



Belarus
Research
Network
on Neighborhood
Policy

Bimonthly Review (December - January)

by the

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and Political Science (IIRPS) and researchers from the
InGAC projectⁱ**



2025

In this review, we summarise the main developments in Belarus during the period from December 2024 to January 2025. We dedicate a special section to what is internationally referred to as a ‘sham presidential election’ in Belarus, providing general context and reflecting on the official outcomes, as well as national and international reactions, to this event. In separate sections, we delve into the repressive developments regarding the human rights situation in Belarus, explore some initiatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition, and reflect on the tendencies towards Russia’s *de facto* absorption of Belarus. We also outline the security and military threats arising from the authoritarian Belarusian regime. Finally, we describe economic developments in Belarus and issues related to the Belarusian diaspora.

I. Belarus: A sham election

On 26 January 2025, Belarusian authorities conducted a presidential ‘election’ that effectively served as a pre-staged re-election for Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Since the events of 2020, the authoritarian regime has sought to minimise risks of protests or political dissent by rescheduling elections to winter, restricting internet access during voting, and implementing increasingly repressive policies against civil society, political parties, and the media. Since the summer of 2024, the authorities have preventively detained, summoned for ‘conversations’, or pressured citizens deemed insufficiently loyal, including former political prisoners. Additionally, transborder repressions against the exiled opposition and active Belarusians abroad intensified; no polling stations were set up outside Belarus, and those who live abroad were not allowed to vote. Lukashenka received support from Russia, with Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov in October 2024 warning against any ‘destabilisation attempts’ during the election and promising that they would interfere in case of any such ‘destabilisation attempts’.ⁱⁱ The primary aim of the 2025 election shifted from ‘creating a façade of democracy to demonstrating control over the country’.ⁱⁱⁱ

‘Electoral campaign’

The 2025 campaign was marked by various manipulations and violations reported by human rights defenders.^{iv} Four candidates representing pro-governmental political parties – as all opposition parties were liquidated in the summer of 2023 – claimed their participation aimed to assist the authorities rather than contest power. For instance, Siarhei Syrankou from the Communist Party stated he was running ‘not instead of, but together’ with Lukashenka. Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) nominee Aleh Haidukevich noted that his supporters recognised they were voting for Lukashenka, not him.^v

The authorities utilised administrative resources to support Lukashenka. They without hesitations used public funds for his campaign events, such as the ‘Marathon of Unity’. On different levels, officials competed to gather more support signatures for Lukashenka. Lukashenka’s nomination launched a propagandistic flash mob called ‘Nado!’ (You must!), where officials and public sector workers recorded videos urging him to run. The campaign also served as a platform for displays of loyalty from groups viewed as disloyal. For example, a signature-collection event for Lukashenka was held at the High-Tech Park (HTP), where residents had actively protested in 2020. This time, IT companies from the park were reportedly forced to donate to the Lukashenka electoral account.^{vi}

Digital control and disinformation

Simultaneously, Belarusian authorities actively controlled digital spaces and spread disinformation both domestically and abroad. They attempted a preliminary blockade of

broadcasting from abroad. This happened with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's New Year speech, when Belarusian secret services allegedly disabled YouTube access and later tested nationwide internet shutdowns. On 26 January 2025, they deployed a deepfake video of Tsikhanouskaya *via* a fake Telegram channel, falsely stating she was leaving politics.^{vii} Abroad, on 20 January 2025, Lithuania's State Security Department (VSD) warned of a fake document circulating on Facebook that claimed the Lithuanian intelligence service was training Belarusian paramilitary groups.^{viii}

Election observation

Belarusian authorities invited representatives from mainly non-democratic countries and Russia-supported organisations, including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), to observe the election. Officially, 456 foreign observers from 49 countries were accredited, although the OSCE/ODIHR declined to participate, citing a late invitation that hindered meaningful observation. The ODIHR expressed regret over its inability to monitor the electoral process effectively but intended to keep watch over Belarusian events within its mandate.^{ix}

The Belarusian democratic forces and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

During the electoral campaign, democratic leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya worked to ensure international non-recognition of the election. On election day, the exiled democratic forces and active Belarusians initiated Anti-Lukashenka rallies abroad, including organising an event in Warsaw titled 'Belarusians deserve better' to unite Belarusians and draw attention away from the sham election.^x Unsurprisingly, shortly after the election, the Belarusian Prosecutor's Office announced criminal cases *in absentia* against activists who protested abroad, which aligned with pre-election threats against the diaspora.^{xi}

Official election outcomes

On 27 January 2025, the Belarusian Central Election Commission (CEC) reported preliminary results, claiming Lukashenka received 86.82% of the votes. The other candidates' percentages were Aleh Haidukevich with 2.02%, Hanna Kanapatskaya with 1.86%, Siarhei Syrankou with 3.21%, Aliaksandr Khizhnyak with 1.74%, and 3.6% for none of the above, with a reported turnout of 85.7% of the 6.9 million eligible voters. Earlier exit polls, which were conducted by pro-government polling institutions, indicated voting for Lukashenka at 87.6%.^{xii}

International reactions

Before the election, democratic governments and organisations condemned it as a sham. On 26 January 2025, the European Parliament adopted a resolution rejecting the election, urging the EU not to recognise Lukashenka's legitimacy due to human rights violations.^{xiii} At a press conference in Vilnius on 25 January 2025, UN Special Rapporteur Nils Muižnieks characterised the event as a fabricated exercise lacking genuine democratic processes.^{xiv} On 23 January 2025, Latvia's Parliament also condemned the elections as fraudulent.^{xv}

Following the election, Western leaders denounced Lukashenka's victory. Although Hungary and Slovakia blocked a joint EU statement,^{xvi} EU High Representative / Vice President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos made a joint statement calling the election neither free nor fair and urging the release of political prisoners.^{xvii} Several countries, including Australia, Canada, the EU, New Zealand and the UK, released a joint statement denouncing the election,^{xviii} and the UK, in coordination with Canada, sanctioned the leaders of institutions responsible for serious human rights

violations and companies in the Belarusian defence sector supporting Russia's war in Ukraine.^{xix}

The Nordic and Baltic states confirmed Lukashenka's lack of legitimacy, citing the fraudulent nature of his re-election.^{xx} Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski expressed mock surprise that 'only' 87.6% of the electorate appeared to have backed Lukashenka. Referring to Lukashenka's repressive practices, he wrote on X, 'Will the rest fit inside the prisons?'.^{xxi} Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda reaffirmed that Lukashenka will never be considered Belarus's legitimate leader and stressed the importance of continued support for Belarusian democratic forces. Kęstutis Budrys, Lithuania's Foreign Minister, echoed these sentiments, underscoring that the EU will not recognise Lukashenka's regime and will maintain sanctions until Belarus undergoes democratic changes.^{xxii}

Lukashenka's reaction to the non-recognition

On 26 January 2025, after casting his ballot, Lukashenka conducted a four-hour press conference where he made a lot of dubious statements and, in some cases (for instance, regarding political prisoners), openly lied. He also claimed he would not rule out running again for president in 2030. In parallel, Lukashenka said he 'did not give a damn' about Western condemnation of and reactions towards the election. The authoritarian leader received praise from his closest ally, Vladimir Putin, who congratulated him for achieving a 'confident victory'.^{xxiii}

The human rights situation and political prisoners in Belarus

Following the announcement of the presidential elections, repression in Belarus has intensified, with detentions reported nationwide since late October. In December 2024, human rights defenders documented 759 reprisals, including 454 administrative trials primarily related to 'disseminating extremist materials', mainly in the Brest and Minsk regions.^{xxiv}

Political prisoners

According to the human rights centre Viasna, from 2024 to early 2025, Belarus saw significant political repression, with 1,245 individuals recognised as political prisoners as of 28 January 2025. Among these, 224 are at particular risk due to health issues, disabilities, age (over 60), mental disorders, or being parents of multiple children. At least 30 families currently have imprisoned members, the highest in recent years.^{xxv} However, the total number of politically motivated detentions in Belarus may be higher. All in all, from the summer of 2020 to November 2024, 3,638 individuals, including 669 women, were designated as political prisoners. Although many have been released after serving their sentences, politically motivated arrests and trials continue.^{xxvi} The human rights situation of political prisoners remains critical, with reports of poor detention conditions, a lack of medical care, torture, and prolonged solitary confinement. Additionally, 2024 saw tragic deaths of political prisoners in custody.

Many political prisoners have been held *incommunicado* for extended periods. Maksim Znak, Viktor Babaryka, Mikalai Statkevich, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and others have had no contact with the outside world for over a year, which constitutes an enforced disappearance under international law.^{xxvii} However, in early January 2025, Belarusian authorities released photos and a video of Viktor Babaryka after more than 630 days without contact. The images were shared by Raman Pratasevich, a former activist who was coerced during the forced Ryanair landing in 2021 to become part of the Belarusian propaganda machine.^{xxviii}

In parallel, over the past year, Lukashenka has pardoned 293 individuals, including 89 women and 17 minors. Just before the election, on 24 January 2025, he signed a decree pardoning 15 prisoners, including eight political detainees – five women and three men – and seven who were convicted of drug-related offences.^{xxxix} Each prisoner released in 2024 had to submit a pardon appeal to Lukashenka; most were serving short sentences. The reasoning behind the act of releasing political prisoners has sparked discussion, with many experts interpreting it as a signal of Lukashenka’s willingness to engage with the West.^{xxx}

Trials in absentia

On 25 January 2025, UN human rights experts expressed concern over Belarus’s increasing use of trials in absentia, conducted without the accused present and lacking fair trial guarantees. These trials can lead to severe penalties, including lengthy prison sentences, property confiscation, and even the death penalty. The experts stated that such practices violate international standards and urged Belarusian authorities to cease these trials immediately to ensure fair and public hearings.^{xxxi}

Labelling civil society and media as ‘extremist’

In 2024, Belarusian authorities designated 89 entities as ‘extremist formations’, increasing the total to 257 since 2021. This includes media outlets, civil society organisations, and initiatives like the Free Kupalautsy theatre troupe. Such designations can lead to severe legal consequences; since 2021, at least 248 individuals have been convicted under Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code for involvement with these formations. The process for declaring an entity ‘extremist’ lacks public disclosure, denying citizens vital information and judicial protection, thereby threatening self-organisation and solidarity.^{xxxii}

II. The Belarusian democratic forces and diaspora

The New Belarusian Passport Initiative and controversies surrounding it

In response to the electoral campaign, Belarusian democratic forces introduced the ‘New Belarusian Passport’. According to the website of the initiative,^{xxxiii} the passport aims to strengthen the democratic Belarusian community and address legal and logistical challenges for Belarusians abroad. However, its status and potential for travel or official use will rely on negotiations with individual countries.

The initiative has sparked controversy, as Lithuania announced it will not legally recognise these passports. While Lithuania supports the Belarusian opposition, its representatives have stated that the passports are not valid under Lithuanian law.^{xxxiv} Some Lithuanian politicians and activists expressed concerns about Belarusians using the armoured knight symbol (*Vytis* in Lithuanian, *Pahonya* in Belarusian) for this document. Commenting on this, Agnė Railaitė-Bardė, chairwoman of the Lithuania Heraldry Commission, clarified that both symbols originate from the same coat of arms used in the Grand Duchy, which included present-day Lithuania, Belarus, and parts of Ukraine. This coat of arms was also official in independent Belarus before Lukashenka’s rise to power. Therefore, Belarusians can use this symbol. Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda has noted that while the *Vytis* is inherently Lithuanian, it could also be used by other ‘freedom-loving’ nations ‘that don’t kowtow to Putin’. At the same time, he acknowledged the need to examine the ‘legal and diplomatic aspects’ of using this symbol in Belarusian ‘passports’.^{xxxv}

We expect further developments on the ‘New Belarusian Passport’ initiative in the near

future – these will be covered in the next issues of the Review.

As of the moment of submission of this Review, the ‘New Belarusian Passport’ project was put on hold after the media, citing a letter by Lithuania’s Deputy Prosecutor General Gintas Ivanauskas, reported that Lithuanian courts may outlaw the passport as a forged document.^{xxxvi} The Belarusian democratic forces reported that they would audit the project to keep it aligned with legal standards.^{xxxvii}

Vandalism acts targeting Belarusians abroad

In January 2025, provocative graffiti reappeared on the European Humanities University (EHU) building in Vilnius, which positions itself as a ‘Belarusian university in exile’. This incident was part of a series of similar acts targeting Belarusian institutions in Vilnius, including vandalism against the ‘Karchma 1863’ restaurant, arson attempts on the Belarusian House, and the defacement of the chapel of the Belarusian Orthodox parish. Despite the recurring nature of these provocations, Lithuanian police have yet to identify any perpetrators.^{xxxviii}

III. Russia-Belarus integration developments

Military and economic cooperation

In December 2024, Lukashenka and Putin approved agreements for a common electricity market and the abolition of mobile roaming fees in the Union State, effective as of March 2025. However, the practical implementation of these agreements by this deadline remains uncertain due to previous delays. Additionally, Dmitry Volvach, Deputy Minister of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, stated that the creation of a single currency for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Union State of Russia and Belarus is not currently needed.^{xxxix} He noted that in the past three years, EAEU countries have been increasingly using their national currencies for trade, with over 90% of trade turnover in the EAEU and 95% in the Union State being conducted in national currencies.

In the military sphere, Belarus’s cooperation with Russia has deepened noticeably. On 6 December 2024, Putin and Lukashenka signed a treaty on mutual security guarantees and the Union State Security Concept, formalising the principle of collective defence, including the use of nuclear weapons. Putin also announced the potential deployment of Russia’s new Oreshnik intercontinental missile system in Belarus by 2025. Overall, experts suggest that Russia is exploring new ways to utilise Belarus for nuclear deterrence and to exert pressure on the West.^{xl}

IV. Security threats

Lukashenka and Oreshnik

The Russian government continues to erode Belarusian sovereignty through its increasing military presence and missile deployments in Belarus. On 26 January 2025, Lukashenka claimed that Russian Oreshnik ballistic missiles would arrive in Belarus ‘any day now’ and suggested they might be deployed to a city like Orsha, near Smolensk. He asserted that this deployment would respond directly to US missile activities in Europe and that the Oreshnik missiles would protect Belarus. Lukashenka likely hopes to exert some control over their use, aiming to bolster Belarus’s waning sovereignty; however, Moscow is expected to retain operational control. Experts from the ISW have assessed that the deployment of Oreshnik medium-range ballistic missiles would not fundamentally change

Russian military capabilities towards Europe and Ukraine, as similar systems have long been maintained in Kaliningrad and elsewhere in Russia.^{xii}

The ‘Zapad-2025’ military exercises

Ukrainian officials have expressed concerns about the upcoming joint Russia-Belarus military exercises, ‘Zapad-2025’. Dmytro Hromakov, Deputy Director of the International Centre for Countering Russian Aggression, suggests that these exercises could provide a platform for a possible Russian invasion of the Baltic states, similar to the ‘Allied Resolve’ drills that preceded Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Hromakov emphasises that ‘Zapad-2025’ may be a sign of Belarus’s role as a generator of threats and a staging ground for aggression. He argues that if Belarus proceeds with these drills, it will signal deeper integration with Russian military objectives, effectively reducing Belarus to a regional extension of Russian authority. Conversely, cancelling the exercises might indicate that Russia is losing control over Belarus. Ukrainian lawmaker Oleh Dunda notes that European intelligence anticipates a Russian attempt to test NATO’s defences by 2028, with potential actions as early as this year. In his opinion, since 2021, Belarusian authorities, with Russia’s support, have been suppressing dissent to create a passive society by 2025, potentially facilitating aggressive military actions against NATO’s eastern flank.^{xlii}

Energy security

In January 2025, Aliaksandr Lukashenka stated his intention to discuss with Vladimir Putin^{xliii} the construction of another nuclear power plant in Belarus, with Astravets and ‘an internationally recognised site south of Mahileu’ as possible locations. In 2024, the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant (BelNPP) in Astravets generated about 15.7 billion kWh of electricity,^{xliv} nearly 4 billion kWh more than in 2023. The plant underwent scheduled maintenance and diagnostics in December 2024 and January 2025, with both power units temporarily disconnected from the grid.

In turn, Lithuania has called for suspending operations at the BelNPP until all safety concerns are addressed. The Lithuanian State Nuclear Power Safety Inspectorate (VATESI) sent a letter to Belarus’s Ministry of Emergency Situations on 22 January 2025, with copies to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the European Commission, the European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG), and the Western European Nuclear Regulators Association (WENRA).^{xlv} VATESI Director Michail Demčenko noted that both reactors at the BelNPP are currently offline, with the first unit undergoing maintenance. He expressed concerns about the plant’s operation, citing unaddressed safety issues and a lack of transparency from Belarus. Demčenko emphasised the need for detailed information to ensure the plant’s safety in line with international standards. VATESI also raised questions about the site selection, the seismic resilience of safety-critical equipment, and reports of contamination in the reactor cooling systems. Lithuania insists on the publication of recommendations from international expert missions and the status of their implementation.^{xlvi}

V. The economic situation in Belarus

Adoption of the 2025 budget

On 13 December 2024, Belarusian Parliament adopted the Law on the Republican Budget of the Republic of Belarus for 2025.^{xlvii} It approved the planned expenditure figure of BYN 50.3 billion (EUR 13.9 billion), with revenues of BYN 45.8 billion (EUR 12.6 billion). Thus, the republican budget 2025 is planned with a deficit of BYN 4.5 billion (EUR 1.3 billion). The growth of the expenditure part of the budget is planned at 13% compared to the planned

figures for 2024, while the growth of the revenue part is 15%, with the projected annual inflation rate in 2025 not exceeding 5%.

Those officials who proposed the budget assume that the most significant growth of budget revenues will be due to taxes: tax revenues should increase by 17% compared to 2024, including an 18% growth of VAT revenues, a 20% growth of excise tax revenues, and a 30% growth of income and profit taxes. Notably, 9.5% of all revenues of the republican budget of Belarus in 2025 are planned to be received as gratuitous revenues from foreign countries, most likely from Russia. A sharp increase in the share of such receipts in the planned budget data occurred in 2023, and since then, gratuitous revenues from foreign countries remain very significant. In the expenditure part of the budget, the most significant growth is noted in expenditures for national defence – compared to 2024, they will increase by 32.1% and amount to BYN 4.7 billion (EUR 1.3 billion).

Inflation and consumer prices

According to 2024 data, the inflation rate in Belarus was 5.2%^{xlviii} – food products rose in price by 6.5%,^{xlix} non-food products by 3.9%, and services by 5%. For comparison, a year earlier, in 2023, inflation was 5.8%. The government of Belarus has managed to restrain price growth through manual regulation. For example, in October 2022, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus adopted Decree No. 713^l ‘On the system of price regulation’, which imposes significant restrictions on price increases by both sellers and producers. The actual ban on price increases, which has been in place for several years, has a negative impact on the finances of enterprises, while the cancellation of Resolution No. 713^{li} and the development of a new system of ‘rules, principles of fair price formation’ has been announced for 2025. As Prime Minister Raman Halouchanka stated, ‘The goal is not to regulate prices directly but to cut off speculative fluctuations. For this purpose, certain price corridors may be introduced, with a focus on one or another problem, where we will see spikes in the price. That is, to get away from direct price regulation on a fairly wide range of positions, to move to the regime of price corridors.’^{lii}

GDP indicators

Belarus has carried out its first assessment of gross domestic product for 2024.^{liii} The volume of GDP in current prices amounted to BYN 246.6 billion (EUR 70.2 billion). Accounting for price changes, it grew by 4% against the level of 2023. At the same time, the target GDP growth rate for 2024 was 3.8%. The Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) notes^{liv} that about 1.4% of GDP growth in Belarus was driven by industry, 0.5% by trade, and 0.2% by agriculture. According to the main parameters of the socio-economic development of the Republic of Belarus for 2025,^{lv} GDP growth in the current year should be 4.1%.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Project “Investigating Good Governance in the Context of Authoritarian Consolidation: The Case of Belarus (InGAC)”, Grant Agreement No. NDICI-GEO-NEAR/2022/434-092-0063 received co-funding by the European Union under the EU4Belarus - Support for Advanced Learning and Training (EU-SALT II) programme. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the researcher only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency.

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