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# TRENDS IN BELARUS 2021/1:

January-April

**Quarterly analytic review**

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## *Key points:*

- A fragile status quo continues to be maintained in the country, with neither side having the capacity to impose its will.
- Repressions and backing from Russia allows the Lukashenko regime to keep protests in check.
- The shape and size of protests is changing: to evade crackdown, the protests have become small in size, spontaneous, and unanticipated.
- The regime and the opposition are gearing up for a transformation of power relations, with Lukashenko initiating a constitutional reform and the opposition, which does not support this process, on the lookout for alternatives.
- There is a surge of new opposition parties.
- Public opinion polls: The legitimacy of the regime can no longer be restored.
- Russia continues negotiations with Lukashenko for a political and military integration but does not expect a rapid shift from the status quo.
- Oil flows are being rerouted to Russian ports, with some 9.8 million tonnes of Belarusian oil products planned to be sent for transshipment to them.
- Western countries have so far introduced sanctions against 327 Belarusians; new sets of sanctions are expected to follow.

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## DOMESTIC PROCESSES

### *Constitutional reform*

On 11-12 February, the 6th All Belarusian People's Assembly (*Всебелорусское народное собрание*) was held in Minsk. This is an extra-constitutional body usually used by Lukashenko to provide a veneer of legitimacy for his decisions. Despite the expectations of Lukashenko announcing specific plans of resolving the current crisis, the Belarusian president's hours-long speech contained only abstract remarks on how he sees the situation:

- the constitution needs reforming as too much power is concentrated in the hands of a single person;
- Lukashenko will step down only if: (a) all protests in the country stop; (b) the former president and his allies receive certain guarantees.
- The new system would give a greater role to the All Belarusian People's Assembly and political parties;
- A constitutional commission is being established (comprising 36 members; the decree for establishing it was signed on 16 March<sup>1</sup>), tasked with preparing a draft for the new constitution. The draft has to be ready by the end of 2021 and a referendum on the new constitution is set to take place in early 2022.

Lukashenko's talk of a constitutional reform and its highly abstract blueprint seem to suggest that the president expects to be able to keep the current processes in check and wants to retain as much room for manoeuvre as possible given possible shifts of his public perception in Belarus and relations with Russia and the West, as well as the country's socio-economic situation at the time.

The opposition has prepared its own draft of a new constitution<sup>2</sup> and has no intention of taking part in Lukashenko's reform process. The opposition's draft includes:

- Transitioning from a presidential to a parliamentary system (the parliament appoints the prime minister and their cabinet and has legislative power);
- Presidents can serve a maximum of 2 five-year terms;
- A proposal to change local government election procedures (more rights and liberties);
- A proposal to create a National Council of Justice and strengthen the role of the National Bank;
- Belarusian and Russian languages are to be named state languages – with the view to expanding the use of the Belarusian language;
- Pahonia is to become the country's coat of arms and the white-red-white flag, the state flag.

These diverging constitutional reform drafts indicates a parallel development of two alternative notions of social reality in Belarus – one pushed by the government and the other conceived by the opposition. They essentially deny each other's existence, thereby making any agreement (or pact) between the government and the opposition fairly unlikely.

Another example of such trends is the initiative by the former presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, announced on 18 March, to start negotiations with constructively-minded regime officials on a new election, which would be overseen by the OSCE and the UN. The internet platform Golos is organising an online vote in support of this initiative.<sup>3</sup> The initiative aims to demonstrate how many Belarusians want talks to begin on holding a new election.

More than 773,000 Belarusians (as of 15 April 2021) have expressed their support via Golos for such negotiations to start. Belarus has around 6.88 million citizens with a right to vote, which means that around 11 per cent of eligible voters are in favour of the negotiations. The regime has not reacted to this offer. It appears that Lukashenko has no intention of accepting any initiatives from the opposition or involving the West and will continue to steer the situation in the direction that benefits him alone. It bears mentioning that Tikhanovskaya and her allies are facing criminal proceedings and international arrest warrants issued by the Belarusian government, and opposition members have been added to the list of 'extremists'.<sup>4</sup>

### *Surge of new political parties*

At the backdrop of a possible constitutional reform, preparations are also under way for the time when the new constitution is (possibly) put in place. There is talk of creating at least several new parties. On 9 April, Lukashenko confirmed that a new law on political parties will be adopted in 2021, and that current parties will have to re-register.<sup>5</sup> On 11 November 2020, the Ministry of Justice issued warnings to 10 political parties regarding the resolution they had signed on 11 September 2020 on holding a new election.<sup>6</sup> Currently Belarus has 15 officially-registered political parties. Registering a new party requires a minimum of 1,000 founders. Additionally, it must have founders representing each region of Belarus as well as the city of Minsk. The party must have offices in Minsk and each region, registered with regional justice departments. All party offices must have valid lease contracts, which presents a serious obstacle because a good number of even currently-registered parties struggle to secure a lease (especially in Minsk).

Although it remains unclear, which of the newly-established parties will be allowed to officially register, this surge of new parties shows that various political players do expect Lukashenko to formally step down (even if it is anyone's guess as to when and on what conditions). The formation of several different parties or movements in a reform-prone segment of the society may well be a sign of pluralism and diversity of views, but there is a danger that these differences of opinion, especially in the absence of a clear and fair playing field, could potentially stoke division and disagreement on the means and direction of the transformation needed.

- A party titled 'Union' (Союз) and favouring complete integration into Russia (Союз) was established on 6 March.
- Yuri Voskresensky, the former Viktor Babariko campaign manager (and later, a defender of Lukashenko's position), and Andrey Lankin, the former Valery Tsepkalov campaign manager, announced they are going to create a party titled 'Democratic Union' (Демократический союз). Its role is likely to be that of quasi-opposition.
- Representatives of the pro-presidential movement White Rus (Белая Русь), for the part, are talking of forming a party again, too. Should this happen, this party (with a proposed title of 'National Union') would be Lukashenko's key ally in the new system.
- The former presidential candidate Andrey Dmitriyev has also announced his plans of establishing a party, titled 'Our Party' (Наша партия).

- On 29 March, the former presidential candidate Babariko issued an announcement on the need to create a party titled 'Together' (*Вместе*), which, according to him, is the most effective way towards a victory. The founding congress of the party is scheduled for May, and its founding committee claims to have collected more than 4,000 signatures of prospective founders. Babariko first announced of his plans to form a party back on 31 August 2020.
- On 8 April, plans of forming a political party were also announced by a member of the Coordination Council, Pavel Latushko.<sup>7</sup>

### *Transforming protests and repressions*

On 25 March, which is celebrated a Freedom Day in Belarus (*День Воли* – commemorating the 1918 declaration of independence), the opposition was getting ready for a resumption of mass protests and planning new large-scale projects. However, no large centralised mass protest took place as the regime mobilised its security forces to prevent any mass gathering. Protests were local and small-scale (scattered across residential areas). According to the Viasna Human Rights Centre, more than 250 individuals were detained, with 175 of them in Minsk. On 27 March, 250 others were detained across the country. A total of 2,523 persons were detained between 1 January and 31 March, with the number of political prisoners rising from 169 to 320.

It can be surmised that the regime is not going to ease restrictions and control, while protesters, despite their lack of intention to return to their 'normal' relationship to the regime, are ex-

periencing a fear of violence. However, the regime has so far been able to keep the waves of protests in check, and the punishments faced by protesters are getting more severe. On 1 March, a new Code of Administrative Offences came into force in Belarus. Under the new code, organising gatherings and expressing views will incur more severe punishments, with fines increased by several magnitudes and longer arrests for repeat offenders.<sup>8</sup> By way of summary it can be said that the nature of protests has changed as of early 2021, becoming smaller in numbers, spontaneous, and unexpected in order to evade crackdown by security forces.

### *Pressure against Poles in Belarus*

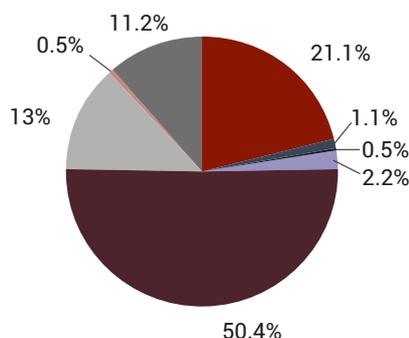
The end of March saw arrests of Polish minority leaders (including Andrzej Poczobut and Andželika Borys) taking place in Grodno and the wider Grodno region. This is not the first time that representatives of Union of Poles, which is not recognised by the regime (and is the country's largest NGO), are arrested; what is new, however, is that persecution has now been extended to (informal) Polish schools and even providers of Polish language courses. On 6 April, Lukashenko ordered to perform inspections in all schools and organisations of this nature across Belarus.

### *Public perception of the situation*

Results of a public opinion survey carried out in February 2021 indicate<sup>9</sup> that the legitimacy of the Lukashenko regime is effectively beyond redemption in the eyes of the Belarusian people, yet their motivation to continue to protest and 'fight until the end' is weakening. This is due to severe repressions by the regime, lack of clarity as to what happens 'after Lukashenko', and the rather passive international response and pressure to the regime (which, despite being felt, is counterbalanced by Russia's tacit support for the regime).

## Question 2

Which candidate did you vote for in the Belarusian presidential elections?



- Aliaksandr Lukashenka
- Siarhei Cherachen
- Hanna Kanapatskaya
- Andrey Dzmitryeu
- Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya
- None of the above
- I destroyed my ballot or removed it from the polling station
- I decline to answer



On 21 March, the Telegram channel Nexta released a documentary about Lukashenko and his riches, titled 'The Golden Bottom' (*Золотое Дно*)<sup>10</sup>. Filmed in the style of Alexei Navalny and his takedowns of Russian leaders and oligarchs, the documentary exposes the extent of Lukashenko's illegally accumulated riches. The film did not generate much of a resonance, and its most discussed element was the claim about the support Lukashenko received (or appropriated) from the European Union. Upon its release, EU officials in question were quick to deny that EU funds have been used for the purposes of the regime.

## EXTERNAL RELATIONS

In the sphere of external relations, Belarus is continuing its negotiations with Russia on the terms of its support for the regime and the pressure from the West is slowly increasing.

## Russia: Negotiating political integration

On 22 February, Lukashenko met with Vladimir Putin in Sochi. The meeting lasted 6 hours, but there was little information as to its content.<sup>11</sup> Public accounts of the meeting are limited to the summary that the respective heads of state discussed integration processes, Russia's backing, and renewal on disrupted transport connections and the statement of support from Russia for Lukashenko's efforts to change the constitution of Belarus and willingness to help in Belarus's fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (including plans of the Sputnik-V vaccine shipments). The main focus of this informal meeting is likely to have exactly been the terms of a deeper integration (the Union State and the 31 'road maps' towards finalising it).

A little later, on 30 March, Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Vladimir Semashko remarked that remaining issues to negotiate with respect to the Union State of Russia and Belarus are a shared tax system, customs, natural gas, common industrial policy, agriculture, and a common market of oil and its products. According to Semashko, these issues are expected to be resolved by the end of April. Nonetheless, given the fact that these are essentially the issues the two parties have been unable to agree upon since 2019, a final agreement and a practical implementation of the Union State project is still some way away. Lukashenko is likely to try and delay the processes of a full and final integration for as long as he can. Russia does not have a goal of openly pressuring him, as it would rather avoid an open confrontation with the Belarusian public.

On 25 March, Putin appointed his current Ambassador to Latvia Yevgeny Lukyanov as the new Russian Ambassador to Belarus. Lukyanov is already a third such appointee since 2018, when the hard-liner Mikhail Babich ar-

rived in Minsk (and was much criticised for his positions there). He was replaced by the moderate-leaning Dmitry Mezentsev in 2019. On 19 March, Mezentsev was appointed as the Secretary General of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.

### *Re-routing Belarusian cargo*

On 19 February, on the eve of the Sochi meeting, Russia and Belarus signed an intergovernmental agreement on redirecting goods (primarily, oil products) away from the Baltic states and towards Russian ports (the agreement is set to last until 2023, with the possibility of renewing it automatically). Some 9.8 million tonnes of oil products are to be sent for transshipment to Russian ports (on the *take-or-pay* clause). Belarus used to transit some 6 million tonnes of oil products annually through ports in the Baltics (in Klaipėda, Ventspils, and Riga). Belarus exports around 10.5 million tonnes of oil products annually. Klaipėda port representatives note that disruptions in oil product cargo from Belarus have been observed since the beginning of the year, and the concluded agreement (were it to be fully implemented) will negatively affect the competitiveness of the port.<sup>12</sup> According to Lithuanian media, transshipment of oil products has almost come to a halt in Klaipėda, but it continues in Ventspils and Riga. This agreement (towards signing of which Minsk has been pressured by Moscow for a long time) is likely attributable to Lukashenko's reduced room for manoeuvre and Lithuania's strict political stance. It puts Belarus at an economic disadvantage and, in the long run, increases its dependence on Moscow.

There is also talk of re-routing potassium fertilizer exports away from the Baltics and towards Russian ports.<sup>13</sup> Such re-routing would hit Klaipėda's economy even harder, but it would also incur greater losses to Belarus (Belarus controls part of the Bulk cargo terminal

in the Klaipėda port). Due to logistical reasons and the existing ties, redirecting potassium fertilizer exports away from Klaipėda and towards Russian ports is therefore not very likely (at least until *Belaruskalij* (Беларуськалий) remains in control of Belarus). However, the re-routing of oil products is a signal that politically motivated decisions, despite being economically irrational, are nevertheless possible.

### *Military cooperation*

There is increased talk again of renewing or strengthening military cooperation between Russia and Belarus. This could be due to expiring lease contracts regarding two Russian military bases in Belarus, which are set to terminate this June.

On 16 March, an agreement on establishing three Russia-Belarus military training centres was announced. One of them, for air force and air defence personnel, is supposed to be created in Belarus (in the region of Lida). The other two, namely the joint land force personnel training centre and the one in the Baltic Fleet Base, are supposed to be in Russia. As to the military centre in Belarus, the discussion seems to be focused on deploying the SU-30SM fighter jets and preparing the personnel. The Belarusian side is essentially expecting to get fighter jets from Russia and train Belarusian pilots to use them. Russians, for their part, are hoping to have their own fighter jets and pilots in the Belarusian territory.

As relations between Russia and the West continue to deteriorate, Belarus's military-strategic location is gaining new value; one can therefore expect a ramping up of pressure from Russia with the view to securing military bases or facilities in Belarus. On the other hand, these discussions go back to at least 2013, but Lukashenko has so far been able to avoid allowing direct entry to Russian soldiers

for a permanent base in his country's territory. Nonetheless, Lukashenko's freedom for manoeuvre is now shrinking. One deterring factor for establishing a physical Russian military base in Belarus is Moscow's unwillingness to taunt the Belarusian people by blatantly ramping up its military pressure.

### *The West: New set of sanctions*

The EU is considering its fourth set of sanctions against Belarus (the first three were introduced in October, November, and December 2021, imposing sanctions on 88 individuals and 7 companies). It is estimated that Western countries (including the EU, the US, the Baltic states, Canada, Switzerland and others) have so far introduced sanctions against 327 Belarusians. The Belarusian opposition (Tikhonovskaya) and certain EU member states (including Lithuania) criticize such a slow and lacklustre sanctioning process. Lithuania has so far imposed sanctions on 274 Belarusian regime officials.<sup>14</sup> In April, the EU is expected to consider including physical and legal persons in this list. However, it is as yet difficult

to expect stricter sanctions to a larger number of individuals, because EU member states have diverging views on the sanctioning process and reaching of the consensus on a wide range of sanctions is therefore difficult.

On 31 March, the US Department of State announced it was considering reintroducing sanctions on 9 Belarusian state enterprises<sup>15</sup> (these had been suspended in 2015). The sanctions could be renewed as soon as 26 April.<sup>16</sup> On 15 March, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the resolution on the situation of human rights in Belarus<sup>17</sup>, which requests the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to gather evidence on human rights violations following the 9 August 2020 election. As a follow-up to the recommendations of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism, International Accountability Platform for Belarus was established on 24 March<sup>18</sup>, with the goal of collecting and preserving evidence of human rights violations and crimes against humanity in Belarus. The platform is overseen by a consortium of Belarusian and European human rights organisations.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Подписан Указ о Конституционной Комиссии. Официальный Интернет-Портал Президента Республики Беларусь', žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/podpisan-ukaz-o-konstitucionnoy-komissii>.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Конституция - КанСтытуцыя', žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <https://kanstytucija.online/constitution/>.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Голос', Платформа Голос, žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <https://belarus2020.org/dialog>.
- <sup>4</sup> Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com), 'КГБ Беларуси внес Светлану Тихановскую в перечень террористов' 02.04.2021', DW.COM, žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <https://www.dw.com/ru/kgb-belarusi-vnes-svetlanu-tihanovskuju-v-perechen-terroristov/a-57088256>.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Совещание По Вопросам Деятельности Политических Партий в Беларуси'. Официальный Интернет-Портал Президента Республики Беларусь, žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosam-deyatelnosti-politicheskikh-partiy-v-belarusi>.
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- <sup>8</sup> 'Чаго чакаць мірным пратэстоўцам ад зменаў у КаАП?', spring96.org, žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <http://spring96.org/be/news/102193>.
- <sup>9</sup> Belarusians' views on the political crisis. Chatham House. 2021. žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f48Bx2sa11VpWDhSGPdqafrqhdrrw6x/view>.
- <sup>10</sup> ЛУКАШЕНКО. ЗОЛОТЕ ДНО – сенсаційний фільм @NEXTA про шалені статки диктатора Білорусі (українською), žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jd8SC\\_Owl24](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jd8SC_Owl24).
- <sup>11</sup> Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com), 'Встреча в Сочи: о чем на самом деле говорили Путин и Лукашенко | DW | 25.02.2021', DW.COM, žiūrėta 2021 m. balandžio 15 d., <https://www.dw.com/ru/moskva-i-minsk-obedinjat-usilija-dlja-protivostojaniju-zapadu/a-56691714>.
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- <sup>14</sup> Paskutinis sprendimas dėl sankcionuojamų asmenų priimtas 2021 m. kovo 25 d. – į sąrašą asmenų, kuriems draudžiama atvykti į Lietuvą, įtraukta 118 naujų pavardžių: <https://www.urm.lt/default/lt/naujienos/ispleciamas-baltarusijos-pareigunu-kuriems-draudziama-atvykti-i-baltijos-salis-sarastas>.
- <sup>15</sup> Belarusian Oil Trade House, Belneftekhim, Belneftekhim USA, Inc., Belshina OAO, Grodno Azot OAO, Grodno Khimvolokno OAO, Lakokraska OAO, Naftan OAO, Polotsk Steklovolokno OAO
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- <sup>18</sup> The International Accountability Platform for Belarus. <https://iapbelarus.org/>