

Four scenarios for Belarus by the end of 2022

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Executive Summary

This Policy Paper outlines four possible scenarios for the future of the political system in Belarus by the end of 2022. The scenarios are based on two key drivers that are crucial for political developments in Belarus: the level of social mobilization and democratic transition.

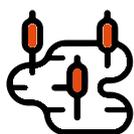
The Policy Paper creates a framework for alternative thinking and outlines important insights, opportunities, and risks. It also formulates desirable normative options for political developments in Belarus in the upcoming twelve months and gives policy recommendations on how to make them possible.

Based on the findings and tendencies distilled from the scenarios, the following goals are recommended for various actors to be reached in the upcoming 12 months:

- **Goal 1:** The EU / West has a comprehensive strategy to tackle the Belarusian crisis
- **Goal 2:** Civic groups, society in Belarus, and the democratic opposition in exile remain capable and relevant actors
- **Goal 3:** Russia is ready for informal consultations on the Belarusian issue with the West

Overview of Scenarios

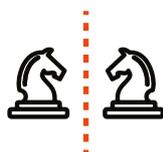
“Stable Swamp”



democratic transition: low | social mobilization: low

Repressions along with a lack of democratic prospects lead to political apathy in society. The regime manages to consolidate its positions, preventing splits in the state apparatus and among elites. State authorities, therefore, decide that there is no need to conduct democratic reforms or make other concessions to the protesters' demands. **“Black Swans”**: none

“Bitter Entrenchment”



democratic transition: low | social mobilization: high

Having decided against a referendum on constitutional changes, Lukashenka moves to enact a new Belarusian constitution which is passed by the parliament in August 2022. As a result, there are no real political changes which could lead to any sort of democratic transition. Nevertheless, the society remains highly mobilized, even though on a small scale.

“Black Swan”: a high-profile opposition figure (e.g., Babaryka) falls ill with COVID-19 and dies in custody

“Belazakhstan”



democratic transition: high | social mobilization: low

Faced with a strong escalation of the migration crisis, Lukashenka strikes a separate deal with Poland to mutually ease pressure. A mobilization campaign by the democratic forces fails and the new constitution enables him to stay in power from a new super-position. This legally paves a way for pluralization after his resignation at an uncertain point in the future.

“Black Swans”:

- Polish border guards die in a clash with young migrants on the Belarusian-Polish boarder
- in a cyberattack on infrastructure by cyber partisans, people die when the power supply to Belarusian hospitals is cut off

“Transition by Mistake”



democratic transition: high | social mobilization: high

Lukashenka is removed from power by an internal coup which caught Russia and the West by surprise. External powers now actively support a negotiated transition, while society is becoming highly mobilized. Societal groups are engaged in negotiations on a political transition. The goal of an organized roundtable is to prepare for free and fair elections in 2023.

“Black Swans”:

- several local officials in the Belarusian regions, who sabotaged falsifications during the constitutional referendum, die in jail allegedly from torture
- rumors are spreading that the purge would affect law enforcement agencies, which triggers a group of officials including the KGB and Ministry of Internal officials to organize a coup against Lukashenka

Chapter 1: Methodology

Belarus is experiencing the gravest political crisis since its independence, causing serious threats both to society and to European security. Even though many internal processes remain non-transparent and hardly predictable, there is a need for politicians, civil society, and business structures to have a vision of possible short-term future narratives for Belarus.

Twelve experts from Belarus, Poland, and Germany worked for seven weeks (September-November 2021) on four scenarios for Belarus by the end of 2022. The goal of the paper is not to predict the future, but to create a framework for alternative thinking, to provoke thoughts on possible events, trends, opportunities, and threats, and what different futures might be possible for Belarus. This paper should also help to understand possible steps to escape the current impasse and to be better prepared for the future.

All the narratives meet the criteria of plausibility and answer the question “Might this scenario occur?” instead of “Will this really take place?”. The goal was to achieve a certain balance between reality and innovation. To prevent a permanent repetition of past trends and increasing or decreasing their likelihood for the future, experts elaborated on key events that might lead to a qualitative change of situation.

The **main question** was formulated as follows:

“What will the Belarusian political system look like by the end of 2022?”

The scenarios are based on two key drivers that are crucial for political developments in Belarus: the level of social mobilization and democratic transition. By focusing on the Belarusian political system, the power of internal changes and opportunities in Belarus was explicitly acknowledged. Belarus was not perceived then as a passive object of EU-Russia relations.

Four scenarios will be presented,

1. starting with an overview of situation,
2. then describing the path from today towards the end of 2022,
3. and finally characterizing the political system in Belarus in 2022 and its impact on six relevant areas.
4. In conclusion, major insights and thought-provoking tendencies are summarized and consequences for current decision-making are drawn.

1.1. Key Assumptions

Prior to the work on scenarios, the expert groups analyzed the present situation in Belarus. The goal was to formulate key assumptions about the current state of the Belarusian political system which could be taken as a point of reference. The experts drew on the following assumptions applicable to the current situation. **First**, the long-standing social contract has been broken for most of Belarusian society. **Second**, Lukashenka cannot win free and fair elections. **Third**, constitutional reform is an important milestone indicative of the regime's plans for the future of the political system.

Looking forward to the end of 2022, the following key assumptions were formulated:

- On Society** It is unlikely that free and fair elections will happen in 2022. It is also unlikely that the old social contract will be restored. However, a new social contract could be formed, one that puts security and survival before people's well-being and democratic values. Belarusian society will remain divided between the proponents of change and those who support the status quo, including employees of the state sector and representatives of the power vertical. Those who support democratic change are forced to leave the country. Most of the population does not trust the regime. As for the repressions, they will most likely continue if the society remains active
- On Russia** Russia remains the main external factor in the Belarusian crisis. The Kremlin will support Lukashenka for as long as he matches Russia's interests. For Putin's Russia, a democratic change in Belarus via protest is unacceptable. From the Belarusian side, including both the people of Belarus and the Lukashenka regime, there is no desire to create common political institutions with Russia
- On the Economy** Economic stability is preserved throughout 2022. There is no collapse to expect, but stagnation is highly likely
- On the Regime and Lukashenka** The regime relies on repressions as the instrument to control the situation. Lukashenka needs loyal security services to maintain stability. Lukashenka is determined to do anything to stay in power, as this is directly linked to his personal safety. Lukashenka is not ready for negotiations on the redistribution of power and power transition. The decision-making process within the existing circle of political elites is not transparent
- On Regime Change** Constitutional reform is one of the indicators of change. It would signal whether the regime intends to orchestrate a cosmetic reform or is preparing some path for the transition of power, possibly after the end of Lukashenka's term

1.2. Key Drivers

Experts outlined the most influential forces and factors which affect the political system in Belarus now and at the end of 2022. They took into consideration the macroeconomic situation, including the budget and financial stability, and the impact of sanctions. They also examined the internal situation, considering the actions of the Lukashenka regime, possible developments within the political elites, and the probability of transformations through the referendum and constitutional reform, or the absence of such. In looking at Belarusian society, experts considered the level of self-organization and mobilization of civil society and newly emerged grass roots initiatives, as well as the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians. Finally, among external factors Belarus's relations with the West and Russia, including economic relations, West-Russia relations, and the role of diasporas were outlined.

After identifying political, economic, social, and technological factors, experts ranked them in order of importance and uncertainty in **givens** and **drivers**. They considered both critically important and very uncertain factors in the near term. These drivers are key to the disparate development of scenarios.

For this analytical exercise, the following drivers were chosen as the most unpredictable and important:

- Protest mood on the ground and the level of social mobilization in Belarus
- The actions of the West, or the lack thereof, and subsequent shift of international attention elsewhere
- Potential for democratic reforms, including constitutional changes and establishing of new political parties and redistribution of powers
- The possibility of negotiating on political prisoners
- Migration crisis or other provocative events
- Negotiations between the West and Russia on Belarus

Selection of Key Drivers

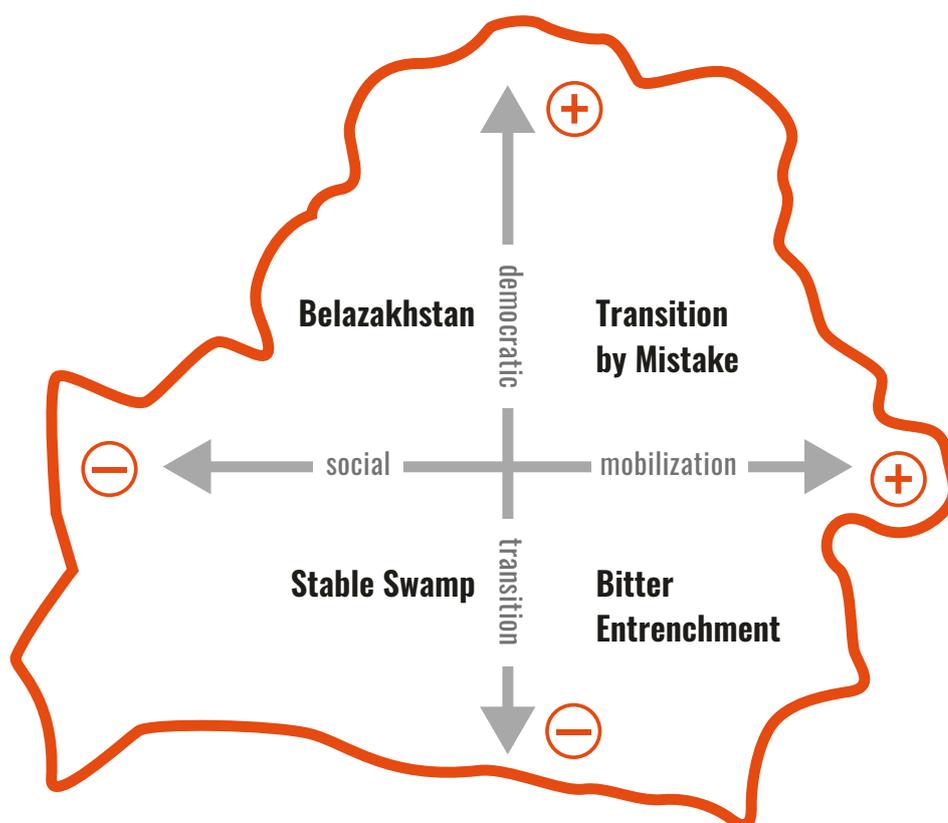
To narrow down the drivers for the purpose of the exercise, two drivers that are most crucial for the further development of the political situation in Belarus were selected:

- **Social mobilization** (ranging between consolidated protest action and political apathy)
- **Democratic transition** (representing democratic reforms and concessions of the regime to the demands of protesters, or the absence of such)

The social mobilization driver represents society's request for changes, while the democratic transition driver essentially represents the response of the authorities to democratic demands. Essentially, the interplay of these two drivers sums up the most likely scenarios of future political developments in Belarus by the end of 2022.

The combination of drivers was designed in a Scenario Compass (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Scenario Compass



1.3. “Black Swans”

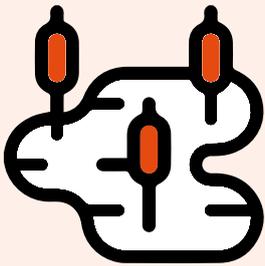
All scenarios introduce a **“Black Swan”** 🦩 factor. “Black Swans” are rare and unpredictable events with severe consequences. They speed up developments and illustrate which events could become game-changers.

1.4 Areas of Application

Each scenario analyzes the consequences of interplay of the abovementioned drivers in the following areas:

1. Actions of Russia, given its geopolitical significance for Belarus and the level of involvement in Belarusian affairs
2. Actions of the West, mainly EU policy towards Belarus
3. Actions of the Lukashenka regime and political elites
4. Actions of democratic actors (political opposition and civil society actors), both those operating inside the country and those in exile
5. Reaction of private businesses operating in Belarus, both Belarusian-owned and international
6. Situation in Belarusian regions, as a representation of nationwide social developments beyond just the capital and major cities

Chapter 2: Four Scenarios for Belarus-2022



"Stable Swamp"

democratic transition: low
social mobilization: low

Repressions along with a lack of democratic prospects lead to political apathy in society. The regime manages to consolidate its positions, preventing splits in the state apparatus and among elites. State authorities, therefore, decide that there is no need to conduct democratic reforms or make other concessions to the protesters' demands.

 "Black Swans": none

“Stable Swamp”

democratic transition: ↓
social mobilization: ↓

Situation

Social mobilization hits a low again, like in the previous years of political apathy during the years of Lukashenka’s rule. The 2020 post-electoral protest is viewed as another failed attempt to get rid of authoritarian rule. Lukashenka seems to maintain his grip on power once again, international attention shifts elsewhere, and Belarusians conclude that there is no prospect for change. People retreat towards “dachas,” kitchen talks, and the private sphere. The grassroots solidarity and resistance initiatives that were formed in 2020-2021 lose supporters and become obsolete.

In these circumstances, democratic transition is absent. The regime feels confident that it managed to stabilize the situation. Constitutional reform is conducted as a cosmetic measure, de facto preserving all powers of the president. Although the authorities do not fear the protest anymore, they take precautionary measures to eliminate risks of future attempts to destabilize the state system, expanding the discretionary powers of law enforcement agencies, ideologists, and local administrations. Political prisoners are a subject of negotiations with the West. Further escalation of repressions is no longer necessary as society does not attempt to change the situation.

Timeline

The materialization of this **scenario does not require the occurrence of certain events, including “Black Swans.”** 🦩 Rather, it implies the absence of these. There are no events that spike new waves of protest activity, no visible progress on the way to the democratic transition, and no signs of weakness of the regime. The

focus of international attention shifts elsewhere and external support for the pro-democratic movement becomes less tangible. Lukashenka feels safe and prepares to release political prisoners as a gesture of good will, indicating that the situation has stabilized. Should a “Black Swan” appear, it would bring instability to the system and give the opposition a chance to challenge the status quo once again.

Actions of Russia

Russia continues to support Lukashenka. The Kremlin considers such an arrangement least threatening compared to other scenarios and, therefore, moves more slowly on political integration and does not insist on the constitutional reform that was earlier considered a path to strengthening pro-Russian political groups in Belarus. At the same time, Russia introduces more conditionality on the economic support of the Belarusian regime, limiting assistance that might have been previously necessary to ensure the regime’s survival during the post-electoral crisis.

Actions of the West

The EU maintains the rhetoric of condemning human rights violations and remains consistent with non-recognition of the legitimacy of the Lukashenka regime. Although the EU does not engage directly in negotiations with the government in Minsk, some EU member states consider reestablishing diplomatic ties or even advocate for less pressure on the regime to secure pragmatic economic and security interests. Eventually the EU decides to ease some restrictions, following the calls of member states, such as Belgium’s request to ease sanctions against the potash

industry. The EU gradually reduces support to pro-democratic Belarusian actors abroad. In summary, the sanctions formally remain in place and the EU expresses concerns about the lack of democratic change in the country, yet de facto there appear loopholes in implementing sanctions and pressure on Belarus decreases.

Actions of the Regime / Elites

The elites feel that the status quo is secure and therefore Lukashenka's leadership is not questioned. The process for the transition of power is pushed beyond 2022. The regime is successful in bypassing sanctions by reorganizing state companies, through informal lobbying, and opaque schemes. The manufactured migration crisis on the EU border comes to an end as pressure from the EU decreases. The regime does not allow for any steps towards liberalization, such as the registration of new or previously liquidated NGOs, to prevent the risk of new social mobilization. The authorities view private businesses with caution, drawing on previous experience when entrepreneurs expressed sympathy for the democratic protest.

Actions of Democratic Actors

Pro-democratic forces do not manage to keep Belarus in the focus of the international attention. Contacts between the democratic groups in exile and in Belarus weaken. Belarusians who fled the country are busy either settling into their new lives abroad or are seeking opportunities to return to Belarus. The opposition finds itself in growing isolation due

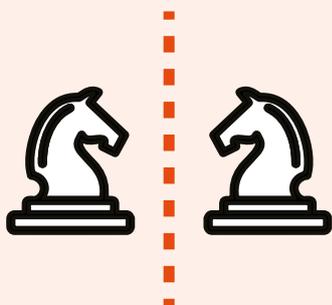
to a lack of work deliverables, as no negotiations with the regime took place and they begin to receive less political and financial support abroad. Society does not respond to calls by the opposition to participate in boycotts, protests, or events like independent observation during constitutional reform processes. The options for pro-democratic activity inside Belarus remain very limited.

Reaction of Business

Business tends to be apolitical. Investment focuses on labor intensive industries and does not invest long-term. Local business is strongly supported to diversify new markets and avoid sanctions. Economic emigration of qualified labor and a lack of young people in the workforce becomes a visible problem. Some businesses previously involved in supporting the pro-democratic protest seek relocation, however others may consider returning to Belarus as the situation inside the country stabilizes and because it is costly to relocate employees along with their families.

Situation in Belarusian Regions

People in regional cities and rural areas are more concerned about economic survival and demographic problems than the abstract concept of democracy. The most active protesters who were not imprisoned lost their jobs, as most of employment options lay in the state sector. The independent media and civil society landscape in the regions deteriorate further due to a lack of donor funding but also due to the regime's excessive regulation of civil society initiatives throughout the country.



"Bitter Entrenchment"

democratic transition: low
social mobilization: high

Having decided against a referendum on constitutional changes, Lukashenka moves to enact a new Belarusian constitution which is passed by the parliament in August 2022. As a result, there are no real political changes which could lead to any sort of democratic transition. Nevertheless, the society remains highly mobilized, even though on a small scale.

🦢 "Black Swan":

- a high-profile opposition figure (e.g., Babaryka) falls ill with COVID-19 and dies in custody

“Bitter Entrenchment”

democratic transition: ↓
social mobilization: ↑

Situation

In 2022, the regime abandons its planned referendum on constitutional reform, fearing protests and social mobilization. After several delays and consultations with legal experts, Lukashenka announces in August that an entirely new constitution will be passed by parliament, in this way bypassing a referendum. This new constitution provides mostly cosmetic changes: it extends presidential terms from five to six years and lowers the age for presidential candidates to 25. Experts interpret this as Lukashenka planning a transfer of power to his son, Nikolay.

Yet, even though no changes have taken place, political mobilization of society in opposition to the regime remains high due to some internal events, most notably the death of a high-profile opposition figure (e.g., Babaryka) of COVID-19. Social mobilization is seen on a small scale. In factories where workers are forced to renegotiate their contracts to lower wages, small protests break out, usually met with repression. Other small types of protest continue, such as graffiti, displays of the white-red-white flag, etc. The authorities continue to arrest, fine, and torture individuals.

Timeline

At the onset of 2022, a new variant of COVID-19 emerges in the region directly affecting Belarus, which is already facing a dire situation due to the pandemic. This strain appears to be more resistant to the Sputnik vaccine, putting all Belarusians at risk. However, Lukashenka does nothing to address the new wave and the population is affected, particularly those in poor prison conditions. This includes

a **high-profile opposition figure** (e.g., Babaryka) who **falls ill with COVID-19 and dies in custody** 🦉 in March, apparently due to the lack of a proper medical help. The society and the international community are outraged. In April, the West imposes greater sanctions, closing loopholes from the previous round of sanctions. Lukashenka is forced to seek more support from Moscow and visits Vladimir Putin in June, where they discuss further integration.

Meanwhile, seeing the high mobilization and fearing serious protests, Lukashenka abandons the referendum on constitutional reform and instead calls on parliament to pass a new constitution for Belarus in August. This new constitution appears to consolidate Lukashenka's grip on the country and set up his son Nikolay as his successor in the future. This new constitution will enter into force one year later, in 2023.

Actions of Russia

Putin is angry with Lukashenka since no real political reforms have taken place to contain the protest or reduce social mobilization. Russia believes that Lukashenka will not be able to control the situation for long and fears a scenario where the political crisis could lead to a new revolution. The opposition figure's death in prison is just another sign to Putin that Lukashenka is making too many mistakes. During a summit where Putin and Lukashenka meet in June 2022, Putin makes more demands to Lukashenka – either transfer of power to a more pro-Russian force or integrate further. Lukashenka makes promises to Putin but returns to Minsk with no intention of keeping them. Nevertheless, dependence on Russia deepens. Belarus is forced to export

potash via Russia as a Russian product which is the only way to bypass EU sanctions. By the end of 2022, the Kremlin is extremely frustrated with Lukashenka and the situation with Belarus, but not yet ready to act.

Actions of the West

After the opposition figure's death in March, the West becomes more determined to punish Lukashenka. Certain loopholes in sectorial sanctions against oil and potash products are closed and they are determined to become more effective in putting pressure on the Belarusian economy. The EU increases its support for pro-democratic opposition and suggests to Tsikhanouskaya that she move her offices to Brussels for fear of her life and the lives of her colleagues. She is now under direct protection of the EU. Official recognition is given to Tsikhanouskaya, however her ability to effect change is still very limited. Belarusians continue to flee the country and protection is offered by EU countries, mainly Poland and Lithuania.

Actions of the Regime / Elites

The elites remain loyal to Lukashenka as he tightens his grip over the country. They are consolidated and the inner circle is focused on keeping Lukashenka in power. In their opinion, the repressions are working. The elites support the new constitutional change and see certain opportunities for themselves if Nikolay becomes president in 2029. Purges continue to take place to ensure further consolidation of the elites – even those loyal to Lukashenka. Security services, military and militia remain loyal to the regime. Repressions continue amidst growing apathy inside bureaucratic circles.

Actions of Democratic Actors

Inside Belarus: Democratic forces remain loosely organized. There is no leader of the democratic opposition. Civil society organizations (even those not related to politics) continue to be shut down and scattered. Still highly mobilized, the

society has no other choice but to self-organize, with small ad hoc protests online or in person and around certain issues (e.g., women's rights, LGBT, response to COVID-19, environmental issues, etc.). Even though some activists have fled, many have stayed in the country and remain ready to participate in the next round of protests, when such an opportunity arises.

Outside of Belarus: Tsikhanouskaya and Latushka keep the topic of Belarus high on the international agenda. Tsikhanouskaya's office is moved to Brussels for her protection. At the same time, she becomes further distanced from Belarusians on the ground. Exile opposition groups agree less on what actions are necessary regarding Belarus and thus become less influential overall.

Reaction of Business

Such a situation is too unstable for private businesses and especially SMEs. Due to the stagnant economic situation, Lukashenka goes after private businesses by raising taxes. Many businesses start moving their offices abroad and foreign capital dries up. After the constitutional changes it appears that Lukashenka will be in power for a long time and the political instability remains with him. This discourages any new investment into the country. IT professionals continue to leave, contributing to brain drain and making it even harder for IT businesses to find qualified professionals.

Situation in Belarusian Regions

Protest activity in the regions is like that in Minsk and the rest of the country. Repressions continue and civil society activities are minimal. However, outbreaks of dissatisfaction take place at workplaces and factories but are quickly dealt with by the authorities. Certain issues become more prominent after gaining relevance during last years: women's rights, harsh laws on minor drugs, personal safety, vaccinations, etc. As a result, civic groups organized around these topics gain prominence as well and try to act in the regions.



"Belazakhstan"

democratic transition: high
social mobilization: low

Faced with a strong escalation of the migration crisis, Lukashenka strikes a separate deal with Poland to mutually ease pressure. A mobilization campaign by the democratic forces fails and the new constitution enables him to stay in power from a new super-position. This legally paves a way for pluralization after his resignation at an uncertain point in the future.

🦢 "Black Swans":

- Polish border guards die in a clash with young migrants on the Belarusian-Polish boarder
- in a cyberattack on infrastructure by cyber partisans, people die when the power supply to Belarusian hospitals is cut off

“Belazakhstan”

democratic transition: ↑
social mobilization: ↓

Situation

The constitutional referendum created on-paper pluralism, but Lukashenka is still the ruler of Belarus in a new position as “secretary general of the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly.” The legal description of this position is vague, hence a future incumbent would likely have less power than he does now by virtue of his “background.” The position of president was weakened and is now occupied by a former minister after a “show” election.

Most people still want to see changes, but they are depressed and resigned because of rigorous repressions, disappointment with the disunited democratic leaders in exile, and feel betrayed by the international community. The opening of the borders and another wave of emigration released some “steam.”

Timeline

In autumn 2021, migration pressure from the Middle East escalates, aggravating the situation on the borders with Belarus, but mostly in South-Eastern Europe. The **death of Polish border guards in a clash with young migrants** 🐼 sparks anti-immigrant riots in Eastern Poland. While the EU is profoundly split on how to deal with the new crisis and mostly looks South, Warsaw strikes a separate deal with Minsk to protect the border and release some political prisoners in exchange for supporting the constitutional reform as way out of the crisis.

In spring 2022, the mobilization campaign of the democratic forces against the constitutional referendum fails over contradicting messages. Segments of the opposition radicalize. **In a cyberattack on infrastructure, people die when**

the power supply to Belarusian hospitals is cut off 🐼 and the regime blames cyber partisans (who deny this). Lukashenka becomes the de facto all-powerful head of the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly and presidential elections (featuring only pro-regime candidates) are held under conditions resembling martial law. After the new elections, the “Tsikhanouskaya-factor” loses its relevance to many people who are now depressed and disappointed.

Actions of Russia

Russia supports the referendum as a way forward but would have preferred to see Lukashenka leave for a more reliable crony rather than stay in power under a new label. Still, the situation plays in their favor since Minsk’s agreement with parts of the EU are very limited and will not inspire a new political thaw like in the pre-2020 years. Rhetorically, Minsk and Moscow keep up their common front against the “collective West.” With Lukashenka still unpopular and not having resources to reconcile with his people, the Kremlin keeps pressing for the implementation of the union programs to establish as many “facts on the ground” as possible to safeguard its interests in the economy, military, financial, legal, and cultural spheres.

Actions of the West

Practical interest in Western capitals to support democratic changes in Belarus shrinks when the EU’s focus shifts to a new big migrant crisis. The Union is split on how to deal with the refugees, arriving mostly via Turkey but also through Belarus. Therefore, despite harsh verbal criticism from European liberals, the Polish initiative to strike a deal with Minsk is de facto accepted by

most EU-members who recognize the dilemma. However, with the pandemic receding, the borders are essentially opened again, and many more pro-democratic citizens leave Belarus for the EU. Disaffected by the EU's disunity, the U.S. maintain their verbal support for Belarusian democracy and civil society but do not make it a priority, their focus being on China.

Actions of the Regime / Elites

Feeling more in control after the migration-deal with Poland, the regime makes repressions more targeted and releases more political prisoners after pardon pleas. With the new constitution adopted and "kinetic" political mobilization down due to fear and social depression, Lukashenka assumes a new position as head of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly to secure his rule beyond election cycles. The ballot in the following presidential vote is a sterile choice of pro-regime candidates. From his new position, Lukashenka keeps Russia's influence at bay while trying to reengage with the West economically. The *siloviki* stay loyal and enjoy their growing influence. This dissatisfies the administrative nomenclature, but they still hope for rewards and limited reforms in the new political setting. The "pockets of the regime" keep supporting Lukashenka, fearing a Russian takeover.

Actions of Democratic Actors

Inside Belarus: The remaining organized democratic actors are increasingly repressed and put survival first. This limits their scope of action to small community building exercises. Meanwhile, new "spoiler parties" and GONGOs appear, advocating for accepting the regime as a given and finding a way to get along with it. This blurs the lines and makes it ever more difficult for people to make choices.

Outside of Belarus: With Minsk and Warsaw negotiating the exacerbated refugee crisis, the democratic forces fight over the right approach to the constitutional referendum. They fail to formulate a common message, some calling

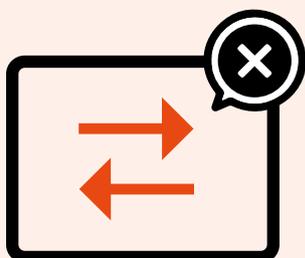
for street action while others urge people to not endanger themselves. Consequently, people in Belarus feel estranged. Neither they nor the international community still have much hope in political leadership from the exiled forces. This sparks radicalization among some of them. A cyber-attack on infrastructure in Belarus during which people die in a blacked-out hospital (cyber partisans claim this was not them but the regime itself) lays the groundwork for more state repression to "protect citizens from the terrorists."

Reaction of Business

Private business in Belarus feels increased pressure as the regime is looking both for more culprits to punish and new income sources. For Lukashenka entrepreneurs are a necessary evil to generate tax revenue. In response to the support for the protest movement by many private companies, businesses are pressured to join state unions and are structurally disadvantaged in comparison to state enterprises. Consequently, small firms need to find niches for their business models and are not satisfied with the constitutional referendum, which fails to address the core questions of structural reforms of the state and economic sector.

Situation in Belarusian Regions

On the one hand, returning to daily routines seems easier in the regions than in Minsk since the net of surveillance and repressions is not as tight. More social activities and even some level of exchange with local authorities remain possible. On the other hand, the continued lack of reforms and the worsening economic effect of sanctions is particularly palpable in regions that had already been struggling economically. Some respond to this by blaming the regime. Others nostalgically dream of "importing stability" through closer cooperation with Russia. The opening of borders for working abroad (both in Russia and the West) eases some of the economic hardship at a personal level.



"Transition by Mistake"

democratic transition: high
social mobilization: high

Lukashenka is removed from power by an internal coup which caught Russia and the West by surprise. External powers now actively support a negotiated transition, while society is becoming highly mobilized. Societal groups are engaged in negotiations on a political transition. The goal of an organized roundtable is to prepare for free and fair elections in 2023.

 "Black Swans":

- several local officials in the Belarusian regions, who sabotaged falsifications during the constitutional referendum, die in jail allegedly from torture
- rumors are spreading that the purge would affect law enforcement agencies, which triggers a group of officials including the KGB and Ministry of Interior officials to organize a coup against Lukashenka

“Transition by Mistake”

democratic transition: ↑
social mobilization: ↑

Situation

Lukashenka is in custody. After mishandling the constitutional referendum, he was removed from power by a coup initiated by regime insiders. The goal of negotiations between regime officials and democratic forces are free and fair elections in 2023. Political and economic reforms are on the agenda. Democratic forces aim for a political transition based on democratic procedures. Regime insiders seek personal security, status guarantees, and leading roles in the new political system.

All forms of non-governmental activity have increased, and a broad spectrum of political parties are emerging. This window of opportunity has made the Coordination Council more representative: it is now the main center of opposition.

Timeline

In 2021, the Lukashenka regime scaled up repressions. Civil society was forced abroad or went underground. But Lukashenka is aware that some political changes are necessary. He schedules the constitutional referendum for February 2022. The proposed changes are cosmetic, but the political campaign is a stress for the weakened state. At the same time, Lukashenka tries to kick off a new wave of regime mobilization against political opponents, alienating society and elites even more, since acceptance of the constitutional reform is low even among his supporters. Employers on the spot undermine the planned mobilization of employees to vote, and local officials sabotage falsifications. Lukashenka initiates further repressions and a purge among officials. He

imprisons numerous **local officials**, several **die in jail allegedly from torture** 🗑️. Regime insiders are afraid of becoming the next victims. Rumors that the purge would affect law enforcement agencies trigger them to act. **A group of officials including the KGB and Ministry of Interior (Mol) officials conspire to topple Lukashenka** 🗑️.

Actions of Russia

Moscow had been supporting Lukashenka, but the coup caught Russia by surprise. Russia seeks a negotiated transition to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence. Democratic forces also engage in talks with Russia. After initial negotiations at the OSCE in Vienna facilitated by Germany, France, and Russia, the roundtable relocates to Belarus. Russian diplomats talk with a broad spectrum of roundtable participants to maintain leverage in Belarus after the political transition. The Kremlin seeks to ensure the final document commits to the realization of the “union programs” on further economic integration with Russia adopted on 4 November 2021.

Actions of the West

After the coup, Germany and France turn to Russia for talks on the transition of power in Belarus. To ensure Russia’s engagement, the EU and U.S. declare they will not propose EU and NATO membership for Belarus and will accept Belarusian-Russian economic integration. European diplomats are engaged in the domestic negotiation process and consultants offer advice on institution-building. EU politicians insist on free and fair elections in 2023 to safeguard democratization. In coordination with Russia, the West offers immediate financial support to the Belarusian government committed to holding

new elections. An international “Marshall Plan” is promised to incentivize reforms. Economic assistance is to be conditional on the implementation of reforms. All suspended sanctions will be lifted following free and fair elections.

Actions of the Regime / Elites

The failed referendum, a new wave of repression, deaths, and rumors of a purge trigger KGB and MoI officials to stage a coup. Many security officials had been discontented before and they felt insecure. The coup plotters prefer to rule from the backseat. They face a shortage of legitimacy and must manage the state and the economy. They launch a negotiation process that will lead to elections in 2023. Freedom from prosecution and quotas in the parliament for their newly-founded pro-regime party are core demands to provide for personal security. Most regime elites choose a wait-and-see approach. Some join the democratic forces. Many of those responsible for repressions leave the country.

Actions of Democratic Actors

Due to mass repressions, democratic actors were forced abroad, jailed, went underground, or were inactive. A limited public sphere remained and political apathy was widespread. But the coup triggers a new wave of social mobilization. Strong social ties, pandemic self-help networks, courtyard communities, and secret chats were quickly revived. New grassroots movements and NGOs are created. Emigres return to Belarus and shape social life. The Coordination Council is reorganized and becomes more inclusive. It represents democratic forces at the negotiation table and seeks to transform Belarus into a democracy based on the rule of law and social inclusivity while promoting economic reforms. But negotiations also bring to the fore ideological

differences and new political parties are being created. The diaspora ensures media attention is turned to the political negotiations and lobbies national governments to provide financial support for reforms in Belarus.

Reaction of Business

The coup took private businesses by surprise. As uncertainties were high, the business community kept a low profile until negotiations started. Private businesses then weighed their options and became more active. Businesses are suspicious of the security services because of administrative pressure and corporate raids. But they understand that regime insiders will play a crucial role in securing property rights. Therefore, it would be risky for them to support only the democratic forces. At the roundtable negotiations, businesses lobby for an economic liberalization program to be adopted in the final document. The business sector invests in various political parties as they have become major stakeholders in Belarus’s economy after the transition.

Situation in Belarusian Regions

The deaths of local government officials sent shock waves across the regions. Local discontent was on the rise as Lukashenka increased his stranglehold over the regions after August 2020. Despite skepticism towards the KGB and the MoI, local support was key to the coup’s success. Regime insiders and democratic forces believe the regions are crucial for political transition. Regional representatives receive a place at the negotiation table. The regions seek to reform the electoral system and local government. Regarding constitutional reform, the regions ask for more autonomy for local executives, more power over local budgets, and independent local councils.

Chapter 3:

Insights, Chances, Risks

3.1. Desirable Normative Option

The following goals were formulated as desirable and important for moving towards a pro-democratic solution of the Belarusian crisis by the end of 2022:

- Belarusian society sustains the motivation to support the democratic cause despite the lack of democratic changes in the past months and is ready to act when the possibilities appear
- Belarusian political system becomes more open to democratic societal demands and less monolithic
- Democratic forces in exile remain focused on practical solutions of the crisis and remain relevant actors in the eyes of the Belarusian society and international community
- The West has a strategy to support an inclusive solution of the crisis in Belarus and adheres to this strategy
- Russia is ready for informal consultations with the West regarding the Belarusian issue

3.2. Main Insights, Chances, and Risks

The following important tendencies and insights were formulated during the expert work on the scenarios. When formulating these tendencies, experts considered the desirable normative option.

General

- Current “stalemate” in the Belarusian crisis could be changed by “**Black Swans.**” At the same time, the “Stable Swamp” scenario illustrates a course of events that develop further as a trend without the interference of unpredictable factors
- Without a solution to the current crisis, the country will suffer a decrease in wealth and stability, and likely will be forced to provide **sovereignty trade-offs** in exchange for the Russian support that has ensured the regime’s survival
- **Internal instability** may lead to tensions both within the regime elite and within democratic forces. As a result, both sides may become too fragmented. The opposition then will have problems in pursuing democratic change and the regime

will not be open to any possible changes in the political structure. Both will be too focused on internal conflicts

- The **risk of a civil conflict** cannot be excluded if Russia reacts differently in the “Transition by Mistake” scenario and creates a loyal counter-coup body. A civil conflict might also be possible if parts of the domestic resistance / partisan movement become more violent
- Exaggerated expectations of the “**paradise after day X**” can lead to disillusionment in Belarusian society
- **Brain drain** from Belarus will continue

**On
Mobilization**

- The situation in the country and of external support can allow for continuous maintaining of the potential for future active social mobilization. Social ties might remain tight and functional in society; they might be of use after the future “day X”
- High mobilization does not necessarily mean mass street protests. Under current circumstances of continued repressions the activities were scaled down, however the request for democratic change persists
- Social mobilization throughout next year is likely to be preserved in the form of minor local actions or online activities, given the repressive environment
- Negotiations between the West and the Lukashenka regime could be perceived by Belarusians as a betrayal by the international community and lead to demobilization
- The combination of “high mobilization” and “democratic transition” is barely possible with Lukashenka in power
- Under current conditions, grassroots activities could be clustered around non-political issues, such as support for marginalized groups or solving local infrastructure problems. At the same time, the regime targets virtually any independent initiative, even environmental NGOs or shelters for domestic violence survivors

**On the
Elites,
Lukashenka,
Local
Authorities**

- The situation in Belarus is unsustainable due to the lack of resources, meaning the regime will likely make mistakes which in turn would open new opportunities for the opposition and social mobilization
- Lukashenka learned the lessons of 2020 and will very unlikely allow civil society to become strong again
- Belarusian elites might be more ready for dialogue on transition when provided with guarantees
- Both declining Russian support and the risk of losing sovereignty to Russia can make Belarusian elites more receptive to national dialogue
- Dissatisfaction with the civil administration while strengthening the presence of security officers in the administration can lead to outflow of professionals / cracks in the regime
- Long-term insecurity and instability can lead to the creation of some channels of communication between democratic forces abroad and regime insiders
- In the regions, where repressions are often lower, more cooperation with local authorities could be possible

- On Democratic Forces**
 - Democratic groups in exile might lose connection to society in Belarus
 - Disunity and loss of focus within and between democratic forces is another risk

- On the West**
 - If Belarus falls out of focus of international attention, democratic forces will most likely lose Western political support and political weight; Belarusian society might become demobilized feeling “left alone” in a battle it cannot win without external support
 - EU member states might seek a “pragmatic deal” with Minsk, especially due to the current migration crisis
 - A united voice by the West is an important factor for further depriving Lukashenka of legitimacy
 - Grey schemes and lobbying could be used by Minsk to avoid western sanctions
 - Provocations at the Belarusian border can lead to military escalation between Belarus and its EU-neighbours

- On Russia**
 - Russia can exploit Lukashenka’s mistakes and weaknesses to make him more receptive to the integration project and sovereignty trade-offs
 - Strong disagreements between Russia and Belarus can lead to cracks among Belarusian elites, which could increase the readiness of Russia for a controlled transition in Belarus. This could also force Lukashenka to make concessions to the EU
 - New international events or crises could make an agreement on Belarus between Russia and the West more likely
 - Lack of political control by any internal actor paves the way for Russia to intervene or consolidate pro-Russian political groups in Belarus
 - Russia may remain uninterested in agreeing to internal negotiation and become a spoiler in the process of a negotiated transition. This would be an effect of the assumption that any (even a negotiated) transition is a risky regime change where Russia loses influence over Belarus and Belarus shifts towards the West

Chapter 4:

Policy Recommendations

Based on the tendencies, insights, opportunities, and risks distilled from the scenarios, these are the goals and recommendations for the upcoming 12 months.

Goal 1: The EU / West has a comprehensive strategy to tackle the Belarusian crisis



Attention! If Belarus falls out of focus of international attention, democratic forces might lose their political weight, while Belarusian society would be demoralized and demobilized feeling “left alone”



Attention! A politically and economically unstable Belarus is a threat for European security



Attention! “Deals” between Lukashenka and the EU (e.g., on the migration crisis, or bargaining on political prisoners) can damage the image of the EU among Belarusians, while Russia could become a better example of a stable state for them

How to reach Goal 1?

EU

- Appoint a special **EU coordinator** for the resolution of the political crisis (either a EU member state or a political figure representing the EU Commission). The aims should be to formulate a **comprehensive mid-term EU strategy on Belarus**, monitor and analyze the situation in Belarus, assess efficiency of EU approaches and those of the international community, resolve contradictions among EU member states on the issue of Belarus, coordinate international efforts, and communicate with third countries
- The EU strategy on Belarus should adhere to the three core demands: release of political prisoners, national dialogue, and new elections. But **sanctions should not be the only EU leverage**. Sanctions should always be accompanied by a positive agenda such as **“The EU Economic Plan for a Democratic Belarus.”** A “carrot and stick” signal should be always sent together
- **The amount of financial aid should be commensurate with the size of sanction damage.** The plan of support should be wider than the current EU support package

that mostly focuses on the development of the private sector and EU-Belarus trade. Consider tailored support to society and business, starting from COVID-19 vaccinations to developing an economic support and investment package. This package should be designed to mitigate to worst “social collateral damage” in necessary future economic reforms and to make targeted investments in promising sectors

- National Parliaments**
- Engage with Belarusian diasporas
 - Focus on solidarity with political prisoners
 - Reform national legislation to make it more attractive for political immigrants from Belarus (visa, residence permit, employment legislation)
- OSCE, Munich Security Conference**
- Continue using the OSCE as a platform for engagement with Belarusian pro-democratic forces and Russia. Use other existing meeting platforms for representatives from different sides for informal contacts / exploring opportunities for inclusive dialogue
 - Work towards possible mediation and conducting of new elections in Belarus in accordance with OSCE / ODIHR standards
- U.S., Helsinki Commission**
- The Belarus caucus in U.S. Congress: lobby the Biden administration to keep Belarus on the agenda and include it in U.S.-Russia talks
 - Helsinki Commission: hearings and similar activities should bring more international media attention to Belarus – they will then be well received in Belarusian society as a sign of U.S. solidarity
- International Donors**
- Support Belarusian non-state think tanks, NGOs / foundations
 - Support long-term reporting on Belarus by independent media (e.g., grants for journalists reporting on specific topics), and fellowships for exiled Belarusian journalists at quality media in the EU / U.S.
- Think Tanks, Universities, Research Institutions**
- Support research on Belarus
 - Provide expertise and communicate policy recommendations to key media stakeholders and politicians (both in Belarus and abroad)
 - Provide more scholarships / fellowships for Belarusian scholars (not only for students, but also for researchers who lost their jobs or had to flee the country)
 - Facilitate translation of academic knowledge to broader public
 - Keep Belarus on the academic agenda (via lectures, workshops, networking events, Belarus panels at conferences)
- International Business, Business Associations**
- Develop international guidelines for doing business in Belarus with a focus on Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA)

Goal 2: Civic groups, society in Belarus and democratic opposition in exile remain capable and relevant actors



Attention! Without a crisis solution, Belarus might face political and / or economic collapse in the near term



Attention! Lukashenka and his regime will likely make mistakes – this might open new opportunities for democratic forces and social mobilization

How to reach Goal 2?

- International Media**
 - Maintain the spotlight on the work of Belarusian civic groups and diasporas
- Donors for Civil Society**
 - Maintain support for civic initiatives inside Belarus and for activists in exile
 - Consider flexibility in funding, including cryptocurrencies
 - Support diverse initiatives, avoiding consolidation of resources within a particular Belarusian initiative that might be willing to dominate the channel of distribution of funds towards fellow Belarusian activists, introducing a “hierarchical approach” and thus provoking divisions inside the pro-democratic community
 - Aim for strategic patience without expecting quick results, given the repressive environment in Belarus
 - Treat diaspora organizations like civil society organizations within the country
- Belarusian Diaspora**
 - Inform national governments and local opinion-makers on the situation in Belarus and formulate clear inputs
 - Develop cross-countries networks
 - Minimize division to focus on the common goal
- Think Tanks, Universities, Research Institutions**
 - Support research on Belarus for deeper understanding of internal processes
 - Engage independent Belarusian scholars and experts, particularly those who were affected by repressions and forced exile
- EU, Ukraine, Georgia**
 - Provide safety guarantees for political refugees who face intimidation by the Belarusian special services operating abroad. Protect activists from the regime’s attempts to target them through including them on Interpol lists
- IMF, EBRD**
 - Include independent Belarusian representatives as consultants, e.g., in current programs on Belarus

Goal 3: Russia is ready for informal consultations on the Belarusian issue with the West



Attention! Russia might become a spoiler in the process of a negotiated transition in Belarus, if any (even negotiated) transition is seen by Moscow as a risky regime change



Attention! Strong disagreements between Russia and Belarus might lead to cracks among Belarusian elites, which could increase Russia's readiness for a controlled transition in Belarus

How to reach Goal 3?

- Germany**
- Make reducing support to Lukashenka part of the agenda of bilateral talks between Berlin and Moscow
- U.S.**
- Make clear secondary sanctions that affect companies doing business with sanctioned Belarusian companies and individuals are possible – this could serve as a restraint for Russian counterparts
 - Include Belarus in strategic talks with Russia in close coordination with the EU and leading EU member states
- OSCE,
Munich
Security
Conference**
- Use these platforms (where Russia is a member) as platforms for informal communication
- International
Expert
Community**
- Circulate the idea that a democratic Belarus does not imply anti-Russian sentiments and a dramatic shift from Russia. Draw on public opinion polls of the past months that indicate that Belarusians stand for equally good relations with all neighbors. Explore whether the image of Russia in the eyes of Belarusians fluctuates when the Kremlin supports repressions in Belarus and continues their support for the Lukashenka regime

Policy Paper Team

Experts Belarus	Andrei Kazakevich , Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere" Anton Radnianski , Think Tank "Center for New Ideas" Katsiaryna Shmatsina , Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) Pavel Slunkin , European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR); former: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus
Experts Poland	Adam Reichardt , College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław Kacper Wanczyk , University of Warsaw; former: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga , Expert on Belarus; former: Researcher at a governmental Think Tank in Poland
Experts Germany	Fabian Burkhardt , Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg Daniel Krutzinna , Independent Consultant on Investments, Berlin; former: Advisor to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus Maryna Rakhlei , German Marshall Fund of the United States, Berlin Jakob Wöllenstein , Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Belarus, Vilnius Anonymous Expert
Methodology and Moderation	Maria Davydchyk , smart learning academy, Berlin
Paper Concept, Co-Moderation, Editing	Olga Dryndova , "Network for Belarus" / Arbeitskreis Belarus (Working Group on Belarus), DRA e.V., Berlin

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You can contact us via: olga.dryndova@austausch.org

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