



## Belarus: Half a Year of Protests

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Since the rigged presidential elections in August 2020, the public protests against Alexander Lukashenka have continued. The Belarusian authorities have responded with repression, detaining protesters and independent journalists. Despite Lukashenka's calls to reform the constitution, he also tries to postpone this process. The European Union should increase its support to civil society and keep demanding the Belarusian authorities respect human rights.

**Social and Economic Situation.** Ever since the presidential election on 9 August last year, public protests are ongoing in Belarus. The authorities, in turn, are trying to stop them, mainly by intimidating and arresting protesters. Belarusian human rights organisations indicate that about 33,000 people have been detained so far, and courts have initiated about 1,800 criminal cases against participants in opposition actions (including minor individuals), strikes, and independent journalists. Some of them report being subjected to torture in police stations and prisons—the UN confirmed at least 450 such cases.

The political crisis is exacerbated by economic problems. Compared to 2019, Belarus' GDP decreased by 0.9% in 2020. The average salary last year was about BYN 1,300 (equivalent to about \$500), which is comparable to 2019's level, but \$90 less than the year before. Moreover, inflation in 2020 amounted to 7.4%. Despite the worsening macroeconomic indicators, the authorities decided not to introduce economic reforms.

Foreign direct investment has also decreased significantly (from \$7.2 billion in 2019 to \$6 billion in 2020), and some private enterprises—especially from the IT sector—decided to move abroad (mainly to Lithuania). The challenging economic situation makes it more difficult for private businesses to support independent social organisations.

According to independent polls, half of the Belarusians surveyed are critical of Lukashenka. Polls also show that he would have no chance of winning a free and fair presidential election. However, despite the lack of social acceptance and growing economic problems, his regime manages to stay in power thanks to the support and loyalty

of internal power structures. Even before the elections in 2020, many employees of OMON and other police formations received raises. Moreover, the officers who use violence against protesters and detainees fear that in the event of a change of government they will be criminally liable, so they opt for the status quo.

**All-Belarusian People's Assembly.** On 11-12 February, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (BPA) took place in Minsk. It is convened every five years and its most important task is to assess the social and economic situation over the previous five years and to develop plans for the next period. This body, though, has no constitutional authority and is used by the authorities as an argument that "ordinary" Belarusians co-shape state policy.

When the first announcements of the convening of this body appeared in the autumn of 2020, they were accompanied by information that the main topic of the work of the BPA would be the reform of the constitution announced by Lukashenka, and the delegates themselves would come to the Belarusian capital at the turn of November to December. However, the BPA was postponed to February. When the 2,400 delegates met, they discussed mainly economic and social issues, assessing the implementation of the economic plan for 2016-2020 and working on the next one for 2020-2025.

In his speech at the assembly, Lukashenka blamed Western countries, including Poland, for the outbreak of the protests. He pointed to the need to deepen economic integration between Belarus and Russia and announced that work on the reform of the constitution will continue

this year, with a referendum on the changes taking place in 2022 (most likely simultaneously with local elections).

The return to the “traditional” topics of the meeting shows that the Belarusian authorities do not yet have a coherent draft amendment to the constitution, including an idea how to politically empower Lukashenka so that he can control the system of power in the state regardless of the person holding the office of president. Although during the BPA there was assurances that a constitutional commission was to be established in the near future, so far no information has appeared that the president’s powers are to be limited. However, if such changes are proposed, it will mean that Lukashenka will most likely decide not to run in the next presidential election. Another politically difficult moment for the Belarusian government will be holding the referendum. Announcement of a date will probably trigger further protests to pressure the authorities not to make changes by manipulating the outcome.

**Russia’s Policy towards the Belarusian Authorities.** In the last six months, Belarus and Russia have signed contracts for this year’s [supplies of hydrocarbons](#). Both countries are also planning activities aimed at intensifying military exercises and [cooperation in the military sphere](#). Moreover, the countries’ prime ministers, foreign ministers, and defence ministers met many times during this time. On 22 February, [Putin met with Lukashenka](#). During that meeting, the men stressed the need to deepen the integration of Russia and Belarus. Agreeing to Russian proposals in this area will therefore be the price Lukashenka must pay for Russia’s political and economic support.

Moreover, the Russian authorities see an opportunity to strengthen their influence in Belarus by changing the political system there, increasing the power, role, and conduct of elections to parliament. In this context, it will be very important for Russia that a strong pro-Russia party, or several of them, participate in the formation of the government. It will also be important to change the president to a person who will pursue Russian interests in Belarus to an even greater extent. If such changes do not take place, it may mean that Russia will withdraw support, mainly economic, in order to bend the Belarusian government to its will.

At the same time, the Russian authorities will want the social situation in Belarus to calm down. From their perspective, the political crisis should be dealt with as soon

as possible so it does not inspire protests in Russia given this year’s Duma elections and presidential election in 2024.

**Conclusions for Poland and the EU.** The Belarusian political and economic crisis will deepen. Russia will try to use Lukashenka’s weakening position to gain further political, economic, and security tools of influence. If the announcements that changes to the constitution will be completed by the end of 2021 come true, it may mean that Russia will demand presidential elections in Belarus in 2022. Thus, the EU should closely follow the process of constitutional changes and in particular how the amendments are adopted, as well as the development of Belarusian-Russian relations.

Moreover, it is worthwhile for the EU to make its policy towards Belarus more active and, irrespective of the plans for long-term support of civil society institutions, propose a “plan for the democratisation of Belarus”, making use of the political processes taking place there. It should include a package of political and financial reforms, as well as economic support (including consultancy) that encourage real democratic changes in the country. It will also be particularly important to ensure long-term financing for civil society and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The EU may take advantage of measures previously implemented by individual Member States, such as Poland or Lithuania. Such a plan could also be developed, for example, in consultation with the administration of President Joe Biden.

At the same time, it would be worthwhile for the EU to increase its assistance to organisations working on behalf of repressed people. In December 2020, the European Commission adopted the “EU4Belarus: Solidarity with the People of Belarus” programme, under which €24 million was allocated to support civil society, independent media, youth, SMEs, and countering the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this is only part of the €53 million aid package announced in August last year. Moreover, the scale and duration of the repressions is disproportionate to that which took place in previous years, hence it is necessary to increase the financial resources and types of assistance provided. It will also be very important to continue supporting independent journalists. Poland should be more active in this area, especially using media broadcasting from its territory, such as Belsat.