

Belarus: international isolation and further protests

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For the eighth week in succession, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's opponents held marches in many Belarusian cities on 4 October, demanding his resignation and the organisation of new elections. The demonstrations called for the release of political prisoners (of whom, according to Belarusian human rights defenders, there are currently 77). Some of the approximately 100,000 protesters in Minsk went to the detention centre on Akrestsyna street, where many of the participants arrested during anti-regime protests were tortured shortly after the elections. Small demonstrations were also held in some big cities (including Hrodna, Brest and Vitsiebsk) and regional towns (including Babruysk, Salihorsk and Zhodzina). The law enforcement forces refrained from mass pacification, although in Minsk unsuccessful attempts were made to disperse the crowds using water cannons. Smaller groups of demonstrators are sometimes still being subjected to brutal arrests (at least 317 people were detained on Sunday), as are journalists (16). The protesters, on the other hand, have not given up on the tactic of peaceful opposition which they have been using for weeks, and have not made any attempts to storm government buildings.

Last week, the political activity of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya increased. On 29 September she held talks with President Emmanuel Macron in Vilnius, and she was scheduled to meet Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on 6 October. Tsikhanouskaya stated that the aim of her talks with leading European politicians is to resolve the situation in Belarus; she added that she also considered Russia as an important participant in these talks. She also began the process of expanding her team by appointing special representatives responsible for human rights and economic reforms. The first issue will be dealt with by the well-known human rights defender Hary Pahaniayla, and the second by Ales Alakhnovich, who is associated with the Belarusian Centre for Social and Economic Research. However, Tsikhanouskaya's staff denied media speculation that a shadow cabinet is being formed.

Minsk's relations with the West are becoming increasingly confrontational. On 29 September, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduced visa sanctions against around 300 politicians, social activists and journalists from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, who were the first in the EU to ban the entry of nearly 130 representatives of the Belarusian authorities responsible for electoral fraud and repression. In response to the EU sanctions list published on 2 October (which contains 44 names, although it does not include Lukashenka himself), Minsk immediately introduced similar visa sanctions against those representatives of the member states and EU institutions (including the European Parliament) whom it calls "the most prejudiced" against the Belarusian authorities. None of the sanctions lists from Minsk have been made public. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry

emphasised that these restrictions would also apply in Russia, which a Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman confirmed.

In addition, Minsk demanded that Poland and Lithuania significantly reduce their diplomatic staff by 9 October (from 50 to 18 diplomats in the case of the Polish diplomatic missions, and from 25 to 14 for the Lithuanians), and that these countries' ambassadors be recalled to their capitals for consultations. In turn, the heads of the Belarusian embassies in Vilnius and Warsaw were recalled to Minsk. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry justified its decision in terms of the "destructive activity" it claims these countries have carried out. The Belarusian government also announced that all foreign media correspondents would be re-accredited. Washington also announced an initial list of eight Belarusian officials banned from entry to the US, stating that more names would be added later.

Commentary

- The scale of Sunday's protests indicates that the divide is growing between the still-active Minsk, where approximately 100,000 people invariably participate in weekly marches, and the increasingly passive provinces, where in most regional cities the number of participants rarely exceeds 1000. A telling case is Homiel: after the brutal suppression of several hundred participants during last week's demonstration, this time few people appeared at the location designated for the start of the protest action. The declining numbers attending demonstrations in the regions indicates that the impetus of protests outside the capital is gradually falling off. In addition, it is also evidenced by the very modest progress of the weekly Saturday women's march; for the first time no calls to participate were made on popular online messengers. The absence of any concessions from the authorities, the brutal detentions of the demonstrators, as well as general fatigue at the lengthy confrontation with the regime, are all causing the rebellious citizens to gradually abandon some of the protests that have been held so far. The main manifestation of opposition remains the Sunday march in the capital, against which the security forces have still not found an effective tactic. Tsikhanouskaya's increased activity is an attempt to strengthen her position as informal leader of the opposition, especially as the Coordination Council has been paralysed as a result of the repression. By holding a series of meetings with European politicians, Tsikhanouskaya is trying to demonstrate her advantage over Lukashenko, who is isolated in the West. Moreover, contrary to her team's official denial, it seems she is also trying to form a shadow cabinet to draw up a reform programme after any regime change in Belarus. However, no Western states have formally recognised her electoral victory, and Russia even denies her any political agency at all. It is also hard to say that Tsikhanouskaya has had any real influence on the actions of the demonstrators in Belarus, even though she is still a symbol of resistance to the regime for them.
- The Belarusian Foreign Ministry's firm reaction to the visa sanctions from the Baltic states and the entire EU confirms that the government is completely uninterested in starting talks to resolve the crisis. It is also tantamount to the withdrawal of Belarusian diplomacy from any attempt at constructive action in its policy towards the West. The very far-reaching restrictions concerning Poland and Lithuania are particularly noteworthy. Although the Belarusian Foreign Ministry demanded the US reduce its diplomatic personnel in 2008 (also in retaliation for sanctions), this time the restrictions

concern two neighbouring countries which are important trade partners for Belarus and actively co-shape the EU's eastern policy. Minsk's confrontational attitude has resulted in the deepest crisis in relations with the West since 1991. This will bring about the far-reaching international isolation of Belarus, and its increasing domination by Russia.