

Rising public dissatisfaction in Belarus

On 11 June, the Belarusian government decided to impose additional duties on exports by individuals from Belarus of a range of goods, including fuel. This is not the first attempt the Belarusian government has made recently to impose an administrative solution on the country's financial crisis. Previous actions of this nature, however, have not yet yielded the expected results, while only serving to increase public discontent.

Under the new government regulation, the export of many Belarusian goods (in amounts exceeding the very small permitted quantities) outside the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan will be charged an additional duty of up to twice the goods' value. This prohibition has been extended to include items such as refrigerators, gas stoves, cement and detergents, as well as many food and vegetable products, such as meat, sugar, pasta, cereals and tobacco. Separate regulations have been introduced on the export of fuel; from now on, each car will only be allowed to cross the border once every five days, otherwise extra costs will be imposed. The Belarusian government has justified this decision by the need to reduce the excessive export of cheap Belarusian goods abroad, which has led to shortages.

This prohibition strikes mainly at residents of the border areas, for whom the sale of goods (mainly fuel) to neighbouring countries has often been their only source of income. Hence, spontaneous protests have occurred in recent days at the border crossings with Poland. This is another manifestation of public dissatisfaction with government policy, which is increasingly taking organised forms. On 7 June, about 1500 drivers blocked the centre of Minsk to protest against a one-off increase of 30% in petrol prices. That action was organised through social networks, reflecting the increasing popularity in Belarus of this hitherto poorly developed technique of mobilising protests. The Belarusian authorities' current anti-crisis policy is not improving the situation, and further administrative restrictions will bring forth discontent from yet more groups of society. <kam>