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FOCUSED ON SURVIVAL
THE BELARUSIAN POLITICAL
AND BUSINESS ELITE POST-2020

Kamil Kłysiński, Piotr Żochowski

NUMBER 88
WARSAW
MARCH 2023

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ISBN 978-83-67159-36-4

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INTRODUCTION

The rigged presidential election in August 2020 and the violent pacification of opposition protests have provoked a deep political crisis in Belarus. This also directly affected the situation of the Belarusian political elite and business circles. The processes which were triggered at that time have resulted in a shift in the balance of power in Lukashenka's inner circle, which in turn has significantly affected the Belarusian domestic and foreign policy model, the relations between the authorities and citizens, and the conditions for doing business.

The civilian section of the state administration has been undergoing a process of marginalisation at all levels in favour of the national security sector, since 2020. This has been the main trend affecting the situation in the ruling camp. At present, the security sector forms the most important internal pillar of support for Lukashenka's regime. Maintaining nationwide stability through far-reaching control of society has become a priority task for Minsk. The fact that Belarusian politics has been dominated by the siloviks has resulted in an unprecedented increase in the oppressiveness of the regime, and in reduced efficiency of the state apparatus as a whole.

The complicity of the Republic of Belarus in the Russian aggression against Ukraine launched in February 2022 has reinforced the processes triggered two years earlier, and increased the importance of the military elite which directly cooperates with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation stationed on Belarusian territory. Due to Minsk's narrative suggesting that Belarus is threatened by NATO, the Belarusian military has gained major influence on the country's domestic security policy and on the militarisation of the country's social life.

The purpose of this study is to discuss the impact the 2020 political crisis in Belarus has had on the balance of power within the country's elite, and the related unprecedented increase in repression and in shifts in

foreign policy. The main problem the authors encountered while working on this text involved them being unable to visit Belarus for a study trip. As a consequence, they mainly monitored and assessed the processes occurring in the Belarusian ruling camp on the basis of publicly available information.

This text has seven chapters. Chapter one is an introduction discussing the situation in the Belarusian political elite prior to 2020. In the next four chapters, the authors present a comprehensive analysis of the balance of power and the changes occurring in specific segments of the ruling elite. Chapter six discusses the current constitutional reform which is in fact an imitation of a genuine system overhaul. The final chapter sums up the text and emphasises what consequences the trends discussed in previous chapters will have for Belarusian foreign and domestic policy.

MAIN POINTS

- The rigged presidential election held in August 2020 was a watershed event that triggered the process of a far-reaching transformation of the balance of power in Lukashenka's system of government. The large-scale street protests came as a surprise and a major challenge to the regime, which had been used to a much smaller scale of discontent, such as that manifested during the previous elections. Lukashenka responded to these developments by stepping up repression to an unprecedented degree, which was followed by an increase in the role of the law enforcement segment of the state apparatus.
- At present, the empowered security sector (the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the General Prosecutor's Office) is the main – if not the only – factor stabilising the country's authoritarian regime. For years, the funds spent on this sector have exceeded those earmarked for national defence, which means that Lukashenka views internal security as a priority. Not only did the siloviks, who enjoy his backing, receive new powers, they also expanded their reach in the state apparatus – they were appointed to posts which had previously been reserved for civilian employees of the state administration (including in the Ministry of Justice). Lukashenka's attempts to gain the loyalty of the sector's representatives in exchange for them maintaining their high financial rewards and immunity, have resulted in the president being 'held hostage' by them as regards the perception of the genuine threats his regime is facing.
- Officials from the law enforcement bodies (the Ministry of Internal Affairs in particular) are subject to an assessment of their 'law-abiding status'. This test determines whether they are fit to continue their service. This indicates that the loyalty of the security sector institutions may erode. The police is the system's weakest link – there are reports suggesting that numerous officers are leaving its ranks to seek employment in the civilian sector. The creation

of the BYPOL platform in exile was an unprecedented development. It groups former officers of the law enforcement agencies, who embarked on the task of exposing the KGB and the Interior Ministry employees responsible for acts of repression.

- By becoming complicit in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Belarus has almost completely separated itself from the West and increased its dependence on Russia in the economic and political sphere. This has also resulted in the increased marginalisation of civilian ministries, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which is now unable to bear impact on the country's most important decisions) and has consolidated the privileged status of the law enforcement sector. Declining loyalty on the part of the security sector institutions may pose a problem to the regime, as they have become more prone to Russian influence in connection with their commitments linked to the invasion. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has boosted the importance of the military elite which is closely cooperating with their Russian counterparts. Higher ranking members of the Belarusian military form the group most closely linked to Russia and any personnel changes in the leadership of the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces need to be approved by Russia beforehand. Belarus's involvement in the Russian aggression has resulted in the Belarusian military intelligence becoming fully subordinated to the Russians as it is carrying out tasks which are important to the Russian army, including in the Ukrainian theatre.
- Lukashenka has strengthened the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus, which includes the heads of the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It has now become a collegiate body supervised by the president. It coordinates the activities of the law enforcement ministries and, in the event of Lukashenka's death, it is authorised to take over power in Belarus until a new presidential election is held. In addition, the status of the head of the KGB has been maintained; since this post is supervised solely by Lukashenka, its holder has

become the most important actor in the state apparatus. Lukashenka believes that the Brest, Hrodna and Minsk oblasts are most at threat of destabilisation, allegedly by Poland and Lithuania and other NATO states. Special plenipotentiaries of the president were appointed in these oblasts from among the KGB and Interior Ministry officials. They have a strong impact on how the local administration operates.

- Belarus's complicity in the Russian aggression against Ukraine has consolidated the anti-Western course of the regime in Minsk. Lukashenka has repeatedly emphasised that the security of Belarus and Russia is under direct and increasing threat from NATO, including Poland, which is allegedly interested in provoking Belarus's destabilisation and undermining its territorial integrity. Under this pretext, the government stepped up repression targeting its real or imaginary opponents and began to combat any manifestations of Polishness on an unprecedented scale. The plan that all actions which the regime views as dissident will be punished as acts of terror is a novelty in Belarus.
- The increased role of the security sector has also resulted in a gradual weakening of civilian institutions. This is particularly evident in institutions which in recent years had assumed a more liberal attitude both to Belarus's domestic policy and its policy towards the West. Their employees were more prone to object to repression after August 2020 than the staff of other public administration bodies. This fast marginalisation of the civilian sector of the state apparatus has affected the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, various cultural institutions and the ministries dealing with economic affairs.
- The 2020 political crisis has increased a tendency seen for many years: to verify the loyalty of Belarusian businesses. Over approximately the last fifteen months, a series of audits has been carried out, which may have been linked to some business owners' criticism of government policy. The regime is also putting pressure on foreign

investors who communicate their intention to leave the Belarusian market. In some sector of the economy, audits and the resulting restrictions are particularly frequent, which is a manifestation of the most glaring variant of ‘manual steering’ in the economy and a brute force interference in the operation of entire sectors.

- Waves of repression have encouraged numerous business owners, in particular from SMEs and the dynamically developing IT sector, to relocate to another country. The dynamics of this process accelerated significantly after 24 February 2022. This is resulting in a permanent weakening of the most innovative and independent sectors of the economy, which equates to a vassal-like subordination of private business owners to the government.
- The situation is different for those business owners who are closely linked to the regime and are frequently referred to as ‘oligarchs’ or ‘Lukashenka’s wallets’. In the period marked by a political crisis and painful Western economic sanctions they did not lose their position. Their importance has rather even increased. There are many indications that they have expanded their illegal or almost illegal business undertakings which now serve as an important source of income for the ruling elite. Enjoying unofficial support from the Belarusian authorities, they expanded the scope of the illegal and highly lucrative business practices which had been carried out in previous years albeit on a smaller scale. This mainly involves the smuggling of goods which are subject to the Western embargo or to standard tariff restrictions imposed by specific EU member states (for example Belarusian-made cigarettes).
- As part of the currently implemented constitutional reform, new sham institutions of representative democracy are being established, the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly is one example. Similarly, the debate on the proposed changes to the domestic political system is a sham initiative which will not result in the creation of

an institution grouping the ruling elite and operating with agency. These changes for example involved repeated attempts to establish a party of power on the basis of the Belaya Rus social movement. Lukashenka mainly relies on the siloviks and continues to be distrustful of various other groups within the elite, which are attempting to increase their formal participation in the state's political life. Therefore, the influence exerted by specific individuals and groups will mainly depend on varying and subjective factors, such as their representatives' ability to interact directly with Lukashenka or his closest aides.

I. THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE BELARUSIAN ELITE PRIOR TO 2020

The changes in the Belarusian system of power, triggered by the constitutional referendum held in 1996 by Lukashenka (who had been elected as president two years earlier) resulted in the consolidation of an authoritarian system of government in Belarus. State security institutions have become one of the key instruments in the country's domestic policy. Their main task involves maintaining far-reaching control of citizens and using repression against the regime's opponents, the independent media and social organisations. This is how the law enforcement sector gained its privileged status (similar to the one it had enjoyed in the Soviet era) as an important guarantor of the regime's stability.

However, despite their special role, the officers of the security apparatus were not omnipotent. Implementation of the economic policy, including its monetary and industrial segments, as well as social welfare programmes required the participation of civilian institutions which had executive powers and were supervised by experienced officials who had direct access to the president. As a consequence, in the first fifteen years of Lukashenka's rule the Belarusian elite saw a relatively stable balance between the proponents of repression and full control of the economy and some more pragmatic (although not necessarily pro-democratic) groups in the power apparatus.¹

Even in the conditions of a persistent command-and-distribution model, Lukashenka needed not merely passive executors of his orders but also efficient administrators and quasi-reformers (who obviously were aware

¹ In the pre-2020 period, the strongest and most stable groups of influence formed around Lukashenka's eldest son Viktor, Syarhey Sidorsky (Belarus's prime minister in 2003–2010) and General Viktor Sheiman (the head of the Presidential Administration in 2004–2006, and secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus until 2008). See K. Kłysiński, A. Wierzbowska-Miazga, *Changes in the political elite, economy and society of Belarus. Appearances and reality*, OSW, Warsaw 2009, osw.waw.pl.

of the limits resulting from the authoritarian system of government). This is why several officials whose skills and attitude to liberal economic solutions considerably exceeded the standards previously applied in Belarus to date were appointed to the top posts in the state administration, in particular post-2010. These include Pavel Kalaur, who has served as the chairman of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus since 2014, and Syarhey Rumas, who was appointed as deputy prime minister responsible for economic affairs in 2010 and served as Belarus's prime minister from 2018 to 2020.

Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey was particularly active. Russia did not warm to him and viewed him as the most 'pro-Western' representative of Lukashenka's entourage.² The role of Belarusian diplomacy increased significantly post-2014, when Minsk became the host of negotiations between Moscow, Kyiv and the West regarding the resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Belarusian diplomats used this fact to build up Belarus's image as a peaceful country acting as a stabilising force in the region, a 'Switzerland of Eastern Europe'.³

Alarmed by the annexation of Crimea and the emergence of two self-proclaimed pro-Russian republic in the Donbas, Minsk decided to improve its relations with the EU and the US. In 2015, this triggered a period of the most intensive cooperation in Belarus's history, which was interrupted by the tragic events following the 9 August 2020 presidential election. In retrospect, it may be stated that the regime's dialogue with the West and the related moderate liberalisation in Belarus's domestic policy were important though not decisive factors curbing an excessive increase in the importance of the law enforcement institutions in

² Although the Kremlin officially avoided expressing open criticism of Makey, Russian journalists and experts manifested their dislike for him. 'Уйдёт ли в отставку главный «западник» Белоруссии', News.ru, 3 April 2019; А. Цуканова, 'Владимир Макей – идеальный для Запада президент Беларуси', Фонд Стратегической Культуры, 21 October 2019, fondsk.ru.

³ 'Макей мечтает, чтобы Беларусь стала Швейцарией. Но президенты там меняются каждый год', Ex-press.by, 14 November 2019, ex-press.live.

the Belarusian power apparatus. It turned out that the most important factor was the sense of security on the part of Lukashenka and his closest collaborators, which was based on their own assessment of both real and imaginary threats to the system (such as the potential outbreak of social discontent).

The first nomination that significantly disrupted the balance maintained over the years between the civilian and the uniformed components of the power apparatus was announced on 5 December 2019, when the first deputy head of the State Security Committee (KGB) Ihar Serheyenka was appointed as the new head of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus. To justify this appointment, Lukashenka cited the need to “save the country”, which involved stepping up invigilation of both the state apparatus and citizens ahead of the upcoming presidential election.⁴ In spring 2020, mounting social discontent, which had been triggered by a decline in living standards, lack of support from the state during the COVID-19 pandemic and society’s fatigue with Lukashenka’s 26-year-long rule, was another factor that encouraged the president to increase the role of high-ranking officials of the security apparatus in ruling the country. This is why in June 2020 (during the electoral campaign) another deputy head of the KGB, General Ivan Tertel, was appointed to the post of the head of the State Control Committee which is responsible for supervising the financial performance of both public and private institutions (thus far this post had been occupied by a civilian official).⁵ These two nominations were only the beginning of the unprecedented increase in the importance of representatives of the state security institutions in the functioning of the most sensitive structures of the state administration. This was the regime’s response to the threat of internal destabilisation which it viewed as a risk to the authoritarian political system.

⁴ ‘Лукашенко принял решение о назначении новых главы Администрации Президента и его заместителя’, Белта, 5 December 2019, belta.by.

⁵ ‘Председателем КГК назначен Иван Тертель’, Белта, 4 June 2020, belta.by.

II. THE STATE SECURITY INSTITUTIONS AND THE MILITARY: THE PILLARS OF LUKASHENKA'S RULE

The need to guarantee security to the regime and to minimise the risk that the emergence of a large-scale protest movement would pose to it has resulted in the law enforcement institutions becoming the guarantors of the authoritarian system's continued existence. As a consequence, since 2020 Belarus has operated in an undeclared state of emergency. The omnipresence of the KGB and the law enforcement bodies, which are closely monitoring all aspects of Belarus's political, economic and social life, has resulted in a situation in which Lukashenka is to some degree held hostage to the interpretation of reality which the security services are presenting to him.

The president formulates guidelines regarding the priorities of the operation of the state security institutions. In response to these guidelines, these institutions frequently create narratives emphasising certain alleged external and internal threats that are in line with his political requirements. The risk catalogue is convergent with the Russian worldview and the main threats are those posed by "aggressive NATO". According to the siloviks, Belarus, just like Russia, has become a 'besieged fortress' surrounded by hostile states which allegedly seek to oust Lukashenka. The state security services have used the atmosphere of fear to expand their legal powers. All aspects of social and economic life and the activity of the education sector have been subject to close scrutiny by the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the prosecutor's office. This has boosted the position of these institutions within the state administration and increased their already significant potential to impact on the state administration's decisions and staffing.

The unique nature of the Belarusian state security bodies is enhanced by their favourable relations with the Russian law enforcement sector, in particular as regards the coordination of actions targeting the West.

Despite its negative international consequences, Russia's attack on Ukraine, in which Minsk has become complicit, has brought certain benefits to the Belarusian law enforcement sector and the Belarusian military. This is because the state of undeclared war enables them to increase their participation in governing the state and provides them with additional funds and powers.

The stronghold of the regime

In Belarus's authoritarian system of government the law enforcement institutions have extensive powers. They are not monitored on an ongoing basis by other institutions such as the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers. Instead, they are supervised solely by Lukashenka, his administration and by the Security Council which he directly supervises. Lukashenka seeks to prevent any attempts to limit his power and refrains from delegating his competences to other individuals and institutions – he personally nominates the holders of the most important executive posts in the security apparatus, including the heads of departments. In this process, he takes into account the employee assessments presented by specific ministers and other information provided by the Presidential Security Service and by the head of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus, General Serheyenka, a former KGB official.

The system of law enforcement institutions

The Belarusian internal security sector includes the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and its Internal Troops, the Operations and Analysis Centre under the President of the Republic of Belarus, and the Presidential Security Service. Other components of this sector include the State Border Committee, the investigative department of the State Control Committee, the State Customs Committee and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Armed Forces of Belarus

(the foreign intelligence department is an element of the KGB's organisational structure). The activity of the state security institutions supervised by the presidential centre of power is subject to special protection concerning its information policy and is one of the least discussed components of Belarus's political system. It is difficult to learn more about their operation because the available information is of low credibility. The publicly revealed facts regarding the operation of the so-called law enforcement bodies are to a large degree elements of the state's official information policy intended to justify Lukashenka's brutal domestic policy. The narrative created by the special services, targeted at Belarusian society (including the representatives of the political and business elite) is another important element. It emphasises the vigilance and omniscience of the institutions responsible for the state's security, which is intended to convince citizens that they are living in a 'besieged fortress' and to discourage them from attempting to destabilise the regime.

The cancellation of the post of the president's national security advisor was an important change in how the state security apparatus is managed. Lukashenka's son Viktor had held this post since 2005 but on 1 March 2021 he was appointed President of the National Olympic Committee of the Republic of Belarus. His former post remains vacant, which may indicate that the state security sector is supervised by President Lukashenka or, in emergency situations, by a collegiate body made up of the president, the head of the KGB, the minister of internal affairs and the secretary of the Security Council.

In September 2020, after the rigged presidential election, the head of the KGB was dismissed. As stated above, he was succeeded by Ivan Tertel, who until that time had been responsible for combatting corruption. Under his leadership, the KGB consistently carries out acts of repression, frequently on the basis of fabricated evidence, targeting individuals

and social and educational organisations which the government considers to be posing a risk to the state security. By creating a narrative that Belarus is under threat from the special services of specific NATO states, Poland and Lithuania in particular, the KGB intends to find the ‘internal enemy’. Examples of these activities include arranging initiatives which are allegedly carried out by representatives of the Polish minority in Belarus, which is viewed as ‘harmful’ to the Belarusian state, and launching an operation to ‘de-Polonise’ Belarus.⁶ The KGB is involved in persecuting Polish civil society activists and journalists, destroying places of remembrance dedicated to the Home Army, and wiping out the Polish language from the education system. Alongside the State Border Committee, it continues to destabilise the situation along the borders with Poland and Lithuania. As part of these activities, since 2021, with the support of the Russian FSB it has established channels for smuggling migrants from the Middle East and Africa there.⁷

On 10 October 2022 Lukashenka issued a decree “On the improvement of the operation of the system of state security bodies”,⁸ which was intended to make the KGB totally dependent on Lukashenka and at the same time to maintain its autonomy in its relations with other public institutions. On the basis of this decree, the KGB was removed from the list of public administration institutions (the status of these institutions is equal to the status of ministries) and transformed into a body directly supervised by the president. By establishing this direct subordination, Lukashenka increased the significance of the KGB in the state administration structure and emphasised its special role in the power apparatus as a whole. He also confirmed the status of the KGB’s head – the holder of this post reports directly to the president; this makes them

⁶ K. Kłysiński, ‘Lukashenka’s anti-Polish speech on the occasion of National Unity Day’, OSW, 19 September 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁷ P. Żochowski, ‘Belarus: an escalation of the migration crisis’, OSW, 27 October 2021, osw.waw.pl.

⁸ Об изменении указов Президента Республики Беларусь. Указ № 356 от 10 октября 2022 г., President of the Republic of Belarus, 10 October 2022, president.gov.by.

the most important actor in the state apparatus. Alongside this, by stripping the government of its powers to supervise the operation of the KGB, he considerably limited the influence of politicians on the state security apparatus.

It is in the interest of the state security services to provide the regime with information (frequently manipulated) on mounting threats, as they expect that this will help them maintain their domination in the state apparatus. The language Lukashenka uses in his public statements suggests that the impact of the narrative spread by the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs is increasing. He presents Belarus as a 'besieged fortress' and emphasises that foreign governments (including the Polish government) cooperate with groups that intend to destabilise the situation in Belarus and that their hostile actions bear the hallmarks of a hybrid war.⁹

The increased role of the KGB in the state apparatus is corroborated by the fact that its leadership is allowed to engage other institutions (such as the internal ministry structures, the military and other state security bodies) in its activities if needed. In Brest, Hrodna and Minsk oblasts, which Lukashenka views as the most threatened by destabilisation from Poland and Lithuania and other NATO states, presidential plenipotentiaries have been appointed. These hail from the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and their tasks include managing the local structures if social discontent emerges, and supervising the situation on the border. Moreover, Lukashenka has increased the importance of the Security Council which is made up of the head of the KGB, the minister of internal affairs and other officials. It has been transformed into a collegiate body supervised by the president. It coordinates the actions of the law

⁹ Lukashenka's statement on 8 August 2022 is an example of this rhetoric: "Poland is the most aggressive state towards Belarus. It is ready to cut off a portion of Ukraine, they are ready to swallow Belarus as a whole. This won't happen". *Лукашенко обвинил Польшу в стремлении захватить часть Украины и всю Белоруссию*, Ритм Евразии, 8 August 2022, ritmeurasia.org.

enforcement institutions and is entitled to govern the country in the event of the president's death until a successor is elected.

The reasons behind the stepped-up role of the law enforcement institutions include the increasing number of cases of political extremism being prosecuted (this includes any actions that the authorities view as a threat to the regime) and involvement in preparing acts of terror. Examples of the latter include exposing of the organisers of the alleged 'military coup' intended to kill Lukashenka and the members of his family, and the thwarting of the alleged attempted murder of Ryhor Azaronak, a journalist loyal to the regime. Both cases were extensively discussed by Lukashenka and were based on fabricated materials provided by the KGB and the Russian FSB. The president's fears that 'foreign forces' may provoke civil unrest to topple him and carry out acts of sabotage to disrupt the operation of Russian troops stationed in Belarus or deployed there have resulted in draconian amendments being introduced to the Belarusian criminal code. On 18 May 2022, a provision was added that introduces the death penalty for attempting to carry out an act of terror. Since autumn 2020, the KGB has compiled its "Official list of organisations and individuals involved in terrorist activity" showing the names of active opponents of the policy pursued by the government in Minsk (in October 2022, independent journalist and Polish minority activist Andrzej Poczobut was added to this list and on 8 February 2023 he was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment).

The expenditure on the law enforcement sector has long exceeded the outlays on national defence, which indicates that internal security is more important to the regime than external security. The increase in spending on this sector seen over the last year, when Belarus was struggling with economic problems, suggests that Lukashenka attaches great importance to maintaining this sector's loyalty (including the loyalty of the special services). The sum earmarked for this purpose accounts for as much as a third of the funds available under the "National defence and national security" budget category. In 2022 (and in 2021), this sector

(including the prosecutor's office and the judiciary) cost the budget around \$1.3 billion¹⁰ and in 2023 the sum earmarked for law enforcement institutions is more than \$1.5 billion.¹¹

The links to the Russian 'ally'

Maintaining a common military space and – to some degree – common internal security has been a concession which Lukashenka made to the Kremlin at the end of the 1990s. In exchange for being able to freely manage Belarus's domestic situation, he has agreed to support Russia's actions targeting the common 'enemies'. Cooperation between the special services of Russia and Belarus is strictly confidential. Occasionally leaked information indicates that it involves areas such as protection of the border with NATO and EU member states, intelligence and counter-intelligence cooperation focused on Belarus's neighbours, and protection of the joint group of the armed forces of Belarus and Russia.

The unofficial influence of Russian security services on the operation of Belarusian institutions is difficult to assess. Lukashenka was previously cautious and concerned about manifestations of their activity, such as establishing contacts with representatives of the Belarusian political elite (cooperation with the Belarusian defence industry is important in this context). However, the situation changed following the 2020 election and Minsk's official support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years later. The crisis in Belarus's relations with the West, combined with Lukashenka's increasing dependence on Moscow (which supports the policy of repression), forced him to become more open to the development of cooperation between the Belarusian political elite and Russia.

¹⁰ According to official statistics, in 2019 and 2020 Belarus spent around \$1.1 billion on its state security bodies. 2021 saw an increase in this spending up to \$1.3 billion. 'Республиканский бюджет на 2022 год', Белта, 6 January 2022, belta.by.

¹¹ 'Похоже на бюджет военного времени. Расходы госказны в 2023 году на оборону и силовиков сильно увеличат', Зеркало, 29 November 2022, news.zerkalo.io.

The invasion of Ukraine has increased Belarus's importance as a territory which Russians use to carry out both military and hybrid activity. In this context, regular meetings between the head of the Belarusian KGB and the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation are important.¹² Brief press releases published after these meetings frequently emphasise "the development of partnership between the intelligence services of the two countries and efforts to combat threats faced by the Union State of Russia and Belarus". This indicates that their special services are involved in joint operations targeting the NATO states. One other important factor which suggests that Russian interests are taken into account by the Belarusian leadership is the activity of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Armed Forces of Belarus. Considering the fact that the Belarusian armed forces are a component of the Joint Group of Forces of Russia and Belarus, it may be stated that Belarusian military intelligence is indeed a part of the Russian military intelligence which carries out its 'commissioned tasks'.

One glaring example of cooperation between the KGB and the FSB was the operation carried out in April 2021 (according to the KGB it lasted six months) intended to expose the organisers of an alleged military coup in Belarus. These types of joint operations are carried out on the basis of bilateral agreements, for example regarding legal assistance and combatting terrorism. Under these agreements, both sides are entitled to request operational assistance in order to detain individuals suspected of having committed a crime. The fact that the cooperation between the KGB and the FSB on Russian territory has been made public should be viewed as a warning from the special services to individuals involved in fighting the regime in Minsk. It is intended to make them aware that they would not be able to feel safe were they to decide to flee to Russia.

¹² For example, at a joint meeting of the executives of Belarus's KGB and Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service held on 7 July 2021 in Moscow, the delegates confirmed their close cooperation in intelligence activities targeting the "destructive policy pursued by the West". 'СВР России и КГБ Беларуси будут совместно противодействовать деструктивной деятельности Запада', Белта, 3 June 2021, belta.by.

Another example of the support the Belarusian security apparatus has offered Russia involves Belarus detaining Russian men intending to evade mobilisation and returning them to Russia.

Doubts regarding loyalty

Should another political crisis occur, there is no certainty that the system in which the law enforcement services acts as pillars of the police state ruled by Lukashenka will prevail. The loyalty of the state security bodies is a precondition of the state's stability. If they are prone to yield to pressure from a neighbouring country, this creates serious risks to the state. Delivering on bilateral commitments linked to the functioning of the common security area with Russia prevents the Belarusian president from pursuing a fully independent policy in this field.

Moreover, the impact of public sentiment on the morale of law enforcement officers is unknown. The Belarusian state security institutions should not be viewed as a monolithic structure. The police is the weakest link of the system and an outflow of police officers to the private sector has been recorded. The creation in exile of the BYPOL platform was an unprecedented development. It groups former officers of the law enforcement agencies, who embarked on the task of exposing the KGB and interior ministry employees responsible for acts of repression. Its head Alyaksandr Azarau (a member of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's interim cabinet) argues that when Lukashenka is ousted from power, the platform will reform the state security institutions and vet their employees. In addition, BYPOL has launched work on a plan known as Peramoha (Victory), which envisages the organisation of providing military training to Belarusians living in exile in order to prepare them to forcibly seize power in Belarus.

BYPOL's initiative is likely to have some influence on the slow disorganisation of the law enforcement structures and to a decline in confidence in the regime, in particular among the lowest-ranking police officers.

The policy pursued by Russia, which views its military, intelligence and counterintelligence cooperation with Belarus as a method for retaining this country in its sphere of influence, has a considerable impact on the morale of Belarusian society. As a consequence, employees of the law enforcement institutions are under dual pressure – the internal factor forces them to be loyal to Lukashenka, while Minsk's close ties with Moscow and the increasingly frequent suggestions that Russia will continue to seek to make him fully dependent may undermine their willingness to defend the present regime at any cost.

The army: loyally serving two masters

The position of the military elite in the power apparatus is determined by the role of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus in planning and executing the tasks required of them as part of their cooperation with the Russian military. Since the end of the 1990s, the Belarusian military has gradually lost its independence in providing the state with autonomous military capability.¹³ In the strategic and operational aspects, it is a component of the Russian military, while the remnants of its 'sovereignty' in deciding how Russia can use Belarusian territory for military purposes disappeared when Russia invaded Ukraine. Lukashenka and his military commanders are unable to independently shape the potential of the Belarusian armed forces because the decision to increase this potential fully depends on the equipment and training support provided by Moscow. This, in turn, is carried out in line with the Russian concept for using Belarus's troops in a potential armed conflict. From the point of view of the Russian army's general staff, the most important components of the Belarusian armed forces include the land component of the air defence, the reconnaissance, signalling and electronic warfare

¹³ The fact that a separate tab was created on the website of the Russian Defence Ministry showing the line-up of the joint executive team made up of representatives of the two countries' defence ministries suggests that the Belarusian army has indeed been included in the Russian security system. '*Состав совместной Коллегии Минобороны Республики Беларусь и России*', Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, structure.mil.ru.

units, as well as units responsible for a wide range of activities linked to materiel and logistical support. The 'allied' Belarusian army carries out auxiliary activities and its main task involves providing security and protection to the Russian troops operating in Belarus.¹⁴

The invasion launched on 24 February 2022 completely changed the former position of the leadership of the defence ministry and the General Staff in the government apparatus. For the first time in history, the territory of Belarus was used for the deployment of Russian troops to enable them to carry out a military operation. This has ultimately integrated the two countries' militaries and reduced the status of the command structure of the Belarusian armed forces to that of a component of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation. Belarus was forced to meet Russia's needs, particularly as regards the request to make its airfields available and to provide Russia with logistical support. It also had to allow Russians to extensively use the Belarusian stockpile of ammunition and military equipment. Unable to prevent Belarus's official involvement in the 'special military operation', Lukashenka focused on avoiding the active participation of Belarusian troops in the aggression. So far, this strategy has proved successful.

The cooperation between the two countries' militaries in war conditions has most likely had an impact on Lukashenka's power to supervise the Belarusian armed forces, though the extent of this is unclear. Military issues are discussed during his numerous meetings with Vladimir Putin and also as part of regular consultations between the two countries' defence ministries. Lukashenka is required to accept the decisions imposed on him, while concepts of specific military operations are agreed in advance by Russian and Belarusian military officials. Russia forcing Belarus to agree to the deployment of their joint group of forces in the first half of October 2022 and attempting, since February 2022,

¹⁴ A. Wilk, *Russia's Belarusian army. The practical aspects of Belarus and Russia's military integration*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, osw.waw.pl.

to draw Minsk in an intensive anti-Western campaign intended to corroborate the alleged potential aggression of NATO troops against Belarus are strong signals that Lukashenka's decision-making power has been significantly reduced. In June 2022 in a public statement, Russia's Minister of Defence Sergey Shoigu emphasised that Belarus is facing the challenge of boosting the defence capability of the Union State (which has existed since 1999). This involves increasing the combat readiness of the regional group of forces and the unified regional air defence system. He assured the public that Russians will provide the 'allied' army with the necessary support in tackling this challenge and stressed that this army's main task involves bolstering the unity of the Union State's defence space.

The military decisions imposed by Russia directly impact on Belarus's domestic policy. The state apparatus operates in conditions resembling martial law and the role of military officials in managing its structures has increased. At the end of April 2022, the Belarusian army was made combat ready, which forced the leadership of the Belarusian defence ministry to take steps to audit its mobilisation capability.

As regards the command structures' attitude to the Russians, there are no indications that they may boycott or disrupt the cooperation between the two countries' armed forces. On the contrary, they are carrying out Russia's plans to engage Ukrainian units on the state border and serve as 'auxiliary forces' protecting Russian troops which operate from Belarus. Belarusian Minister of Defence Viktor Khrenin and the head of the General Staff Viktor Hulevich create the army's image and are responsible for cooperation with the Russian side. In their activities, they do not show any political ambitions – they position themselves as obedient executors of Lukashenka's orders and approve the plan to limit the 'sovereignty' of the Belarusian armed forces in their relations with Moscow. All decisions regarding the staffing of top posts in the Belarusian Ministry of Defence and its armed forces need to be approved by the Russian side and this is the most important argument suggesting that higher-ranking

Belarusian military officials form the group that is most closely linked to Russia. Therefore, the careers of the highest-ranking officials depend on favourable decisions made by the leadership of the Russian military. This in turn forces them to be loyal to their Russian counterparts. Moreover, these individuals are under close scrutiny by the Russian military intelligence which monitors the situation in the 'allied' army.

The decision to implement a 'military' model of government mainly resulted from Lukashenka's anti-Western orientation and the fact that he presents Belarus as a 'front-line' country which is adjacent to NATO's eastern flank. As regards Belarus's domestic policy, besides repression, another method to maintain discipline among citizens expected to take part in their homeland's 'defence' is seen in the efforts to improve society's military organisation. This includes: the acceleration of work on the structure of territorial defence, the narrative stressing that the country is able to mobilise 500,000 individuals, accelerated organisation of military training for as many citizens as possible. This type of discipline is favourable from the point of view of the regime.

The line-up of the highest-ranking military officials is stable. Khrenin (who used to serve as the commander of the Western Operational Command) has been in his current post since January 2020, while Hulevich has been the head of the General Staff since March 2021. He was appointed to this post when his predecessor Alyaksandr Valfovich became the secretary of the Security Council, which is responsible for the coordination of actions carried out by the military and the state security apparatus. Valfovich's career corroborates the view that as early as the beginning of 2021 one of Minsk's priorities was to develop the government system in such a way so as to prepare the country for the introduction of unofficial martial law.

The Belarusian military elite is also carrying out ideology-propaganda tasks supporting the Kremlin's policy. They spread a worldview in which Belarus's military alliance with Russia is intended to defend it against

NATO's political ambitions. At the beginning of October 2022, the Belarusian minister of defence warned that in the coming months initiatives will be launched against Belarus in order to destabilise it and to discredit the two countries' militaries.¹⁵ The alarming tone of this statement indicates that indoctrination of the Belarusian political elite is increasing and that, aside from their purely military activities, the Belarusian armed forces also act as 'guardians' of the ideology endorsed by the government.

¹⁵ 'Хренин о военной политике Беларуси: целесообразно не бряцать оружием, а сесть за стол переговоров', Белта, 6 October 2022, belta.by.

III. MARGINALISATION OF THE CIVILIAN APPARATUS

The limited domestic liberalisation and the related dialogue between Belarus and West were halted by the 2020 presidential election. Furthermore, the election also brought about far-reaching changes in the balance of power within the state apparatus. The former fragile balance between the influential law enforcement sector (which nevertheless at that time had limited powers) and the civilian part of the government administration has collapsed completely. Due to the unprecedented scale of terror targeting citizens who protested against the rigged election results, the role of ministries other than the law enforcement ministries was practically reduced to an ongoing supervision of current affairs and supporting the repressive apparatus if necessary. The status of the civilian segment was further undermined by the personnel crisis recorded in some (if not all) institutions. Numerous employees resigned from their jobs in response to the scale of oppression and brutality on the part of the law enforcement bodies, or were dismissed for being disloyal to the regime.

The ‘suspicious’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The problem was most visible in the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs which until August 2020 had been the main institution responsible for establishing and maintaining contacts with the EU and the US. In this context it is worth noting that it was this ministry that for years had been unofficially regarded as the most liberal institution in the state apparatus as a whole and which was sceptical of Lukashenka’s authoritarian methods of governance. In many instances, the frustration of the ministry’s employees was likely aggravated by the fact that their efforts to achieve rapprochement with the West had been in vain. This is why, over several weeks following the election, dozens of employees at the ministry’s headquarters and the foreign missions resigned or were dismissed for criticising the government. These included the director of the ministry’s North America and Western Europe department,

the ambassadors to Argentina, Spain, Slovakia and Latvia, the chargé d'affaires in Switzerland, as well as lower-ranking diplomats in India, Poland and Lithuania.¹⁶ The total number of dismissed employees is likely close to 70. The ministry's top officials have declined to provide the exact number of dismissed employees and only published estimates (likely understated) according to which this number is around 5–6% of the staff.¹⁷

Unlike many of his subordinates (including his son Vitaly who objected to the policy of repression and resigned from his post at the Ministry of Internal Affairs shortly after the election), Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makey did not resign. He decided to be fully loyal to Lukashenka and continued the policy imposed on him by the president, which involved severing Belarus's ties with the West and opting for unconditionally moving closer to with Russia. In practice, this involved publicly condemning the years-long strategy of developing cooperation in many foreign policy areas and shaping Belarus's image as a neutral state which is allegedly a guarantor of peace and stability in the region.¹⁸

Makey retained his post but lost his privileged status in Lukashenka's entourage. The decline in the main area of the MFA's genuine prerogatives, that is the relations with the West,¹⁹ has reduced the foreign minister's tasks to justifying the consecutive acts of repression targeting the regime's opponents (which the siloviks supported) and explaining why Belarus has embarked on a collision course with the Western world.

¹⁶ В. Еремин, 'От Лукашенко уходят послы, дипломаты, чиновники, журналисты', Newsland, 28 October 2020, newsland.com.

¹⁷ 'Макей об увольнении дипломатов: «Если бы 70 или 100 сотрудников уволились, то МИД перестал бы работать»', Брестская газета, 15 February 2021, za: bgmedia.site.

¹⁸ '«Верность Лукашенко оказалась сильнее верности своим идеалам». Рассказываем, как развивалась и что определяло карьеру Владимира Макея', Зеркало, 9 December 2021, news.zerkalo.io.

¹⁹ According to a tacit agreement in the Belarusian system of power regarding the division of powers in the field of foreign policy, the MFA mainly focused on contacts with the West, while the Presidential Administration dealt with cooperation with allied Russia and Minsk's strategic cooperation with China.

Makey's sudden death on 26 November 2022 (most likely due to a heart attack) and the appointment of Syarhey Aleynik, former deputy foreign minister, as his successor on 13 December had no impact on the foreign ministry's position in the state apparatus. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that the process of marginalising this ministry will continue.

At the same time, it seems that upon seeing numerous signs of disloyalty on the part of foreign ministry employees, Lukashenka may have lost confidence in Belarusian diplomats. He suggested this in July 2021, when he harshly criticised the ministry for failing to control its employees, which in his opinion contributed to the emergence in this institution as the biggest centre of open or tacit support for the regime's opponents in the state apparatus as a whole. This was also when he ordered a detailed review of the ministry's personnel policy.²⁰ Lukashenka referred to the issue of the MFA's loyalty once again in February 2022, when he spoke about "the ministry's huge debt to the country" and expressed his hope that the personnel crisis recorded in 2020 will not re-occur.²¹

The rebellious employees of the Ministry of Culture and the ministries dealing with economic affairs

The regime's brutal actions have also provoked major discontent in the culture sector, including in the Ministry of Culture, numerous cultural institutions and from individual artists. A protest that received major media coverage was organised at the Janka Kupala National Academic Theatre in Minsk, which suspended its performances in response to acts of repression, and the theatre's director Pavel Latushka attended anti-government demonstrations. As a consequence, most actors (around 60 individuals) lost their jobs and Latushka was forced to emigrate. In exile, he has become a leader of the Belarusian political opposition.

²⁰ 'Лукашенко: с предателями церемониться не будем', Белта, 20 July 2021, belta.by.

²¹ 'Рассмотрение кадровых вопросов', President of the Republic of Belarus, 10 February 2022, president.gov.by.

The magnitude of protest among the staff was so large that the theatre resumed its operation as late as late autumn 2020, when all the vacant posts had been filled.²²

Due to discontent among artists, in November 2020 the minister of culture was dismissed. Anatol Makarevich, a loyal official of many years who had held numerous posts at various levels of the local government and used to work as the presidential inspector for Brest Oblast, was appointed as the new minister of culture. In a statement justifying his decision, Lukashenka admitted that this was the first time when he appointed an individual with no previous experience in the culture sector as the minister of culture, which indicated that he had lost confidence in the representatives of the culture sector. In January 2022, the minister announced that around 300 employees of the culture sector had been dismissed nationwide since the 2020 presidential election due to their “destructive views”. This was one of the few public statements offered by a high-ranking official confirming that a purge in the state apparatus had been carried out.²³

Among those individuals who lost their job for political reasons are also: employees of other sectors such as the ministries dealing with economic affairs (which used to be viewed as relatively liberal), the central bank, state-controlled banks and the railways. Other dismissed employees included many healthcare professionals involved in civil activism, school teachers, academic lecturers and employees of state-controlled companies, in particular those which organised protests in 2020. In civilian institutions, the vetting of staff to test their loyalty to the regime was combined with efforts to reduce their importance in the state apparatus. This interrelation was evident in the ministries dealing with economic

²² Т. Неведомская, ‘Что с Купаловским театром и актерами, которые из него ушли?’, Deutsche Welle, 20 August 2021, [dw.com](https://www.dw.com).

²³ ‘Главное — поддерживать власть. После 2020-го на высоких должностях в Беларуси оказалось немало неожиданных людей — рассказываем’, Зеркало, 16 August 2022, news.zerkalo.io.

affairs. When the government toughened its domestic policy, they turned out to be of little use from the point of view of fighting the regime's opponents. At the same time, the government began to consider them as inconvenient because they promoted a realistic view of the state of the Belarusian economy.

Since autumn 2020, the central bank has been subject to particular pressure. Its chairman Pavel Kalaur objected to excessive money creation and unrestricted lending activity which was generating losses to the state sector. Lukashenka additionally increased the degradation of this part of the administration when he returned to the anti-free market rhetoric typical of the 1990s. The populist direction of economic policy, which was inadequate to the economic realities of that time, was officially adopted during the sixth National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus held in February 2021. It approved a five year plan (2021–2025) for the state's development, which had been devised on the basis of assumptions that do not correspond to the current economic situation at home and abroad.²⁴

Similar efforts intended to weaken the importance of the civilian branch of the state administration have not been recorded in the Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus, which continues to be one of the country's most important planning and decision-making centres. However, the fact that the status of this institution has not changed results from the monopolistic position of the president in the Belarusian political system. It is also connected with the fact that since December 2019 it has been headed by General Ihar Serheyenka, former deputy head of the KGB. As a representative of the state security sector, he most likely makes every effort to ensure the Administration of the President remains reliable and loyal to the regime.

²⁴ K. Kłysiński, 'The cost of a police state: Belarus's economic problems', *OSW Commentary*, no. 392, 11 May 2021, osw.waw.pl.

A decline in the effectiveness of the state apparatus

Despite their overt or concealed scepticism towards the government and its actions targeting the citizens, the vast majority of civil servants have not left their jobs. Their loyalty is largely due to their financial and family commitments, the lack of alternative attractive employment opportunities and fear of the consequences of quitting their jobs. In the present circumstances, the government could view this decision as an act of treason. Individuals holding prestigious executive posts, in which full subordination to the regime is required, are particularly exposed to the risk of being held accountable.

The wave of purges in the state administration sector, which has been ongoing with varying levels of intensity for the last two years, has affected hundreds of individuals and possibly more than a thousand. Although this group is just a fraction of the total workforce,²⁵ dismissals of its representatives have to some degree disrupted the stability of the state apparatus. Moreover, in a situation when the civil servants' main task involves demonstrating their loyalty to the government, carrying out their usual duties has become less important. As a consequence, the quality of management and the efficiency of cooperation between specific ministries have declined, the more so because showing initiative exposes the individual in question to increased risk.

Fearing an economic slump, Lukashenko tolerates the proponents of a rational policy. One example of such a pragmatic approach involves the reshuffle carried out in July and August 2022. Dzmitry Krutoy, former deputy head of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus, was appointed as Belarus's ambassador to Russia, while his former post was taken by Maksym Yermolovich, who used to serve

²⁵ According to data for 2021, the Belarusian state apparatus employs around 180,000 individuals. 'Сколько в Беларуси работников и чем они заняты?', onliner, 26 December 2021, money.onliner.by.

as Belarus's ambassador to the United Kingdom.²⁶ Both officials have for years been considered 'liberal', which in Belarus does not precisely equate to being ready to introduce a full market economy model so much as simply being critical of the principles of the centrally planned economy.

Lukashenka's public statements seem to suggest that he is increasingly aware that the silovik-dominated state is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. During a meeting on the state's personnel policy held on 16 December 2021, he recommended that the state security institutions should show "more restraint" in prosecuting the "traitors from the administration". He also admitted that the civil servants who are subject to consecutive acts of repression and vetting have begun to regard their colleagues with suspicion, and summed up this statement with the following words: "if we stop trusting each other, then we can start handing power over to our fugitives who live abroad".²⁷ He referred to the issue of excessive repression once again on 6 September 2022. He expressed his doubts regarding the rightness of the current strategy of "persecuting and jailing everyone" who may pose a political risk. In his opinion, this strategy may provoke the disintegration of society. However, he concluded his statement by saying that in his view no other policy is possible. This line of reasoning indicates that the regime is unwilling to liberalise the system although it is aware that the current situation has a negative impact on the country and the citizens.²⁸ This means that Lukashenka indirectly admits that he fears a situation in which the state apparatus may regain its former balance that had existed prior to the 2020 crisis. This, in turn, would equate to both domestic and foreign policy becoming more rational. In addition, the domination of the law enforcement

²⁶ 'Лукашенко назначает на важные посты людей, с подходами которых годами публично не соглашался. Эксперты — о том, почему это происходит', Зеркало, 2 August 2022, news.zerkalo.io.

²⁷ '«Предателям прощать нельзя». Лукашенко про «свою точку зрения», «подписантов за альтернативщиков» и НГО', Зеркало, 16 December 2021, news.zerkalo.io.

²⁸ 'Лукашенко заговорил об амнистии, «перегибах» и «озабоченности многих граждан», Наша Ніва, 6 September 2022, nashaniva.com.

sector is facilitated by the war in Ukraine. Belarus is complicit in this war on Russia's side. In this situation, the few appointments which are inconsistent with the tendency to make the domestic policy tougher do not indicate that – at least in the short term – the process of the marginalisation of the civilian sector of the state apparatus may be reversed or stopped, at either the level of day-to-day administration or as regards the creation of the state development strategy.

IV. THE LOYALTY CRITERION: REPRESSION TARGETING PRIVATE BUSINESS

The crisis that followed the 2020 election turned out to be a breakthrough not only as regards the balance of power in the state apparatus but also in terms of the relations between the state and the private sector. As a consequence, the model which had been in place for many years collapsed. It had been based on the coexistence of two theoretically contradictory systems: the state command-and-control system based on authoritarianism and a free market economy understood at least as the right of private entrepreneurs to maximise their profits. Although members of the ruling elite blocked the attempted privatisation of large industrial plants and continued to manually control the state sector, they allowed private business to develop. At the end of 2017, Lukashenka even signed two decrees to liberalise the conditions for doing business for entrepreneurs and IT companies. Under the new rules, these companies were allowed to operate in an unprecedentedly liberal manner. This led to the *de facto* emergence of two parallel economic systems within a single state.²⁹

As a consequence of this policy, recent years have seen a systematic increase in the number of small and medium-sized privately-owned businesses operating in Belarus (in 2020 there were more than 381,000 of them). Although the private sector's share in the country's GDP remained stable for many years (around 25–26%), between 2012 and 2020 the number of individuals employed in it increased from 37.8 to 45.5%, and in the category of export revenues this sector's share doubled from 30% to almost 65%.³⁰ Particularly dynamic development was recorded in the IT sector which in 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, accounted for as much as 7.3% of Belarus's GDP. This means that its share increased

²⁹ K. Kłysiński, 'Is the crisis over? The economic situation in Belarus after two years of recession', *OSW Commentary*, no. 262, 27 February 2018, osw.waw.pl.

³⁰ А. Александров, 'Малый и средний бизнес: итоги работы за 2020', *Экономическая газета*, 25 May 2021, neg.by; В. Беляев, 'КЕГ: Источником роста белорусской экономики были частные компании', *Белорусский Партизан*, 9 July 2021, belaruspartisan.by.

by around 1 percentage point compared with 2019 and that it became as important as the share of the extensive agricultural sector (which receives numerous subsidies from the state).³¹

From Lukashenka's point of view, the participation of numerous representatives of the business sector, in particular IT sector employees, in the anti-government protests held in 2020, was an act of "betrayal" and a manifestation of ingratitude towards the government officials who had built a "paradise" for private business owners. He criticised the post-election mass demonstrations attended by rebellious citizens and referred to them as a "petty bourgeoisie revolution provoked by individuals who want to seize power".³² As a consequence, repression also covered business owners. This was seen for example in increasingly frequent audits of companies owned by businesspeople who were suspected of criticising the regime. These audits resulted in fines being imposed on business owners and sometimes even in their companies being closed. Some of the most active political and civil activists, such as the managers of the PandaDoc IT company, were detained. This indicates that in order to survive, the private business sector needs to be apolitical, which in this case means that it needs to show unconditional loyalty to the regime.

Acts of repression targeting private business

One typical example of actions carried out by the state security bodies which targets the business sector involved a raid carried out by the officers of the interior ministry (supported by OMON) on the premises of the Minsk-based Belagro company at the end of September 2022. The official reason given for the search was the company's taxes being in arrears. However, some time later a video was

³¹ 'ИТ по влиянию на рост ВВП «откатилось» до уровня сельского хозяйства', Dev.by, 2 February 2021, devby.io.

³² '«Ребята, прекратите шалить». Как менялось отношение Лукашенко к айтишникам', Зеркало, 15 December 2021, news.zerkalo.io.

published online showing a company employee admitting, under pressure from the investigators, that he had “insulted” the regime’s supporters in his internet posts, and saying that the actual reason behind the raid was the participation of Belagro’s employees in the “anti-state” protests held in 2020.³³ 20 individuals were detained during the raid. This incident was not only another example of the unprecedented increase in the role and the powers of the law enforcement sector, it was also a brutal manifestation of the regime’s attitude towards Belarusian business owners.

Aside from forcing the business sector to show loyalty to the regime, the actual purpose of the attacks on private businesses was to introduce the manual control of specific segments of the economy which until that time had been allowed to operate relatively freely. Examples that corroborate this view include the wave of audits carried out by the State Control Committee in companies operating in the healthcare sector and the unexpected decision made by the Ministry of Health in May 2022 to revoke the licences of several private hospital chains such as Lode, Klinika A1 and Nordin, which had been operating in Belarus for many years. The ministry’s decisions coincided with the process of introducing payments for selected state healthcare services. This created the impression that the government intended to prevent private companies from competing with the state-controlled ones, and also likely wished to force the staff of the closed down companies to seek employment in the state sector, where salaries are much lower (in November 2022 Belarus recorded a shortfall of more than 4,500 medical specialists). The decision to revoke Lode’s licence was cancelled the following month, which indicates that the legal basis for these decisions was vague. Recent months have seen the authorities issuing numerous chaotic and contradictory decisions targeting other companies operating in the healthcare

³³ ‘Стала известна причина обысков в «Белагро»’, Еврорадио, 29 September 2022, euroradio.fm.

sector.³⁴ As a consequence, most of the audited companies suspended or even stopped their operations, which contributed to a major decline in the quality of medical services and in a deterioration of the general situation in the healthcare sector.

In response to mounting pressure, most business owners attempted to adapt to the new conditions, while the most independent ones decided to close down or relocate their companies. According to estimates based on surveys conducted in the IT sector and on the number of visas issued in the main destination countries between 2020 and the end of 2022, it is likely that more than 60,000 IT specialists and their families have left Belarus.³⁵ This number is likely to double in the immediate future because around 30% of the respondents who continue to live and work in Belarus declare their readiness to emigrate. It should be noted that the wave of departures increased significantly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This was largely due to pressure put on Belarusian programmers by their Western partners willing to continue to cooperate solely with companies from countries other than 'toxic' Belarus which is a co-belligerent in the war.³⁶

The staff shortage is evident in official statistics, according to which in the first seven months of 2022 the number of IT specialists working in Belarus decreased by more than 6,000, which indicates a major aggravation of the trend recorded since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷

³⁴ 'Минздрав разрешил вернуться к работе «Нордину» и «Трем Дантистам Плюс» (но приостановил работу еще одного центра)', Зеркало, 3 October 2022, news.zerkalo.io.

³⁵ Between autumn 2020 and the end of 2022, Poland issued around 65,000 visas under the Poland Business Harbour programme directed towards IT specialists. See A. Tacznik, 'Białoruska migracja. Dokąd i dlaczego Białorusini wyjeżdżali w roku 2022', Belsat, 22 January 2023, belsat.eu.

³⁶ K. Kłysiński, 'The price of dependence on Russia. The economic consequences of Belarus's complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine', OSW Commentary, no. 441, 29 April 2022, osw.waw.pl.

³⁷ 'С начала 2022 года из белорусского IT-сектора «выпали» более 5,5 тысяч человек', Зеркало, 5 July 2022, news.zerkalo.io.

In the same period, a 2% decrease in the overall number of small and medium-sized companies was recorded (i.e. by around 7,500 businesses) compared with the corresponding period in 2021. As a consequence, between 2020 and the end of 2022 around 20,000 companies were forced to close down or relocate.³⁸ Although repression from the regime was not always the immediate cause for these liquidations or relocations, the current contraction of the private sector is certainly due to a major decline in conditions for doing business in the IT sector.

³⁸ 'Малый и средний бизнес стал «ужиматься»', Илех Новости, 6 June 2022, [ilex.by](#).

V. MORE PRIVILEGES: THE PART OF THE BUSINESS SECTOR LINKED TO THE REGIME

The political crisis, followed by the war in Ukraine, created new opportunities for the most affluent business owners linked to Lukashenka's closest aides. In the most difficult months of 2020, a small group of businesspeople who owed their commercial success to their favourable relations with the authorities remained fully loyal to the regime. Belarusian 'oligarchs' had too much to lose and therefore decided not to show support for an opposition which lacked a strong leader. Big business was even more tightly linked to the regime due to the EU's personal sanctions, for example targeting the most prominent and influential business owners such as: Mikalay Varabey, Alyaksandr Shakutsin, Aliaksey Alek-sin and Alyaksandr Zaytsau. Their Western assets have been frozen and their companies were included in a trade embargo.

The introduced restrictions have not resulted in a rift in this segment of the elite and it seems that all of the above-mentioned businessmen have managed to adapt to the new situation relatively quickly, for example by transferring ownership of their companies to their relatives or closest collaborators.³⁹ The case of Alyaksandr Moshensky, one of the leaders of the Belarusian agri-food sector, is worth noting. He successfully lobbied to avoid being put on the sanction list. As a consequence, he continues to be the only prominent businessman linked to the regime to be excluded from Western sanctions (in spite of this, the sale of his products to the EU declined considerably after 24 February 2022).⁴⁰

Minsk's increasing isolation since the autumn of 2020 and the sanctions pressure from the West have convinced the 'oligarchs' to expand their former practices involving illegal transactions and smuggling, in

³⁹ K. Kłysiński, 'Pressure being stepped up cautiously: the EU's and US's sanctions against Belarus', *OSW Commentary*, no. 381, 19 February 2021, osw.waw.pl; P. Zochowski, 'The EU: striking at Lukashenka's base', *OSW*, 22 June 2021, osw.waw.pl.

⁴⁰ 'Владелец «Санта Бремор» снова не попал под санкции. Кто вступился на этот раз?', *Маланка.Media*, 19 May 2022, malanka.media.

which they enjoy tacit support from the government. It is highly likely that these activities have generated profits for Lukashenka and his closest aides for many years. Recently, the regime's most trusted businessmen, such as Zaytsau, Aleksin and Varabey, have played the main role in these practices. Their tobacco and transport companies are involved in the smuggling of huge amounts of Belarusian-made cigarettes without an excise label to the EU and Russia on an unprecedented scale. According to most likely incomplete data for 2021, Lithuanian, Latvian and Polish customs officers have confiscated more than 2.5 million packs of cigarettes at border crossing points and the share of Belarusian contraband in the total volume of goods smuggled to these countries was between 43% (in Poland) and 88% (in Lithuania).⁴¹

Another interesting example is the Bremino Group which is run by the above-mentioned businessmen. It is a logistical-transport operator which enjoys a highly privileged status (businesses making up this group operate according to rules applied to a free economic zone). Independent Belarusian investigative journalists argue that the company is suspected of smuggling a wide array of goods to and from Belarus (aside from tobacco products, this practice involves Polish-grown apples, Turkish-made textiles and other goods) and also of transferring illegal revenues generated in this way to the United Arab Emirates.⁴² The regime is believed to transfer both its financial assets and its non-transparent and most likely largely illegal projects to non-European countries. It should be noted that undisclosed business links between members of the Belarusian power apparatus and the ruling elite of African, South American and Arab states were most often combined with favourable political relations at the highest level. This is proven, for example, by frequent visits to the UAE by Lukashenka and his eldest son Viktor.⁴³

⁴¹ А. Кирейшин, 'Креативная контрабанда, или Как нелегальные сигареты из Беларуси попадают в другие страны', Белорусы и рынок, 3 April 2022, belmarket.by.

⁴² М. Кугель, '«Табачный король» Беларуси. Режим Лукашенко и контрабанда сигарет', Радио Свобода, 24 June 2021, svoboda.org.

⁴³ 'Łukaszenka i jego interesy. Białoruś – tajna polityka zagraniczna', OSW, 7 February 2022, youtube.com.

The regime's 'exotic' investment projects

Gold mining in Zimbabwe is an example of non-transparent foreign 'investments' carried out by the Belarusian regime. It used to be supervised by General Viktor Sheyman – Lukashenka's long-term aide who is currently responsible for the implementation of projects in non-European countries, including for Minsk's business undertakings in Venezuela. These had been intensive prior to 2013 and the death of Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's president who had been favourably inclined towards Lukashenka. According to information provided by the independent media, Sheyman coordinated the projects carried out in Zimbabwe via his son Syarhey and Alyaksandr Zingman, a businessman of Belarusian origin linked to the regime (NB. he is Zimbabwe's honorary consul in Minsk). These two men have established several companies in Zimbabwe operating in the sector of gold mining and the trade in gold. In addition, Zingman supervised the equally lucrative supplies of Belarusian-made agricultural and construction equipment to Zimbabwe. The companies controlled by these individuals enjoyed numerous tax reliefs offered by their African hosts. It is worth noting that in spring 2021 Zingman was detained in the Democratic Republic of Congo on suspicion of the illegal trade of arms and involvement in preparations for a coup in this country. The 'business' activity of the representatives of the Belarusian regime in Zimbabwe is proof of the major flexibility, creativity and efficiency of the Belarusian elite as regards finding new sources of income – even in such geographically and culturally distant regions.

VI. SHAM REPRESENTATION: THE POSITION OF MEMBERS OF THE RULING ELITE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The absence of a party of power was one of the key elements of the authoritarian political system built back in the 1990s. Lukashenka deliberately blocked attempts to form such a party in order to maintain his dominance in the state apparatus. From his point of view, the emergence of a large party rooted in the government structures would have excessively strengthened the position of the members of the ruling elite, which in time could have threatened his continued rule. This is why, from the beginning of his presidency, he opted for the participation of small, insignificant parties in Belarusian politics, and the official narrative prioritised social organisations, associations and trade unions, which were expected to ensure ‘direct’ contact between the ruling elite and the people. As a consequence, consecutive attempts made over the past years by some members of the elite to establish a party of power on the basis of the pro-regime Belaya Rus movement, have all failed.

The Belaya Rus social movement: an attempt at creating a party of power

The Belaya Rus nationwide social organisation was established in November 2007. At present, it has almost 200,000 members, most of whom are civil servants working at various levels of government, from district and regional administration to institutions operating at the central level. Its ideology is based on full and unconditional support for Lukashenka.⁴⁴ From the beginning of its existence, Belaya Rus has been a manifestation of attempts by the active portion of the ruling elite to create a party of power in order to stabilise the elite’s political position and to enable the party members to

⁴⁴ ‘Республиканское общественное объединение «Белая Русь», President of the Republic of Belarus, president.gov.by.

push through their collective interests more effectively. It was also hope that the future party structures could serve as a launch pad for young civil servants and activists to help them to develop their career. However, the project has never transformed into something more than a social movement. The history of the activity of the Belaya Rus movement, which spans almost fifteen years, is a series of attempts to transform the organisation into a more formalised entity. These attempts included numerous declarations of readiness to transform it into a political party, which each time met with a sceptical response from Lukashenka. As a consequence, the organisation's role *de facto* boils down to nominating loyal members to sit on electoral committees during elections to various state administration bodies, and organising demonstrations of support and other events which fit in with the model of the Belarusian socio-political life endorsed by the government.

The constitutional amendments which Lukashenka announced for the first time in spring 2018 were viewed as an opportunity to meet these expectations. According to the declarations, the purpose of this reform was to modernise the political system, for example to strengthen the role of parliament. This could potentially pave the way for establishing one or several parties of power. Ultimately, the draft law approved in the referendum held on 27 February 2022 contained other solutions which were less favourable from the elite's point of view. Parliament was expected to continue to act as an institution of secondary importance, while the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (which until recently had been held every five to six years in the form of a meeting of delegates from all over the country) was granted the status of a constitutional body. The assembly has up to 1,200 members elected for a five-year term. They represent local government structures and social organisations from each of Belarus's seven oblasts. In theory, the assembly received wide-ranging powers which were granted to it at the expense of the prerogatives of the government and the president. It is managed by a permanent presidium

and the incumbent president may be appointed as the presidium's head. Once the law on the All-Belarusian People's Assembly is passed, the presidium will be transformed into an executive body and its recommendations and decisions will be enforced by parliament, the president and the council of ministers.

In the context of this reconstruction of the political system, Lukashenka continues to have a conservative approach to the idea of a power party being established. During a meeting on two draft laws (on the reform of the political scene and on the modification of the rules governing the operation of social organisations) held on 30 August 2022, he stated that “this is not the right time for the development of a party, now it is necessary to defend the country and rally around the president”. He also expressed his concern about the excessive increase in the importance of political parties, which may “destabilise society and provoke divisions and the emergence of different centres of power”. He added that “constructive relationship with the government” and “acceptance of the current political course” were the main criteria that should be taken into account when assessing legitimacy of any party.⁴⁵ This indicates that the changes to the Belarusian political system which are currently being implemented or which have recently been announced offer no realistic opportunities for the members of the ruling elite grouped in the Belaya Rus movement to transform their organisation into an independent entity in whatever form (a potential party of power or a structure operating in the All-Belarusian People's Assembly).

It should be emphasised that the amended constitution has *de facto* made it possible for Lukashenka to remain in power until the end of his life. It is likely that the All-Belarusian People's Assembly will be formed when Lukashenka is appointed as the presidium's head (the draft constitution introduces no limits on the number of terms in this office).

⁴⁵ ‘Совещание по законопроектам, регулирующим развитие гражданского общества, работу партий и общественных объединений’, President of the Republic of Belarus, 30 August 2022, president.gov.by.

Once this happens, Lukashenka will retain his powers to make key decisions related to domestic and foreign policy, including by initiating legislative amendments or annulling specific legislative acts.⁴⁶ The announced reform, was meant to result in a major overhaul of the state structures, but has turned out to be merely a simulacrum of the elite's interests since the most important powers will remain in Lukashenka's hands. Moreover, Lukashenka has criticised the formal and *de facto* meaningless solutions adopted in the referendum, such as the method of forming the assembly, and he continues to block them. As a consequence, as part of the so-called 'public consultations' carried out in late October and early November 2022, the proposal to hold a general election to the assembly (which was contested by the presidential centre) was dropped. Only deputies of the lower house of parliament will be elected in this election, while the remaining members will be automatically nominated in connection with their function (e.g. regional governor) or delegated as representatives of the most important pro-regime social organisations.⁴⁷ This equates to an almost total revival of Soviet-era standards with no elements of direct democracy.

⁴⁶ P. Żochowski, K. Kłysiński, 'Transformation of Lukashenka's system of government: the draft of Belarus's new constitution', OSW, 21 January 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁴⁷ А. Целюк, Ю. Демешко, 'Эксперты — об уникальности законопроектов о ВНС и Избирательном кодексе и о предложениях граждан', СБ. Беларусь Сегодня, 10 November 2022, sb.by.

VII. CONCLUSIONS. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR BELARUS'S INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL POLICY

The changes that occurred in the Belarusian ruling elite and business circles in the wake of the 2020 political crisis are having a significant impact on the state model and on the country's current domestic and foreign policy. The power apparatus, which for many years was based on a unique balance between the law enforcement ministries and the civilian ministries, has now been almost completely dominated by the state security sector. This, in turn, has significantly reduced its efficiency. the prioritisation of issues such as internal security, the need to combat real and imaginary external threats (with sanctions being a real threat and NATO aggression an imaginary one) and repression against the regime's opponents have pushed other areas of state activity, such as the economy, society and culture, into the background. The actions carried out by the ministries responsible for these sectors are becoming increasingly reactive. Proponents of liberal or at least more flexible solutions choose not to show any initiative, fearing the consequences. Instead, they try to adjust to the current policy of the ideological indoctrination of citizens and to the restrictive model of a centrally planned economy. The changes in Belarusian foreign policy are a glaring example of the degradation of the civilian part of the state administration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs no longer plays the role of an active creator and executor of the rapprochement tactic in Belarus's relations with the West. Instead, it mainly focuses on justifying Lukashenka's anti-Western and pro-Russian stance. As a result of these moves, the system of government, which relies on a highly privileged law enforcement sector, has lost its former efficiency and effectiveness in seeking solutions that could foster the country's development. Belarus is consistently moving towards a totalitarian model, and the inertia in its economic and foreign policy is further increasing Minsk's unprecedented dependence on Moscow.

The civilian part of the state apparatus is marginalised and its attempts to act as an independent group are consistently blocked by the government.

The loyalty of this group's members to Lukashenka will mainly be driven by fear, which suggests that the current situation may not be sustainable. In addition, private companies (including those in the IT sector) are relocating their operations to other countries (this has been ongoing with varying intensity since 2020) and the educated professionals of working age are emigrating. These two processes additionally decrease Belarus's development potential. Focused on intimidating its citizens, the regime is unable to restore the business climate which had been present in Belarus prior to the 2020 elections. Therefore, the most creative groups of citizens are likely to continue to leave the country in the immediate future. As a consequence, the Belarusian economic system will need to rely on outdated Soviet-era solutions and on an almost vassal-like relationship between the central government and unconditionally loyal business-people. At the same time, a steady increase in the importance of a small group of Lukashenka's trusted 'oligarchs' should be expected, which will result in the development of the shadow economy which is not covered by statistical reporting and supervision by the state institutions. This set of factors will plunge Belarus into a mounting crisis which it will only be able to weather if it receives increasing support from Russia, and its internal development potential will be further reduced.

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Work on this text was finished at the beginning of February 2023.