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Crisis in Belarus: role of Russia and options for the West

Policy Brief | October 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Crisis in Belarus: role of Russia and options for the West

The Policy Brief analyzes possibilities of leveling the Russian influence in Belarus as one of the key factors affecting the Belarusian internal political crisis.

The Policy Brief contains an assessment of the current socio-political situation in Belarus, the role of Russia in it, and possible conditions for the Kremlin's refusal to support the Lukashenka regime.

Based on the findings, the West is advised to:

- develop a common EU/West strategy to resolve the Belarusian crisis
- appoint a EU Coordinator for crisis resolution in Belarus
- continue international delegitimization of the Belarusian authorities
- put Belarus on the EU-Russia talks agenda
- draw the “red line” for the Kremlin on the issue of Belarus
- work on reversible sanctions with a positive agenda
- return direct flights to Belarus
- stronger support the Belarusian civil society

RUSSIAN FACTOR IN BELARUSIAN POLITICS

Belarus keeps up a high level of discontent with the authorities and their policies.¹ Still, the massive violence and ongoing repressions have suppressed the protest movement and put it on hold, and it is unlikely to restart under the current circumstances. The Lukashenka regime retains control over the socio-political situation in the country, and any prospect of a serious split in the ruling elites is very vague. The economic situation remains stable, but it can deteriorate significantly under the influence of the current and potential new sanctions in the next 1-2 years.

Russian Factor

Russia has been the dominant trade and investment partner of Belarus for decades. In 2020 Russia accounted for² 45% of all Belarusian exports, 50% of imports, and 22% of all foreign direct investments³ on a net basis.

The Russian Federation is the largest creditor of Belarus—with the public debt level around \$18 billion at the start of 2021, the debt to Russia was over \$8 billion.

In the context of the lacking domestic legitimacy of Lukashenka, international isolation, and sanctions pressure, the role of **Russia** has increased to the status of virtually the **only actor in foreign policy, trade, economy, military, and finance, which keeps the Belarusian regime alive**.

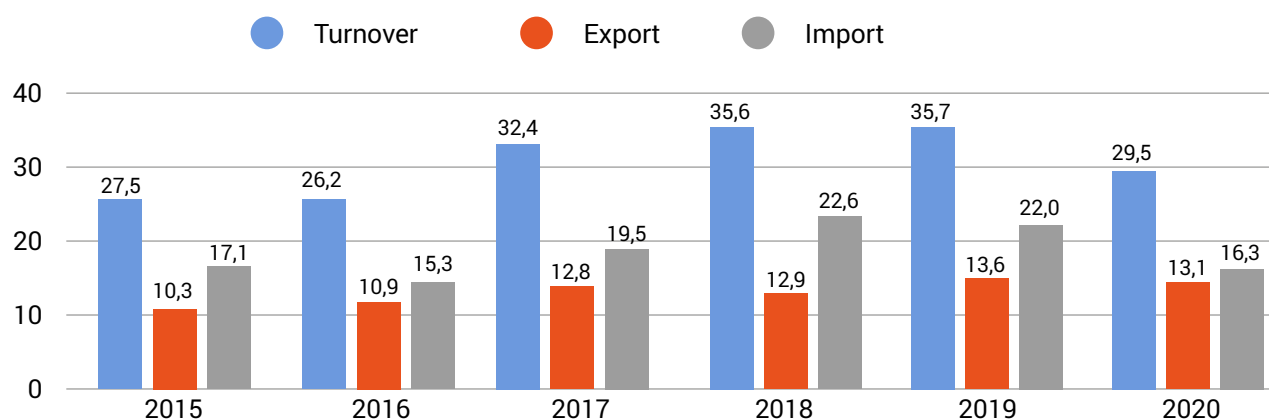
Such dependence however is double-edged. Moscow is also strongly dependent on Lukashenka. In spite of Lukashenka's "pro-Russian" sentiments, in the past 27 years Russia has always failed to build its own political infrastructure in

¹ Dr Ryhor Astapenia, "Belarusians' views on the political crisis | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank", 11 June, 2021: <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/belarusians-live-increasingly-divided-country>> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

² Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь, „Общая информация о внешней торговле: направления, задачи, итоги за актуальный период” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, „General information about foreign trade: directions, tasks, results for the current period”], <https://mfa.gov.by/export/foreign_trade/> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

³ Министерство экономики Беларуси, „Результаты инвестиционной политики Республики Беларусь” [Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus, „Results of the investment politics of the Republic of Belarus”], <<http://www.economy.gov.by/ru/pezzultat-ru/>> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

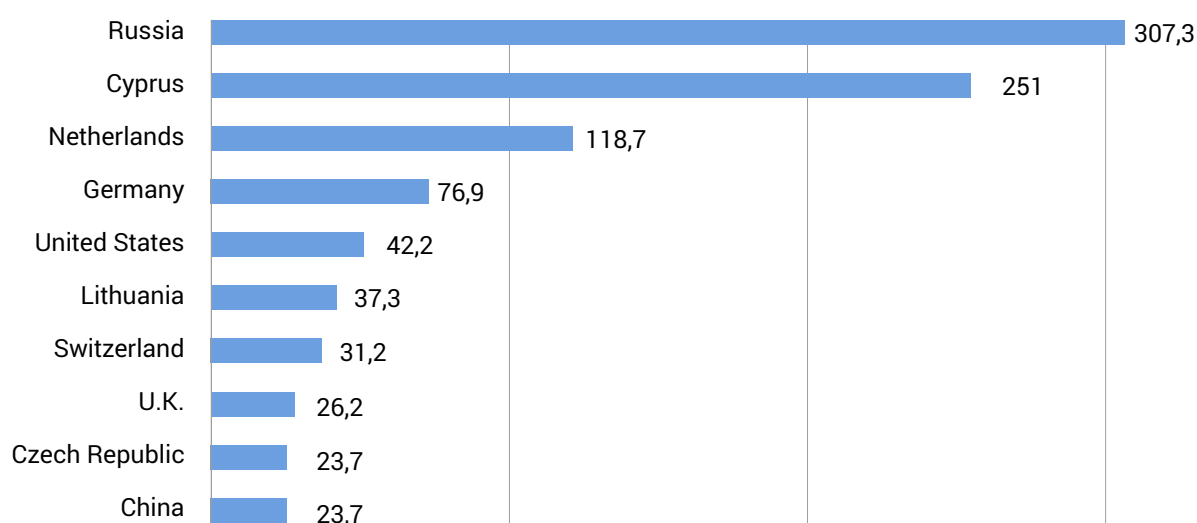
► Figure 1 Trade in goods Belarus-Russia (billion USD)⁴



Belarus, or to somehow influence internal political events by bypassing Lukashenka. He never recognized the legality of the annexation of Crimea, nor the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, consistently refused to sell state-owned companies to oligarchs affiliated with the Kremlin, or to deploy a Russian military base in Belarus. At the same time, Lukashenka is effectively playing on Moscow's fear that any movement of Belarus along the European path poses an existential threat to Russia. He offers his **anti-Westerness in exchange for a political and economic support** for himself.

In the near future, Russia and Belarus plan to endorse 28 union programs for economic and legislative integration of the two countries. According to official

► Figure 2 Top 10 countries investing in the economy of Belarus in 2020 (direct investments on a net basis in million USD)⁵



⁴ Source: Посольство Республики Беларусь в Российской Федерации, "Об итогах внешней торговли Беларуси с Россией в 2020 году" [Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Russian Federation, "On the results of foreign trade between Belarus and Russia in 2020"], <https://russia.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/trade/>, (accessed 30 August, 2021).

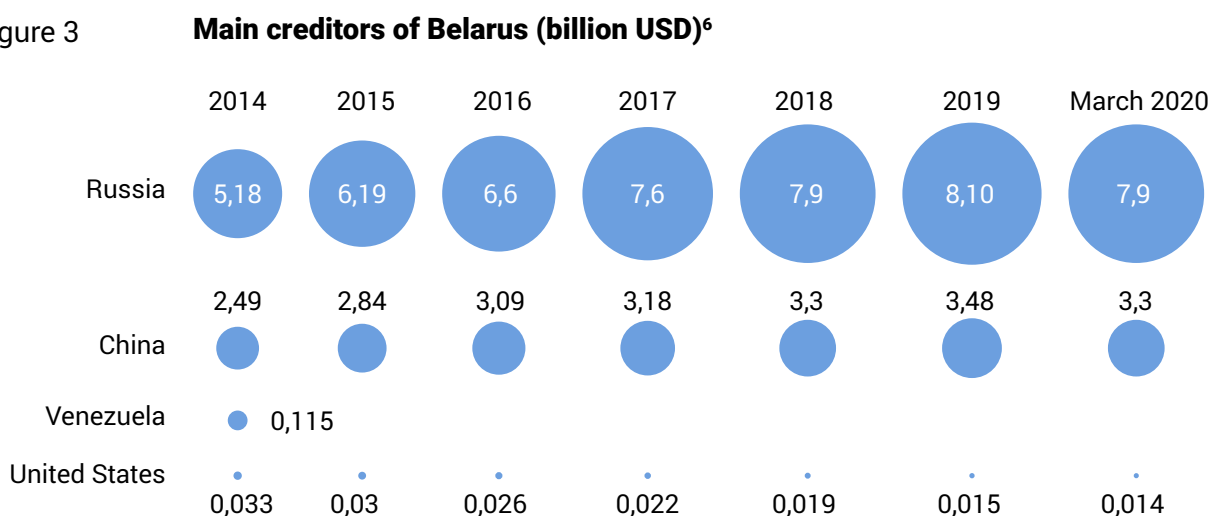
⁵ Министерство финансов Беларуси, "Государственный долг Республики Беларусь на 1 апреля 2021 года" [Ministry of Finances of the Republic of Belarus, "Public debt of the Republic of Belarus for 1 April, 2021"], <https://www.minfin.gov.by/ru/public_debt/pressreleases/11663779ee6a4513.html> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

sources, the parties do not discuss political unification—creation of a single currency, unified supranational bodies—but the real content of the negotiations is hidden from the public. There is no annexation of Belarus not because Lukashenka is a “guarantor of sovereignty,” but because he values his personal absolute power. Over the years of his presidency he has relinquished many things to Russia thereby greatly deepening dependence on it, but has retained his full control over those resources that were necessary to remain the sole ruler of Belarus. On the other hand, Russia does not insist on the political takeover of Belarus fearing that it might provoke a wave of protests over the merger with Russia, an unpopular idea with Belarusians, as well as sanctions of the West that are likely to follow.

The international toxicity of Lukashenka is rising rapidly, but the Kremlin’s tolerance threshold is very high too, if existent at all. Even in less strategically important regions than Belarus, Russia supports much more toxic characters — Bashar al-Assad, Nicolás Maduro, and the military junta of Myanmar. Along with this, Russia has its own internal political context, which shares a lot of similarities with the Belarusian regime. All of it gives rise to well-grounded fears among the Russian elites for their future and neutralizes any discomfort from supporting the capricious Belarusian dictator.

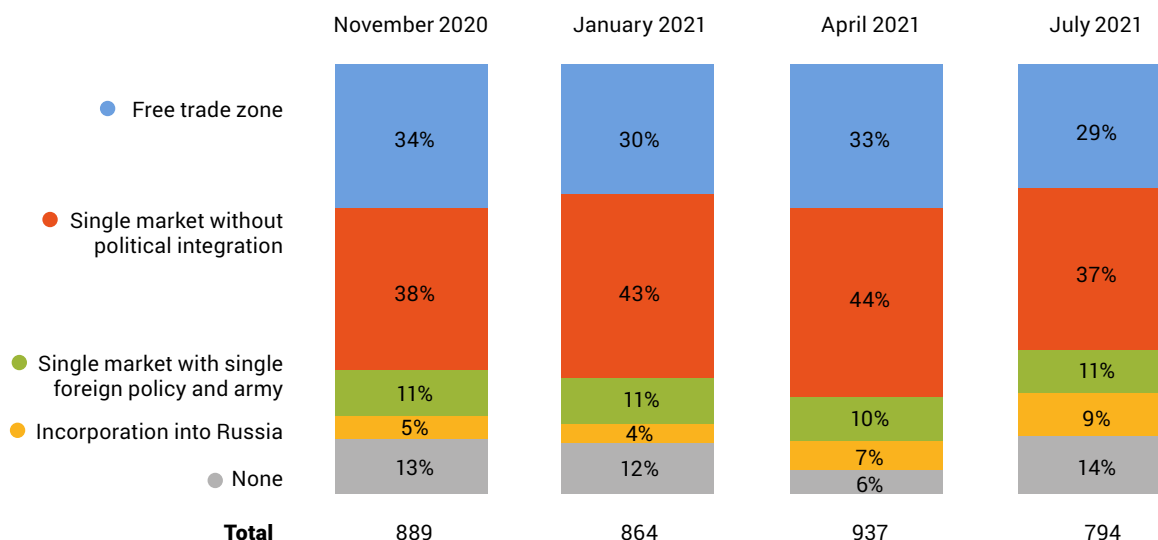
For these reasons the Russian authorities do not want any revolutionary change of power in Belarus or even a peaceful transit caused by a split in the ruling elites. **So long as Moscow has no guarantees of maintaining its positions and internal political leverage in Belarus, it will continue to perceive Lukashenka’s stepping down as a threat to its own interests.**

► Figure 3



⁶ Source: Ksenia Churmanova, “Спасение соседа. Сколько теряет Россия на поддержке Беларуси” [“Rescue of a neighbour. How much does Russia lose supporting Belarus?”], <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-58508091>>, (accessed 30 August, 2021).

► Figure 4 **Which option for a union with Russia seems most appropriate in your view?⁷**



Prospects of Russian Influence

Based on the above-mentioned systemic factors, we can project Russia's position vis-à-vis the Belarusian crisis in the near future. On the one hand, Russia will continue to build up its influence in Belarus and use economic instruments to make Lukashenka more compliant, and at the same time inculcate in the minds of Belarusians ideas of close political integration to counter socio-economic problems in the country⁸.

On the other hand, Russia will continue to support its ally who, like Russia itself, is under sanctions. To quote Putin's spokesman, Russia's position is "to oppose the attempts of the collective West to destabilize the situation in the country." However, it is important to understand that **Russia is not going to compensate Belarus's economic losses from the imposed sanctions if in return Lukashenka does not agree to real political concessions in the integration with Russia.** Moscow is going to help Minsk circumvent the sanctions in such a way as to increase its dependence on Russian contractors and infrastructure, and even make some money on it. Russia is also going to provide some minimal economic grants to the Lukashenka regime to keep Belarus from going bankrupt and thus becoming politically unstable.

Under the current circumstances Russia is not interested to seriously discuss the Belarusian crisis neither with the leaders of the Belarusian opposition, nor with the leaders of the EU and the United States.

⁷ Source: Dr Ryhor Astapenia, "Belarusians' views on the political crisis, Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank", 11 June, 2021: <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/belarusians-live-increasingly-divided-country>> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

⁸ ТАСС, "Путин и Лукашенко обсуждают попытки Запада и дальше раскачивать ситуацию в Белоруссии" [TASS, "Putin and Lukashenko will discuss attempts of the West to further destabilize the situation in Belarus"], 13 July, 2021: <<https://tass.ru/politika/11891763>> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

FACTORS FOR CHANGING THE KREMLIN'S POSITION

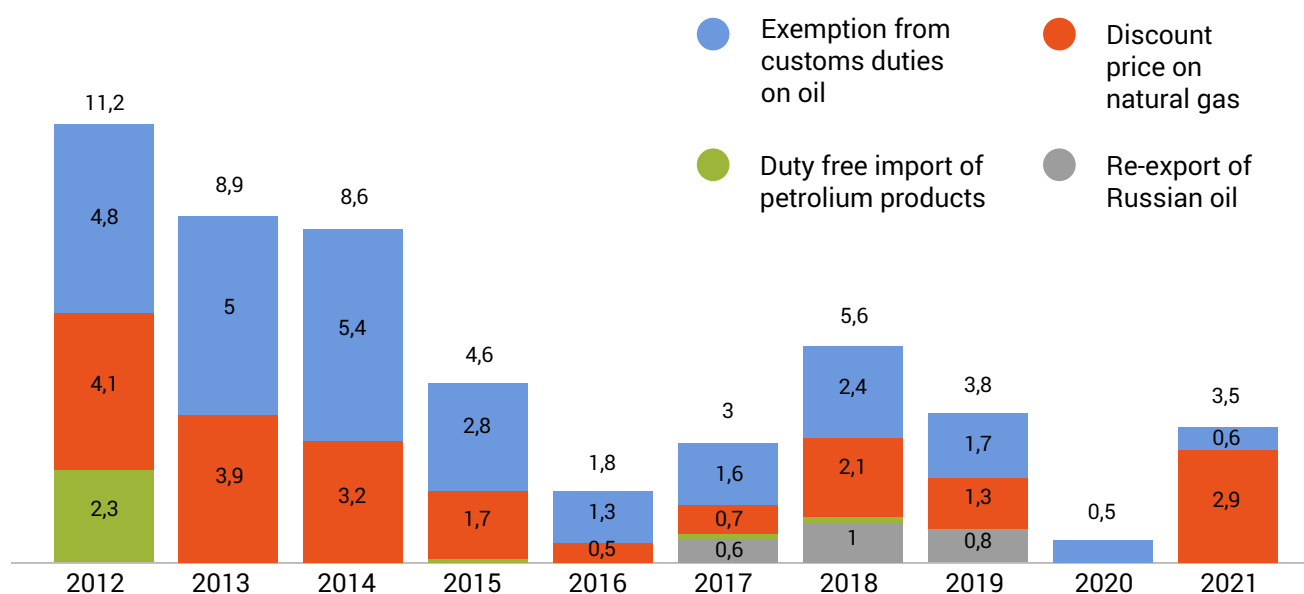
What could increase the chances of Moscow changing its position even ever so slightly? There are not many such incentives for Moscow, but there are a few:

- **Belarus becomes too costly for Russia**

On the one hand, Lukashenka does not want to acquiesce to Russia's integration demands; on the other hand, he badly needs more and more money to maintain economic stability. The widening gap between the benefits sourced by Moscow from the intransigent Lukashenka and the sheer size of financial aid to the Belarusian economy will increase the likelihood that at some point Russia will realize that the costs greatly outweigh the benefits of bolstering the current regime. The massive sectoral sanctions coupled with the outright refusal of the Western countries to recognize Lukashenka's legitimacy all contribute to this scenario. Still, for it to be played out, the price of Lukashenka's support must become prohibitively high for Russia (dozens of billion USD per year).

► Figure 5

Russian energy subsidies for Belarus (billion USD)⁹



⁹ Source: Ksenia Churmanova, "Спасение соседа. Сколько теряет Россия на поддержке Беларуси" ["Rescue of a neighbour. How much does Russia lose supporting Belarus?"], <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-58508091>>, (accessed 30 August, 2021).

However, this tactic has a downside—the exorbitant price that Belarus would have to pay for the Russian support of Lukashenka. The damage caused by the sanctions might turn out to be in many ways irreparable and irrevocable. The same tactic of Western countries played out against Crimea in the past seven years has neither led to a revision of its status nor forced Moscow to refuse to finance the peninsula.

- **Pro-Russian alternative to Lukashenka**

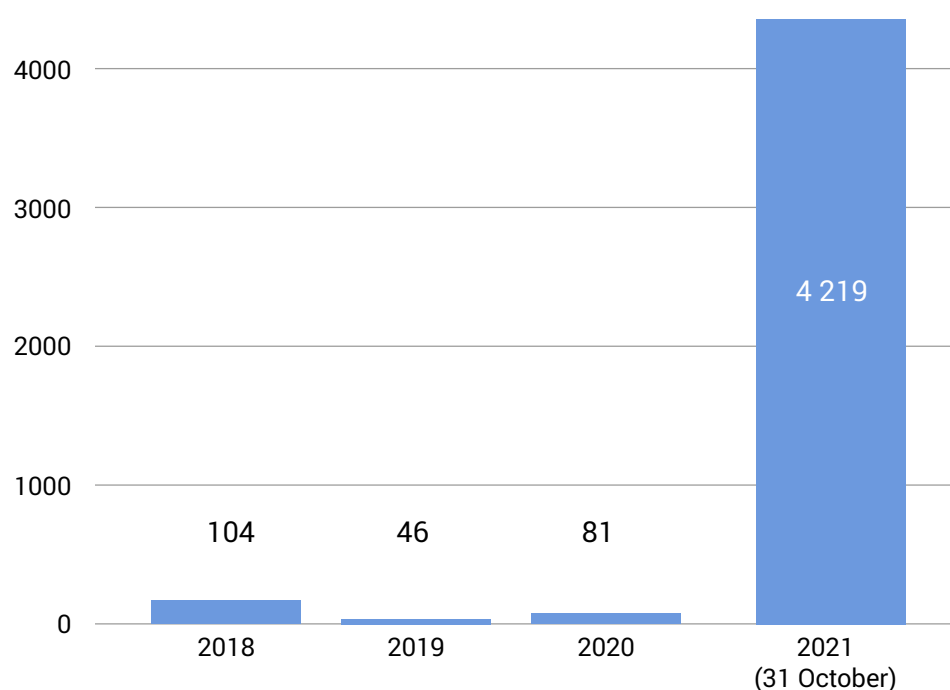
Pro-Russian political forces reputable among the Belarusian society might suddenly appear in Belarus or even abroad. Former top officials from the Lukashenka system may become their leader. The absence of a pro-Russian alternative allows Lukashenka to be the sole spokesman for Moscow's interests in Belarus and leaves Russia with little choice over whom to work with to resolve the political crisis.

- **Lukashenka's mistakes**

Under the desperate circumstances, Lukashenka can and, most likely, will take risky and poorly calculated steps. And mistakes might be not only anti-Western episodes (such as the forced landing of Ryanair Flight 4978 or the initiation of migration crises in EU countries), which will provoke new conflicts and new EU and US sanctions.

► Figure 6

Irregular migrants illegally crossing the Belarus-Lithuania border¹⁰



¹⁰ Sources: Neteisėtos migracijos stebėseną [Monitoring of illegal migration], <<https://ls-osp-sdg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/9b0a008b1fff41a88c5efcc61a876be2>>; Nelegalių migrantų krizė Lietuvoje užklumpa nebe pirmą kartą [This is not the first time that Lithuania has been hit by the crisis of illegal migrants], <<https://osp.stat.gov.lt/straipsnis-nelegaliu-migrantu-krize-lietuva-uzklumpa-nebe-pirma-karta>>, (accessed 30 August, 2021).

- **Power transit**

A constitutional reform continues to be that crisis resolution formula allegedly “endorsed” by Moscow back in September 2020 at a meeting between Lukashenka and Putin in Sochi. Depending on the model of power transformation in Belarus and to what extent it complies with Moscow’s interests, Russia’s position may also vary. So far it looks like Lukashenka is not going to give away any real powers. Here it is important to follow both the actions of the Belarusian authorities and the Kremlin’s reaction to them—how readily Moscow is going to support the chosen format of changes.

- **Mass protests in Belarus**

If a new wave of mass protests starts in Belarus, which would likely stir up discontent among the ruling elites and law enforcement, and if it becomes clear that Lukashenka is not going to hold out for a second time, then Russia will have a plan for that. To prevent a disadvantageous power transit, Moscow can choose to publicly support a convenient figure from among the incumbent top officials, who will then head the provisional government. There are no guarantees that such a plan will work, but Moscow would still rather use this plan instead of a forceful option. Considering last year’s experience, Moscow most probably has already developed a protocol for such turn of events.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WEST

The West has no such leverage on the internal politics in Belarus like Russia does. On the one hand, the past 27 years have not really enabled such leverage; on the other hand, both the EU and the United States have been demonstrating little will or interest to have it. Still, certain steps described below can reduce or even neutralize the Russian influence on the Belarusian crisis and put in place conditions to move Belarus towards more balanced relations with Russia and the West.

1. Common EU/West Strategy to Resolve the Belarusian Crisis

Until now Western countries have been more reactive, responding to the actions of the Lukashenko regime, and therefore more dependent on the internal and external situation. Considering the regional threats generated by the conservation of the political status quo in Belarus, it is important to put the Belarusian crisis at the top of the E.U. agenda.

2. Designation of the EU Coordinator for Crisis Resolution in Belarus

Such a coordinator can be either an influential European country with a past cooperation experience with Belarus, or a special representative on Belarus from the European Commission, or any other appropriately empowered political figure. Among the main functions of such a coordinator should be to formulate a strategy, monitor and analyze the situation in Belarus, assess efficiency of the approaches of the EU and the international community, resolve contradictions between EU states, coordinate international efforts, and communicate with third countries.

3. Continued International Delegitimization of the Belarusian Authorities

It should be done through international organizations (OSCE, UN, IMF, World Bank, etc.) and through bilateral contacts between the EU and its partners. There can be no discordance in the behaviors of individual countries of the West and their allies, no backstage contacts with the Lukashenka regime. For example, a visit of the Speaker of the Moldovan parliament to Belarus (May 2021), Lukashenka's visit to Azerbaijan (April 2021), or IMF's €1 billion allocated to the Belarusian government (August 2021) undermine the global efforts to isolate the Belarusian regime. It will be similarly bad if E.U. ambassadors start to hand their credentials to Lukashenka or if European leaders start accepting credentials signed by him.

4. Putting Belarus on the EU-Russia Talks Agenda

Regular talks between Russia and the EU on the issue of the Belarusian crisis will arouse in Lukashenka fear of losing Russian support. The threat of potential compromises between the West and Moscow will keep him on his toes and will provoke him into making tactical and strategic mistakes that can undermine the idyllic relationship of the Kremlin and Minsk. However, to make it happen, it is necessary to create incentives for Russia to participate in such talks (for example, making concessions on the cases of Russia's interest).

5. Drawing the "Red Line" for the Kremlin on the Issue of Belarus

It is important for the EU to show decisiveness and tell Moscow exactly what costs it would have to bear if it tries to use Lukashenka's vulnerability to limit Belarus's independence. Any agreements with illegitimate Lukashenka on the establishment of supranational bodies, deployment of a military base, selling of strategic assets, etc. must result in sensitive financial losses for the Kremlin.

6. Reversible Sanctions with a Positive Agenda

An inevitable side effect of the international isolation and sanctions is the heightened Russian influence in Belarus. Since sanctions are virtually the only instrument used by the West, one needs to turn them into an instrument of effective pressure on the regime and minimize the numerous side effects for the country and its citizens. Extraordinary sanctions must be offset by extraordinary support measures for the Belarusian people. It makes sense

to make the amount of financial aid commensurate with the size of sanction damage. For example, the sectoral sanctions imposed by the EU and the UK (not even including the sanctions of the United States, Canada, Switzerland, and other countries) may inflict losses of up to 13.5% of Belarus's GDP¹¹, or in monetary terms up to \$8.5 billion. At the same time, the EU Economic Plan for Democratic Belarus is currently budgeted for the allocation of only €3 billion.¹²

7. Return of Direct Flights to Belarus

The ban on direct flights to Belarus has attached all Belarusian air traffic to Russia both in terms of the number of flights and flyover rights, thus making the whole Belarusian aviation industry critically dependent on Russia. In addition, this measure has significantly narrowed rescue options for the representatives of civil society suffering from repressions and persecution, and led to an increase in the cost of air travel along the remaining routes. A ban on transit flights over Belarus would have no such adverse effects, but would still serve as an adequate punishment of the Belarusian authorities for the forced landing of Ryanair Flight 4978.

8. Stronger Support for Civil Society

This can be unilateral signs of goodwill, such as the simplification of the EU visa regime or a visa-free travel for citizens of Belarus. A significant increase of the financial aid for the repressed networks—for example, independent media and human rights organizations. Humanitarian aid to all the victims of repressions and their families, assistance in their rehabilitation. First of all, such measures are feasible for the EU, and their implementation does not depend on the Belarusian authorities. Secondly, they would build a positive image of Europe against the negative backdrop of Russia that sponsors the repressions in Belarus. Under the current circumstances, it is also a question of survival for the civil society institutions of Belarus, and a matter of popular demand for democratic changes in the country.

These recommendations are partially based on the previous conclusions of the authors from the following research papers: "A Belarus Strategy for the West" by Pavel Matsukevich¹³ and "Belarus and the Baltic States: Repercussions of the Lingering Political Crisis" by Pavel Slunkin and Artyom Shraibman¹⁴.

¹¹ Dmitry Kruk, Lev Lvovski, "Опасности могут поджидать с разных сторон" ["Danger can come from different directions"], 19 August, 2021: <<https://thinktanks.by/publication/2021/08/19/opasnosti-mogut-podzhitat-s-raznyh-storon-dmitriy-kruk-i-lev-lvovskiy-o-sanktsiyah.html>> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

¹² European Commission, "The European Union outlines a €3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus", 28 May 2021: <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2685> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

¹³ Pavel Matsukevich, "A Belarus Strategy for the West", May, 2021: <<https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/A-Belarus-Strategy-for-the-West-2-1.pdf>> (accessed 30 August, 2021).

¹⁴ Pavel Slunkin, Artyom Shraibman, "Belarus and the Baltic States: Repercussions of the Lingering Political Crisis", June, 2021: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/18025-20210623.pdf> (accessed 30 August, 2021)

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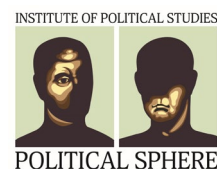
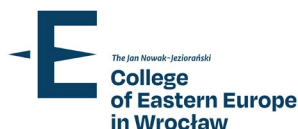
About the project

This Policy Brief was produced within the project **"Network for Belarus"**. This is a joint project of seven organizations from Germany, Poland, and Belarus: German-Russian Exchange (DRA e.V.), Human Rights in Belarus, Belarusian Community RAZAM, College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław, Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere", Civic Initiative "Honest People" and Center of the Belarusian Solidarity.

The project is financed by the German Federal Foreign Office within the Program "Expanding Cooperation with Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership Countries and Russia" and the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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The Policy Brief is published online: www.ak-belarus.org



In cooperation with:

With the financial support of:

