

VisiBYlity

For Belarusian democratic actors

Belarus on the eve of 2024: same old story

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As we approach the end of 2023, there is little to say regarding the recent developments in Belarus, as the key variables — the positions of the Lukashenka regime, the extent of its reliance on Russia, and the persisting fight of the pro-democratic movement — remain constant.

Alternatively, we may observe micro-trends such as tensions between members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) during the Minsk summit,¹ or the decreased communication between Lukashenka and Putin in the past few months.² The Wagner group's presence and Russia's placement of tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory drew international attention to Belarus during the summer. However, neither of these factors are being discussed much in the news these days. Despite the concerns, there have been no disruptions at the EU-Belarus border by Wagner mercenaries³ and no indications of a nuclear escalation,⁴ even though Belarusian infrastructure has been placed on alert to accommodate the Russian military, including instructions on the usage of nuclear weapons.

Intimidation tactics, suppression, and imprisonment of civil society actors

Repressions, which started on a large scale in 2020, continue. Now, when most activists are either behind bars or have left the country, imprisonments occur on such minor accusations as sharing photos, the use of messengers, activity on social media, and even archived posts, when crossing the Belarusian border. People adapted: They wipe out their phones before crossing the border, prepare themselves for possible interrogation by a KGB officer, hoping that such encounters will not lead to arrest, and proceed on their journey to the EU, knowing that similar procedures will follow upon their return home.⁵

As of October 2023, the human rights center Viasna reports that the number of political prisoners amounts to at least 1,473.⁶ The real number of prisoners is presumably higher because victims frequently avoid drawing attention to themselves in order to not attract undesirable

¹ AP News (23.11.2023): Armenia's leader snubs meeting of Russia-dominated security grouping over a rift with the Kremlin. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-belarus-armenia-security-summit-putin-ff3a7502a5dbe0f70f7153226ecf2fef> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

² Віталь Цыганкоў (24.11.2023): «АДКБ апынулася ў самым сур'ёзным крызісе за час свайго існавання», — Казакевіч. Radio Liberty. URL: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32697967.html> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

³ Newsweek (27.07.2023): NATO Leaders Cite Security Risk From Wagner's Move to Belarus. URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/nato-leaders-cite-security-risk-wagner-move-belarus-1809454> (last accessed 17.11.2023).

⁴ U.S. Department of State (27.07.2023): Remarks for Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman at the 18th Annual NATO WMD Nonproliferation Conference. URL: <https://www.state.gov/remarks-for-deputy-secretary-wendy-sherman-at-the-18th-annual-nato-wmd-nonproliferation-conference/> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

⁵ Марта Сакавік (13.06.2023): Проверки на белорусской границе: как обезопасить себя? URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/proverka-na-belorusskoj-granice-kak-obezopasit-seba/a-65893705> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

attention from law enforcement or prison officials. In addition, not all prisoners convicted of political activism are considered political prisoners according to the criteria of human rights organizations. Family members of prisoners typically maintain a low profile. Those who do not, such as Darya Losik, who was a vocal opponent of the regime and stood up for her jailed husband Ihar, end up going to jail themselves. Losik's daughter is currently being raised by her grandparents.⁷ One of the methods to intimidate the opponents of the regime is compulsory psychiatric treatment: Maria Uspenskaya, widow of Andrei Zeltser, who was killed in a shooting with a KGB officer during his violent and unlawful detention, was sent to a psychiatric hospital.⁸

In the current reality, looking for relatives and friends who are assumed to have been detained by law enforcement, is extremism. Even the Telegram channel “Окрестина задержанные” (Detainees of Okrestina), which helps them to search for the names of those detained, was recently labeled as an extremist source. Hence, subscribing to this channel could lead to detention.⁹

Under these conditions, activists who stay in Belarus, tend to keep a low profile, and an increasing number of them decide to leave the country, after enduring the risks of repressions for the past three years. In November, Alina Nahornaya and Ihar Sluchak fled to Lithuania, deciding that it was no longer possible for them and their two sons to stay in the country.¹⁰ Nahornaya and Sluchak, who are known for their advocacy for the use of Belarusian language in the public space, have lived in constant fear of prosecution, up to the point when giving birth to their son at a hospital could have allowed the authorities to track them down, imprison them, and separate them from their children who would be taken to an orphanage. Aleh Matskevich, a human rights defender, is yet another example of an activist who withstood the pressure and intimidation by the regime for the past years, has undergone violent detentions, but recently chose to leave the country. He, like many other emigres, aspires to come back home one day.¹¹

Dealing with the proponents of the Belarusian regime

By bringing up these facts about the scale of repressions, I do not intend to draw a dramatic picture of the victimhood of Belarusians. Rather, I want to formulate a counter-argument for those pro-regime advocates who seek to establish contacts with their western counterparts, calling for a relaunch of relations with the Belarusian regime.

Proponents of the Lukashenka regime, such as Yauheni Preiherman, advocate for a relaunch of pragmatic ties with the regime.¹² Such advocates argue that cooperation on economic and regional security served to the advantage of both Belarus and the West. This was a common strategy of the regime advocates during the times of “normalization” of Belarus’ relations with the West in 2014-2019, when the Lukashenka regime sought to present itself as a neutral state to serve as a platform for the Ukraine peace talks.

In contrast, my argument is that the days for appeasing the regime of Lukashenka are over: The point of no return has been crossed when the regime ordered to brutally spill the blood of peaceful protesters in 2020, and later became a co-aggressor in the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine. However, it is important to separate the Belarusian people from the regime: At least 1,630 Belarusians were detained for their participation in anti-war rallies, and Belarusian fighters of the Kalinouski regiment are fighting for Ukraine, while the relatives of the soldiers, even of those deceased, face repressions at home.¹³

The proponents of the regime count on reaching out to the pragmatists in the West, strengthening ties with “Putinverstehers” (i.e. individuals who empathize with Putin and/or Russia and defend the actions of the Russian regime) and those who consider the war an expensive enterprise, claiming that the West is overspending on the support for Ukraine and that Kyiv should potentially give up some territory to reach a peace agreement with Moscow. Following a similar logic, one could argue that it

⁶ Viasna (04.11.2023): Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2023. URL: <https://spring96.org/en/news/113244> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

⁷ Radio Free Europe (19.01.2023): Wife Of Jailed RFE/RL Journalist Sentenced to Two Years In Prison In Belarus. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-darya-losik-jailed/32230436.html> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

⁸ Radio Free Europe (31.05.2022): Widow Of Man Killed In Minsk Apartment Shoot-Out With KGB Goes On Trial. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-zeltser-shootout-wife-trial-uspenskaya/31876749.html> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

⁹ Gazetaby (21.11.2023): После признания группы «Окрестина задержанные» экстремистским формированием организаторы удалили ее. URL: <https://gazetaby.com/post/posle-priznaniya-gruppy-okrestina-zaderzhannyye-ekstremistskim-formirovaniem-organizatory-udalili-ee> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

¹⁰ Radio Free Europe (17.11.2023): The Kindness Of Strangers: Struggling Belarusian Émigrés Get Help (And Hope) From Their Compatriots. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-emigres-lukashenka-crackdown-assistance-hope/32688639.html> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

¹¹ Voice of Belarus (n.d.): Human rights defender Aleh Matskevich: “I will return to Belarus anyway”. URL: <https://www.voiceofbelarus.org/article/human-rights-defender-aleh-matskevich-i-will-return-to-belarus-anyway/> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

¹² Yauheni Preiherman (06.10.2023): Wrong Analytical Lenses undermine the West’s Belarus Policy. In Oxpól - The Oxford University Politics Blog. URL: <https://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/wrong-analytical-lenses-undermine-the-west-belarus-policy/> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

¹³ Voice of Belarus (n.d.): Another criminal case launched against mother of Kalinouski Regiment soldier killed in action. URL: <https://www.voiceofbelarus.org/belarus-news/another-criminal-case-launched-against-mother-of-kalinouski-regiment-soldier-killed-in-action/> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

is worth supporting the “independence” of Lukashenka from Putin, turning a blind eye on Lukashenka’s authoritarian escapades. I would just point out that the achievements of the liberalization and seemingly diplomatic progress reached between Minsk, Brussels and Washington in 2014-2020 were wiped out fast, when the regime launched another crackdown against its citizens.

Perspectives on the future of Belarus and importance of support of with Belarusian democratic actors

I tend to agree with my fellow Belarusian experts, such as Pavel Matsukevich¹⁴, who argue that the EU needs a coherent strategy towards Belarus. This would allow not only to respond in a reactionary way to Lukashenka’s actions and applying sanctions, but to calculate steps in advance, i.e. how to incorporate Belarus in the regional security architecture and facilitate a democratic transition. Sanctions alone will not lead to the democratization or a change of Belarus’ political course, given that Moscow picked up the check, compensating the Belarusian regime for its international isolation.

On the bright side, the study of the Belarusian diaspora conducted by Henadz Korshunau of the Center for New Ideas looks promising. Belarusians abroad are actively involved in crowdfunding civil society and solidarity initiatives. They are financially secure, highly-educated, contributing to the communities where they relocated, and even those who do not plan to return home to “new Belarus” plan to maintain ties and invest in the Belarusian economy.¹⁵

Western strategy towards Belarus should be coherent and multi-faceted, not only focusing on sanctions, but expressed in tangible value-based political support for the pro-democratic forces and the Belarusian people at large.

¹⁴ Gazetaby (18.10.2023): Мацукевич: «Режим интересуется признанием и полем для маневра. Много это или мало за освобождение политических заключенных в ситуации, когда иначе им не выйти?». URL: <https://gazetaby.com/post/maczukevich-rezhim-interesuuet-priznanie-i-pole-dly/195141/> (last accessed 27.11.2023).

¹⁵ Henadz Korshunau (01/2023): A snapshot of the Belarusian diaspora: ties and prospects. In New Belarus. URL: https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Diaspora_Eng.pdf (last accessed 27.11.2023).

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About VisiBYlity

The project supports Belarusian democratic actors in diaspora by supporting their projects and increasing outreach in the German public. The background papers give context and explanations on current development in the Belarusian diaspora communities. They serve as a basis for discussion during public debates.

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