

Editorial Team: Beata Surmacz (Director of ICE), Tomasz Stępniewski (Deputy Director of ICE), Agnieszka Zajdel (Editorial Assistant), Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, Jakub Olchowski, Konrad Pawłowski, Agata Tatarenko

No. 386 (83/2021) | 14.05.2021

ISSN 2657-6996

© IEŚ

Jakub Olchowski

“Stabilization” of the situation in Belarus

A year has passed since the first protests against the regime, but now the protests have almost stopped, stifled by brutal repressions. Alyaksandr Lukashenka is consolidating, with the help of Russia, an authoritarian model of governance, and at the same time the social and economic crisis in the country is deepening. In international relations, Belarus is consistently moving away from the West, which is accompanied by a growing, multi-dimensional dependence on Russia.

Suppression of protests. It was expected that with the coming of spring, demonstrations against Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s authority would resume. It was hoped that the authorities could be forced to negotiate and to resign within a few months. The symbolic beginning of the new wave of protests was to be Freedom Day – March 25. However, this did not happen, and the authorities successfully pacified all attempts to hold anti-regime demonstrations. In turn, before May 9 and the Victory Day celebration, security forces warned that any demonstrations using forbidden symbols (white, red, and white colours) would be ruthlessly suppressed.

In order to suppress the protests, Lukashenka resorted to harsher repressions than before, making it clear that he was not willing to compromise and that he did not intend to give up power. Since May 2020, approximately 35,000 people have been detained. Among them are political opponents (led by Lukashenka’s counter-candidates), participants in the protests, and also any groups deemed hostile to the authorities, with particular focus on representatives of independent media recently.

Subsequent information on sentences for journalists, Telegram channel administrators, etc. also shows that the authorities have changed their tactics: the penalties are no longer limited to 15-30 days in prison, but verdicts reach several years (usually 4-6 years). There are many pretexts: “participation in mass riots,” “destruction of property,” “armed resistance to government officials,” “conspiracy to seize state power in an unconstitutional manner,” etc. There are also heavy fines (often paired with imprisonment), usually in the range of 500 to 1500 rubles¹, frequently for absurd reasons such as white, red, and white fruit jellies or socks. Any public assemblies not approved by the authorities are forbidden, as well as the reporting of such events.

According to the Human Rights Center “Viasna,” there were 370 political prisoners in Belarus in May 2021. Their number is therefore growing systematically: at the end of 2020 there were only over 100, and by February 2021 it was already over 250. This is part of a broad campaign to intimidate the public, carried out using various methods and means, such as information about alleged plans to attack Lukashenka or, in the case of Belarusian Poles, the collection by prosecutors of personal data of teachers and students from Polish language teaching centres. The repression of Poles also has a different meaning: it was a symbolic attack on the “hostile West” (guilty of destabilizing Belarus) and a warning to the entire Belarusian NGO sector – as in 2005, when the Union of Poles in Belarus was banned.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, still in Lithuania, calls on the Belarusian authorities to enter into dialogue and, together with other opposition leaders, tries to internationalize the situation in Belarus, also in forums of international organizations. For example, Finland was asked to initiate tripartite talks with Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarusian civil society, and Russia.

¹ According to the Belarusian statistical office, in January 2021 the average salary in Belarus was 1,290 gross rubles, i.e. 496 USD or around 420 EUR.

Бизнес как обычно? Lukashenka does not negotiate and does not promise anything. He exercises power as he has so far. After suppressing the protests and restoring relative stability with the help of Russia, he felt confident enough to return to his earlier manner of governing. At the same time, he dropped the subject of changes to the constitution, which he had promised at the beginning of 2021, in order to calm both the unrest in the Belarusian society and pressure from Russia.

The pandemic is still being used instrumentally, which serves not only to control society, but also to strengthen relations with Russia, as an element of success propaganda. Belarus produces the Russian Sputnik V vaccine under license, and medical and humanitarian cooperation with Russia is also emphasized. However, the vaccination process in Belarus is very slow, and the COVID-19 statistics have most likely been faked. According to the report of the Belarusian branch of the Mediazona portal, in November and December 2020 only in Minsk there were more infections and deaths due to coronavirus than officially in the whole of Belarus.

The Belarusian government has consistently strengthened their rhetoric emphasizing community with Russia and pointing to the West as a factor behind the protests aimed at destabilizing Belarus. Lukashenka used the Victory Day celebration to make it clear: “they are trying to impose flags and hymns on us that have been stained by cooperation with Nazi murderers – instead of the symbols of the Great Victory.” This kind of rhetoric contrasts with the situation from a year ago, when Lukashenka unequivocally suggested that the political forces hostile to him were inspired by Russia and not, as previously, by the West.

The force institutions of the state are still being strengthened. In this context, the decree on “protection of sovereignty and the constitutional system” signed on May 9 is of particular importance. According to its provisions, in the event of the death of the head of state as a result of an act of violence, de facto power is taken over by the Security Council, which introduces a state of emergency, and its decisions are to be unconditionally implemented by all state institutions. The Security Council of Belarus is currently the only state body, apart from the president, that has real power, and it is appointed by presidential decree, which controls its entire composition. The decree of 9 May, contrary to the constitution, gives the Council dictatorial power, according to numerous opinions. Assessments of this decision are divergent: according to some, it proves that Lukashenka does not trust anyone anymore, but according to others it is an expression of fear of Russia or, on the contrary, a result of Russia’s growing influence.

Regardless of which of these assessments is correct, Lukashenka cannot act as usual. If he eases the course, it will be perceived as a sign of weakness and will provoke not only further protests, but also a reaction from Russia. If he rules with a firm hand, he will be increasingly isolated internationally (and thus condemned to rapprochement with Russia on its terms) and rejected by Belarusian society. This will also have an impact on the economy, which is already in a very bad shape.

The international situation. Belarus currently has its worst relations with the West in years. The United States has already reintroduced sanctions against nine Belarusian state-owned chemical companies (initially introduced in 2008 and then suspended in 2015), and the European Union is also planning similar actions. Moreover, though through 2020 Lukashenka was able to efficiently balance Russia and the West and the US could use Belarus in its policy of containing Russia, it is currently impossible. Belarus presents an anti-American position, accusing the US of planning an attack on Lukashenka and not allowing entry of Julie Fisher, who, after a break of several years (since 2008) in US-Belarusian diplomatic relations, was to become the US ambassador to Minsk. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also announced that it had prepared possible retaliation measures in the event of new sanctions from the West.

Russia is taking advantage of the situation by increasing Belarus' political and economic dependence. Belarusian-Russian cooperation is tightening, and on April 22 Lukashenka met in Moscow with Vladimir Putin, which was preceded by a series of talks at the government level. The meeting was devoted to plans for economic and military integration and increasing cooperation of secret services.

The alleged attack on Lukashenka, about which it was not accidentally announced just before Lukashenka's visit to Moscow and the return to integration talks, suggests close cooperation between the services of Belarus and Russia. Military cooperation is also developing: defence ministers and chiefs of staff have met several times in recent months, and a 5-year plan for military cooperation was adopted in February 2021.

According to many assessments, the Russian demonstration of force on the border with Ukraine also had a "Belarusian dimension," diverting attention from the intensification of military cooperation aimed at establishing a base for Russia's permanent military presence in Belarus.

Conclusions

- The current behaviour of Alyaksandr Lukashenka suggests that he is convinced that he will rule for life. However, he is not aware of how archaic he is and that there is still a potential for protest in society, especially as the scale, scope, and mass nature of repression are incomprehensible not only to the opposition.
- Propaganda attacks against the West (and against Poles, who have been the target of such attacks for a long time), in line with the Russian narrative, are to a large extent an attempt to regain social legitimacy – so far not very effective, but they will probably grow.
- In foreign policy, a return to "multi-vector" is impossible. The West will not talk to Lukashenka any more, a success for Russia.
- Russia is unlikely to openly annex Belarus because the possible international consequences and the possible reaction of the Belarusian society make it too risky. However, a "creeping annexation" is likely, and further integration will take place under Russian conditions. In the long run, this will also have consequences for Lukashenka himself.
- European Union once again borders on a dictatorship, as archaic as its leader, but potentially dangerous due to the growing influence, including military, of Russia.