



Expert Assessments

# BELARUS CHANGE TRACKER

**Pavel Slunkin, Artyom Shraibman,  
Philipp Bikanau, Henadz Korshunau,  
Kateryna Bornukova, Lev Lvovskiy**

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The war against Ukraine has increased Belarus's international isolation and fueled further political mobilisation within society



Due to Western sanctions and the loss of the Ukrainian market the Belarusian economy has plunged into recession. Response: Withholding information and nationalisation of the economy



Supporters and opponents of the regime are becoming even more polarized, while Lukashenka appears to have regained the support of some politically-neutral citizens

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BELARUS  
CHANGE  
TRACKER

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# INTRODUCTION.

## WHAT IS THE BELARUS CHANGE TRACKER?

Belarus is going through the most turbulent period since its independence. The war in Ukraine\* and the Belarusian authorities' complicity in Russia's aggression, combined with the still unresolved internal political crisis of 2020, persistent mass repressions, unprecedented foreign sanctions and the ensuing severance of economic relations with neighbours, international isolation and peak social polarisation have all merged into a "perfect storm" for the country. The situation poses many new challenges to researchers. It is increasingly difficult to identify sustainable and relatively long-term trends through the mists of a controlled information flow and the extreme volatility in both economics, politics and public sentiments, as well as in regional security issues.

To address this challenge, six Belarusian experts will produce a quarterly analytical report, the Belarus Change Tracker. The idea behind this product is to record and analyse more general trends in place of observers' usual focus on individual events and the noise of daily information. The team includes two political analysts, two sociologists and two economists. They are **Pavel Slunkin**, visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations; **Artyom Shraibman**, founder of the Sense Analytics consultancy; **Philipp Bikanau**, independent sociologist; **Henadz Korshunau**, programme director of Belaruskaya Akademia and senior analyst at the Center for New Ideas; **Kateryna Bornukova**, academic director at BEROCC and visiting professor at Carlos III University in Madrid; and **Lev Lvovskiy**, BEROCC senior research fellow.

The analytical "zest" of our report is an exclusive quarterly opinion poll that enables us to record shifts in public opinion across different segments of Belarusian society.

For the first issue of the Tracker, two public opinion surveys were conducted using different online panels. The name of the survey operator is not being disclosed owing to the considerable risks involved when conducting surveys on socio-political issues in Belarus. The first online panel surveyed 1,024

respondents from 18–26 May 2022. The second online panel surveyed 500 respondents from 28 May–1 June. The authors also looked at findings from a survey conducted from 14–28 October 2021, covering 1,448 respondents. These data were used for comparative analysis. In all three cases, the sampling structure was determined by quotas reflecting the effective structure of the general population (residents of Belarusian cities with population over 5,000) by gender, age, and region of residence. In both cases the sample was weighted by RIM Weights (Raking) on the grounds of the settlement size, education, gender, and age. The survey questionnaire is available at: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14qL5A6BDXsBxn7YzGs\\_mNlKBXHIKW/rJU/edit#gid=1703526527](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14qL5A6BDXsBxn7YzGs_mNlKBXHIKW/rJU/edit#gid=1703526527).

Despite considering our data reliable and valid, we acknowledge that data collected through surveys in Belarus should be treated with caution. The distribution of responses in the sample may be skewed by the context of political repression in the country, which may add to respondents' anxiety about answering questions on politically-sensitive issues. For example, many respondents discontinued the survey when presented with a question about their approval of the activities of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the Belarusian government. This leads to potential distortion of response distributions in the achieved sample towards "neutrality", as well as to the washout of neutral respondents who may overreact to politically-sensitive questions. In addition, one should presumably not ignore the nature of online surveys, which the more economically and socially-active urban population engages with more than other sectors of society — as a result, it can be assumed that support for Lukashenka's policies in the sample may differ from the actual level of support.

The authors would like to thank the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for its support in preparing the report, and Press Club Belarus for contributing to the dissemination of the results.

\* While the authors use various designations of the Russian-Ukrainian war, they are all unanimous in interpreting this conflict as Russia's war against Ukraine.

## SUMMARY

Belarus's contribution to the Russian military aggression against Ukraine has increased its international isolation and toxicity. In these new conditions, the Lukashenka regime is lobbying for a **renewed Soviet practice** of economic cooperation with Russia, thus accelerating the process of Belarus's **loss of sovereignty**. However, the proliferation of security risks has also opened up new opportunities for the Belarusian authorities to make pragmatic deals with Western partners. Meanwhile, the democratic forces have had to focus their efforts on **international advocacy of the Belarusian people** and on resolving the humanitarian and consular problems of Belarusians.

The start of the war caused an upsurge in political mobilisation, which coincided with the final days of voting in a constitutional referendum. This has manifested in **street protests and other forms of guerrilla anti-war resistance**. The authorities had to markedly step up repressions, resorting to demonstrative violence in order to suppress signs of discontent. The **use of pro-government activists to put pressure on opponents** was one of several new trends in the repressive apparatus. New signs of **competition between the country's security agencies** have emerged. The democratic forces were unable to mobilise the public in the immediate aftermath of the February referendum but became more active after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including getting involved in the **coordination of anti-war resistance**. Unhappy with the dominance of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office, the "second tier" opposition made **its first attempt at institutionalisation** by creating the Forum of Democratic Forces.

**The quickening severance of ties with the West**, primarily as a result of sanctions, was the main trend in Belarus's foreign economic relations. For a small, open economy, this trend poses a serious challenge. The situation is further aggravated by the **complete loss of the Ukrainian market**, which last year accounted for 14% of Belarusian exports. Meanwhile, **Russia's support of Belarus has not been as large** as desired in Minsk. Both countries managed to negotiate new gas and oil prices. But instead of loans, Belarus only received a restructuring of foreign debt payments. Compensation of losses through import phaseout is complicated by the lack of access to Western financing and technology. The loss of its main export markets threatens Belarus with its biggest economic crisis since the 1990s. Not surprisingly, Belarus has unsuccessfully attempted to

have sanctions lifted as part of a deal on the transit of Ukrainian grain to markets.

The main spring 2022 trend in the domestic economy has been the **intensification of GDP decline, which has been ongoing for three months now**. This downturn has affected almost all sectors of the economy, excluding the IT sector. Unwilling to address the root of the problem — the military-political crisis — the Belarusian government has **opted to conceal information about the real situation and amplify positive reports about the state of the economy**. Another backlash included **greater government intervention** in economic processes with paradoxical **limited liberalisation**.

The war served as an important factor in the transformation of public opinion in Belarus. **For the time being, Alyaksandr Lukashenka appears to have regained the support of some politically-neutral citizens (those who represent the equivalent of floating voters in a democracy)**. One explanation is that propaganda messages about the government's efforts to keep Belarus away from the war are falling on fertile ground all the while the public fears being dragged into the Russia-Ukraine confrontation. It forces many people to forget or ignore their fundamental material difficulties, contrasting these to a more dreadful scenario — a war with the full-scale participation of Belarus. **The war also fuels further polarisation within society** as active supporters and opponents of the regime are now able to easily identify each other by their support for either warring party. The social distance between supporters and opponents of the regime is large and growing.

Owing to the earlier repressions, the institutional structures of civil society in the country have been virtually destroyed. **The repression has refocused on any manifestations of self-organisation and has become more preventive**. Nevertheless, a new wave of protests emerged after the outbreak of war. **It is characterised by guerrilla-type actions and direct support of Ukraine**, including information about Russian troops in Belarus and the "rail war" practices. **Belarusians abroad also joined the anti-war movement** by helping refugees from Ukraine and supporting the Ukrainian forces (and the Belarusian units within them). Another activity of the Belarusian diaspora is its fight against "Belarusophobia" that emerged as a result of Belarusian state complicity in the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

## 1

## FOREIGN POLICY

### 1.1. BELARUS AS AGGRESSOR: COUNTRY'S TOXIC REPUTATION RISES TO NEW HEIGHTS

Russia's armed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marks a key moment in Belarus's modern history — one that will determine the country's trajectory over the coming decades. The extent of Minsk's dependence on Moscow, combined with the nature of its relations with Russia since the outbreak of the internal political crisis in Belarus in 2020, has prevented the Belarusian authorities from using the regional crisis for foreign policy balancing, as they did for example in 2014. The Lukashenka regime's provision of Belarusian territory, military and civilian infrastructure for the attack on Ukraine, as well as logistical, medical and other assistance to the occupying forces, was seen by Western countries as complicity in the act of aggression.<sup>1</sup> Even the findings of the OSCE report,<sup>2</sup> which did not classify Belarus as a party to the conflict, had no major effect on the overall context of international perceptions of Belarus. But, since the first weeks of the war, Minsk has been striving to improve its image.

From 2013 to 2020, Minsk used two sets of arguments to demonstrate its own rapprochement efforts towards Western partners:

1. Emphasising its proactive steps to meet EU and US expectations, such as the release of political prisoners, easing of repression, liberalisation of legislation, reducing dependence on Russia, active participation in the Eastern Partnership etc.;
2. Rejecting steps that could lead to a significant degradation in relations and maintaining the "positive" status quo for the West, including non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea and the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the refusal to host Russian military bases etc.

In the current context, however, the positive or proactive elements have almost entirely given way to arguments in the second category. The Belarusian authorities are not prepared to take any domestic and foreign policy steps that the West could interpret as a clear desire to resume a productive dialogue. Minsk has, though, tried to use several events for this purpose: the rounds of Russia-Ukraine talks in Belarus; the withdrawal of most Russian troops from the country; and its diplomatic messages to the UN Secretary-General<sup>3</sup> and EU leaders.<sup>4</sup> Belarus even dispatched informal negotiators to meet EU officials; these negotiators were former diplomats who remained loyal to Lukashenka after their resignation from senior government positions. However, at the moment, the gap between the minimum concessions that the West expects from the Belarusian side and the maximum that the Lukashenka regime can offer remains too wide for any meaningful progress to be made.

For this reason, it is much easier for Minsk, in its dialogue with the West, to focus on its ability to complicate the regional security situation further (for example by deploying Russian weapons, including nuclear,<sup>5</sup> in the country; joining Russian troops in Ukraine;<sup>6</sup> or recognising the occupation administrations in Ukrainian territories as a legitimate authorities),<sup>7</sup> as well as its ability to exploit the human rights situation inside Belarus (by expanding the use of death penalty to political opponents).<sup>8</sup> The idea was that such prospects might prompt the West to soften its demands and be pragmatic in its approach to bilateral engagement, while the Lukashenka regime had nothing to lose by maintaining the status quo since steps

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/pc\\_1361\\_eu\\_statement\\_on\\_ukraine.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/pc_1361_eu_statement_on_ukraine.pdf);

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/belarus-role-in-the-russian-military-aggression-of-ukraine-council-imposes-sanctions-on-additional-22-individuals-and-further-restrictions-on-trade/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/a/515868.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/o-bezopasnosti-konflikte-v-ukraine-i-rol-i-oon-lukashenko-napravil-poslanie-guterrishu-503434-2022/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/RikardJozwiak/status/1514621612724793351?s=20&t=JP6y3kygPoDwEJOQYDsigg>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/podrobnosti-telefonnogo-razgovora-lukashenko-i-makrona-487253-2022/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belorusskie-vojska-ne-primajut-nikakogo-uchastija-v-rossijskoj-spetsoperatsii-v-donbasse-486648-2022/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-priznanii-lnr-i-dnr-v-blizhajshee-vremja-my-sdelaem-tak-kak-budet-nuzhno-i-belarusi-i-486672-2022/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-pokushenie-na-terrorizm-rasstrel/31856126.html>

to escalate relations entail negative consequences for the regime itself.

## 1.2. BACK TO THE USSR

The economic sanctions imposed on Belarus after the start of the aggression have surpassed all previous EU and US sanctions packages to a considerable degree. However, contrary to the expectations of many Western politicians, the record-breaking sanctions pressure and international isolation have not (yet) forced Lukashenka to abandon his repressive practices and hybrid aggression against the EU and its allies. Lukashenka's choice is between unpromising attempts at dialogue with the West, on the one hand, and the familiar bartering of Belarus's loyalty and sovereignty in exchange for political and financial aid from Moscow, on the other. Lukashenka is obviously betting on the latter. Being profoundly Soviet in his views, Lukashenka is trying to use the current state of affairs to partially restore the economic practices of the USSR in his bilateral relations with Russia. In many respects, this option is now the only one available to him without taking steps towards democratisation and liberalisation. In the long run, such a de-sovereignisation policy risks making Belarus an independent state in name only, with key domestic and foreign policy decisions all being made in Moscow.

Meanwhile hopes that, amid the breakdown in relations with the West, China and Asia could provide a counterweight to increasing dependence on Russia have turned sour. The "pivot to Asia",<sup>9</sup> announced by the authorities after the onset of the internal political crisis and several rounds of sanctions against Belarus, only exists in Belarusian officials' public statements and not in reality, as has always been the case. After the start of the war, political "successes" in this direction have been limited to two telephone conversations between Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej and his Vietnamese<sup>10</sup> and Pakistani<sup>11</sup> counterparts. Prospects for progress look dubious since China and other states in the region are wary of secondary US sanctions and an economically-isolated Belarus is an unattractive international partner.

## 1.3. THE REGIME: UNEXPECTED BENEFITS FROM WAR

Nonetheless, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Lukashenka's complicity in the aggression, alongside the obvious costs, has also brought unexpected foreign policy benefits to the ruling regime.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sb.by/articles/belarus-v-sluchae-khudshego-razvitiya-situatsii-gotova-zamestit-evropeyskie-investitsii-aziatskimi.html>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_anumBg2wCU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_anumBg2wCU)

<sup>10</sup> [https://mfa.gov.by/press/news\\_mfa/cc7f4539a582d38b.html](https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/cc7f4539a582d38b.html)

<sup>11</sup> [https://mfa.gov.by/press/news\\_mfa/b27a2a9d4d9533df.html](https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/b27a2a9d4d9533df.html)

First, the clear differentiation between "the regime" and "the people" that had taken hold in international political discourse regarding Belarus after 2020 suddenly evaporated after the outbreak of the war. The positive image of Belarusians as "brave fighters for democracy" was abruptly transformed into them being seen as "accomplices in aggression". The actions of the regime cast a shadow on all Belarusian citizens. Only the presence of organised groups of Belarusians fighting alongside the Ukrainian army, the partisan anti-war movement, and opinion polls confirming the negative attitude of Belarusian society about the prospect of the Belarusian army fighting in Ukraine, have helped to improve the situation slightly.

Second, the reaction of EU countries to Lukashenka's complicity in the aggression disappointed opposition-minded Belarusians who enjoyed "European solidarity" and felt they were being unfairly punished for the crimes of the regime they fought against. The accounts of Belarusian emigrants in Ukrainian banks were frozen,<sup>12</sup> some European countries restricted the right of Belarusian citizens to apply for Schengen visas and residence permits,<sup>13</sup> and most Belarusian political refugees, who had lived in Ukraine before February 2022 and were forced to flee the war, were not eligible for the protection and assistance mechanisms available to Ukrainian citizens in the EU.<sup>14</sup>

Third, the war reinforced the impression that Lukashenka is the only Belarusian politician who can influence key decision-making in Belarus. It therefore added arguments to the supporters of realpolitik who call on Western countries to engage in pragmatic dialogue with Lukashenka for the sake of regional security.

Fourth, for objective reasons, the focus of international attention has shifted to the horrors of the war in Ukraine and comprehensive assistance to Kyiv to repel Russian aggression. At the same time, the number of political prisoners in Belarus continues to increase (from 1,078 on 22 February to 1,207 on 25 May), along with the growing persecution of dissent, human rights violations, and restrictions on the media (see section "**The Dynamics of War and Civil Society**" for details), but these developments go largely unnoticed by the international community.

<sup>12</sup> <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/v0044500-22#Text>

<sup>13</sup> <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAP/b621a760a04111ec9e62f960e3ee1cb6>  
<https://www.siseministerium.ee/ru/novosti/grazhdane-rossii-i-belarusi-bolshe-ne-poluchat-novye-vizy-i-vidy-nazhitelstvo-dlya-raboty>

<https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/zapret-na-vydachu-vnzh-grazhdanam-rf-i-belarusi-vvoditsya-do-30-iyunya-2023-godano-isklyucheniya-predusmotreny.d?id=54202818>

<sup>14</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L\\_.2022.071.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=O-J%3AL%3A2022%3A071%3ATOC](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2022.071.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=O-J%3AL%3A2022%3A071%3ATOC)

#### 1.4. THE DEMOCRATIC FORCES: RESPONDING TO MILITARY CHALLENGES

The war has also had a significant effect on democratic forces inside Belarus. While Lukashenka has consistently tried to show foreign politicians that he is the only one who can address issues of war and peace and the extent of Belarus's involvement in the attack on Ukraine, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office has to focus primarily on solving the humanitarian and consular problems of Belarusian citizens and act as their advocate before Western politicians. The efforts of democratic forces and Belarusian NGOs have helped to persuade a number of European countries to reconsider their plans of imposing restrictions on Belarusian citizens<sup>15</sup> and significantly simplified legalisation mechanisms for them.<sup>16</sup>

Tsikhanouskaya's team have tried to transform her former image as the "leader of the democratic forces of Belarus" into one as the "national leader of Belarus"<sup>17</sup> and continues working on her international recognition in this new capacity. To this end, they announced the creation of a "transitional cabinet" as a "national body of the Republic of Belarus" with the objective of "defend[ing] the independence and national interests of Belarus" and tasked with "represent[ing] the Belarusian people and guarant[ee] their rights and freedoms until new elections". In practice, such decisions are not yet palpable in international politics, let alone in Belarus itself. However, the existence of an alternative and internationally recognised Belarusian government in exile will be crucial if the Lukashenka regime goes ahead with the de facto liquidation of Belarusian statehood.

With the outbreak of war, attempts at gaining Russia's support or neutrality towards democratic change in Belarus also ended. While Tsikhanouskaya's earlier statements on Russia were cautious and diplomatic, since the events of February 2022 she has directly labelled Putin and Lukashenka aggressors,<sup>18</sup> and the public position of her staff has become openly pro-Ukrainian. Tsikhanouskaya's team opened their first office outside of Lithuania in Kyiv. It has no diplomatic status, but the range of its planned tasks coincides with the traditional functions assigned to foreign diplomatic representations.<sup>19</sup> The opening of the first representative office in Kyiv makes both practical and symbolic sense. Owing to the regime's complicity in the aggression against Ukraine, citizens of Belarus face many legal, bureaucratic and everyday difficulties that require quick solutions. Tsikhanouskaya's team also hopes to smooth out differences and contradictions that have accumulated between the Belarusian democratic forces and the Ukrainian authorities since 2020. A coordinated position will allow both sides to pursue their interests more effectively in the international arena where they coincide. The symbolism of this step is in showing Ukraine the support of Belarusian society in contrast to the actions of the Lukashenka's regime.

<sup>15</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/11-05-2022-itog-vizita-svetlany-tihanovskoj-v-chehiyu-zakona-o-zaprete-viz-belorusam-nebudet/>

<https://belsat.eu/ru/news/02-04-2022-latviya-i-estoniya-budut-vydavat-vizy-belorusam/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/12730.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/ru/events/news/bcogfod4e-3e1b5f.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/ru/events/news/cf3138f204b47d7.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://svaboda.global.ssl.fastly.net/a/31869398.html>

## 2

## DOMESTIC POLITICS AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF WAR

In the spring of 2022, the war in Ukraine shaped Belarusian domestic politics. Minsk's complicity in the Russian invasion sparked a new wave of protest mobilisation and other forms of resistance. This, in turn, led to a revival of both the opposition in exile and the authorities responding with repression and mobilisation of their own "activists".

### 2.1. REFERENDUM IN THE SHADOW OF ANTI-WAR PROTESTS

The constitutional referendum held on 27 February, and the political campaign preceding it, failed to significantly politicise society. Eighteen months of mounting repression and the departure of tens of thousands of opposition-minded activists have drastically reduced the potential for mass mobilisation. The question put to voters in the referendum — the choice between the new and old "Lukashenka Constitutions" — also narrowed the opposition's campaigning possibilities, since they simply did not have an option on the ballot to campaign for. In terms of administrative practices, the February referendum was probably the most restrictive electoral campaign in modern Belarusian history. For the first time, not a single opposition member<sup>20</sup> was included in the polling station commissions. The composition of these commissions was classified.<sup>21</sup> As in the 2020 election, independent observers were not allowed to go directly to the polling stations under the pretext of COVID-19 precautions.

Opposition forces instead based their campaigns on urging supporters to invalidate ballots by ticking both boxes on the ballot paper and to report having done so to the "Golos" (Voice) chatbot. The results, however, only exposed the diminished ability of the democratic forces to mobilise their supporters domestically. Despite a broad coalition in support of the "double-tick" strategy and a sustained information campaign, just over 110,000 people reported to Golos that they had heeded the

democratic forces' call and only one in six of them were not afraid of sending photos of their ballots.<sup>22</sup>

According to a Chatham House poll, apathy and a lack of belief in the referendum's ability to resolve the political crisis was the most common sentiment in society.<sup>23</sup> The real turnout among the urban voters was around 50% — one-and-a-half times fewer than in the 2020 presidential election.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, according to the poll, the referendum was invalid as it required more than half of all eligible voters in the country to vote "yes".<sup>25</sup>

The final days of the referendum coincided with the outbreak of war in Ukraine. As a result, the voting day of 27 February gained a new political meaning — those dissatisfied with Belarus's complicity in the war joined the first spontaneous mass protests in more than a year. Some protests took place outside polling stations, one of the few places where people might legally gather. And the biggest mass demonstration and procession took place near the General Staff of the Armed Forces building in the centre of Minsk.

It is impossible to estimate the total numbers participating in the various forms of protests as the elimination of almost all independent media has limited the coverage of protest action to the publication of rare videos and photos from the participants themselves. However, circumstantial evidence suggests that the number of protesters in various forms — from the use of protest paraphernalia to participation in marches — was at least several thousand people. Human rights activists are aware of more than 900 detainees on 27–28 February in Minsk and other cities, which is comparable to the number of those detained during the Sunday marches in autumn 2020.<sup>26</sup>

After the suppression of street activity, people found other outlets to express their frustration with the actions

<sup>20</sup> <https://referendum2022.spring96.org/be/news/106710>

<sup>21</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/10047.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31842710.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://belaruspolls.org/articles/referendum-5>

<sup>24</sup> <https://belaruspolls.org/articles/referendum-2>

<sup>25</sup> <https://belaruspolls.org/articles/referendum-3>

<sup>26</sup> <https://spring96.org/be/news/106930>

of Russia and the Belarusian authorities in connection with the war. Dozens decided to resort to “direct action”, damaging railway equipment so as to slow down the movement of Russian military echelons; thousands joined in to help to track Russian troop movements and missile launches from Belarusian territory.

## 2.2. OPPOSITION MOBILISATION AND ACTIVITIES

Immediately after the outbreak of war, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's increasingly anti-Kremlin rhetoric in the international arena was followed by a series of ambitious domestic political initiatives. On 24 February, she announced she was assuming the responsibility of “national leader” and was forming a “transitional cabinet as a national authority”.<sup>27</sup> She called for protests on 27 February, the main day of voting in the referendum, although until then she had avoided direct calls for street activism, with very occasional exceptions. On 1 March, Mrs Tsikhanouskaya announced the creation of an Anti-War Movement, calling on Belarusians, among other things, to form a volunteer battalion to defend Ukraine and “disable and slow down [the transport of] equipment and paralyse the state infrastructure without harming people's health and lives”. The ByPOL initiative<sup>28</sup> took on the coordination of the latter and the sabotage actions, which the authorities would later deem terrorism.

The calls of 1 March have been implemented to a greater or lesser extent, but generally as initiatives independent of political forces. The activities set out in Tsikhanouskaya's political announcements did not fully materialise because, after the late February protests, neither her office, nor other democratic forces in exile had any new mechanisms for influencing the political processes inside Belarus. As of the end of May, the “transitional cabinet” was yet to be established and the Anti-War Movement bulletins became digests of the opposition's traditional diplomatic and informational activity on the war. The opposition's return to domestic policy has not become a sustained trend, mainly for objective reasons.

Another “simmering” trend within the opposition — the activation of the “second tier” actors who disagree with the current configuration of democratic forces, and above all with the dominance of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office — has seen some development. The first major autonomous initiative of these politicians and groups was the failed nationwide strike in autumn 2021. On 16–17 May, the Forum of Democratic Forces (FDF), led by ex-presidential candidate Valery Tsapkala, was held in Warsaw, bringing together several dozen representatives of various structures (“Nash Dom”, Dissident.by, “Supratsiou”), political

analyst Dmitry Bolkunets, ex-official Anatoly Kotov and others.<sup>29</sup> The most prominent “first tier” forces, including Tsikhanouskaya's office, National Anti-Crisis Management (NAU) ByPOL and Viktor Babaryka's staff, ignored this forum. The key message, both in the FDF itself and in the interviews given by its initiators, was a call for greater pluralism in decision-making in the opposition and a departure from “one-man rule”.<sup>30</sup> In its final resolution the FDF took on the responsibility of consolidating the democratic forces and setting up working groups on different tracks.<sup>31</sup> It is too early to assess the viability of this new structure, but the Forum has so far become the most visible attempt to institutionalise those opposition groups that, in one way or another, are dissatisfied with the work of Tsikhanouskaya's office and its affiliated structures.

## 2.3. THE AUTHORITIES' REACTION

In response to the new wave of public discontent, the ruling regime mobilised, first of all, by stepping up repression across the entire spectrum (for more details see the section **“The Dynamics of War and Civil Society”**). As a direct reaction to the anti-war resistance, participants in the street actions were arrested and tortured in police cells, dozens of railway workers were detained on suspicion of being involved in sabotage, firearms were demonstratively used to capture one of the “rail guerrilla” groups in late March, and the death penalty for attempted terrorism was introduced into the Criminal Code.

Some actions by security agencies were not directly linked to the anti-war movement, but rather continued the general repressive trend initiated in 2020 — the introduction of courts in absentia to confiscate property from exiled opposition leaders and activists, the arrests of dozens of trade union activists, depriving political prisoners' lawyers of their right to practice, and so on.

The intensification of repression can also be linked to a March meeting of senior security officials with Lukashenka at which the latter unexpectedly criticised them, especially the Interior Ministry, for passiveness and sluggishness.<sup>32</sup> This meeting revealed yet another intra-elite trend: in a situation when repressive activism is the main demonstration of loyalty and usefulness on the part of law enforcement agencies, it has also become a field for competition between them. Prosecutor General Andrey Shved, one of the most ardent supporters of tough measures, in fact prepared the ground for criticism of his colleagues by reporting, in the presence of Lukashenka,

<sup>27</sup> <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/ru/events/news/aa83da-b79e8c81e.html>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTwomWoPQsE>

<sup>29</sup> <https://reform.by/313807-forum-valerija-cepkalo-sobral-dogonjajushih-svetlanu-tihanovskuju>

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6cnsF\\_-aGM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6cnsF_-aGM)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.belarusforum.org/t/forum-demokraticeskikh-sil-belarusi-16-17-maya-2022-goda/2065>

<sup>32</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/coveshchanie-po-voprosu-obespecheniya-zakonnosti-i-pravoporyadka-v-strane>

statistics on political criminal cases that had been terminated or where proceedings had not been initiated by investigators despite the position of the prosecutor's office.

More active involvement of pro-governmental activists in the struggle against opponents, including diplomats of "unfriendly" states as determined by Minsk, is another sub-trend in the escalation of repression. On 12 May dozens of people from the state media, BRSM, "Belaya Rus", the Liberal Democratic Party and the Young Rus movement staged an action in front of the Ukrainian embassy, trying to shame the guests of the diplomatic reception. In May, state media employees Ryhor Azaronak and Lyudmila Hladkaya visited an "unwanted" bookstore and exhibition, which almost immediately led to the removal of paintings by "unreliable" artists and the prosecution of book publisher Andrey Yanushkevich.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, a concert by the Russian musician Basta was cancelled following complaints by Azaronak and other propagandists.

Mobilisation of such "parastatal" activists for repression has two explanations — the desire of these activists to prove themselves in an important field of struggle against the opponents, and the need for the authorities to offer something for their most passionate supporters to channel their energy in the absence of regular opposition protests. However, if this trend develops steadily, it will confirm the evolution of Belarusian authoritarianism towards the use of totalitarian practices — mobilisation of its "hongweibing" to suppress opponents and maintain a certain level of ideological "purity" in society.

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**33** <https://mediazona.by/article/2022/05/25/cancel>

## 3

## FOREIGN ECONOMIC RELATIONS

In early 2022 foreign economic relations proved a serious shock for Belarus. The country could be headed for its deepest economic crisis since the 1990s. Economic relations with the West have sharply deteriorated, and not only due to sanctions: the toxicity of Belarus as a co-aggressor in the Russia-Ukraine war has compelled international companies to abandon cooperation with Belarusian partners. Belarus has also lost an important market in Ukraine, while Russia, for its part, is in no hurry to pour money into Belarus to absorb the impact of the sanctions. Russia faces its own recession too. As a result, Belarus is losing some of its main export markets: the EU market due to sanctions and toxicity, the Ukrainian market due to the war, and the Russian market due to the crisis. For Belarus's small open economy, such losses are critical. This can be seen in GDP estimates for April 2022, which show a 6.5% drop despite the still incomplete effect of sanctions. A serious recession in the short run will be replaced by long-term stagnation unless there are significant changes.

### 3.1. RUPTURE OF ECONOMIC TIES WITH THE WEST REACHES A NEW LEVEL

After the war's outbreak, EU member states, the US, and other Western countries have significantly expanded their sanctions against Belarus. The most painful sanctions have come from the EU with whose members Belarus had traded extensively, but US financial sanctions have had an appreciable effect on the banking sector. If the intention of sanctions imposed in 2021 was for an incomplete or delayed effect, then recent sanctions are designed to cause a significant and imminent economic damage.

New EU sanctions<sup>34</sup> imposed immediately after the war started to hit exports first and foremost. They have reinforced the already imposed sanctions on petroleum products by expanding the list of commodity codes subject to sanctions. This expansion made it impossible to evade

the sanctions by manipulating the commodity codes of the sanctioned goods (e.g. gasoline). In addition, the sanctions were extended to all main exports from Belarus to the EU: woodworking, metals, rubber and plastic, and cement. Overall, the sanctions affect about 70% of Belarusian exports to the EU or almost 17% of all Belarusian commodity exports. The ban on potash transit through Lithuania de facto blocks a further 5% of exports.

The Belarusian banking sector is like a minefield owing to various sanctions and restrictions. Of the systemically-important banks, only Priorbank (a member of the Raiffeisen group) has not fallen directly under sanctions and not facing challenges due to sanctions on its parent company. Other major banks have found themselves either under direct European sanctions, which have closed access to finance, or under US blocking sanctions.<sup>35</sup> Three banks have been disconnected from the SWIFT payment system, which de facto cuts them off from servicing their foreign economic activities. However, the disconnection from SWIFT has not affected the largest banks. Separately, it is worth noting the blocking of international reserves of the Belarusian National Bank (the country's central bank) by the EU (the US has not followed suit yet). The scale of the blockage remains hidden, but it will clearly have a significant impact on the manoeuvrability of the National Bank in the Forex market. Some banks, such as the Belarusian Alfa Bank, have been affected by sanctions imposed on their Russian parent companies, although these Belarusian banks have not had sanctions imposed directly on them. A banking crisis has been avoided despite the significant outflow of deposits, but challenges with foreign economic payments continue. The Belarusian banking system is unlikely to be an important funding source for economic development without inflation risks in the coming years.

In April 2022, the EU introduced a new package of sanctions, which included a ban on companies dealing with trucking operators from Belarus.<sup>36</sup> Belarus has always had high revenues from goods transit: its net export of transportation

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/belarus-role-in-the-russian-military-aggression-of-ukraine-council-imposes-sanctions-on-additional-22-individuals-and-further-restrictions-on-trade/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jyo602>

<sup>36</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_2332](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_2332)

services has typically brought in about \$1.8 billion a year. Therefore, the ban was another serious blow to the economy. In response, Belarus has imposed quite reasonable counter-sanctions,<sup>37</sup> which prohibit European transporters from transiting the country, but allow them to enter the country and transship cargo onto Belarusian carriers at logistics hubs located in the vicinity of border crossings. In addition, there are active ways to circumvent the sanctions; for example, Belarusian logistics companies have started to register their businesses en masse in Kazakhstan; the latter, however, is trying to block this scheme.

Another indirect factor affecting the economy is the increased toxicity of Belarus as an economic partner. Although the exodus of international companies from Belarus is not on the same scale as from Russia, it will still have a considerable effect. Companies are not only leaving the country, but they are also refusing to cooperate with Belarusian counterparts. This often leads to the loss of export contracts and the breaking of production chains. It is very difficult to assess the macroeconomic effects of such disruptions since they depend both on the importance of the missing link (regardless of its size) and on the possibilities for finding replacements.

The toxicity effect has been particularly noticeable in the IT sector. Many IT companies, primarily responding to the demands of Western counterparts, have begun leaving Belarus and relocating their employees to other countries. This situation, combined with people's fear of war and military conscription, may lead to a mass exodus of IT workers. Official statistics show a decrease in employment in the IT sector by 3,300 people in March-April 2022, bucking the usual growth trend in the sector. According to a survey by [www.dev.by](http://www.dev.by), about a third of interviewed IT workers had already relocated by March 2022, and another third were contemplating relocation. Landmark companies like Flo<sup>38</sup> and Wargaming<sup>39</sup> have left the country. Others, such as EPAM<sup>40</sup> and Itransition<sup>41</sup>, have suspended recruitment in Belarus. Today, one can surely say that the IT sector will not be able to play the role of a growth driver in the Belarusian economy in the future. This means that there will be no more growth drivers, and Belarus's involvement in the war is to blame.

The impact of the new sanctions began to be felt as early as March and April 2022, although they will not become fully effective until June 2022. Exports to the EU fell by 13% in March 2022 (when the sanctions were not yet in full force) as compared with January and February, which are not traditionally months that see large trade volumes. The keenest challenges have emerged in wood processing and oil refining industries, which were almost entirely

oriented towards the EU and Ukraine markets. The oil refineries have been working at half capacity and reorienting to serve the domestic market primarily.<sup>42</sup> The woodworking sector is trying to find new markets in China and Central Asia, but so far the lack of smooth and financially feasible logistics has presented a major obstacle.<sup>43</sup> The metal industry has coped better because it already had better-diversified markets, but BMZ (Byelorussian Steel Works) has stated that the lost EU market was its most profitable.<sup>44</sup> Potash producers are trying to export through Russian railways, but there is clearly not enough capacity: most of the potash mines at Belaruskali confined themselves to repair and maintenance operations in April and May.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.2. BELARUS LOSES UKRAINIAN MARKET, PROSPECTS UNCLEAR

With the coming of war, trade between Belarus and Ukraine stopped almost completely: the drop in turnover amounted to more than 95% in March. In 2021, 14% of Belarus's commodity exports had gone to the Ukrainian market. At the same time, Ukraine has not imposed any trade embargo on Belarus, unlike its trade embargo on Russia. The absence of an embargo leaves room to resume trade in the future, but will these opportunities be realised?

Before the war, Belarus and Ukraine maintained economic relations despite political discord. The reason was Ukraine's dependence on oil product supplies from Belarus. However, if one looks at trade as a whole, Belarus has been more dependent on trade with Ukraine than the reverse. Ukraine was Belarus's third largest export market and it was critical for Belarusian oil products, especially in light of EU sanctions. Now Ukraine is working on alternative supplies<sup>46</sup> and if they become well-established then, even once the war is over, the prospects for restoring trade relations with Belarus will look very dim. If Ukraine has alternative supplies of oil products, economic cooperation with Belarus will be unnecessary for Ukraine because the Belarusian market is very small, with only 2.2% of Ukrainian exports going there. Moreover, the political logic will work against trade with Belarus.

The war has also blocked the transit of Belarusian goods through Ukrainian ports. Before the war, Belarus began transshipping potash through Ukraine and some food exports to Asian countries also went through Ukraine. These trade routes will be blocked at least until the end of the war and, all the while it is under sanctions, Belarus has only Russian transit routes as an alternative.

<sup>37</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/12762.html?c>

<sup>38</sup> <https://devby.io/news/flo-uhodit>

<sup>39</sup> <https://devby.io/news/wargaming-1649071115>

<sup>40</sup> <https://devby.io/news/epam-priostanovil-naim>

<sup>41</sup> <https://devby.io/news/itransition-sourcing>

<sup>42</sup> <https://reform.by/309099-belaruskie-npzh-rabotajut-navnutrennij-rynok-iz-za-sankcij>

<sup>43</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/12835.html?c>

<sup>44</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/12962.html?c>

<sup>45</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/12689.html?c>

<sup>46</sup> <https://interfax.com.ua/news/economic/834275.html>

### 3.3. RUSSIAN ECONOMIC SUPPORT NOT MEETING EXPECTATIONS

Active involvement in the war increased Belarus's dependence on Russia; other markets were de facto inaccessible. Owing to this Belarus counts on serious economic support which, it seems, Russia is not presently ready to provide. It is most starkly evident as far as financial support is concerned. Only a couple of years ago Russia would have almost certainly supported Belarus with a new loan worth of several billion US dollars if Belarus had faced a serious GDP decline. Today, one can only talk about restructuring debt repayments to Russia.<sup>47</sup> Belarus will always seek new loans, i.e. refinancing that could be used to repay debts to Russia and much more besides, but there has been no confirmation from the Russian side about any debt restructuring arrangements in the current situation.

In other respects, Belarus has managed to gain some support. Oil and gas pricing has been revised, although there are practically no details publicly available. Oil pricing is no longer based on a formula<sup>48</sup>, which most likely means oil pricing has been detached from market prices. It can be assumed that Belarus has received a rebate similar to those received by India and China. Such a discount should enable domestic oil refining to break even. The only thing that is known about gas pricing is that natural gas is now being priced in Russian rubles. It is not certain that this is to the advantage of Belarus: Belarus has a negative trade balance with Russia, which means it may lack Russian rubles. In addition, the current strengthening of the Russian ruble does not favour Belarus either.

Belarus has high hopes for engagement in import substitution programmes in Russia. In particular, the Belarusian production industry could substitute supplies from some international companies. So far, however, there are no specifics about these plans and potential obstacles are visible. First, import substitution would require investments, i.e. money and time, which neither Belarus nor Russia has at the moment. Second, import substitution will not solve the problem of lost markets for many industries. Russia does not need Belarusian oil products, wood or metals. Therefore, current close economic ties with Russia bring no benefits to Belarus, but several risks as the Russian market is rapidly shrinking.

### 3.4. BARGAINING ATTEMPTS: POTASH FOR FOOD TRANSIT

In May, there were suggestions that sanctions against Belarus (and Russia) could be partially and temporarily lifted in exchange for allowing the transit of Ukrainian grain. In particular, Belarus could provide a humanitarian corridor to transport grain to Lithuanian seaports by rail. (The alternative route through Poland has low throughput capacity because of the difference in rail gauges.) Under the mooted scheme, Belarus would be allowed to transit potash through Lithuanian ports for six months in return. Such proposals have been voiced, among others, by UN representatives.<sup>49</sup> Alyaksandr Lukashenka has gladly supported the proposals.<sup>50</sup> In addition to political benefits, the restoration of potash exports for six months would help to mitigate the peak of the economic crisis.

However, it seems that no party other than Belarus is ready to accept the proposed terms and conditions. It seems that Putin himself is going to use the threat of starvation to blackmail and bargain. Ukraine is not ready to make concessions and would rather use the threat of starvation as an argument for getting help to unblock its seaports. Europe and the US would also rather not give in to what can be seen as a blackmail scheme. Consequently the unfreezing of relations with the West and the lifting of sanctions have been postponed.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/golovchenko-rossija-provedet-restrukturizatsiju-kreditnoj-zadolzhennosti-belarusi-490206-2022/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://reform.by/309099-belarusskie-npz-rabotajut-na-vnutrennij-rynok-iz-za-sankcij>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-n-seeks-to-ease-russian-blockade-of-ukraine-grain-shipping-to-avert-food-shortages-11652717161>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/o-bezopasnosti-konflikte-v-ukraine-i-rol-i-oon-lukashenko-napravil-postanie-guterrishu-503434-2022/>

## 4

## DOMESTIC ECONOMIC POLICY

After Russia invaded Ukraine, the Belarusian economy experienced an unprecedented external economic shock and went into recession. The main domestic economic trend (as of this writing) has been a continuous three-month long decline in GDP. The state responded to the latest crisis by trying to conceal the real economic situation, ensuring larger government intervention in the economy, and limited liberalisation.

Early trends of deeper government intervention in the economy and data secrecy emerged back in 2020, but they have intensified recently. And the trend towards minimal liberalisation emerged only after Belarus was recognised as a co-aggressor in the attack on Ukraine and included alongside Russia on the sanctions lists.

### 4.1. GDP FALLS THREE MONTHS IN A ROW

The war had almost no effect on GDP growth in February 2022 since it began late in the month. However, Belarus could be seen going into recession as early as March: GDP declined by 3.3% compared to March 2021. The negative trend expectedly intensified in April 2022 and, according to preliminary data, the decline was already 6.5% compared to April 2021. In May, the corresponding indicator was 8.5%.

Overtly negative trends are observed in the manufacturing sector; its GDP drop of 12% accounted for almost half of the April decline. The worst performer was trade, where after a surge due to panic buying caused by the war's outbreak, the fall amounted to more than 20% in April 2022 compared to April 2021. Other sectors declining included construction and transportation services, which sagged by over 15%, and industrial production which shrank by more than 10%. Industrial inventories rose by 8%.

The IT sector remained the only driver of economic growth, showing 7% growth in Q1 2022 compared to Q1 2021. In April 2022, the IT sector accelerated to almost 15% growth compared to April 2021.

Inflation since the beginning of the year has surpassed 15%, which exceeds the stated targets of the National

Bank, but at the same time this is not record-breaking inflation in the modern history of Belarus. Average real incomes started to decline because of high inflation; so far, this decline is within the 1–2% range.

### 4.2. WITHHOLDING INFORMATION AND VERBAL INTERVENTIONS

The first reaction of government representatives, particularly those comprising the "economic block", to the war and ensuing sanctions was to deny the problem. Thus, on 25 February, First Deputy Prime Minister Snapkov stated that there were no special difficulties for the operations of enterprises and the consumer market in light of the situation. He said the only problem at that time was the closure of the Odesa seaport. Snapkov was confident that this logistical challenge could also be solved within 10 days.<sup>51</sup>

Prime Minister Raman Galovchenka, commenting on the weakening of the Belarusian ruble on the same day, said that he considered currency fluctuations to result from the build-up of destructive forces and panic, which would end in a few days.<sup>52</sup> Senior officials repeatedly echoed rhetoric that the sanctions and war would have no effect on the economy of Belarus. At times, they asserted that there were positive effects of the restrictions due to the opportunities for Belarusian goods to occupy the niches vacated by foreign companies in the Russian market. Such statements can hardly be attributed to forecasting errors: they stem directly from the concept of managing economic expectations, which seems to be shared by many government members.

Ekaterina Rechits, an analyst at the state-owned Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research, has formulated the concept

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/snopkov-zajavil-ob-otsutstvii-osobyh-problem-v-rabote-predpriyatij-i-potrebitelskogo-rynka-486927-2022/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/golovchenko-net-osnovanij-prinimat-dopmery-regulirovanija-na-valjutnom-rynke-kolebanija-kursa-vremennye-486864-2022/>

most clearly.<sup>53 54</sup> This paradigm focuses not on the factors of economic growth, but on the expectations of people and companies; therefore, by manipulating these expectations, it is possible to achieve a positive effect even against an objectively unfavourable background.

The trend of hiding socially important information has been present in Belarus in one way or another for a long time. Thus, the newest phase of the country's existence began with the concealment of data on mortality from COVID-19. Then the format of reports on the share of non-performing loans/bad assets on banks' balance sheets was distorted, and after sectoral sanctions were announced, it was decided to classify statistics on exports in sectors under sanctions.

In 2021 an amendment was introduced to the Criminal Code to criminalise the dissemination of "false information" about the economic situation in Belarus.<sup>55</sup> After the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, the National Bank stopped publishing its regular economic situation surveys. Access to public information portals was also restricted from abroad, and subscription-based data sales to independent institutions were ended.

By restricting access to objective data, the government has continued to supply mass media with plenty of glowing statements reflecting only one or another positive factor out of context. For example, in a large TV interview on 24 May, Prime Minister Golavchenka pointed to the record-breaking scope of foreign direct investment as "proof" of the positive economic situation. At the same time, the fact that this figure was achieved at the expense of foreign companies who were prohibited from withdrawing their dividends was neglected. Nor did he mention the ongoing GDP decline.

Despite the fact that objective factors are stronger than the positive verbal interventions of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and of the economic block of the government, the trend of concealing information and manipulating the economic agenda is likely to continue in the future.

### 4.3. GOVERNMENTALISATION OF THE ECONOMY

The trend of expanding government interventions in the economy to a greater or lesser extent has existed in Belarus throughout the entire Lukashenka presidency.

<sup>53</sup> Established by the President of the Republic of Belarus to provide information and analytical support for the operations of government authorities and officials  
<https://president.gov.by/ru/statebodies/beloruskiy-institut-strategicheskikh-issledovaniy>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.belta.by/comments/view/ekonomika-belarusi-v-kratkosrochnyh-analiticheskikh-prognozah-7736/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://etalonline.by/novosti/mnenie/ugolovnaya-otvetstvennost/>

Back in 1995 he promised to "shake hands with the country's last entrepreneur" and clarified that he considered business people to be "lousy fleas".<sup>56</sup> Over time, the anti-market position of the state began to weaken and in 2017–2019 the first president of Belarus even repeatedly noted the success of private businesses and the IT sector.

After the 2020–2021 protests, the pendulum swung back again. Along with the detentions of leading business figures and the stripping of accreditations from commercial bank directors, private businesses were lambasted with accusations of disloyalty and responsibility for the accelerating inflation.

Belgazprombank — formerly headed by Viktor Babaryka — has been taken over by the state. In 2020 six directors and board members of Belarusian commercial banks were deemed to be "not complying with the qualification and business reputation requirements".<sup>57</sup> In 2021 this figure rose to twelve, and the first five months of 2022 have seen ten individuals identified as such. In addition, the number of "unqualified" executive managers of commercial banks in Belarus ranged from two to four people per year in 2017–2019.

Apparently, this measure is being applied to commercial banks in order to make them more willing to write off loans to state-owned enterprises, to comply with the "recommendations" of the regulator, and not to disclose information at the banks' disposal that is in the public interest.

An important part of the paradigm about the superiority of the state economy is the conviction that the government can invest money more rationally than ordinary market players. Thus, Prime Minister Golavchenka pinned his hopes for economic growth on the beginning of a new state investment cycle as early as the end of 2020.<sup>58</sup>

The main agent of public investment in Belarus is the Development Bank. Any available funds and special rights have been funnelling in to this bank. Thus, in November 2021, the National Bank allowed the Deposit Insurance Agency (which serves natural persons who are depositors at commercial banks in Belarus) to invest its available funds in bonds issued by the Development Bank, and later, through a series of special Presidential Decrees, the Development Bank was able to issue bonds worth several billion Belarusian rubles.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/07/10\\_a\\_610866g.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/07/10_a_610866g.shtml)

<sup>57</sup> [https://www.nbrb.by/system/commission/protocol?fbclid=IwAR0VBgKxx1Pdkx5w5zWrfqHmJYjLLa8nWzTCU5DZ\\_UKY-jsXH5UWs62SBBbc](https://www.nbrb.by/system/commission/protocol?fbclid=IwAR0VBgKxx1Pdkx5w5zWrfqHmJYjLLa8nWzTCU5DZ_UKY-jsXH5UWs62SBBbc) (accessible only from Belarus or with appropriate VPN)

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/golovchenko-v-2021-godu-ozhidaetsja-vosstanovitelnyj-rost-ekonomiki-i-zapusk-novogo-investitsikla-411879-2020/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://aqm.by/news/ekonomika-tryd-byhyhet/bank-ravzitiya-vypustit-obligatsii-na-summu-2-6-mlrd-rublej-v-2022-godu/>

In addition to the state investment programme, the government has started interfering more actively in pricing since the 2020 political crisis. On several occasions, it accused private retailers of inflating prices artificially and the owner of a large retail chain was even detained after Lukashenka publicly accused him of not wanting to sell Belarusian goods.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, a list of goods whose prices had to be controlled by the Ministry of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade appeared, which led to an even greater increase in prices.

Lukashenka also paid attention to the IT sector which had largely been neglected by the state in the past. Having previously pledged to get to the bottom of the High-Tech Park, initiated criminal prosecutions against some IT companies<sup>61</sup> and intimidating the largest industry players,<sup>62</sup> Lukashenka has now outlined his own vision<sup>63</sup> for IT companies' development in the current context.

#### 4.4. LIMITED LIBERALISATION

After the war started and the sanctions pressure increased, Belarusian entrepreneurs expected relief and government support.

The Republican Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE) drafted proposals<sup>64</sup> for the support of businesses. The RUIE hoped to reduce bureaucratic hurdles and government audits, while receiving assistance in circumventing a number of sanctions, tax vacations, and foreign currency exemptions. The Republican Confederation of Entrepreneurs requested 1.2 billion Russian rubles from the Union State budget.<sup>65</sup>

However, Juryi Seliverstau, Minister of Finance, rejected most of the entrepreneurs' proposals, saying that money was needed for the sowing season.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the state did take some measures to ease the business environment. In particular, the threshold for duty-free imports into Belarus has increased<sup>67</sup> fivefold (up to EUR 1,000), the embargo on food imports from the EU has been largely lifted, as have restrictions on travelling abroad.<sup>68</sup>

In addition, the government has adopted a package of measures designed to help the economy of Belarus.<sup>69</sup> However, the feasibility of these measures remains highly questionable: promises to help exporters with export logistics look unrealisable under current sanctions. And the prospect of taking funds from the treasury to ensure fringe benefits to the employed often carries a risk of criminal prosecution to those entrepreneurs who dare to do this.

<sup>60</sup> <https://reform.by/201432-zaderzhan-vladelec-torgovoj-seti-green>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-54041272>

<sup>62</sup> <https://reform.by/248206-lukashenko-obvinil-dobkina-v-finansirovanii-protstov-i-svjazjah-so-specsluzhbami>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ajtishniki-belarusi-i-rossii-ne-dolzny-byt-na-pobegushkah-u-krupnyh-inostrannyh-kompanij-501260-2022/>

<sup>64</sup> [http://rspp.by/news\\_posts/340](http://rspp.by/news_posts/340)

<sup>65</sup> <https://profile.ru/news/abroad/beloruskie-biznesmeny-poprosili-1-2-milliarda-rublej-iz-bjudzheta-sojuznogo-gosudarstva-1052317/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.belarus.kp.ru/online/news/4672546/>

<sup>67</sup> <https://neg.by/novosti/otkrytj/posylki-iz-za-granitsy-limit-beshposhlinnogo-vvoza-povyshen-s-17-aprelya/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/vyezhat-iz-belarusi-teper-mozhno-no-ne-v-ukrainu/a-61353029>

<sup>69</sup> <https://neg.by/novosti/otkrytj/plan-podderzhki-ekonomiki-belarusi/>

## 5

## TRENDS IN PUBLIC OPINION

5.1. SOCIAL CONFRONTATION:  
IS THE PAGE TURNING?

The Russia-Ukraine war is a serious shock for the east European region. The war inevitably affects the socio-political situation in Belarus, as well as public opinion. We will analyse Belarusian society using several tools, particularly the **Social Conflict Segmentation (SCS)**. The SCS is based on the assessment of people's confidence in both state and non-state institutions, as well as in supporters and opponents of government. During data collection, respondents were asked to rate how much they trusted or distrusted certain groups, for example "the militia" or "people designated as political prisoners".

The analysis of these assessments enables the division of Belarusian society into four groups differing in their degree of trust or distrust in the authorities: (i) ardent supporters, (ii) inclined to trust, (iii) inclined not to trust, and (iv) ardent opponents.

- Almost half of society made of those inclined not to trust and ardent opponents
- The other half of society is formed by those inclined to trust and ardent supporters

Both segments vary significantly in socio-demographic characteristics, as the group of **ardent opponents** is

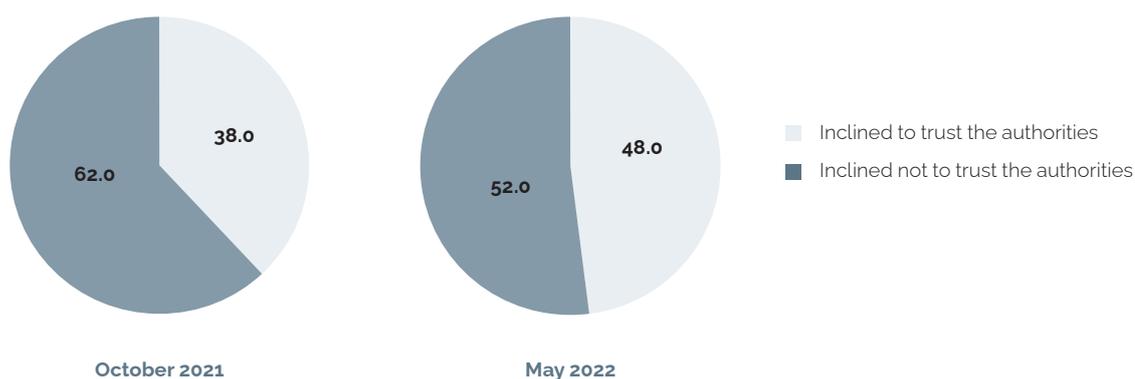
dominated by men and better-educated people; representatives of this segment are more likely to live in Minsk and have higher incomes. By contrast, there are more women among the **ardent supporters**. People in this group are generally less well-educated and have below average incomes.

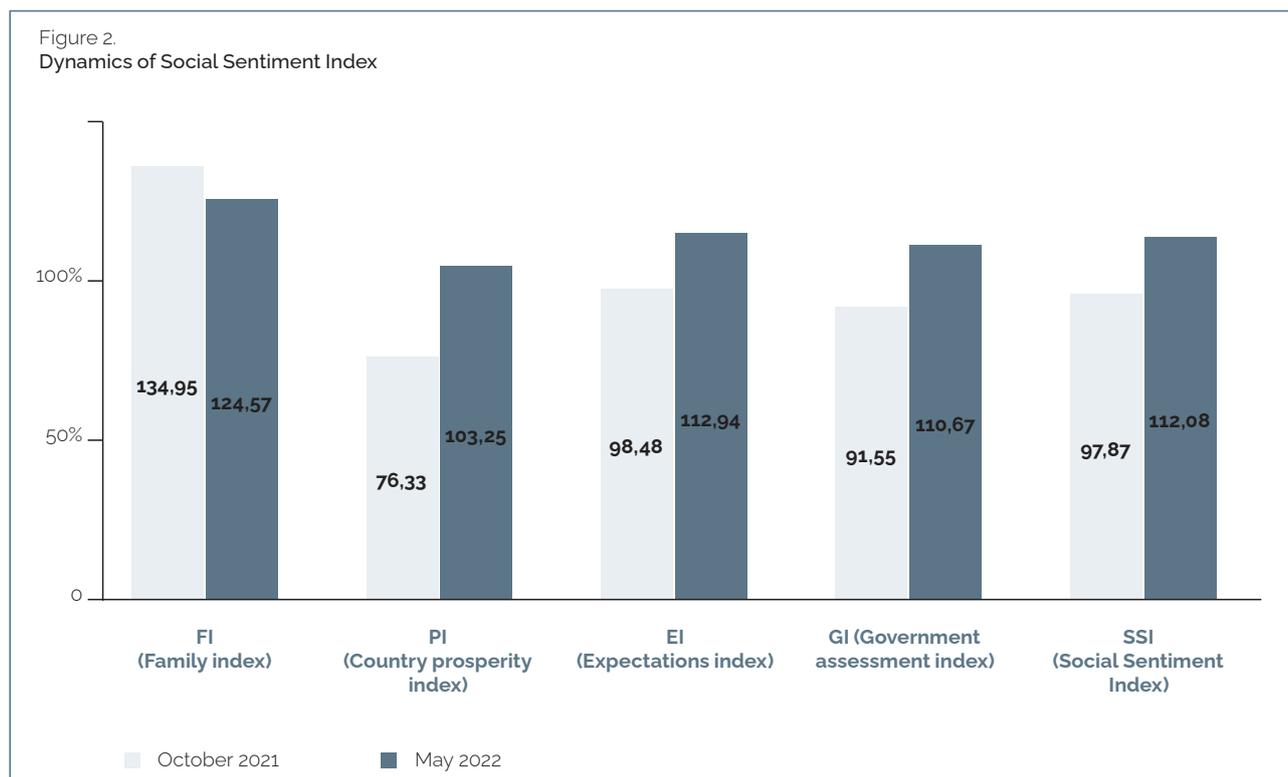
**Ardent supporters** and those **inclined to trust** demonstrate high confidence in pro-governmental institutions and those social groups that were singled out through factor analysis as "supportive of the authorities".

In October 2021, the balance of "ardent supporters + inclined to trust" vs "ardent opponents + inclined not to trust" was approximately 38 to 62. In May 2022, the figure was roughly 48 to 52.

The authors of the publication have deliberately avoided comparisons of the size of specific groups (for example, there were X ardent supporters in October, and in May their number was Y). The reason is that the dynamics may have been affected by a change in the survey data provider between October 2021 and May 2022. To test this hypothesis, the researchers commissioned a reduced survey (segmentation questions only) from the previous provider. Data comparison confirms the dynamics at the level of the two large groups of society but shows some discrepancies at the small group level (one provider's results show more

Figure 1.  
Dynamics of SCS into 2 groups





**ardent supporters** than those **inclined to trust**, while the other provider's results show the opposite).

The differences between the online panels are largely attributed to the fear factor: the most politically-sensitive questions (during or after which most respondents discontinued the survey) in the new panel came before the clustering questions. The November Chatham House poll demonstrated that representatives of the so-called "neutral" segments tend to be more afraid of answering political research questions.<sup>70</sup> It is very important to understand that getting into the category of those inclined to trust or even ardent supporters **does not necessarily mean support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka, especially electorally.**

The sections below will help understand the reasons for the observed dynamics.

## 5.2. SOCIAL SENTIMENT: "COULD BE WORSE"

How do groups within the social conflict see the situation in the country? To answer this question, the Social Sentiment Index (SSI) methodology has been used.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Chatham House. Belarusians' views on the political crisis (poll conducted 1–10 November 2021), <https://belaruspolls.org/wave-6>

<sup>71</sup> The full methodology is described here: <https://www.levada.ru/obnovlennaya-metodika-izmereniya-indeksa-sotsialnykh-nastroenii-isn/>; the study questionnaire included questions A2–A13.

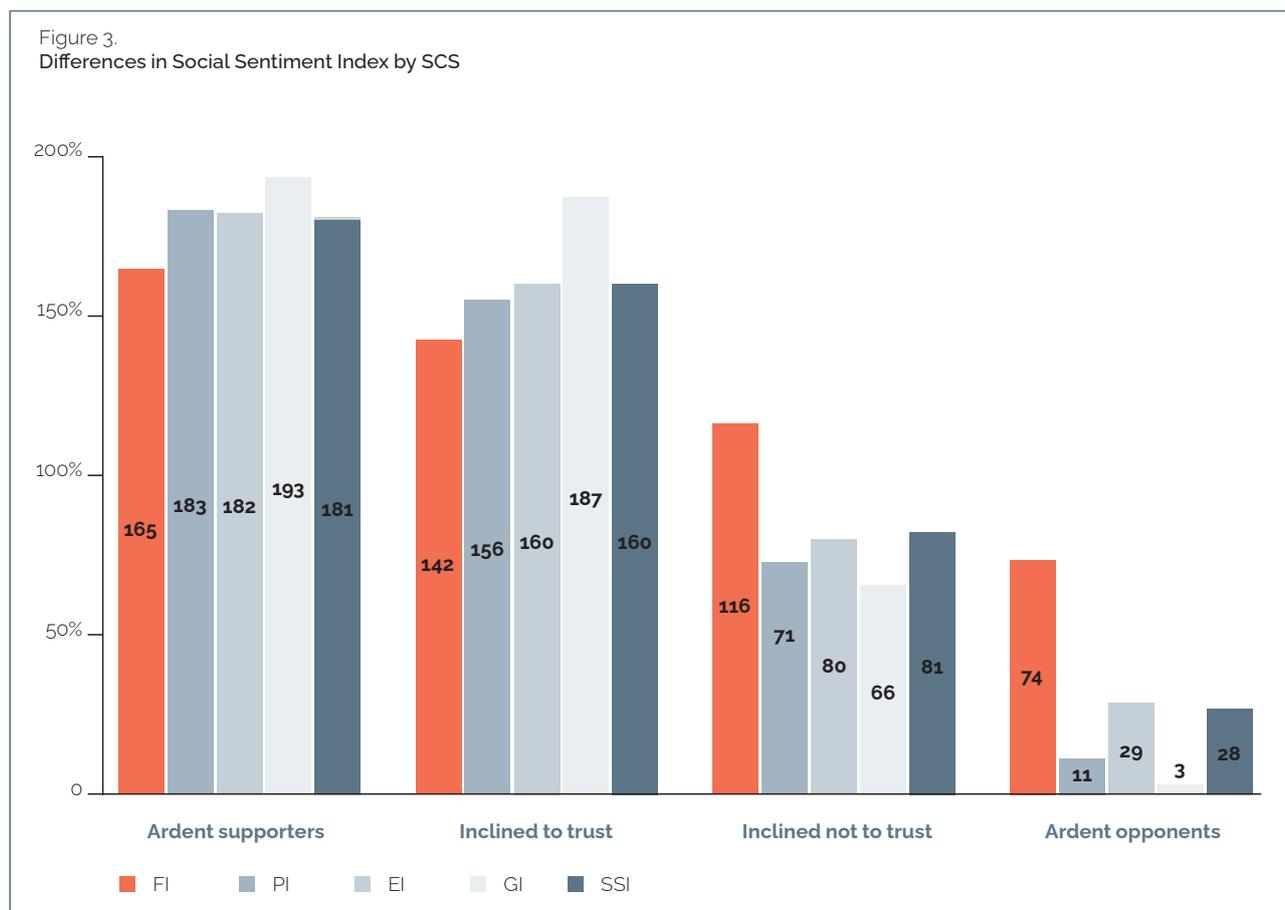
The SSI reflects the vector of political, economic and public concerns of Belarusians. The SSI varies over a range from 0 to 200, where values below 100 indicate the prevalence of negative appraisals.

In addition to the general SSI, four partial indices (the SSI components) were constructed:

- A family situation index (FI), reflecting respondents' subjective assessments of the emotional and material situation of their families;
- A country prosperity index (PI), combining assessments of the economic and political situation of the country as a whole;
- An expectations index (EI), reflecting people's perceptions of their personal future and that of the country;
- A government assessment index (GI), reflecting the level of approval of the state authorities in the country.

Compared to October 2021, there has been an increase in all indices, except for the FI. This means that Belarusians consider their own family situation to be declining, and Belarusians feel the impact of the economic crisis on their families' financial standing (more than 40% reported worsening of well-being). Here one can clearly see a split in society's attitudes to the economic and political situation.

- All index scores for **ardent supporters** and those **inclined to trust** are above the 150-point mark.
- In turn, all scores of **ardent opponents** are critically low: GI and PI are less than 15, and only FI



remains at 74 (due to the higher income of representatives of this segment).

- The difference in the scores of **ardent supporters** and those **inclined to trust** is insignificant; both segments are very positive about the situation and have similar views. Among those **inclined not to trust** and **ardent opponents** there is a starker difference. Although negative assessments prevail among those inclined not to trust (i.e. all indices other than FI are below 100), they are close to the middle value, whereas the indices for ardent opponents are all several times lower. This difference may well be partially due to the fear factor, especially the GI score, which includes approval of Lukashenka's activities.

This points at two processes taking place in society:

1. Radicalisation of the opposing segments of SCS. The **ardent supporters** segment shows a significant increase across all SSI indices compared to October 2021, while the **ardent opponents** segment shows a corresponding decrease. It can be assumed that the increase in optimism (or pessimism) is related to support (or lack of support) for Russia's military action in Ukraine. Chatham House researchers record a strong correlation between support for the war and the receipt of information from Russian and

Belarusian state media.<sup>72</sup> It can be reasonably assumed that **ardent supporters** consume war-related information precisely from such media. Their optimism can then be compared to the optimism of Russians, which is directly related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (for example, support for the war among Russians is linked to the level of happiness).<sup>73</sup> **Ardent opponents** are more likely to receive information from non-state Belarusian, Russian or even Ukrainian media. Such differences in perceptions of the war are also reflected in the contribution of these SCS segments to public opinion.

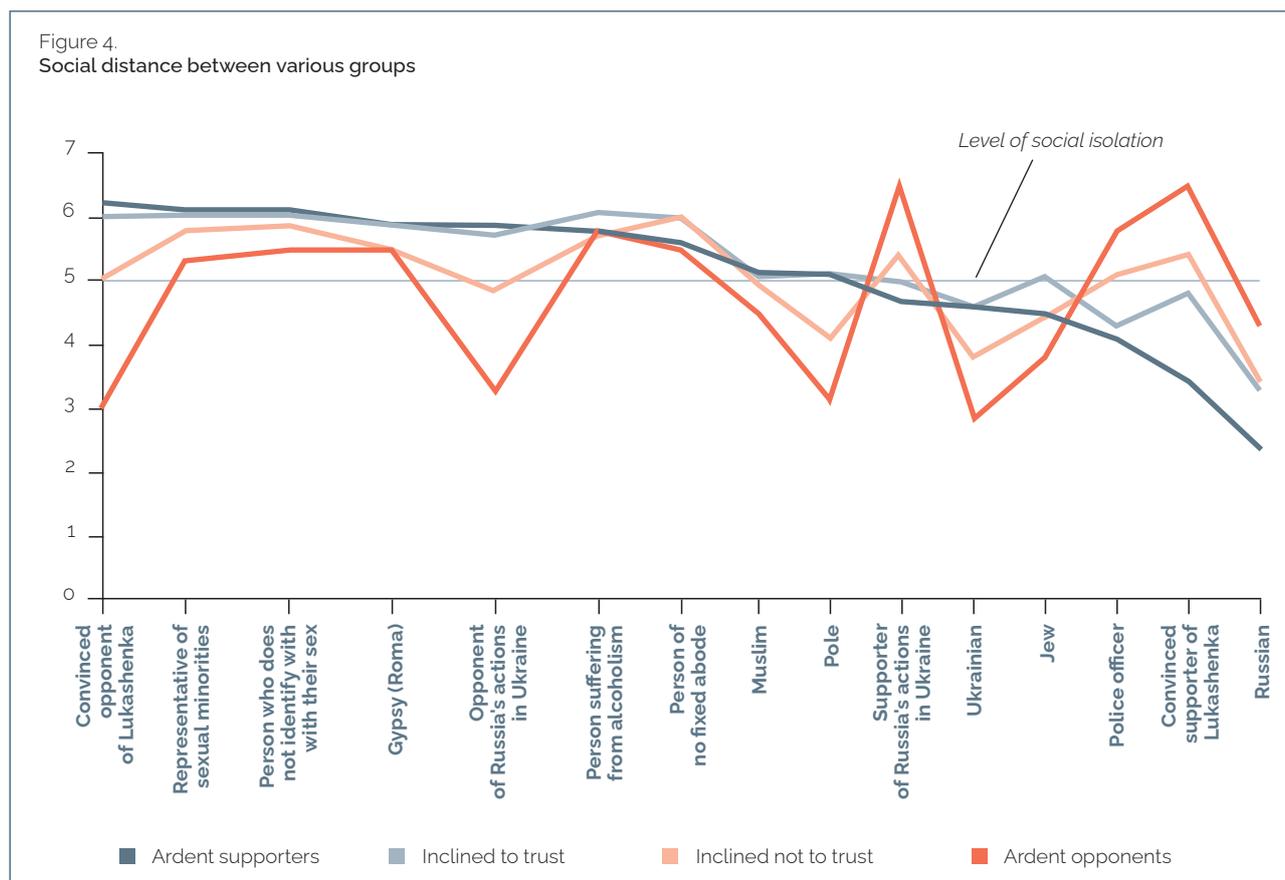
2. Rally round the flag effect in more neutral segments.

It is interesting to note that the groups inclined to trust the government have a lower FI compared to the values in other indices. The same phenomenon is observed in Russian society.<sup>74</sup> While for **ardent supporters** it is associated with a general increase in optimism (all their indices have increased since

<sup>72</sup> Chatham House. Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, eighth survey wave. <https://belarus-polls.org/wave-8>

<sup>73</sup> ExtremeScan, Release No.7, <https://t.me/ExtremeScan/37>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2021/08/19/obshhestvenno-nastroeniya-letom-2021/>



October 2021), those **inclined to trust** demonstrate only some positive assessment of the overall situation for the country: they expect their family situation to deteriorate, but generally have a positive view of the country.

Most likely, "neutral" people have partially helped replicate the effect of 2014–2015, when Alyaksandr Lukashenka could boast of a certain consent to his role as the president.

How did this work and materialise? War is highly unpopular among Belarusians. The research of Andrei Vardomatski's Belarusian Analytical Workshop shows only an 11% support for Belarus joining the war;<sup>75</sup> the Chatham House research found only 6% wanting the Belarusian army to enter the war on the Russian side. At the same time, Belarusian society is very afraid of being drawn into the war.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, Lukashenka's "dovish" rhetoric about the country resisting such an eventuality finds a keen audience. The vision of a potential "horrible" future, in which Belarus goes to war, outweighs concerns for the current deterioration of people's material situation. In the current context declining living standards does not represent the worst-case scenario.

At the same time, a full repetition of the 2014–2015 effect is not the case. The result will hardly persist in the long term — as in any other instance of a rally round the flag effect, it represents an instinctive reaction that will subside over time. Furthermore, only the most malleable part of society, comprising the more neutral segments (those inclined to trust and inclined not to trust) was significantly exposed to this effect. Unlike in 2015, today there are many people united in their distrust in the regime, people who are not ready to accept Lukashenka's rule in any form, and for whom "not being drawn into the war" does not outweigh all the other accumulated grievances against the regime. Moreover, the regime could instantly lose even its present level of support if it gets involved in the war.

### 5.3. WAR EXACERBATES DIVISIONS IN SOCIETY

Social polarisation and conflict after August 2020 have been analysed by many experts and researchers. Various studies<sup>77</sup> describe groups of supporters and opponents of the government who can clearly identify "friends" and "foes" in the political coordinates and feel antipathy

<sup>75</sup> <https://t.me/linearaggression/47>

<sup>76</sup> Chatham House. Belarusians' views on Russia's war on Ukraine, ninth survey wave, <https://belaruspolls.org/wave-9>

<sup>77</sup> Exploring the national Identity of Belarusians, <https://press-club.by/events/novoe-issledovanie-belarusskaya-nacionalnaya-ident>; Chatham House, Wave 6. Belarusians' views on the political crisis, <https://belaruspolls.org/wave-6>

towards each other. After 24 February 2022, the war factor was added to this combustible situation.

To measure the degree of confrontation, the Bogardus social distance scale was used. It has a standardised interpretation whereby an average score above 5 means social rejection or isolation of the group asked about.

In terms of mutual rejection, 3 social groups can be distinguished demonstrating the biggest division in relation to representatives of different segments.

1. Russians and Ukrainians.
  - The level of rejection of Russians among **ardent opponents** to the regime is roughly at the same level as the rejection of Ukrainians among **ardent supporters**
  - At the same time, **ardent supporters** show a strong rejection of Poles.
2. Convinced opponents and supporters of Lukashenka.
  - **Ardent opponents** have extremely positive attitudes to Lukashenka's opponents, whereas the level of rejection of this social group is critical (more than 6 points) among both **ardent supporters** and those **inclined to trust**
  - **Ardent supporters of the regime** scored highest on the index among all the social groups

3. Supporters and opponents of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

- **Ardent opponents** show equally large social distance in relation to "supporters of Russia's actions in Ukraine" and "convinced supporters of Lukashenka". The same works the other way round: ardent supporters are not ready to accept Lukashenka's opponents and those who oppose Russia's actions in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine and its accompanying or facilitated loyalties and identities are very easily embedded in the existing socio-political conflict. A typical opponent of the regime would expect a regime supporter to also support Russia in its war on Ukraine, while a regime supporter would expect opponents to support Ukraine. Given the observed radicalisation of opposite segments, of paramount importance is the fact that **ardent opponents** may soon have their own "security wing" in the form of Kastus Kalinouski regiment.<sup>78</sup> Since Belarusians are ready for guerrilla action on the railway even in total repression, further radicalisation and an increase in the distance between ardent supporters and ardent opponents may at some point develop into a violent confrontation.

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<sup>78</sup> See Section 6 of this Report

## 6

## THE DYNAMICS OF WAR AND CIVIL SOCIETY

After the events of 2020, the authorities pursued a strategy of “mopping up” civil society. The strategy has resulted in the vast majority of independent media outlets, both regional and national, having been eliminated or pushed abroad. More than 500 non-governmental or non-profit organisations, from human rights and environmental NGOs to children’s hospices, have been liquidated. The authorities imprisoned thousands of civil society activists both from institutionalised structures and from self-organised communities.

### 6.1. A NEW WAVE OF PROTEST ACTIVITY

Under such conditions, one might expect the total disappearance of civil society in Belarus. But the events of the late February 2022 vividly showed that the country’s civil society is alive and ready to act. The beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war and the referendum on the constitutional changes in Belarus almost coincided, and the coincidence of timing and anti-regime orientation produced a cumulative effect that launched a new wave of activity among civil society actors.

As in 2020, the main driving force behind protests was a grassroots self-organisation of Belarusian society, which had no open institutional support in Belarus. Such support used to be complex and multilevel, but by March 2022 all elements of this system had been removed from the legal field and either driven out of the country or forced to act semi-legally or illegally. Belarusian civil society recalibrated itself by shifting from large open communities to small closed “cells”, resorting to more spontaneous<sup>79</sup> and less visible<sup>80</sup> forms of action and finding a new generation of activists in the

<sup>79</sup> These included, for example, unorganised and sudden actions such as the taxi drivers’ strike in Babrujsk and an unsuccessful attempt to repeat it in Baranavichy (<https://euroradio.fm/ru/v-bobruyske-bastovali-taksisty-yandeks-go>; <https://www.intex-press.by/2022/05/10/taksisty-yandeks-sobiralisna-zabastovku-v-baranovichah-no-ih-uzhe-zhdala-militsiya/>). Also, the attempts of dairy factory workers in Maladzechna, Viliejka and Valozhyn to stand up for their economic rights.

<sup>80</sup> Including due to the destruction of independent media and suppression of any manifestations of freedom of speech.

media and on the ground for whom it has become more important to achieve tangible results, rather than having a demonstrative effect.

The only significant exception to this rule occurred on the first Sunday after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, when Belarusians were asked to vote on constitutional amendments. At the call of the opposition, thousands of people<sup>81</sup> gathered outside the polling stations in Minsk alone to demonstrate their disagreement with the government’s position.

### 6.2. PARTISAN PROTESTS IN BELARUS

Further protest activities in Belarus occurred mainly in a guerrilla format. The main components included a) displays of anti-war sentiments; b) expressions of solidarity with the people of Ukraine; and c) support for refugees from Ukraine.

Volunteers and activists provided refugees with support at a level comparable to that provided by the state, if anything surpassing state efforts.<sup>82</sup> The authorities and their subordinate structures, such as the Border Committee,<sup>83</sup> the Belarusian Orthodox Church<sup>84</sup> and sanatorium administrations, withheld information and obstructed volunteer humanitarian assistance to refugees from Ukraine and to those who stayed behind. Within a week or two, spontaneous relief groups were prevented from helping refugees.<sup>85</sup> A little later, even officially registered

<sup>81</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/27-02-2022-protesty-vo-vremya-referenduma-belorusy-c-ukrainoj-lukashenko-ne-belarus/>

<sup>82</sup> It is possible to compare reports on individual cases of “grassroots” help to Ukrainians (<https://d2uy8l7fpcdb88.cloudfront.net/by/naviny/gomelchane-peredali-ocherednuju-partiju-pomosci-zhiteljam-ukrainskogo-prigranichja.html>) and assistance organised by a pro-government organisation (<https://t.me/minzdravbelarus/4767?single>).

<sup>83</sup> <https://t.me/flagshtok/8157>

<sup>84</sup> <https://t.me/flagshtok/8143>

<sup>85</sup> “..humanitarian aid collection in Belarus stopped due to pressure of special services on some organisers”: <https://telegra.ph/Gomelsk%D1%96-valancyor-raspavyadae-pra-zhyccyo-%D1%9Ekra%D1%96nca%D1%9E-na-akupavanaj-tehrytory%D1%96-CHarn%D1%96ga%D1%9Eshchyny-EHksklyuz%D1%96%D1%9E-nae-%D1%96ntehrvyu-03-14>

organisations, such as the "Little Sunshine" Charity, were told to avoid any independent actions and given instructions that all refugee aid had to be organised and provided strictly under the supervision of the regime-controlled Belarusian Red Cross.<sup>86</sup> The purpose of such obstacles and bans was to monopolise care for refugees and to present only one actor — the authorities — in a positive light.<sup>87</sup>

The practice of directly supporting Ukraine in its war with the Russian Federation was the distinct and most important area of protest activity. First, it included the collection of information about Russia's military activity on the territory of Belarus. The project called "Byalaruski Hajun" (@Hajun\_BY) was the main aggregator of such information. Despite facing a real risk of criminal prosecution, more than 12,500 people submitted some 40,000 reports (data correct at the end of May)<sup>88</sup> on the movement of Russian troops, missile launches and Russian aircraft departing from Belarusian airfields towards Ukraine.

Second, it included practices that have been dubbed the "rail war" honouring the guerrilla resistance on the Belarus railways during World War II. There were two main components:

- Cyber warfare — attacks on the Belarusian Railway online resources by an anonymous hacker group known since 2020 as the "Cyber Partisans". The goal of these attacks was to disrupt logistics management in order to delay the movement of Russian troops into Ukraine;
- Destruction of control equipment — the guerrilla activists primarily targeted relay cabinets with signalling, centralisation and blocking devices on the railway tracks.

These activities greatly disrupted the authorities who immediately initiated a flurry of inspections and reprisals against railway workers. The KGB also got involved, detaining close to 100 people. In addition, the security forces deployed armed guards at key points near the railway tracks and even operated under a shoot-to-kill policy.<sup>89</sup> The Russian railway management prohibited the movement of its military trains through Belarus at night in response. They began to camouflage cargoes destined for the war in Ukraine, transporting them without any indication of their hazardous loads. By 19 March railway traffic between Belarus and Ukraine had practically ceased, for which Oleksandr Kamyshyn, the head of Ukrzaliznytsia

(Ukrainian Railways), thanked the Belarusian partisan railwaymen.<sup>90</sup>

### 6.3. SUPPORT FROM THE BELARUSIAN DIASPORA

Both the protest and anti-war activities are supported by Belarusians living abroad. Diaspora structures attempted to act as an organisational launching pad for the Belarusian anti-war movement. They also announced support for the new anti-war movement, relevant reorientation of the previously created platforms and movements, and the direct supervision of partisan activity in Belarus. However, it is impossible to assess the extent to which these declarations and pledges of coordination have been realised in the present conditions.

One can single out two main elements of the protest and anti-war activity by the Belarusian diaspora:

- Comprehensive assistance to those leaving Ukraine, with no distinction between "fellow" Belarusians and Ukrainians fleeing the war;
- Informational and resource support for those remaining on the territory of Ukraine and taking part in military actions (including medics).

Special attention is given to Belarusians who are directly involved in combat as members of the Territorial Defence and Armed Forces of Ukraine. The two primary relevant units are the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment (in active service) and the Pogonya Regiment (under formation).

Another important diaspora activity is countering "Belarusophobia", that is the negative image of the Belarusians as a nation, which emerged as a result of Belarus's complicity in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This image is being debunked by distinguishing between the Belarusian people and the Lukashenka regime, specifically focusing on:

- a) Belarus's existence in a "double occupation" under the regime of Lukashenka and the Russian military presence;
- b) Participation of Belarusians in the Russia-Ukraine war on the side of Ukraine;
- c) Anti-war public sentiments in the country;
- d) Lukashenka's illegitimacy after the 2020 election.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian diaspora keeps its old tasks on the agenda, including dissemination of objective information inside the country about what is happening in the world and in Belarus itself, support for compatriots

<sup>86</sup> Insider information confirmed by BYSOL and Human Constanta activists.

<sup>87</sup> <https://t.me/flagshtok/8356>; <https://t.me/flagshtok/8658>

<sup>88</sup> Statistics provided by Anton Motolko, creator of the Byalaruski Hajun channel.

<sup>89</sup> <https://reform.by/306969-bobrujchan-zaderzhali-podpodzheniju-v-podzhoge-relejnyh-shkafov-pod-osipovichami-odin-chelovek-ranen>

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/chestnye-lyudi-sredi-belorusskih-zheleznodorozhnikov-sumeyut-ostanovit-voennye-eshelony-v-ukrainu-intervyu-glavy-ukrzalznitsy/31761179.html>

remaining in the country, including political prisoners and their families, assistance to refugees from the Lukashenka regime, and issues of internal self-organisation.

#### 6.4. REGIME'S REACTION TO THE NEW PROTESTS

The regime felt impelled to react to the latest upsurge of civil society activity. The authorities continued to systematise repressive laws and escalate repressive practices. And while they have limited opportunities to apply measures against members of the Belarusian diaspora, against whom they have to be satisfied with the practice of "trials in absentia" and adding activists onto the list of terrorists, there are no obstacles to repressions on the territory of Belarus itself.

The authorities embarked upon a final "cleansing" of the institutional structures of civil society, this time focusing on the remnants of the trade unions. After the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, the Belarusian Independent Trade Union of Radio Electronics Industry Workers and the Independent Trade Union of Grodna Azot were recognised as extremist formations, and their activists were detained and later recognised as political prisoners. Other actions included searches of trade union offices,<sup>91</sup> phone checks and preventive conversations with trade union members (even former ones).<sup>92</sup>

But the main feature of repressions in Belarus since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war has been the shift in focus from pressure on institutionalised structures of civil society to individual activists and self-organising communities. This is confirmed by a monthly statistical analysis of lists of extremist materials and formations, lists of liquidated organisations and organisations that have applied for self-liquidation. If one compares the repressions of 2021 and early 2022 with the situation after 24 February 2022, then there is an obvious reduction of pressure across all positions, except for the recognition of certain materials as extremist, which has almost doubled. The materials recognised as extremist during the three months of the war have included online chat rooms and/or social media channels associated with self-organised communities, local or protest.

Apart from strictly legal pressures, the authorities have reinforced the preventive component of repressive action by adding intimidation — written undertakings to reject "war conversations", preventive detentions on the grounds of "political unreliability", searches and detentions of activists in 2020 election, additional charges and sentences for those already convicted, re-incarceration of those who served their sentences, using firearms to shoot at "railway guerrillas" with the broadcasting of these videos

in the media, and so on.<sup>93</sup> The government also tried to influence civil society activists who had travelled abroad. Two special chatbots were created, one for refusing to participate in the "Peramoga" plan<sup>94</sup>, and the other for turning themselves in and refusing any form of participation in extremist and terrorist activities.

The authorities have also stepped up persecution in the national cultural sphere. These include bans on certain exhibitions and concerts,<sup>95</sup> the closure of independent book publishers and stores, as well as the inclusion of Belarusian-language books on the list of extremist materials (all books included in this list in 2022 are in Belarusian).<sup>96</sup> National minorities in Belarus have also come under pressure, as Lithuanian<sup>97</sup> and Polish<sup>98</sup> schools were forbidden from teaching in their own languages, with all teaching to be done in Russian only.

Another repression by the Belarusian regime is the economic one. The authorities continue looking for specific social and professional groups, the pressure on whom can produce some economic dividends. Most recently, such groups included orthopaedists, dozens of whom were detained for choosing foreign endoprostheses and then released from custody after compensation for damages,<sup>99</sup> and BelVEB bank managers. Their director was also released to find funds and compensate the damage caused to the state.<sup>100</sup> Another example of economic repression is the state pressure on popular private health centres, which became competitors to state clinics after the introduction of paid health services by the latter.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>91</sup> <http://rebrand.ly/mediazona-by/?to=/news/2022/04/19/spm>

<sup>92</sup> <https://nashaniva.com/290455>

<sup>93</sup> <https://t.me/ontnews/74095>

<sup>94</sup> A mobilization plan run via Telegram by BYPOL initiative, which envisages creation of a county-wide network of opposition activists, who are ready to be simultaneously mobilized upon receiving the instruction from BYPOL

<sup>95</sup> <https://mediazona.by/article/2022/05/25/cancel>

<sup>96</sup> <https://belsat.eu/news/23-05-2022-u-spise-ekstremistskih-materyyalau-bolsh-za-6-dzyasyatkau-knig-ale-oruela-pakulyama/>

<sup>97</sup> <http://rebrand.ly/mediazona-by/?to=/news/2022/04/25/lithuania>

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/kak-bekjruskskije-vlasti-pessujut-polskoje-menshinstvo/a-61557393>

<sup>99</sup> <https://carbide-datum-297715.appspot.com/news/2022/04/20/5>

<sup>100</sup> <https://t.me/nashaniva/44187>

<sup>101</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/13766.html>

## AUTHORS:

**Pavel Slunkin, Artyom Shraibman,  
Philipp Bikanau, Henadz Korshunau,  
Kateryna Bornukova, Lev Lvovskiy**

Design: Olena Marchishina, Roman Marchishin

## CONTACTS

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine /  
Project Belarus

Christopher Forst | FES Representative for Belarus  
St. Pushkinska, 34, Kyiv, 01004, Ukraine

Tel.: + 38-044-234-10-38 | Fax: + 38-044-234-10-39

All texts are available on the website:  
<http://www.fes.kiev.ua>

Orders / contacts:  
[belarus@fes.kiev.ua](mailto:belarus@fes.kiev.ua)

## Expert Assessments

### BELARUS CHANGE TRACKER



The war against Ukraine has increased Belarus's international isolation and fueled further political mobilisation within society



Due to Western sanctions and the loss of the Ukrainian market the Belarusian economy has plunged into recession.  
Response: Withholding information and nationalisation of the economy



Supporters and opponents of the regime are becoming even more polarized, while Lukashenka appears to have regained the support of some politically-neutral citizens