



Belarus Facing Growing Domestic Problems

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The Belarusian authorities continue to suffer the consequences of rigging the 2020 presidential elections and their support for Russian aggression against Ukraine, which have resulted in a significant reduction in political and trade contacts with Western countries. To maintain internal stability, the regime is stepping up repression and attempting to militarise society by portraying external threats. Although the risk of regime collapse is not high, the EU should be prepared to increase its support for the democratisation of Belarus.

In recent weeks, amended language and citizenship laws have come into force in Belarus as part of further elements of the Russification of public space and persecution of the opposition, including the exiled Interim Government of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In addition, Alexander Lukashenka has signed a law creating the *Narodnoe Opolcheniye*, or People's Militia, which demonstrates a move towards the progressive militarisation of society. The changes to the law are a result of the ongoing political crisis since 2020 and the authorities' awareness that they lack legitimacy and public trust.

The Regime's Actions Towards Society. For the past three years, the Belarusian authorities have been carrying out repression of those who have opposed state policy in any way. As a result, almost 1,500 people now have the status of political prisoners, the prosecutor's office is handling more than 3,500 political criminal cases. Reports from independent organisations indicate that since May 2020, about 136,000 people have been victims of persecution.

Independent NGOs and media outlets have been abolished since 2022. Some of the still-functioning political parties have not passed the re-registration procedure and will be liquidated. Russification of the public space is progressing, and an amendment to the Law on Language came into force on 25 July that, among other things, makes teaching in minority languages almost impossible. Although Belarusian has formally the same status as Russian, Russian is the language of education for almost 90% of pupils. Russian also dominates the public and media space.

In 2022, all schools had to undergo a teaching licensing procedure, which *de facto* eliminated private schools that had a different approach to education than state ones. Since 2022, a military-patriotic education programme has been implemented in schools and serves as an important part of the systematic militarisation of society. The authorities are also pursuing it in other dimensions. On 17 July, Lukashenka signed a law on the People's Militia, giving a legal basis for the voluntary participation of citizens in providing security during martial law. Members of the *Narodnoe Opolcheniye* will be checked by the authorities and trained, among other things, in the use of weapons. These measures are accompanied by rhetoric from the authorities pointing to alleged threats coming from NATO countries (mainly Poland and Lithuania) and in connection with the ongoing war in Ukraine and an increased number of manoeuvres, including combined Belarusian-Russian ones.

The widespread repression has resulted in passivity in society and limits the ability of the population to resist the regime. However, Russian and Belarusian propaganda have failed to influence Belarusians' perception of the war in Ukraine. A poll conducted in March this year by Chatham House indicates that 44% of Belarusians surveyed do not support the war and 30% of those asked said they believe that Belarus should declare full neutrality. Only 3% of respondents were in favour of the Belarusian army taking part in military action in Ukraine on the side of Russia. Access to independent media operating from abroad is of great importance in shaping such attitudes, as 91% of their

audiences were in favour of opposing the war, while only 21% of audiences of official and Russian media were of the same opinion.

The atmosphere of persecution has also resulted in numerous departures of Belarusians from the country. According to estimates by the independent Belarusian analytical institution BEROC, up to 172,000 Belarusian citizens left for EU countries between 2021 and 2023, mainly for Poland (up to 111,000) and Lithuania (around 49,000). However, leaving the country does not mean avoiding a trial in Belarus. The country's authorities have introduced trials *in absentia*, which, since they need not be present, deprives the accused of even an illusory right to defence. A new version of the law on citizenship also came into force on 13 July this year that stipulates that if a Belarusian citizen convicted with a final sentence does not return to the country to serve his or her sentence, he or she may be deprived of citizenship. These changes primarily hit opposition activists in exile, as many members of the Interim Cabinet, including Tsikhanouskaya, have been sentenced to long prison terms. The next step for the Belarusian authorities will most likely be to deprive them of their citizenship and public rights. This is intended to make it more difficult for them to act internationally by preventing them from using Belarusian documents and undermining their legitimacy to take action on behalf of the Belarusian people.

The Economic Situation and Government Action. The political crisis is accompanied by economic problems. According to official data, the Belarusian GDP declined by 4.7% in 2022, while the 3.8% top-line growth announced for this year will not compensate for earlier losses. Industry, mainly armaments and petrochemicals (supporting the Russian war effort), and domestic market demand contributed most to GDP. Significant declines were recorded in the IT sector (-17%) and agriculture (-6.1%). Inflation year on year in the first half of 2023 was less than 3%, but economists forecast a significant increase in the second half of the year. The average wage in 2023 increased by 7.4% and stands at BYN 1,927 (just over PLN 3,000). However, the increase in wages is linked to a shortage of suitable workers. Since 2020, mainly young (25-40 years old) and well-educated people have left Belarus, which has adversely affected economic sectors such as IT, construction, transport and logistics, or healthcare. The longer the political crisis in

Belarus lasts, the chances of people who left after 2020 returning diminish, which will have a negative impact on the Belarusian economy in the long term. A declining workforce will result in an increased burden on the state to pay social benefits. Therefore, the Belarusian authorities are preparing a draft law limiting the possibility of departure of some specialists, or making it more difficult to change jobs in agriculture.

The Belarusian economy has also been hit by Western sanctions, which, according to official Belarusian 2022 estimates, have affected 20% of it. As a result, an anti-crisis group was set up in the government that introduced, among other things, restrictions on the sale of shares of foreign companies operating in Belarus and a ban on exports of certain types of food products. In 2023, Belarus also started to cooperate with the Central Bank of Russia, whose policies helped to limit the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The changes to the law introduced in recent weeks restricting the rights of Belarusian citizens and the progressive militarisation of the state are a reaction by the Belarusian authorities to the lack of support and legitimacy to govern. They show that the Belarusian regime functions mainly through intimidation of the public and support from Russia, which weakens state structures and, in the long term, will adversely affect the economy.

Thus, Western support for the opposition and independent media is essential, as they play a key role in the survival of Belarusian independence. It is also very important to support initiatives related to the propagation of the Belarusian language and culture, which will at least partly prevent the Russification of the country.

It would be worthwhile for the EU to update the plans published in 2021 to support the democratisation process in Belarus, which would send an important signal to the people there that the Member States still want to support an independent Belarus. The EU should develop assistance strategies for civil-society institutions and better align and coordinate financial assistance with the Member States. It also would be worthwhile for the new strategy to consider that in case of the democratisation of Belarus, how to supply economic aid and support mechanisms for administrative reforms.