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Belarus in the shadow of Russia's aggression against Ukraine

Edited by
Andrzej Szabaciuk

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Résumé

Present-day Belarusian society does not support the war and strongly opposes the involvement of the Belarusian army in hostilities. The war has now been recognised as a threat by Belarusians, which was not the case before. Anti-war sentiment within society is robust, but the Lukashenka regime is managing to maintain control through its repressive machinery and by imposing prison terms on those who show solidarity with Ukraine.

Lukashenka's primary goal is survival, both personally and politically. He may resort to extreme measures, such as sending troops to fight against Ukraine or taking actions that distance him from Kremlin support. His choices will depend on his perception of the risks to his survival. This increases the chances that the regime may agree to some demands (e.g., releasing political prisoners, engaging in a roundtable with the opposition) when faced with critical situations, such as intolerable pressure from the Kremlin.

Belarus seeks to disassociate itself from complicity in military aggression with minimal losses, and Lukashenka

will make every effort to restore his image as an international peacemaker. He continues to pursue opportunities to mediate negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv. It is possible that Minsk is seeking support from Kyiv to mitigate its responsibility for co-aggression in exchange for certain guarantees, such as a promise not to attack Ukraine again. Negotiating talent is an important asset of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, as he proved during the mediating talks between the rebel commander of the Wagner Group and the Kremlin authorities.

The Nazarbayev-Tokayev scenario in Belarus should be taken into consideration, even if it currently seems unlikely. Lukashenka wants to survive politically and prevent democratisation in the country, and he is likely considering various means to achieve these goals. One potential survival strategy is to step down from the presidency and assume the chairmanship of the Belarusian People's Congress. The extent of power retained by the presidency and the incentives of a hypothetical new president will play a crucial role. Additionally, a bottom-up regime change due to renewed protests is also a possibility in the medium-term perspective.

Particularly at a time of intense involvement of the Lukashenka regime in support of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the mutual assistance shown by the two authoritarian states to each other, the apparatus of the Belarusian state should not be identified with Belarusian society. The mass anti-government protests of 2020 showed that a large group of Belarusian citizens do not identify themselves with the Lukashenka regime and expect changes. However, the unprecedented terror imposed by Lukashenka, mass dismissals of people accused of disloyalty, arrests,

and discrimination have made many people decide to emigrate. Others choose “internal emigration” – staying in the country but drastically reducing their social activities and not speaking out on political issues.

Independent Belarusian culture serves as an enclave of freedom for Belarusian society and a platform where the Belarusian opposition is active. Supporting it is an investment in the future of a free, democratic, and pro-European Belarus.

The future destiny of Belarus will depend not only on the ongoing socio-political processes within Belarus and Russia but also on the outcome of Russian aggression against Ukraine. A Ukrainian victory could potentially trigger a process of disintegration within Vladimir Putin’s regime, which would directly impact the situation in Belarus.



Introduction

Following the rigged presidential elections in 2020, we are witnessing a progressive isolation of Belarus on the international stage and a deepening economic crisis in the country due to sanctions imposed for repression against civil society and support for Russian aggression against Ukraine. Consequently, Belarus is becoming increasingly politically and economically dependent on Russia. The Russian Federation serves as the main creditor and sponsor of the Lukashenka regime, as unprofitable Belarusian state enterprises rely on subsidies to survive. Russia conditions its aid to Belarus on its involvement in supporting the regime's invasion of Ukraine. This includes allowing military bases in Belarus to be used for airstrikes on Ukrainian targets and training Russian recruits for frontline deployment. Belarus has also donated military equipment and ammunition to Russia. Furthermore, the Belarusian arms industry repairs Russian equipment damaged in Ukraine or destined for the war, and Belarusian workers are involved in constructing military fortifications in occupied Ukrainian territories.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka seeks to delay integration with the Russian Federation within the Union State, viewing it as a threat to Belarusian sovereignty and potentially resulting in his removal from power. He strategically avoids increasing involvement in supporting the Russian Federation's actions against Ukraine and aims to distance himself from Vladimir Putin. Despite frequent meetings and consultations with Putin, Lukashenka has not sent his military to Ukraine throughout the year and a half of war, consistently avoiding such a possibility. Recent reports of Lukashenka's ill health following these consultations may suggest increased Russian pressure on Belarus ahead of the anticipated Ukrainian counter-offensive.

Since coming to power, Lukashenka has consistently maintained that he would not allow the situation in Belarus to destabilise and involve the country in war. Belarusian propaganda has often portrayed him as a hospitable host and criticised the situation in Ukraine and the Russian Federation. However, the outbreak of war has brought Belarusian and Russian propaganda narratives much closer together. This has made it increasingly challenging for Lukashenka to project himself as a constructive politician supporting peace initiatives in the region. The merits he claimed for himself in the context of the Minsk agreements have begun to lose relevance due to Belarus' involvement in aggression against Ukraine after 24 February 2022. The unsuccessful course of the war has prompted Lukashenka to once again attempt to broker an agreement between Russia and Ukraine. However, Ukraine firmly rejected Belarusian mediation after initially successful attempts, accusing the Lukashenka regime of complicity in the aggression on its territory.

One notable achievement for Lukashenka was his role in facilitating talks between rebel Wagner Group commander Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Kremlin authorities, effectively preventing an escalation of the conflict that could have destabilised Russia during a critical phase of the war. Allowing Prigozhin to travel to Belarus and extending a similar offer to the Wagner Group mercenaries enabled Vladimir Putin to swiftly bring an end to the mutiny, while also potentially utilising Wagner Group members to train Belarusian services.

As we observe the Russian losses in Ukraine and the resolute support of the West for President Volodymyr Zelensky in his defensive war against Russia, Lukashenka aims to distance himself from Putin and avoid future co-responsibility for aggression. The alleged threat from the North Atlantic Alliance and Belarus' neighbouring countries, Poland and Lithuania, is used as a pretext to limit engagement in support of the Kremlin. False information is being spread about alleged sabotage groups trained by Polish and Lithuanian services to destabilise Belarus and stage a political coup to remove Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his entourage from power. Since the new phase of Russia's aggression against Ukraine began, Belarusian media has also emphasised the threat from the southern neighbour, portraying a potential attack by Ukrainian troops on Belarus. However, it should be noted that the announced deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus will significantly weaken the argument of there being an external threat.

The changes introduced in the Belarusian political system after 2020, including the increased importance of the Belarusian People's Congress at the expense of the parliament, serve to diminish the impact of the electoral process

and secure Lukashenka's influence on state policy even after the potential election of a new president. The establishment of the pro-presidential Belaya Rus party should be interpreted in a similar manner. Lukashenka's desire to maintain real influence on the affairs of the state, despite his advanced age, is combined with the fear of being held accountable once removed from power, a common consequence for dictators. This fear prompts him to continue repressing civil society.

Repression against Belarusian society is not decreasing; on the contrary, we are witnessing an increasing number of political prisoners. Belarusian propaganda continues to discredit opposition circles and escalate an anti-Western narrative. Concurrently, there is a noticeable trend of progressive Russification in cultural life within the country. The protection and development of Belarusian culture abroad are crucial for the survival of the nation and serve as an investment in the future of a free Belarus.

Andrzej Szabaciuk



Piotr Rudkouski

In the Shadow of War: Belarus' Domestic Policy in the Context of Russian Aggression against Ukraine

The war in Ukraine and the involvement of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime have dominated discussions over the past year. However, amidst the shadow of war, a "political transformation" is underway in Belarus. In February 2022, the regime staged a constitutional referendum, leading to the adoption of a new version of the Constitution.

One significant change is the transformation of the Belarusian People's Congress (BPC or Congress), previously an occasional gathering of the nomenklatura without constitutional status, into a body that operates regularly with considerable powers. The Belarusian regime has also taken steps towards reforming the party system, including the launch of a process to create a party of power.

While Belarus' dependence on Russia has increased in the context of the war, the regime has been striving to preserve its sovereignty. It has attempted to revive certain

aspects of Belarusianisation. As Russia's "closest ally", the Lukashenka regime has deepened military cooperation with Russia but has refrained from direct participation in the war thus far.

Let us examine these developments more closely to gain a better understanding of how the Belarusian regime manoeuvres in the context of the war and what survival strategy it is likely to adopt in the coming years.

The "supreme representative body"

The most significant constitutional amendment is the transformation of the BPC from an irregular assembly of the nomenklatura into the "supreme representative body". On 7 February 2023, Lukashenka signed the bill on the BPC into law,¹ which outlines its functioning principles and sets the launch date for the end of April 2024. So, what will the BPC look like?

First and foremost, as mentioned earlier, it will serve as the "supreme representative body". Its primary responsibility will be to establish the "strategic directions for the development of the state and society". Additionally, it will have considerable influence over the appointment of top officials, particularly in the judiciary, and will possess the power to impeach the president.

Secondly, the delegates of the BPC will serve on a voluntary (unpaid) basis, with the exception of the chairperson and their deputies. In other words, the majority of delegates

¹ *Aleksandr Lukashenko signs Belarusian People's Congress bill into law*, <https://president.gov.by/en/events/aleksandr-lukashenko-podpisal-zakon-o-vsebelorusskom-narodnom-sobranii-1675955641> [15.02.2023].

in the supreme representative body will live and work like ordinary citizens, earning a living from employment in factories, schools, private businesses, and so on. It is expected that they will dedicate their free time to working on the country's "strategic directions" or handling cadre policies.

Thirdly, the BPC will comprise three more-or-less equal parts. One part will consist of officials holding high positions within the state power system: the president, ex-president (if applicable), prime minister, government members, heads of executive committees, and parliament members. The second part will be composed of representatives from local councils. The third part will include representatives from "civil society", referring to "prominent social organisations that have an influence on public life and are represented in all regions".

Forth, individuals holding citizenship of another state or possessing any foreign documents that grant specific benefits will be ineligible for the BPC. This provision appears to be aimed at protecting the body against holders of a Pole's Card (Karta Polaka), individuals under international protection, and holders of any residence cards.

Lastly, the Congress will convene at least once a year, and its Presidium will meet at least once every six months. The total number of delegates should not exceed 1,200 individuals.

Therefore, in addition to the bicameral parliament, which also functions as a representative body, there will be a "supreme representative body" in the form of the BPC. Belarusian officials themselves acknowledge that the BPC has no counterparts in the world and is an original creation of Lukashenka and his circle. The closest comparable entity

to the Belarusian People's Congress is perhaps Muammar Gaddafi's General People's Congress of Libya. However, there is a significant distinction: Gaddafi's Congress was not an "addition" to the parliament but rather a substitute for it.

Despite the exotic nature of the BPC, the reasons behind its establishment are not difficult to discern. It appears to be intended to minimise the influence of electoral mechanisms on power sharing within the country. The events of 2020 demonstrated that even in a tightly consolidated autocracy like the Belarusian political system, the electoral process can spiral out of control. Lukashenka recognised that in order to secure the longevity of his regime, he needed to find a way to further insulate it from electoral procedures. And he found that solution.

Reform of the party system and creating a party of power

Another innovation of Lukashenka's "reform" involves changes in the functioning of the party system in Belarus. In August 2022, Aleh Haidukevich, the leader of the pro-regime Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus (LDPB), announced two significant changes in this regard: 1) the establishment of a party of power and 2) the reduction of the number of parties to three or four by imposing stricter requirements on membership numbers.²

For over a quarter of a century, the Belarusian regime has operated as a personalist autocracy, where all socially

² «Это перспектива ближайшего будущего». Депутат Гайдукевич анонсировал создание в Беларуси партии власти, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/20913.html> [14.02.2023].

significant decisions are made or approved by a single individual. According to the Institute for Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), in 2022, the index of power personalisation in Belarus was 98.5/100, ranking third among the 190 countries and territories monitored by V-Dem (with North Korea and Nicaragua claiming the top two spots). Even in absolute monarchies like Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, the level of power concentration in a single hand is significantly lower (81.5/100 and 81/100, respectively).³

The high degree of personalisation of power in Belarus coexists with the absence of a ruling party. In most contemporary autocracies, whether collegial or personalist, such a party exists. For example, in the Russian Federation, it is United Russia; in Kazakhstan, it is Amanat (formerly Nur-Otan); in Azerbaijan, it is New Azerbaijan; in Venezuela, it is the United Socialist Party; and in North Korea, it is the Workers' Party of Korea. Studies indicate⁴ that the presence of a party of power contributes to the stability of an authoritarian regime by creating space for internal competition and serving as a platform for generating new ideas.

The issue of creating a ruling party within the Belarusian regime has been raised for a considerable period. Since 2004, the pro-presidential nomenklatura association Belaya Rus has been a natural contender for such a role. Every two or three years, whenever there was a new development in political life such as elections, liberalisation, or the prospect of constitutional reform, reports would emerge about

³ Varieties of Democracy, <https://www.v-dem.net/> [15.03.2023].

⁴ E. Frantz, A. Kendall-Taylor, *Pathways to Democratization in Personalist Dictatorships*, "Democratization" 2017, no. 1, pp. 20-40.

the authorities' intention to transform Belaya Rus into a party. However, each time, these reports would result in vague statements. Apparently, the process was hindered by Lukashenka's reluctance to change his management practices and establish an institution that could potentially limit his personal power.

Lukashenka continues to maintain scepticism toward the party of power. On two occasions in August 2022, he argued that "it is not the right time [to address the party issue]" due to the "extremely tense situation in the world."⁵ At one point, seemingly reminding himself of something, he stated, "We promised – we must fulfil." It appears that either due to internal agreements or an acknowledgement of the impossibility of maintaining the status quo, the Belarusian ruler reluctantly acceded to the proposal of creating a party of power.

On 7 February 2023, Aleh Ramanau, the chairman of Belaya Rus, announced that a founding congress would take place on March 18, where the party would be established.⁶ Regarding the issue, Mr Ramanau stated, "We envision this party occupying the centre of the political spectrum. It is not a party of extremes, nor does it solely represent the interests of a single, albeit significant, social group. This party

⁵ *Сф. Лукашенко о преобразовании "Белой Руси" в партию: я не буду препятствовать, но спешка ни к чему*, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-preobrazovanii-beloi-rusi-v-partiju-ja-ne-budu-prepjatstvovat-no-speshka-ni-k-chemu-516514-2022/> [15.02.2023]; *"Обещали - надо выполнять". Будущее партий и гражданского общества стало темой совещания у Лукашенко*, [https://www.belta.by/president/view/obeschali-nado-vypolnjat-budushee-partij-i-grazhdanskogo-obschestva-stalo-temoj-soveschaniya-u-521109-2022/](https://www.belta.by/president/view/obeschali-nado-vypolnjat-budushee-partij-i-grazhdanskogo-obschestva-stalo-temoj-soveschaniya-u-lukashenko) [15.02.2023].

⁶ *"Белая Русь" заявила о начале строительства новой политической партии*, <https://www.sb.by/articles/roo-belaya-rus-provodit-zasedanie-orgkomiteta-po-stroitelstvu-partii.html> [15.02.2023].

will represent the interests of the Belarusian people. Therefore, we propose not adopting any classical political ideology (such as liberalism, conservatism, or social democracy) as the ideology of the political party. Instead, we propose adopting the ideology of Belarusian statehood ... We need a force that will provide reliable support for the Belarusian state and its leader – the Head of our state.”⁷

Thus, the party of power was created on March 18. As is common with such parties, it will refrain from adhering to a specific ideology to maintain adaptability to the current political climate, without the need to align its policies with a particular ideology or the interests of a specific social group.

The ghost of Belarusianisation

In the second decade of the 21st century, Lukashenka showed some favourability towards the idea of strengthening national identity, a period that was sometimes referred to as “soft Belarusianisation.” However, after Russia assisted Lukashenka in maintaining power in 2020, pro-national rhetoric largely disappeared from the discourse of the Belarusian regime. Yet, in July and September 2022, it resurfaced in a rather provocative manner.

On 2 July 2022, during his speech on Republic Day, Lukashenka stated, “Let us remember that it was on the basis of the Belarusian ethnos that a unique state entity

⁷ Романов рассказал, какой идеологии будет придерживаться новая “Белорусская партия “Белая Русь”, <https://www.sb.by/articles/romanov-rasskazal-kakoy-ideologii-budet-priderzhivatsya-novaya-belorusskaya-partiya-belaya-rus.html> [15.02.2023].

was created – the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was the first Belarusian state.”⁸

The acknowledgment of the positive role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) in the formation of the Belarusian state was not entirely new. This theme had been consistently present in the regime’s ideology since at least the beginning of the previous decade. However, what was new in this speech was the presentation of the GDL as the first Belarusian state. It is worth noting that the GDL had never been an ally of Moscow and had, in fact, fought against it on at least fifteen occasions. Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, in which Belarus itself has been involved as Russia’s ally, such a statement was undoubtedly provocative for the Kremlin.

On 1 September 2022, during the open lesson titled “Historical Memory: The Road to the Future,” Lukashenka reiterated the importance of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), but in a slightly different manner. He stated, “During this period, the existence of the GDL, the Belarusian nation was formed.” Later, he posed a rhetorical question, “And who conquered whom, as some say? We ourselves were the masters of our land.”⁹ The assertion about the alleged “conquest” of Belarusians by Lithuanians is a common element in Moscow’s propaganda. Therefore, this rhetorical question was seemingly directed at Russians and/or pro-Russian forces in Belarus.

Despite being Russia’s “closest ally”, Lukashenka still does not permit any emancipation of pro-Russian grassroots

⁸ Лукашенко: именно на основе белорусского этноса было создано ВКЛ, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-imenno-na-osnove-belorusskogo-etnosa-bylo-sozdano-vkl-511467-2022/?ref=tjournal.ru> [15.02.2023].

⁹ Ibid.

initiatives in Belarus. In 2022, the Immortal Regiment movement (Bessmertnyi Polk) attempted to register in Belarus twice, but their applications were rejected by the Belarusian authorities. Since the end of 2020, Belarusian pro-Russian groups have also been attempting to establish their own Soyuz party, but the regime has not granted permission thus far. Amidst gestures towards the pro-national option, Lukashenka eagerly protects his monopolistic position in promoting Russian interests in Belarus.

Military activity within the country

In 2022, Lukashenka and Putin met eight times and had several telephone conversations. The content of their discussions behind closed doors can only be speculated upon, but it is highly likely that one of the main topics was Belarus' military involvement in the war. From March to September, the issue of military manpower was a pressing concern for the Kremlin. During this time, Putin's generals made every effort to recruit soldiers for their "special military operation", which did not go as planned. Prior to declaring "partial mobilisation" in September, the Kremlin explored various avenues to address the manpower problem: inviting Chechen paramilitary fighters, searching for mercenaries in the Middle East, and allowing the Wagner Private Military Company to recruit prisoners. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's regime had 50,000 active soldiers and approximately 300,000 in reserve. Given the severe manpower shortage, it is highly likely that the Kremlin viewed "allied Belarus" as a potential source of soldiers.

Thus far, Belarusian soldiers have not been deployed to participate in the war. It can be assumed that since Russia's

“partial mobilisation”, the need for soldiers from Belarus is no longer as pressing, and military cooperation between the two regimes has adjusted accordingly.

However, Lukashenka has taken steps towards closer military cooperation with Russia. Some of these actions may be merely superficial, aimed at appeasing the Kremlin and avoiding deeper involvement in the war. But there is also the potential for some of these steps to evolve into joint actions against Ukraine.

At the end of May 2022, Lukashenka ordered the establishment of the Southern Operational Command. Shortly thereafter, he announced the creation of a “people’s militia” (*narodnoye opolcheniye*), which would consist of approximately 50 individuals at each village council (*selsovet*) and be trained in basic weapon usage.

These actions did not appear to be significant military undertakings. The creation of the Southern Command was accompanied by Lukashenka’s statement that “we do not need to carry out such modernisation [of the army] as we swung at then.” The exact meaning of the phrase “as we swung at then” is unclear, but it likely referred to previous discussions about modernising the Belarusian army, which would entail increased funding. Thus, the creation of the Southern Command may serve a twofold purpose: to demonstrate support to the Kremlin in terms of keeping Ukrainian northern troops in check and to signal to the domestic audience that no increase in military spending should be expected in light of “the new situation”. The introduction of the “people’s militia” likely aimed to convey a similar message.

A more significant step was the deployment of the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) in Belarus in the autumn of

2022. Lukashenka announced the deployment on October 10, emphasising that it was in response to the “escalation on the western borders of the Union State”. It is somewhat peculiar that he justified this decision not based on what was happening on the “southern” borders (with Ukraine), but rather by alleging threats from the West, presumably Poland or Lithuania. In reality, there were hardly any real threats from these countries, and it is unlikely that the regime genuinely believed in the existence of such threats.

Lukashenka’s agreement to deploy the RGF may have been another way to feign support for and cooperation with the Russian army. However, regardless of Lukashenka’s initial calculations, it was conceivable that the Kremlin could have pressured him to transform the RGF into a unit to participate in a major new offensive that was expected to occur around the one-year anniversary of the war’s launch. However, this offensive did not materialise. The possibility of Belarus becoming more deeply involved in the war is being taken seriously by the Belarusian opposition and some foreign governments. On February 6 2023, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya called on Belarusians to consider an action plan in case of war.¹⁰ On February 13 2023, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs “strongly” advised French citizens against travelling to Belarus and urged those already in the country to leave.¹¹ In the following days, Germany and Canada issued similar warnings to their citizens.

¹⁰ *Ціхановіцкая заклікала беларусаў абдумаць план дзеянняў на выпадак вайны*, <https://nashaniva.com/309221> [15.02.2023].

¹¹ *France reiterates advice to citizens to avoid going to Belarus*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-belarus-france-idAFP6N33500J> [15.02.2023].

Conclusions and recommendations

Lukashenka's "constitutional reform" is being carried out without any dialogue with society, relying solely on fear and repression. This poses a significant problem as it lacks positive factors such as economic development or improved international standing to pacify the population. The apparent quietness could be deceptive and may lead to new and greater challenges, as seen in the Arab countries at the beginning of the last decade.

Considering this, here are a few recommendations that can be useful for the Belarusian democratic opposition and foreign/international actors involved in shaping policies on Belarus:

1. Towards Lukashenka: Isolate and nudge. Lukashenka's primary goal is survival, both personally and politically. He may resort to extreme measures, such as sending troops to fight against Ukraine, or take actions that distance him from Kremlin support. His choices will depend on his perception of the risks to his survival. The "isolate-and-nudge" approach involves gradually isolating the Belarusian regime while preserving some channels for dialogue. This increases the chances that the regime may agree to some demands (e.g., releasing political prisoners, engaging in a roundtable with the opposition) when faced with critical situations, such as intolerable pressure from the Kremlin.
2. Have a plan for a Nazarbayev-Tokayev scenario in Belarus. Although it may seem implausible at the moment, Lukashenka's departure from the presidency in the coming years is quite possible. He wants to survive politically and prevent democratisation in the country, and he is

likely considering various means to achieve these goals. One potential survival strategy is to step down from the presidency and assume the chairmanship of the Belarusian People's Congress. The extent of power retained by the presidency and the incentives of a hypothetical new president will play a crucial role. Additionally, a bottom-up regime change due to renewed protests is also a possibility in the medium-term perspective.

3. Don't conflate the Belarusian regime and society. It is crucial to distinguish between the regime and the Belarusian society, not only for ethical reasons but also for pragmatic ones. The regime draws strength from its claim to represent the Belarusian people. The events of 2020 demonstrated a deep divide between the regime and society. However, indiscriminately labelling "Belarus" and "Belarusians" as aggressors may lead to the consolidation of a significant portion of society around the regime, making it stronger and undermining the prospects of democratisation. A non-democratic Belarus poses a problem for regional security, as clearly evidenced in 2022.



Volha Siamashko

From Pacifist to Co-Aggressor: How Belarusian President Lukashenka Became Putin's Ally in the War

In the conditions of the ongoing aggression of Russia against the Ukraine, Belarusian dictator Aliaksandr Lukashenka has emerged as a key ally of President Putin. The responsibility for this decision lies solely with Lukashenka and his regime, and it would be incorrect to hold all Belarusians accountable for the war. In fact, both opponents and supporters of Lukashenka have condemned the conflict. For Lukashenka's electorate, February 2022 brought an unpleasant realisation that their president, who had long promised a "peaceful sky" over their heads, had unexpectedly become a threat to peace by allowing attacks on neighbouring Ukraine from Belarusian territory. According to sociologist Andrei Vardomatsky's research, the general attitude of Belarusian society towards the war was established early on, and one year later, that stance appears to have remained largely unchanged.

Roughly half of the country adheres to a “no war” discourse, expressing opposition to the conflict, while the other half follows a “not war” discourse, choosing to ignore or deny its existence.¹ Furthermore, the majority of Belarusians oppose the involvement of their country’s army in any conflicts. Recent sociological studies indicate that the war has already been recognised as a significant threat by the majority of Belarusians.

In the international arena, Lukashenka, particularly after the events of 2014 in Ukraine, sought to portray himself as the primary peacemaker among the Slavic nations, making extensive efforts to reconcile Russia and Ukraine. The pinnacle of these peacekeeping endeavours was the Normandy Four meeting held in Minsk in February 2015, during which the Minsk agreements were signed. Subsequently, on the global stage, the Belarusian government consistently advocated for peace and stability in the region, promoting a narrative of peaceful resolution.

However, it is important to note that any militaristic rhetoric expressed by the government was primarily intended for domestic recipients, emphasising that “the guarantor of Belarus would not surrender even a single piece of the state to its enemies”. These statements made by Lukashenka were not taken seriously in the West.

Lukashenka’s public image as a peacemaker within the country suffered a significant blow in 2020, following a highly controversial presidential election marked by fraud. He responded by brutally suppressing protests and

¹ A. Vardomatsky, *Research results: how Belarusians feel about the war in Ukraine*, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32242519.html> [6.06.2023].

subjecting thousands of citizens to torture. Furthermore, on 24 February 2022, Lukashenka's involvement in the Russian aggression against Ukraine further eroded his image as a peacemaker.

Peacemaker for outside, militarist at home

The topic of war in Belarusian society is highly sensitive. The generation that experienced the Second World War (known as the Great Patriotic War in the territory of Belarus) is still alive, and front-line photographs can be found in every family album. The war is widely perceived as a monumental tragedy, claiming the lives of every third inhabitant of the country. In an attempt to gain the trust of every Belarusian family, Lukashenka consistently claims that he himself suffered as a victim of the Great Patriotic War, even asserting that his father died at the front, despite the fact that he was born in 1954.

For 25 years, the message broadcasted through every TV set in Belarus was that Lukashenka would never allow war on Belarusian territory. "Never again" became the central theme of his rhetoric. The Belarusian authorities long touted the "peaceful sky" over Belarus as their most significant achievement, often drawing comparisons with Ukraine, a country plagued by constant revolutions and wars. Lukashenka positioned himself as the "guarantor of peace" in Belarus, and the absence of war was attributed solely to his merit. Some segments of Belarusian society, particularly those upholding humanistic ideals, embraced this rhetoric and genuinely regarded Lukashenka as such a guarantor.

Lukashenka successfully projected this image of a peacemaker abroad, not only within a historical context but also in relation to ongoing conflicts in the region, such as the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Minsk attempted to position itself as a mediator in this confrontation. In 2015, Lukashenka ensured the signing of the Minsk agreements in Belarus. The regime takes great pride in this meeting, to the extent that this year, on February 11, it published photos with the caption “8 years ago, the Normandy Four met in Minsk. Regardless of what the Western participants in this photo may hypocritically say now, given the current situation, they would not have come if they did not desire peace.”² Additionally, the stories that circulated about Lukashenka staying up all night, preparing sandwiches and coffee with his own hands, to facilitate a peaceful compromise among the Minsk meeting participants, have become propaganda myths in Belarus.

Lukashenka attempted to use the Belarusian platform to resolve the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in 2022. At the very onset of the full-scale war, he organised negotiations between the delegations of Ukraine and Russia on the country’s territory. However, it was a painful blow for him when the Ukrainian side started considering other platforms for dialogue and eventually halted the negotiations altogether. For Lukashenka, organising such meetings was an attempt to absolve himself of guilt for his involvement in the war and evade punishment as a military aggressor.

² Publication of the press service of Lukashenko, 11 February 2023, https://t.me/pul_1/8203 [7.06.2023].

For many years, Lukashenka condemned Russia's policies towards Ukraine, refused to recognise the annexation of Crimea, and propagated a "peaceful" rhetoric. He sought political dividends and guarantees for his power from the West. The foundation of Minsk's official policy was the concept of "geopolitical balance" between Russia and the West: whenever Moscow exerted economic pressure, he would turn to the West to voice his complaints and secure loans, knowing that he could rely on the West's leniency regarding democracy and human rights violations in Belarus.

This state of affairs suited Western politicians, as Lukashenka could always be bought, posed no military threat to the region, and even presented himself as a peacemaker. Belarus was assigned the role of a buffer zone between Russia and NATO. Moreover, Lukashenka successfully played the part of a peaceful neighbour to such an extent that in 2022, he managed to convince Ukraine that he had no intention of launching an attack. As a result, the northern border of Ukraine turned out to be vulnerable, and Russian troops moved into Kyiv without any hindrance.

On the other hand, within the country, alongside the perception of "Belarus as a war-torn nation", there existed a cult surrounding the Great Victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War. This celebration is marked with great pomp and ceremony each year. During this period, society becomes highly militarised: Lukashenka himself, donning military attire, presides over the parade, military vehicles traverse the central streets, and the message to neighbouring countries is clear: "Don't even consider attacking us." Lukashenka desires a formidable army that would instil fear in others, but the country's financial constraints have

hindered the acquisition of the latest military equipment. Consequently, he has had to rely on Russia for either free or credit-based assistance. Every such delivery to the Belarusian army garnered significant attention, with Lukashenka, dressed in military uniform, personally testing the new equipment. He has also perpetually issued warnings about the escalating threat from abroad, targeting his presumed adversaries.

February 2022

The deepening isolation of Belarus has led Lukashenka to agree to participate in Putin's plans regarding Ukraine. It seems strange now to think that in February 2022, when the world believed in the might of the Russian army, Lukashenka had doubts. He echoed Russian propaganda, claiming that they would occupy Kyiv within three or four days and then continue to the English Channel.³ Initially, he entered this war with the belief that he would emerge as the victor. It is possible that Putin promised him that the Belarusian military would not be directly involved in the attack but would instead control a portion of the occupied Ukrainian territory as a temporary military administration.

Involving the Belarusian army directly in the hostilities would have been a misguided idea from the start. In February 2022, the Belarusian army was militarily incompetent. Even if Lukashenka himself failed to grasp this, his generals should have known that the army lacked

³ A. Lukashenko's interview to Russian journalist Vladimir Solovyov, February 2022, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ukraina-nikogda-s-nami-ne-budet-voevat-ved-vojna-prodlitsja-maksimum-tri-chetyre-dnja-483158-2022/> [7.06.2023].

combat experience. Belarusian soldiers, even the best-trained ones, were not equipped with the skills required for fighting. Their training focused on activities such as marching in formation, performing clean-up duties, and singing songs, but not on actual combat. Sending such “soldiers” to Ukraine would have meant sending them to their deaths, a fact the Belarusian authorities should have recognised.

Moreover, the Belarusian military themselves were not eager to participate in a “foreign war”. While the Russian military had a clearer understanding, driven by Putin’s directive to reclaim historically Russian lands, the Belarusian soldiers did not fully grasp these chauvinistic narratives. Given that every third Belarusian resident regularly visited Ukraine, many did not perceive it as a country overrun by Nazis. During that period, the main propaganda channel in Belarus, though somewhat independent from Russian propaganda, focused more on highlighting Lukashenka’s achievements rather than Putin’s global ambitions. Lukashenka did not declare the conquest of Ukraine as the goal of his policy; his fight was against the Belarusian opposition.

Later, when he had to justify his involvement in the aggression, Lukashenka claimed that Ukraine had planned an attack on Belarus and had not abandoned these plans. According to this narrative, Belarus was preparing to defend itself rather than initiate an attack.⁴

⁴ Statement by A. Lukashenko at a meeting with V. Putin, March 2023, <https://ria.ru/20220311/belorusiya-1777664103.html> [7.06.2023].

Belarusian society, raised in a tradition of a “peaceful sky”, also did not fully comprehend the objectives of the war, and certainly did not welcome the prospect of missiles flying into Belarusian cities. The majority of the country’s residents did not support military operations, including some who had voted for Lukashenka. While his electorate was willing to endure poverty and tolerate the tyranny of the authorities, war was not part of that social contract. Initially disregarding public opinion, Lukashenka later used the public discontent as leverage in negotiations with Russia, aiming to avoid full engagement in the war.

Could Lukashenka have refused to support Putin in February 2022? The Belarusian authorities had limited options. After the 2020 elections, Lukashenka’s relationship with the West had deteriorated significantly. Western societies condemned the harsh suppression of peaceful protests, Western politicians refused to recognise the election results, and they provided refuge to tens of thousands of political exiles, including opposition leaders. Consequently, the authorities in Minsk relied heavily on Moscow and Putin personally after August 2020. While relations between the two dictators, Belarusian and Russian, had not been close prior to 2020, with Putin occasionally humbling Lukashenka and avoiding contact due to his toxic image, their personal relationship flourished after 24 February 2022. Lukashenka and Putin met frequently, sometimes even twice a month, and communicated weekly. They appeared to be best friends and allies in the eyes of external observers.

Lukashenka seized the opportunity to acquire modern weapons from Moscow, preferably at no cost, as the

Belarusian budget could not withstand the expenses. He even discussed the potential return of nuclear weapons to Belarus, which aligned with the Kremlin's plans. Additionally, Belarus sought compensation from Moscow for the impact of international sanctions, estimated at around USD 20 billion.⁵

One year later

When it became evident that Russia's blitzkrieg had failed, Belarus, as Russia's ally, grew nervous. It was not possible to share in the victory, but Belarus would have to bear the responsibility for the war alongside Russia. Primarily, this responsibility was economic in nature. The sanctions imposed on the Minsk regime before the war – for the election irregularities, brutal crackdown on protests, and the forced landing of Ryanair's plane in Minsk – were a milder version of the restrictions imposed for complicity in the war. Lukashenka faced isolation on the international stage, and his international travel was limited to Russia or countries like Zimbabwe. Recent data indicates that 25% of the country's economy has been affected by sanctions, including key industries such as potash and woodworking. Major IT companies have also relocated from Belarus, resulting in an outflow of talent and capital.

The conflict further fuelled emigration from Belarus. After 2020, those who actively participated in protests and faced political persecution or imprisonment left the country.

⁵ Prime Minister of Belarus R. Golovchenko. Speech to representatives of the power bloc on the military-political and socio-economic situation, <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/golovchenko-gosudarstvo-ne-pozvolilo-nanesti-uscherb-blagosostojaniju-grazhdan-v-uslovijah-sanktsij-527874-2022/> [7.06.2023].

In 2022, young people who were not enthusiastic about the prospect of joining the Belarusian army and ending up on the Ukrainian front started leaving Belarus. Additionally, foreign companies, international organisations, and firms working with foreign clients relocated their employees to more secure jurisdictions. Currently, there are no official statistics to calculate the exact number of Belarusians who have left the country over the past two and a half years, but estimates range from 300,000 to one million people. Furthermore, if it were not for the potential military aggression under Lukashenka's regime, some of them might have stayed in Belarus as they had found a compromise with the regime. However, economic circumstances, such as the fear of job loss and the inability to find new employment within the country, forced them to move.

It appears that Lukashenka was able to convince Russia that the Belarusian army would not support the war, making it clear that sending Belarusian soldiers into combat was not a favourable idea. Additionally, the course of the military operation changed with the decision to postpone the attack on Ukraine from the northern direction. Russia has assigned Belarus the role of a military training base in its current military strategy. Over the past year, Russian troops have been transported by train to Belarusian territory, where they receive training from Belarusian forces before being deployed to Donbas. Belarus provides complete military facilities, such as the military airfield in Zyabrovka near Gomel, to accommodate the needs of the Russian military. This airfield was previously known only to a select few specialists, but now it has been transformed into a fully operational military base for the Russians.

The Minsk regime is seeking to exploit the current situation to its advantage. Economically, Belarusian enterprises have started fulfilling Russian military orders, and construction plants are producing anti-tank structures. Belarusian factories are also engaged in repairing Russian military equipment.

Minsk has finally received the long-awaited S-400 missile defence system from Moscow. While negotiations had been ongoing, Russia had been delaying the deliveries. Furthermore, Russia is reportedly planning to provide Belarus with nuclear weapons. This has become an obsession for Lukashenka, as possessing such a tool of leverage would elevate Belarus to a different level of military significance.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Present-day Belarusian society does not support the war and strongly opposes the involvement of the Belarusian army in hostilities. The war has now been recognised as a threat by Belarusians, which was not the case before. Anti-war sentiment within society is robust, but the Lukashenka regime manages to maintain control through its repressive machinery and by imposing prison terms on those who show solidarity with Ukraine. However, the situation could change rapidly, and an external factor could act as a trigger. For instance, if the Kalinovsky regiment, comprising Belarusian volunteers fighting alongside Ukraine, enters Belarus from Ukrainian territory, they may receive support from Belarusians within the country.
2. Belarus is already seeking to disassociate itself from complicity in military aggression while trying to minimise

its own losses, and Lukashenka will make every effort to restore his image as an international peacemaker. He continues to pursue opportunities to mediate negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv. Lukashenka strongly opposes the idea of being placed on the same bench as Putin in an international court in The Hague. It is possible that Minsk is seeking support from Kyiv to mitigate its responsibility for co-aggression in exchange for certain guarantees, such as a promise not to attack Ukraine again.

3. In the West, lobbyists for the official Belarusian government are actively working to convey the message that “sanctions and isolation are pushing Minsk further into dependence on Moscow. Belarus needs to be freed from Russia’s sphere of influence.” Belarus has successfully employed this narrative for many years, despite repeatedly violating its own agreements. The task for the international community now is to develop a clear understanding of Belarus’ position and role in Eastern Europe. A decision must be made whether to leave the country under Lukashenka’s leadership within Russia’s sphere of influence or to support democratic changes and incorporate Belarus into pro-Western alliances and coalitions, which is impossible with Lukashenka at the helm.



Taciana Niadbaj

Suppression of Belarusian Culture: Belarus 2022/2023

Lukashenka regime's policy towards Belarusian culture

From the late 1990s to 2020, Belarusian culture was consistently repressed by the state. The authorities excluded it from state resources and subsidies, and denied it access to state media platforms, educational programs, and state events. Grants and assistance from abroad were effectively banned unless authorised by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the Office of the President, which granted permission only if it deemed the project appropriate. Businesses supporting independent culture also risked their own existence by supporting writers, musicians, and other artists who were perceived as disloyal to the authorities.

National culture was labelled as nationalist and marginal, and the state promoted a narrative based on Soviet ideology and the rhetoric of the “great Russian culture”, perpetuating a form of self-colonisation. Despite this situation,

independent culture has managed to survive and occasionally flourish. The events in the region, such as Russia's actions in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, made the Belarusian authorities realise the consequences of adhering to the imperial narrative. As a result, the state reluctantly started embracing a national agenda and refrained from interfering with cultural initiatives that maintained a clear distance from politics.

The emergence of crowdfunding platforms, which provided legal means for the audience to support cultural projects, combined with a limited liberalisation, led to a growth in cultural initiatives before 2020. Business entities also cautiously began supporting independent culture while maintaining a separation from politics. NGOs and cultural initiatives not only managed to survive under these challenging circumstances but also learned to develop independently, in defiance of the state's expectations that culture would only be accepted if it served the ideological interests of the authorities. Although these conditions did not allow for full development, culture managed to emerge and thrive like grass breaking through asphalt.

After the events of 2020, where cultural figures played a prominent role in peaceful protests against violence and electoral fraud, the regime launched unprecedented repression against the national culture. Belarusian-speaking individuals were subjected to additional beatings, torture, and humiliation, simply for possessing stickers, flags, or clothing with the national colours (white-red-white). They received sentences equivalent to those for unauthorised picketing or participating in mass events. This wave of repression, initiated in 2020, continues unabated, eradicating

and suppressing any alternative cultural expressions not sanctioned by the state.

Since October 2019, the Belarusian PEN Club has been diligently documenting violations of cultural and human rights against cultural figures. The following is a summary of the human rights situation in the cultural sphere for 2022/2023, based on the Belarusian PEN's monitoring efforts.

Overall, politically motivated persecution of cultural figures persists, characterised by the violation of their civil and political rights and censorship of creative activities. Cultural figures disloyal to the regime, both in the independent sector and state cultural institutions, face a de facto “professional ban” that restricts their ability to practice their profession. Language-based discrimination, particularly against the Belarusian language, is also prevalent.

The number of political prisoners among cultural figures continues to rise. As of 1 January 2021, there were 15 political prisoners from the cultural sphere (out of a total of 169 political prisoners in Belarus). This number increased to 68 as of 1 January 2022 (out of a total of 969 political prisoners), and further to 108 as of 1 January 2023 (out of a total of 1,446 political prisoners in the country). These figures are likely incomplete due to the limited availability of data.

Examples of suppression of representatives of Belarusian culture

In 2022, a significant number of violations were documented against cultural figures, cultural organisations, and communities in Belarus. Hundreds of cultural figures experienced detentions, arrests, interrogations, court proceedings, searches, fines, and imprisonment, leading many

to be forced to leave the country. The regime responded with repressive measures, such as dismissals, searches, confiscation of property, and deportations, targeting individuals involved in the development of Belarusian culture.

Throughout the year, at least 2,021 cultural figures were detained for political reasons. Of these, at least 106 faced administrative trials and received sentences totalling at least 1,670 days of arrest and fines amounting to approximately 24,010 rubles (around USD 9,000). At least 91 cultural figures faced criminal charges, with penalties ranging from 1.5 years of “home detention” to 18 years in a high-security colony. The most common grounds for criminal prosecution were participation in peaceful assemblies and protests in 2020 and criticism of state representatives and security forces.

The conditions of detention for cultural figures in places of deprivation of liberty were described as appalling and torturous. They endured unsanitary conditions, overcrowded cells, cold temperatures, lack of bedding, inedible food, and the presence of individuals with lice infections. They also faced night checks, inadequate medical care, and mistreatment by prison staff. Restrictions were placed on walks, reading materials, and sports activities, while communication with relatives, hospitalisation, and access to correspondence were often denied or hindered. Additional forms of pressure included imposing penalties for fabricated reasons, placing individuals on preventive registers, solitary confinement, transfer from custody to prison, or initiating new criminal cases under Article 411 of the Criminal Code, which deals with “malicious disobedience to the requirements of the administration of a correctional institution”.

Cultural figures faced persecution for their anti-war stance and support of Ukraine and its culture. Acts such as participating in anti-war actions, offering prayers for peace, sharing materials on social networks, sending anti-war letters to state authorities, or displaying Ukrainian symbols and colours, led to persecution. The regime also targeted cultural figures who expressed dissenting opinions under the pretext of combating extremism and terrorism. Many were classified as “extremists” or “terrorists” by the regime, and their works, including songs, books, websites, and on-line channels, were labelled “extremist materials”.

The Lukashenka regime in Belarus has been using the pretext of combating extremism and terrorism to suppress dissent and silence any form of expression. In 2022, a disturbing number of cultural figures were targeted by this repressive approach. The Ministry of Internal Affairs classified at least 102 cultural figures as “extremists”, including them in the “List of citizens of the Republic of Belarus, foreign persons, or stateless persons involved in extremist activities”. Additionally, the KGB designated 14 cultural figures as “terrorists”, listing them in the “List of organisations and individuals involved in terrorist activities”.

Furthermore, the regime has labelled numerous cultural materials “extremist”. This includes 56 items, including 12 songs, 10 books with fiction or history themes, as well as various websites, YouTube channels, and Telegram channels that focus on cultural topics. These materials are listed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs as “Republican List of Extremist Materials”.

Cultural figures who have been targeted by this suppression have often been left with no choice but to leave

Belarus. They face severe persecution, including criminal prosecution, home searches, property seizures, pressure on their relatives, and other forms of harassment. The regime has even introduced the institution of special (in absentia) court proceedings, further undermining the rights of these individuals.

The persecution of cultural figures and the restriction of their freedom of expression not only violate their basic human rights but also hinder artistic creativity, diversity, and cultural progress in Belarus. It is crucial for the international community to recognise and condemn such acts of repression, and to offer support to the affected cultural figures in their pursuit of justice and the restoration of their rights.

Censorship and administrative obstacles have plagued the cultural sphere, including the suspension and liquidation of independent publishing houses, restrictions on the distribution of Belarusian books, the circulation of blacklists targeting politically “unreliable” artists, and censorship of theatre repertoire. The state has also imposed its ideological preferences on thematic exhibitions in museums and forcibly closed cultural NGOs. Furthermore, there was a suppression of nationally oriented elements, such as language, symbols, and history. The regime has placed pressure on Polish and Lithuanian national minorities, promoted the ideology of the “Russian world”, and subjected Belarusian-speaking individuals to beatings and harassment, even for simply using the Belarusian language in public.

The first example of such a cultural figure is Pavel Belavus, the founder of the Symbal.by store and manager of culture. On 20 February 2022, the criminal case against Pavel

Belavus began in the Minsk City Court, and the proceedings were conducted behind closed doors. He faced charges under four articles of the Criminal Code: Article 342 (“organisation and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them”), Article 361 (“calls for actions aimed at causing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus”), Article 361-1 (“creation of an extremist formation or participation in it”), and Article 356 (treason to the state).

According to the Investigative Committee, Pavel Belavus allegedly used various public social networks and websites under the guise of cultural and historical development to spread ideas of Belarusian nationalism with the aim of changing the state authorities in Belarus. They claimed that his actions incited hostility among compatriots towards their homeland. The Investigative Committee further asserted that Pavel Belavus posed a threat to the country’s internal and external security for a period of ten years through his criminal activities. Pavel Belavus has been in custody since 23 December 2021, and the case continues to be reviewed behind closed doors.

It is worth noting that prior to 2020, Pavel Belavus carried out his activities with the assistance of officials and government personnel, adding an interesting aspect to the case.

In the second example, we have the case of Andrei Yanushkevich,¹ a publisher who attempted to open a Knihauka bookstore in Minsk in May 2022. Unfortunately, the bookstore was only able to operate for less than a day. On the first

¹ Андрэй Янушкевіч (вызвалены 15.06.2022), <https://penbelarus.org/2022/05/20/andrej-yanushkevich.html> [6.06.2023].

day, in the morning, state propagandists, namely Lyudmila Hladkaya from SB Belarus Today and Ryhor Azaronak from STV, entered the store and posed provocative questions, accusing the establishment of promoting nationalism. Shortly after, officers from the Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus conducted a search of the premises. During the search, 15 books, approximately 200 copies in total, were confiscated for further examination. Yanushkevich himself was detained and later convicted on two administrative charges. He was released on 14 June 2022, after spending 28 days in custody.

The third example involves Ales Bialacki, a writer, human rights activist, and the founder of the Human Rights Center “Viasna”. In 2022, Bialacki, along with the Center for Civil Liberties and Memorial, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his relentless defence of human rights in Belarus and Belarusian culture. However, on 3 March 2023, he was sentenced to 10 years in a high-security colony on politically motivated charges related to “Viasna”. During his final statement in court, Bialacki highlighted the issue of the Belarusian language in the courtroom. He noted that despite being a Belarusian-speaking person, both the prosecution and the court adamantly refused to speak Belarusian, disregarding the fact that it is the state language. Bialacki emphasised that as state officials, they are obligated to speak both state languages, including Belarusian, and should use it when communicating with Belarusian-speaking citizens. He argued that this unequal treatment deprived him of the

opportunity to fully explain his position and challenge the unfounded accusations against him.²

In the state media, there is a prevalence of propaganda and hate speech, with a deliberate campaign aimed at discrediting Belarusian cultural figures.

Another concerning trend observed within law enforcement and ideological structures is the demand for repentance. Detainees are coerced into reciting a specific script on camera, and these videos, commonly referred to as “penitential” videos, are subsequently released to the public by law enforcement agencies. This practice serves as a means to further humiliate and intimidate individuals involved, as well as to propagate a particular narrative.

The regime’s attitude toward disloyal cultural figures was openly expressed by the Minister of Culture, Anatoly Markevich, who stated the following: “Traitors have no place on the stage, whether it is a state event or a concert in a rural area. But at the same time, an individual approach is applied to each artist or creative team who has declared renunciation of previous views and a desire to work for the benefit of Belarus. If a person sincerely repents of his words, posts, likes, is ready to work for the state and publicly declare his civil position, he is given a second chance.

If the words of repentance turn out to be lies, we part with such people immediately and forever.”

² *What Bialiatski, Stefanovic, and Labkovich said in their final statements in court: full translation of their speeches*, <https://spring96.org/en/news/110790> [6.06.2023].

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Culture should be prioritised in supporting programs aimed at the development of civil society in Belarus, independent media, and human rights.
2. Cultural figures acting in the public interest should be singled out as a separate target group for monitoring, protection, and support. They should be included in programs aimed at protecting freedom of expression in Belarus as they play a crucial role in defending cultural rights according to international standards.
3. Belarusian culture lacks significant state support. Culture, along with education, healthcare, and other socially important sectors, requires systemic state support to thrive. The survival and development of Belarusian culture currently depend on individual institutions and cultural figures. To ensure a stable democratic environment, friendly states, ministries of culture, and cultural institutions should take on patronage over supporting “non-targeted” culture in the long term.
4. Cultural figures and initiatives within Belarus need unconditional financial support with minimised reporting for security reasons. Despite limitations on public cultural activities, many cultural figures and initiatives continue to operate within the country. Due to political reasons, these individuals may have been dismissed from their previous jobs and lack sources of income. It is important to provide them with the opportunity to continue their cultural activities and support them financially.
5. Culture in emigration serves as a unifying force for Belarusian emigrants. As active and conscientious citizens have left Belarus, there is a high demand for participation

- in cultural life and access to cultural products. Enabling them to remain connected to Belarusian culture abroad allows them to stay engaged with the Belarusian agenda and continue supporting democratic change in Belarus.
6. Support programs for cultural projects should consider the medium- and long-term perspectives of impact and change. The events of 2020 in Belarus were the result of decades of preparation and work. Culture influences media consumption, electoral choices, and resistance to propaganda. Supporting Belarus' independent culture today is an investment in the sustainability of democratic change tomorrow and in the underlying values necessary for the challenging work ahead.
 7. Many initiatives and organisations from Belarus have relocated and continue their activities in other countries. However, even after registration, these organisations need time to adapt to the legislation and realities of their new location. It is important to provide competent staff to administer and finance their activities, as the transition involves significant effort and challenges. Institutional support during the first one to three years is crucial for these organisations to hire competent specialists and operate in accordance with the law. This support will accelerate the resumption of the NGO sector upon their potential return to Belarus and facilitate the transfer of best practices.
 8. A significant portion of the repression in Belarus is carried out covertly. Lawyers, bound by non-disclosure agreements, often cannot inform their clients' relatives about the charges they face. Victims and their relatives fear additional persecution or worsened conditions if

they report the facts and nature of the repression to the media or human rights defenders. Additional efforts and tools are needed to analyse and understand these cases, hold perpetrators accountable, provide assistance to the repressed, and facilitate their rehabilitation as victims of political repression.



Maxim Zhabankou

The Belarusian Cultural Situation Following the Fraudulent Elections and the Onset of the War in Ukraine

Changes in Belarusian cultural policy after 2020

The events surrounding the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus brought about a deep systemic crisis, leading to a radical transformation of the political and social landscape. The autocratic post-Soviet regime swiftly transitioned into a repressive apparatus that engaged in political oppression and cultural terror, thereby dismantling established cultural norms.

Previously, there existed an unusual coexistence between a loyal public sector, a dissident culture advocating for national self-determination, and pro-European non-party-consumerist cultural practices of the creative class. This coexistence was based on an unspoken agreement: as long as the creative class refrained from challenging the regime's

power, their projects would be left intact. However, this arrangement has now come to an end.

The authorities, lacking a proper understanding of the nature of social protest and driven by a belief in global conspiracies and the presence of NATO tanks everywhere, experienced a powerful shock in August 2020. In response, they actively sought internal enemies and insidious “puppet masters” behind the protest movement. Consequently, most grassroots civic initiatives, including independent cultural movements, were labelled as agents of disorder and faced suppression.

In summary, the Belarusian cultural landscape has undergone a traumatic reset, with the previous conventions of the cultural process being destroyed due to the radical political and social transformations. The authorities’ misunderstanding of social protest and their search for scapegoats have had a detrimental impact on grassroots civic initiatives, including independent culture.

The scale of the losses is astonishing, even for experts with little experience, as the destruction of cultural infrastructure went hand in hand with the dismantling of civil society. In essence, these were two aspects of the same process, sharing common ideas, similar methods, and involving almost identical players.

In these circumstances, with a severe crackdown on the political opposition, culture became the primary legal avenue for driving change. Consequently, instead of witnessing an armed popular uprising, we saw a mass performance. As a result, there was no political victory, nor could one be achieved. Following the political defeat, cultural terror ensued.

Independent cultural research and analytical institutions are now scarce. Some have been shut down, some have relocated abroad, and some operate underground. Being an expert in the current climate is a direct path to persecution and imprisonment.

There has been a relentless pursuit of non-state media, repression targeting social media interactions, such as likes and reposts, widespread practices of political denunciations by “concerned citizens”, and the official branding of dissenting cultural figures as “extremists” and threats to national security. These actions have effectively dismantled the previous system of public cultural communication, rendering “alternative” culture virtually invisible to the public.

The cultural landscape of the country, particularly in the capital, has undergone a radical transformation. Numerous creative hubs, thematic institutions, art galleries, and informal creative centres have been shuttered. Their leaders have either fled the country or faced detention and conviction, often on fabricated criminal charges.¹

It has become alarmingly easy to receive significant prison sentences (where even 15 days appear trivial) for seemingly minor infractions. For instance, playing Tsoi on bagpipes as part of the ethno-fantasy band Irdorath,² creating an “ideologically incorrect” portrait, like the painter Ales Pushkin (who died in unclear circumstances on 10 July 2023 in

¹ For example: DJ Alexander Bogdanov and set designer Maxim Kruk were sentenced to three years of prison for “gross violation of order”, <https://mediazona.by/news/2021/12/17/papa-bo> [6.06.2023].

² *Лидеров белорусской группы Irdorath осудили на два года колонии*, <https://www.dw.com/ru/liderov-belorusskoj-gruppy-irdorath-prigovorili-k-dvum-godam-kolonii/a-60120602> [6.06.2023].

a Belarusian prison)³ did, or performing an instrumental DJ set during a march, as demonstrated by cultural activist Alexander Bogdanov (Father Bo). Engaging in such activities can now lead to harsh consequences.

A new genre of cultural work has emerged: the pursuit and surveillance of musicians and artists during protest marches, with photo and video evidence being collected for up to ten months after the events.

Consequently, the range of permitted activities for cultural institutions and enterprises has drastically diminished. Cultural event venues, organisers, and participants must be included on lists approved by a select group of loyal cultural actors, sanctioned and authorised by ideological bodies. Any cultural activities conducted without the proper authorisation, regardless of their format, genre, or scale, are automatically labelled as unreliable and subject to prohibition. The loyalty of the cultural field is enforced through bureaucratic purges.

Changes in the cultural life of Belarus after 2020

The human resources within the cultural sector have been dispersed due to emergency evacuations, imprisonment, forced changes in the nature of their work, relocation to migration centres, and the initiation of secret illegal initiatives. The current norm for a Belarusian cultural activist is that of a displaced person, constantly on the move.

³ Художник Аляксей Пушкін тры месяцы за рэшэткай. Разве в картине дело?, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/30-06-2021-hudozhnik-ales-pushkin-tri-mesyatsa-za-reshetkoj-razve-v-kartine-delo/> [6.06.2023].

Thus, in modern Belarus, the social significance and influence of private “free” cultural initiatives – both protest and commercial – have declined to the level of closed events “for their own” purposes. These include underground concerts, clandestine performances, secret seminars, and gatherings held in private apartments.

Belarusian culture currently appears to be in a state of turmoil: it is characterised by shattered frameworks, a fragmented vocabulary, fragmented perspectives, oppressive censorship, and a lack of clear prospects for both those who have left and those who have chosen to stay.⁴

The most evident indication of the present era is the transition of state cultural policy towards a repressive regime. For over twenty years, the state has lacked a clear ideology, the economy is slowing down, and prospects abroad are diminishing. Propaganda is perpetually in a state of hysteria. Consequently, loyal culture has little to offer the people as a whole. The cultural industry operates within a noisy environment, causing any meaningful statement to be seen as rebellion, provocation, or interference from the “collective West”.

As part of the establishment of a manageable and obedient culture, cultural censorship has resurfaced, with banned books and “blacklists” of artists, arrests of street musicians, the disruption of city tours, and political dismissals in theatres and museums. Political and cultural repression merge into a general atmosphere of national intimidation and a war against an active minority.

⁴ О. Шпарага, *Национальные идентичности в 21-м веке: перспектива для Беларуси*, <https://reform-by.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/reform.by/nacionalnye-identichnosti-v-21-m-veke-perspektiva-dlja-belarusi/amp> [6.06.2023].

Belarusian culture and emigration

Another sign of the times is the unprecedented increase in emigration flows within the creative class. With the mass exodus of individuals who built and contributed to Belarusian “inner Europe”, not only is the social landscape changing, but the cultural field is also undergoing a significant transformation. The community of vibrant creators, daring artists, talented promoters, effective producers, contemplative writers, dynamic filmmakers, proactive advertisers, and high-quality journalists, which has been the most vibrant and active segment of the domestic cultural scene in the past decade, has largely embarked on emergency evacuations to neighbouring countries.

Currently, most of the iconic figures of Belarusian culture reside abroad. The loss of audiences and the departure of authors are two concerning measurements of the current situation, for which there is no clear solution yet. Cultural patterns are crumbling like needles, leaving the silenced public of the country under pressure. The authors who have departed must grapple with the remnants of their former authority, unable to rely on their previous status in the new context.

In reality, everyone has been affected – both those who departed with shattered meanings and the need for immediate cultural adaptation, and those who chose to remain with their cautious identities and underground independence in a suffocating environment.⁵

⁵ *Беларуская культура на родзіне і в ізгнанні*, <https://www.dekoder.org/ru/article/belaruskaya-kultura-doma-i-v-emigracii> [6.06.2023].

And this goes beyond merely discussing “two cultures”. Both sides of the border host cultural bureaucrats from the old quasi-Soviet school. In a country held captive by a totalitarian regime, at least three cultural sectors coexist: colonial-pro-Russian, decorative-ethnocentric, and conspiratorial-partisan.

Belarusian culture, as it is presented to external audiences, is far from being unambiguous. This expression of culture includes a variety of loosely compatible components, including non-partisan traditionalism, agit art, applied urbanism, conceptual formalism following the European model, and naive attempts at grassroots Belarusian self-identification inspired by the incredible events of 2020. In a situation where the system of values has been dismantled, communications severed, and previous cultural foundations devalued, all these cultural practices lacking a unified semantic centre coexist on equal ground. Consequently, they blur the very concept of a “universal” cultural identity for Belarusians. The “new Belarusian”, both from the perspective of its bearers and external observers, is increasingly seen as a challenge and a problem.

New roles emerge in this new context: the weary author, the clandestine spectator, the mobile critic, the underground director, the “protest” scribbler, the empathetic stranger, and the “culture” deserter. There are also creative loners who act as directors of major autonomous cultural entities. They have it both easy and difficult: on one hand, they communicate directly with the space, free from intermediaries, but on the other hand, their language is only

understood by a few.⁶ This is not a new cultural order but rather a fragmented puzzle lacking assembly instructions.⁷

The exodus from the profession is an inevitable consequence of the changing country and cultural context. A crisis of genres is normal if it drives growth, regardless of the direction.

Full-scale Russian aggression and Belarusian culture

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine introduced a new dimension to the Belarusian cultural landscape (whatever that may entail). The closest ally, if not the only one of the Lukashenk regime, entered into a severe military-political confrontation with the "collective West". The response from cultural figures was highly revealing, effectively mirroring the fundamental attitudes of the main players in the Belarusian political sphere.

On one hand, the state cultural institutions, traditionally playing subservient roles, remained unequivocally silent, fully embracing Putin's narrative of the "invisible war" and Belarus' complicity in it as a mere technicality. Pro-government resources were limited to media outlets propagating Russian messages, effectively acting as conduits for Russian propaganda. Cultural activities were thus reduced to discreet, one-time appearances by pro-government pop artists in areas under Russian control.

⁶ Д. Вачедин, *Посттравматический поп: почему зла не надо бояться*, <https://www.dw.com/ru/posttravmaticheskij-pop-iz-berlina-pocemu-zla-ne-nado-boatsa/a-64086856> [6.06.2023].

⁷ *Беларусь пасля 2020: культурныя тактыкі, стратэгіі і ўмюніі*, <https://reform.by/belarus-paslja-2020-kulturnyja-taktyki-stratjegii-i-topii> [6.06.2023].

On the other hand, immediately following the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, 570 cultural figures publicly condemned it.⁸ Some of them remained in Belarus at that time. A protest appeal from over 130 independent Belarusian filmmakers was published. Almost all renowned artists who had left Belarus organised events in support of the Ukrainian people, including fundraising concerts, exhibitions, auctions, joint projects with Ukrainian musicians, and translations of Ukrainian poetry.⁹ Many art activists volunteered on the Polish-Ukrainian border and at operational assistance points.

With little hope for immediate changes in the country, the most resourceful Belarusian cultural figures who were forced to go abroad saw the protest against Russian aggression as a direct continuation of their political activism in the model of 2020. Putin, who undoubtedly supported Lukashenka, following the rigged elections, is rightfully perceived as a direct accomplice to the failure of the Belarusian revolution. Therefore, the resistance of art activists against Putin's aggression becomes an attempt at artistic revenge – a continuation of the struggle for a free Belarus, this time on a broad international stage.

In 2022, seven curators (five Belarusian and two Ukrainian) established the International Coalition of Cultural Figures against the War in Ukraine. They created a platform for the exchange of digital art from around the world. The project has successfully established itself on authoritative

⁸ *Беларускія дзеячы культуры супраць вайны*, <http://belarusiancultureagainstar.tilda.ws/> [6.06.2023].

⁹ *Информационная кампания беларусов "Belarus with Ukraine"*, https://www.facebook.com/BelarusWithUkraine/photos/?ref=page_internal&_rdr [6.06.2023].

platforms such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and Manifesta, serving as an instrument for mobilising international solidarity in support of the Ukrainian and Belarusian people's struggle for independence.

In the midst of the war in Ukraine and the escalating state political terror in Belarus, new programs to support artists in exile have emerged, with the participation of Belarusian art communities abroad. Among these initiatives, the *Per-spAKTIV* residence was established in Berlin in the summer of 2022, with the involvement of Belarusian communities *Ambasada Kultury* and *Razam-Kunst*, as well as *ABA* (*Air Berlin Alexander Platz*), created by Belarusian artist Alexander Komarov. Those who had left earlier are helping newly arrived refugees seek support.

The wartime situation makes long-term planning and clear prospects impossible. Belarusian society remains in a state of semantic instability, constant stress, and persistent depression. The old narratives have concluded, and new ones have not yet been established.

The current cultural landscape can be interpreted as a procession of catastrophic self-awareness.¹⁰

Currently, Belarusian culture is an open project lacking clear value, semantic coherence, and stylistic priorities. It is characterised by the collective experience of an unfinished revolution, a sense of social disunity, the absence of clear prospects, and the exhaustion of conventional forms of artistic expression. It can be described as nervous dances

¹⁰ Аляксей Братачкін. 2022-ы – год «гістарычнай памяці» і палітычнага выкарыстання гісторыі ў Беларусі, <https://penbelarus.org/2023/02/13/2022-y-god-gistarychnaj-pamyaczi-i-palitychnaga-vykarystannya-gistoryi-u-belarusi.html> [6.06.2023].

on the remnants of past frameworks, marked by conceptual and stylistic confusion. In a nod to the ironic and poignant self-designation of the rock band “Lyapis Trubetskoy”, one could refer to the current state of affairs as a “cosmic circus of outsiders”.

This situation represents a choreography based on the fragments of previously comprehensible reality. In a time of global reset, the old punk slogan “No Future” resonates within Belarusian culture. The notion of a future is absent or yet to be conceived.

The uncertainty is both exhilarating and frightening. There is a desire for beauty, intelligibility, and preferably rapid change. We yearn for a Ministry of the Future or, at the very least, a “Revival”. However, this is most likely a complete self-deception. Culture, regardless of how it was built and dismantled by the Communists, cannot be confined to five-year plans or dictated by directives. Its natural state is a multifaceted movement of individual projects, embracing diversity and inconsistency. A living culture always poses challenges, but a lifeless culture serves no purpose and has no value.

The Belarusian state is currently producing a culture devoid of life. It is characterised by noise devoid of artistic and semantic value. Meanwhile, those in exile are often engaged in similar pursuits, attempting to create something meaningful from the fragments of outdated concepts. In doing so, they dwell not in the future but in the past. Unfortunately, there is no dictionary for our fractured times, and the key to understanding lies within a faulty alarm clock. Therefore, the goal becomes finding these keys and developing a new vocabulary, reigniting creative exploration,

rebuilding professional connections, and restoring the cultural ecosystem.

The previous ecosystem of cultural dynamics has been destroyed and will not be revived in the foreseeable future within the country. As a result, it may be necessary to establish a new generation of cultural industries outside the borders of Belarus – an institution of meaning creation for the country, but outside of it.

However, we encounter several significant **challenges** in this endeavour.

1. Quality of human resources: Emergency evacuations often result in traumatic adaptation to new cultural and linguistic environments, and not all individuals retain the opportunity and desire to remain in their profession. The pool of adaptable individuals is limited.
2. Cultural construction: Expat art businesses face a dilemma: should they create niche products for their own community or engage in broader collaborations? The former may lead to the formation of a “Belarusian ghetto” with artificially maintained “purity” of national identity, while the latter entails transitioning to a more complex form of self-determination, post-classical in nature. The former is feasible, while the latter is challenging.
3. Internal conflict, fragmentation, and blurring of the conceptual field: The absence of a unified project for all Belarusians creates competition and acute ideological confrontations even among those who are situationally close to each other. Belarus remains an “archipelago” in transition, as described by Valentina Akudovich.
4. Discrepancy between the goals and orientations of the two poles of the new cultural emigration: “sovereignists”

and “new Europeans”. The former prioritise the ideas of return and revival with a national-romantic and lyrical-melancholic sentiment, while the latter focus on personal self-realisation with a vital and professional Euro-pragmatic approach.

5. Lack of infrastructure for the development of the cultural field: Assistance is needed in areas such as cultural reforms, the establishment of Belarusian educational systems in exile (at all levels), book publishing and cultural representation, regular residencies and internships for artists and art managers, creative hubs and discussion platforms, the formation of a pool of cultural critics, and the implementation of grant systems, creative competitions, awards, and festivals.

It is still a project, but without it, there will be no cultured nation. We need to start by identifying the primary tasks that are worth solving together. The **following problem areas** are considered priority:

1. There is a lack of knowledge among the new generation. Non-state Belarusian humanitarian education has been suppressed, and state education is still operating based on outdated models. This is why we need educational programs that are post-classical and post-academic, providing relevant insights into the current cultural situation.
2. There is a lack of platforms for presenting new projects and fostering the exchange of fresh ideas. A thriving cultural ecosystem requires a well-developed infrastructure of communicative spaces and creative workspaces. We need more hubs and specialised clubs. We need cultural forums that serve as open platforms for presenting

Belarusian cultural identity in the European context, rather than closed Belarusian ghettos.

3. Collaborative projects and creative partnerships are crucial for successful adaptation to the European cultural context. The best training comes from assimilating actual cultural practices and semantic frameworks through collaborative exchanges. It involves a mix of cultural traditions and trends, fostering professional dialogues among local cultures, and promoting the interpenetration of different approaches to cultural work through equal creative cooperation.
4. Another pathway to the European space is through targeted programs for creative promotion and mobility. This includes travel, residencies, festivals, presentations, and promoting creators. It is essential to focus not only on supporting established authors and recognised authorities but also to work systematically and consistently with young creators, the generation awakened in 2020. Helping these “spontaneous Europeans” join the process of building a new Europe and find their place within it is crucial for the effective growth of the Belarusian cultural field.
5. Visas, humanitarian support, and residence permits are technical aspects that are no less important than the previous ones. They are part of cultural work and cultural policy. Offering preferential legalisation is an excellent means for the creative class to determine their political orientation and country of residence.
6. Cultural migrants need support and protection, but more importantly, they need opportunities for creative growth and prospects of post-traumatic self-determination. It

is important to create not just tangible things but also opportunities. Contrary to Lukashenka's forced uniformity and arbitrary authoritarian cultural bureaucracy, we need to establish a natural zone of creativity – a territory of freedom.

7. Eventually, Belarusians will find their way through their emergency identity and fragmented self-consciousness on their own. We only need assistance in building the rails, and the train will continue its journey. The result will be our response to the police regime – a Belarus beyond the totalitarian state. A new culture for a new country.



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Following the rigged presidential elections in 2020, we are witnessing the progressive isolation of Belarus on the international stage and a deepening economic crisis in the country due to sanctions imposed for repression against civil society and support for Russian aggression against Ukraine. Consequently, Belarus is becoming increasingly politically and economically dependent on Russia. The Russian Federation serves as the main creditor and sponsor of the Lukashenko regime, as unprofitable Belarusian state enterprises rely on subsidies to survive. Russia conditions its aid to Belarus on its involvement in supporting the regime's invasion of Ukraine. This includes allowing military bases in Belarus to be used for airstrikes on Ukrainian targets and training Russian recruits for frontline deployment. Belarus has also donated military equipment and ammunition to Russia.

At the same time, repression against Belarusian society is not decreasing; on the contrary, the number of political prisoners has been on the rise. Belarusian propaganda maintains efforts to discredit opposition circles and amplify an anti-Western narrative. Concurrently, there is a noticeable trend of progressive Russification in cultural life within the country. The protection and development of Belarusian culture abroad are crucial for the survival of the nation and serve as an investment in the future of a free Belarus.

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