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The future of Belarus without Lukashenka and Its Implications for the Stability of the Baltic and Nordic regions

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The new regional environment created by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has impacted the political situation in Belarus in two major ways. First, it significantly increased dependence of the Lukashenka regime on the Kremlin, and second, it led to growing authoritarian tendencies inside Belarus. Harsh repressions and rapprochement with Russia allowed Aliaksandr Lukashenka to hold on to power in spite of the Western comprehensive sanctions and democratic pressure by the exiled Belarusian opposition. 2024-2025 can become crucial years which can either consolidate the existing trends or open a window of opportunity for potential political changes in Belarus.

This policy brief will discuss the prospects of democratic transition in Belarus and its implications for the West by addressing three interrelated questions: Under which conditions is democratization in Belarus possible? What are the benefits of democratic Belarus for the Baltic and Nordic region? What can the West do to advance democratic changes in Belarus?

Democratisation in Belarus: mission (im)possible?

Since the start of the 2020 post-electoral protests and the onset of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the official relations between Belarus and the West have been largely frozen. The EU has imposed several packages of comprehensive sanctions against the Lukashenka regime in response to gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, the scale of repressions and authoritarian tendencies in Belarus has not decreased. In addition to that, the Lukashenka regime has significantly strengthened its cooperation with Russia,[i] trading off Belarusian sovereignty in return for the Kremlin's political, economic and military support. Thus, after nearly three decades of engagement with the official Minsk, the EU has not yet succeeded in bringing about democratic changes in Belarus while Russia has, on the other hand, significantly increased its control over the Belarusian territory and strengthened its leverage over the Lukashenka regime.

Although it is difficult to envisage when the democratic changes in Belarus can occur, it is crucial to develop and understand different scenarios of power transit and be prepared for a potential window of opportunity. Power transition in personalist

dictatorships, such as Belarus, usually happens as a result of demise or serious illness of the national leader. However, the current geopolitical environment, including Belarus's involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine, raise the probability of other mechanisms of power change. They can be grouped into three main clusters 1) elite defection and negotiations; 2) popular uprising; 3) external pressure.

Based on the first scenario, Russia is weakened due to the war and is no longer able to provide economic, military and political support to the Belarusian regime to the same extent as before. Representatives of the Belarusian nomenclature start negotiations with the West to lift sanctions and restore friendly relations, since they do not have enough resources to maintain the regime. As a result, all-national dialogue is launched with the purpose to resolve the political crisis.

The second scenario envisages political transformation in Belarus as a result of bottom-up pressure in the form of industrial strikes or popular uprising triggered by sharp deterioration of the socio-economic situation as a result of Russia's losses in the war and the affect of Western sanctions.

Finally, according to the third scenario, power change in Belarus can happen through military seizure of power. One of the ways in which this scenario can materialise is when the Belarusian army directly enters the war with Ukraine on Russia's side and the territory of Belarus comes under military attacks from Ukraine. During the counteroffensive Ukrainian troops enter Belarus with units of Belarusian volunteers. Lukashenka is arrested and forced to leave power, leading to the transition of the temporary government headed by the military under international control.

Successful implementation of any of these scenarios depends on two crucial factors – Russia's substantial weakening or loss in the war against Ukraine as well as the unity and strength of the Belarusian democratic forces.

2024-2025 as a possible turning point.

This and next year can be considered pivotal for both of these factors.

First, the European elections in June 2024 and US elections in November 2024 will test the strength of Western unity and resolve on Ukraine. Although the US Congress has

recently approved a vital and long-awaited 61 bln USD support package[ii] to Ukraine, it still remains to be seen whether this step will embolden the Russian government to aggressively interfere in the 2024 US presidential election and increase the chance of Donald Trump's victory over Biden. If this happens, military aid to Ukraine can be halted. In Europe, the Hungarian EU presidency which is set to start in July 2024, poses risks for maintaining financial support and continuing the EU enlargement negotiations with Ukraine. To avoid any of such negative scenarios the West needs to take active steps and mobilise military production for itself and for Ukraine, strengthen sanctions pressure, especially by closing existing loopholes which allow Russia to bypass its restrictive measures as well as seize 300 USD billion[iii] of frozen Russian Central Bank assets and provide urgent support for Ukraine.

Second, 2024-2025 will be a litmus test for the strength and unity of the Belarusian democratic forces. After the 2020 presidential elections, the Lukashenka regime forced the Belarusian opposition into exile, where it continued to function on the basis of several institutions and organisations. The central place in the political arena belongs to the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST). In addition to OST, there are several other centres of gravity, including National Anti-Crisis Management (NAM) in Warsaw led by Pavel Latushka; Forum of Democratic Forces of Belarus (FDFB), headed by Valery Tsapkala and his wife Veranika Tsapkala; Zianon Pazniak, the leader of the Belarusian Christian Party – BPF as well as a military formation "Kalinowski Regiment", an organisation of Belarusian volunteers, who fight against Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

After the 2020 protests and relocation abroad, OST fell under criticism[iv] of several other groups, including NAM, FDFB as well as the Belarusian Christian Party – BPF. The main reasons for resentment included alleged lack of transparency in managing the funding, insufficient work for pressuring the Lukashenka regime and a lack of coordination with the other groups. In addition, the Ukrainian government has for a significant time refused to cooperate with the OST and has seen the Kalinowski regiment as the only legitimate representative of the Belarusian democratic movement. The situation has recently improved after Ukraine has appointed[v] a former

Ambassador to Belarus Ihor Kyzym to cooperate with the Belarusian Democratic Forces.

In spite of the seeming fragmentation of the Belarusian Democratic movement, over the last few years, Tsikhanouskaya has gained international recognition as a leader of democratic Belarus. The most recent manifestation of this trend which can serve as an example of international recognition of OST is a Letter of Intent[vi] which the European Parliament has signed with Tsikhanouskaya, underlining the legitimacy of the Belarusian democratic forces.

OST has created two key institutions – United Transitional Cabinet (UTC) which represents the temporary executive body, and Coordination Council (CC), a Belarusian parliament in exile.

Coordination Council held its first elections since 2020 on the 25-27 of May[vii] based on proportional electoral system. Voters were able to cast their ballot online for one out of 11 registered lists (total number – 259 candidates). Based on the results, 80 delegates have been chosen for the new convocation of the Coordination Council. During the months leading up to the elections, registered candidates showed a high level of political activity despite the threats and risk of repressions by the Lukashenka regime. The elections also demonstrated the increasing influence of Coordination Council in the current configuration of the Belarusian democratic movement.

One of the main challenges for the democratic forces in 2024-2025 will focus on ensuring sustainable funding. After 2020 the international donors provided general support to the Belarusian opposition and civil society. However, as time goes on, it becomes increasingly difficult to persuade the donors why they should maintain a high level of support for these political forces if they cannot bring significant political changes in Belarus. A possible decrease in financial support can result in growing tensions among the democratic forces and give a chance to critics of Tsikhanouskaya to argue that her mandate, issued in 2020, will expire by 2025, and the opposition needs to find new leaders.

2025 will be also crucial in another respect - the Lukashenka regime intends to hold presidential elections in Belarus. Although it is likely going to be a usual one-man show, some analysts argue that elections could also be followed by a possible political reconfiguration, e.g., Lukashenka can step down from the presidential post but continue to stay in power as a leader of the newly formed and influential All-Belarusian People's Assembly.[viii] In either of these options Lukashenka will attempt to silence any opposition, supress any sign of protests and fully solidify his power.

In order to prevent this scenario, the West needs to ensure adequate support to the Belarusian democratic forces, especially during such critical phase of their development. The elections to the Coordination Council can be seen as an important test of democracy for the Belarusian political actors which have been striving to have it for decades. These elections will pave the way for future democratic procedures and will provide an important platform for discussions and finding solutions to power transition in Belarus.

Why is democratic Belarus important for the Baltic and Nordic region?

Historically, Belarus has always had close relations with the three Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as well as the Nordic region. The strategic importance of Belarus for these countries is based on its geographical location. Belarus is situated in the centre of Europe and serves as an important bridge between East and West. The crucial role of Belarus in transiting goods, services and people will only increase if Belarus becomes democratic and begins to lessen its economic dependence on Russia.

Belarus can also continue playing an important role in transiting Russian energy resources to the EU, provided Russia democratises itself after the fall of the Putin regime. In addition, Belarus has oversaturated electricity market and can sell the electricity surplus to the Baltic and Nordic states.

Furthermore, Belarus is home to a highly educated nation and has a skilled workforce, especially in STEM disciplines. Democratisation in Belarus can open a new window of opportunity for intensifying people-to-people contacts and bring economic migrants

to the Baltic and Nordic region which are currently experiencing an increase in the share of older population. These countries, in particular the Baltic region, have already benefited from relocation of Belarusian IT specialists after the 2020 political crisis, and democratisation of Belarus can contribute to fostering stronger links as well as exchange of knowledge and best practices between various IT hubs in each of these countries.

Finally, Belarus can play a crucial role in ensuring the security of the EU borders. Russia's war against Ukraine has profoundly changed the security landscape in the EU neighbourhood. All Nordic-Baltic countries have recently become NATO members,[ix] and this new security situation both requires but also provides an opportunity for a deepened regional cooperation on security issues. One of the most important elements of this dialogue focuses on addressing the long-term threat posed by Russia which cannot be accomplished without increasing coordination on Belarus. If the Lukashenka regime stops helping Russia, it will have a detrimental effect on Russia's war effort, including Russia's efforts in nuclear escalation as well as Russia's access to Kaliningrad and the EU bordering states via Suwalki corridor.[x] Therefore, free, independent, democratic and sovereign Belarus with guaranteed territorial integrity is essential for deterring present and future aggression from Russia.

Overall, a democratic and stable Belarus is in the interest of the Baltic and Nordic region as well as the whole EU, and the Baltic and Nordic states can act as role models for Belarus's further steps in building independent country, which can be seen as a part of European family.

Policy Recommendations

The EU can undertake several steps to advance democratisation in Belarus.

First, the EU should maintain the sanctions pressure against the Lukashenka regime and close loopholes which allow Russia to bypass restrictive measures via Belarus. At the same time, it is crucial for the EU to develop an effective strategy for release of political prisoners and analyse what concessions can be made in return for potential freeing of the regime's opponents.

Second, it is necessary for the EU to provide continued support to the Belarusian democratic movement, including independent media and civil society, and intensify cooperation with various structures of Belarusian opposition, particularly the newly elected Coordination Council. Such cooperation can happen through different platforms, including via inter-parliamentary dialogue, Nordic (N5) and Nordic-Baltic (NB8) formats, EU consultative group meetings.

Third, the EU should take measures to curb discriminatory practices against Belarusians, which can be observed in several member states, including one of the Baltic countries Lithuania. It is crucial for the EU countries to distinguish on the one hand, between Belarusians and the Lukashenka regime, and on the other hand, between Belarusians and Russians. This approach would ensure that Belarusians in exile will get the necessary support and protection and will form a positive image of the EU. This, in turn, would contribute to increasing pro-European sentiments among the Belarusian society and their strive for democratising their home country.

Fourth, It is important for the EU together with the Belarusian democratic movement to develop an effective communication strategy with Belarusians inside Belarus. Some elements of this strategy can include increasing educational opportunities for Belarusians, investing in independent media and developing support programmes and rehabilitation schemes for political prisoners. The EU should invest in constructing a strong narrative and provide balanced information, so that Belarusians can make an informed choice about their geopolitical orientation.

Fifth, it is fundamentally important for the EU and the West at large to provide sustained support to Ukraine. Russia's defeat in the war can lead to the fall or weakening of the Putin's regime which are crucial conditions for triggering democratic changes in Belarus.

ENDNOTES

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