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The deprivation of the political rights of citizens of Belarus

On 6 September 2022, Aliaksandar Lukashenka held a meeting on tightening the citizenship legislation in Belarus and offering an amnesty for some prisoners as of 17 September, timed to mark the ambiguous day of so-called national unity. In the meeting, proposals were put forward reflecting the strategy of the authorities for settling the internal political crisis that began in August 2020. The government intends to implement the following principles:

- Belarusian citizens who left the country may be deprived of citizenship “if they act to the detriment of the State and the people by committing crimes”;
- citizens are obliged to inform the government about obtaining foreign citizenship, a residence permit and other documents, such as a “Card of the Pole”ⁱ;
- the country will announce an amnesty that will affect about 8.5 thousand people convicted in criminal cases related to the presidential elections and subsequent street protests. The list of those to be released is supposed to be drawn up “with the participation of the constructive opposition”ⁱⁱ.

These statements came a day after a series of convictions in high-profile cases surrounding an attempted *coup d'état* and terrorism. In the first trial, sentences ranged from 2.5 to 11 years for participation in “an attempt to seize power”ⁱⁱⁱ. In the second trial, members of a “radical group of anarchists” were convicted. They received sentences ranging from 5 to 17 years in prison^{iv}. In total, there are more than 1,300 people that are recognized by human rights organizations as political prisoners. Many of them have been convicted of or remain under investigation for relatively mild charges and may be subject to amnesty. The amnesty is unlikely to affect the convicts in the two high-profile cases, but many others may be affected, and in total thousands of people could be released from Belarusian prisons. The new official policy in the field of citizenship and in relation to political activists has been noted both in Russia^v and in Poland^{vi}. The government’s decisions could change the status of political emigrants in the future.

The authorities of countries where many of the political emigrants are located (Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic) will face the problem of legalizing refugees (providing them with a legal status). The scale of the problem for these countries will depend on how actively Minsk uses the instrument of the deprivation of citizenship.

Amnesty for those to whom NGOs have granted the status of political prisoners is one of the conditions for the governments of Europe and the United States to start considering the easing of sanctions and the possibility of restarting dialogue with the authorities of Belarus. The Belarusian authorities' condition for amnesty is "the sincere repentance and confession of guilt" by the convicted^{vi}. In this way, the government ensures that they formally reject their active political struggle and agree with the official results of the presidential elections of 2020.

After that, political activism is possible only for the highly loyal. An "opposition to his majesty" is transformed into "his majesty's opposition".

The deprivation of citizenship and tightened control over the people will be used to influence both the emigrants themselves and the governments that gave asylum to political refugees. The emigrants will be forced either to abandon all criticism of the authorities or completely tear up relations with their homeland and prepare for long years of exile. If the government continues using the instrument of the deprivation of citizenship, the authorities of neighboring countries will have to look for juridical tools that allow them to grant legal status to stateless persons, and international organizations will have to construct something analogous to the "Nansen passport", which existed after World War I as an officially recognized travel document for stateless refugees.

Furthermore, a blow will be dealt to paramilitary units that have been created with Belarusian citizens on the territory of Ukraine. The authorities of a few countries (Ukraine and Poland) will have to construct a new legal status for persons who cease to be Belarusian citizens *de jure*. In any case, the legal regime for the activities and relocation of these stateless persons will be seriously complicated. The Belarusian government is trying to conduct an active diplomatic offensive to overcome its foreign policy isolation and may try to use ordinary citizens as an instrument of pressure on their own governments. The same goal is seen in the visa-free entry regime established by Belarus until 1 January 2023 for citizens of neighboring states.

The impact of sanctions on the Belarusian economy

Belarus's GDP had fallen by 5.2% by September 2022. In July of this year, a 10% drop was registered. The Ministry of Economy stated that the reported figures for July are the

result of the fluctuation caused by the postponement of the start of the harvesting season. By the end of August and in September, the government expected economic growth to compensate for the decline in the previous months. The prime minister of Belarus insisted that it was not a recession and that there would be a turning point in the economy in late summer and early autumn^{viii}. However, at a meeting on the problem of inflation on 6 October, Lukashenka ordered the introduction of a ban on price increases in Belarus from 7 October.^{ix}

Nevertheless, in many branches of the economy there has been a steady downward trend caused by the restrictions imposed by sanctions: gross indicators in the fields of information and communications, industry, construction, cargo transportation and trade have all sharply decreased^x. The decline of GDP in Belarus was the largest of the countries of the region (except for Ukraine). Apart from agriculture, there are no other drivers of economic growth. A loan for USD 1.5 billion, allocated to Minsk by the Russian government to mitigate the shock caused by sanctions and the consequences of the military conflict in Ukraine, will be used to implement import-substitution programs. Prior to this, in April 2022, Russia postponed payments on a loan that was supposed to be repaid by Belarus, and it also allocated another USD 1.3 billion to Minsk^{xi}. Forecasts from the analysts of international banks^{xii} promise a drop in Belarusian GDP of 2.6-6.5% by the end of the year. The most serious blow to the economy happened in March 2022, when exports fell by 22%. In the following months, the supply chains were adjusted, and part of the country's exports were sent to Russia. Due to this, by June, the volume of foreign trade had recovered and a surplus of USD 2.25 billion was accumulated.

The emergence of internal political problems in Belarus and a decrease in the level of social stability in such a situation is unlikely, but the position of Belarusian economy is still risky due to its extreme dependence on the support from Russia. So far, according to the forecast of Raiffeisen Bank International, the inflation rate will remain within the range of 16.3-26.9% in 2022^{xiii}. Moreover, the country has a steady source of energy from Russia, which makes it more stable but also highly dependent on Russia.

As is often the case with internal problems, the Belarusian authorities try to shift citizens' attention to neighboring countries through populist rhetoric, predicting a humanitarian catastrophe and social collapse in Poland, Lithuania and other states.

*Lukashenka even made a flashmob offering his own chopped firewood for heating
“the poor Poles”^{xiv}.*

External forces and circumstances can upset the balance – for example, this could happen because of Russia and an expansion of the military conflict. It seems that Lukashenka is trying with all his might to avoid active participation in the Ukrainian conflict. He has repeatedly stressed that Belarus does not plan to fight and that his country’s troops will not enter the territory of a neighboring state^{xv}. Relations with Ukraine depend on the extent to which Minsk will be independent in shaping its policy on the war near its southern border – at least for now, the Belarusian authorities consider the most profitable strategy to be minimizing its participation in the conflict.

Pulling Belarus into the Russian war in Ukraine

On 10 August 2022, there was an incident at the local military airfield in Zyabrovka (Gomel region) which had been given over to the Russian army^{xvi}. This event caused reverberations that were disproportionate to its scale and, in particular, allowed official authorities in Minsk to publicly position themselves in relation to the Ukrainian conflict. Ukrainian and foreign information sources reported on the incident, which involved numerous large explosions: foreign commentators suggested that these were the result of the destruction of military equipment and would terminate the operations of the military airfield^{xvii}. Ukrainian politicians made vague statements, from which it was possible to conclude that the incident was not an accident^{xviii}. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense categorically denied the numerous explosions and detonations. It stated that the incident took place because of a fire that spread to some military equipment. The incident was promptly buried and had no serious consequences^{xix}. Satellite images suggest that a plane suffered from the fire, and that numerous explosions were probably the result of the detonation of ammunition^{xx}.

This story had significant repercussions both in Belarus and abroad. The Ministry of Defense also issued a statement refuting that the fire was connected with the activities of anti-government saboteurs. The statement contained a line saying that “we will combat, fight and die on our land”^{xxi}. In this context, this meant that Belarus was trying to distance itself as much as possible from participation in the Ukrainian conflict, yet it also confirms that the country continues to fulfill its obligations as an ally of Russia. To date, there have been two contradicting versions of what happened: 1) the engine of a

certain military mechanism caught fire (the official version), and 2) it was a major incident that was the result of sabotage (the Ukrainian military version)^{xxii}. The fact that this story was reflected in Belarus's official media shows that the incident in Zyabrovka was not supposed to cause serious concern among ordinary citizens. The state was forced to explain to Belarusians that this incident did not mark a transfer of hostilities to the territory of their country – neither in the form of a missile strike from abroad, nor in the form of a guerrilla war.

Shortly after the explosions at the airfield – and, possibly, in connection with them – Lukashenka formulated his position towards Ukraine.

"You do not think that I am planning some kind of attack here, that we will bomb Ukraine from the territory of Belarus and so on. I have no desire for your and my children to fight. In the name of what? We need to calm down."^{xxiii}

The minor incident in Zyabrovka became an excuse for the citizens and authorities of Belarus to pull away from their potential participation in the Ukrainian war. Officially, Lukashenka postulated the status of his country as an outside observer – Minsk certainly sympathizes with one of the parties in the conflict but will not support it with armed force. At around this point, the rhetoric of the official media of Belarus changed: they began to speak less harshly about the war, and the Ukrainian topic almost disappeared from the news. Inasmuch as it is possible to make any conclusions, the reasons for this are a lack of news from the trenches, the transformation of the war into a positional one. The fear of the Belarusians that military operations will spread to their territory are mitigated by the declarations of Belarusian peacefulness. Lukashenka's "pacifist" statements about the "meaninglessness, bloodiness and destructiveness" of the war are heard more and more often^{xxiv}.

Fatigue from the Ukrainian conflict might also be revealed by the measurements of public opinion by Chatham House (the precision is not ideal, but in Belarus polls are not carried out at all): the number of supporters of the military operation decreased by 3% less from June (33%) to August (30%), while the number of its opponents increased by 2% (45% against 43%). But the attention to the incident in Zyabrovka in the foreign media also had a psychological influence on Belarusians. The events at the airfield did

not have a significant impact on the situation in the region, but definitely made the mood of the official Minsk look less confrontational.

ENDNOTES

I

ⁱ Belarusian state owned agency BELTA, “Лукашенко: достойны ли сбежавшие из страны и действующие ей во вред оставаться гражданами?” [Lukashenka: are the ones having run away from the country worthy of being it's citizens?], <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-dostojny-li-sbeznavshie-iz-strany-i-dejstvujuschie-ey-vo-vred-ostavatsja-grazhdanami-522242-2022>

ⁱⁱ Belarusian state owned agency BELTA, “Лукашенко рассказал кто может попасть под ближайшую амнистию а кто не из этой серии” [Lukashenka told who can fall under the next amnesty and who won't], <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-kto-mozhet-popast-pod-blizhajshuju-amnistiju-a-kto-ne-iz-etoj-serii-522235-2022>

ⁱⁱⁱ Belarusian state owned agency BELTA, “Суд Минского района вынес приговор по делу о заговоре с целью захвата власти” [The court of the Minsk region issued a verdict in the case of conspiracy to seize power], <https://www.belta.by/photonews/view/sud-minskogo-rajona-vynes-prigovor-po-delu-o-zagovore-s-tselju-zahvata-vlasti-30314>

^{iv} Belarusian state owned newspaper SB, “Суд вынес приговор группе анархистов” [Court announces the verdict for the group of anarchists], <https://www.sb.by/articles/sroki-dlya-radikalov.html>

^v Russian state owned agency «Sputnik», “Лукашенко рассказал кому светит амнистия ко дню Народного единства” [Lukashenka explained who could receive amnesty for the day of National Unity], <https://sputnik.by/20220906/lukashenko-rasskazal-komu-svetit-amnistiya-ko-dnyu-narodnogo-edinstva-1066538667.html>

^{vi} Polish state owned TV-channel «BELSAT», “Амнистия или новые репрессии? Что готовит Лукашенко к 17 сентября” [Amnesty or new repressions? What is Lukashenka saying running up towards 17 September], <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/02-09-2022-amnistiya-ili-novye-repressii-что-gotovit-lukashenko-k-17-sentyabrya/>

^{vii} News and analytical portal Reform.by (operating from Abroad), “Амнистия в Беларуси затронет более 8 тысяч человек” [Amnesty may affect more than 8 thousand people in Belarus], <https://reform.by/328555-amnistija-v-belarusi-zatronet-8-tysjach-chelovek>

II

^{viii} Belarusian state-owned agency «BELTA», “Вернется ли белорусская экономика на траекторию роста до конца года? Прогноз от премьер-министра” [Will the Belarusian economy return to a growth trajectory before the end of the year? Forecast from the Prime Minister], <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/vernetsja-li-belorusskaja-ekonomika-na-traektoriju-rosta-dokontsa-goda-prognoz-ot-premjer-ministra-519597-2022/>

^{ix} Belarusian state-owned agency «BELTA», “Лукашенко распорядился с 6 октября ввести запрет на повышение цен в Беларуси” [Lukashenka ordered to impose a ban on price increases in Belarus from October 6], <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasporjadilsja-s-6-oktjabrja-vvesti-zapret-na-povyshenie-tsen-v-belarusi-527678-2022/>

^x Biggest independent Belarusian news and entertainment portal Onliner.by, “ВВП Беларуси снизился в июле на 10%. Что произошло?” [Belarus' GDP fell by 10% in July. What happened?], <https://money.onliner.by/2022/08/22/vvp-belarusi-snizilsya-v-iyule-na-10-что-proizoshlo>

^{xi} Polish state owned TV-channel «BELSAT», “Россия планирует выделить Беларуси еще один кредит на 1.5 млрд долларов” [Russia plans to provide Belarus with another \$1.5 billion loan], <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/23-08-2022-rossiya-planiruet-vydelit-belarusi-eshhe-odin-kredit-na-1-5-mlrd-dollarov/>

^{xii} Raiffeisen Bank International, “Semi-Annual Financial Report”, 30 June 2022 https://www.rbinternational.com/en/investors/reports/quarterly-reports/_jcr_content/root/responsivegrid/contentcontainer_19445301/contentbox/downloadlist_copy.download.html/2/Semi-Annual%20Report.pdf, p. 66

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Russian business newspaper «Коммерсантъ» YouTube channel, “Лукашенко наколот дров для Европы” [Lukashenka chopped wood for Europe], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SC08EFFPz9A>

^{xv} Russian state-controlled agency «Interfax», <https://www.interfax.ru/world/857411>

^{xvi} Official Facebook account of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02VFTLVs5orCwSDNHeutHUVu3QG8f1ivssfHRWmYwUuvHatF4yaFfNzNP997cDoohml>

^{xvii} Independent Ukrainian media holding NV.ua, <https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/vzryvy-v-zyabrovke-poyavilos-video-odnoy-iz-vspyshek-poslednie-novosti-50262502.html>

^{xviii} Official Twitter account of the Adviser to the Head of the Office of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky, https://twitter.com/Podolyak_M/status/1557637444387983360

^{xix} Official Telegram account of the Belarusian Ministry of Defense, <https://t.me/modmilby/16963>

^{xx} Official Telegram account of the Belarusian Ministry of Defense, <https://t.me/modmilby/17030>

^{xxi} Official Telegram account of the Belarusian Ministry of Defense, <https://t.me/modmilby/17030>

^{xxii} Official Telegram account of Belsat, <https://t.me/belsat/81566>

^{xxiii} Russian state-controlled agency «Interfax», <https://www.interfax.ru/world/857411>

^{xxiv} Belarusian state-owned agency «BELTA», “Лукашенко об Украине: в ближайшее время развязка будет” [Lukashenka about Ukraine: there will be a denouement in the near future], <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ob-ukraine-v-blizhajshee-vremja-razvjazka-budet-521541-2022>