building of its army, were worth something in exchange, if not money, then at least something no less substantial.

Twenty-eight short paths (tangles of problems)

The bilateral agenda in late 2020 and early 2021 was largely defined by the topic of constitutional reform. The configuration of the bilateral bargaining changed rather quickly, though, and the topic of integration came to the fore again.

Lukashenko revisited the topic once again in February 2021. He said that the parties only had 6 or 7 integration roadmaps (out of the 33 stipulated by the agreements) to finalize. For comparison, there were one or two unfinished maps out of 31 a year before. By the time of the September meeting between Putin and Lukashenko, the number of roadmaps increased to 28 and they were renamed “union programs.” Their list was finally published on the website of the Russian government.²

This package was finally signed on November 4, after which the integration activity slowed down drastically. After the approval of the integration decree, no noticeable progress in the convergence of the economies was made that year.

Summing up the preliminary agreements and actual circumstances of the integration process, its overall results can be described as follows:

1. An agreement on the *unification of the Russian and Belarusian gas markets* was announced. It is expected to be signed before December 1, 2023. The parties also plan to establish a *single oil and electricity market*. This looks very tempting for Minsk, but the final terms of the ‘merger’ are not entirely clear yet. In 2021, Belarus failed to achieve substantial concessions on oil and gas. The country was buying gas at the price of the previous year (2020), and at the price of 2021 in 2022 (USD 128.5 per 1,000 cubic meters). The situation with gas transit went worse: the transit capacity was considerably higher than the actual piped volume, after the Nord Stream 2 was launched, so Belarus had to cover the difference at its own expense. Gas transit through Belarus in the fourth quarter of 2021 decreased from nine to two billion cubic meters.

² «Совместное заявление Председателя Правительства Российской Федерации и Премьер-министра Республики Беларусь о текущем развитии и дальнейших шагах по углублению интеграционных процессов в рамках Союзного государства.» *Правительство России*, 10 Sep. 2021, <http://government.ru/news/43234/>.

2. The maximum amount of the *loans*, which Belarus might count on in the period from September 2021 to the end of 2022 were expected at USD 630–640 million, according to Putin. Later, Standard and Poor’s linked this money with a partial compensation for Belarus’ losses from the tax maneuver in the Russian oil sector, which was neither confirmed, nor denied. In the first half of 2021, Minsk initiated negotiations on a USD 3 billion loan through the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development, and then, later that year, requested half a million more (USD 3.5 billion), but was turned down.

3. The *transport-logistic dependence* on Russia is an inevitable effect of the serious quarrel with the West. Russia reap dividends from the isolation of Belarus, at least when over-executing the plan to redirect Belarusian oil products and then fertilizers to Russia’s northern ports. As a result of the air blockade imposed in April 2021, the Russian airspace became the only option for Belarus. Minsk hoped in vain that Russia would fully compensate for the losses of Belavia by expanding flights of the airline.

4. There was nothing new in the thesis about *joint defense* against external threats, given that a ‘joint defense center’ was already there, joint exercises were held, etc. What was new is that regional context has changed, and Russia began making aggressive plans.

5. *Other agreements* concerned mutual payments and integration of the currency systems under the decree on integration, which still remains a phantom, because even the negotiators admit that they are not yet ready for this transition. Many other agreements on the harmonization of the tax systems, equal economic and social rights and opportunities for Russians and Belarusians in the Union State, common industrial policy, reciprocal access to public procurement, state-guaranteed order, etc. do not go beyond mere declaration either.

Elements of political transit

Early in the year, Lukashenko reiterated his interest in political reform, and, on March 15, he issued a decree on a constitutional commission primarily tasked to map out amendments to the Constitution and ensure their “nationwide discussion”.

In fact, Lukashenko was rather reluctant to talk about constitutional amendments, choosing to play for time and fix the status quo in the future constitutional referendum. He more and more often called the possible amendments “corrections”, emphasizing their insignificance. The authorities published the final draft of the new constitution as late as the end of the year, and no significant changes were made during the fictitious “nationwide discussion”.

Some adjustments to the institutional design were made with the direct involvement of Russian security services when it came to the power transfer mechanisms.³ After the “detection” of the failed assassination attempt on Lukashenko, he issued a decree that stipulates that in the event of his violent death, the Security Council chaired by the prime minister would take over his powers with the simultaneous introduction of a state of emergency or martial law.⁴ This is supposedly meant to secure the heads of the law enforcement agencies, guarantee that Lukashenko’s entourage would retain their positions, and ensure that the Kremlin maintains partial control over the internal political situation during a transition period.

³ «Россия и Беларусь заявили о предотвращении переворота и покушения на Лукашенко. Их якобы планировали на 9 мая.» BBC News, 17 Apr. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-56770162>.

⁴ «Лукашенко подписал декрет о передаче власти Совбезу и введении чрезвычайного положения в случае своей гибели.» Новая газета, 09 May 2021, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/05/09/lukashenko-podpisal-dekret-o-peredache-vlasti-sovbezu-i-vvedenii-chrezvychainogo-polozheniia-v-sluchae-svoei-gibeli>.

Sketches of the “hybrid warfare”

It would seem that only *two* convincing arguments were initially used in the disputes and bargaining with the Kremlin: constitutional reform and economic integration. However, as soon as early March, at a meeting on Belarus – Russia cooperation, Lukashenko put an emphasis on militarization of Belarus, defense cooperation with Russia, and establishment of an anti-Western axis.

Defense cooperation was on the agenda throughout the year. State propagandists dwelled on an imaginary hybrid war with the West in general, and Belarus’ neighbors in particular (the Baltic States, Poland, and Ukraine).

In summer 2021, Belarus put one more argument into circulation: the migration crisis at the western border of the Union State, which looked like Minsk’s desperate attempt to open communication channels with the West, resume the geopolitical swing, and, by this means, obtain some more chips in disputes with the Kremlin. The migration crisis was complemented with the Belarusian-Russian West 2021 military exercise. Following the Lukashenko-Putin meeting held at the end of December 2021, the allies in the future anti-Ukrainian axis announced the new Union Resolve 2022 exercise.⁵

Through the entire year, Minsk actively sought to escalate relations with the West in such a way that it would simultaneously increase tensions between the West and Russia. The result of this strategic effort was already visible in the second half of 2021, and manifested itself in abundance in February 2022. By the end of the year, Belarus *de facto* transformed into Russia’s military-strategic foothold.

⁵ «Военная интеграция Союзного государства.» *Riddle*, 20 Feb. 2022, <https://ridl.io/voennaya-integratsiya-soyuznogo-gosudarstva/>.

Trade and economics

The Belarusian-Russian trade turnover grew markedly in value terms by 35% in 2021 against 2020 thanks to the so-called “foreign economic miracle” (Table 1), most evidently, the restoration of energy imports and exports of potash fertilizers and oil products amid rising prices of raw materials.

Figure 1. Exports and imports by aggregated product groups



Source: Belstat.

Leaving other roots of this phenomenon aside, the increase was short-term, and domestic demand and consumption in Belarus was in an apparent downward trend, according to economists.⁶

⁶ «Экономист: “Внешнеторговое чудо” Беларуси близится к концу.» *Deutsche Welle*, 02 July 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/jekonomist-vneshnetorgovoe-chudo-belarusi-blizitsja-k-koncu/a-58127100>.

Table 1. Belarus – Russia foreign trade in commodities in 2015–2021, USD million⁷

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% against 2020
Turnover	27,533	26,114	32,424	35,561	35,552	29,667	40,053	135.0
Exports	10,398	10,948	12,898	12,986	13,569	13,157	16,392	143.3
Imports	17,143	15,306	19,599	22,619	21,982	16,510	23,661	124.6
Deficit	6,745	4,558	6,701	9,633	8,414	3,353	7,268	

The trade turnover surpassed USD 40 billion for the first time in nine years. Belarusian exports to Russia totaled USD 16.39 billion, while imports from Russia stood at USD 23.66 billion, Belarus' deficit thus only amounting to USD 7.27 billion⁸ (see Table 1, Figure 1).

The *National Statistics Committee of Belarus* (Belstat) stopped publishing reports on foreign trade in commodities under sanctions. The contribution of the oil component is evident in all three indicators (import, export, net). The increase in supplies of Belarusian foods and oil products to the Russian market is reflected in the increase in imports. According to the Belarusian embassy in Russia, 31 new commodity items were added to the list of exports to Russia in 2021, but the increase was not impressive in value terms (USD 0.6 million).⁹

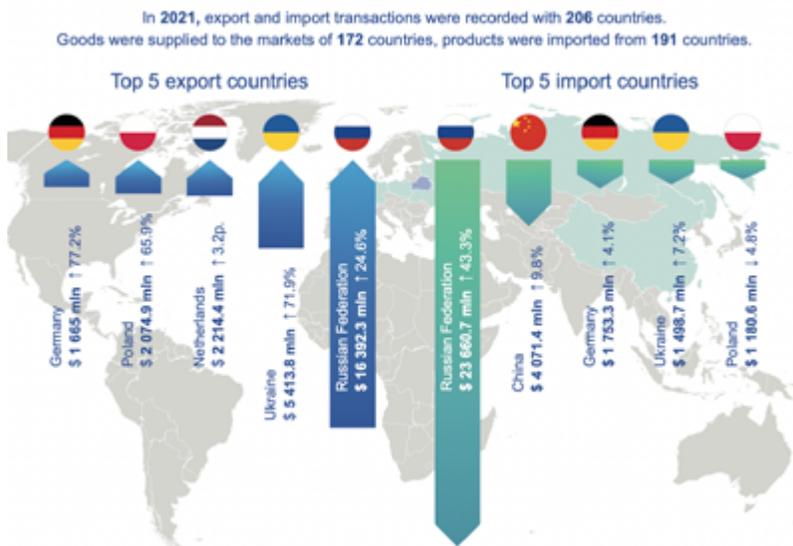
⁷ Данные: «Статистика внешнеэкономической деятельности.» Интерактивная информационно-аналитическая система распространения официальной статистической информации, <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/Indicators/Search?code=1063065>.

⁸ The situation was better with trade in services: exports to Russia – USD 2.80 billion, imports – USD 1.659 billion; surplus – USD 1.140 billion.

⁹ «Об итогах внешней торговли Беларуси с Россией в 2021 году.» Посольство Республики Беларусь в Российской Федерации, https://russia.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/trade/.

As before, Russia remained the major and most important foreign economic partner of Belarus. In 2021, it accounted for 49.0% of Belarus' commodity turnover: 41.1% of exports (45.1% in 2020) and 56.6% of imports (50.4% in 2020) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Exports and imports of goods country, 2021



Note. In 2021, export and import transactions were recorded with 206 countries. Goods were supplied to the markets of 172 countries, products were imported from 191 countries.

Source: Belstat.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022 is a “conservative revolution” in practice,¹⁰ a reaction to a series

¹⁰ “Conservative Revolution.” Wiki, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative_Revolution.

of political crises in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan (2020) and Kazakhstan (early 2022), and an attempt to prevent a collapse of the post-Soviet imperial complex with Russia in the center. The war highlights the key points of the Belarus – Russia relationship differently. Despite the high uncertainty, future political trends can be described as follows.

1. “Smooth takeover”, i. e. the partial or complete transfer of some sovereign functions and infrastructure of Belarus as a state to Russia. In particular, this concerns transport and logistics capacities, information policy, defense and security, etc. Currently, Lukashenko has no control over the movement of the Russian military across the country, and he cannot make most decisions without taking into account the Kremlin’s opinion.
2. For Minsk, the international isolation and sanctions, which tend to turn into a full-fledged economic blockade, mean an even greater dependence on Russian political elites, their decisions and fate.
3. Russia’s economic assistance in the form of debt restructuring, super favorable regime for Belarusian enterprises, access to import substitution programs, more “optimized” prices of energy commodities, etc. could help the Belarusian economy, but the effects of these indulgences is very limited, and potential positive effects are strongly influenced by the situation in the Russian market.
4. The constitutional referendum of 2022 will still be followed by further bargaining on the implementation of the union programs and economic assistance to the ally. The result of the referendum does not guarantee Moscow’s subsequent non-interference in the internal affairs of Belarus.

The Kremlin's aid is not gratuitous, and there are things it values more than Lukashenko's debt warrants. Turning Belarus into an external military-strategic foothold of Russia is one of the items on the Kremlin's price list. The change in the geopolitical status of Belarus demonstrates one of the most dramatic metamorphoses in Eastern Europe of the past eight years.

BELARUSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS: IN FREEFALL

Anton Penkovsky

Summary

The entire year 2021 was marked by a deterioration of the Belarus – U. S. relationship. The new Administration in the White House took a tougher stance on the Lukashenko regime. Minsk completely abandoned its pragmatic line in relations with the United States in favor of a one-sided orientation to Russia, and, for the first time in a long while, chose to pointedly aggravate relations with America.

Sanctions and asymmetric responses have brought the Minsk-Washington relationship to its lowest point ever. The U. S. diplomatic presence in Belarus was put in question, while mutual understanding and cooperation was reduced to a minimum. Normalization and return to a pragmatic dialogue became impossible, as the Belarusian leadership was no longer perceived as a legitimate and independent actor. In the meantime, the U. S. began actively supporting the Belarusian democratic forces in exile.

Trends:

- Rapid deterioration of bilateral relations and the complete abandonment of the pragmatic “policy of small steps”;
- Diplomatic swordplay that involved Russia as Minsk’s protector and role model;
- Washington’s reorientation to open support for the Belarusian democratic forces in exile;
- Increase in trade between the countries interrupted by sanctions.

New Administration with less patience

The year began with a rotation of the officials involved in building bilateral relations. In January, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Kravchenko, who was in charge of the North American

region in the Foreign Ministry, and was expected to be appointed Belarus' ambassador to the United States, was replaced by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik, who passed away in January before departing to Washington.

Changes were much more significant in the United States. Joe Biden was elected the 46th President of the United States, and took over from the Donald Trump Administration. Experienced diplomat and strategist Anthony Blinken headed up the U. S. Department of State. Personnel reshuffles took place in the Department of State as well, but Julie Fischer, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, remained the first U. S. ambassador to Belarus since 2008, and was supposed to arrive in the country soon.

During the *first months* of the year, the U. S. repeatedly stated its opinion on the situation in Belarus, in particular, the infringement of the freedom of speech, arrests of journalists and trials of civil society activists. The U. S. permanent representative to the OSCE devoted his speeches to the developments in Belarus more and more often.

The United States paid much attention to the growing number of political prisoners in Belarus. Diplomats attended trials in Minsk and other cities, but the Belarusian authorities soon deprived them of this opportunity. In March, the U. S. State Department awarded the International Women of Courage (IWOC) Award to jailed Maria Kolesnikova, highlighting the role of women's leadership during the events of 2020.

On April 19, the U. S. Treasury Department in coordination with the State Department revoked the licenses issued to U. S. entities and individuals back in 2015 and extended annually since then to conduct some transactions with *nine* Belarusian state-owned enterprises subject to sanctions, Belneftekhim state petrochemical concern among them.¹ Previously, the sanctions

¹ "Issuance of Belarus General License 2H." U. S. *Department of the Treasury*, 19 Apr. 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20210419>.

were suspended when Belarusian political prisoners were released, and Minsk showed some progress in the field of human rights. This reasoning became irrelevant in 2021, so it was prescribed to terminate economic relations with Belarusian counterparts within 45 days.

The “small steps policy” in Belarus – U. S. relations, which had been pursued for five years, was over due to the events of spring 2021 in Belarus. The Democratic Party in the person of President Biden and the Congress majority remained much less tolerant of suppression of the freedom of speech and reprisals against journalists than the Republicans. The U. S. resolutely condemned the closure of *tut.by* portal on May 18.

Five days later, the forced redirection of the *Ryanair* flight FR4978 to the Minsk airport and the arrest of journalist Roman Protasevich brought about new restrictive measures against Belarus. The United States stopped referring to the Belarusian leadership as “government”, calling it either vaguely “the authorities of Belarus” or “the Lukashenko regime”. Seconded by the European Union, the U. S. pushed for the international isolation of Belarus even harder, as White House Spokeswoman Jen Psaki stated on May 28. Economic sanctions came into force on June 3 after the expiration of the 45-day period.

Throughout the year, the Belarusian authorities put pressure on the U. S. embassy and the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Office in retaliation for what was perceived as U. S. government’s hostile actions. On June 4, Belarus notified the U. S. of restrictions on the work of U. S. diplomatic and technical staff of the U. S. embassy in Minsk, which, basically, showed that the country’s leadership had no other arguments in dialogue with Washington except for limiting the U. S. diplomatic presence.

The parties still had not exchanged ambassadors. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry was in no hurry to appoint a new ambassador to the United States to replace Kravchenko. The MFA

denied visa to Ambassador Fischer, yet did not revoke her *agrément*. Belarusian state propagandists not only demonized some American officials in every possible way, but also accused the U. S. of coup attempts in Belarus, pressure on the country, posing a military threat, making attempts to destabilize the region, and even of its involvement in the preparation of Lukashenko's assassination and capture of his family.

Regime pushed aside.
Priority given to democratic forces

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who assumed the role of the leader of the democratic forces of Belarus, visited the United States capital in mid-July. U. S. officials no longer had interaction points with Minsk, so contacts with the democratic forces as representatives of the people of Belarus intensified. Tikhanovskaya met with President Biden, the secretary of state, senators, members of the Congress, and a number of officials of various levels. Representatives of the American political establishment declared their full support for Tikhanovskaya and the people of Belarus.

The regime's response to that visit was rather erratic. Judging by the comments that followed, the degree of America's willingness to publicly support the Belarus democratic community was largely misestimated. Lukashenko looked disgruntled. He awkwardly joked about Biden "serving cookies" to Tikhanovskaya, and accused the U. S. President of short-sightedness.²

On August 9, the anniversary of the rigged 2020 presidential election in Belarus, the U. S. President extended the state

² «Встреча с активом местной вертикали по актуальным вопросам общественно-политической обстановки.» *Официальный интернет-портал президента Республики Беларусь*, 30 July 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-aktivom-mestnoy-vertikali-po-aktualnym-voprosam-obshchestvenno-politicheskoy-obstanovki?openVideo=true>.

of emergency declared by Executive Order 13405 of June 16, 2006 (to block the property of the individuals who undermine democratic processes or institutions in Belarus). According to the Order, the restrictions were imposed on the officials, heads and top executives of the political institutions that damaged the sovereignty and security of Belarus, violated human rights, and were involved in election fraud and corruption.³

Two days later, Minsk responded by banning new U. S. government programs in Belarus (this did not apply to ongoing projects), demanded that the number of American diplomats in Minsk be reduced to *five* by September 1, and revoked Ambassador Fisher's *agrément*. It was just a formality for the ambassador, as nobody believed in August that she would be allowed to go to Minsk anyway, which would mean that the United States had recognized the Lukashenko Administration's legitimacy. A little later, Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said that given the sanctions, he saw no sense in sending an ambassador of Belarus to the United States, although there was a candidate for this position.

In October, Julie Fischer was given the status of a U. S. special envoy for Belarus, and headed the Belarus Affairs Unit in Vilnius, while retaining the diplomatic rank of ambassador. This promoted the United States' contacts with the exiled Belarusian democrats (represented primarily by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's Office) even more.

In response to the summer restriction on the number of U. S. diplomats in Minsk, the United States demanded that Belarus reduce its diplomatic presence in the United States as well, in particular, by closing the Consulate General in New York.

³ "Executive Order on Blocking Property of Additional Persons Contributing to the Situation in Belarus." *The White House, The United States Government*, 09 Aug. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/08/09/executive-order-on-blocking-property-of-additional-persons-contributing-to-the-situation-in-belarus/>.

The Belarusian leadership interpreted this as escalation, and demanded on October 20 the closure of the American Center in Minsk and the Public Affairs and USAID offices, and dismissal of around *two dozen* local employees.⁴

This step had no precedent in Belarusian-American relations. The Belarusian leadership stated that operations of the U. S. embassy in Minsk were no longer desirable. For the regime and its propaganda, the closure of the embassy was only a symbolic victory, as no really sensitive retaliatory measures against the United States were possible. At the same time, the termination of USAID projects in the fields of health care, COVID-19 response, academic, professional, and cultural exchanges, preservation of the historical and cultural heritage of Belarus, and the closure of the All About the USA partner centers in the regions, affected Belarusian civil society. The pressure on the U. S. diplomatic mission is generally in line with Russia's policy towards the U. S. Belarusian Foreign Ministry's statements on this topic are made as comments to the Russian media.

Nevertheless, the mutual trade turnover between the United States and Belarus increased significantly in 2021. In the first half of the year, the U. S. moved up from the 10th to the 8th position on the list of Belarus' major trading partners. America's share increased from 1.3% to 1.5% of the total turnover. This growth was interrupted in the middle of the year due to the resumption of the U. S. sanctions.

The mutual trade turnover increased in 2021 by 38.8% year on year to slightly over USD 1 billion, while exports of goods from Belarus to the U. S. rose by almost 150% (USD 491 million),

⁴ "Efforts to Hamper U. S. Development Assistance and Public Diplomacy Programs in Belarus. Statement by the U. S. Special Envoy for Belarus Julie Fisher." U. S. *Embassy in Belarus*, 29 Oct. 2021, <https://by.usembassy.gov/efforts-to-hamper-u-s-development-assistance-and-public-diplomacy-programs-in-belarus/>.

the highest of the past 10 years.⁵ Imports of goods to Belarus decreased by 1.1% (USD 529 million). Exports of services to the U. S. stood at USD 1.51 billion, mainly thanks to the IT sector (89.8% of the total). Imports of services from the U. S. look insignificant, totaling USD 189.9 million.

Conclusion

The Lukashenko Administration has abandoned its long-standing policy of balancing between the U. S. and Russia's interests in the region. Although the Belarusian Foreign Ministry was still trying to sell the argument "if you do not close your eyes to human rights violations, we would become totally dependent on Russia", these tactics were applied rather out of habit, and did not correlate with the strategic decision of Minsk to completely follow the Kremlin's lead.

The new Presidential Administration in Washington took an extremely tough stance on the regime in Belarus. The U. S. has actually recognized the inevitable role of the Lukashenko regime as a satellite of the Kremlin, and does not intend to make any more concessions on sanctions or other issues.

Even during the very difficult years in bilateral relations, the U. S. Department of State showed incredible patience, pragmatically assessing Belarus' chances for reducing its dependence on Russia. In the current situation, the pragmatic approach dictates that the U. S. authorities should stop wasting time and energy on convincing Minsk to play nice. During the year, the sanctions on Belarus became much heavier. The new *Belarus Democracy, Human Rights and Sovereignty Act of 2020* inherits

⁵ «Внешняя торговля.» Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/realny-sector-ekonomiki/vneshnyaya-torgovlya/vneshnyaya-torgovlya-uslugami/godovye-dannye/>.

the Act of 2004. However, the tools of the harshest economic coercion were still not applied in 2021.

It is noteworthy that the U. S. Department of State has intensified its cooperation with representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces in exile. Special Envoy Julie Fischer works from Vilnius, and the State Department clearly favors Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's Office. It can be expected that efforts in this area will increase in proportion to the reduction in interaction with the Lukashenko Administration.

At the end of the year, the Belarus – U. S. relationship was at an extremely low point, from which it is unlikely to rise in the near future. Any noticeable changes for the better are only possible in case the democratic forces come to power in Belarus.

Washington will not resume dialogue with the incumbent Belarusian authorities any time soon. New economic sanctions will be applied in 2022, and for the once promising IT companies, their presence in Belarus will carry unreasonable risks. Sanctions will be used as a tool to increase the price of the Kremlin's support for Lukashenko, rather than to influence the regime directly. The U. S. will discuss the fate of the Belarusian authorities without them.

December 26, 2021 was the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Belarus – U. S. official relations. On Christmas Day 1991, the United States became the second country after Ukraine to recognize the sovereignty of the young republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This anniversary went unnoticed in December 2021. The sovereignty of Belarus, apparently, raises great doubts in the United States. The Belarusian authorities are thus hardly in the mood to think about their unrealized ambitions in the international arena.

BELARUS – POLAND: IN THE SHADOW OF THE MIGRATION CRISIS

Anna Maria Dyner

Summary

The year 2021 came to be one of the most difficult in the history of Belarusian-Polish relations. Political, social, and cultural contacts between the two countries virtually dwindled to purely technical communication due to the events that followed the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, the migration crisis orchestrated by Minsk, persecution of the Polish minority, and accusations of Poland of striving to pursue a revisionist policy towards Belarus.

The relationship was also negatively affected by the security situation in the region, including Russia's policy and growing tensions around Ukraine. The Union State integration processes did not play in favor of it either. Taking into account that these factors will remain the essential variables, one should not expect them to improve any time soon.

Trends:

- Growing political crisis in bilateral relations, leading to the curtailment of diplomatic contacts and important programs, including the European Poland-Ukraine-Belarus cross-border cooperation program;
- Increasing political revisionism;
- Emergence of additional factors that cause heightened tensions in the region (the migration crisis, persecution of the Polish minority in Belarus, forced landing of the Ryanair plane, etc.);
- Increasing divergence in the perception of regional security challenges and threats;
- Situational improvement in trade relations.

Political relations

The year 2021 was one of the worst in the 30-year history of the Belarusian–Polish relationship, even worse than the period of 2011–2015, which was previously considered the most difficult. The crisis was caused by actions of the Belarusian authorities after the presidential election of 2020, i.e. escalating repressions, which hit almost all public organizations, including those of the Polish minority, obstruction to Polish diplomatic and consular services, the incident with the *Ryanair* plane, accusations of the hostile policy against Belarus addressed to the Polish government, etc. The sanctions imposed by the European Union added oil to the fire, and so did the migration crisis at the western border of Belarus.

As a result, all political contacts, except for sporadic technical ones at the regional level, were terminated. Cross-border cooperation, both bilateral and under the European Union's Poland-Ukraine-Belarus program, was suspended. Only two meetings of Belarusian and Polish delegations on the cross-border migration crisis took place during the entire year: the meeting of the Belarusian-Polish intergovernmental ad hoc group on August 16, and the meeting of the delegations of the Supreme Chamber of Control of Poland and the State Control Committee of Belarus on December 16 in Belovezhskaya Pushcha (Bialowieza Forest).

On February 28, the Polish School in Brest hosted the commemoration event “Cursed Soldiers” attended by the Polish consul, which triggered the persecution of the Polish minority and caused yet another diplomatic crisis. The Brest Regional Economic Court ruled in April to liquidate the Polish school.

Earlier, on March 9, Belarus decided to expel the Polish consul general from Brest. In response, Poland declared a Belarusian embassy officer in Warsaw *persona non grata*. Minsk, in turn, ordered the Polish consul out of Grodno. On March 12, Poland expelled two Belarusian consuls from Warsaw and Bialystok.

Andželika Borys, President of the Union of Poles in Belarus, was arrested on March 23 for organizing the traditional Kaziuki fair in the Polish consulate in Grodno, and charged with “rehabilitation of Nazism and incitement of national hatred”. Journalist Andrzej Poczobut was arrested on the same charge on March 25. Both activists are looking at up to 12 years in prison. Union activists Marina Tishkovskaya, Irena Bernatskaya and Anna Panisheva were also arrested and released on May 25. Intense Belarusian-Polish negotiations on the release of Borys and Poczobut continued until late 2021, but no agreement was reached.

The forced landing of the Ryanair plane at the Minsk airport on May 23 and the high-profile arrest of Sofia Sapega and Roman Protasevich, who were on board, severely aggravated the situation. Back in February, the Investigative Committee of Belarus requested the extradition of Stepan Putilo and Roman Protasevich, the co-founders of the NEXTA independent news channel, from Poland. After the incident with the Ryanair plane, Poland and then the Baltic States and the European Union closed their airspace to Belarusian planes.

The Belarusian government added September 17 to the calendar of public holidays as the National Unity Day, which was one of the indicators of the bad neighborhood relations. For the first time, the period of 1920–1939 was called the time of the Polish occupation of Western Belarus, time of terror, repressions and denationalization of Belarusians by the Polish authorities. Warsaw interpreted this as an unfriendly gesture, because this date is associated with the Soviet attack on the Second Polish Republic, and is largely equivalent to September 1, the day of the Nazi invasion and the beginning of World War II. Before that, historical memory had not been a matter of serious political disagreements between Minsk and Warsaw.

In 2021, Poland became one of the Western countries most involved in resolving the political crisis in Belarus, among other things, through the imposition of more sanctions against

the Lukashenko regime, both personal and economic. At the same time, together with the countries of the Visegrad Group, Poland initiated the European Union's Economic Assistance Plan for a Democratic Belarus.¹ The package of EUR 3 billion is designed for economic reforms, investments in infrastructure and institutional changes in the case of a democratic transition of Belarus. The program aims at generating additional growth potential, through which new jobs will be created. The investment package is backstopped by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank with grant support from the Neighborhood Investment Platform, which Belarus does not currently have access to.

Border crisis and security threats

Since the second half of 2020, Minsk has been accusing Poland and the Baltic States of waging a hybrid war against Belarus, and preparing a revolution in the country. For the Lukashenko regime this was one of the pretexts for greater military integration with Russia. At the same time, as the tension around Ukraine was growing, and Russia massed its troops near Ukraine's borders in the spring and autumn of 2021, NATO continued thinking about the further force buildup on its eastern flank. In late 2021, Russia presented NATO and the U.S. with demands, the fulfillment of which would de facto mean a contravention of the NATO functioning principles and security policy of the U.S. and its allies.

The most acute of the bilateral disputes was the migration crisis provoked by the Belarusian authorities at the western border of Belarus, which can be divided into two phases. During

¹ "The European Union outlines a € 3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus". *European Commission*, 28 May 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2685.

the *first* phase, the migrants were brought to the borders of Lithuania and Latvia, and, during the *second* one, to the border shared with Poland. The conflict began in mid-May, when the Lithuanian Border Guard Service began reporting increasing attempts to cross the border illegally from the Belarusian side. Hostile actions took place in early August at the border with Poland. Over time, they took the form of a full-scale hybrid attack. Pursuant to the Border Guard Act, Poland engaged its army and police to support the border guards. Also, Poland decided to build a 180 km long and 5.5 meters high fence on the border with Belarus.

Polish Defense Attaché Colonel Jaroslaw Kembrowski was summoned to the Ministry of Defense of Belarus on November 9. Pointing at the concentration of Polish troops at the border with Belarus, the ministry reminded that, according to the bilateral supplementary agreement to the Vienna Document of the Negotiations on Confidence and Security-Building Measures, the opposing side must be notified of all exercises involving more than 6,000 soldiers. The Defense Ministry of Belarus also stated its disagreement with Poland's belief that Belarusian secret services and the army were behind the border crisis.

In the context of this crisis, Belarusian diplomacy also took a number of actions aimed at discrediting the neighboring countries in international organizations, including the UN and the OSCE, presenting Poland and Lithuania as countries unwilling to accept refugees and migrants. At the September 27 session of the UN General Assembly, Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei accused Poland and the Baltic States of murdering the migrants, who were trying to enter these countries from Belarus, and transporting their bodies to the Belarusian territory.

The conflict was actively used by Russia to upset the Belarusian-Polish relationship. Moscow not only seconded Belarus' accusations at international venues, but also demanded an investigation into the alleged murders of migrants at the

Belarusian–Polish border. To justify these accusations, Minsk mainly used the testimony of Polish army soldier Emil Czecko, who defected to Belarus at the height of the migration crisis, and, according to the Belarusian authorities, applied for asylum in December 2021.² Russia used the conflict as an opportunity to test the political unity of NATO and the EU.

The border crisis had a pronounced military aspect. Its second phase began a month before the active phase of the West 2021 joint strategic exercise based on a scenario of military actions of Belarus and Russia against the western neighboring countries. The exercise clearly demonstrated that Belarus and Russia were preparing for military action against NATO in the East.

A while after the end of the exercise, on November 11, Lukashenko asked Russia for support in guarding the border with the NATO members. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin said on November 16 that the Belarusian army was ready to respond to the challenges arising at the western border, and emphasized that the actions taken by the Polish army to guard the border were inadequate to the scale of the threat.

The border crisis and its aggravation in the Polish direction in November can also be interpreted as a test of the Polish border guards' capabilities when it comes to interaction between the army and other defense and security agencies. The sustained tension at the border aimed at putting pressure on the eastern NATO members, which had to increase the spending on border protection and extend the state of emergency.

The different perception of security issues in the region and the identified threats was an important element of the disagreement between Minsk and Warsaw. Poland was increasingly concerned about rapidly developing Belarus–Russia military

² «Перебежавший в Беларусь польский солдат найден повешенным — власти.» RTVI, 17 Mar. 2022, <https://rtvi.com/news/sbezhavshiy-v-belarus-polskiy-soldat-nayden-mertvym/>.

integration, especially after it was reported in October that the Union State of Belarus and Russia would soon adopt a new military doctrine, which would highlight threats ostensibly posed by NATO as the most important ones.

Minsk's statements about the possible deployment of the Iskander missile systems and S-400 air defense systems at the western border of Belarus, and the country's readiness to host Russian nuclear weapons in case of the placement of American nuclear weapons in Poland (which is highly unlikely) are also worth noting.

Minsk perceived the possible reinforcement of the NATO troops in the eastern regions as a threat, in particular, the purchase of modern weapons by Poland, including the F-35 fighters, Patriot missile defense systems and HIMARS multiple rocket launchers. Belarus' warnings, including those voiced right after the presidential election in August 2020, were not something new, but, in 2021, they became more frequent and harsher, as Russia showed interest in that.

Economic and social relations

In contrast to the political crisis situation, Belarusian-Polish trade developed quite intensively in 2021. The mutual trade turnover amounted to over USD 3.775 billion (USD 2.489 billion in 2020). Belarus' exports to Poland totaled USD 1.687 billion; imports – USD 2.088 billion.³ Poland still had a surplus in trade with Belarus.

From time to time, the countries imposed trade restrictions related to both phytosanitary issues (mutual restrictions

³ Henceforward: "Import i eksport według krajów z wymienieniem sekcji." Główny Urząd Statystyczny, http://swaid.stat.gov.pl/HandelZagraniczny_dashboards/Raporty_predefiniowane/RAP_SWAID_HZ_3_7.aspx.

on the import of poultry, pork, etc.), and the EU sanctions against Belarus.

As before, trade was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying restrictions. This mainly concerned the passenger traffic, which was also attributed to the border crisis that had been ongoing since August, and, in November, seriously complicated the functioning of the Kuźnica Białostocka – Bruzgi border crossing point.

In 2021, the Belarusian-Polish border was crossed 2.18 million times (a 28% decrease from the previous year). Polish border guards apprehended 2,877 citizens of third countries, who crossed the border illegally (up 1,070% against 2020), and only 152 of them were Belarusian citizens.⁴

During the year, 2,134 citizens of Belarus applied for international protection in Poland; 1,150 Belarusians fulfilled the conditions for international protection (this includes the data of the Polish Office for Foreigners on the previous years, mostly 2020).⁵

Although it was very difficult for Poland to execute projects in Belarus due to the pandemic, worsened political relations, and the migration crisis, it allocated PLN 169.63 million, which were spent, among other things, on scholarships and educational activities.

As previously noted, Warsaw refused to cooperate with Belarus under the Poland-Ukraine-Belarus program (2021-2027), and only partnered with Ukraine. This is one of the most interesting programs to support cross-border cooperation, thanks to which, dozens of projects, from the improvement of border infrastructure to the popularization of common history and cultural heritage, have been implemented.

⁴ “Statystyki SG.” *Straż Graniczna*, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/granica/statystyki-sg/2206,Statystyki-SG.html>.

⁵ “Ochrona międzynarodowa w 2021 r.” *Gov.pl*, 12 Jan. 2022, <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/ochrona-miedzynarodowa-w-2021-r>.

Conclusion

The situation inside Belarus (human rights violations, persecution of the Polish minority, etc.), the COVID-19 pandemic, the border crisis and security threats in the region had a negative impact on the Belarusian-Polish relationship. The year 2021 was a period of deepening divergences in the perception of the most important threats and the lack of political will for any kind of cooperation, even technical or local.

Although the deteriorating political climate between the two countries did not lead to a noticeable decline in trade, it strongly affected all social and cultural contacts. Due to the policies of the European Union or Russia, which are unlikely to undergo significant changes in the coming years, any improvement of the Belarusian-Polish relationship is highly unlikely, so, at best, it will remain purely technical.

Bilateral trade is likely to deteriorate because of the European sanctions. Aggravated security issues will further increase mutual distrust. Only significant political changes in Belarus may alter the situation.

BELARUS – UKRAINE: IN ANTICIPATION OF A STORM

Arseny Sivitsky

Summary

The year 2021 saw a pivotal change in the Belarus – Ukraine relationship. Mutual attempts to establish political dialogue in the first half of the year bore no fruit.

After the forced landing of the Ryanair plane in Minsk, Ukraine finally stopped refraining from joining Western sanctions. In response, the Belarusian leadership sharply toughened their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. Minsk's explicit solidarity with the Kremlin's position, particularly, joint military activities (West-2021 exercise and the announced Union Resolve 2022 exercise) and the plans to deploy the newest Russian combat systems close to the Ukrainian border, transformed Ukraine's perception of Belarus from a state that guaranteed the impossibility of invasion of third countries from its territory into a source of real military challenges and threats.

Nevertheless, the geopolitical tensions had little effect on bilateral trade and economic cooperation, which reached an all-time high.

Trends:

- Transition of bilateral relations from benevolently neutral to confrontational;
- Abandonment of the strategy of being a “donor of regional security and stability” by Minsk;
- Transformation of Belarus into a real, rather than a potential source of security challenges and threats to Ukraine, in many respects, due to its military-political alliance with Russia;
- Increased trade and economic cooperation in spite of the coronavirus pandemic and occasional trade conflicts.

Political dialogue: between good neighborhood and confrontation

Belarus-Ukraine cooperation in the first half of 2021 was sluggishly affected by the crisis caused by Ukraine's non-recognition of the result of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, which resulted in the suspension of political dialogue.¹ Minsk thus showed its willingness to continue constructive and mutually beneficial cooperation with Ukraine, based on the principles of sovereign equality and mutual respect.

Although Ukraine did not recognize Lukashenko as legitimate president, it did not join Western sanctions against Belarus. Moreover, Kyiv ignored the efforts of Belarusian democratic leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to obtain the status of a legitimate leader, either. Despite the attempts made by Tikhanovskaya's Office to establish contacts with the Ukrainian leadership, their communication was informal and sporadic, mostly on the sidelines of international events in third countries. For Democratic Belarus the inter-faction group in the Ukrainian parliament was the main communication channel for Tikhanovskaya's Office in Ukraine.

The forced landing of the Ryanair plane in Minsk triggered a tougher stance of Ukraine towards Belarus. Ukraine joined the Western aviation sanctions on May 26, and prohibited flights of Ukrainian airliners over Belarus. On May 29, the Ukrainian Cabinet also banned Belarusian airplanes from entering Ukraine's airspace in transit.²

¹ «Политические отношения.» Посольство Республики Беларусь в Украине, https://ukraine.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/political/.

² «Украина закрыла небо для белорусских самолётов с 29 мая.» UNIAN, 28 May 2021, <https://www.unian.net/economics/transport/ukrainareshila-zakryt-nebo-dlya-belorusskih-samoletov-s-29-maya-novosti-ukraina-11435434.html>.

That was the point, past which the confrontation between Minsk and Kyiv began to seriously heat up, and Ukraine began treating the Belarusian authorities as an external threat. Ukraine's official comments were quite contradictory, as it was still critical for Kyiv that the northern border remained secured. At the same time, the Ukrainian government stated its determination to support the legitimate interests of the Belarusian people, who "deserve a decent life in a democratic country, where human rights and the rule of law are respected".³

After the *Ryanair* incident, the Ukrainian authorities began to think about moving the negotiations of the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group on Donbass to another venue, pointing at Belarus' dependence on Russia and the inadequate behavior of the Belarusian authorities in the international arena.⁴ As a result, Minsk lost the important symbolic status that made it possible for the Lukashenko Administration to manoeuvre between Kyiv and Moscow for years by converting it into various economic and diplomatic dividends in its relations with the West.

The Belarusian authorities tried to form a pro-Belarusian lobby in Ukraine, staking, however, on outright weak political figures. For instance, Lukashenko met with Ukrainian House Representative Yevheniy Shevchenko, and Natalia Kochanova, Speaker of the Council of the Republic (the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament) held a meeting with a delegation of the Socialist Party of Ukraine led by Oleksandr Moroz. These contacts had no effect on Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, except for some annoyance in Kyiv.

³ "Україна категорична адхіляє абвінавчання ў нібыта пастаўках зброі». МЗС і Памежная служба Ўкраіны запырэчылі Лукашэнку." *Радыё Свабода*, 02 July 2021, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31338339.html>.

⁴ "Україна має шукати заміну мінському майданчику через події у Білорусі – Кравчук." *Українформ*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3253702-ukraina-mae-sukati-zaminu-minskomu-majdanciku-cerez-podii-u-bilorusi-kravcuk.html>.

Shortly after, Lukashenko made a number of statements about Ukraine, which the Ukrainian authorities interpreted as interference in the internal affairs of the country. For example, Lukashenko said that if he stepped over the Ukrainian border, he would become the most popular politician there supported by 90% of the population, and would be able to “make Ukraine be Ukraine”. He also threatened that together with Russia, Belarus could bring Ukraine “to its knees”, if Minsk stopped supplying fuels and lubricants. However, Lukashenko continued to voice security guarantees, promising that foreign troops would not attack Ukraine from the territory of Belarus.⁵

Meanwhile, according to an opinion poll conducted by Ukrainian Rating sociological research group, 59% of Ukrainians had a negative attitude towards Lukashenko in 2021, and 34% generally liked him. The number of Ukrainians who showed a positive attitude to Lukashenko has been steadily decreasing (45% in 2020; 67% in 2019), i.e. the number of supporters in Ukraine halved over the two years, while the share of Ukrainians who considered Belarus a hostile country in 2021 more than doubled from 22% to 48%.⁶

Having failed to form a pro-Belarusian lobby and to play on pro-Belarusian sentiments in Ukraine, Minsk once again tried to draw attention to itself by speculating on the recognition of Crimea as a Russian territory. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry only responded to this blackmail with a warning about “irreparable repercussions” for bilateral relations.⁷

⁵ «Лукашенко: Я переступлю границу Украины, и у меня там будет 90%.» *Reformation*, 09 Aug. 2021, <https://reform.by/248077-lukashenko-ja-perestuplju-granicu-ukrainy-i-u-menja-tam-budet-90>.

⁶ “Суспільно-політичні настрої населення (6–8 грудня 2021).” *Рейтинг*, 10 Dec. 2021, https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/obschestvenno-politicheskie_nastroeniya_naseleniya_6-8_dekabrya_2021.html.

⁷ «МИД Украины предупредил Минск о “непоправимых последствиях” признания Крыма российским.» *ТАСС*, 10 Nov. 2021, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12887865>

At the end of the year, Lukashenko started using the possibility of cutting off transit from Ukraine to Lithuania as leverage. Lithuania previously banned transit of Belarusian potash fertilizers through its territory, while Ukraine continued transiting and importing fertilizers from Belarus.

Security: chronicle of escalation

In 2021, Belarus stopped positioning itself as a “donor of regional security and stability,” which previously implied certain security guarantees for the neighboring countries and predictable military-political behavior on the international arena. Three events – the crisis caused by the *Ryanair* incident, the migration crisis at the Belarusian-European border, and the Belarusian-Russian joint strategic exercise West-2021 – predetermined a qualitative change in the regional security situation and, as a consequence, the West and Ukraine’s new perception of Belarus as a source of hybrid and military threats.

The Belarusian authorities toughened their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric in the second half of 2021. Lukashenko said on July 2 that sleeper terrorist cells formed jointly by Ukraine, Germany, the United States, Poland and Lithuania were detected in Belarus during a large-scale anti-terror operation. Lukashenko ordered to shut the border with Ukraine, claiming that large amounts of weapons had been smuggled into Belarus from there.⁸

The migration crisis at the western border of Belarus did not directly affect Ukraine, but made Kyiv seriously consider reinforcement of its border in the north. Like other Western capitals, Kyiv saw the border crisis as an element of the Kremlin’s anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian hybrid strategy in addition to

⁸ «Торжественное собрание в честь Дня независимости.» *Президент Республики Беларусь*, 02 July 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/torzhestvennoe-sobranie-v-chest-dnya-nezavisimosti>.

the cut supplies of natural gas to Europe and the escalation of military activities at the Russian-Ukrainian border, which began in spring 2021.

Speaking about the West-2021 exercise, Lukashenko said that he planned to purchase Russian weapons worth over USD 1 billion (including the S-400 air defense systems) and to deploy them near Ukraine's border, citing alleged boot camps in Ukraine arranged for future actions against Belarus.⁹

Possible aggression against Ukraine from Belarus began to be perceived as a probable payment that Lukashenko promised to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who actually saved him in 2020.¹⁰ On November 23, Ukraine entered the active phase of the Polesye special operation at the border shared with Belarus conducted jointly with the National Guard, police and army in coordination with its State Border Guard Service.

The placement of an 8,000-strong contingent of Ukrainian security forces at the border with Belarus was used by Minsk as a pretext to justify a complete rethinking of its position on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus Alexander Volfovich said that under the guise of combating illegal migration, Ukraine deployed army groups, heavy weaponry, helicopters and combat aircraft, which could lead to a local conflict.¹¹ Lukashenko stated that in the event of

⁹ «Доклад об обстановке на Государственной границе Беларуси.» *Президент Республики Беларусь*, 27 Sep. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/doklad-ob-obstanovke-na-gosudarstvennoy-granice-belarusi>.

¹⁰ “Можлива війна Білорусі з Україною – плата Лукашенка Путіну за порятунок свого режиму.” *ЛІГА.net*, 05 Oct. 2021, <https://www.liga.net/ua/politics/opinion/vozmojnaya-voyna-belarusi-s-ukrainoy-plata-lukashenko-putinu-za-spasenie-svoego-rejima>.

¹¹ «Вольфович считает, что украинские учения могут привести к локальному конфликту.» *Reformation*, 08 Dec. 2021, <https://reform.by/284857-volfovich-schitaet-chto-ukrainskie-uchenija-mogut-privesti-k-lokalnomu-konfliktu>.

an escalated armed conflict between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk or directly with Russia, he would enter the war on Russia's side.¹²

In early December, Lukashenko announced the joint Belarusian-Russian military exercise Union Resolve 2022 near the Ukrainian border in the next two months, and promised “big decisions” regarding Ukraine after the New Year holidays, which would affect the entire region “from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea.”¹³

Trade and economic cooperation: in spite of geopolitics

Although Belarusian-Ukrainian political relations deteriorated significantly, the trade and economic cooperation reached an all-time high in 2021. Paradoxically, this happened despite a decrease in the bilateral cooperation intensity caused by the coronavirus pandemic, sporadic trade conflicts, fierce rhetorical skirmishes between the two governments, and the tense geopolitical situation.

Over at least the past two decades, trade in goods with Ukraine consistently brought Belarus the largest surplus and, to a certain extent, compensated for negative effects in trade with Russia, China, and the European Union. In 2021, Ukraine became the second largest foreign trade partner of Belarus after Russia.

¹² «Совещание по вопросам военной безопасности.» Президент Республики Беларусь, 29 Nov. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/coveshchanie-po-voprosam-voennoy-bezopasnosti#block-after-media-scroll>».

¹³ «Лукашенко пообещал большие развязки в ситуации с Украиной после Нового года.» *Reformation*, 06 Dec. 2021, <https://reform.by/284234-lukashenko-poobeshhal-bolshie-razvjazki-v-situacii-s-ukrainoj-posle-novogo-goda>.

The trade turnover of goods between the countries approached USD 7 billion.

Exports of Belarusian goods to Ukraine increased by 71.9% to USD 5.4 billion for the second time in the past decade. Imports grew slower by 7.2% to nearly USD 1.5 billion. Overall, Ukraine accounted for 13.6% of Belarus' exports and 3.6% of imports.¹⁴

In 2021, Belarus earned over USD 3.9 billion in foreign trade with Ukraine. Before that, the best surplus of USD 3.5 billion was reported in 2012. For comparison, in foreign trade in goods, Belarusian enterprises showed a trade deficit last year, mostly in trade with Russia, China and Italy (minus USD 7.2 billion, USD 3.2 billion and USD 0.6 billion, respectively).

Belarus became Ukraine's sixth largest trade partner after China, Poland, Germany, Russia and Turkey. In terms of export interests of Ukrainian economic entities, the Belarusian market was only the 14th after China, Poland, Turkey, etc.

According to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, the country mostly exported oil products, mineral and nitrogenous fertilizers, petroleum coke, bitumen, coal, gases, tractors, tractor trucks, trucks, electric energy, and wood-fiber boards. Ukraine supplied farm products and foods (soybeans, soybean meal, oil-cake, corn), railway rolling stock, steel products, and agricultural machinery.¹⁵

The exports of mineral fuel, crude oil and products of its refinement from Belarus totaled USD 2.86 billion. Oil products accounted for 59.3% of Belarusian commodity exports to Ukraine. Fertilizers were second, accounting for 11.8% (USD 570.6 million).

The Belarusian export of services to Ukraine increased to almost USD 210 million, making Ukraine one of the largest

¹⁴ «Украинский шлагбаум, или Ожидание провала.» *Белорусы и рынок*, 22 Mar. 2022, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-50189.html>.

¹⁵ «Торгово-экономические отношения.» *Посольство Республики Беларусь в Украине*, https://ukraine.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/trade_economic.

importers of services after Russia, the U.S., Germany, Cyprus, Lithuania, Poland and China. Ukraine's import of services (around USD 185 million) grew slower than the export. Belarus' surplus in this segment increased from USD 5.6 million in 2020 to about USD 24 million. According to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, transportation services topped the list of exports and imports of services in money terms. Belarus made a high profit from exporting software on demand, while Ukrainians earned dearly from tourist services.¹⁶

The Intergovernmental Belarus-Ukraine Mixed Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation had long been the main coordinator of the trade and economic cooperation. Its work was frozen after the outbreak of the political crisis in August 2020. The national Chambers of Commerce and Industry took over in 2021. Business delegations held a number of meetings as well. Belarus and Ukraine established a Business Council¹⁷ in September in addition to the Belarusian-Ukrainian Business Cooperation Advisory Council, which also suspended its activities in 2020.

A well-developed distribution network of more than a hundred Belarusian companies operated in Ukraine in 2021. The Belarusian Automobile Plant (BelAZ), Minsk Tractor Plant (MTZ), Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and "Atlant" had dealers in Ukrainian regions, while Ukraine had 314 enterprises with its capital in Belarus (115 of them were joint ventures).

Intensive business contacts, however, did not prevent trade conflicts that arose as a result of Ukraine's tightened foreign policy towards Belarus, which agreed with the position of Western

¹⁶ «Как потеря украинского рынка отразится на белорусском экспорте?» *Белорусы и рынок*, 26 Mar. 2021, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-50279.html>.

¹⁷ «О заседании Белорусско-Украинского делового совета.» *Посольство Республики Беларусь в Украине*, 09 Dec. 2021, <https://ukraine.mfa.gov.by/ru/embassy/news/a58ecd05d7aa99d1.html>.

countries. In response, the Belarusian government issued a resolution on May 26, which introduced licensing of a number of commodities coming from Ukraine, namely confectionery, chocolates, juices, beer, chipboards, fiberboards, wallpaper, etc.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the year 2021 was a turning point in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, which predetermined the participation of Belarus in the Russian-Ukrainian war on the side of Russia. Ukraine did not give Lukashenko any substantial reason to abandon the guarantees given to Ukraine back in 2014. Although the Belarusian army was not directly involved in combat operations against Ukraine, the country provided its territory to Russian troops for the invasion, which is equal to military aggression from the point of view of both international law and the position of Ukraine's leadership and its Western partners.

As long as the Russian-Ukrainian war continues, and Belarus has not withdrawn from it, political dialogue or trade with Ukraine in previous formats is out of the question. At the same time, the war may well transform into a regional conflict that can spread to the territory of Belarus. The future relationship with Ukraine will largely depend on Belarus' ability to fit into a new geo-economic and geopolitical reality that will emerge during and after the war.

BELARUS' RELATIONS WITH ASIA, AFRICA AND LATIN AMERICA: "BOUNDLESS OPPORTUNITIES FOR US THERE"

Sergei Bogdan,
Angelika Pobedonostseva-Kaya

Summary

Belarus' relations with Asia, Africa, and Latin America (AALA) continued to deteriorate in 2021 due to both the pandemic and the political crisis in and around Belarus. China seemed to be among the exceptions. However, it would be wrong to speak about foreign policy stagnation in this area. Minsk was looking for solutions, albeit often opportunistic and built on sand.

Trends:

- Dynamics of cooperation with Asia, Africa, and Latin America was virtually all-time worst;
- China was one of the main partners of Belarus in terms of qualitative development of the bilateral relationship with diversified trade that imitated not only technologies, but also ideological concepts and organizational models;
- Significant contacts with Pakistan and Iran amid dramatically declined cooperation with the traditional partners, such as Turkey, Venezuela, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates;
- Greater focus on farm exports for a variety of reasons, particularly restricted access to foreign ports, undermined production capacity, etc.

One more "turn to the East"

At the July meeting at the Foreign Ministry, Alexander Lukashenko suggested reconsidering the national foreign policy strategy.

“The ministry should clearly understand that today’s world is not limited to the European Union”, he said. He pointed at China, India, Pakistan, Turkey and other countries of Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, saying, “There are boundless opportunities for us there. We just don’t always know how to exploit these opportunities effectively”. He revisited this topic during the anti-sanctions rallies on July 6 and October 7.

In 2021, Belarus’ foreign trade showed an increase, including with the AALA countries. Exports to China grew by 9.7% and imports by 8.0% year on year; exports and imports to Turkey – by 170.4% and 18.8%, respectively; Vietnam – by 97.0% and 29.6%, respectively. Belarusian officials reported the good foreign trade performance, admitting, though, that it was achieved largely thanks to pent-up demand during the pandemic, so efforts were yet to be consolidated.¹

Trade with many developing economies continued to show both rapid growth and a sharp decline. Last year, for example, trade between Belarus and Pakistan stood at USD 92.6 million, up 77% from 2020, with a surplus of USD63.6 million. Shipments of Belarusian goods to Central Africa increased nearly fourfold.

Belarus’ cooperation with developing economies reduces its dependence not only on the West, but also on Russia, and Moscow is fine about this like in previous years. Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus Nikolai Borisevich met with Russian president’s envoy for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov on November 9 in Moscow to discuss regional policy in Africa and the Middle East. The Belarusian leadership had some ideas on how to lean on Russia in cooperation with AALA without increasing its dependence on the Kremlin. Possibilities of cooperation with China and other

¹ «Роман Головченко: Внешняя торговля сегодня не просто экспорт, а борьба за интересы своей страны.» Совет министров Республики Беларусь, 20 July 2021, <http://www.government.by/ru/content/9911>.

countries in a trilateral format were considered during talks with the leadership of the Russian Primorsky region.²

Agricultural country

Since a number of regional and Western markets were inaccessible, Minsk faced difficulties in redirecting the exports of machinery, chemicals and mining products to the non-Western world. Belarus was largely barred from reaching the seas throughout 2021 as part of comprehensive Western sanctions, and some countries of the region went even further than the sanctions of that time required. For instance, Lithuania intercepted BelAZ spare parts intended for Chile in September.³ Mechanical engineering, chemical and potash industries came across obstacles the most.

As a result, the Belarusian government started paying even more attention to the agro-industrial sector and its export capacity, including in trade with the AALA. This was not a new trend: Belarus' farm exports had nearly doubled over the past decade, reaching one-fifth of the total. Traditionally, the post-Soviet republics account for most of the exports, and now a significant part goes to China, which, for instance, has become one of the major importers of Belarusian fat-and-oil products alongside the European Union, Russia and Norway. "We are yet to increase our presence in the markets of China, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Islamic World", said Deputy Prime

² «Встреча с Госсекретарём Союзного государства Дмитрием Мезенцевым.» Президент РБ, 26 Mar. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-gossekreterem-soyuznogo-gosudarstva-dmitriem-mezencevym>.

³ «Самосвалы БелАЗ не смогли покинуть литовский порт.» *Onliner.by*, 07 Sep. 2021, <https://auto.onliner.by/2021/09/07/samosvaly-belaza-nesmogli-pokinut-litovskij-port>.

Minister Alexander Subbotin, “And we are just beginning to explore African markets”⁴

In any case, Minsk has already managed to diversify its exports to China, overcoming the previous trends, when potash fertilizers constituted more than two-thirds of its exports. The share of foods and farm products reached 40%, outstripping the fertilizers.

Like China

The Belarusian government has long been considering China as a priority direction. Minsk is willing to cooperate with Beijing as much as possible, and declared the readiness to follow Chinese concepts and practices of state administration, however, avoiding CPC-related components, and even sometimes imitated China’s political rhetoric. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Snopkov’s speeches were full of quotations from Xi Jinping’s statements.⁵

Belarus officially opened a consulate general in Chinese Chongqing on January 28, which was the only new foreign mission opened in 2021. There were just few direct high-level contacts, though. The meeting between Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on September 17 on the sidelines of the Heads of State Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was one of them. Beijing

⁴ «Александр Субботин: АПК Беларуси наращивает производственный потенциал и расширяет географию экспорта.» *Совет министров Республики Беларусь*, 29 Nov. 2021, <http://www.government.by/ru/content/10075>.

⁵ «Николай Снопков о железном братстве Беларуси и КНР, работе послом в Пекине и чему можно поучиться у китайских друзей.» *Совет министров Республики Беларусь*, 30 Sep. 2021, <http://www.government.by/ru/content/9984>.

stated its willingness to continue cooperation, as evidenced by some economic projects and humanitarian gestures. For example, in 2021, Belarus received 2 million doses of the Chinese coronavirus vaccine, and, in September, China provided material and technical assistance to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry.

Relationships with major Chinese businesses were expanding. On November 3, Prime Minister Golovchenko met with the first vice president of Chinese *CITIC Construction*, the general contractor and co-investor in BelGee. The company currently implements three major investment projects in Belarus. The parties discussed a new facility for production of nitrogen fertilizers, and the Belarusian National Biotechnology Corporation project on building an agro-industrial full-cycle production facility near Minsk. Much hope was pinned on cooperation with China in the Belarusian petrochemical industry that fell under Western sanctions. Minsk was also trying to expand the range of products for exports. Belarusian Polymir plant expects Chinese companies to construct a new ethylene-propylene facility. In order to start production of engines for the Belarusian Automobile Plant (BelAZ), Minsk Tractor Plant (MTZ), Gomselmash farm machinery manufacturer, Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT), and Minsk Motor Plant (MMZ), Belarus is working with a Chinese company on a project to manufacture engines rated 450 hp and above.⁶

Belarusian officials call BelGee one of the most successful industrial projects in the country's history. In 2021, 30,000 Geely cars were produced in Belarus (an increase by almost one-third against 2020). The Belarusian government considers this joint project with China not only as a source of new technologies, but also as a new model for infrastructure and industry development. First and foremost, Minsk hopes that BelGee, which began

⁶ «Юрий Назаров рассказал о разработанных Беларусью антисанкционных мерах.» Совет министров Республики Беларусь, 08 Oct. 2021, <http://www.government.by/ru/content/10023>.

assembling electric cars in 2021, will help popularize electric cars in the country. BelGee is also seen as an exemplary ‘digital factory’ that digitizes all production processes.⁷

All the above meet Belarus’ general policy to make maximum use of China’s experience in building a “digital society” with updated national legislation.⁸ Another large-scale example of imitation was the model of ‘state corporations.’ During the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly, Prime Minister Golovchenko set the task to start setting them up. Commenting on the reorganization of Belgospischeprom Concern into a state corporation, Deputy Prime Minister Subbotin acknowledged that China’s experience was taken as a model.⁹

‘Chinese World’

Minsk supported the Chinese leadership at international venues, and was quite active in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). President Lukashenko attended the session of the SCO heads of state on September 17 in Dushanbe, and, on November 25, Prime Minister Golovchenko took part in the session of the SCO Heads of State. “The SCO member states should unanimously oppose the sanctions and the Western interference in internal affairs of other countries”, Golovchenko said. Minsk is

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ «Совещание о проектах правовых актов, направленных на пресечение незаконных финансовых операций в сфере высоких технологий.» Президент Республики Беларусь, 16 Mar. 2021 г., <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-o-proektah-pravovyh-aktov-napravlennyh-na-presechenie-nezakonnyh-finansovyh-operaciy-v-sfere-vysokih-tehnologiy>.

⁹ «Беларусь при создании госкорпораций берёт пример с Китая — Александр Субботин.» Совет министров Республики Беларусь, 30 Aug. 2021, <http://www.government.by/ru/content/9950>.

also trying to combine different areas of its international policy, seeking to create a larger integration entity under China's leadership. To this end, Golovchenko proposed to prepare a comprehensive agreement on cooperation and understanding between the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Minsk also advocated closer cooperation with China in post-Soviet organizations led by Moscow. At the session of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council on May 21, Lukashenko stressed that it was "necessary to continue positioning the Union as one of the centers of the integration contour of the Eurasian Partnership, including in conjunction with China's Belt and Road project". In particular, he suggested focusing negotiations with China on the creation of "digital transport corridors" and promotion of exports to China, including by means of optimized veterinary and phytosanitary control. The Belarusian leader also called on to step up negotiations on free trade zones with other countries, especially Egypt, which would open Africa to the Eurasian Economic Union. He repeated his proposals regarding China and Egypt at the December 10 meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, underscoring the need to enter into free trade agreements with Iran and Israel.

Foreign policy pandemic

Although the ambitious task to refocus foreign relations on non-Western countries, the intensity of such interactions in 2021 was nearly the all-time lowest (partly due to the coronavirus pandemic). Gaps were especially noticeable in relations with the longstanding partners – Vietnam, Turkey, and the UAE.

As concerns Vietnam, Belarusian officials admitted that "it would take much effort to bring trade back to the pre-pandemic level". A scheduled visit of the Belarusian prime minister

to Vietnam was postponed. A puzzling situation arose with Turkey. In an interview with TRT on December 9, Lukashenko called Turkey one of Belarus' best friends, citing political understanding and cooperation with the Erdogan Administration, and the good economic partnership. However, there were no high-profile contacts with Ankara last year.

Another gap arose in relations with the UAE. Lukashenko met with large Emirati *Emaar Properties* company founder Mohamed Ali Alabbar on June 28. There were no reports on what they discussed. Assumptions can be made, given that Alabbar is close with the UAE rulers. Prime Minister Golovchenko took part in the World Expo 2020 on November 21-22 in Dubai. Belarus made no secret that the exhibition was used to “build up cooperation with the Middle East and the Persian Gulf countries”. Only the information about Golovchenko's meeting with UAE Minister of Tolerance Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahya, head of the UAE Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Social Development, is available.¹⁰

Interestingly, even in the difficult international situation, Minsk did not try to revive cooperation through the Non-Aligned Movement. Belarusian representatives took part in its events, but only ceremonially, or for bilateral meetings on the sidelines. Officials of the highest level were not delegated there. The July meeting of the NAM foreign ministers and the October summit timed to the 60th anniversary of the Movement can serve as an example.

Interaction with the *Middle East* was full of activity, yet quite inconsistent. Ceremonial contacts with Iran were associated with institutions of little importance, such as the Belarusian parliament, or just supplemented other events. Following the

10 «Роман Головченко: На ЭКСПО прорабатываем сотрудничество со странами Ближнего Востока и Персидского залива.» Совет министров Республики Беларусь, 22 Nov. 2021, <http://www.government.by/ru/content/10068>

visit of a group of Iranian MPs to Belarus in July, House Speaker Vladimir Andreichenko went to Iran on August 5–6 for the inauguration of President Raisi. He met with President Raisi and Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. The presidents of Belarus and Iran met on September 16 in Dushanbe. The Belarusian foreign minister delivered proposals on a cooperation roadmap to his Iranian counterpart during their September meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The Belarusian MFA held a series of consultations at the level of deputy minister: with Iraq on June 14; with Qatar on September 21; with Egypt on September 22, and with Kuwait on November 7–8.

In *Asia*, Belarus' cooperation with Pakistan stood out. Defense Production Minister of Pakistan Zubaida Jalal went to Belarus on June 24–25 to meet with Foreign Minister Makei. On July 27, Minsk hosted the fifth round of consultations between the Foreign Ministries of Belarus and Pakistan attended by Deputy Foreign Minister of Pakistan Muhammad Tariq. Lukashenko met with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan on September 16 in Dushanbe, and invited him to Belarus. The sides agreed to intensify the preparation for a meeting of an intergovernmental commission. Foreign Minister Makei planned to go to Pakistan before the end of the year, but the visit was later canceled. Contacts with Indonesia were of smaller scale. Indonesian Deputy Foreign Minister Rachmat Gobel paid a visit to Belarus on October 20–21. The sides also held a number of videoconference talks.

Multilateral events became kind of a substitute in the absence of direct contacts. A Belarusian-Asian Forum took place on June 9 in Moscow. Attending the Forum were representatives of the embassies of Indonesia, Yemen, Cambodia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand, Afghanistan, Laos and the Philippines, and senior officials of the Belarusian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Industry, Agriculture, the Chamber

of Commerce and the Development Bank of the Republic of Belarus.

Relations with *African countries* basically remained within the purview of the Presidential Administration of Belarus, which set up agricultural, construction, transportation and haulage companies in Africa. The preparation for the construction of a tractor plant in one of the African countries was mentioned in early 2021.¹¹ From May 31 to June 1, Minsk hosted the second Belarusian-African Economic Forum attended by business people and officials of Gabon, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Congo, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Eritrea, Ethiopia and South Africa, and delegates of more than 175 companies and enterprises of Belarus.

The Foreign Ministries of Belarus and Mozambique held consultations on 3 June in Minsk with the participation of Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Mozambique Manuel Jose Goncalves. A Belarusian delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Borisevich went to Zimbabwe on July 9-10. The delegation met with the president of Zimbabwe, and delivered a batch of Belarusian forestry and firefighting machinery.

Relations with *Latin America* were also in decline. In summer, former head of the Presidential Property Management Directorate Viktor Sheiman traveled to Latin America on a certain assignment given by the head of state.¹² Lukashenko met with Venezuelan president's special envoy Adán Chávez Frías

¹¹ “Лукашэнка паставіў задачу па развіцці новых напрамкаў работы ў структуры Кіраўніцтва справамі Прэзідэнта.” БелТА, 09 Маг. 2021, <https://blr.belta.by/president/view/lukashenka-pastaviu-zadachu-pa-razvitstsi-novyh-napramkau-raboty-u-strukturny-kiraunitstva-spravami-97573-2021/>.

¹² «Встреча с Виктором Шейманом.» Президент Республики Беларусь, 26 Aug. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-viktorom-sheymanom#block-after-media-scrol>.

on October 7 in Minsk. “Both Venezuela and Belarus poorly benefit from the progress achieved years ago. It is time to revisit our cooperation and build an even stronger relationship”, said Lukashenko.

Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Denis Moncada made an official visit to Belarus on October 18–19. Deputy Foreign Minister Yevgeny Shestakov visited Ecuador and Colombia on October 25–30. Minsk tries to return to the practices of the second half of 2010, but, given the nature of the regimes in these countries and the attitude of the United States to them, this will be uneasy.

Conclusion

Despite the contradictory results of the attempts to “turn to the East,” there is one stable component: relations with Beijing, which are indeed evolving. The Belarusian leadership has always been hoping for a better future, linking it with China’s rise in global terms. This hope was particularly evident in 2021, when relations with the neighbors of Belarus and the West collapsed, and the country found itself deeply and solely dependent on Russia, and the Belarusian regime has never been happy about that.

A big problem for Minsk is the double geopolitical catastrophe, which drastically changes its strategic importance to China and some other AALA countries. Belarus suddenly found itself deeply dependent on Moscow in 2020, and then, in 2021, cooperation ties with other countries began to break up sharply, and, consequently, its role in transit chains began to decrease. This means that it was already difficult for Minsk to offer Beijing its services on the Chinese route to Europe, as well as its partnership as China’s production base near Europe.

Even more dire were the consequences of this double disaster for the relationships with other countries of Asia, Africa, and

Latin America. Supplies of even products of nonmilitary purpose via ports outside Russia, the use of Western components in Belarusian products, the very possibility to make payments without complicated schemes, etc. came under threat. In the near future, Belarus' relations with the AALA are likely to improve to a certain extent, as the world begins to recover from the pandemic that hindered cooperation and trade. However, Minsk once again faces severe isolation from the region and the West in general, which leaves it with no way out. Therefore, this improvement will hardly be significant.

SOCIETY

FROZEN SYSTEMIC CRISIS: OCCUPATION REGIME AND RESILIENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Gennady Korshunov

Summary

The year 2020 was a period of protest and a horizontal revolution in Belarus, while the year 2021 can be described as a period of repression and counterrevolution on the part of the powers that be. Two competitive social media – the pro-regime and protest-democratic – emerged in the confrontational environment. In an attempt to suppress their opponents, the Belarusian authorities actually created a situation, which can be defined as “internal occupation”.

The government did not manage to reverse the course of events, since Belarusian society, which included the national diaspora that grew stronger manifold, had enough resources and competences for successful counteraction to the regime, and for its own development. After the last year’s “freeze”, this distinctly manifested itself after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Trends:

- Emergence of a new normality – the unresolved systemic crisis – as the authorities and society mutually reject and confront each other;
- Impossibility for the authorities to regain the right to be a guarantor of national sovereignty;
- Actual internal occupation with a reliance on the security bloc and repression;
- Preservation of anti-regime protest sentiments, self-organization, and mutual assistance despite the repressive pressure.

Normalization of the crisis and two Belaruses

The confrontation between Belarusian society and the Lukashenko regime, which erupted during the mass protests in 2020, remained unresolved in 2021. No matter what actions were taken by the parties, neither of them managed to achieve a decisive advantage over their opponent.

On the one hand, the plans and projects announced by the democratic camp (the return of protests to the streets in spring, forcing the authorities to negotiate, a new election, etc.) were not implemented, and, consequently, did not make a critical impact on the government. On the other hand, the authorities' efforts to destroy independent media outlets, civil society organizations and networking self-organization activists failed to subdue society and turn the page on the past.

A new status quo was established, as the old social contract was no longer observed, state repression intensified, and social activism went subversive. The previously spontaneous confrontation became systemic. In other words, the crisis, which began in 2020, entered a new phase, got routinized, and turned into a new normality.

The authorities systematized their actions, which resulted in both the legal and institutional shaping of repressive and violent practices applied in 2020, and in their upscaling, which led to an almost total suppression of any manifestations of social activity, which the regime was unable to control.

In turn, Belarusian society grew significantly after the 2020 events. The huge upswing of solidarity and mutual assistance, expansion of the horizontal ties, and the feeling of national unity enabled Belarusian diasporas outside the country to feel full-fledged members of Belarusian society, and to begin acting with as such. Although those devoted to protest lowered the degree of activism inside the country, society continued

self-organization, looking for new forms of mutual support and opposition to the regime, and starting new institutions, which would either work in parallel or completely replace state institutions.

Public opinion surveys¹ and expert polls² show that Belarus was in a state of severe crisis. They demonstrated the prevailing distrust of state institutions and chronic anxiety and fear fueled by the authorities, security agencies and propagandists, particularly in Minsk, where the degree of protest has always been the highest.

Expert research makes it possible to estimate the actual strength of the parties to the confrontation. Although the regime managed to retain power, it was in an acute crisis, having no capacity to maintain its stability. Despite the constant repressions, society remains strong, mainly acting within the framework of horizontal sociality with the Belarusian diasporas in the avant-garde.

Normalization and stabilization of the crisis lead to an increasing divergence and mutual alienation of the authorities and society. Two opposite narratives and two competitive systems emerged. This phenomenon is described as the existence and opposition of two versions of Belarus³: vertical-authoritarian Soviet Belarus and horizontal-democratic people's Belarus.

¹ “Belarusians’ opinion on the political crisis (findings of the sociological research conducted on November 1–10, 2021).” *Chatham House* (Google drive), 2021, <http://surl.li/bynpn>.

² “Resilience Index.” *Цэнтр новых ідэй*, <https://newbelarus.vision/special/index-resilience/>.

³ “Two parallel Belaruses – the main outcome of the last year’s events.” *Цэнтр новых ідэй*, 07 Sep. 2021, <https://newbelarus.vision/dve-parallelnye-belarusi/>; «Социолог: Лукашенко до последнего будет избегать вступления в войну.» RFI, 17 Mar. 2022, <http://surl.li/bynpnu>.

Internal occupation regime

The specificity of the transformation of state institutions and the presence of “two Belaruses”, reliance on the security bloc, massive repression, non-recognition of the results of the 2020 presidential election by society, and maintained position towards the de-legitimization of the Lukashenko Administration gives grounds to define the new format of the governments’ functioning as “internal occupation”, as both the Belarusian authorities and society basically interpret it.

This perception is based on the popular denial of Lukashenko as the winner in the 2020 presidential election and the proponent of the national sovereignty. The months of mass protests that followed clearly demonstrated the popular attitude to the regime for all key social and political actors. Little changed in this respect in 2021. The majority of Belarusians seemed to have adopted this point of view. The power vertical and the international community are likely to realize this as well.

The declared illegitimacy of the Lukashenko regime narrowed its instrumentality down to a few tools, the repressive machine apparently being one and the major of them. The authorities saw the escalation of repressions as a way to preserve itself.

The *second important point* is that after the events of 2020, the government and its security bloc began to perceive Belarusian society as hostile, disobedient and unbowed. It does not matter who, how, and why “the quietest field, the most obedient population”.⁴ changed. What does matter is that the people turned out to be an enemy. That is why the authorities set themselves the very simple task: the harshest pacification of the population, i. e. violent peace enforcement. This perception of society provokes the pseudo-violent rhetoric of the country’s top

⁴ Presumably Interior Minister of Belarus Yuri Karayev.

leadership⁵ and the occupation narrative⁶, and, consequently, the perception of those who disagree as the people who should be eliminated.

Such actions generate a natural public response: the perception of the authorities as an occupation administration. The people do not always make it explicit, but they can clearly see the scale of repressions against their families and neighbors, the rechanneling of finances from the vulnerable segments of the population to security agencies, and the absence of a social base of the incumbent government. Sociological surveys show that Belarusians believe that the regime has no social base, but only power (officials) and security forces protecting this power (the police, KGB and army). As a matter of fact, Lukashenko himself states that the military, including former servicemen, should be the pillars of his power.⁷

The denial of the regime's right to be the national sovereignty guarantor, its reliance on violence, as well as society's attempts to create an alternative to the state (in cooperation with the diasporas) have fixed the occupation status of the Belarusian authorities, and problematized the possibility of reaching a consensus between the government and society.

Society's resilience

In 2021, the authorities spared no effort to deprive society of any possibility to be a political actor. Virtually all independent mass

⁵ "We do not take prisoners," Alexander Lukashenko.

⁶ "We have already started entering their territory, we have already started chasing them, and we are already chasing them with all the national security forces, the KGB, army and border guards." Presumably Interior Minister of Belarus Yuri Karayev.

⁷ «Лукашенко видит большой кадровый резерв в регионах Беларуси среди бывших военных.» *Прайм Пресс*, 01 Oct. 2021, <http://surl.li/bypps>.

media⁸ and non-governmental organizations⁹ were destroyed or pushed abroad. Organizations and activists were subjected to administrative and/or criminal prosecution at the local¹⁰, professional¹¹, and national level¹².

Despite the flurry of repressions that has not ceased to this day, society as a whole has retained its protest, anti-regime spirit, and developed practices of horizontal solidarity.

Based on sociological research data, it is possible to say that the protest capacity did decrease, but minimally. Between January and November, the direct support for protest¹³ (*univocal or rather positive*) only fell by 6% (from 39% to 33%), while the number of those who refuse to support it rose from 40% to 42%. Given the all-up segmentation in the monitoring measurements applied by Chatham House Belarus, the “protest core” only contracted by 4% (from 34% to 30%), while the “Lukashenko

⁸ In its annual report, the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Belarus *fifth* in the world by the number of imprisoned journalists. According to the Freedom House’s Internet Freedom global ranking, in 2021, Belarus was among the countries with the greatest deterioration of the Internet Freedom alongside Myanmar and Uganda.

⁹ In 2021, about 150 NGOs were forcibly liquidated, and more than 200 applied for self-liquidation; see “Monitoring of NGOs in Belarus that are in the process of forced liquidation or self-liquidation.” *Lawtrend*, <https://www.lawtrend.org/liquidation-nko>.

¹⁰ First of all, Telegram chats of neighborhood communities, which accounted for the absolute majority of the “information products declared extremist in 2021”. There were 427 court sessions on such matters in 2021 [Article 314 of the Civil Procedure Code], to compare with 19 such sessions in 2020.

¹¹ Repressive pressure was put on entire professional groups: health professionals, railway workers, lawyers, etc.

¹² I. e. independent media and nationwide platforms like BYPOL or BYSOL. More than a half of the 27 organizations declared extremist over the last three months of 2021 were organizations of this kind.

¹³ As answered to the question: “What is your attitude to the protests against the incumbent authorities?”

Bastion” grew by 2% (from 25% to 27%). Obviously, the changes are minimal, remaining basically in the sampling error zone.

It should be noted that the decline in protest sentiment, albeit insignificant, did not turn into a benefit for the loyalists. The main trend is rather marked by a slow and gradual increase in the share of the so-called “neutrals”, the part of society which got tired of political tension and/or is disappointed in the major political actors. It is well visible in the dynamics of such a critical element as trust in the state and independent institutions. The share of those undecided about the trust in state institutions increased by 8% on average, and those trusting non-state ones – by 10%. Another important point is the support for protest demands: the number of those undecided rose by an average of 8%.

The expansion of the “gray zone” is rather a situational process associated with economic problems, the lack of bright victories of the pro-democratic camp, and uncertainty over any prospects for the future sociopolitical situation. It is extremely unlikely that the society ‘neutralization’ trend is caused by real value transformations, the more so as the observed increase in the number of the ‘neutrals’ falls within the fear factor range (experts estimate it at 8-9%), i. e. the unwillingness to share true opinions on sensitive issues under the threat of persecution.¹⁴

The year 2021 has convincingly proved that the events of 2020 were not accidental. The Belarusian revolt was a natural result of civil society development, and it is impossible to return this society to its previous state. Repressions can only temporarily suppress external manifestations of horizontal sociality and protest activity, grassroots self-organization, and mutual support. However, whenever an opportunity or a new challenge arises, solidarization and individual proactive actions will re-emerge.

¹⁴ Belarusians’ opinion on the political crisis (findings of the sociological research conducted on November 1–10, 2021). *Chatham House* (Google drive), 2021, <http://surl.li/bypnp>.

The events of late February 2022 confirm this thesis. With the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, after a brief shock, horizontal protest entities began to work again in Belarus, some in a secret, guerilla format (anti-war actions, sabotage, and information and communication support for Ukrainian troops), and some in a semi-legal mode (assistance to refugees from Ukraine, information, logistics, and resources). Belarusian political and social entities can only function openly outside the country, having an additional stimulus to action, relocated platforms of mutual assistance, Belarusian media, experts, activists of professional and neighborhood communities, which assist Belarusian and Ukrainian refugees.

Conclusion

The Russian-Ukrainian war is the main factor, on which the direction and pace of social dynamics in Belarus will depend. It is already not only the main topic in the Belarusian information space, but also the most important driver of the sociopolitical dynamics both inside and outside Belarus.

In case of Ukraine's quick victory, it is possible to expect further (and rapid) expansion of horizontal ties and protest practices in Belarusian society. If the war continues for many months, the regime of the already double occupation of Belarus will also stay for a long time. However, in both cases, society's resistance to the regime will remain, and it will not be possible to turn the page on the past.

CIVIL SOCIETY: TOTAL PURGE AND RETAINED PUBLIC TRUST

Vadim Mozheyko

Summary

In 2021, Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs) faced a total indiscriminate repression on the part of the authorities. Apparently, it was not the presence of CSOs on the list of untrustworthy entities (which is enough for liquidation), but the absence of trustworthy ones there. For many CSOs, relocation was a forced solution that presented them with new challenges. The authorities tried to reseed the scorched field of CSOs with organizations they fully control. It is likely that their representatives will be given seats in the All-Belarusian People's Assembly as 'delegated from civil society'. However, sociological research shows that Belarusians still trust the CSOs that are not controlled by the government.

Trends:

- Demolition of the legal framework for the existence of uncontrolled CSOs in Belarus;
- Non-public activities of the few CSOs, which have escaped repressions and remained in Belarus;
- Relocation of most CSOs and activists to another jurisdictions as a new challenge and new opportunities for interaction;
- Activation of GONGOS, the state-controlled pseudo NGOs that imitate CSOs, being often affiliated with Moscow;
- Retained public support and trust despite adverse environment, in which CSOs have to operate.

All-around repression:
civil society purges in all segments

Most Belarusian civil society organizations were forced to stop legal activities in the spring of 2021. In April, Alexander

Lukashenko ordered to “whip into line” the CSOs and foundations that are not controlled by the authorities, which, he said, was “a matter of principle”. Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei unambiguously stated that if the EU sanctions got tougher, civil society in Belarus “would cease to exist”.

Lukashenko developed the idea in May, saying that GONGOs (see below) were also demanding the elimination of CSOs. “Political scientists, our supporters, MPs and others, are already pointing fingers at us, saying “You must clean up society. We see what has been happening”, he said.¹

According to *Lawtrend*, this statement was followed by the forced liquidation of 384 CSOs,² while 273 decided to dissolve voluntarily.³ The “comb-out” hit CSOs of all legal forms (public associations, institutions, foundations, etc.) and focus areas (sports clubs, freemason’s lodges, automobile fans, think tanks, honorary consul societies and animal protection groups, song and dance ensembles, and clubs of philosophy enthusiasts). The indiscriminate reprisals also affected the CSOs that had not been active for a long time.

It seems that it was not the presence of the CSOs on the list of untrustworthy entities, but their absence on the list of trustworthy ones, which was enough grounds for liquidation. Lukashenko said in December that the liquidated CSOs “would never be reinstated”.

¹ «Лукашенко напомнил о перерегистрации некоммерческих организаций.» REFORM.by, 06 May 2021, <https://reform.by/223216-lukashenko-napomnil-o-pereregistracii-nekommercheskih-organizacij>.

² «Ликвидация ОГО 2021-2022 (обновляется).» *Lawtrend*, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/0/d/1qHDjDaoqIFz9TnVsbTih-sFbWP_4U-1faraytI8AuKXM/htmlview.

³ «Перечень НКО, в отношении которых принято решение о самоликвидации.» *Lawtrend*, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YExGoYV-jKMbx4fTnT-7VY8ScYIJ6lKXLrWOjuPvS-Cg/edit?fbclid=IwAR0K7J0ojX-Oao6M24Je1OTTmHvmGKhTmUoAwA-hVwNyLXxDjxH9oZGjUT68#gid=0>.

Several waves of searches, confiscations, account blockages, interrogations and arrests (and later prison sentences) of CSO representatives, including of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the independent trade union of the radio-electronic industry, and Polish diaspora organizations, took place across the country. The leadership of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Sergei Drozdovsky, Oleg Grablevsky), environmentalists (Irina Sukhiy, Natalia Gerasimova), analysts (Valeria Kostyugova, Tatiana Kuzina, Vladimir Matskevich), artists (Pavel Belous, Ales Pushkin) and feminist activists (Olga Gorbunova, Daria Tsarik) were detained.

Human rights defenders, including *Viasna* Human Rights Center and its regional branches, Human Constanta, the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Center for Legal Transformation *Lawtrend*, and Legal Initiative, were also subjected to targeted persecution. All *Viasna* leaders and many activists and volunteers, who stayed in Belarus, were taken into custody. Head of *Viasna* Gomel branch Leonid Sudalenko was sentenced to three years in prison. By the end of 2021, no registered or, at least, publicly working human rights organizations was left in Belarus.

Criminal cases were initiated against representatives of BY_help and BY SOL solidarity foundations, whose work was interpreted as “financing of activities of an extremist group”. The foundations were declared extremist like many other public initiatives and media outlets. Many websites of the liquidated CSOs were blocked in the territory of Belarus.

The list of the organizations that can rent premises at reduced rates was shortened twice (in March and December). The requirements for CSOs’ reporting were expanded: they must now specify all events held during the year, indicating the purposes and contents of the events, and listing all the participants, including bloggers, journalists and social media moderators.

Relocation and new challenges

Given the overall environment, it comes as no surprise that many CSO members chose relocation over arrest (or had to flee the country once they had been released from custody, thus remaining under the threat of further prosecution). Diasporas of Belarusian activists became massive in Vilnius, Warsaw, Berlin, Tbilisi, and pre-war Kyiv. Offline CSO events are now held there in a teleconference or other formats. Relocation has made it possible to preserve the human capital of CSOs to a large extent, though, certainly, not in full.

Those who chose relocation, however, lost much of the contact with their target groups in Belarus and the social engagement capacity. CSOs most often fail to recruit or engage representatives of new local initiatives, neighborhood groups of Telegram chat communities, which emerged in 2020. Their capabilities for renewal and strengthening remain unrealized. The authorities have always been reluctant to communicate with CSOs, and now all contacts have been discontinued, so there is no space left for advocacy.

Most surveyed⁴ CSOs point at the impossibility of long-term planning and project implementation in the constantly changing environment, hence the increasing apathy and burnout among the employees and activists. The risks associated with external support required for continued operations have grown manifold, while funding from domestic sources has decreased. For many CSOs, the planning horizon has narrowed to mere survival in the medium term.

Nevertheless, despite the repression, there are still CSOs and individual activists in Belarus, who have not been officially

⁴ «Состояние и актуальные потребности белорусских организаций гражданского общества в ситуации политического кризиса.» SYMPA, 22 Mar. 2022, <https://sympa-by.eu/ru/articles/v-dopolnenie-k-issledovaniyu-sostoyanie-i-aktualnye-potrebnosti-belarusskih-organizacii.html>.

de-registered and continue their activities. Fearing prison terms, active CSOs thus avoid publicity in every possible way, which negatively affects their visibility and ability to contact their target groups. Many CSOs have become faceless, and people are afraid of civic engagement (often even after relocation).

The solidarity foundations that were set up after the 2020 events (BYSOL, BYPOL, medical and sports solidarity foundations, the Belarusian Rada of Culture) adapt to the new conditions, and continue helping their target audiences. In 2021, the foundations were building partnerships, including institutional ties with old CSOs, and finding new niches.

GONGOs: blossoming before regimentation

While seeking to destroy civil society, the government simultaneously attempted to imitate it, by launching or activating pseudo-NGOs, i. e. GONGOs (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations). Unlike real CSOs, they act strictly in line with government policy and interests of the authorities, and never criticize the powers that be (except for unimportant occasions).

GONGOs actively comment on ongoing events for the state media, creating the illusion of an alternative or expert opinion, and participate in various events organized by the authorities for propaganda purposes.

Close ties with Moscow are typical of Belarusian GONGOs. They regularly have interviews with the Russian media (including Sputnik Belarus); go to Moscow for talk shows, cooperate with Russian experts, who are directly represented in Belarusian GONGOs, and partner with Russian institutions.

In turn, the state supports such GONGOs by providing benefits, premises and immunity from prosecution. Their representatives are invited to official events attended by Lukashenko

and other officials, including the so-called “Big Talk with the President” on August 9, 2021, which was meant to mark the end of the year of protests.

Belarusian *Znanie* (“Knowledge”) Society positions itself as a GONGO. It is registered as a republican state-public association, and traces its history back to the Soviet times. Vadim Gigin, who previously worked in state universities and media, took on leadership of the Society in September 2021. He admits that the organization was revived on Lukashenko’s initiative for propaganda purposes. “It had not been much visible in the information and public space, so the president set the task to make the organization an instrument for conveying relevant social, political, historical, cultural and other information to the nation,” he said.⁵ Former MP Valery Borodnya, who used to participate in talk shows hosted by Gigin, became Gigin’s deputy. The regional branches of *Znanie* are headed by rectors of local state universities. In November, Lukashenko granted *Znanie* privileges and provided free offices all over the country.⁶

In October 2021, Dmitry Belyakov, the pro-government and pro-Russian activist, registered the informational and educational institution Systemic Human Rights Center. Despite the name, it focused on supporting the state position on the migration crisis, which was artificially provoked at the Belarus – EU border, rather than human rights defense in Belarus. Guised as a human rights activist, he handed out several packs of flu medicines to the migrants and gave several interviews to state media reporters. Belyakov accused international health care

⁵ «Гигин: деятельность белорусского общества “Знание” активизируется.» БелТА, 03 Sep. 2021, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/gigin-deyatelnost-belorusskogo-obschestva-znanie-aktiviziruetsja-458239-2021/>.

⁶ «Гигину и его обществу “Знание” выдали помещения и льготы.» REFORM.by, 13 Nov. 2021, <https://reform.by/277268-giginu-i-ego-obshhestvu-znanie-vydali-pomeshhenija-i-lgoty>.

organizations and European countries of “flagrantly cynical attitude to human life.”⁷

The GONGOs that imitate research and analytical centers are also getting active. Pro-government public speaker Alexei Dermant heads the so-called “Northern Eurasia Center for Continental Integration Studies and Development”. Another pro-government speaker Piotr Petrovsky is its member. Other experts of the Center are Russians. Actual Concept, which is similar to the above GONGO, does not even have a website, but allows pro-government public figure Alexander Shpakovsky calling himself the director of the Center.

Shpakovsky is also a member of the expert council of the Minsk Dialogue initiative, the leaders of which Yevgeny Preygerman and Denis Melyantsov were also invited to the Big Talk with the President on August 9, 2021. The Minsk Dialogue team traveled to Moscow in December to establish the Russian-Belarusian Expert Dialogue together with the Institute for International Studies of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Preygerman explicitly calls the authorities of Belarus and Russia the beneficiaries of the venue. “Its goal is to create a permanent format to work in the interests of both the Foreign Ministries and the Union State”, he said.⁸

The significance and far-reaching meaning of this rise of GONGOs is underlined by the draft amendments to the Constitution promulgated in the last days of 2021. The All-Belarusian People’s Assembly will be given the status of a new body of supreme power in Belarus. Before that, in October, Lukashenko announced a legislative stipulation for interpreting civil society

⁷ «“Ябатька” Беляков стал хьюманрайтс активистом.» REFORM.by, 11 Nov. 2021, <https://reform.news/276642-jabatka-beljakov-stal-hjumanrajts-aktivistom>.

⁸ «Установочная встреча Российско-Беларусского экспертного диалога.» МГИМО, 13 Dec. 2021, <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/main/russian-belarusian-expert-dialogue/>.

as GONGOs. “Time has come to adopt a law and spell out that our civil society is not NGOs, NPOs, or other trash, but that we have trade unions, the BRYU [Belarusian Republican Youth Union], and organizations of veterans and women”, Lukashenko said, noting that representatives of GONGOs will be delegated to the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly, while CSO representatives will certainly not be admitted. “We will hold discussions with MPs and experts, and determine of whom this civil society will consist. And then we will determine how to form a pool of delegates to the Assembly from this civil society. There will be no terrorist cells, which envenom our lives, in civil society”, said Lukashenko.⁹

Retention of public support

Despite this adverse environment, Belarusian CSOs still enjoy public support. According to *Chatham House Belarus* surveys,¹⁰ among all Belarusian public institutions (including political entities and state administration agencies), only those uncontrolled by the state have a positive index of trust (the trust/distrust difference) exceeding the statistical error: non-governmental media – 17%; independent human rights organizations and independent trade unions – 15% each; the Orthodox Church – 5%. Other institutions with a positive trust index are the “administration of my enterprise” (2%) and the army (1%). The official

⁹ «Лукашенко: гражданское общество Беларуси будет состоять из людей, которые себя проявили, которые являются истинными столпами этого общества.» ОНТ, 22 Jan. 2022, <https://ont.by/news/lukashenko-grazhdanskoe-obshestvo-belarusi-budet-sostoyat-iz-lyudej-kotorye-sebya-proyavili-kotorye-yavlyayutsya-istinnymi-stolpami-etogo-obshestva>.

¹⁰ «Взгляды белорусов на политический кризис.» *Што думаюць Беларусы*, Nov. 2021, <https://belaruspolls.org/wave-6>

trade unions and state-controlled mass media have negative trust indices (-22% and -43%, respectively).

Conclusion

In 2021, Belarusian civil society organizations faced repression on an unprecedented scale, which results from the state's aspiration to purge civil society, and replace CSOs with controlled GONGOs. Repressions have undoubtedly severely undermined the organizational capacity of CSOs, forcing them to focus on survival (and many activists to survive physically behind bars).

However, a priori, GONGOs cannot achieve public trust comparable with the original CSOs, at least, because the target audience of such institutions is not society, but the state.

CSOs will have to adapt to the new conditions, and, in many cases, to operate from abroad. The reformatting of the sector will occur as a result of government action, but not according to the government's scenario. There will be growing demand for cooperation networking, both because of the similarity of objectives, and because of the relocation of previously distant CSOs to the same localities.

DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATIONS: RELOCATION AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Dmitry Kukhlei

Summary

In 2021, party-building was going on in an extremely adverse environment of escalating repression against almost all democratic organizations. Some of them had to conduct their activities from abroad, escaping criminal prosecution in Belarus. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's Office and the People's Anti-Crisis Administration (PACA) headed by Pavel Latushko managed to establish effective interaction with their supporters inside the country with the help of independent media and their own communication channels. Center-right activists continued to cooperate with Tikhanovskaya's headquarters (United Civic Party), the Coordination Council (Belarusian Christian Democracy) and PACA (For Freedom movement), expecting repression to stop one day, or a window of opportunity to open.

Viktor Babariko's organizing committee named "Together" still could become the most popular party project. Alongside Andrei Dmitriyev's Our Party, since the second half of the year, "Together" has been focusing on educational activities to consolidate sympathizers in the face of stiffening repression.

In 2021, Alexander Lukashenko relied on the tough suppression of dissidents, and gradually froze party system development, including all loyalist projects.

Trends:

- Continued free coordination between democratic organizations within the broad coalition led by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's Office and the People's Anti-Crisis Administration;
- Switching of party projects into a sleeping mode in expectation of a window of opportunity or relaxation of repressions;

- Freezing of party system development by the authorities in the period of reaction, yet with a possibility of reinvigoration of political establishment's projects amid the falling rating of Lukashenko.

Introduction

It got much harder for democratic organizations to engage new members under the mass repressions and relocation of activists from Belarus. Although the authorities failed to depoliticize society, by the end of the year, they managed to take the streets under control, clear cities of any signs of protest, and consolidate loyalists around Lukashenko.

The democrats did not achieve a success under their joint mobilization plan for the spring of 2021, mainly because the active part of society had largely burnt out in the lengthy confrontation with the authorities. Nevertheless, local marches and subversive protests resumed. The spring strategy was initiated by a broad coalition of political organizations and democratic initiatives, including Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's Office, the Coordination Council, People's Anti-Crisis Administration and Veronica Tsepkaló.

The latent politicization of society and its mobilization capacity remained, among other things, judging by the vote in support of the united democratic campaign for negotiations with Lukashenko. More than 780,000 people took part in the voting despite government's countermeasures.¹

Political organizations succeeded in keeping civil society's demands on the agenda of relations with Europe and regarding their influence on the attitude of the Western capitals towards the Lukashenko regime. The organizations kept calling for sanctions and the international isolation of Belarus. The democrats

¹ «Мы требуем начать переговоры.» Голос, <https://belarus2020.org/dialog>.

initiated advocacy campaigns and exerted effective pressure on foreign companies. These efforts resulted in the refusal of a number of Western companies to place advertising in the Belarusian state media and to continue economic cooperation with state-run corporations.

At the same time, they could no longer engage activists in cooperation with civil society organizations. Most NGOs, including the Belarusian Popular Front *Adradzhenne* (“Revival”), For Freedom Movement and Tell the Truth Campaign, were officially liquidated in the second half of 2021.

Despite the declared intentions, the authorities did not amend the laws and regulations on political parties, and did not begin the promised re-registration of political parties.² Lukashenko once again curbed the enthusiasm of state officials, who were eager to build a fully controlled party system. Early in the year, *Belaya Rus* (“White Russia”) Association announced its transformation into the Party of National Unity, while the registered democratic parties, tried to keep low profile, fearing liquidation, and avoided harsh statements.

Tough repressions coupled with the refusal of the authorities to enter into dialog and the state propaganda kept society polarized. The segmentation of the advocates of change increased, and the common agenda of civil society gradually eroded over the year.

In the first months of 2021, Olga Karach, head of Our Home organization, was among those who fell under severe criticism on the part of the democratic coalition. Our Home managed to establish effective channels of communication with supporters of change, but then the organization’s influence on the agenda declined, among other things, as a result of scandals.

² «Совещание по вопросам деятельности политических партий в Беларуси.» Президент Республики Беларусь, 09 Apr. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosam-deyatelnosti-politicheskikh-partiy-v-belarusi>.

The discussion about a revision of the dialog policy was resumed in the public space later that year. The voice of the critics of the sanctions approach (with Belarusian Popular Front head Zenon Poznyak in the lead) grew louder.

A part of political organizations, including activists of Viktor Babariko's team and the organizing committee of Together party, showed their willingness to work out a compromise with Lukashenko, but he dismissed any possibility of dialog. The government only sought to force all strata of society to accept Lukashenko's presidency as legitimate.

Nevertheless, the ultimatum rhetoric remained mainstream, being seconded by the coalition led by Tikhonovskaya's Office and the People's Anti-Crisis Administration. The influence of the democrats on the agenda declined, but was still considerable. Democratic organizations had to relocate their activists from Belarus and build their organizational infrastructure outside the country. Organizational development of parties inside Belarus was suspended due to severe repressions, arrests and criminal prosecution. Democratic organizations tried to retain support of their sympathizers through online media, live communication and other activities, having very small wiggle room in the adverse environment.

Coalition projects: Coordination Council, Gathering Platform and the left-wing alliance

Throughout the year, the democrats were trying to find common ground, especially regarding common values. The majority of democratic organizations in Belarus and émigré centers joined the Coordination Council's memorandum in defense of the sovereignty and independence of Belarus.³ The Council,

³ «Список подписавших Меморандум КС и демократических сил в защиту суверенитета и независимости Республики Бела-

however, was giving up positions in shaping the agenda, but remained a broad platform of democratic organizations and initiatives with free coordination and a decentralized structure.

The informal alliance of Tikhanovskaya's Office, the Coordination Council and People's Anti-Crisis Administration were working on a joint strategy, including on the diaspora outreach, Eastern Partnership initiative, and the 2022 referendum on amendments to the Constitution. The broad democratic coalition cooperated with independent experts and civil society, building up its capacity for self-organization and communication with supporters inside the country.

Closer to the end of the year, the coalition initiated a campaign to mobilize those hungry for change during the referendum on the updated Constitution in 2022. Tikhanovskaya's Office, the Anti-Crisis Administration led by Latushko, the Coordination Council and a number of socio-political organizations launched the initiative named "Cross Out Lawlessness, Cross out the Referendum", trying to hear both those who spoke in favor of a boycott and those who were going to vote in the referendum.

According to independent sociologists of *Chatham House*, the coalition managed to mobilize a democratic core, but a significant part of sympathizers ignored the joint strategy.⁴ About 30% of oppositionists were critical of the coalition's strategy, wanted a boycott of the referendum, and did not vote, which is typical of most electoral campaigns under the Lukashenko Administration.

руть.» Координационный совет по организации процесса преодоления политического кризиса, 24 May 2021, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1b_F7TbrwWIdnyGxrJ4F3YHlki5FcLs4bg_F7vQLCmjM/edit#gid=1245486468.

⁴ Астапеня, Рыгор. «Референдум-2022: как проголосовали беларусы и что думают про официальные итоги?» *Беларуская ініцыятыва*, <https://belaruspolls.org/articles/referendum-3>.

Some parties, both already registered and those seeking to be registered, did not publicly support the coalition's position on the referendum at first, fearing persecution, but later voiced some ideas that were close to the joint mobilization plan.

At the beginning of the year, some political organizations and new activists launched *Skhod* ("Gathering") initiative with the help of IT specialists. It was supported by the Coordination Council out of spite of the official All-Belarusian People's Assembly. The platform attempted to obtain a negotiating mandate and legitimacy from the grassroots, i. e. directly from voters. Assisted by *Golos* ("Voice") initiative, Gathering organized online voting to nominate delegates.

New activists and civil society representatives, as well as nominees from the already structured opposition, including the Belarusian Popular Front, Belarusian Christian Democracy, Tell the Truth, and For Freedom, actively participated in Gathering. However, the latter failed to attract attention of the majority of the advocates of change in the face of growing repression. Only 151 delegates were elected for 328 seats, and the number of voters only totaled 90,000.

There was still hope for the registered parties to enter into negotiations with the Lukashenko Administration. In early 2021, the Belarusian Popular Front, Belarusian Social Democratic Party (*Hramada*), Green Party, United Civil Party, and Fair World Party continued consultations on the constitutional reform. The parties distanced themselves from the opinionated political organizations that were delivering ultimatums from outside Belarus.

Shortly before the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, the left-wing coalition of the BSDP (*Hramada*), the Greens and Fair World held the forum "For Equality and Social Justice" with the participation of the Free Trade Union of Metalworkers. The delegates discussed an updated civil society agenda to begin negotiations with the authorities, proposing a phased plan to de-escalate the

social confrontation and transform the regime. Their demands included:

- the release of political prisoners and discontinuance of repression,
- a new election mediated by the OSCE,
- and constitutional reform.⁵

This was unacceptable to the government, which continued imposing its own agenda through repression.

Democratic organizations expectably did not participate in the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. Former presidential candidate Anna Kanopatskaya did, being among the few notable figures. The absence of representatives of political parties was also associated with the common position of the democrats, who were critical of the goals and organizational procedures of the Assembly.

In spring, the Belarusian Popular Front, Belarusian Social Democratic Party (*Hramada*) and the Greens tried to resume contacts and interaction with the authorities, and applied for permission to hold annual events timed to the Freedom Day and the Chernobyl march. The authorities demonstratively refused to engage in dialogue with the parties, which had reconsidered their ultimative demands. Applicants for the traditional opposition actions were sentenced to administrative arrests.

By the middle of the year, the left-wing coalition of *Hramada*, the Greens and Fair World suspended their development due to the deteriorating political situation. The parties were even unable to rent premises for a joint event, as the authorities forbade the landlords to cooperate with the applicants.

Fearing reprisals, members of the Right of Choice party alliance refused to jointly observe the February 2022 referendum. Over the years, the Right of Choice observation had been an example of successful cooperation between the United Civil

⁵ «Второй форум левых демократических сил Беларуси.» *Беларуская партыя “Зялёныя”*, 10 Feb. 2021, <https://greenparty.by/?p=1058>.

Party, Belarusian Popular Front, *Hramada*, the Greens, Belarusian Christian Democracy, Party of Freedom and Justice, and Radio-Electronic Industry Trade Union.

Renewal of the party field: Viktor Babariko's "Together" and Andrei Dmitriyev's "New Party"

At the beginning of 2021, a number of leaders and teams announced the establishment of new parties, including loyalist and pro-Russian ones. However, most of the party projects were put on pause in the middle of the year.

Nearly 6,000 founders joined the organizing committee of "Together" initiated by imprisoned ex-banker Viktor Babariko during the first month after the announcement of the party formation. The organizing committee hoped to hold a founding congress in May, but, amid escalating repression, it was postponed indefinitely.

Since law enforcers were obstructing regional meetings, the "Together" headquarters went online, trying to reach wider population without focusing on ideological and value-oriented matters that could divide or demotivate a part of the audience.

Following Babariko's headquarters, leader of the People's Anti-Crisis Administration Pavel Latushko announced the establishment of a party in the distant future, i. e. after a victory over the regime. Unlike "Together", Latushko mainly addressed the staunch opponents of the Lukashenko regime and the democratic core. He managed to reinforce his organization by inviting, among others, his former colleagues from the diplomatic corps. At the same time, some other team members (E. Bury, V. Prokopyev, A. Ostapovich, etc.) left the Administration for different reasons, including to start their own projects.

Andrei Dmitriyev, presidential candidate in the 2020 election, tried to form Our Party, but the founding congress was

postponed due to the adverse political situation. The party continued online communication and educational activities for the sympathizers, waiting for a thaw.

The national democrats from the Belarusian Popular Front had to suspend their public activities, especially after the arrest of their leader Grigory Kostusev. At the beginning of the year, the party expected to consolidate its supporters and celebrate the Freedom Day. The BPF leadership applied for official permission. However, by March 25, repressions were in full swing, hitting new groups of dissidents. A ban was imposed on all public party activities.

Throughout the year, some BPF activists emigrated to escape criminal prosecution for taking part in the 2020 riots or for administering some popular regional media or public initiatives. In the autumn, the Ministry of Justice liquidated the BPF's *Adradzhenne* Public Association, the oldest social and political movement of the national democrats.

Constructive opposition and loyalists in the stand-by mode

It became obvious by the end of the spring of 2021 that the government halted the experiment on the establishment of new controlled loyalist parties, although statements were made in early 2021 that there would be a National Unity Party (mainly formed of *Belaya Rus* members) and a Union Party of supporters of integration with Russia.

The authorities also lost interest in an anti-Russian party of former presidential candidate Anna Kanopatskaya, which was supposed to engage the audience of national democrats and supporters of the BPF *Adradzhenne*. The Round Table of Democratic Forces led by Yuri Voskresensky, the New People and the Democratic Union that targeted at the teams of former

presidential candidates Viktor Babariko and Valery Tsepkalo, respectively, did not evolve either.

As before, the sleeping political parties on the Justice Ministry's register did not show any signs of independent public activity, except for supporting the regime or participating in official events.

Conclusion

Political organizations will adhere to the strategy of cooperation as a coalition, but mutual criticism and tension will intensify amid shrinking resources, a narrowing audience, and in the absence of tangible results in forcing the Lukashenko regime to negotiate. Organizations in exile will continue developing their networks in an effort to preserve their assets and influence the intra-Belarusian agenda, as well as relations between the West and Belarus.

Given the strong politicization of society, demand for political parties will remain high. However, their attractiveness will be mainly determined by the presence of popular charismatic leaders, rather than ideological values.

Against the backdrop of the total purge of civil society organizations, the fact that the registered parties have not been liquidated suggests that a part of the political establishment has not abandoned the idea to develop a controlled party system in the next few years. However, Lukashenko is interested in delaying the adoption of new legislation on parties, and, fundamentally, is not interested in any transformations of his personalistic regime. Nevertheless, a part of the state apparatus and loyalists expect the role of the security bloc to decrease, and the experiment with controlled parties to be resumed, together with integration of some moderate opponents into the political system.

MEDIA: IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEFIELD WITHOUT PREREQUISITES FOR DEVELOPMENT

Elena Artiomenko-Meliantsova

Summary

The 2020 trends in the Belarusian media field intensified in 2021. The entire system of independent media was destroyed, and the outlets engaged in covering social and political affairs were stripped of their legal status and their activities criminalized. In the meantime, state controlled media applied new propaganda approaches and new technologies.

While the state propaganda was broadcasted on official channels on a larger scale, the media uncontrolled by the state was losing access to official sources of information and forced out of the country, so the media's public oversight and information security functions were largely undermined or discontinued.

Relative successes in the economy, which could revitalize the advertising market and, consequently, the financial standing of the media, cannot ameliorate the overall situation, since independent media's infrastructure is destroyed.

Trends:

- Destruction of the independent media sector;
- New methods of state propaganda in the controlled media;
- Uncertainty in the advertising market and public relations.

Situation with independent media in Belarus

The large-scale state campaign aimed at sterilizing the media scene continued in 2021. The mass media, NGOs and those who dared to criticize official policies remained under massive

pressure. The majority of actively working independent socio-political periodicals were forced out of the country. Although, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), the number of detentions of journalists decreased from 481 in 2020 to 113 in 2021, the authorities managed to almost completely destroy independent media, and subjected many of them to criminal prosecution.

The BAJ reported criminal cases against 60 journalists in 2021, 32 of whom remained in custody as of the end of the year. Yekaterina Borisevich (*tut.by*), Yekaterina Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova (both *Belsat*) and Sergei Gordievich (*1reg.by*) were convicted in criminal cases; there were 146 searches of offices and homes of independent media journalists, mostly on suspicion of involvement in terrorist activities and/or organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order (sections 289 and 342 of the Criminal Code of Belarus).¹

The authorities used the amended anti-extremist legislation to push independent media out of the legal field. Materials published by independent outlets were massively declared extremist, after which their websites and social media channels were blocked. Anyone who distributed such materials (including by reposting on personal pages in social media) face prosecution.

According to the Republican List of Extremist Materials, from 2008 to 2020, there were 172 court rulings to declare various materials extremist. The number of such rulings was over *four hundred* in 2021 alone. Alongside major independent media channels (*tut.by* and *Nasha Niva* among them), the same measures were applied to communication channels of opposition institutions, regional and local information channels and chat rooms. A number of large outlets, such as *Belsat*, *Radio Liberty*, *BelaPAN* news agency and their followers in social media, were

¹ «СМИ в Беларуси. Итоги медийного года 2021. Электронный бюллетень № 1(67).» *Беларусская ассоциация журналистов*, 2022, <https://baj.by/ru/analytics/smi-v-belarusi-v-2021-godu-obzor-za-god>.

declared extremist groups, membership in which is a punishable crime now.²

The Ministry of Justice filed a lawsuit to liquidate the Belarusian Association of Journalists, which worked in the field of research, support and development of the media in Belarus. In April 2021, Reporters Without Borders ranked Belarus 158th out of 180 countries in terms of the freedom of the press. Belarus was called Europe's most dangerous country for journalists.³

Many outlets continue working from outside the country, but their effectiveness considerably decreased. Access to sources of information and opportunities to distribute their products are very limited, and there are few or no possibilities for self-financing. The outlets, nevertheless, retain a significant part of the Belarusian audience that finds technical ways to bypass the blockages.

New approaches applied by state-controlled media

Since independent media have been almost completely eliminated in Belarus, the operating conditions for the state media are changing noticeably. Given the challenges posed by the 2020 political crisis, dismissals of some state media employees for political reasons and invitation of Russian substitutes to Belarusian TV, approaches to the creation and promotion of the state media content have undergone certain adjustments. The authorities take a part of the media content and propaganda messages to social media, mostly Telegram. Official channels were opened there, and advertisements are posted in other media, including *YouTube*.

² Ibid.

³ "2021 World Press Freedom Index: Journalism, the vaccine against disinformation, blocked in more than 130 countries." *Reporters without Borders*, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/2021-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-vaccine-against-disinformation-blocked-more-130-countries>.

Socio-political programs hosted by Grigory Azarenok, Igor Tur, etc. are released on state TV channels. They are not pronouncedly propagandist, but rather a kind of artistic performances. New Belarusian propagandists often outstrip their Russian colleagues in terms of aggressiveness and sarcasm. For instance, Xenia Sobchak said in an interview with Avdotia Smirnova that she watches Azarenok, who is more expressive than Russian propagandists, and called it her guilty pleasure.⁴

The targets and indicators set in the Mass Information and Book Publishing Program were formulated in 2021 as follows: to achieve the state mass media's confidence rating of 41%; self-financing of the state print media of at least 72%; to increase in the share of Belarusian-made programs on Belarusian TV to 31%.

Attempts to increase self-sufficiency of the media in order to reduce the budget spending on them has been a mass communication policy objective in Belarus for years. The above could help enhance sustainability of the media and ensure information security, but nothing suggests that this may be achieved any time soon, neither from the viewpoint of external economic and political conditions, nor in terms of policies towards independent media or available resources.

Spending on mass media

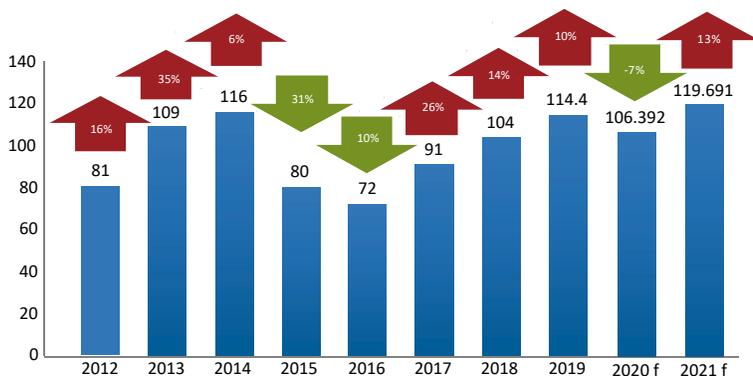
New state media approaches are reflected in – the public funding dynamics. In 2019, BYN 87.3 million were allocated from the national budget for television and periodicals, while in 2020, the amount increased to BYN 150.4 million (BYN 143.1 million for television and radio and BYN 7.3 million for periodicals), which was connected with that year's election campaign. The spending

⁴ «Авдотья Смирнова. Школа злословия с Собчак: Кириенко, Немцов, Навальный и, конечно же, Чубайс.» *Осторожно Собчак*, 21 Nov. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3deY1Q9ThMs>.

in 2021 was planned at BYN 155.7 (BYN 133.9 million for television and radio and BYN 21.8 million for print media).⁵

During the post-pandemic economic recovery period, the advertising market grew by 10–15% in 2021, according to preliminary estimates (Figure 1), largely thanks to the inflow of investments in online advertising.

Figure 1. Media advertising market dynamics in Belarus, 2012–2021, USD million



Source: Expert assessment by Alcazar, APO, Vondel-digital and WebExpert.

The expected Internet advertising market in 2021 is estimated at USD 50 million (USD 44.9 million in 2019–2022).⁶ However, 68% of the market falls on the advertising in search results and targeted advertising, rather than the mass media, which promotes online media development in a lesser degree. The destruction of

⁵ «Бюджет для граждан 2021.» Министерство финансов Республики Беларусь, 2020, <https://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/bp/budget/budget2021.pdf>.

⁶ «Итоги белорусского рынка интернет-рекламы за 2020 год: какие каналы и клиенты показали рост, а какие — падение.» Marketing.by, 01 Mar. 2021, <https://marketing.by/analitika/itogi-belaruskogo-rynka-internet-reklamy-za-2020-kakie-kanaly-i-klienty-pokazali-rost-a-kakie-padeni/?mobile=N>.

independent media narrows the options for advertisers, since they lose partners for advertising and PR campaigns, which, consequently, reduces the budgets that could be channeled into the media market financing.

According to the available data for February 2021, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) accounted for 34% of the online media advertising (key players: Nestle, Mars, “Savushkin Product”); car sales – 16% (Avtopromservis, “Atlant-M”); financial services – 10% (MTBank, VISA); e-commerce – 9% (21vek. by); electronics – 9% (Samsung, Huawei); pharmaceuticals – 8% (Sandoz, Sanofi, KRKA); telecom services – 5% (A1, MTS).⁷ In television advertising in the second half of 2021, according to the Belarusian TV audience measurer *Mediameter*, the major advertisers were Mars (21,717 min), Jacobs (21,294 min), Nestle (19,719 min), A1 (16,236 min), PEPSICO (15,607 min), Coca-Cola (13,971 min), MTS (13,859 min), Procter&Gamble (11,401 min), L’Oreal (9,595 min), and Patio (8,663 min).⁸

This shows that multinational corporations that operate in the FMCG sector were among the main sources of funding for the media, including state TV channels, many of which declared their intention to abandon advertising on state TV in Belarus after the political crisis of 2020.

Media consumption by the Belarusian audience

Despite the growing influence of the Internet as a source of information, the coverage by Belarusian TV channels remains quite

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ «В Беларуси подвели итоги телесмотрения за II полугодие 2021 года и рассказали, какие бренды тратили на ТВ-рекламу больше всех.» *Marketing.by*, 01 Mar. 2021, <https://marketing.by/analitika/v-belarusi-podveli-itogi-telesmotreniya-za-ii-polugodie-2021-goda-i-rasskazali-kakie-brendy-tratili-/>.

high, *Mediameter* says. In December 2021, the average daily rating of TV programs in Belarus stood at 15.98%, and the average daily media outreach at 62.95% of the Belarusian audience. Among the TV channels, the highest average daily outreach was achieved by ONT (27.10%), Russia-Belarus (24.56%), Belarus-1 (24.50%), NTV Belarus (23.30%) and CTV (17.92%). The monthly coverage of these channels is as follows: ONT — 78.98%; Belarus-1 — 76.51%; Russia-Belarus — 75.57%; NTV Belarus — 74.79%. In terms of monthly outreach, CTV (68.93%) was behind Mir (71.27%) and Belarus-2 (70.74%). The total monthly outreach by the measured TV channels was at 95.88% of the Belarusian audience.⁹

According to the Euroradio, *Mediameter* CJSC is most probably affiliated with the state. It surfaced after the state TV channels stated their dissatisfaction with their ratings.¹⁰ According to *Chatham House*, only 41.6% of the Belarusian audience obtains information from TV¹¹, while *Baltic Internet Policy Initiative* reports 30.9%.¹²

The above data have their methodological limitations. The data provided by *Chatham House* and *Baltic Internet Policy Initiative* only concern the Internet audience and, therefore, are understated. *Mediameter's* data, on the other hand, is non-transparent, and is only collected with the help of peplemeters in

⁹ «Информационный отчет о телесмотрении, декабрь 2021 года.» *Mediametr*, Jan. 2022, https://mediameter.by/pdf/month_report_December.pdf.

¹⁰ «Как друг Лукашенко, певица и госканалы грызутся за рынок теле-рекламы.» *Euroradio*, 01 Mar. 2021, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/kak-drug-lukashenko-pevica-i-goskanaly-gryzutsya-za-rynok-telereklamy>.

¹¹ «Медиапотребление городской интернет-аудитории в Беларуси, ноябрь 2021 года.» *Information Policy*, 20 Jan. 2022, <http://www.infopolicy.biz/?p=18614>.

¹² «Где беларусы ищут новости: мужчины в российских медиа, а женщины — в белорусских? Данные исследования.» ОЕЕС, 12 Jan. 2022, <https://oeec.ngo/opinions/research/media-consumption/>.

the households that have TV sets, and, therefore, the indicators are overstated.¹³

Among the preferred TV genres, films and TV series led with 40%, and entertainment programs with 25%. Belarusian viewers spent 16% of their time watching information programs, and 5% watching social and political programs.

Belarusian entertainment YouTube channels topped the list of the video content on the Internet. According to *livedune.ru*, *World of Tanks Blitz* was the most influential Belarusian channel in 2021 alongside *Official Channel* (665,000 subscribers, over 60 million views), *Bready Bread* (356,000 subscribers, 85 million views) and VERTEICH (551,000 subscribers, 98 million views) game channels. According to *Baltic Internet Policy Initiative*¹⁴, in December 2021, *Real Belarus* (193,000 subscribers, 6.9 million views) was the most popular political channel. *NEXTA Live* totaled 157,000 subscribers and 4.7 million views; *BELSAT News* – 454,000 and 3.3 million, respectively; *tut.by* – 440,000 and 3.2 million; *Danuta Hlusnia* – 84,000 and 2.1 million; *Malanka Media* – 104,000 and 1.8 million; *BalaganOFF* – 88,000 and 1.6 million; *VOT TAK* – 359,000 and 1.5 million; *Lukashenko's Moustache* – 60,000 and 1.4 million; *ATN: News of Belarus and the World* – 201,000 and 1.3 million.

Among the most popular Belarusian Telegram channels were *NEXTA Live* and *NEXTA* with 1.7 million and 412,000 subscribers, respectively (it should be noted that *NEXTA Live* was very popular with the Russian audience, and the administrators targeted it purposefully as well); *Zerkalo | Novosti* (409,000), *Belaruskі Hayun* (392,000), *Yellow Plums* (“Tabloid Leaks” wordplay, 167,000), *Belarus of the Brain* (154,000), *Unpleasant Channel*

¹³ Editor's note.

¹⁴ «Количество просмотров белорусских YouTube-каналов в декабре 2021.» *Information Policy*, 02 Jan. 2022, <http://www.infopolicy.biz/?p=18562>.

(144,000), *MotolkoHelp* (126,000), *Pool of the First* (124,000) and *Onliner* (124,000).¹⁵

Given the above, entertainment and, to a lesser degree social and political content of both TV and new media channels is in greatest demand among the Belarusian audience. In the structure of the media consumption, independent resources are in the key positions in the new media. The fact that channels of the official media and government agencies were also in the top 10 indicates that the latter had joined the IT mainstream, and have their audience on the Internet.

The Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and *EcooM* center say that in November–December 2021, the main sources of information about domestic events were the national television (22.0%), online media (21.7%) and social media (13.7%), the immediate social environment (10.9%), national newspapers and magazines (7.3%), local TV (6.6%), Russian TV (6.5%), local newspapers and magazines (6.5%) and national radio (4.2%).¹⁶

According to the sixth wave of the Chatham House’s poll (November 2021), Belarusians usually receive information from the Internet (69.2%), social media (67.7%), live communication (56.1%), TV (41.6%), messengers (38.1%), radio (14.8%) and printed periodicals (10.0%). Unlike *EcooM*, which only presents data as totals, *Chatham House* publishes raw data obtained from all respondents in XLSX/SAW formats for greater transparency.¹⁷

Andrei Vardomatsky’s Belarusian Analytical Laboratory says the state television and the Internet were approximately equal

¹⁵ «Рейтинг Telegram-каналов.» *Каталог Telegram-каналов и чатов, 2022*, <https://by.tgstat.com/ratings/channels/public?sort=members>.

¹⁶ «Основными источниками получения информации белорусы назвали республиканское ТВ и интернет-СМИ.» *Дом прессы*, 19 Dec. 2021, <http://www.dompressy.by/2021/12/19/osnovnymi-istochnikami-polucheniya-informacii-belorusy-nazvali-respublikanskoe-tv-i-internet-smi/>.

¹⁷ Editor’s note.

as news sources. When asked which channels had been important sources of socio-political information about developments in Belarus (as of March 2022), *Telegram* was named by 33.1% of respondents; state television – 32.1%; YouTube – 29.8%; Russian state television – 25.6%.

In terms of trust, the Belarusian Analytical Laboratory saw a long-term trend towards a decline in trust in the Belarusian official and Russian media. In December 2021, the index of confidence (trust/distrust ratio) of the Belarusian state-controlled media outlets was at 0.9 percentage points; Belarusian independent media – 18.2 p. p.; Russian media – 9.6 p. p.

Conclusion

The destruction of the independent media segment makes the Belarusian media unable to perform their socially significant functions. The forced relocation of most independent outlets in the absence of Belarusian advertisers (i. e. the impossibility to achieve self-financing) poses threats to information security.

New approaches applied by the state media to raise the degree of propaganda influence together with the use of new media channels can create an ideological alternative to non-state media. However, this does not solve the problem of building a national system of mass communication, which would ensure information security and make it possible for the media to perform their public monitoring functions.

Despite the adequate goals of state programs aimed at media self-sufficiency, a greater share of national content and higher public confidence, it is unlikely that they will be attained, given the current economic and political challenges and destroyed infrastructure of independent outlets. The Belarusian media space will continue to be a field of ideological struggle with great dependence on Russian media.

EDUCATION: SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY ABOVE ALL

Alexander Pionov

Summary

In 2021, the extensive and intensive indicators of education continued to deteriorate. Legislative changes, first of all those connected with the new wording of the *Education Code*, were not basically intended for a real transformation or development of education in Belarus, but only for the final legalization of the existing administrative practices and punitive tools.

Education quality assessments were increasingly shifted to the tasks of securitization, i. e. patriotic education and full external control of faculties and academic aspects of activities of educational institutions, response to information threats that might affect students, and reorientation of international relations from the West to the East.

Trends:

- Securitization of education at all levels, from kindergartens to universities; shifting of the threat to national security from the streets to classrooms;
- Making of education part of the national security system, and reorientation of internal practices and international relations of the education system toward this task;
- Ideological monopoly of the state, and the ousting of all other stakeholders from educational processes by means of total administrative control.

In 2021, the oases of academic culture that have existed covertly for the past decade suddenly surfaced in explicit or tacit support for protests in 2020, and were suppressed with unprecedented vigor. Administrative control and the ideological monopoly of

the state have been hastily asserted. However, this was uneasy because of the system's inertia, departmental incoherence, and the poor motivation of a significant part of the academic community and some of the stakeholders.

Education statistics

Education fits into the general trend of depopulation and a gradual deterioration of intensive indicators in 2021, i.e. the number of students on all tiers of education per 10,000 population.¹ The number of educational institutions and the number of students of all types of institutions from kindergartens to universities has been decreasing each and every year. The relatively stable number of secondary school students is the only exception.

For many years, intensive indicators have been a source of pride for the authorities and an argument for justifying their educational policy. With 619 students per 10,000 population and the 87% higher education rate in 2013, Belarus was among the top countries, staying behind a small group of leaders like South Korea and the United States. As of today, this figure dropped to 282 students per 10,000 population.

Comparisons with other countries are no longer comforting to the authorities. However, as before, these figures do not indicate the quality of the national education system, but only the availability of higher education, which has also been in

«Образование в Республике Беларусь, 2021.» Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, 2021, https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/obrazovanie/publikatsii_8/index_39557/; «Инфографика. Наглядно об образовании в Республике Беларусь (Учебный год 2021/2022).» Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, 2021, https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/oficial_statistika/infografika-obrazovanie-21_22.pdf.

decline for quite a while. Over the past five years, the specialized secondary school enrollment rate decreased from 42.6 to 40.6 percent in 2021, and university enrollment rate from 71.9 to 63.8 percent.

As concerns the quality of higher education, its structure, i. e. the ratio of students at different levels of higher education (undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate studies), is also an important indicator. The already small number of master's degree and doctoral students decreased in 2021 even more.

The number of secondary schools continued to decrease, mostly in rural areas, with a small overall increase in enrollment. There were 2,967 schools in the 2021/22 academic year to compare with 3,009 in the previous year. This reduction is justified economically. It follows European trends, and, ideally, makes it possible to enhance the quality of education of the young rural population. However, the catastrophic gap in the level of education of rural and urban students demonstrated in 2018 by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and the student – teacher ratio, which is far from the European standard, show that the reduction in the number of schools has solved neither educational nor economic problems.

The process of russification of secondary schools continues. In the 2006/06 academic year, 23.3% of pupils were taught in the Belarusian language, while there were 10.2% in 2020/21. This is also directly related to the closure of schools in rural areas, since it is precisely such schools that use (often nominally) the Belarusian language.

New version of the Education Code

Shortly after the Education Code came into force in 2011, it became obvious that it needed a substantial revision. It took ten

years for its new version to become law.² Unfortunately, the latest version of the Code (like the previous one) is not intended for a real transformation and development of education, but only legitimizes the established practices.

In some rare cases, the Code approves something new and long overdue, such as the combination of school-leaving exams and university entrance exams after the 11th grade, but the innovations are still disappointing due to their half-heartedness and inconsistency. For instance, the combined centralized examination is introduced only in two subjects, leaving the rest unchanged.

The *Diploma Supplement* in accordance with the common European model adopted after more than a decade of promises can be mentioned among positive changes. This is the only Bologna obligation that has been almost completely fulfilled.

The three-step Bologna architecture has still not been adapted to the structure of *higher education*. Despite the Education Ministry's attempts of late to include postgraduate education in the higher education system, it is not enshrined in the Code. There has been no progress in the legislative adoption of such a Bologna instrument as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Without it, neither international mobility, nor elective courses, nor individual academic paths have a guaranteed basis.

There is no progress in the field of independent education quality assurance. Instead of a promised independent quality monitoring agency, the Ministry of Education got a new departmental branch – the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education.

The social dimension of higher education has not been enriched by either a renewed system of post-graduation

² «Обновлённый Кодекс об образовании. Новые правила приёма в высшие и средние специальные заведения.» Минобразования Республики Беларусь, <https://edu.gov.by/kodeks-ob-obrazovanii/>.

employment assistance or inclusion tools. Belarus just solidified and expanded the obligatory post-graduation job placement. The Code provides a very narrow concept of inclusion, limited to persons with disabilities. The most important goal of educational policy – ensured accessibility of higher education for all vulnerable groups – has disappeared from strategic documents. There is no such thing either in the Education System Development Concept of Belarus for the period to 2030, or in the Code.

Any progress in terms of academic values was hard to expect. Among the principles of state educational policy, there is still no room for preservation, dissemination and development of national culture, autonomy of educational institutions and academic freedom, or social partnership in education. Instead, the repressive mechanism of legislation on education has been significantly reinforced. Paragraphs on the persecution for any manifestation of protest, and repeated punishment or restriction on rights of those who have already been punished administratively or criminally were added to the Code. On the one hand, the Code limits the rights of parents to influence the education process or to choose a school. On the other hand, it makes them responsible for the behavior of their children.

The only small consolation is that the Code is not a directly applicable law, and there is no reason to hope for an eased or liberalized regulatory framework of education in bylaws.

Internationalization of education

The Education Ministry reported around 27,000 foreign students in Belarusian universities, although the National Statistics Committee (*Belstat*) only counted 20,936. Almost half of them were citizens of Turkmenistan. As before, the inbound mobility is inferior to the outbound mobility.

A fundamental change in the vector of outbound mobility is noteworthy. For a long time, most Belarusians (more than 70% of those who left to study) went to Russian universities. Last year, the attractiveness of Poland was almost equal to that of Russia. According to the Gromyko Association for Foreign Policy Studies, the number of Belarusian students in Russian universities in 2021 stood at 10,600, whereas Poland alone accounted for 9,700 Belarusian students, as reported by the Perspectives Educational Foundation. Russia has ceased to dominate this market despite all efforts of the authorities of the two countries to promote the Common Education Space.

The attractiveness of Belarus to Russian students did not grow either. Five years ago, 1,700 Russians studied in Belarus, while there were 1,400 in 2021. Russia significantly increased the quotas for free education of Belarusians in 2021 from 200 to 700 student spaces, and recommended its universities to accept them not only on the basis of the uniform state exam results, but also based on the Belarussian centralized testing.

Simultaneously, the number of direct interuniversity agreements increased to over 1,500. The number of joint events was growing rapidly. Associations and forums of sectoral universities were strengthened and expanded. However, the result was very modest despite the crisis of the Western vector, i. e. the curtailment of institutional interuniversity cooperation with European partners, which took place due the large-scale violation of the academic rights of Belarusian students and teachers on the one hand, and the expulsion of the Goethe Institute, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Polish educational organizations, etc., from Belarus on the other hand.

Meanwhile, cooperation with Chinese universities is developing quite successfully. China significantly increased the number of its students in Belarus: 3,634 in the 2020/21 academic year against 1,435 in 2019/20. Today, more than 2,800 Chinese citizens are studying at the Belarusian State University (64% of

the total number of foreign students). Previously, Turkmenistan was the uncontested leader in this respect.

The number of Belarusians in all educational programs in China is about 1,000 people. The Ministry of Education reports around 500 direct cooperation agreements between educational institutions of the two countries with more than 20 joint educational programs of the first level of higher education and around a dozen of the second level. Belarus and China have two joint educational institutions and four research laboratories. There are six Confucius Institutes at Belarusian universities, which go far beyond the learning of the Chinese language. For instance, the Confucius Institute in Sweden was accused of restricting academic freedom, monitoring Chinese students abroad, and promoting ideas and goals of the Chinese Communist Party.

The policy of self-isolation from Europe and curtailment of official contacts between European universities and Belarusian partners switched academic cooperation and support for student mobility to the more targeted assistance to repressed students and teachers both in Europe (U4Belarus Scholarships – SALT, etc.) and inside Belarus (Polish scholarship programs NAWA “Solidarni z naukowcami”, Kalinowski Program, German DAAD scholarships, Hilda Damin Program, Czech, Norwegian, Lithuanian and other scholarships). Despite the unprecedented international academic support, the effectiveness of many endeavors is lower than expected due to formalism and bureaucratic obstacles. Afghanistan got much higher on the agenda of scholarship programs than Belarus since the middle of the year.

The Belarusian Ministry of Education tried to maintain a semblance of participation in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). However, in December 2021, even the very tolerant highest executive body of the Bologna Process – the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) – removed Belarus from the presidency by a majority vote in 2022 at the request of the European

Students Union. Apart from the reputational damage, this decision does not particularly threaten education in Belarus, but it is noteworthy that the BFUG for the first time decided to resort to voting to choose between fundamental academic values and to choose values by consensus.

Securitization of education

Securitization of education means an interpretation of problems of this area as an existential threat to national security and a right of emergency action, bypassing standard legal and political procedures. This is how the authorities assessed the situation in educational institutions after the 2020 protests. Participants in the Republican Pedagogical Council held on August 23–24, 2021 outlined objectives and mechanisms of securitization. It was established that there is a direct ideological monopoly; education cannot stay out of politics, and the only policy is that of the state; there must be total administrative control over all aspects of education.³

Education is subordinated to the priority task of promotion of patriotism based on the Program of Patriotic Education of the Population of Belarus in 2022–2025 approved by the Council of Ministers on December 29, 2021 (resolution No.773). The program is meant as a response to geopolitical challenges and the need to strengthen the national sovereignty and security. The authorities appointed the National Interdepartmental Coordinating Council for Patriotic Education chaired by Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Igor Lutsky. The curricula and textbooks are being updated in accordance with the patriotic education tasks.

³ «Участие в Республиканском педагогическом совете.» Президент Республики Беларусь, 24 Aug. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/uchastie-v-respublikanskom-pedagogicheskom-sovete>.

Alexander Lukashenko tasked to work out a standard for schools based on various aspects from the classroom management to the personal appearance of students and teachers. Updated internal regulations prohibit any unauthorized actions or statements. The statements that can be interpreted as discrediting Belarus are criminalized, and the Ministry of Education is now among the entities responsible for countering extremism (the new version of the law on countering extremism).

The Ministry of Education issued resolution No.146 on July 15, 2021, which revises the model personnel establishment and staff size standards in secondary education institutions. It introduces the full-time position of one person in charge of military-patriotic education in institutions (except for elementary schools, special needs schools, evening schools, specialized institutions) with 351 or more students and cadet schools, and one half-time position in institutions with 50 to 350 students, 2,000 staff positions in total.

Vice rectors in charge of security and human resources were appointed to universities. Information about them is not available in the public domain. According to the documents somehow obtained by journalists, the tasks of the vice rectors are to oversee activities related to state secrets, ensure information security, coordinate interaction with security and law enforcement agencies, detect, prevent and suppress actions that threaten university employees' safety, etc.

A staff rotation in university administrations and faculties continued. The state tightened its control over the Belarusian Republican Youth Union. The updated Education Code significantly limits access to education for civil society organizations and parents' influence on educational processes.

The securitization policy principle is that "only a patriot can educate a patriot," which, as the authorities declare, primarily concerns the teaching staff of universities. BeSSA documented 3,234 cases of various kinds of pressure and harassment of

university teachers, ranging from threats, fines, and dismissals to imprisonment.⁴ This is, certainly, an incomplete list of victims of purges of disloyal educators. But even these figures show that the repressions affected a sizable part of 19,000 teachers. In contrast to universities, secondary school teachers look more trustworthy to the authorities,⁵ and they have even more tasks ahead, primarily to bring discipline to schools by any means.

Adjustments to the social composition of the student community through the stimulation and expansion of the targeted enrollment of those from the loyal population groups were a quite logical step in securitization policy and a 'reloading' of the education system. So far, the targeted enrollment attempts have not been very successful, and employers have showed little support for that. New measures largely focus on the political aspect ("loyal staff"). Graduates of sports, pedagogical and military-patriotic orientation classes, children of servicemen and policemen, who died or were disabled in the line of duty, enjoy priority rights of admission to universities now.

The Republican Pedagogical Council also identified the socio-professional groups that pose a threat to national security, in particular, large technology companies that are suspected of using internal commercial management systems for subversive ideological activities.

The IT industry and digitalization come as a serious challenge to the system, requiring a rapid response. With this in mind, the authorities prioritize the creation of a unified information and education resource base, aggressive penetration

⁴ "Агляд механізмаў дапамогі рэпрэсаваным выкладчыкам." *Общественный болонский комитет*, 24 Mar. 2021, <http://bolognaby.org/index.php/124-news-and-events-ru/866-aglyad-mekhanizma-dapamogi-represavanym-vykladchykam>.

⁵ «Участие в Республиканском педагогическом совете.» *Президент Республики Беларусь*, 24 Aug. 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/uchastie-v-respublikanskom-pedagogicheskom-sovete>.

into social media, and control over professional training for the IT sector, feeling uncomfortable and suspicious of advanced information technologies. As a consequence, there is a perverse desire to fence off the new with old educational myths.

Conclusion

Combined with the post-election depression in Belarusian society, the Russian-Ukrainian war rendered forecasts of education development inside and outside Belarus irrelevant, and significantly increased the uncertainty. Belarusians, who have left or stay in the country can no longer count on unconditional sympathy and international support as victims of academic repression. Both the official education system and independent educational institutions of Belarusian diasporas are approaching a bifurcation point. At the moment, it is hard to predict the trajectory of future events. Unfortunately, little will depend on Belarusian educators, so one can only expect a reactive behavior of all Belarusian education actors in 2022.

GENDER SITUATION IN BELARUS: STATE-LEVEL IMITATION AND PUBLIC ACTIVISM

Vladislav Ivanov

Summary

Gender equality in Belarus was paid little or no attention, since the government was busy finding ways to withstand massive sanctions. Gender programs and civil society development, including its gender segment, were minimized or suspended in conditions of intimidation and large-scale purges. State violence made it impossible to promulgate the five-year National Plan for Gender Equality at the end of 2020. Overall, the government's actions aimed at preventing domestic violence have done more harm than good.

Trends:

- Imitation of the implementation of the National Gender Equality Action Plan for 2021–2025 in Belarus. Official sources report progress, while ignoring problems. Partners in civil society, with whom cooperation was planned, are being eliminated;
- Comb-out of Belarusian civil society in the absence of gender inequality monitoring;
- Slowdown or suspension of official cooperation between Belarus and the West, including in the gender development segment;
- Pro-democratic struggle of markedly weakened and depleted civil society in 2021 with a distinct woman's face; many high-potential civil society initiatives took place thanks to women.

Unviability of the National Gender Equality Action Plan for 2021–2025

According to official data, in 2021, Belarus put in motion the new National Gender Equality Action Plan for the period of the next

five years as part of cooperation with the UN in the field of social and gender development. In particular, the Plan provides for designing an institutional mechanism for gender equality; gender-oriented health care; measures to prevent domestic violence and human trafficking; informational and educational support for gender equality advocacy.¹

Official reports and descriptions of the Plan under consideration showed a positive trend in 2021. The article published in *Zviazda* newspaper on March 4, 2022 created an impression that “gender equality had been achieved, and women were increasingly fulfilling themselves”. The increase in the number of women in the parliament from 30% to 35%, women’s active involvement in the public life through the Belarusian Union of Women, which numbers around 140,000 members, and resolution of the women’s unemployment problem were listed among the achievements.²

However, reports made by Belarusian human rights defenders, journalists and witnesses of violence, as well as by the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus Anaïs Marin provide a completely different picture regarding a decline in women’s role in decision-making; violence and rape during mass protests; the woman’s face of the COVID-19 pandemic; vulnerability of Belarusian women and men to the virus; growth of domestic violence in the context of the pandemic; elimination of organizations and civil society associations engaged in gender equality advocacy, and economic impoverishment of the population, especially women.³

¹ “Новы нацыянальны план па гendarнай роўнасці распрацоўваецца ў Беларусі.” *Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь*, 26 Sep. 2020, https://sdgs.by/by/news_events/news/e2d67c120d845ff.html.

² “У Беларусі забяспечана гendarная роўнасць, і жанчыны ўсё актыўней рэалізуююць сябе.” *Звязда*, 04 Mar. 2022, <https://zviazda.by/be/news/20220304/1646411539-getyya-pytanni-znahodzyacca-nasabistym-kantroli-starshyni-saveta>.

³ Marin, Anaïs. “Belarus: Women paying heavy price for standing up for human rights – UN expert.” *United Nations*, 25 Oct. 2021, <https://www.>

The work with independent experts and local communities is another important step in assessing the effectiveness of state gender policy. The Belarusian authorities stated in the 2021–2025 National Plan their commitment to cooperate with Gender Perspectives and other civil society organizations. However, the office of Gender Perspectives was searched in summer 2021, and the Supreme Court liquidated the organization in the autumn.

The elimination of key independent civil society actors involved in the Gender Equality Plan underscores the largely declarative and simulative policy of the government in many areas, including gender-related ones. The regime demonstrates its lack of understanding or sensitivity to the gender agenda, and that it simply uses this topic to raise funds from the UN and other international organizations without addressing actual problems or pursuing real gender shifts. This is one of the reasons why Belarus is not always included in gender reports and ratings. Or, when being rated with respect to the gender index, Belarus does not provide information on some indicators (for example, statistics on domestic violence, the proportion of women in the top- and middle-level management, etc.).⁴

Domestic violence at the state level

On December 21, 2021, the Belarusian House of Representatives passed in the first reading the bill on amendments to the laws on offense prevention basics, on weapons, on social services, and on the procedure and conditions for preventive institutionalization on medical and occupational grounds. Officially, the purpose is “to enhance the effectiveness of the prevention of

ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/belarus-women-paying-heavy-price-standing-human-rights-un-expert.

⁴ “Human Development Reports / Belarus.” *United Nations Development Programme*, 2021, <https://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BLR>.

domestic violence and protection from this negative phenomenon.”⁵

However, the proposed changes only indirectly relate to domestic violence, as they only partially cover the prevention of crime in general. There is still no separate law on domestic violence in Belarus, although some aspects have been worked on for a while. Alexander Lukashenko intervened in the process back in 2018, and stopped all work between the state and civil society, calling the domestic violence issue “nonsense imported from the West.”

On the positive side, the amendments expand the range of persons against whom violence would qualify as domestic violence, as well as prohibit abusers from acquiring weapons. But, in the absence of a separate law to prevent domestic violence, and, especially, amid the elimination of civil society organizations that had been dealing with the matter (*La Strada* and *Gender Perspectives*), all these changes remain minor and purely cosmetic. In fact, the year 2021 saw violence against Belarusians, which may be regarded as domestic violence at the state level.

The woman’s face of civil society

Women’s activism during the mass protests and in civil society in general in 2020–2021, especially the escalation of street actions showed women’s dissatisfaction with the narrow public field that the state has long offered to them. The phenomenon of women in white or white-red-white clothes was a reaction to rigged elections, state violence, and the tightly regulated official invitation from the authorities to cooperate, but only in the

⁵ «Депутаты поддержали изменения в законы о профилактике правонарушений.» БелТА, 21 Dec. 2021, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/deputaty-podderzhali-izmenenija-v-zakony-o-profilaktike-pravonarushenij-475912-2021/>.

projects beneficial for the state, especially when international organizations require the engagement of non-state actors.

Today's protests echo those of the past years, decades, or, according to researcher Nelly Bekus⁶, of 1989, the year of many unrealized national-democratic aspirations of Belarusians, including those related to gender issues. Although Belarusian protests of the women dressed in white or, more precisely, white-red-white, are a rather new phenomenon for the country and the region. They fit into the global practice of new social gender movements known as movements of solidarity or emotion.⁷

The main feature of the white-clothed protests of Belarusian women is a combination of national, pro-democratic and gendered messages, which is well illustrated visually: the women's marches started out white, but quickly became white-red-white. Comments made by participants in the marches also capture not only the gender, but also the nation-wise orientation of the action. Also, under the influence of the change of the regime from dictatorship to junta, the evolution of local women's protests, which take place exclusively in the capital, became peculiar.

However, the gender dimension of Belarusian protest demonstrates the strengthening of the gender-oriented political grassroots call of the day, i. e. a more radical way in the authoritarian environment, and this call often remained theoretical, and therefore, was simply not understood by many inside the country.

The liquidation of a large part of NGOs in 2021 also comprised a significant gender aspect, since, in fact, many civil society entities (not necessarily focused on gender issues) conducted gender monitoring and pursued gender policy based

⁶ Bekus, Nelly. "Echo of 1989? Protest Imaginaries and Identity Dilemmas in Belarus." *Slavic Review*, 2021, 80(1), p. 4.

⁷ Нёвё, Эрык. *Сацыялогія сацыяльных рухаў*, Мінск: Прапілеі, 2021.

on gender-specific feedback. Flash-mobs of women dressed in white and the images of Belarusian women in and out of prisons (Nina Baginskaya, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, Maria Kolesnikova, Natalia Hersche, Anna Severinets, Julia Chernyavskaya and many others) remained the symbols of protest in 2021.

Conclusion

The general situation in Belarus in 2021 can be described as critical and catastrophic both on the levels of the state and civil society. The 2021–2025 Gender Equality Plan remains purely declarative and unrealizable in conditions of an uncontrollable increase in the regime’s rigidity, international sanctions and the elimination of the majority of civil society institutions. In 2021, Belarus did not carry out any real gender policy. On the contrary, the government responded to international sanctions by destroying its domestic partners and civil society organizations in charge of gender-sensitive matters and expert inputs.

The deterioration of the gender situation in the country manifests itself on the economic and socio-demographic levels, although a precise measurement remains impossible in the absence of reliable data. The crisis in the region and in Belarus in particular has a woman’s face.⁸ There are no statistics on deaths from COVID-19, including deaths of elderly women. There is also the acute problem of domestic violence,⁹ which is exacerbated amid general political violence and the absence of legislation on the prevention of violence, and the problem of impoverishment of the population, especially of women, as they are the first to face unemployment, layoffs and unequal pay challenges.

⁸ Guterres, António. “A Crisis with a Woman’s Face.” *United Nations in Belarus*, 07 Mar. 2021, <https://belarus.un.org/en/115171-crisis-womans-face>.

⁹ Гарбацкі, Уладзь. “Хатні гвалт дзяржаўнага маштабу.” *Радыё Свабода*, 21 Feb. 2021, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31114127.html>.

However, there are positive signals in the generally discouraging environment. The comparative perspective of the analysis of women's white-attired movements in Belarus with similar movements in other authoritarian states (Cuba, Argentina) suggests the continued existence and functioning of Belarusian women's protests, because, for example, Cuban ladies in white have faced similar brutality, crackdown, arrests and even killings. Some optimism is inspired by the fact that the Cuban women in white achieved the release of hundreds of political dissidents after years of protests.

RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS: PRESSURE ON CHURCHES AND PERSECUTION OF BELIEVERS

Alexander Shramko

Summary

In 2021, like the entire nongovernmental sector, the Churches were in the crosshairs of the regime, which sought total control over all segments of civil society. This was primarily reflected in personnel changes in the leadership of the *two* leading confessions – the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Alongside the reshuffles made under the government’s pressure, the authorities interfered in religious affairs on an unprecedented scale, and imposed their ideological narratives, striving to fill ideology with pseudo-religious content and simulate the “unity of the Churches and the state.” Repressions against believers and religious organizations, which were involved in the 2020 protests, continued.

Trends:

- Demonstration of various degrees of loyalty to the authorities by the leading denominations; the loss of independency of the official Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC); attempts to balance between formal loyalty and displays of some autonomy made by the Catholic Church;
- Ongoing consolidation and cooperation between Christians of different confessions at the lower tier of the clergy and laity against the backdrop of indecisiveness of the Church leadership;
- Government’s attempts to take the Churches under control and use them for the state’s purposes by suppressing the Church leadership, persecuting lay activists, and exploiting the religious discourse for propaganda purposes.

Sentiments in the Churches: an outward glance

The impact of the political crisis on religious communities’ sentiments is illustrated by the survey conducted by the Christian

Vision group of the Coordination Council and the National Poll independent sociological project from December 20, 2020 to January 10, 2021, involving 4,408 respondents identified by their phone numbers in Viber.

According to the survey¹, regardless of denomination, 89% choose the answer “Yes, they [the Church leaders] should actively participate in public life by advocating human rights and condemning violence”. Twenty percent of the respondents linked this participation with support for protesters.

Seventy-nine percent of Catholics believed that their leaders ideologically supported the demands put forward by the protesters, while only 48% of Protestants were convinced of this. At the same time, neither Catholics nor Protestants thought that most of their religious leaders were sympathetic to the incumbent authorities, while 30% of Orthodox believers thought that the Orthodox Church leaders ideologically supported the authorities.

Seventy-four percent of Orthodox believers described their attitude to the actions of their Church leaders in the current political situation as extremely negative. Only 20% saw both positive and negative examples. The majority was concerned not so much about support for the authorities, as about the passivity, silence and hypocrisy. About 30% of respondents were so disappointed that they were willing to switch to another denomination, although only 3% said that they actually did.

In April 2021, the Telegram channel of the Christian Vision group questioned the subscribers about how preachers of different denominations react to the political crisis in Belarus (342 respondents in total).² An almost equal number of Orthodox

¹ «Результаты “Народного опроса” по исследованию религиозного сообщества Беларуси и протестах. Часть 1. Общее.» Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі, 24 June 2021, <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/rezultaty-narodnogo-oprosa-po-issledovaniyu-religioznogo-soobshhestva-belarusi-i-protetax-chast-1/>.

² Хрысціянская візія, 22 Apr. 2021, <https://t.me/christianvision/757>.

respondents said that their parishes either did not touch upon political issues, or criticized the incumbent authorities, or supported the protest. The pro-government sermons were exactly half as many as those critical of the authorities.

The ratio is even more contrasting in other Churches. Catholics have 10 times more “critical” parishes than ‘neutral’ ones, and Protestants have more than twice as many. Only two Protestants said there were pro-government sermons, while Catholics reported none.

The Christian Vision concludes that Belarusian Churches and the clergy are part of society, and advocates of change among them are in the overwhelming majority.³ However, the positions of the denomination leaders differ considerably. Catholic bishops mostly sided with society and condemned the actions of the government. Even if a priest has pro-government views, he is likely to refrain from voicing them during sermons. The Orthodox leaders in the person of Metropolitan Veniamin (Tupeko), on the contrary, prefer showing loyalty to the government, and silence some politically active priests.

Changes in the Belarusian Orthodox Church

After the appointment of Metropolitan Veniamin as the new Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus with his explicitly servile policy toward the regime, the Grodno Eparchy headed by Archbishop Artemy (Kishchenko) was standing out for its pro-democratic spirit for quite a while. During the 2020 protests, Archbishop Artemy openly condemned the authorities and security agencies for violence against civilians.

³ Хрысціянская візія, 01 May 2021, <https://t.me/christianvision/888>.

A purge in the Grodno Diocese began in June 2021. Archbishop Artemy was hastily removed from his post and forced to retire in violation of the Church statutes, first by the Synod of Bishops of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and then by the Moscow Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. Bishop Antony (Doronin), who was transferred from Slutsk to replace him, removed the priests who were sympathetic towards Artemy from key positions, and took all possible measures to suppress all undesirable sentiments in the Diocese.

Changes in the Belarusian Catholic Church

Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, Metropolitan of Minsk and Mogilev, Chairman of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus, formally retired in the early days 2021, having attained the age of 75. Following negotiations between Minsk and the Vatican, he returned to Belarus for a short while, after he had been denied entry to the country for *four months*.

His age was hardly the point, considering that an even an older bishop, Kazimierz Welikoselec, was appointed interim apostolic administrator of Minsk and Mogilev. Jozef Staniewski (previously auxiliary bishop of the Grodno Diocese) took the office of archbishop of the Minsk and Mogilev Archdiocese in September. Both priests demonstrate conspicuous loyalty to the regime to such a degree that both the interim administrator⁴ and the new archbishop⁵ find themselves victims of manipulation by state propagandists.

⁴ «Епископ Казимир Великоселец дал интервью государственной газете.» Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі, 11 July 2021, <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/episkop-kazimir-velikoselec-dal-intervyu-gosudarstvennoj-gazete/>.

⁵ Хрысціянская візія, 20 Dec. 2021, <https://t.me/christianvision/1852>.

Government claims leadership in religious life

Striving for total control over all aspects of public life, the government, among other things, claims the role of a religious leader, primarily with the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, paying close attention to the former.

Speaker of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament Natalia Kochanova and even Lukashenko himself hold meetings with the clergy, which look like strategy sessions for issuing directives to subordinates. The Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Education introduced the optional course 'Fundamentals of Spiritual and Moral Culture and Patriotism' in schools to be taught by Orthodox priests, which caused a strong public response. According to the current Statute on the Procedure, Conditions, Content and Forms of Cooperation Between Educational Establishments and Religious Organizations, such courses are only allowed after school hours as part of the character- and morale-building curricular, and only upon written applications from students.

The authorities are more cautious and restrained when it comes to the Catholic Church, but still there's place for absurdity at times. For instance, a "festival of children-adults bonding" organized by the local police with a demonstration of weapons and other police equipment was held in the territory of St. Teresa Avila Church in Shchuchin.

Apparently, the Prayer for Belarus official event on the Independence Day, July 3, was expected as a culmination of the general religious mobilization. Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs and Nationalities Alexander Rumak ordered to hold a morning prayer and ensure attendance, but the effect was not achieved. The event went almost unnoticed by the Orthodox Church, and the response of the Catholics even caused a scandal. The Curia of the Minsk-Mogilev Eparchy recommended

the parishes to include the God Almighty hymn (which is actually prohibited in the country) in the Prayer for Belarus. This spoiled Lukashenko's mood, and he even voiced threats against the clergy.

Another attempt to fill the official ideology with pseudo-religious content and simulate the unity of the Churches and the state was the presence of the heads of the leading confessions and religious attributes at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. However, this did not go beyond the somber formalism, both on the part of the state and the Churches.

Migration crisis through a religious prism

The humanitarian crisis at the border that Belarus shares with Lithuania and Poland organized by the regime to pressurize the West also reflected the desire of the Belarusian authorities to regulate and control all possible activities in the country, including religious.

The Churches and charitable organizations could provide substantial assistance in alleviating the situation with refugees, as they do in Poland and Lithuania. There is the Catholic Charitable Society *Caritas* in Belarus, which has resources and infrastructure for that. The leadership of the Catholic Church stated their willingness to provide humanitarian aid through Caritas, but the government made every effort to hamper civic activism, and forbade the reception of funds from foreign sources.

The regime only allows humanitarian activities within the boundaries it determines. This was once again made obvious at the meeting with representatives of four confessions on the migration crisis chaired by Commissioner Rumak, who used the Churches to address "politicians of the European states". Under the supervision and with permission of Rumak, Metropolitan

Veniamin, head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church stated the readiness “to provide humanitarian aid through the parishes of the Orthodox Church.” Meanwhile, much smaller Orthodox churches in predominantly Catholic Poland and Lithuania acted more effectively and independently, dealing not only with humanitarian aid, but also with the protection of refugee rights.

Believers’ activism and repression

Repressions against believers, who demonstrated their civic and Christian attitudes by protesting against the regime’s immoral actions, continued throughout 2021. Those incarcerated, such as Orthodox Pavel Severinets, Catholics Irena Bernatskaya and Olga Zolotar, and Protestant Vladimir Matskevich, were subjected to additional restrictions. They were denied meetings with clergy or access to religious literature.

Homes of Orthodox and Catholic clergymen were searched across the country, and security services put many active priests under surveillance. Some of them had to leave Belarus. A number of priests had to delete their pages on social media or switched to “for friends only” access. Personnel purges were also conducted in educational institutions of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. The Minsk Theological Academy, which stood out among Russian Orthodox academies for its free spirit, was hit the hardest.

Evangelical Christians were also under pressure. The video series “Voice of the Church” and “Witnesses to Violence” were deleted, and other projects, such as Sergei Lukyanov’s “Pastor in the City”, were suspended. Some religious communities involved in the pro-democracy movement are denied official registration, while section 193-1, which criminalizes activities without registration, has been returned to the Criminal Code. Therefore, any

publicly voiced position can draw attention of law enforcers, and put the very existence of the community in question.

The New Life Full Evangelical Church, which openly condemned violence in 2020, was forcibly evicted from its preaching house, but it continues to hold open-air worship services every Sunday near the vacant house despite threats from the authorities.

Interfaith prayer services are also regularly held in front of the Town Hall. But the most significant and visible role in the pro-democracy Christian movement is played by the Christian Vision group of the Coordination Council, which unites believers of different Christian denominations. Its potential has even grown as many Christian activists choose to emigrate.

Conclusion

The authorities' attempts to make religion an instrument of its ideology have produced a rather limited result. The only thing the authorities can do in this respect is to bridle and pressurize the supreme bodies of confessions and religions, thus exploiting religious discourse for propaganda purposes. Attempts in these *two* directions will most likely continue.

In this situation, one should expect greater consolidation of the Christian community around informal grassroots initiatives. Also, the shiftlessness and servility of the Church leadership can result in greater spiritual renown of those who really follow Christian commitments, making their lives an example, first of all prisoners of the regime. In response, the authorities may increase persecution of believers, including for disobedience to higher Church authorities.

HEALTHCARE: VICIOUS POLITICIZATION AND VACCINATION FAILURE

Oleg Monastyrsky-Severny

Summary

In 2021, the health care system of Belarus showed poor effectiveness in responding to COVID-19 pandemic challenges, both in preventing deaths and vaccination. Important managerial decisions were often made based on political expediency, rather than health support considerations.

The practice of concealing health care problems became common. Many professionals who raised questions were forcedly silenced. The strengthened administrative control and regulation triggered an outflow of specialists, although the salaries in the industry were the highest in the previous few years, mainly through bonuses paid to those who directly worked with COVID-infected patients.

The vaccination campaign failed due to the ineffective awareness-building efforts of the Health Ministry and general vaccination hesitancy amid the increased coronavirus incidence and shortages of medicines and consumables.

Trends:

- Elimination of vertical communication channels within the system, purges of undesirable personnel, and fear-mongering;
- Brain drain and demotivation of those who stayed, as a consequence, which affects the quality of medical care and medical science;
- Manipulations of statistics for creating a sense of self-complacency in one part of society and emotional discomfort in the other part that did not trust official data;
- Erosion of credibility of the state health care system, complicated communication between doctors and patients;
- Ineffective awareness-building efforts of the Health Ministry during vaccination.

COVID-19 pandemic as a challenge to the health care system

The global COVID-19 pandemic continued in 2021 in the so-called “second” (winter 2020–2021 in Belarus) and “third waves”. In Belarus, the third wave began in April and peaked in October when the delta variant of the coronavirus infection came to the country, bringing twice as high contagiousness and more frequent severe forms of the disease, including in young patients.

The increased contagiousness of the new SARS-CoV-2 variant and the larger number of severe forms were yet another significant challenge to global health care in terms of available treatment and technological capacities, increasingly requiring oxygen supply, health monitoring equipment, etc. In some countries (including Russia), hospitals got so quickly overcrowded with patients, and the media began to describe the situation as catastrophic.

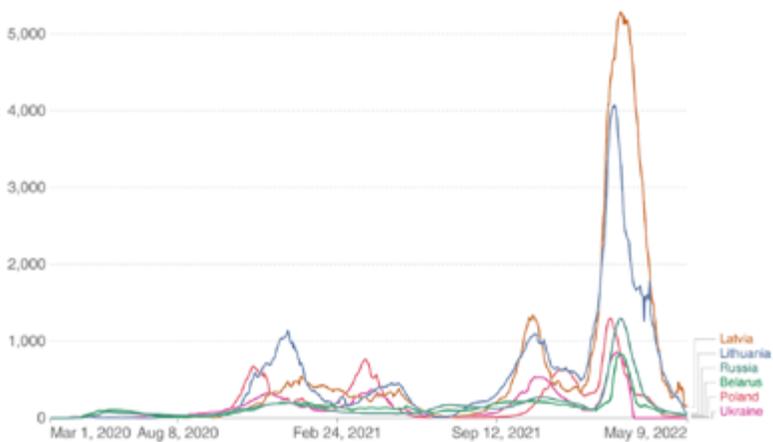
Various vaccines were developed surprisingly quickly and the worldwide vaccination campaign began, being, in fact, another challenge to the national health care systems.

Incredibility of Belarusian COVID-19 morbidity and mortality statistics

The coronavirus pandemic (like any acute respiratory viral infections) came in waves with different morbidity rates. However, the data provided by the Ministry of Health of Belarus on a daily basis were significantly different from those of the neighboring countries, and often went beyond the bounds of common sense.

The Oxford University Our World in Data provides a good visualization of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic waves. Figure 1 shows the dynamics of the number of patients with COVID-19 (based on PCR tests) in Belarus and the neighboring countries.

Figure 1. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people



Note. 7-day rolling average. Due to limited testing, the number of confirmed cases is lower than the true number of infections.

Source: Our World in Data.

Conspicuously, Belarus and Russia differ from other countries by the unusual smoothness of these waves, which means that the number of officially reported cases is lower. At the beginning of the year, First Deputy Minister of Health Elena Bogdan said that “the coronavirus incidence plateaued in Belarus”. This could be a good meme, but not a clear epidemiological term.

This “plateau” probably resulted from the limited possibilities to perform PCR diagnostics in Belarus. There are significant reasons to doubt this, though, and to believe that the line agencies and/or the central government decided not to provide the real data. Below are arguments in a nutshell in favor of this assumption.

An extrapolation of the data of the spring survey by SATIO and BEROC shows that as of early March 2021, more than 1.2 million of the urban population aged 18 to 64 had been exposed to

the COVID-19 virus in the past¹, while according to the Ministry of Health, there were almost half as many such persons (697,600) as of the end of 2021.²

The national statistics on the number of deaths from COVID-19 in Belarus (Figure 2) was also phenomenal. The deceased were even called differently: those died with detected coronavirus infection (5,561 as of the end of 2021). Their number virtually did not change throughout the epidemic waves, which contradicts all the laws of epidemiology, let alone the mathematical logic.

Figure 2. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases & deaths per million people



Note. 7-day rolling average. Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of cause of death means the cases and deaths may not be accurate.

Source: Our World in Data.³

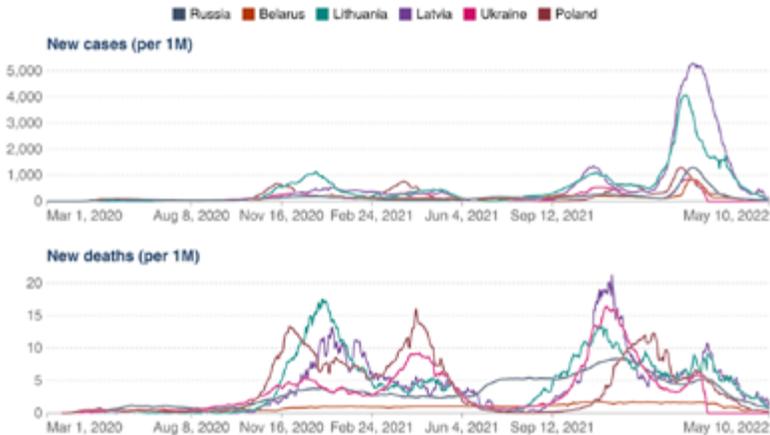
¹ «Восприятие ситуации с COVID-19 и отношение к вакцинам.» SATIO/BEROC, 19 Mar. 2021, <https://www.beroc.org/upload/iblock/1fc/1fc4cc66b9e5736372accb04bee8ce36.pdf>.

² Официальный Минздрав / Telegram, 30 Dec 2021, <https://t.me/minzdravbelarus/3964>.

³ Hanna Ritchie et al. "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Cases." *Our World in Data*, University of Oxford, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases>.

The comparison of Belarus with the neighboring countries with respect to the same parameters helps visualize this phenomenon (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases & deaths per million people



Note. 7-day rolling average. Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of cause of death means the cases and deaths may not be accurate.

Source: Our World in Data

In most countries, the number of deaths naturally increases with wave-like growth of morbidity, so the almost flat lines in Belarusian statistics look anomalous, and cannot be explained by other reasons, but an arbitrary decision to provide this particular information.

The real mortality rate could be estimated based on the excess mortality data, but these statistics have not been available since 2020, so it can only be estimated judging by indirect indicators. *Nature* journal published research conducted by American and Belarusian experts, who used a validated mathematical

model of the analysis of Google requests for ritual services in the period from early 2020 to August 2021. According to the experts, during the studied pandemic period, mortality in Belarus exceeded the pre-pandemic values by more than one-third on average (2,953 to 3,690 excess deaths).⁴

eLife journal published an analysis of excess mortality⁵ based on the *World Mortality Dataset*, the largest and most regularly updated open database of mortality in 103 countries. Given the data on the first half of 2020 provided by Belarus to the UN Statistical Commission (5,700 deaths against 390 reported by the Health Ministry), the authors recorded a 14.7-fold underreporting. As one of the authors wrote, “it is hard to assume that so large underreporting can have any unintentional explanation”.⁶

Such manipulation of statistics creates a false sense of self-complacency for one part of the population and chronic emotional discomfort for another, i.e. those who realize the apparent improbability of the given numbers. This undermines trust in official medicine, complicates communication between doctors and patients, impedes analysis of the real state of affairs in the industry, and the ability or willingness to make carefully weighed managerial decisions. Besides, the inaccessibility of mortality data, the silencing of the facts of coworkers' deaths and lack of respect for them, and the apparent contradictions

⁴ Kirpich, A., Shishkin, A., Weppelmann, T.A. et al. “Excess mortality in Belarus during the COVID-19 pandemic as the case study of a country with limited non-pharmaceutical interventions and limited reporting.” *Nature*, 31 Mar. 2022, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-09345-z>.

⁵ Karlinsky, A., Kobak, D. “Tracking excess mortality across countries during the COVID-19 pandemic with the World Mortality Dataset.” *eLife*, 30 June 2021, <https://elifesciences.org/articles/69336>.

⁶ Нелюбин, Максим. «Смертность от ковида в Беларуси: учёный о занижении статистики в 15 раз.» *DW*, 02 Feb. 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/nemeckij-uchenyj-o-covid-19-v-belarusi/a-56413826>.

between the official data and the real situation significantly demotivated health workers.

Ineffective management as a scourge of the health care system

Problems with supplies of medicines and consumables continued in 2021. Although production of means of individual protection and antiseptics was launched after the first wave of the pandemic, there were mass interruptions of supplies of consumables for lung ventilators, anticoagulants, Remdesivir and other drugs.

Health Minister Dmitry Pinevich said that BYN 1.5 billion (around 1% of GDP⁷) were spent on COVID-19 response measures in 2021. BYN 273.5 million were also allocated from Lukashenko's reserve fund, and the World Bank provided a USD 98 million loan under the program of emergency response to COVID-19 in the Republic of Belarus. For comparison, Lithuania allocated slightly over 1% of GDP⁸ in 2020 to support the health care system, and there were no significant disruptions of medicine supplies, although there were some difficulties with protective gears and antiseptics at the very beginning of the pandemic, but that was typical of all countries without exception.

The above undoubtedly rooted in the Belarusian authorities' inarticulate policy, i.e. restrictive measures taken during the pandemic, the vaccination failures, ineffective financial

⁷ «Итоги работы органов и организаций здравоохранения в 2021 году и основные направления деятельности на 2022 год.» *Медицинский вестник*, 10 Mar. 2022, <https://medvestnik.by/news/itogi-raboty-organov-i-organizatsij-zdravookhraneniya-v-2021-godu-i-osnovnykh-napravleniyakh-deyatel-nosti-na-2022-god>.

⁸ "Policy Responses to COVID 19." *International Monetary Fund*, <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#L>.

management, and rigid funding of the health care sector, which complicated flexible planning and distribution of funds, including for preventive procurement.

Hospitals reported systematic oxygen supply failures, like it happened, for example, in the Vitebsk Emergency Hospital, where oxygen supply devices malfunctioned regularly and for long periods, putting patients at risk. The problem was not resolved at the local level, so head of the intensive care unit Vladimir Martov had to appeal to the minister of health. The case went public, and the Ministry of Health sent a commission to the hospital. The commission, however, checked how properly the patients were treated, rather than looking into the oxygen supply interruptions. Martov, a renowned specialist with a thirty-year experience, was fired, and problems with oxygen continued. Doctors of other hospitals pointed at the same problems and the similar approach to solving them.

Politicization of health care management and vaccination failure

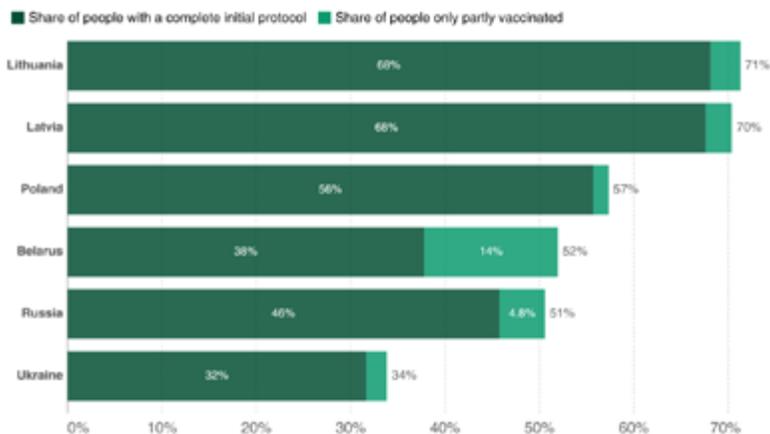
In 2021, top officials of the country fundamentally changed the rhetoric regarding the relevance of COVID-19 related topics for Belarus, and began using the pandemic as an occasion to demonstrate the state's concern for its citizens, while hospitals and polyclinics became a background for TV reports about the red zones. *SB Belarus Today* newspaper counted about *twenty* such statements made by Lukashenko alone during the year.

However, the demonstration of the high attention to the problem did not lead to an increase in the effectiveness of the system, but only exacerbated the dominating considerations of political expediency and voluntarism in managerial decision-making. For example, during the next wave of the pandemic in October, Lukashenko criticized the compulsory wearing

of masks, after which the Ministry of Health issued decree No.111 that abolished the administrative responsibility for not using respiratory protection indoors and in public transport.

The government made the political decision not to import Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca vaccines to Belarus, although, according to a SATIO/BEROC opinion poll, the population trusted them more than the available Russian Sputnik V and Chinese Sinovac. In the autumn, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya's Office negotiated with the European Union a donation of at least one million doses of European vaccines to Belarus⁹, but Minsk ignored the offer.

Figure 4. Share of people vaccinated against COVID-19, Dec 31, 2021



Note. Alternative definitions of a full vaccination, e. g. having been infected with SARS-CoV-2 and having 1 dose of a 2 dose protocol, are ignored to maximize comparability between countries.

Source: Our World in Data

⁹ “Ціханоўская: ЕС гатовы дапамагчы беларусам і прадаставіць вакцыны”. *Euroradio*, 29 Oct. 2021, <https://euroradio.fm/cihanouskaya-es-gatovy-dapomagchy-belarusam-i-pradastavic-vakcyny>.

The SATIO/BEROC opinion poll showed that more than a *half* of Belarusians were reluctant to get vaccinated, and one in *four* categorically rejected it. The authorities did not conduct an effective awareness building campaign. Lukashenko said that “the Russian and Chinese vaccines proved to be much better than their Western analogues”. As a result, by the end of 2021, 51.8% of the population of Belarus¹⁰ received one vaccine dose, and only 39.8% completed a full course of vaccination, which was a considerably lower rate than in Poland and Lithuania (Figure 4).

Personnel purges and nursing staff shortages

In 2020, politically motivated dismissals of health professionals (especially healthcare administrators) were rather sporadic and were primarily targeted at the most visible undesired persons, such as Professor Alexander Mrochek, former director of the Cardiology Research Center, while in 2021, the purges became massive and systematic.

According to the Medical Solidarity Foundation of Belarus and open sources, as of November 2021, more than 90 health professionals were fired on political grounds, including, for example, Mother and Child Center cardiologist Elena Baranova after 25 years of work for her comments on *Facebook*. The Foundation said that more than 250 health care workers were arrested and/or fined.¹¹ Subsequently, most of them were also fired. Their contracts were not extended, which, formally, can be done by the employer under the applicable law.

¹⁰ Официальный Минздрав / *Telegram*, 03 Jan. 2022, <https://t.me/s/minzdravbelarus/3996>

¹¹ «Репрессии и онлайн-консультации: как белорусские врачи объединились, чтобы помогать пациентам и друг другу.» *Настоящее Время*, 15 Nov. 2021, <https://currenttime.tv/a/mediki-belarusi/31558464.html>

Seven health care workers were behind bars on criminal charges (and some more were released on their own recognition), and at least eight medical students were expelled from universities. In November, undergrad student Vladislav Martinovich was expelled from the Belarusian State Medical University, and sentenced to four years in prison for administering White Coats Telegram channel, which was declared extremist.

This “decimation” during the pandemic could not but jeopardize the quality of health care and demotivated health workers, making them think about leaving Belarus or switching to other trades (in particular IT). It is not surprising that in 2021, even according to the official statistics, the medical service density reduced from 55.8 to 55.2 per 10,000 population; nursing staff – from 134.1 to 120.7.

It is planned to solve the staffing problem, applying old methods, i.e. by increasing the number of targeted vacancies in higher educational medical institutions to 80%, and the admission itself by 160 enrollees in medical universities and by 300 in nursing schools. Also, the authorities are counting on the attractive salaries (153% of the national average for doctors and 93% for nurses), but do not take into account that to earn this money, doctors need to work 37% more hours, and nurses 26% more hours on average. Besides, the average salary includes bonuses for treating Covid patients, which will no longer be paid once the pandemic is over. But even during the pandemic, not all health care workers received the bonuses, and most of them had much more modest incomes.

Conclusion

The transformation of Belarusian society and the state in 2021 resulted in a transformation of the Belarusian health care system into an outer show, convenient for the bosses, but problematic

from the point of view of efficiency. The elimination of vertical communication, repressions, and personnel appointments based on political loyalty made health care ineffective and formalistic on the part of the staff.

Since the current state system is predominantly punitive and repressive, it is safe to assume that the staff attrition will increase, which means that the quality of medical care services will continue to decline in many respects due to deterioration of the material resources and pay cuts. Also, the toxicity of Belarus as a state will inevitably lead to a limitation of contacts with the civilized world, which will affect health care quality even more and lower the already low level of medical science.

On top of this, virtually no efforts were made to digitalize health care in 2021, although it had been previously declared a panacea for all woes. It was only reported in March that the Ministry of Health discussed a project on a software platform for the centralized health information system in Belarus. Meanwhile, Belarus is to start repaying in 2022 the funds borrowed from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development for this digitalization.

The manual steering of the system will increase, and performance discipline (in practice, simulation of vigorous activity) will be further named among the priorities against the backdrop of the reduced financing of the industry. It will be necessary to find additional resources to keep health care alive, which, in the situation of dropping revenues from the export of services, can be only compensated by an increase in the share of fee-based services in state clinics and hospitals. Ultimately, the quality of medical care will deteriorate even more.

BELARUSIAN CULTURE: LIFE AFTER LIFE

Maxim Zhbakov

Summary

The year 2021 saw the continued disastrous spinning dive of Belarusian authoritarianism in all its dimensions, including culture. The situation was indisputably marked by all signs of not just a systemic crisis, but a complete disintegration of the previous hierarchy of values and the structure of the cultural order.

The former mode of sluggish political stagnation with the relatively autonomous coexistence of the three models of culture and culturalness – state-serving, conditionally commercial and creative underground – entered the phase of acute confrontation. The cultural process turned into a police operation, on the one hand, and fragmented civil resistance, on the other, leaving the commercial sector to pack the bags and learn to survive on the wreckage of previous projects and reputations. The only thing that was left in the public cultural field cleansed of undesirable elements were politicians and conformists.

The state went into hysterical self-defense mode. For the creative field, this means the activation of the emergency program of cultural repression: permanent political censorship, forced emigration of artists, liquidation of cultural venues, actual prohibition of the artistic freedom, and prosecution of dissidents. Emigration, liquidation, anonymization and creative underground made the virtual headlines in 2021.

Trends:

- Transition of the war on independent culture into routine repression and permanent domestic terror with harsh extirpation of the cultural field and explicit intimidation of the people of culture and local audiences;

- Destruction of the previous ecosystem of horizontal ties, cultural venues, and financial self-sufficiency;
- Impossibility to ensure safety of artists and the public, which has caused most authors and their audiences to leave the dangerous zone of publicity for conspiratorial creativity and creative anonymization;
- Emergency relocation of a considerable part of cultural leaders from the country, which became a part of the 'Belarus outside Belarus' systemic migrant reorganization of Belarusian political, economic, media, and cultural entities and projects.

Cultural terror: down-to-nothing haircut

The total misunderstanding of the nature of social protest multiplied by the blind faith in global conspiracies and the omnipresent NATO tanks forced the authorities, which received a powerful shock in August 2020, to actively search for the internal enemy and insidious puppeteers of the protest. Most grassroots civic initiatives were declared foreign agents, and this includes independent culture.

The wave of velvet Belarusization was brought down even before the election, during the hunt for stores with handy-dandy merchandise carrying national motifs. Then came the lists of activists/extremists. The purge was zealous and profound, hitting the Union of Writers, PEN Center, *Godna* and *Budzma* campaigns, and the *Korpus* creative space. Musicians, poets and DJs went to jail for days or years. Paddy wagons under red-green flags uncompromisingly struggled with red scarves and white socks. A line of pro-government merchandise – black and gray shirts and hoodies with quotations from the self-elected leader – were offered to help them.

To go to prison for years (15 days of administrative arrest are no big deal now), it was enough to play Viktor Tsoi's songs

on bagpipes, like IRDORATH ethno-fantasy band did¹, paint an ideologically wrong portrait, like painter Ales Pushkin did², play an instrumental DJ set during a demonstration, like cultural activist Alexander “Papa Bo” Bogdanov did. Deferred hunting became a popular genre of cultural work: musicians and artists were identified on surveillance camera recordings made during protest marches even six to ten months after the actions.

Return of partisanship: the no-name time

What seemed like a cultural revolution at the height of the mass protest movement inside the country has shrunk in 2021 to scattered experiments in self-defense, eluding and conspiratorial events.

Disowning a signature under a cultural text, blurring a photo, cutting back on media—this is about everything at once: the refusal to speak openly and personally, the fear of getting on an arrest list, the desire to stay in the protest camp and yet have an opportunity to travel, disbelief in a quick positive outcome, and catchy advertising tags. Poet Slavomir Adamovich once publicly stitched up his mouth to protest against the arbitrariness of the authorities. Today, the Free Choir sings blindfolded.³

¹ «Лидеров белорусской группы Irdorath осудили на два года колонии.» *Deutsche Welle*, 14 Dec. 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/liderov-belorusskoj-gruppy-irdorath-prigovorili-k-dvum-godam-kolonii/a-60120602>.

² «Художник Алесь Пушкин три месяца за решёткой. Разве в картине дело?» БЕЛСАТ, 30 June 2021, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/30-06-2021-hudozhnik-ales-pushkin-tri-mesyatsa-za-reshetkoj-razve-v-kartine-delo/>.

³ «“Вольный хор” исполнил “Пагоню” у Бранденбургских ворот в Берлине.» *Наша Ніва*, 26 June 2021, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=275119&lang=ru>.

The *four actual dimensions* of the latest guerrilla movement are decentralization, autonomization, conditional publicity, and the hope for self-preservation.

The anonymity of new online protest is in some ways in tune with the current anonymity of the power machine. In both cases, it is about personal security, offering of complicity and sharing of responsibility. But there is also a fundamental difference between the anonymity of the powers that be and the anonymity of protest. The anonymization of power is in the imposition of uniformity, loyalty through intimidation, cultivation of artificial passivity, and destruction of narratives. Protest activism, by contrast, is a sum of units capable of perceiving their private movement as part of the general stream of dissent, not waiting for the next global strategy of change.

The new anonymous protester reproduces the basic patterns of the previous century's underground conspiracy: minimum publicity, minimum contacts, and tactics of delinked cells. This is a strength, as seizure of one cell does not destroy the network. But this is also a weakness, as cultural events clam up in a small circle of a reliable minority, sharply narrowing the range of impacts on the incidental audience. Other culture is forced to fence in, turning marginal from the point of view of influence on external and internal social processes.

The present state of affairs is a wartime cultural order, a state of emergency. It spurs the self-elected regime to fight the hostile cultural content, upscale the propaganda hysteria, burns down the unreliable, and, from the ground up, educates the shallow generation of smoothies and muffins in the Belarusian specific partisanship, i.e. creative movements below the state's radar.⁴

⁴ «Максим Жбанков: Политическая революция у нас ещё не произошла. Кто вам сказал, что она случилась?» *Reformation*, 22 Sep. 2021, <https://reform.by/259759-makim-zhbankov-politicheskaja-revoljucija-u-nas-eshhe-ne-proizoshla-kto-vam-skazal-chto-ona-sluchilas>.

The trend of the year is the choreography of action in the presence of an invader, a dance in the occupied territory. Secret events, hidden faces, elaborate metaphors, the play of concealed meanings, actions for export, exhibitions without names (like the Klaipeda *Red Line*). The author goes into the shadow to survive. How to remain relevant and significant at the same time is a question, to which there is no clear answer.

Phantom of an alternative:
recyclables to take out

There are *two* important and directly interrelated trends on the cultural front: the complete nullification of the old mental matrices and forced assimilation into the new European context. Emergency self-identification in the absence of lost financial and organizational resources, acute political frustration, and ideological and stylistic collapse was a test for the Belarusian culture's adequacy and the ability to quickly respond to the traumatic deformation of the cultural space. The inconsistency of unprecedented devastation and the limited opportunity for creative response was the main feature of the troubled times.

The stagnant cultural practices of the recent past produced a peculiar kind of the quasi-Soviet author: a cautious peddler of branded clichés, self-repetition and self-citation, firmly stuck in a narrow patch of old successes, a character who has nowhere and no reason to grow.

This used to be a survival strategy, and now it has become a reactionary, random décor, filling the existential void with random noises, videos with the slope of protest glamor, the pioneering cuteness of hipster bands (Navi Band, VAL), and heart print pullovers, indispensable ethnic motifs, inextirpable choral experiments, and endlessly victorious march of cheeky pussycats. In the art environment scattered all over Belarus, the lack

of tomorrow's trendsetters makes yesterday's survivors mainstream.

Even the art criticism turned out to be secondary. Actionist Alexei Kuzmich made a video-deconstruction of Belarusian protest as an infantile teenage hysteria without sense or prospects,⁵ and did it in the language of... infantile teenage hysteria without sense or prospects. He mirrored the situation, and became a hostage to it.

The secondariness of efforts, insignificance of achievements, and parochialism of the cultural optics are reflected in the choice of enemies. Who are we fighting? With parades and Dazhynki festivals. With the toxic Belarusian TV and Radio Company. With the wretched choice of the state candidate for Eurovision 2021, ludicrous Local Voices. With the attempt to acculturize the moth-eaten X Factor pop contest on the Belarusian soil. With the enthusiasm of the Minsk audience at the concerts of Russian *Hands Up!* pop singers.

And even when attempts to make a statement are made, a secondary semantic and formal resource seizes the initiative and broadcasts in its own way. A psychodrama about a killer in uniform flows into a plastic sketch with quotations from Lermonov and NIZKIZ band ("Error 403" by the Belarus Free Theatre), and the attempt to invent an alternative candidate for Eurovision 2021 turns into a hybrid of electronics, ethnic chants, pictures of Tarot cards, a horned dictator and a double of Lukashenko's youngest son in a red jacket.⁶

⁵ «Я пратэстую. 2021. Францыя/Чернагорія.» *YouTube*, 14 Feb. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjyzTzYQ42s>.

⁶ "Eurovision Belarus 2021 – emigrant version (Shuma – Dreva)." *YouTube*, 15 Mar. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6co2jJVmr0M>.

Country without a country: new maps of Belarusianness

Semantic polyphony and the multilayered character are an important feature of the newest Belarusian culture. The most obvious segment is the triable and tried: fugitives from criminal prosecution and long prison terms. And then there are the corporate relocatees, the office people that migrate according to company policies. Ideological alternatives are the protest staff, children of the world behind the looking-glass, naive dilettantes hooked on revolution, newcomers to politics, fresh citizens with no experience in ideological confrontation, and just random people (including those inside the country), who had not planned to fight, but were not ready to become minced meat in the state meat grinder, plus the splinters of the shattered underground. And Lukashenko's backup dancers. All of those are different audiences and different authors. The motley dimensions of Belarus' resilient cultural identity.

Civil society, which frightened the inertial authorities by its independence from the state machinery, has managed to arrange a flexible system of horizontal ties and creative contacts during the few years of mild Belarusization and relaxation of administrative control, has confidently reached the international level and acquired the status of valid partners. This 'inner Europe' contrasted (sometimes though a strange symbiosis) with the clumsy noise industry of the pro-government establishment, and created a self-sustaining zone of culture of the active minority.

This micro-ecosystem lived in the dormy social medium according to the laws of the new age. And when the system began to struggle against alien implants, persecuting cultural activists and pushing the unwanted outside the country, the surviving 'Europeans' did not become fugitives without an alibi. Irrespective of the scatter, they returned home, to greater Europe, to

a familiar world with clear rules and a clear structure. Evacuated in a package. Took out their common slice of life. Belarus after Belarus.

The experience of forced semantic switch-overs, the emergency change of cultural residency and the ability to make someone else's things their own are valid here. Artist Maxim Osipov travels across Europe with a touring exhibit. He paints Godzilas wearing embroidered shirt, rhymes naïve with pop thrash, and amateur painting with propaganda schizo. Svetlana Ben, the acknowledged art chanson prima, went to Berlin together with another Belarusian traveler, Galia Chikis, to record the "Mirror Ball" single, perhaps the most appropriate response to the current situation in the country.

One more experience of cross-cultural expression, the novel "Wherefore Are You Going, Wolf?" by Eva Vezhnavets, combines magical realism with pagan mythology, blends people's drama with the personal history of the emigrant author, added trippy shamanism and provincial alcoholism. And not only did it become the undisputed winner of the Giedroyc Literary Award, but also set a new standard of quality for a literary work of troubled times.⁷ In her debut "Death.net" novel, Tatiana Zamirovskaya, the old-time cultural emigrant, found, perhaps, the most precise metaphor for a broken time: digital copies of the physically dead are lumped together in a peculiar world and, desperately trying to be alive.

A number of web projects made themselves known in 2021: Nikita Monich and Maksim Zhbankou's new YouTube channels, Nikita Melkozerov's acclaimed "Raspberry Life", and Vadim Prokopyev's "Radio Hague", the combat leaflet of the frontline restaurateur. The previously underdeveloped format of the cultural standup allowed playing on the edge of genres, bringing the

⁷ "Ян Максіміюк. Аповед зламанага чалавека. Размова пра новую кнігу Евы Вежнавец." *Радыё Свабода*, 13 Mar. 2021, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31143720.html>.

cultural anatomization into the media domain, and making media longreads spectacular and stagey. The conversational genre became a fact of Belarusian culture, and marked the possible direction of its growth.

The experience of successful collaborations of European management and Belarusian documentary filmmakers enabled new films that followed the events of 2020, from Warsaw Film Festival winner Andrei Kutsila's "When Flowers Are Not Silent" to Alexei Paluyan's "Courage" on the Oscar longlist, to confidently become favorites of international film festivals.⁸

The practices of flexible setup, lap gluing, montage joints and mobile self-determination were the new experiences of *Belarusianness*. Migration is a traumatic buildup of meaning and style, pushing junk out of the action field. Unnecessary things are thrown aside along the way. This is how everything necessary grows today.

Conclusion

The political crisis made art-activism and cultural terror the main subjects of the day, leaving the sphere of pure entertainment at the mercy of visiting tourists, cut off the habitual patterns of cultural contacts and creative support, and completely nullified the social heft of the subsidized, servile cultural environment. The main events of the year were made for takeout, taken online and/or minimally publicized.

Together with the nation, Belarus' culture undergoes a period of shock therapy, a defocusing of meaning with an unclear perspective and unobvious effectiveness. The style of the age of change inevitably crumbles into formal experiences, external

⁸ «Без "Купалы", но с "Куражом": подводим итоги года в беларусском кино.» *Reformation*, 18 Dec. 2021, <https://reform.by/286548-bez-kupaly-no-s-kurazhom-podvodim-itogi-goda-v-belarusskom-kino>

influences, and self-citation. The collage-montage-feuilleton reel is in fashion for the second year in a row. A strange time is looking for its own vocabulary, and has not found it so far.

What's next? Apparently, new forms of chaotic activism amid the repressive information noise of a higher level. The old order is irreversibly lost. The new one does not yet exist. What is being called "purge" is, in fact, a square one experience, an eve of new stories and emergence of new heroes.

THINK TANKS: RELOCATION WITHOUT SUSPENSION OF OPERATIONS

Natalia Ryabova

Summary

In 2021, the vast majority of think tanks were officially deregistered and deprived of the possibility to work in Belarus. Nevertheless, practically all the Belarusian research centers that were active as of the beginning of the political crisis in 2020 continued working, although mainly from outside the country. Since they were busy with dealing with organizational problems, they produced fewer products than in 2020.

Think tanks drastically reduced their interaction with the state, yet managed to reinforce themselves by employing some experts from public offices. Interaction within the Belarusian Association of Research Centers was reactivated, the Bank of Ideas was launched, and plans for reform proposals under the *Belarus Beehive* project were presented.

Trends:

- Complications faced by analytical centers in the first half of the year followed by a reformatting of the sector and closure and/or relocation due to repressions;
- Reduction in think tanks' productivity due to the rechanneling of resources to solve internal problems;
- Radical reduction in the interaction with the state.

Repressions do not destroy the sector,
but undermine its organizational capacity

A worsened operational environment for Belarusian think tanks in 2021 was expected. It was a popular belief that “political

analytics will only have a free voice outside the country”.¹ The reality turned out to be worse than the forecasts. Virtually all research centers were stripped of registration and, accordingly, could no longer operate in Belarus, which naturally resulted in a reduction in their productivity.

Research titled “Status and Actual Needs of Belarusian Think Tanks” was published in December 2021.² It described the current standing of Belarusian idea factories, both those that worked in Belarus and those originally registered abroad, and analyzed their potential and problems they had to deal with.

Repressions against civil society organizations in 2021 were defined as “external conditions”. A number of researchers and analysts, including Tatiana Kuzina, Valeria Kostyugova, Vladimir Matskevich, Tatiana Vodolazhskaya, Oksana Shelest, Vlad Velichko and many others were arrested and criminally prosecuted. Think tanks faced a deterioration of the legal, economic and media environment in Belarus, discrediting by the authorities, and attempts to substitute them with loyal organizations.

In 2021, expert centers suffered from repressions, lost their registration in Belarus, and partially or completely relocated their staff to other jurisdictions. Only those, which were affiliated with the state and supported the authorities during the political crisis, dodged liquidation.

Nevertheless, practically all Belarusian think tanks which were active in the period of the beginning of the political crisis continued working. The organizational capacity of the research centers and the entire sector was severely undermined. Some people left or were jailed (repressions, fear, impossibility to work

¹ Ryabova, Natalia. “Think Tanks: Increased role of independent centers.” *Belarusian Yearbook 2020*. Vilnius, 2021, p. 228.

² Рябова, Наталья; Чулицкая, Татьяна; Казакевич, Андрей; Можейко, Вадим. «Состояние и актуальные потребности белорусских исследовательских центров.» SYMPA-BIPART, 2021, https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/think_tanks_situation_and_needs.pdf.

in Belarus, internal conflicts, escape to safer jurisdictions), and infrastructure in Belarus was basically lost (registration, contracts with partners, registered projects on material and technical assistance, offices, a part of equipment). There were also problems with management, fundraising and access to information.

Think tanks drastically reduced their interaction with the state, while managing to reinforce themselves with experts, coming from public offices. Interaction within the community thus intensified within the framework of the Belarusian Association of Research Centers. The Bank of Ideas was launched,³ and the plans for a training program for research centers were presented under the BELARUS BEEHIVE project.⁴

Since think tanks were going through a rough patch, and organizational costs increased, think tanks' output considerably declined against 2020.

Research by leading centers

BEROC Center published more than 30 research papers and macroeconomic reviews in the field of fintech, green and circular economy, business environment, and women's inputs in business, which were slightly fewer than in 2020. Research was conducted on the transformation of nation's values and a general concept of future reforms in Belarus. The Covidonomics Belarus website that focused on impacts of the pandemic on development was no longer updated.

BEROC switched to online educational activities, which includes the KEF-2021 School of Economics, the XI Student School, regular open lectures and seminars, and the *first* course of the Economic Journalism Laboratory.

³ Банк идей, <https://www.ideasbank.vision/>.

⁴ Belarus Beehive, <https://www.belarusbeehive.eu/>.

The Research Center of the Institute for Privatization and Management (IPM) has not updated its website and Telegram channel since July 2021. Before that, five policy briefs and discussions materials on climate risks, economic expectations and the private sector were posted together with IPM Index business sentiments monitoring. The Kastryčnicki Economic Forum (KEF) did not take place in 2020 and 2021. The KEF website published the book “The State for the People. Why Values and Public Opinion Matter for Social Policy and How to Bring It Closer to Ideal.”⁵ It contained materials about the influence of expectations on the economy, and infographics about what the Belarusian economy should be like.

CASE Belarus published four studies on Belarus – EU trade in services, the state and financial sectors of Belarus and impacts of the pandemic on the national economy, posted a series of interviews with experienced foreign reformers and offered webinars on Belarus – Russia economic ties.

Belarus Security Blog published reports on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, the Eurasian Security Digest, national and economic security monitoring findings, comments and analysis. The Varta radio program stopped broadcasts.

The expert initiative Minsk Dialogue held a virtual roundtable session titled “30 Years after the USSR: Balkanization of Eastern Europe?”, published reports and reviews, and posted three issues of the Minsk Barometer (a review of Belarus’ main foreign policy trends and security).

Nashe Mneniye (“Our Opinion”) expert community published 20 to 25 analytical papers on various topics per month until July 2021, when the site editor Valeria Kostyugova was jailed. The number of posts reduced after that. The Belarusian

⁵ «Государство для человека. Почему ценности и общественное мнение имеют значение для социальной политики и как приблизить её к “идеалу”» Исследовательский центр ИМП, 2021, <http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/books/state2021.pdf>.

Yearbook (Russian and English versions) summed up the results of 2020. Jointly with the Press Club, Belarus in Focus and Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, *Nashe Mneniye* organized online sessions of the Expert Analytical Club, which were then posted both as videos and text summaries. Among other things, the participants discussed the state of the expert community under repression (July 2021).

The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) published the second issue of the National Identity Index, studies on value transformations and pandemic impacts, analytical reviews and commentaries. The website *Covidresearch.by* previously launched by BISS for coronavirus pandemic insight and analysis stopped functioning. Currently, materials on this topic are posted on the main website of the organization.

The Center for European Transformation started *The Fourth Republic*, an analytical project aimed at “finding grounds and possible options for the transition of the Republic of Belarus from an authoritarian to a democratic state.” Experts contributed texts and videos about possible future arrangements in different areas of life in Belarus and ways to reform them. The Center continued monitoring of communication in Belarusian Telegram chat rooms, and published the e-book “Answering for Myself. Notes by a Tart Tempered Philosopher” by Vladimir Matskevich based on his Facebook posts of 2019, and posted analytical comments on current events.

The BIPART Research Center conducted research on the state of civil society in the political crisis, civil society organizations and think tanks, and produced infographics, analysis, and commentary for the *Kosht Urada* project. Educational activities were conducted online as part of the SYMPA School.

The Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies mainly published analytical reviews and comments. There were no more significant materials on the Center’s website in 2021.

The Political Sphere institute for political studies posted analytics and commentary, and made a video blog. It organized the IX International Congress of Researchers in Belarus,⁶ which took place October 1–3 in Kaunas, and numbered around 150 in-person and 200 online participants.

The EAST Center released a series of studies on the coronavirus pandemic and vaccination (including a study of authoritarian post-Soviet countries' responses) and a study on countering misinformation in Central and Eastern Europe.

iSANS expert network issued a report on the use of weapons by Belarusian security forces to disperse peaceful protest actions, published quarterly monitoring of narratives of Belarusian state TV channels, materials on militarization of Belarus, the migration crisis, integration with Russia, and Belarusian propaganda personas.

The Strategy Research Center, which lost its founder Leonid Zaiko (died in 2020) and official registration, apparently ceased to exist as an organization. The *Mises Center* also did not post any new research on its website, but Jaroslav Romanchuk continued providing analysis and comments as an independent expert.

The Bologna Committee only published current news on education, and did not issue any monitoring or research materials.

The New Ideas Center employed new researchers—Gennady Korshunov, former director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, and Pavel Matsukevich, former diplomat and chargé d'affaires ad interim of Belarus in Switzerland (2016–2020). As a result, the Center enhanced the quality of its sociological and international research. It also started What Belarusians Think Telegram channel with analysis of public opinion. The Center published the Rating of Belarusian Cities 2021, studies, podcasts, articles and analysis, held online

⁶ Міжнародны кангрэс даследчыкаў Беларусі, <http://icbs.palityka.org/>.

events (such as the *Re-Shape* conference and the Young Reformer School), workshops and expert discussions.

The *Regional Expert Club* (recently launched in Mogilev) mainly posted materials from the local media, as well as the results of several local opinion polls on the role of activism and volunteerism, the potential of self-organization, and urban problems in Mogilev and the Mogilev Region.

Independent sociologists continued working mainly online. Regular online surveys of the urban population from Chatham House Belarus⁷ present the dynamics of changes in public opinion. Various sociological measurements made by some other foreign institutions are not available in the public domain. People's Poll and Honest People conducted political surveys that were not claiming to be representative samplings.

State researchers continued publishing very few findings. The rampant political crisis and repression distanced state and independent researchers from each other even more. The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research stood out to a certain extent. It maintains the strong presence in the state-controlled mass media, but no studies have ever been published on its website, except for materials in the Opinion section.

Influence on policy making and relations with stakeholders

State

Open cooperation has shrunk to next to zero. There was some interaction in the form of information transfers through indirect channels (international organizations, mass media, social media, etc.). Several officials and representatives of the

⁷ "Belarus Initiative." *Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/russia-and-eurasia-programme/belarus-initiative>.

academic community continue to cooperate with Belarusian research centers, and contribute papers under pseudonyms.

Civil society organizations

In 2021, civil society was under even more pressure than in 2020, being busy with mere survival. Coupled with problems faced by the attacked civil society segments, organizations' research is not much in demand on the part of civil society.

Media

Media outlets were also subject to massive repression. Many of them were pushed out of the country, and their websites were blocked in Belarus. Those, who continued working, cooperate with research centers. The media ask for comments and analysis, and research centers provide their products to them. The collaboration between independent think tanks and state media has been curtailed. State analysts only make comments in the state media.

Political parties and movements

Think tanks usually seek to retain independence at the institutional level, and do not engage in cooperation or consultation with any political entities. Research findings and individual projects of interest to political actors (e.g. the Bank of Ideas) are presented to the entire democratic community. Individual analysts and experts do selectively consult political forces, though.

Conclusion

The unpredictable and adverse environment should be perceived by think tanks as a “new normal,” a narrow space, in which they need to show some flexibility. They will try to do what they are supposed to and what they know how to do, i.e. provide analysis

and research, education, outreach, and monitoring. However, it is hard to predict to what extent the environment in Belarus and in the entire region would facilitate or hamper these activities.

ECONOMY

MACROECONOMIC SITUATION: HEADING INTO THE UNKNOWN UNDER THE FLAG OF A FOREIGN TRADE MIRACLE

Dmitry Kruk

Summary

The year 2021 was quite controversial from the economic point of view. Judging by the key macroeconomic indicators, it could be recognized as relatively successful. Output grew by 2.3%, which did not look hugely impressive, yet it helped end the COVID-caused recession. Most of the macroeconomic and financial stability indicators showed a significant improvement, inflation being among few problems. Price rises accelerated to around 10%.

All positive trends were ensured by the preservation and even expansion of the 'foreign trade miracle,' i. e. the extremely favorable environment for Belarus' foreign trade. However, it was deceptive in many respects, given the institutional regress and the growing pressure of sanctions that affected overall growth. The influence of the sanctions did not fully manifest themselves in 2021, but gave rise to great uncertainty and a wide range of threats to the Belarusian economy.

Trends:

- Foreign trade miracle as a driver of modest output growth; fragile financial stability, and quite comforting foreign trade and fiscal stand;
- Acceleration of inflation to a double-digit rate;
- Significant institutional regress; drastic deterioration of the environment for long-term growth;
- High uncertainty caused by sanctions and numerous downside risks in the absence of clear economic policy priorities.

Echoes of the pandemic recession and weak growth environment

The near-term outlook seemed very blurred in early 2021. On the one hand, external demand was rapidly recovering in the second half of 2020, which began to pull Belarus out of the pandemic recession. This was also facilitated by the agreed prices and terms for the purchase of Russian crude oil and, primarily, natural gas. On the other hand, domestic demand remained sluggish with no structural prerequisites for a revitalization of its growth.

Investment demand looked problematic the most in this respect. Future growth of the households' final consumption expenditure looked a little better: its increase could rely on recovery effects, but primary impulses of growth were needed in order to give it a boost, which could only come from the outside.

The growth potential depended one way or another on external demand, which, at the beginning of 2021, held out the prospect of nearly 1.5% output growth by the end of the year. A further significant improvement in the external situation would increase output to 2.0–2.5%, while a worse situation would result in zero growth or even a moderate recession.

Systemic risks and the government's desire to hide from them

In addition to the above gloomy picture, a large number of systemic threats were identified in 2021. For example, during the pandemic, many state-owned enterprises faced a chronic problem of debts, so a growing debt crisis was quite probable early in the year, and then came the sanctions (both against Belarus and Russia), the aggravated political crisis, migration, and new global economy shocks.

Institutional measures were needed to neutralize these threats. However, after the period of the selective liberalization in 2015–2018, the authorities turned allergic to such measures. Short-term horizons and here-and-now priority measures became more and more evident in Belarus' economic policy. Institutional issues were looked into every now and then, but not deeply and only out of necessity.

The tangible threat of the debt crisis forced the authorities once again to try to find at least a partial solution to this problem. The mechanism sought should be both painless for enterprises and for the country's financial stability, and help avoid the visualization of de facto incurred losses.

Unable to find a way to invent the impossible, the government began to address the debt problem selectively in the most severe and acute cases. At the beginning of 2021, the situation at the Belarusian Steel Works (BMZ) was recognized as such.¹ The equivalent of USD 620 million debt of the company was transformed into a debt to the national budget. The BMZ's debt was restructured with respect to the payback period, and converted from foreign exchange into the national currency. The bonds, for which the country purchased the debt from banks, remained in foreign exchange, which meant that the national budget assumed the currency risk.

Finally, some of BMZ's debts to banks were written off, repaid at a discount, and transformed into a banks' share of the company. This episode was unique in the practice of debt clearing in Belarus in terms of its scale (about 1.3% of GDP), the number of instruments involved, and the results (in the form of transferring risks and losses to the budget and banks).

The BMZ case became a kind of a benchmark (decree No.391) for the general mechanism that ensures the conversion of bad

¹ Гарбацевич, Артём. «Секретный план по спасению БМЗ: Минфин возьмёт долг на себя, банки ежемесячно будут выделять по \$ 6 млн на зарплату.» *Наша ніва*, 19 Feb. 2021, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=268451&lang=ru>.

debts into good debts through their restructuring and the application of new management standards at the debtor enterprises. When doing that, the authorities hoped to avoid admitting large-scale losses, and if they would nevertheless be visible, they would have to be shouldered by the national budget.

Greater integration package:
an attempt to plug economic and political gaps

The tax maneuver in the Russian oil sector entered the next phase in 2021. For Belarus, this meant that the entry price of Russian crude oil rose from about 82.5% to 88.9% of the market price. However, the monetary equivalent of the oil subsidy remained close to the level of 2020 (because of the increased oil refining volumes and the market oil prices). Therefore, the impact of the tax maneuver was not so vivid.

On the one hand, it allowed to maintain the functioning of economic mechanisms tied to oil refining. But, on the other hand, all of them were hovering near the critical permissible level, and additional adjustments (excise tax deduction when selling fuel on the domestic market, increased fuel prices, etc.) were required to keep them working.

Accordingly, it is likely that in 2021, the oil refineries operated with next to zero profitability (the exact statistics were no longer published after the imposition of Western sanctions). The oil feed for the budget and the balance of trade were near the all-time low. The next iteration of the tax maneuver (in 2022), all other things being equal, will highly likely lead to crossing the line of tolerance both at the micro- and macro level, and/or will require a substantial revision of the industry functioning mechanisms.

The situation in the oil refining industry, increasing sanctions and the political isolation of Belarus from the West prompted

the Belarusian government to sign a package of agreements with Russia on greater integration. The so-called “Union programs” on trade in oil, oil products and gas, and “harmonization of tax and customs legislation” were the key ones in that package for Belarus. Agreements based on these programs de facto imply an exchange: Russia will meet Belarus halfway on gas and oil prices (by means of a reverse excise duty for Belarusian refineries, which is interpreted as a compensation for the tax maneuver) in the coming years, and Belarus will undertake to sign interstate agreements on indirect tax collection and customs regulations. The related programs are interlinked both in terms of execution and timeframes.

The other 25 programs cover virtually all economic segments. In combination, the standards can be viewed as an institutional basis of the economy, setting the red lines and rules of the game. The programs basically mean that Belarus will adopt and adapt to the Russian standards.

Foreign trade miracle: healer of the symptoms of economic woes

External demand was the main generator of economic activity in 2021, pulling the Belarusian economy out of the COVID recession and ensuring its growth. The foreign trade miracle consisted of three components: (1) a rapid increase in exports, the physical volume of which reached a historical peak; (2) impaired growth of imports in physical terms; (3) significant improvement of the terms of trade (export/import price ratio), especially in the second half of the year.

Exports of a wide range of goods began increasing rapidly back in the 3rd quarter of 2020. Most commodity groups showed an increase to the pre-pandemic volumes at the turn of 2020-2021. The recovery effect could be expected to weaken

thereafter. However, the peculiarities of the global post-pandemic market behavior and a number of specific effects determined further rapid growth of demand for Belarusian goods.

The physical volume of exports rose in 2021 by 9.9% from 2020. Its trend equilibrium growth rate was estimated at about 2% per year, whereas, when comparing the lowest point in 2020 and the highest one in 2021, the increase was gigantic, reaching 47.5%.²

Five factors are seen as key to explain these dynamics.

1. During the COVID-19 epidemic, global demand strongly shifted from services to goods. The dominant market players were sometimes unable to promptly fill this new niche (for instance, due to limited production capacities or component supplies). The producers who had ready-made goods in stock, or could quickly produce them, got significant competitive advantages.

2. During the pandemic, many well-established logistics and transportation chains were broken. Disruptions and, quite often, chaotic attempts to make new arrangements caused the prices of logistics and transportation services to skyrocket. The manufacturers' ability to deliver goods to the customers quickly and at a relatively low price was a great competitive advantage. The production and business practices that were typical of many Belarusian producers, and had been considered as defective for external competitiveness, i. e. the low internationalization of production and remoteness from sea routes for supplies, unexpectedly turned out to be strengths.

3. As prices were going up in many markets, consumers began looking at lower price segments, which also gave an advantage to Belarusian producers, because many of them operate in those segments.

² Henceforward: «Официальная статистика.» Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, 2022, <http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/>.

4. Demand for foods grew in the CIS in the post-pandemic period, creating a good environment for Belarusian agriculture and related industries (manufacture of agricultural machinery, fertilizers, etc.).

5. The effect of the low comparative base was working, since the usual export volumes of oil products and potash fertilizers were back.

Along with the positive dynamics of exports, important metamorphoses took place in imports. On the one hand, they grew by 5.2% against 2020. On the other hand, there were grounds to expect their much more rapid increase.

Traditionally, other things being equal, the physical volumes of exports and imports go hand in hand in the Belarusian economy. Simply put, export volumes largely predetermine imports, because, basically, a stable amount of imported raw materials and components is used to produce goods for export. Accordingly, a rapid increase in exports usually leads to a proportional increase in the imports of intermediate products. In fact, however, the increase in the latter was very modest. It did not even recover to the pre-pandemic level of 2019 (standing around 95%), whereas exports surpassed their pre-pandemic volumes by 13.5%. The growth dynamics of the intermediate imports was largely lowered by commodities other than oil and gas, and, to a certain extent, consumer and investment goods.

One more component of the foreign trade miracle became increasingly evident in the second half of the year: the better terms of trade, i. e. the export/import prices ratio. The rise of export prices resulted from an increase in world prices of many commodities and intensified global logistical problems. Import prices rose at a slower rate, being largely cushioned by the preferential terms of Russian oil and gas supplies.

Sanctions as a blow to the present and the future

Western sanctions grew stronger by the middle of 2021, and reached a qualitatively new level. *Firstly*, selective sanctions hit some systemically important financial and non-financial companies. The U. S. put Belaruskali on its SDN list, and the EU sanctions were targeted at Belarusbank, Belagroprombank and Belinvestbank.

Secondly, for the first time, the European Union and the United Kingdom imposed sectoral sanctions, which ban imports of particular groups of Belarusian commodities, which, importantly, include oil products and, partially, potash fertilizers. Also, sanctions against the largest banks can be also interpreted as sectoral financial sanctions.

Thirdly, Western countries began to increasingly coordinate their sanctions. Since the implementation mechanism had been different, this coordination was an important prerequisite for the effectiveness of the sanctions.

The impacts of the sanctions were somewhat cushioned, because they were stretched in time until the end of 2021, so the main effects were expected no sooner than late 2021 and early 2022. The sanctions pressure increased by the end of the year, being strongly influenced by the migration crisis orchestrated by the Belarusian authorities. New packages of selective sanctions were imposed against systemically important companies, such as Belavia, Belorusneft, Belshina and Grodno Azot (by the EU), as well as the Belarusian Potash Company and Slavkali (by the U. S.). Also, the United States strengthened the sanctions related to the Belarusian government debt. Finally, at the very end of the year, Lithuania tried to terminate the contract on transit of Belarusian potash fertilizers through its territory.

The sanctions packages of late 2021 hit 13.5% of Belarus' entire exports, potentially threatening with about 8% output

losses in Q2 through Q4 and, later, nearly 12%. At the same time, there was a chance to briefly boost the exports to third countries of goods that could not be sold in the West. The financial sanctions were more like a threat to the competitiveness and stability of the financial sector in the relatively distant future, rather than right away.

Overall, the sanctions came as a new crucial factor of the functioning of the Belarusian economy, as they reduced the growth potential of the economy and undermined its stability. However, in 2021, the foreign trade miracle mechanisms outweighed the effects of the sanctions. Moreover, this situation may well persist for a while.

Inflation surge and economic policy inconsistencies

Inflation in Belarus accelerated in the second half of 2020. Unlike the previous years, the National Bank ignored the inflation dynamics, probably because of the shifted state economic policy priorities. Output support considerations appeared to increasingly replace the previous focus on curbing price hikes.

The logic of monetary policy, its goals and tools were adjusted to fit business trends. This included the almost manual bank liquidity regulation and a lesser role of interest rates. The latter were only raised once to 9.25%, i. e. next to the actual inflation rate.

Inflationary impulses were not extinguished at the early stages, though. Through the mechanism of inflation expectations, they went into the self-maintained mode. Closer to the end of the year, when external price pressures rose, which was the flip side of the foreign trade miracle, inflation settled near 10%.

Acceptable macroeconomic results of the year with extreme uncertainty about the future

The macroeconomic results of 2021 looked pretty comforting, especially compared with the expectations in the beginning of the year. Output grew by 2.3%, signaling not just the end of the pandemic-induced recession, but also growth relative to the pre-pandemic level (by 1.6%). In terms of demand, the net export (2.7 percentage points) and household final consumption (2.3 p. p.) were the key contributors to output growth, while the gross fixed capital formation was negative (-1.5 p. p.).

Acting as growth drivers were the manufacturing industry (1.4 p. p.), information and telecommunication (0.7 p. p.), energy and trade (0.4 p. p. each), and health care (0.2 p. p.). The output contraction and, accordingly, its negative impact on the overall dynamics were reported in construction (-0.8 p. p.), agriculture (-0.4 p. p.), and financial and insurance services (-0.2 p. p.).

Alongside its influence on the growth dynamics, foreign trade conditions provided attractive external and fiscal positions, which helped avoid strains on the national debt servicing, and enhanced financial stability with respect to a number of indicators. The current account position was the best in the history of sovereign Belarus with a surplus of 2.7% of GDP.

Indicators of the nominal exchange rate remained virtually unchanged during the year. In real terms, due to the inflationary dynamics, the ruble grew stronger, and there was a negligible, almost zero deficit in the consolidated budget, although the government expected a significant deficit of up to 3.5% of GDP. The budget of the public administration sector (i. e., including the Social Protection Fund) even had a small surplus.

This favorable external and fiscal situation made it possible to easily repay a small portion of the external public debt (USD 336 million) and to service the remaining part. The gold and

foreign exchange reserves grew by almost USD 1 billion (12.8%) to USD 8.5 billion, which is close to the all-time high.

Together with the above trends, an important role in the dynamics of the gold and FX reserves was played by the Special Drawing Rights (SDR), a special reserve asset of the IMF received by Belarus. According to its quota, Belarus received SDR 653.2 million (about USD 930 million), which were used to recharge the reserves. However, de facto, Belarus has little chance to exercise its right to use these funds (in accordance with the IMF procedures) due to the sanctions and political isolation. In this sense, the increase in the gold and FX reserves, which is almost mathematically identical to the value of the received SDR, can be considered as not entirely accurate.

A certain upturn also took place at the micro level. Thanks to increased revenues, the financial performance of the real sector improved, and its debt burden decreased. However, restricted public access to statistics does not allow assessing the scale of this progress, especially when it comes to state-owned enterprises.

The macroeconomic indicators of household incomes and the labor market also looked very positive. The average real wage rose by 4.4%, significantly outpacing the output growth rate. There was also a gradual decrease in unemployment to 3.9%, to compare with 4.0% in 2020.

At first glance, the inflation rate was the only fly in the ointment, while the in-depth analysis reveals some alarming trends. Although economic activity continued to increase, employment was rapidly declining by about 1.3% per year due to demographic factors and layoffs, as companies were seeking to cut excessively inflated labor costs. The number of new jobs was the lowest ever. This suggests that companies perceived growth as temporary and unguaranteed in the future.

There were many reasons for this uncertainty. It is highly likely that the foreign trade miracle will fade out sooner or later,

and its negative effects (inflationary pressure, logistical disruptions, etc.) will increase. The sanctions will intensify closer to the end of the year, and their influence will soon begin to outweigh external environment advantages.

Negative macro-trends were already evident in the second half of the year. Output growth declined at first, and turned into a fall by the end of the year. Inflation continued to accelerate. Meanwhile, the authorities did not show any willingness to initiate a political thaw, which could have had a favorable effect on economic prospects. On the contrary, the political rhetoric and repressions became harsher. The government kept showing an arrogant and flippant attitude to the already obvious substantial risks.

As a result, at the turn of 2021–2022, the degree of uncertainty was sky high. The range of qualitative and quantitative characteristics of further development scenarios (comparable in terms of probability) increased greatly from continuing moderate growth based on the foreign trade miracle to a deep and long recession coupled with a financial crisis caused by the sanctions and structural flaws of the national economy.

Conclusion

Three macroeconomic factors can be highlighted as key in 2021: (1) the stagnant domestic environment with a hint of recession; (2) increasing pressure of sanctions; and (3) the foreign trade miracle. From the point of view of the key macroeconomic indicators, the foreign trade miracle decisively outweighed the impact of the first two. Therefore, output exceeded the pre-pandemic level at the end of the year, and most of the macroeconomic stability indicators significantly improved. Accelerated inflation was the main macroeconomic problem of the year.

In 2021, the West brought the sanctions to a qualitatively new level. They began to transform from selective and symbolic to sectoral and systemic. Against this backdrop, the institutional environment regressed, and the weak long-term growth potential weakened even more. Institutional and structural changes practically came to naught.

In 2021, the sanctions mainly had a negative informational effect, and only slightly weakened economic activity, but their role will be great in the future. They have generated a whole bunch of serious risks to the national economy. Given the large number of systemic flaws of the Belarusian economy, this generates a huge uncertainty of the future. It is equally likely that thanks to the foreign trade miracle, growth will remain at the beginning of 2022, but it will be insignificant, or there will be a dive into a deep and prolonged recession.

CURRENCY MARKET AND BANKING SYSTEM: FOREIGN TRADE MIRACLE

Vadim Iosub

Summary

The year 2021 happened to be the most successful year for the Belarusian ruble in the modern history of the country, despite the ongoing political crisis and numerous economic sanctions. Apparently, this took place thanks to the “foreign trade miracle”, i. e. the extremely favorable external environment, particularly, increased demand followed by a rise in prices. Since the causes of this phenomenon were purely external, Belarus was just lucky that prices rose in the exports of goods and services, rather than imports. Nothing suggests that a foreign trade miracle will occur again, while the economic sanctions will be much heavier.

Trends:

- Record-breaking rise of the Belarusian ruble against the basket of currencies in the new market environment;
- Post-pandemic recovery of the global economy with rising demand and increased prices of Belarusian exported commodities (raw materials, farm products, cargo transportation services, etc.);
- Outstripping growth of exports compared with imports in trade in both goods and services;
- Deferred effects of sanctions.

Best year for the Belarusian ruble

Although Belarusians traditionally keep a watchful eye on the U. S. dollar exchange rate, the National Bank of Belarus (NBB) uses the basket of the currencies of its main trading partners—the U. S. dollar, euro, and Russian ruble — for a comprehensive

assessment of the ruble dynamics. Given the growing share of the Russian ruble in the foreign trade turnover and transactions in FX on the Belarusian Currency and Stock Exchange, its share in the currency basket was increasing. In 2009, the currencies were equally presented in the basket (one-third each). Since 2016, the share of the Russian ruble has increased to 50%, while the dollar and euro made up 30% and 20%, respectively.

This composition of the basket of currencies is used to estimate the ruble dynamics, but, since it has become difficult to use the dollar and euro in foreign trade payments, the composition is likely to continue to change. All three currencies fell against the Belarusian ruble in 2021 for the first time in the modern history of the country. According to the National Bank, the Russian ruble was down by 1.19%, the dollar by 1.57% and the euro by 9.01%.¹ As a result, the value of the basket of currencies decreased by 3%, which is the best result for the Belarusian ruble ever. The euro declined globally the most. During the year, the EUR/USD rate decreased from 1.23 to 1.13 (-7.9%); EUR/RUB – from 90.8 to 84.0 (-7.6%).

The strengthening of the Belarusian ruble cannot be considered artificial. It was possible to raise the ruble exchange rate administratively through a reduction in the gold and foreign exchange reserves, but these were growing for most of the year. The National Bank reported purchases of foreign exchange as one of the reasons of the increase in the reserves, so the NBB's efforts just slightly restrained the strengthening of the ruble.

According to the NBB, the net sale of foreign exchange on the domestic market stood at USD 1,458.4 million, and all categories of currency market participants registered in the NBB statistics acted as net sellers (Table 1).

¹ «Официальный курс белорусского рубля по отношению к иностранным валютам.» Национальный банк Республики Беларусь, <https://www.nbrb.by/statistics/rates/ratesdaily.asp>.

Table 1. Foreign exchange market participants as sellers, 2021

	Net sale, USD million
Resident enterprises	678.9
Non-resident enterprises	575.0
Banks	151.1
Households	53.4

As can be seen from the table above, resident and non-resident enterprises made the largest contribution to the net supply of foreign exchange to the domestic market, and this contribution could only be made through net exports growth. This means that the Belarusian ruble strengthened as a result of the market's behavior: the supply of foreign exchange outstripped demand.

Foreign trade miracle

The all-time high surplus in foreign trade in goods and services made the year 2021 the best year ever for the Belarusian ruble, according to the National Bank. This stemmed from the outstripping growth of exports of goods and services compared with imports.

In 2021, exports of goods and services totaled USD 49,257.4 million (up 32.5% year on year); imports — USD 45,487.0 million (up 28.9%). The deficit in trade in goods stood at USD 791.1 million, while trade in services showed a surplus of USD 4,561.5 million. Outstripping growth of exports was observed in both trade in goods and services.

The deficit in trade in goods was the lowest since 2012, though. Like the overall balance of trade in goods and services, the balance of trade in services was the best since 2000.

According to the Foreign Ministry, products of the petrochemical, machine-building, metallurgical, woodworking and light industries, dairy and meat products, furniture, glass, fiber-glass, and cement were the largest export commodity groups in 2021. Russia remained the main trading partner of Belarus, accounting for 49% of foreign trade in goods (41% of exports and 57% of imports).

The European Union was the second largest trading partner with about 20% of the foreign trade turnover. Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Italy, Latvia, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Spain were the key importers of Belarusian products in the European Union. Ukraine also remained an important market, accounting for 13.6% of exports of goods.²

According to the Belarusian National Statistics Committee (Belstat), the largest importers of Belarusian services were the European Union (31% of the foreign trade turnover), Russia (30%), the U.S. (11%), and China (4.5%). In the exports of services, transportation accounted for 43% of the total, up 19% (by USD 690 million) from 2020; IT services – for 29%, up 20% (by USD 495 million).³

Cause of the miracle: favorable environment and deferred effects of the sanctions

The unexpectedly favorable market environment was the main cause of the unprecedented surge in exports of goods and

² «Общая информация о внешней торговле: направления, задачи, итоги за актуальный период.» Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь, <https://mfa.gov.by/trade/>.

³ «Внешняя торговля.» Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь. <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/realny-sector-ekonomiki/vneshnyaya-torgovlya/>.

services. The world economy's recovery after the slowdown caused by the pandemic in 2020 was considerably above forecasts and expectations. This led to a significant increase in prices of raw materials and farm products, as well as growth of demand for freight transportation and its prices.

In 2021, Brent oil rose from USD 50 to USD 80 per barrel (+60%), which entailed an approximately proportional increase in prices of oil products exported from Belarus. The rise in world prices affected almost all major exports of Belarus, including chemical and petrochemical products, inorganic fertilizers, metal products, timber, wood products, construction materials, agricultural raw materials and foods.

In spite of the *first* wave of relocation, the almost entirely export-oriented IT services sector showed inertial growth by around 20%, although the rate of this growth slowed down against the previous years. The recovery of business activity in the neighboring countries contributed to the increase of freight traffic (both to and from Belarus and transit) primarily by rail and road.

The sanctions imposed in 2021 had little effect on Belarus' exports. They either were not designed to, being targeted at particular persons, or were deferred and had a number of exemptions. For instance, the sanctions imposed in summer 2021 concerned the potash, oil refining and, partly, the banking sectors. They provided for a *six-month* delay for entry into force, the need to execute already signed contracts, an exemption for some products, etc. Therefore, the sanctions virtually did not affect Belarus' exports or the ruble exchange rate until the end of 2021.

According to *Belstat*, average commodity export prices rose in 2021 by 24.4% year on year, while the index of physical volume only increased by 9.9%. In other words, Belarusian exporters managed to respond to growing demand by raising prices and, much more modestly, by increasing output of commodities for export.

The 'foreign trade miracle' was basically a result of extremely favorable external factors, i.e. growing demand and, consequently, rising prices, rather than wise industrial policy, marketing breakthroughs, or conquering market with new products. Belarus was just lucky that the rise in prices mostly took place in the exports of goods and services, rather than imports. So much for a miracle.

Banking system: sanctions, flows of deposits, withdrawal of foreign capital

In 2021, a number of Belarusian state-owned banks, including the Development Bank of the Republic of Belarus, BelarusBank, BelInvestBank, BelAgroPromBank and AbsolutBank, fell under various packages of sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union.

According to the National Bank, ruble deposits increased by BYN 566.2 million to BYN 5,098.8 million (up 12.5%), while foreign exchange deposits decreased by USD 674.4 million to USD 3,965.3 million (-14.5%). The inflow of time deposits in rubles and the outflow of FX deposits indicated a greater attractiveness of the former amid inflation and devaluation expectations. The outflow of foreign exchange deposits thus outstripped the inflow of ruble deposits, which suggests population's decreasing confidence in the banking system against the backdrop of the first sanctions imposed on some Belarusian state-owned banks back in 2020.

In 2021, major deals in the banking market were conditioned by the general political and economic situation: foreign capital was leaving the Belarusian market, being substituted by national or Russian capital. In spring, MTBank, the commercial bank with 100% national capital, purchased Idea Bank stock from Getin Holding S. A. and Getin International S. A. (Poland) for BYN

50 million (about USD 19.6 million at the exchange rate of that time), which was estimated at 42.5% of the bank's equity, bringing its share to 99.999%.

At the end of the year, Alfa-Bank (99.9% owned by the Russian Alfa Group consortium) acquired 99.98% of FransaBank (owned by Lebanese Fransabank S. A. L. and Fransa Holding S. A. L.) for nearly BYN 27 million (USD 10.6 million), which equaled about half of FransaBank's equity of BYN 55.62 million (USD 21.80 million). This was done at the second attempt, because, at first, the National Bank vetoed the deal in early 2021, saying that Alfa-Bank did not meet all the requirements for obtaining permission to carry out the transaction.

In terms of equity capital, Economic Newspaper⁴ rated Belarusian banks in 2021 as follows (see Table 2). The top five remained the same as in 2020.

Table 2. Top 10 banks in terms of equity capital, BYN million

	2021		2020	
	Volume	Rated	Volume	Rated
Belarusbank	5,828	1	4,748	1
Belagroprombank	1,850	2	1,821	2
Priorbank	931	3	815	3
Belgazprombank	808	4	739	4
Sberbank	782	5	724	5
Belinvestbank	658	6	584	7
Alfa-Bank	644	7	511	8
BelVEB Bank	631	8	606	6
MTBank	376	9	290	10
VTB Bank	352	10	297	9

⁴ Наривончик, Дмитрий. «Банковский сектор: спасибо, что живой. Рейтинг по итогам 2021 года.» *Экономическая газета*, 29 Apr. 2022. <https://neg.by/novosti/otkrytj/rejting-bankov-belarusi-po-itogam-2021-goda/>.

The second half of the top 10 changed: Belinvestbank and Alfa-Bank moved up from seventh and eighth to the sixth and seventh positions, respectively. BelVEB was down from the sixth to the eighth position. VTB Bank and MTBank, which were ranked ninth and tenth in the previous year, moved up.

Conclusion

The year 2021 was the best year for the Belarusian ruble in its history thanks to the “foreign trade miracle” caused solely by the favorable external environment, rather than Belarusian government or domestic enterprises’ strategies. It was pure luck, actually.

The chance that the miracle will recur in 2022 is slim, and exports will definitely decrease, as sanctions are taking effect. However, the decline in imports associated with that will curb the devaluation of the ruble. The ratio of falling imports and exports will determine the further fundamental dynamics of the ruble: its depreciation and the dollar exchange rate in the range of BYN 4.5-6/USD 1 by the end of 2022 are most likely.

The high probability of foreign exchange shortages may entail tough administrative restrictions, for instance, a ban on the sale of cash and rationing of non-cash FX. In this case, the official exchange rates (and the rates on banks’ listing boards) will be totally irrelevant, while the real exchange rate will be determined by the black market.

ENERGY SECTOR: AFTER RENT. BETTER THAN EXPECTED

Alexander Avtushko-Sikorski

Summary

In 2021, the oil and gas sector, which used to generate windfall profits for the ruling class, was mostly trying to stay profitable. Belarus faced a number of obstacles and risks in the export of oil products due to the Western sanctions imposed on its oil refining industry.

The events of 2020 weakened Belarus' bargaining position on oil and gas supplies, and the foreign policy situation of 2021 weakened these positions even more. Belarus classified the statistics on oil imports from Russia, so the volumes can only be estimated based on indirect parameters.

Trends:

- No new consensus in relations with Russia that could change the terms of oil and gas supplies, or the format and content of tax maneuver compensation arrangements;
- Preservation of the previous terms of natural gas supplies and their rescheduling from 2021 to 2022;
- Sharp increase in losses and potential risks for the oil refining sector due to the present and future Western sanctions;
- Gradual rejection of Belarusian electric energy by the neighboring countries.

Gas

In 2021, Belarus imported 19.78 billion m³ of natural gas from Russia, thereby increasing supplies in volume terms by 5.5%. The price per 1,000 m³ thus rose insignificantly against 2020

from USD 127 to USD 128.5. It was also said at the end of 2021 that Russia would not adjust the gas price rate in 2022, which formally and actually means its invariability in comparison with the previous year.

Over the past *three* years, Belarus has been failing to achieve a lower price of Russian gas. Given the domestic socioeconomic and political situation, Belarus has virtually no leverage in negotiations on a new gas price formula, while integration and acceleration of the Eurasian Economic Union's common oil and gas market launch have moved to the back burner after the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

Table 1 shows the dynamics of the average annual prices of Russian natural gas for Belarus and benchmark gas prices at the German border. As can be seen, although the gas price for Europe was even slightly lower in 2020 than the price for Belarus (for the first time ever), the price difference in 2021 increased significantly because of the sharp rise in gas prices for European countries (Table 1).

It should be kept in mind that for the first time in a very long while, this difference in the price of natural gas for Belarus and European countries was not a consequence of structural changes in the European gas market or some special gas preferences for Belarus. First of all, it is a combination of several factors: the cold winter of 2020–2021 and the resulting low gas stocks in European underground gas storages, the accident at Gazprom's large gas chemical plant in Novy Urengoy, and the possibility that for the first time in many years, Gazprom resorted to the gas blackmail strategy (which, however, is not supported by concrete facts, and is somewhat speculative). To be more exact, by refusing to reserve gas transportation capacities of the Yamal–Europe pipeline (or to decrease the reserved volumes compared with the previous periods), the Russian gas monopolist pushed European gas prices up amid the low European stocks, forcing European bureaucrats to license as soon as

possible the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which could provide additional capacities.

Table 1. Dynamics of Russian gas prices for Belarus and at the German border, 2014–2021

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Average price of Russian gas at the German border, USD per 1,000 m ³	386.00	268.63	160.63	197.90	269.42	156.00	111.00	519.00
Price of Russian gas for Belarus, USD per 1,000 m ³	170.00	144.00	137.00	130.00	129.00	127.00	127.00	128.50
Price difference, USD per 1,000 m ³	216.00	124.63	24.63	67.90	142.42	29.00	-16.00	390.50

Source: Belstat¹, IMF², author's calculations.

Given the restrictions on the consumption of Russian energy imposed since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the price of gas for Europe is likely to rise significantly in 2022. However, it is very hard to predict how much (and in what way) the price difference would affect the competitive advantages of Belarusian enterprises, taking into account the export restrictions in force.

¹ Henceforward: «Внешняя торговля» Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, www.belstat.gov.by.

² Henceforward: “Primary Commodity Prices.” *International Monetary Fund*, www.imf.org.

Oil

The unavailability of detailed statistics on the crude oil import to Belarus and the export of oil products from Belarus is a distinctive feature of the period under review. To put it more exactly, the available statistics only cover a short period of time. Throughout almost the entire year, the data on foreign trade in oil and oil products (in value and volume terms) were classified due to the sanctions imposed on the Belarusian oil industry, in particular, on the Novopolotsk refinery. Indirect estimates of foreign trade in oil and oil products can be made based on some data from sources other than the official ones, for instance from the *UN Comtrade* database.

In 2021, Belarus imported oil from Russia alone, unlike 2020, when small amounts of oil came from Norway, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Azerbaijan. Deliveries from Kazakhstan, planned for the autumn of 2021 under bilateral agreements on cooperation in the oil sector never started. Belarus announced supplies of 360,000 tons of Azerbaijani oil, but there is no information about it in international statistics, so the volume or the very fact of supplies cannot be confirmed.

In money terms, Belarus imported USD 1.99 billion worth of Russian crude oil, which is almost half as much as in 2020 (Table 2). The decreased import was most likely compensated by the reduced export of domestically produced oil (USD 343 million in exports in 2020 against USD 237 million in 2021). In general, this was linked either with the actual Russian oil import cuts (as confirmed by official open sources for 1Q21), or with possible distorted statistics provided by Belarus and Russia because of the sanctions against Belarusian Naftan refinery.

Statistics on the exports of Belarusian oil products were classified in mid-2021, so only the limited data published before the sanctions imposed on Belneftekhim and Naftan in June are available. The Belarusian oil refining sector's performance in 2021 (with corrections and clarifications) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Indicators of the exports and imports of Russian oil and Belarusian oil products to world markets, 2015–2021

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Physical volume of the import of oil, million tons	22.5	22.9	18.1	18.0	18.2	16.0	N/A
Cost of import, USD billion	5.663	3.745	5.292	6.800	6.580	3.890	1.99 ¹⁾
Oil price, USD per ton	247.30	192.00	294.00	373.60	365.50	243.12	N/A
Russian oil price on the world market, USD per ton	720.00	363.90	388.70	513.70	468.50	305.88	476.80
Physical volume of the exports of oil products, million tons	16.580	13.000	12.300	11.900	10.500	8.487	3.390 ²⁾
Proceeds from the exports of oil products, USD billion	6.830	4.040	5.340	6.500	5.200	2.747	1.470 ³⁾
Price of oil products, USD per ton	403.50	311.00	434.14	546.20	495.23	323.70	433.62 ⁴⁾

Notes: ¹⁾UN Comtrade data, which may be incomplete; ²⁾data of January-April 2021; ³⁾data of January-April 2021; ⁴⁾calculated based on the data of January-April 2021.

Source: Belstat³, IMF⁴, UN Comtrade Database⁵, author's calculations.

³ «Внешняя торговля.» Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, www.belstat.gov.by.

⁴ "Primary Commodity Prices." *International Monetary Fund*, www.imf.org

⁵ UN Comtrade Database, www.comtrade.un.org.

The available information is not enough to estimate the volume of oil imported to Belarus and its cost per ton, or the oil discount for Belarus compared with the prices of Russian oil on the world markets. Belarus managed to significantly increase its oil product exports to Ukraine and Western Europe in 2021 before the sanctions: in January-April alone, oil product exports almost reached the volume of entire 2020. The price per ton also rose.

The oil product exports increased so much, probably, because the Belarusian authorities were expecting sanctions against the national oil industry. Given the sanctions and new information, Belarus will probably apply schemes of gray re-export of oil products via third countries in 2022. This is quite possible, considering that following the imposition of the sanctions on the oil industry, Belarusian refineries reoriented its oil products to Russian ports, where they can be re-labeled.

Electric energy

In the electric energy sector, the termination of purchases of Belarusian energy by Ukraine was the most important challenge to Belarus. Some volumes were purchased early in the year, which was dictated by the cold winter. Ukraine prohibited the import of Belarusian electricity in May, citing national interests and the need to synchronize its national power grid with the European Union's energy system. Nevertheless, the import resumed under short-term contracts in early November, and the volumes almost *doubled* during the heating season. The import stopped again in February 2022.

Apart from the end of the heating season, the import was stopped, among other things, because Ukraine started testing its grid in view of the complete disconnection from the Belarusian and Russian grids and synchronization with the European Union's system. Although the cessation of imports is not always

dictated by political considerations, it has an important symbolic meaning: Ukraine will finally stop importing electricity from Belarus by 2023, and Belarus will lose the last buyer of its electricity.

Conclusion

The year 2021 turned out to be a slack period with regard to the changed terms of supplies of Russian energy commodities to Belarus. Overall, the forecast made in the previous *Belarusian Yearbook*⁶ worked well: given the foreign policy environment, Belarus made no visible efforts to achieve better terms of Russian oil and gas supplies, accepting them, as they are “still better than expected”.

The events of 2021 threw the Belarusian energy sector development, investments and exports into turmoil. The sanctions against the Belarusian oil industry will significantly reduce its profitability. It is difficult to make any forecasts, since the data is under lock and key, and new sanctions may well be imposed.

⁶ Avtushko-Sikorski, Alexander. “Energy Sector: From the resource supplying rentier state to the consumer state,” *Belarusian Yearbook 2021*, Vilnius, 2021, p. 256–264.

REAL SECTOR: RECOVERY BEFORE THE COLLAPSE

Vadim Sekhovich

Summary

In 2021, market demand, which was deferred due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the environment favorable for key export items in the global market ensured a recovery of Belarus' GDP growth, which happened to be above the most optimistic forecasts. The industrial sector and, first and foremost, its main segment – the manufacturing industry – had the decisive influence on the growth rate. The service sector, particularly the high-tech IT component, also made a considerable contribution. Farm output, however, showed a decrease for the first time in many years.

The growth rate of exports of goods and services noticeably surpassed imports, resulting in a record-breaking trade surplus. A relatively small deficit in foreign trade in goods was compensated by the service sector. The decision to freeze the price of Russian natural gas for Belarus played an important role as well.

In contrast to the pre-crisis period, the public sector became a driver of industrial growth amid rising global commodity prices and the government's lending support to enterprises. The private sector remained largely under the influence of negative factors, and the state did not provide any support to it during the crisis period. The outflow of personnel and money continued due to the adverse sociopolitical situation in the country.

Trends:

- Economic growth in the absence of internal prerequisites; inflated expectations for maintaining and developing this trend;
- Expansion of sanctions against key enterprises and sectors; restrictions in the crucial sales markets;

- Reduced number of the sources of financing of business; curtailment of lending programs by international and private investors;
- Decline in business activity, output and services in the private sector; deterioration of the financial standing, and increased number of bankruptcies;
- Emigration of specialists and the outflow of capital; a reduction in investments in the high-tech sector;
- Tighter state regulation, higher taxes, the growing threat of nationalization, and increasing influence of the security bloc on the economy.

Unexpected growth

In 2021, the real sector did not yet feel the full effects of international sanctions imposed in 2020–2021 against a number of business people, companies and entire segments of the national economy. Their impact on GDP was minimal during this period, so the Belarusian economy was able to grow significantly.

Belarus' gross domestic product grew in 2021 by 2.3% (BYN 173.2 billion), which was above all forecasts. The recovery of economic growth was largely achieved thanks to the industrial sector, which accounted for 1.6% of growth. Industrial output rose by 6.5% year on year to BYN 154.4 billion.

The manufacturing industry, the share of which in the industrial output index was over 85.0%, showed a 5.9% increase (BYN 138.0 billion). The National Statistics Committee of Belarus (*Belstat*) reported an increase in all ten published groups of businesses. The growth of six groups surpassed the overall average: manufacture of computing, electronic and optical equipment – 20.3%; manufacture of machinery and equipment not included in other groups (agricultural machinery, etc.) – 14.9%; manufacture of wood and paper products, printing and duplication of media – 12.2%; manufacture of electrical equipment – 10.3%;

manufacture of vehicles and equipment – 10.1%; manufacture of basic pharmaceuticals – 9.8%.¹

Belstat stopped publishing statistics on production, export and import of the goods that fell under sanctions. Therefore, the 2021 report does not show the dynamics of the following industrial groups: production of coke and refined oil products; chemical products; other finished products; repairs and installation of machinery and equipment. However, the data published by the statistics agencies of Belarus' partners indicate an increase in production and supplies of goods of these groups, which were the most important to the national economy. According to the Ukrainian State Statistical Service, Ukraine's imports of Belarusian oil products and fertilizers nearly doubled from USD 1.2 billion to 2.3 billion and from USD 290 million to 570 million, respectively.²

Three other industrial components were on the rise as well. Mining industry output increased by 2.8% (BYN 1.88 billion); water supply, waste management and pollution cleanup – by 2.7% (BYN 2.6 billion); electricity, gas, steam, hot water and conditioned air supply – by 12.6% (BYN 11.9 billion).

Farm output decreased by 4.2% (BYN 25.0 billion), including 3.2% (BYN 21.1 billion) in agricultural organizations, the backbone of the agricultural sector. Last year, the country produced less grain and leguminous crops, potatoes, vegetables, sugar

¹ “Industrial output index, % year on year. Interactive information-analytical system of distribution of official statistical information. Industries' main performance indicators (database). Operational data. Industry. Economic statistics. Official statistics.” *National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/realny-sektor-ekonomiki/promyshlennost/>; <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/Indicators/Preview?key=136993>.

² “Foreign trade in selected commodities: breakdown by countries in 2021. Economic Statistics/Foreign Trade and Economic Activity. Economic Statistics. Statistical Information.” *State Statistics Service of Ukraine*, <http://ukrstat.gov.ua/>.

beets, livestock and poultry, which led to a slowdown in processing. Output of foods, beverages and tobacco products rose by 1.9% (1.1% in the food production subgroup), to compare with 2.7% (2.9% with respect to foods) in 2020.

Record-breaking surplus

The post-pandemic demand ramp-up in the global market resulted in a 30.7% year-on-year increase (USD 94.751 billion) in Belarus' foreign trade turnover of goods and services, and the record-breaking foreign trade surplus of USD 3.772 billion, which nearly doubled from 2020 (USD 1.898 billion). There was a major deficit in trade with Russia, while trade with Ukraine brought a surplus.

Exports of goods grew by 37.4% (USD 39.023 billion); imports – by 31.0% (USD 39.814 billion). A deficit of USD 791.0 million was reported in foreign trade in goods, but it was considerably smaller than in the previous year (USD 1.993 billion).

This deficit was fully compensated by the service sector. Although its growth rate was not as high as in the goods sector, exports increased by 16.5% to USD 10.237 billion; imports – by 15.9% to USD 5.674 billion. The resulting surplus of USD 4.563 billion was above the previous year, when it stood at USD 3.891 billion.³

The main contribution to the surplus in trade in services for the second year was made by computer, telecommunication and information services. Their exports increased by almost half a billion dollars from 2020 to over USD 3.19 billion. Imports reached USD 482.5 million, the surplus standing at USD 2.7 billion. For comparison, the export of transportation services

³ “Foreign trade in goods and services of the Republic of Belarus. Statistics on foreign economic activity. Statistics.” *National Bank of the Republic of Belarus*, <https://www.nbrb.by/statistics/foreigntrade>.

totaled USD 4.388 billion, import – USD 2.5 billion, surplus – USD 1.876 billion.⁴

Considering the above, the government made optimistic forecasts for 2022 (the Economy Ministry expected GDP to grow by 4–4.5%). However, there were several negative trends behind these figures of 2021, including a decline in capital investments, which were expected to increase by 2.0%, but showed a 5.6% decrease instead (BYN 30.13 billion).

Private sector in stagnation

One of the key problems that manifested itself in 2021 was that the private sector, which accounted for around a half of the economy, being its main growth driver since mid-2010, has lost its leading position. While most neighboring countries supported their real sector entities during the pandemic, Belarus provided little or no support at the peak of it, so the sector had to rely on its own resources to overcome the consequences. Pandemic impacts and the shortage of reserves to withstand them led to a series of bankruptcies of a number of large private businesses and declined financial stability of many companies primarily oriented to the domestic market.

Private business has been and still is affected by the sociopolitical crisis that began in the country after the 2020 presidential election. The state regulation got much tighter; the public sector was subjected to a political purge, and taxes were raised to support the loyal entities financed from the national budget.

⁴ “Exports and imports of services of the Republic of Belarus by the main types. Annual data. Foreign trade in services. Foreign trade. Economic statistics. Official statistics.” *National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/realny-sector-ekonomiki/vneshnyaya-torgovlya/vneshnyaya-torgovlya-uslugami/>.

The year saw a series of high-profile arrests of private business representatives (*Tut.by Media*, *21vek.by*, etc.) and amendments to the tax legislation, including the abolition of VAT exemptions and changes in taxation of private entrepreneurs. This triggered even more massive emigration, relocation of businesses to more stable jurisdictions, and withdrawal of capital. The number of proposals for the sale of businesses increased, although few deals were closed, as sellers requested substantial discounts, given the high associated risks.

The domestic political situation, migration crisis, deteriorating business environment and expanding international sanctions against counterparties and industries reduced the interest of old and new foreign investors, and affected infrastructure projects.

The temporary increase in the tax on profits from 9% to 13% for the High-Tech Park resident companies (since January 2021), which was supposed to support the economy during the pandemic period, on the one hand, increased the deductions into the budget to an all-time high, while, on the other hand, it hit the fundamental principle of not worsening the business climate. Therefore, fewer new residents of the High-Tech Park were registered in 2021, while the number of exits increased. For example, Belarus' first ever unicorn startup *PandaDoc* left the Park. The mass relocation of employees to more comfortable places continued.

EPAM Systems, the High-Tech Park's largest resident and founder, stopped hiring in autumn 2021. At the end of the year, its Belarusian office numbered fewer employees than its office in Ukraine for the first time.⁵

⁵ "EPAM Reports Results for Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2021. News. Investors. About EPAM." EPAM Systems, 17 Feb. 2022, <https://investors.epam.com/news-releases/news-release-details/epam-reports-results-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2021>.

The sanctions slowed down investments in two other major infrastructure projects – the China-Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park and Bremino – Orsha Special Economic Zone – putting the reasonability of investments in question. The suspension of some logistics projects in Belarus financed by China shows the latter's declining interest in the transit potential of Belarus as a whole.

Against the backdrop of the reduced inflow of resources from the West and Asia, Russian investors were active in the sectors with a quick return of capital (retail trade, e-commerce, etc.). The Western sanctions, however, significantly narrowed their interests in the local market, for example, projects of the family of Russian billionaire Mikhail Gutseriev.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its consequences will be a key factor affecting development of global and regional economies in the next few years. For Belarus, it means the loss of its second most important foreign trade partner, while its indirect participation in the Russian aggression will inevitably lead (regardless of the outcome of the war) to the rapid implementation of the already imposed sanctions and application of additional financial, trade, investment and technological restrictions and bans by the international community.

The scale of the sanctions against Russia and its ally not only makes Russia's support for Belarus problematic, which, among other things, concerns loans and subsidies. This also means that under the new circumstances, Belarus will have to worry not so much about economic growth, but about at least keeping it more or less stable in view of a possible national default.

Some industrial enterprises, primarily in the consumer segment, will be admitted to the Russian market or strengthen

their positions there, since Western businesses are leaving Russia, weakening the competition. Protectionist measures taken by Belarus to maintain social stability in the domestic market, and shortages of raw materials and components previously imported from the West will be a serious problem. Due to the migration crisis and new sanctions, Belarus has permanently lost its significance for Europe as a transshipment point for grey re-exports to Russia.

The sanctions, deteriorated economic environment and tightened domestic policy with possible nationalization will lead to the continued outflow of Western capital and shutdowns of joint ventures and foreign enterprises, including in all special economic zones. This will not only lead to reduced tax revenues and job cuts, but will also deepen the technological gap between Belarus and developed economies.

Private businesses will continue leaving the country, as commercial opportunities are getting fewer, the tax burden increases, and the extra-economic interference become more frequent. In the previous years, owners of businesses were thinking about changing the country of permanent residence or acquisition of new citizenships, while now, this is about the active transfer of production or, at least, financial centers, and the relocation of key professionals. In the actual economic blockade and the lack of adequate support from the government, companies' inactivity means a high probability of closure.

DEFENSE ECONOMY: SANCTION RESTRICTIONS

Yegor Lebedok

Summary

Despite the imposed direct sanctions, defense enterprises increased their output in 2021, and operated at a profit thanks to both the export contracts in force and increased supplies to the Belarusian army. In the future, Belarusian defense sector's output may also be boosted through the engagement in the restoration of Russia's military capabilities affected by sanctions, and supplies to the domestic market.

Trends:

- Increased defense sector's output and maintained profitability even under direct and indirect sanctions;
- Significant increase in the spending on R&D for development of new weapons;
- Reduction in the amounts of export contracts and uncertainty about new ones caused by expanding sanctions.

General description of the defense sector of the economy

Enterprises of the State Military-Industrial Committee (SMIC), the list of which was approved in 2009, remained the backbone of the defense sector of Belarus (the Minsk Research Institute of Radio Materials is off the list since 2021). A large number of enterprises subordinate to other agencies and ministries, as well as some private companies are part of the defense industry. More than 150 Belarusian entities are licensed to deal with products designed for military use.

Thirteen defense industry organizations and around a dozen economic entities of the defense sector were involved in the execution of government defense orders in 2021. The total number of employees of defense industry organizations is roughly estimated at 14,600 people (except for *three* special exporters). The average wage paid in the industry stands at around BYN 1,900.¹ Wages and output grew by 12% during the year. The latter rose to the highest in the history of the industry, although *four* organizations were under European Union and United Kingdom's sanctions last year. Exports of goods and services rose by 28.5% from 2020, mostly thanks to previously signed contracts, which will be in 2021 for the most part, as well as the increased amount of works to be performed in Asia, Africa, Azerbaijan and Russia.

The defense industry system includes *nineteen* open joint-stock companies, which must disclose business information. At the time of writing, data on *eleven* OJSCs were available (Table 1), and all of them made profits. *Five* companies reported a drop in profits, although only one – the 140th Repair Plant engaged in the upgrade and repairs of armored vehicles – was under sanctions.

“AGAT – Electromechanical Plant” (under sanctions) even managed to increase its profit, most likely thanks to a large volume of work ordered by the Belarusian armed forces. In 2021, the company supplied radio relay stations and artillery fire control command vehicles, which significantly enhance unit control. Also, this may explain the increased profit of “AGAT – Control Systems”, which supplied radios, hardware and communication units, and automated reconnaissance, control, and communication complexes.

¹ «Подведены итоги деятельности Госкомвоенпрома в 2021 году и определены задачи развития военно-промышленного комплекса на 2022 год.» БСВТ, 10 May 2022, <https://bsvt.by/ru/novosti/post/podvedeny-itogi-deyatelnosti-goskomvoenproma-v-2021-godu>.

Table 1. Financial performance of some defense industry OJSCs in 2020–2021

OJSC	Net profit, thousand rubles		Revenues, thousand rubles		Profit margin, %	
	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	2021
Peleng	49,653	40,874	208,098	190,283	23.9	21.4
AGAT – Control Systems	21,350	15,524	175,492	110,072	12.2	14.1
Radar Design Bureau	14,353	21,884	62,951	56,217	22.9	38.9
ALEVKURP	7,375	4,127	24,018	17,332	30.7	23.8
2566th Electronic Warfare Systems Plant	5,013	5,795	35,741	31,447	14.0	18.4
Research Institute of Computer Systems	1,463	1,172	10,936	10,187	13.4	11.5
AGAT – Electro-mechanical Plant	1,020	85	55,489	46,066	1.8	0.2
Minsk Instrument Engineering Research Institute	368	698	6,683	7,528	5.5	9.3
140th Repair Plant	255	5,003	27,181	56,717	0.9	8.8
Orsha Aircraft Repair Plant	68	57	48,742	45,686	0.1	0.1
Communications Engineering	4	1,714	33,538	33,056	0.01	5.2
Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant	–	7,177	–	280,559	–	2.6
558th Aircraft Repair Plant	–	2,280	–	158,231	–	1.4

Note. Highlighted are the enterprises under sanctions.

Source: Publicly available reports posted on the websites of the OJSCs, and author's calculations.

“Peleng” OJSC increased profits by expanding space instrumentation engineering, and thanks to a larger number of orders placed by the Russian and Belarusian armed forces. For example, eighty Russian BTR-82A armored personnel carriers delivered to Belarus were equipped with optical instruments manufactured by “Peleng” and means of communication supplied by “AGAT – Control Systems”.

Radar Design Bureau, the producer of radar and electronic warfare systems, reported a decrease in profits due to a reduction in the number of foreign contracts. The company expected USD 5.5 million in exports in its business plan for 2021, whereas the actual exports amounted to USD 2.40 million. This may be due to both the saturation of the markets with this kind of products, and problems with entering new markets caused by direct and indirect sanctions.

Lines of business of defense sector enterprises

Manufacturers of defense products, especially for communications and electronic warfare, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), increasingly rely on development of new weapons and import substitution. At the MILEX-21 exhibition of armaments (Minsk, 2021), 148 prototypes were presented by organizations of the State Military-Industrial Committee, and 29 by other companies engaged in development of defense products, to compare with about 100 prototypes showcased at MILEX-19. During MILEX-21, twelve export contracts worth USD 140 million were signed against USD 200 million worth contracts signed during MILEX-19. This was partly due to the sanctions, and partly because a significant number of developments are not used by the Belarusian army, and are less attractive to the armies of other countries.

In 2021, defense enterprises also performed 205 R&D works to design finished prototypes of arms, military and special-purpose equipment, ammunition and components.

The first National Defense – New Technologies and Solution state program was presented last year. Its financing in 2021–2025 will amount to BYN 27.3 million, which will be allocated from the national budget. The government spending on the defense industry rose by 30.4% against the plan for early 2021. Only 85.9% of the funds were used, though, due to the customs clearance of equipment, which took longer than expected.²

Dmitry Pantus, Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee, pointed out six priority areas for 2021.

(1) *Development of missile and anti-aircraft weapons.* This particularly concerns Belarus' own “Polonez” missile for multiple rocket launchers capable of engaging targets at the ranges of up to 300 km, and a Belarusian missile for the Buk-MB3 surface-to-air missile system (up to 70 km). Tests of these missiles will continue in 2022.

(2) *Unmanned aerial strike systems of various types and small-size high-precision aviation weapons.* No less than nine organizations in Belarus are one way or another involved in UAV production. More than 20 prototypes have already been designed, but only a small part of them (and a small number) are supplied to the army in the absence of a systemic approach to the combat application of some models, usability problems and some unsatisfying characteristics.

(3) *Small arms and ammunition.* Research tests of the SMAR-100BPM assault rifle and SCR-1200M sniper rifle (Kidma-Tech JSC) were performed. They are expected to replace Soviet

² «Наука в Беларуси – состояние и перспективы.» ГКНТ, 10 May 2022, http://belisa.org.by/pdf/2022/science_day.pdf.

models used by the Belarusian army. In 2021, Kidma-Tech supplied 406 VSK-100 rifles to the Pakistani police.³

(4) *Advanced air target detection and tracking systems.* Successful tests of low-altitude and small-sized target detection systems of Radar Design Bureau were carried out.

(5) *Reliable mobility means.* The Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) developed a truck train to replace the MAZ-537 tractor of Soviet manufacture. The MZKT-692251 chassis for the Buk-MB3K SAM command post were tested. The 2566th Electronic Warfare Systems Plant conducted preliminary tests of the MT-LBU chassis for the repair of a large number of army vehicles.

(6) *Upgrade of armaments and military and special-purpose equipment used by the armed forces.* The mounting of the specialized part of the Osa-2B SAM system on a Belarusian-made chassis is particularly important, since Belarus has about 95 complexes on Soviet-made chassis. There are serious problems with components for the old chassis and their repair. State tests of the Uragan multiple-launch rocket system on MAZ 6317 chassis were conducted with a view to replace the obsolete Soviet chassis. The BM-21B Belgrade-2 MLRS has been added to the armory, and 122 rocket launchers for the Grad MLRS are being upgraded to increase the fire range and increase the target engagement capability.

A number of defense sector enterprises were designing special-purpose software for the military, AGAT Holding, Kidma-Tech, Fortity LLC, Belfortex LLC among them. An IT unit (company) was formed at the Military Academy of Belarus to deal directly with software for military systems and training. This area is developing both in terms of the amount of works and the number of organizations involved. The main developments

³ "Is Belarussian VSK-100 the new SMG of Pakistan Military?" *Quora*, 10 May 2022, <https://pdj.quora.com/Is-Belarussian-VSK-100-the-new-SMG-of-Pakistan-Military-Recent-reports-point-towards-POF-built-AK-variant-called-VSK-1>.

are aimed at creation of automated control systems, application software for military and specialized equipment, and combat management simulation. According to State Secretary of the Security council Alexander Volfovich, the share of armament of domestic design and manufacture in the Belarusian army was over 30% in 2021.⁴

Possible developments under sanctions

The operational environment for defense sector enterprises will noticeably change in 2022 because of the war in Ukraine and related sanctions, and not only for Belarusian companies, but also for Russia's foreign economic activity in general. Belarusian and Russian small companies of various kinds were often used by Belarusian defense sector enterprises to circumvent the sanctions when supplying components and, to a lesser extent, services, and this becomes virtually impossible now.

A narrower corridor of supplies of products under sanctions can also be expected in other directions (Turkey, the UAE, and some Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan). This can seriously affect not only the development of new products, especially for export, but also the maintenance of Belarusian products that have already been exported. The latter circumstance puts new export contracts in question.

All consequences of direct and indirect sanctions are hard to predict. Promising export contracts become less and less possible over time, as the West consolidates its strategic position on restrictions against Russia, including by influencing China (one

⁴ Исаёнок, Светлана. «Вольфович: более 30% вооружения и техники в Вооружённых Силах Беларуси — белорусского производства.» СБ. Беларусь сегодня, 10 May 2022, <https://www.sb.by/articles/volfovich-bolee-30-vooruzheniya-i-tekhniki-v-vooruzhennykh-silakh-belarusi-belorussskogo-proizvodstva.html>.

of the key suppliers of components for the Belarusian defense industry). Furthermore, China may question the expediency of providing Russia with military products and strengthening its neighbor. For Belarus, this risk is not that serious.

The sanctions will affect not only the purchase of components, but also the upgrade and uninterrupted functioning of defense enterprises that need software, new machines, components, etc.

In this situation, the stake is placed on greater cooperation with Russia and purchases of components from China. In 2021, LEMT Research and Development Center proposed to establish a joint venture to produce optoelectronic devices, robotic systems and UAV detection and control complexes, which would be localized in Udmurtia (Russia). Belarus and Russia are going to cooperate in repairing the Tor-M2K air defense systems for the Belarusian army. Some repairs will be performed in Belarus and some in Russia.

It is highly probable that Belarus will insist on involving its companies as much as possible in the modernization and supply of Russian military products to the Belarusian army by the example of the aforementioned BTR-82A armored personnel carriers.

In 2022, activities of defense enterprises will likely be ensured by the increased funding under the state defense order. The spending on national defense in 2022 is already planned to be 23.9% higher than in 2021. For the first time, the Republican Centralized Innovation Fund allocates BYN 14.16 million to finance defense-related R&D works in 2022. The defense sector development strategy provides for about 300 experimental and development works to be carried out in the next *five* years.

Belarusian defense enterprises will definitely benefit from Russia's need to restore its equipment and compensate for its losses during the war in Ukraine. "Peleng" JSC, AGAT Holding, the Orsha Aircraft Repair Plant, 558th Aircraft Repair Plant

(Baranovichi), 140th Aircraft Repair Plant, etc. can be actively involved.

Conclusion

The defense industry considerably increased output in 2021, and, in spite of the sanctions, worked with a profit, in many respects thanks to previously signed export contracts and increased supplies to the Belarusian army.

The spending on R&D related to development of new weapons increased substantially. Judging by similar works of late, the volume of financing will not decrease in the future, and may even increase. However, the direct and indirect sanctions can be a problem for defense enterprises.

The industry mainly focuses on designing missiles, UAVs and weapons for them, radar and communications systems, and mobility means.

In 2022, the need to restore Russia's combat capabilities may become a driver of Belarusian defense industry's output. However, Russian weapon supplies to Belarus will probably decrease due to the above factors, so Belarus will step up repairs and modernization of the military hardware that it already possesses, and work on new products, which means an increase in supplies to the domestic market and economic growth of the national defense segment of the economy.

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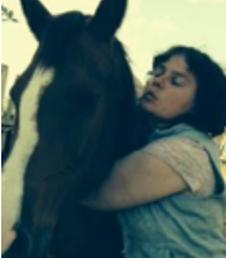
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