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country report

Belarus

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Belarus under a Deep Snow Cover

The wheels are in motion, but there is no sight of a solution to the political crisis. A snapshot of the situation.

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While the stem of the thermometer would rarely drop below zero in *Belarus* in the winter of 2019/20, the second frost wave with stable double-digit negative temperatures is about to hit *Belarus* at the beginning of February. The country has been under a thick blanket of snow for weeks, and it also seems to many that the “*Belarusian summer*” is followed by a long winter, reflecting the political situation. But there is much more to this. Belarus has largely disappeared from the German media at the moment, so this report provides an overview of the overall situation and selects focus areas

External consolidation of the regime

The confrontation during the months since the fraudulent presidential election has repeatedly been described as a “stalemate” between Lukashenka's security authorities and Belarusian civil society. There has been a shift in the last few weeks — at least on the surface — in favor of the ruler: the mass demonstrations have significantly diminished in the face of the fatigue, the announced break, the onset of winter, the rampant pandemic and, last but not least, considerable state pressure. The regime has ramped up its repressive apparatus and adopted deliberate lawlessness and arbitrariness as its ***modus operandi***. While uniforms with police vans still dominated the streets in autumn, it is now often “thugs in regular clothes” who drive up in private cars, break into backyards or even apartments, sometimes beat people unconscious, or simply kidnap them from the street. The fact that it is not clear, whether it is the police in civvies or regular thugs loyal to the regime, is also contributing to the climate of fear. “Unfaithful residential apartment blocks”, which the regime precisely maps, are particularly pinched and patrolled. On the other hand, the authorities are trying to formally “legalize” their approach. In a new criminal case, the attorney general classified the representatives and structures of the democracy movement as extremist organizations and criminalized any support from third parties. The penalty for regulatory offenses such as unauthorized demonstrations, insulting officials, or receiving foreign funding for the media has been increased significantly. Further tightening is expected. The announced criminalization of “white-red-white”, the former state flag, which *Lukashenka* had abolished in 1995 and which has now become the central symbol of the democracy movement, is likely to further fuel the confrontation and deepen the rift in the society. There are also rapid developments in religious communities — the Catholic Church, in particular, had criticized the violence — and Lukashenka appointed high officials as special oversight director to state companies. The most recent blows against freedom of the press were the withdrawal of a media outlet status for the largest independent news portal tut.by in mid-January and “no-punches-pulled” searches at the *BelaPan* news agency and the Press Club. In the case of the latter, five employees were arrested, probably also to serve as a public deterrent, since they received money from abroad. Hardliners in parliament are demanding the introduction of the disgraceful “foreign agent” moniker following the Russian model.

The number of arrests is approaching the 35,000 marks and that of political prisoners is over 220 — both are sad records. The latter could easily multiply, as over 1,000 criminal proceedings are currently underway and harsh judgments can be expected. The trial against *Sergej Tsikhanouskij*, a blogger critical of the regime and the husband of *Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya* has also started. His fellow received three years' imprisonment. The case of the 28-year-old blogger *Ihar Losik*, who has been detained since June and went on hunger strike for six weeks at the end of the year, also attracted particular attention. The legal pre-trial detention periods are repeatedly extended, while not a single trial has been initiated against security officers, despite strong evidence of torture and murder. Most recently, a rapid amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure ensured that notifications received by the police could remain unprocessed for any length of time.

The state uses all ways and means at its disposal to put pressure on “disloyal” workers, teachers, employees, students, and parents. A standardized database is currently being set up to manage the comprehensive record of the opponents. Meanwhile, leaks from high officials reveal plans to set up internment camps and eyewitnesses report that state “*sanatoriums and recreational centers*” across the country had been temporarily converted into camps during autumn. The wiretap of a conversation by *Mikalaj Karpeankau*, head of GUBOPiK (Police Directorate for Corruption and Organized Crime), which dates back to the end of October, the day of the “no prisoners” speech by Lukashenka, in which former calls for the use of weapons against demonstrators, sent particularly notable ripples across the community. *Karpeankau* now commands the Interior Ministry's troops as a Vice Minister. Another leak revealed murder assignments by Lukashenka's targeting people in the EU.

According to reports, the regime is using the coronavirus as a weapon by penning prisoners together and denying medical treatment to the sick. On the other hand, COVID-19 is used on a case-by-case basis to justify restrictions on public life when it benefits the authorities — such as the closure of the western land borders before Christmas.

Under the surface

The democracy movement in the country has become much more decentralized but also more flexible. Some call it “*grass-roots democracy*”, others “*guerilla opposition*”. But despite inflammatory statements and official reports about prevented terrorist attacks, the protest remains overwhelmingly peaceful. Instead of the Sunday rallies in the center of *Minsk*, there are hundreds of small to medium-sized local parades and protest actions by neighborhood, professional and social groups, on different times and days, which keep the “flame of resistance” burning. People play a dangerous cat-and-mouse game with the authorities during their “walks” or when putting up white-red-white symbols in all conceivable places, shapes, and sizes. Numerous arrests continue — almost 170 people on January 31, mainly in *Minsk*.

Initiatives, activists, and groups of the *Coordination Council* are active nationwide to strengthen independent trade unions, support individual strikes and the neighboring communities. A lot of energy goes into securing evidence of crimes committed by officials and security forces.

The mood alternates between giving up on the one hand — over 20,000 people have left the country — and the dogged fighting spirit on the other. In between lies the million-strong silent hope for the breakthrough. The structural changes that made the “*Belarusian Summer*” happen in 2020 — changes in values, changed economic structure, increased levels of awareness, regime's lack of resources to fulfill the old social contract — and the horror in the face of sheer violence have not disappeared. People know that there is no going back to the supposed “stability” of earlier years and that a victory by Lukashenka would lead to a relentless “counter-revolution” — some experts warn of a “*European North Korea*”. As the ambient

temperature rises, so does the expectation of a revival of the large-scale demonstrations. *Tsikhanouskaya's* foreign policy advisor *Franak Viachorka* expects a new wave of mobilization as early as February and telegram channels as now assessing the readiness of the people as well as suitable formats.

The democracy movement in exile has expanded at its main locations in *Vilnius* and *Warsaw*, and *Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's* staff moved to a larger office in January. Social initiatives, solidarity funds, and telegram channels also operate from there. This is intended to strengthen the movement's sense of community and extinguish internal conflicts and fend off external attempts at driving the wedges in between their ranks. In mid-January, a mini-series on Belarusian state television entitled "*The Lies by the Fugitives*" portrayed the democratic exile as a snake-pit of squabbling cowardly amateurs and showed slandering videos of the former members of the opposition, mainly from the solidarity fund and the "*Strana dla Zhyzni*" initiative.

Both the representatives of *Viktor Babaryka's* team and parts of the coordination council around Presidium members *Volha Kavalkova* and *Paval Latushka* work in exile in *Warsaw*. The latter had created the "*National Anti-Crisis Management*" (NAM) in autumn, which is similar in structure to a government in exile and above all offers a place to "defectors" of the regime. Despite certain similarities to *Tsikhanouskaya's* "Cabinet", both structures can usefully complement each other. Millions of Belarusians see *Tsikhanouskaya* be the president-elect, both within the framework of the democracy movement and as a personalized demand for peaceful change and free elections. At the same time, there is a need for people with administrative experience, who also address target groups close to the regime and who can shape politics beyond the transitional period.

It was not only of symbolic importance that the leaders of both staffs, as well as the *Coordination Council* and the *Tsepkalo* couple, went to a retreat near Vilnius at the end of January to discuss their strategy for the new year. In addition to supporting victims of repression and local communities, as well as creating a safe tool for expressing opinions, the cooperation focuses on building up the protests and pressure on the regime.

The All-People's Assembly

Lukashenka, on the other hand, is already the winner. The year 2021 was dubbed by him the year of "national unity", which can safely be assumed as a reiterated rejection of any dialogue with the opposition. While his statements on further developments seemed ambiguous and contradicting at the end of the year, it is now becoming clear that he wants to stall the constitutional reform for as long as possible. The first draft should not be available until the end of the year; more specific provisions are yet to be determined. Then the text would have to be subjected to discussion and a referendum would have to be called. This could drag on until the end of the current term and *Lukashenka* is no longer even ruling out staying in office after 2025.

This also puts the high expectations of the upcoming "*All Belarusian People's Assembly*" into perspective. This is a large gathering of some two and a half thousand delegates, who convene every five years to discuss the "*main directions and values for the development of the state*" and to "*work out a plan for the economic and social development of the country*". They will meet again on February 11 and 12, and at the beginning of December, *Lukashenka* had announced that he would promote the assembly to the rank of a constitutional body. It was only natural that he wanted to make himself its chairman in order to step down as president but still remain in power. He took this back, however, and observers expect that Congress will most likely issue him a pass to change the constitution as he sees fit. The delegates are clearly sterile loyalists,

although “constructive opponents” are invited to participate. This could be, for example, *Yuri Vaskrasensky*, a former member of the *Babaryka’s* initiative group and founder of the “*Round Table of Opposition Forces*”, whose colleague *Andrei Lankin* recently announced the creation of a political party. He had proposed that an amnesty be granted for the political prisoners by the Assembly. But *Lukashenka* refused, pointing out that there were no political prisoners in *Belarus*. With the exception of a possible moratorium on the death penalty, hardly any significant developments are to be expected, and, according to a representative online survey of the urban population, only 16 percent of *Belarusians* believe that the meeting expresses the opinion of the people. *Latushka* threatened to blacklist all delegates and activists while launching the “*Skhod*” initiative, a democratic counter-effort at a “true people’s assembly”, which is currently recruiting participants online and also advising them on future issues in the country.

Lukashenka’s tactics are evidently based on demobilizing his opponents by means of attrition. A major step, such as the creation of a new super-committee or even the announcement of a binding timetable for constitutional reform or even his resignation, on the other hand, could potentially drive dozens of thousands quickly back into the streets. But the people of *Belarus* are not the only thing he should be keeping an eye on. Most recently, the Russian leadership, in particular, seemed to be pushing for observing the plan for an orderly change of power that was allegedly agreed between *Putin* and *Lukashenka* in *Sochi* in September. According to insiders, the six-month period had been discussed and high-ranking visitors from *Moscow*, such as Foreign Minister *Lavrov* at the end of November, are said to have “reminded” *Lukashenka* of this.

Dependence on Moscow

But *Russia* is primarily interested in safeguarding its strategic interests. Specific instruments such as constitutional reform, but also support for people, were put in the back seat. *Moscow’s* position on *Lukashenka* remains ambivalent. A one-hour prime-time feature interview by the first Russian TV channel at the beginning of January sought to highlight his “human side”, with *Lukashenka* calling *Putin* his “only friend”. The latter must only feel partial affection, but for the moment he is probably not completely dissatisfied with the way things are in the neighboring country. *Lukashenka* has cut ties to the west and is now, for better or for worse, hooked on *Moscow’s* support. On January 1st, the second tranche of the USD 1.5 billion loans was transferred to *Minsk* and an agreement on the energy prices was reached earlier than expected. While *Minsk* protested violently against a lower oil price last year, *Lukashenka* only said that it “could have been fairer”.

Kremlin, too, should be taking notice of the fact that the protests in *Belarus* are not anti-Russian and that the support for *Lukashenka* damages *Russia’s* reputation among the *Belarusian* public. But for the time being it is more important for *Russia* that *Lukashenka* delivers, for example in the form of consent to the diversion of *Belarusian* exports from the Baltic to Russian ports, the agreement of closer cooperation with the *Russian National Guard*, or an ambitious annual plan for military exercises. *Lukashenka* also stressed his readiness for deeper integration within the Union state, and there are ongoing multi-level negotiations. Although *Minsk* is fundamentally aware of the risk of a gradual loss of sovereignty, the economic situation, in particular, could force concessions to be made, for example in selling large state-owned companies such as *GrodnoAzot* and *Belaruskali*, which have long warranted strong interests from the Russian side.

A leaked concept for building a pro-Russian party in *Belarus* revealed at the end of the year that the *Kremlin* is desperately looking for a suitable alternative to *Lukashenka*, but *Moscow* traditionally relies on people rather than structures. Knowing that a *Kremlin*-friendly force could be far more dangerous to him than any pro-European opposition, *Lukashenka* has

always been good at monopolizing this area. The leaders of the democracy movement, on the other hand, are likely to have disqualified themselves as interlocutors for *Moscow* because of openly sympathizing with *Navalny's* supporters during the demonstrations on January 23 and 31. It is still difficult to predict how the protests there will affect *Belarus*. On the one hand, *Putin* and *Lukashenka* are becoming more synchronized in the narrative of a major Western conspiracy and the *Kremlin* will hardly advocate a dialogue solution in *Belarus* when arresting thousands of demonstrators itself. On the other hand, should *Russia* slip into a deeper crisis, attention to *Belarus* might wane. If the situation calmed down quickly, however, it could be assumed that the *Kremlin* would also increase the pressure on *Lukashenka* again in the medium term.

The West and the Rest of the World

With the third *EU* sanctions package on December 17th, the list of persons got as big as it was after 2010. Seven companies were also added this time, but there were hardly any positive reactions from *Belarus*. While the regime maintains, sanctions are generally meaningless and inefficient (at the same time having already announced a “symmetrical response”), the democratic forces see the package as a step in the right direction, albeit falling short of the promise. The case of the Norwegian company *Yara* clearly shows that economic pressure can definitely make a difference. The chemical producer is one of *Belaruskali's* main customers and has succeeded in reinstating the dismissed strike participants. *Tsikhankouskaya* and *Latushka*, when making international appearances, therefore demand much tougher measures against the regime and its “wallets”.

Among *Tsikhankouskaya's* most recent international meetings, the informal meeting of the *UN Security Council*, the *OSCE* round with the ambassadors of the *EU* member states, the first official meeting with state representatives of *Ukraine* in *Lublin* format, and the invitation by *Joe Biden* are particularly noteworthy. *Atlantic Council* experts advised the new *US* president to receive her during his first 100 days in office. As recently as December, *Congress* had adopted an updated version of the *Belarus Democracy Act*, which also provides for the possibility of sanctioning Russian *Lukashenka* supporters. It is still unclear, whether the newly appointed ambassador *Julie Fisher* will actually travel to *Minsk*.

The withdrawal of the ice hockey world championship, which *Belarus* was to host together with *Latvia*, sent a few ripples. The decision of January 18th was preceded by a highly controversial visit by *IIHF* President *René Fasel* to *Minsk*. Although this, like the withdrawal of the “*Modern Pentathlon World Cup*”, has few immediate practical consequences, the symbolic effect should not be underestimated, bearing in mind the great importance attribute to sports by the regime and *Lukashenka* personally.

Economy

At the turn of the year, some performance figures for 2020 became available. Inflation reached 7.4 percent and foreign trade collapsed by 15 percent. GDP contracted by 1.2 percent, which is only a slight decrease in regional comparison. On the one hand, the economy was significantly less burdened because the country waived a corona lockdown. On the other hand, there are indications that the figures have been embellished, as the production of state-owned companies is also reflected in the GDP, although their produce was not sold but rather warehoused. The national debt rose from 41.5 to 54 percent of GDP, mainly due to the sharp devaluation of the *Belarusian ruble* — over 90 percent of the debt is held in foreign currencies.

A survey conducted by the Belarusian institute *Satio* among 420 companies in the state and private sector paints a gloomy picture, reporting that two-thirds assess the *status quo* and the prospects as poor. Without the political crisis getting resolved, recovery can only be expected in several-years' time. Refinancing the loans will also be difficult under the current conditions. The country's currency reserves have melted to around seven billion US dollars, which, according to expert estimates, would cover less than three months of import. There is only limited access to western and international lenders, and the final tranche of the joint USD 1.5 billion loans from *Russia* and the Eurasian Development Bank is getting disbursed in the coming weeks. According to the *Berlin Economic Team*, however, the "hard economic data" hardly reflects any effect of the political crisis and the strikes in late summer. Major slumps are therefore not foreseeable in the coming period, rather the situation will continue to deteriorate at the same pace. Cuts in the social sector are already being discussed and taxes were increased and introduced at the beginning of the year. This also affects the IT sector, which recently used to generate half of economic growth and is particularly affected by emigration.

Outlook

It is difficult to forecast the developments over the next weeks and months. On the one hand, the regime will do its utmost to violently suppress the visible manifestations of protest and to drive its opponents into internal and external emigration by creating an atmosphere of fear. At the same time, it tries to somehow hold back on violence so as not to mobilize the people even more as it happened in August. But even with the considered actions by the authorities, the "pressure in the boiler" builds up. Belarus maintains a historical self-image of a "guerilla nation" and it is not only the regime who calls its opponents fascists — the people also repeatedly draw parallels between what is happening today and the *Nazi* occupation.

So it cannot be ruled out that people will fight back united and the situation will escalate. A reconciliation of society with *Lukashenka*, however, is hardly imaginable. In the capital city of the country, whose government has been declaring security, stability, and order to be its trademark for decades, not many dares to go out into the streets today. People get arbitrarily arrested for going for a walk at the wrong time. On the other hand, as a *Minsk*-based political scientist put it, "in summer people got the first real taste of freedom." This memory and the awareness of belonging to a majority, of having voted out the "eternal president" and of now growing together as a society seems still be rooted deeper than can be handled by way of denial on part of the regime. A resurgence of the mass protests is therefore quite possible. But it is not (currently) a given. Several factors would presumably have to come together. On the one hand, the exiled democratic forces must not squabble over positions or legitimacy, but put personal agendas and ambitions aside and maintain focus.

But what matters most is what happens in Belarus itself. *Tsikhonouskaya's* "ultimatums" only triggered temporary mobilization in late autumn and further unsuccessful repetition of this would cause major frustration damage. It is difficult to presume, which event can ultimately become a new trigger for dissatisfaction, anger, and willingness to take to the streets. Anniversaries, such as the founding day of the Belarusian People's Republic on March 25, are traditional occasions for rallies. Both an unexpected release of prominent political prisoners and them getting extended sentences, especially *Viktar Babaryka*, whom people still see as the most promising presidential candidate in polls and who is now to be tried by the *Supreme Court*, could have a mobilization effect. *Tsikhonouskaya's* return to Belarus, however, hardly seems sufficient, also since she would immediately end up imprisoned. There are no signs of an immediate collapse of the economy. Therefore, many point out that sooner or later the regime is bound to make mistakes again, especially when *Lukashenka* feels more secure. This

could then be a crucial moment. But even if hundreds of thousands take to the streets again, that alone does not address the issue of how it plays out.

That is why many activists and initiatives are already focusing their energy more strongly towards developing ideas, projects, and platforms that go beyond the current crisis and build a foundation of democratic culture and education for the future of the country. Meanwhile, it is important that Belarus continues to receive international attention and support, especially from the *EU*. A solution to the political crisis is a must so that our neighboring country can develop in a stable, democratic, and prosperous way in order to realize its social and economic potential. The fraudulent election happened six months ago on February 9th — and the Sunday before that was proclaimed the *“Day of Solidarity with Belarus”*.

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