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A smart shift in Belarus: Tikhanovskaya instead of Lukashenko?

Zarys treści: Celem artykułu jest ocena charakteru opozycji białoruskiej oraz jej potencjału ekonomicznego, informacyjnego oraz społecznego jako wystarczającego bądź niewystarczającego do tego, by zastąpić rządy Łukaszenki. Złożoność problemu wymaga ujęcia interdyscyplinarnego, na które składa się wiedza obejmująca zagadnienia z obszaru kultury, gospodarki, mediów oraz stosunków międzynarodowych, z elementami wiedzy o społeczeństwie i zarządzaniu informacją. Jako narzędzie teoretyczne zastosowano pojęcie homeostatu – modułu regulującego równowagę funkcjonalną systemu w perspektywie dynamiki dotyczących go procesów.

Outline of content: The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the specificity and economic, informational, and human potential of the Belarusian opposition as sufficient or insufficient to replace Lukashenko's government. The complexity of the issue requires a multidisciplinary approach, which embraces knowledge of such areas as economy, media, international relations, social processes, and information management. The concept of homeostat was applied as a theoretical tool. It is treated as the module whose task is maintaining a functional balance of the system from the perspective of current processes.

Słowa kluczowe: Białoruś, opozycja, media, gospodarka, Putin

Keywords: Belarus, opposition, media, economics, Putin



Motivations

Since August 2020, the world's attention has been focused on Belarus, a country in Eastern Europe that may not be particularly large but is strategically significant as the interests of the Russian Federation, the countries belonging to the European Union EU and the United States of America intersect there. Their realisation requires an incessant negotiating of spheres of influence and balancing the contradictory objectives of the Kremlin, Brussels and Washington. As a society, the Belarusians have found it necessary to define how their country develops. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the weakness of many governments, including the Belarusian one. On the other hand, it has also served as a triggering factor for the long-suppressed frustration of the public. The Belarusian opposition, associated with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, and the official state power represented by Alexander Lukashenko are the lens through which the split of Belarusian society can be observed. They also reflect the global problem of influence distribution in which the superpowers stand on opposite sides of the barricade and engage their allies. Poland has a complicated role, and any of its choices will be fateful. Given the country's direct neighbourhood with Belarus, anti-Russian sentiments, membership of the EU and NATO, and its geographical position, Polish scholars, politicians, and strategists have paid great attention to the balance of forces behind the Eastern border. Huge data sets they gather help to explain the reasons for the events unfolding but impede forecasting and steering the developments. Those two latter aspects, however, play a key role not only in the outcome of the Belarusian revolution but also in reinforcing the present balance of forces in Europe or changing it. Thus, capturing the key moment of the process is indispensable, initiated by the result of the presidential elections on 9 August 2020.

Current situation

The literature on the post-election situation in Belarus is extensive. It includes analytical reviews of Polish and foreign research centres, academic books and press, television programmes, online resources, and social media content. The Centre for Eastern Studies,¹ the Polish Institute of International Affairs,² the Centre for International Relations³ and the Batory Foundation⁴ are among the leading centres that publish research results on Belarus. The Council on Foreign Relations,⁵ the

¹ The Centre for Eastern Studies, n.d., <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

² The Polish Institute of International Affairs, n.d., <https://www.pism.pl/> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

³ The Centre for International Relations, n.d., <https://csm.org.pl/en/> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

⁴ The Batory Foundation, n.d., <https://www.batory.org.pl/?s=Belarus> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

⁵ The Council on Foreign Relations, n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

Centre for Strategic and International Studies,⁶ the Institute for War and Peace Reporting,⁷ and the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Lithuania)⁸ are some existing foreign centres doing the same. Many studies have been devoted to the organisation and course of recent protests.⁹ An equally extensive group of publications concerns the media, especially new ones.¹⁰ The present condition of the Belarusian economy is another issue that draws the attention of experts. Research on it is split into some categories: that based on hard data such as reports of banks and other financial institutions; analyses speculating on Belarusian-Russian economic relations; estimates of the outcome of the strikes in terms of weakening Lukashenko's regime; and studies presenting standards of living of average Belarusians. It is worth mentioning that economic relations with Russia are discussed against the background of military-political integration.¹¹ Sociological survey analyses are scarce,¹² however,

⁶ The Centre for Strategic and International Studies, n.d., <https://www.csis.org/> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

⁷ The Institute for War and Peace Reporting, n.d., <https://iwpr.net/> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

⁸ Foreign Policy Research Institute, n.d., <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/08/protests-in-belarus-geopolitical-considerations-and-the-future-of-lukashenko/> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021).

⁹ A.V. Buzaglin, A.I. Kolganov, 'The protests in Belarus: context, causes and lessons', *Critical Sociology*, vol. 47 (2020), 441–53 (accessed: 12 May 2021), doi.org/10.1177/0896920520982368; A. Minchenia, 'Belarusian professional protesters in the structure of democracy promotion: enacting politics, reinforcing divisions', *Conflict and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2020), 218–35 (accessed: 12 May 2021), doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2020.060113. For studies of the 2008 protests, see: J. McCarthy, L. Titarenko, C. McPhail, P. Rafail, and B. Augustyn, 'Assessing stability in the patterns of selection bias in newspaper coverage of protest during the transition from communism in Belarus', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, vol. 13 (2008), 127–46 (accessed: 12 May 2021), doi.org/10.17813/mai.13.2.u45461350302663v.

¹⁰ K. Izdebski, 'Media, czaty, narracje. Rola Internetu i nowych technologii w czasie protestów w Białorusi', 9 Dec. 2020, <https://mojepanstwo.pl/aktualnosci/746> (accessed: 20 Apr. 2024); Fundacja e-Państwo (2020), https://epf.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/Raport_Bia%C5%82orus%CC%81_min_PL.pdf (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021). O. Manaev, 'Media in post-Soviet Belarus: between democratization and reinforcing authoritarianism', in: *Mass Media in the Post-Soviet World*, ed. P. Rollberg, M. Laruelle (Stuttgart, 2018), pp. 111–37.

¹¹ A. Marin, *The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myths and realities of political-military integration* (Vilnius, 2020), <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Anais-Marin-Union-State-of-Belarus-and-Russia.pdf> (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021); K. Kłyśński, P. Żochowski, *The End of the Myth of a Brotherly Belarus? Russian Soft Power in Belarus after 2014: The Background and Its Manifestations*, OSW Studies Series, vol. 58 (Warszawa, 2016), https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace_58_ang_end_of_myth_net.pdf (accessed: 10 Apr. 2021); B. Пастухов, 'Объединение, поглощение, заглот — эволюция идеи Союзного государства' (2020), <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/sences/evolyuciya-idei-soyuznogo-gosudarstva/> (accessed: 10 March 2024); A. Leukavets, 'Russia's game in Belarus: 2020 presidential elections as a checkmate for Lukashenka?', *New Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2021), 90–101 (accessed: 10 March 2024), doi.org/10.1177/2336825X20984337.

¹² For actual partial research, see O. Шелест, "'Голос улиц': социология белорусского протеста', *RFI* (2020), <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/европа/20201019-голос-улиц-социология-белорусского-протеста> (accessed: 10 March 2024); 'Опрос. Изучение ценностей белорусского общества', *Кастрычніцкі эканамічны форум* (KEF), <http://kef.by/publications/research/opros>

which makes it difficult to conclude the political awareness of Belarusian society, the ideological content of the protests, and national consciousness, which is sometimes speculative. The protesters demand freedom, democracy, and civil society, but reliable data on the struggle for civil society institutions in Belarus are hardly available and, if they are, outdated.¹³ The attitudes of Western countries towards the Belarusian protests are the topic of another group of studies. Regardless of the main problem they discuss, all authors try to forecast possible scenarios for both the near and distant future.¹⁴

Research objectives and hypotheses

This paper aims to assess the Belarusian opposition by analysing its economic, information-related, and social potential as either sufficient or insufficient to replace Lukashenko's regime. This potential must be confronted with the productivity of the tools applied by official state authorities to reveal its efficiency.

The primary research hypothesis is that the present social movements are to lead to a replacement of the governing elite not only in terms of its form but also content and semantic scope: Lukashenko is to be replaced by people who have a different mentality and style of thinking and will create the state system based on new values. The alternative for the abovementioned process of radical change is maintaining the present state power, which provokes another supplementary hypothesis: Russia will play a crucial role in maintaining the specificity of Belarusian power due to the influence it already has and the necessity to secure Russia's vital interests and the mentality of the Belarusian people shaped by their past. It is worth mentioning here that maintaining power does not mean supporting Lukashenko. At stake is a collision of two ways of thinking about reality and managing it. If Russia engaged in a power shift in Belarus, it would help to replace Lukashenko with another politician favouring the Kremlin's influence.

izuchenie-tsennostey-belorusskogo-obshchestva (accessed: 10 May 2021); R. Astapenia, 'What Belarusians think about their country's crisis', *Chatham House* (2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/10/what-belarusians-think-about-their-countrys-crisis> (accessed: 10 March 2024); P. Rudkouski, H. Korszunau, 'Rosja jest przyjaciółką, lecz większą przyjaciółką jest demokracja', <https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Demokracja-jest-przyjaciolka.pdf> (accessed: 14 April 2024).

¹³ O. Manaev, 'Public Opinion Polling in Authoritarian State: The Case of Belarus', in: *The Silent Majority in Authoritarian States. Opinion Poll Research in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, ed. K. Bachmann, J. Gieseke (Frankfurt-am-Main, 2016), pp. 79–98.

¹⁴ A. Rącz, V. Gherasimov, and M. Nič, 'Four Scenarios for the Crisis in Belarus', *DGAP. Policy Brief*, vol. 16 (2020), <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/four-scenarios-crisis-belarus> (accessed: 10 May 2021); B. Challis, *Belarus Beyond 2020: Implications for Russia and the West*, Building Better Security for Wider Europe Series (London, 2020), <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Belarus-policy-brief-1.pdf> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

Systemic analyses as a methodological approach: the homeostat

The complexity of the research problem requires applying an interdisciplinary approach, including theory and tools from the fields of economics, media, international relations, sociology and information management. The multitude of research units and their dynamics provoke, in turn, focusing on significant elements and ignoring negligible ones. Both will be defined with the purpose of this research in mind. They constitute a system that is a set of interconnected constituent parts. Examining the configuration, e.g. their place in the system and the types of dependencies among them, will be another step. To summarise, a systemic approach, which means treating a chosen part of reality as a set of interconnected elements, is an adequate research tool for such complexity.

In the light of the accepted methodology, the following research tasks emerge: first of all, it is necessary to define what part of reality will be regarded as the 'system' given the aim of this research; secondly, significant elements will be extracted from the general set of phenomena related to 'Belarus', and thirdly, we shall show and discuss connections and dependencies between them. Let us recall the purpose: to estimate the potential of the Belarusian opposition and confront it with the productivity of the power of the official state authorities. There exist the following significant elements of the system: Lukashenko as a symbolic representation of the specificity of Belarusian state power (e.g. the features of Lukashenko's behaviour as characteristic of the 'old' regime), the Belarusian economy and the state media. These elements are interconnected in some ways: the economy meets the energy needs of the power, e.g. it supports the state with material resources. It happens in two ways. First, the economy is a source of financing for all the elements that strengthen the authorities: law enforcement, army and administration structures. Secondly, the economy is an incentive tool for members of society when losing one's job equals loss of livelihood. The official media, in turn, support Lukashenko's image by creating pictures of enemies. Information impact is also significant. The media act as a supportive tool or as a measure of psychological terror, depending on who uses them. The power of pictures is related to the images created in the consciousness of Belarusian society since the Bolshevik revolution and, subsequently, the Soviet Union. They are a kind of cultural code carrying values.

We treat the new Belarusian opposition as an emerging counter-system, which means that similar elements will be analysed: the nucleus of authority and the efforts to institutionalise it, economic resources and non-state media. Thus, there are two systems: the previously existing represented by Lukashenko and the emerging one represented by Tikhonovskaya. We shall call them, respectively, the system and the counter-system.

Homeostasis – a functional balance of a system, and homeostat – the system's control unit are vital theoretical concepts for this research. The notion of homeostasis

was posited by Walter Bradford Cannon in 1926.¹⁵ Shortly after, it became one of the basic terms in physiology. Cannon's idea of a mechanism that maintains and counteracts a loss of balance in a system was developed by the British psychiatrist Ross Ashby in his books *Design for Brain* (1952) and *Introduction to Cybernetics* (1956). Ashby is a central figure in cybernetics and is regarded as the founder of the general system theory. In 1948, Ashby constructed the homeostat – a device that embodied his theory of system modules capable of maintaining and regaining the functional balance of a system by learning and adaptation behaviours.¹⁶ Over time, Ashby's concepts of the general system theory went beyond mathematics and natural sciences, finding broad application in the humanities, social sciences and economics.¹⁷ The notion of homeostasis has also been applied in political science.¹⁸

In Polish cybernetics, the homeostat and homeostasis as theoretical tools for research on individuals, society, culture and state power have been used by Marian Mazur¹⁹ and Józef Kossecki.²⁰ The homeostat is a unit in a system that distinguishes between the elements disturbing homeostasis and those restoring it. Thus, to simplify, we can assume that the homeostat decides what actions are desirable or non-desirable in the system, enforcing the former and eliminating the latter.²¹ The homeostat is an inner unit of the system, and it steers the system in such a way as to secure one's interests, e.g. those of the people who constitute it. The steering behaviours include preventing inner disturbances and restricting influence outside the system.

Let us then study the specificity of the homeostat in the Belarusian state system and discuss the causes of disturbances of the functional balance to the extent that state authorities lose the ability to restore it.

¹⁵ W.B. Cannon, 'Physiological Regulation of Normal States: Some Tentative Postulates Concerning Biological Homeostatics', in: *A Charles Richet: ses amis, ses collègues, ses élèves*, ed. A. Pettit (Paris, 1926); S.J. Cooper, 'From Claude Bernard to Walter Cannon. Emergence of the concept of homeostasis', *Appetite*, vol. 51 (2008), 419–27 (accessed: 10 May 2021), doi:10.1016/j.appet.2008.06.005. Cannon popularised the notion of homeostasis in 1932 in: W.B. Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body* (New York, 1932), pp. 177–201.

¹⁶ The detailed work on the concept of 'homeostat' was documented in Ashby's journal. See: 'Journal of W. Ross Ashby', vol. 11, p. 2432, in: The Ross Ashby digital archive, www.rossashby.info (accessed: 10 May 2021); see also: Ashby's journal reference to the homeostat, in: 'Ross Ashby's Journal', <http://rossashby.info/journal/index/thumbs/homeostat.html> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

¹⁷ A. Damasio, H. Damasio, 'Exploring the concept of homeostasis and considering its implications for economics', *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 126 (2016), 125–29 (accessed: 10 May 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2015.12.003>.

¹⁸ R.M. Savory, 'The principle of homeostasis considered in relation to political events in Iran in the 1960s', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 3 (1972), 282–302.

¹⁹ M. Mazur, *Cybernetyczna teoria systemów autonomicznych* (Warszawa, 1966); id., *Cybernetyka i charakter* (Warszawa, 1976).

²⁰ J. Kossecki, *Cybernetyka kultury* (Warszawa, 1974).

²¹ Mazur, *Cybernetyka i charakter*, p. 151.

Alexander Lukashenko: the ‘dream of power’ by the side of the ‘Russian bear’

Alexander Lukashenko became the president of Belarus in 1994, thus gaining an opportunity to satisfy his untamed political ambitions.²² They were associated with Russia and rooted in nostalgia for the Soviet era. In 1996, Lukashenko introduced constitutional changes and dissolved the parliament, replacing it with the National Assembly of Belarus. They were both inextricably linked to Russia and rooted in nostalgia for the Soviet Union. On 2 April 1996, the Community of Belarus and Russia was founded. The idea of a close connection evolved, and on 8 December 1999, the Union State of Russia and Belarus was formed. Lukashenko won the presidential elections of 2001, 2006, 2010 and 2015 with an overwhelming majority of votes. The candidates who were his challengers or could show that there was any alternative political course were eliminated: in 1999, Viktor Hanchar disappeared,²³ in 2006, Alyaksandr Kazulin, who called for protests against election frauds, was beaten and Alyaksandr Milinkevich was arrested, while Uladzimir Nyaklyayew was imprisoned in 2010. The 2020 scenario was to be similar. Viktor Babaryka,²⁴ Valery Tsepkalo and Sergei Tikhonovskiy were Lukashenko’s serious challengers. The first two were associated with the official authorities’ circles, whereas Tikhonovskiy enjoyed great public support as the author of the video blog ‘A Country to Live In’. Babaryka presented himself as a supporter of a pragmatic policy and, as such, opposite to Lukashenko’s. A pragmatic governing style in international relations is characteristic of Putin but alien to Lukashenko, who favours ideology over pragmatism. It is worth mentioning that the election of Putin as the Russian Federation’s president ended Lukashenko’s dream of Yeltsin’s presidential era that he would become the leader of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.²⁵ Putin was aware that real abilities and skills did not accompany Lukashenko’s excessive ambitions. He also realised the threats they created: Lukashenko was manoeuvring between Russia and the West. As things stood, Putin, far from

²² A. Brzeziecki and M. Nocuń, *Lukaszenka. Niedostryży car Rosji* (Wołowiec, 2021).

²³ Viktor Hanchar – head of the Belarusian Central Electoral Commission. In May 1999, he ultimately turned away from Lukashenko. He announced that the election he had organised was invalid. He disappeared without a trace on 16 September 1999. Thus, the official election was in 1999, and then not until in 2001. Hanchar organised presidential election in 1999 and announced the end of the term of Lukashenko’s office. The election was declared invalid by state authorities.

²⁴ Viktor Babaryka – had good relations with Lukashenko, who just in Jan. 2020 thanked him for his significant contribution to development of the Belarusian banking system. Babaryka is the ex-president of the Bielhasprambank – Gazprom’s branch. He advocates the idea of close economic relations of Belarus and Russia. He was a candidate in the recent presidential election. He was arrested on 18 June 2020. See: M. Budzisz, ‘Białoruś chce ropy przez Polskę. Prorosyjski liberal rzuca wyzwanie Łukaszenko’, *Tysol.pl* (19 May 2020), <https://www.tysol.pl/a48278-Wiktar-Babarykau-prorosyjski-liberal-rzuca-wyzwanie-Lukaszenko> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

²⁵ M.H. Van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars. The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism* (Lanham, 2014), chap. 4.

a strictly political alliance, initiated actions towards making Belarus dependent on Russia economically. Lukashenko supported him involuntarily by governing Belarus in the style he was used to – that of a kolkhoz director. His anachronistic views and governance were far from the mentality and expectations of the young generation who grew up in the post-Soviet era and had access to the information of the Western culture, either by direct contact or via social media. Youth, but not only, wanted a change.

High-technology collective farm: the Belarusian economic model

In contrast to the Western post-Soviet countries, free market reforms in Belarus were implemented slowly and inconsistently. The state authorities did not carry out mass privatisation, which, in turn, frustrated the emergence of an oligarch group to an extent known from Russia or Ukraine. Consequently, a specific hybrid economic model, described as a “socially-oriented market economy”,²⁶ developed in Belarus in subsequent years. The model was defined as an “effective economy with advanced entrepreneurship and market infrastructure, effective state regulations encouraging entrepreneurs to develop and refine production quality, and workers to increase productivity”.²⁷ In practice, the economic policy implemented by Lukashenko’s camp led to slowing down the privatisation process, centralisation of economic governance, increasing the range of state subsidising of unprofitable state-owned enterprises, and limiting the inflow of foreign capital.²⁸ All the factors mentioned above limit investment and financial activity. In recent years, the Belarusian economic model has been enriched by a dynamic development of the IT sector that could count on tax relief and privileges. It is worth mentioning that, firstly, it has helped increase the country’s GDP and, secondly, it has not been included in the centrally planned economy. Due to its specificity, the IT sector has become one of the most potent tools of regime contestation. Exports of the IT sector’s services decreased after the August 2020 elections: in July, it was 220 million US dollars, whereas in September, it was only 167 million.²⁹ The unstable situation has caused companies to move to other countries.³⁰

²⁶ *Национальная стратегия устойчивого социально-экономического развития Республики Беларусь на период до 2020 г.* (Минск, 2004), p. 14, <https://www.minpriroda.gov.by/ru/nsur2020-ru/> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ W. Kosiedowski, *Współczesna Białoruś. Społeczeństwo i gospodarka czasu przemian* (Toruń, 2013), pp. 63–66.

²⁹ ‘Ну что, вот и приплывают последствия наезда на IT’, *Кладовая любителя статистики* (2 Nov. 2020), https://t.me/stat_sklad/570 (accessed: 10 May 2021).

³⁰ *Koszty białoruskich protestów dla Łukaszenki*, *Analizy OSPP*, vol. 61 (2020); https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/aszwoj/u/10/69/1069e36c-425a-443a-8800-be0cb7239441/analiza_osp_pierwsiego_2020_-_koszty_bialoruskich_protestow_dla_lukaszenki.pdf (accessed: 10 March 2024).

Lukashenko's lack of entrepreneurial spirit is coupled with Belarus' credit dependency on Russia. According to the Finance Ministry's data, on 1 January 2021, the external debt of Belarus amounted to 18.6 billion US dollars, which means that it increased by 1.4 billion (i.e. 8.4 per cent) in one year.³¹ Russia has been Belarus' main creditor throughout. After the political crisis triggered by the elections, Russia decided to support Lukashenko's regime with one billion dollars. Half of the sum was issued by the Eurasian Stabilisation and Development Fund, whose primary donor is Russia.³² The other half came to the Belarus' Finance Ministry as a Russian loan.³³

Minsk's dependency on Russia, however, goes far beyond loans. It also includes the energy sector, where Russia provides Belarus with subsidies for energy resources imported from Russia. Here are some examples. Preferential oil prices have allowed for the successful operation of two big Belarusian refineries, Mozyr Oil and Naftan Oil, which generate up to 20 per cent of income for the state budget and 10 per cent of the GDP. Belarus imports oil from Russia at fixed rates and then sells its products in European markets at world prices. Moreover, thanks to the low prices of natural gas imported from Russia, Lukashenko's regime has been able to maintain its outdated industry for years. Nowadays, Belarus is totally dependent on natural gas imports from Russia. In sum, maintaining the Belarusian archaic economy model for thirty years has been possible only with Russia's substantial financial support.

After the protests in August 2020, Belarus' financial, investment and creditworthiness sharply decreased in world markets. Two of the world's three biggest rating agencies (Fitch and S&P) attributed new scores to Belarus. The Fitch maintained a long-term rating for Minsk on the 'B' level but lowered the rating outlook from 'stable' to 'negative'. The change reflected the Fitch's opinion that:

The political crisis in Belarus made it more vulnerable to the dangers caused by relatively low international currency reserves and a weak bank sector. Intensification of the political unrest could put additional pressure on the international reserves and cause an outflow of deposits, which, in turn, could endanger macroeconomic and financial stability.³⁴

In September 2020, S&P also changed its Belarus' credit worthiness forecast from 'stable' to 'negative'. The ranking was preserved as 'B', but the agency declared

³¹ 'Public debt of the Republic of Belarus', Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, n.d., http://www.minfin.gov.by/en/public_debt/condition/ (accessed: 10 May 2021).

³² 'The EFSD Council approves a US \$500 million financial credit for Belarus', Eurasian Development Bank (2020), <https://eabr.org/press/releases/soviet-efsr-odobril-predostavlenie-respublike-belarusi-finansovogo-kredita-v-obeme-500-mln-dollarov-ssh/> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

³³ 'Правительство России одобрило проект соглашения о предоставлении Беларуси кредита', *Belrynok* (21 Dec. 2020), <https://www.belrynok.by/2020/12/21/pravitelstvo-rossii-odobrilo-proekt-soglasheniya-o-predostavlenii-belarusi-kredita/> (accessed: 10 March 2024).

³⁴ 'Fitch Ratings: Belarus – Rating Action Report', (2020), <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/belarus-rating-action-report-13-11-2020> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

that not only the estimates but also creditworthiness may be decreased.³⁵ It is worth mentioning that 'B' is given to actors whose ability to pay their debts is doubtful, and only a friendly economic environment gives them opportunities to meet their obligations. In the case of Belarus, the loss of credibility is equal to the lack of possibilities to refinance the Lukashenko regime's huge foreign debt in international markets.

However, the crisis of the world economies, including the Russian one, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic does not allow Belarus to improve its ratings through beneficial interactions with the economic environment. The results of the Index of Economic Freedom for Belarus by Heritage Foundation in 2021 are not optimistic, either. They indicate 61.0 points, i.e. 0.7 points less than last year and puts Belarus at number 43 among 45 European countries. The result is below the regional and world average. Although it allows for including Belarus into the group of 'relatively free' states, it is closer to the bottom limit of the scale (60–69.9 points).

Since the recent presidential elections, an intensified withdrawal of foreign investors has been observed in Belarus. In 2020, foreign investment in Belarus' economy amounted to 8.68 billion US dollars, of which 6 billion (69.2 per cent) was direct foreign investment. It is the lowest recorded level of investment since 2016.³⁶ It can be supposed that in 2021, the indicators will probably continue to go down due to the growing investment risk. The latter can be discussed in two dimensions: as investors' risk of restrictions from Lukashenko's regime and that of their own states due to possible future sanctions for Belarus imposed by different countries.

Negative tendencies were also observed in foreign trade. In 2020, Belarus' economic trade turnover amounted to 60.7 billion US dollars, with exports accounting for 28.4 billion and imports 32.3 billion, respectively. That means that exports decreased by 11.8 per cent and imports by 17.4 per cent compared with the previous year.³⁷

All the above factors have contributed to a decline in Belarusians' living standards. That, in turn, has resulted in an increased awareness that Lukashenko's style of governing the country has ceased to be effective in the dynamically changing reality. It is worth noticing that the crisis started long before the pandemic, and the outbreak of public discontent resulted from the cumulative feeling of helplessness and frustration growing since at least the after-election protests in 2010.

³⁵ 'Trading Economics – Belarus', n.d. (2021), <https://pl.tradingeconomics.com/belarus/rating> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

³⁶ 'Foreign investment', National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, (2021), <https://www.belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/real-sector-of-the-economy/foreign-investment/> (accessed: 10 March 2024).

³⁷ 'State Customs Authorities of the Republic of Belarus', (2020), https://www.gtk.gov.by/ru/2020_stat-ru/view/itogi-vneshnej-torgovli-respubliki-belarus-za-janvar-dekabr-2020-goda-16514/ (accessed: 10 May 2021).

Economic security of the state and citizens' needs

All Belarus' neighbours, except for Ukraine, enjoy higher living standards. In Belarus, GDP per capita (6,663 US dollars) is two times lower than in Russia (11,583 US dollars), about 2.5 times lower than in Poland (15,692 US dollars), and about three times lower than in Latvia and Lithuania (17,828 and 19,601 US dollars, respectively). In 2019, GDP per capita in Belarus was only 4.4 per cent higher than in 2008. Moreover, such a significant difference results only from the state's economic policy over the last thirty years and not from the citizens' education or skills.

World Bank data on the Human Development Index (HDI) shows that Belarusian people represent a well-trained and highly qualified workforce with a relatively low prosperity level.³⁸ Their skills and qualifications do not fit the economic climate in Belarus, shaped by state-owned enterprises and the growth of big companies, as well as the lack of the state's support for small and medium businesses. Given the situation, Belarusians depend on state workplaces, and their salary does not depend on their individual initiative or predispositions. Moreover, employment is temporary, and, as such, it does not give them a sense of security and stabilisation. European Commission data show that 90 per cent of Belarusians work based on employment contracts for a definite time (known as junk contracts). In fact, there are no other forms of employment present.³⁹ Thus, Belarus does not apply a system of permanent job contracts, which makes the employee totally dependent on the employer. Moreover, those employed in the state sector do not have the right to terminate their contracts.

The economic crisis has brought about a decrease in salaries and a freezing of prices of goods. According to data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat), the average wage in January 2021 amounted to 1,290 Belarusian roubles, i.e. 502.6 US dollars. In contrast, in December 2020, it was 1,474.6 rubles, i.e. 5,76.6 US dollars. It is worth noticing that in September and October 2020, the average wage fell below 500 US dollars.⁴⁰ At the end of 2020, Belarus recorded the highest inflation rate for the last four years. It was 7.4 per cent, whereas in 2019, it was 4.7 per cent, and in 2018 – 5.6 per cent. That fact, combined with the price increases, made the situation of Belarusian citizens very difficult. In the second half of February, price restrictions for some products and

³⁸ 'Human Development Reports', United Nations Development Programme, (2020), <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking> (accessed: 18 May 2021).

³⁹ 'Резервы ужесточения трудовых отношений государством фактически исчерпаны', *Belarus in Focus* (10–16 Feb. 2014), <https://belarusinfocus.info/by/regiyony/rezervy-uzhestocheniya-trudovyh-otnosheniy-gosudarstvom-fakticheski-ischerpany> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁴⁰ 'Gross average earnings in the Republic of Belarus', National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, (2021), <https://www.belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/real-sector-of-the-economy/labor-cost> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

medicines were introduced on the wave of increasing inflation. The prices for 62 goods were frozen, out of which 57 included food items. Moreover, a list of 50 medicines was published whose prices were fixed based on the same regulation.⁴¹ The regulation in question entered into force on 1 March 2021.

The current protests, on the one hand, deplete the regime's resources, but on the other hand, they worsen society's material situation. The protests provoke Lukashenko to redirect money to law enforcement agencies. He supports his tools of impact on society by subsidizing it. As long as the homeostat has the power to decide what is helpful for the functional balance of preservation and what is not, the nature of the state will not change. Preliminary analyses of state authorities show that the economy, although battered, is still the primary tool for managing human resources. The initial strikes at big industrial factories were suppressed, rebellious teachers pacified with the threat of job loss, and journalists and other employees in state media offices who were reluctant to adhere to the official rhetoric were fired, or they lost their licenses and, in many cases, were fined or imprisoned. In the context of relations between obedience to the regime and economic motivation, it is worth remembering that only a part of Belarusian society has such a highly negative attitude as to retort to protests as an expression of discontent. It is hard to say how big that part is, but saying they are the majority is unfounded.⁴² Even if they do not support Lukashenko's policy, a large section of society also does not champion the opposition and anti-governmental actions. There are some reasons for that. First, the new opposition has not worked out a consistent political programme yet, nor has it institutionalised its centres to such an extent as to have any noticeable influence through specific stable social structures. Secondly, people who do not participate in protests either do not believe in their effectiveness as they grew up in the Soviet era or have no political awareness and/or are not used to expressing opinions concerning political matters. Thirdly, there exists a vast group of law enforcement agents who are, in a natural way, a part of the regime and, therefore, not interested in its destruction.

Managing Belarus' economy is Lukashenko's domain, and despite the opposition's efforts to disorganise it by strikes, it is still a tool used by the regime. On the other hand, the Belarusian economy is under Russia's control. Here, a real danger for Lukashenko emerges.

The struggle for power between the state and the new opposition looks quite different if one looks at the information space. Lukashenko's opponents have

⁴¹ 'О временных мерах по стабилизации цен на социально значимые товары первой необходимости', *Pravo.by* (2021), <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C22100100&p1=1> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁴² M. Budzisz, *Iluzja wolnej Białorusi. Jak walczyć o demokrację, można utracić ojczyznę* (Warszawa, 2020), p. 16; G. Ioffe, 'The complexities of measuring Belarusian public opinion', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 18, no. 22 (2021), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-complexities-of-measuring-belarusian-public-opinion/> (accessed: 18 May 2021).

the possibility to equalise their chances and are even able to gain an advantage. Social media have played an information-providing and mobilising role since August 2020.

Official state media versus social media

Lukashenko knew that presidential elections would be accompanied by fierce information warfare since the very beginning of 2020. At a meeting of official state media managers, he expressed the thought: “We have to be ready for information warfare in the nearest presidential campaign because they will be shooting from all sides and most often in the back”.⁴³ It is worth mentioning that he was talking not only about the opposition’s or Western media but also Russian outlets.

Let us briefly summarise the sources that provide the Belarusian people with current news. Television is the primary source of information for 90 per cent of them, ‘word of mouth’ – 89 per cent, the internet – 82.2 per cent, the traditional printed press – 61 per cent, and the radio – 53 per cent.⁴⁴ The most popular newspaper, *Nasha Niva*,⁴⁵ is appreciated as an opinion-forming source, whereas *tut.by*⁴⁶ is the most popular among online information channels.⁴⁷

During the COVID-19 pandemic, internet users increased their activity on social media and via communicators such as Facebook, Viber, YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram.⁴⁸ When the protests broke out in August 2020, the media automatically became effective tools of communication, which became even more desirable when state authorities ordered the mobile operators to shut the networks down and block access to some social media.⁴⁹

Websites and channels on *youtube.com* are among the initiatives launched by members of the new Belarusian opposition. Some of them were created in response to the demands of the day, like ‘23.34’, the website of the International

⁴³ Budzisz, *Iluzja wolnej Białorusi*, p. 115.

⁴⁴ ‘Беларусь в цифрах, 2020’, (2020), https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public_compilation/index_16711/ (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁴⁵ ‘История “Нашей Нивы” с 1906 года до наших дней’, *Наша Ніва* (18 Aug. 2017), <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=151632&lang=ru> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁴⁶ *Инфографика дня: беларусская интернет аудитория в первом полугодии 2020*, Information Policy, 2021, <http://www.infopolicy.biz/?p=14236> (accessed: 18 May 2021).

⁴⁷ ‘ТОП-20 Telegram-каналов о Беларуси’, (2020), <https://vc.ru/medialogia/152550-top-20-telegram-kanalov-o-belarusi> (accessed: 10 March 2024).

⁴⁸ ‘Откройте, вам Telegram! Теперь в Беларуси за подписку на независимые телеграм-каналы можно получить до семи лет тюрьмы’, *Новая газета* (28 Oct. 2021), <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/10/28/otkroite-vam-telegram> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

⁴⁹ ‘Эксперты рассказали как Telegram обходит блокировки в Белоруссии’, *РИА Новости* (11 Apr. 2020), <https://ria.ru/20200811/1575645271.html> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

Committee for Investigation of Torture in Belarus.⁵⁰ It stores information on the use of violence against protestors by the militia to hold responsible the officers who break the law.⁵¹ There also exist other websites such as ‘Information Map’, storing forbidden materials and information for those who want to help distribute it,⁵² links to websites with job offers, the initiative ‘Honest People’,⁵³ ‘Stay Safe’,⁵⁴ a website where tutorials and advice on how to act when getting arrested or imprisoned are published.

Youtube.com gained popularity long before the elections. The channel ‘A Country to Live in’, owned by Sergei Tikhanovsky, has 326,000 subscribers, and NEXTA, owned by Stepan Putila, has over 1,170,000,⁵⁵ and the number of followers is growing. It has been the people that constitute the base for the opposition’s actions – contrary to the state’s activities.⁵⁶ They supported such initiatives as control of the voting process or collecting Belarusians’ opinions on the Coordination Council’s activities.⁵⁷

As already mentioned, the government blocked several websites soon after the elections.⁵⁸ State authorities gained time to implement internet content censorship tools by disturbing websites’ operation and denying internet access. Switching the internet off proved helpful in disorganising protests – it usually stopped one or two hours before the planned protest action.⁵⁹ Censorship was implemented in two ways: by removing content and arresting its authors.⁶⁰ State authorities systematically

⁵⁰ ‘International Committee for Investigations of Tortures in Belarus releases new report’ (2020), <https://belarusfeed.com/international-committee-investigation-torture-belarus/> (accessed: 18 May 2021).

⁵¹ ‘23.34 Мы всё записываем’, *23-34.net*, <https://23-34.net> (accessed: 18 May 2021).

⁵² *Карта інфармавання*, Resources Page, n.d., <https://agitka2020.com> (accessed: 18 May 2020).

⁵³ *Honest People*, <https://honest-people.by/> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁵⁴ *Stay Safe*, <http://sos.belngo.info/> (accessed: 18 May 2021); ‘З’явіўся сайт з SOS-кантактамі праваабарончых арганізацыяў’, <https://penbelarus.org/2020/08/07/zyaviusya-sajt-z-sos-kantaktami-pravaabaronychh-arganizacyyau.html> (accessed: 20 Apr. 2024).

⁵⁵ Izdebski, ‘Media, czaty, narracje’.

⁵⁶ ‘Телеграм-канал Тихановского признан в Белоруссии экстремистским’, *Интерфакс* (16 July 2021), <https://www.interfax.ru/world/778278> (accessed: 16 March 2024); ‘Усиленный режим сошел с ума’, *Новая газета* (14 Dec. 2021), <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/12/14/usilennyi-rezhim-soshel-s-uma> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

⁵⁷ The Coordination Council is a nucleus of a representative body created by Svetlana Tsikhounouskaya and is to secure the state power transmission during the political crisis, and to secure Belarus’ sovereignty in the period of transition. For more information see: Coordination Council, <https://rada.vision/en> (accessed: 18 May 2021).

⁵⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN25Q01T/>, 30 August; M. Xynou, A. Filastò, *Belarus protests: From internet outages to pervasive website censorship*, 15 Sep. 2020, <https://ooni.org/post/2020-belarus-internet-outages-website-censorship/> (accessed: 14 April 2024).

⁵⁹ *Inhabitants of the ‘Change square’ informed about problems with the internet* (2020), <https://42.tut.by/707908> (accessed: 18 May 2021).

⁶⁰ ‘Белорусская цензура вырезала из российских “Вестей” сюжет о низком рейтинге Лукашенко’, *NEWSru.com* (15 Nov. 2010), <https://www.newsru.com/world/15Nov2010/lukacenz.html> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

removed from the information space elements they regarded dangerous: journalists were detained⁶¹ or deprived of accreditation,⁶² websites of independent newspapers were blocked, and users of thematic chats on social media were found and repressed. In October 2020, the most popular channel, NEXTA-Live, was considered extremist and based on a court ruling, its activity was banned. The authorities did not hesitate to apply administrative measures.⁶³ Website administrators were arrested under Article 39 of the Criminal Code and accused of participation in riots or arrested under Article 342 and accused of public order disturbance.⁶⁴

Social media ensures the anonymity of users and helps them remain independent of state authorities. Thus, they are an effective tool for social mobilisation. Nevertheless, there are also weak points. First, social media content is hard to verify, making them an efficient device for both the opposition and official authorities' advocates – as a disinformation tool. The latter use trolling. They publish content intending to discredit the opposition by associating it with Nazism. They also apply deliberate misleading and encourage the supporters of the state policy to get fake Facebook or other social media accounts to convince other users that “Belarus is an economic power to compare with the neighbouring countries, especially ones that are based on democratic principles”.⁶⁵

One fact is important, however. Young people create social media, and young people are their receivers. As Tomasz Sulima aptly noted:

The Belarusian youth lives on the Internet. If the media lies, they watch TV on the Internet. If the state media promotes the kolkhoz model of life (with all due respect for farmers), they will look for alternatives online. And if the president cheats them by stealing elections, the youth launches the NEXTA channel and makes a revolution financed online by tens of thousands of people.⁶⁶

Social media are a weapon in the battle with the regime, but, first of all, they promote a lifestyle different from that which was accepted by previous generations of the Belarusian people. Thus, a new generation of future politicians is taking its first steps into a new reality, which, so far, is a virtual one. The current protests

⁶¹ ‘Belarus: Attacks on journalists mount amid protest crackdown’, Amnesty International (12 Aug. 2020), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/belarus-journalists-under-attack/> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁶² ‘Belarus revokes accreditations of journalists covering protests for foreign media’, Reuters (30 Aug. 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN25Q01T/> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁶³ ‘Telegram-канал Nexta стал в Белоруссии экстремистским формированием’, RBC (29 Oct. 2021). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/29/10/2021/617b91af9a7947cb80b77420> (accessed: 16 March 2024); ‘Власти Беларуси объявили канал Nexta “экстремистским”’, *Радио Свобода* (20 Oct. 2020), <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30903443.html> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

⁶⁴ Izdebski, ‘Media, czaty, narracje’.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ K. Wóycicki, *W pogoni za wolnością. Białoruska rewolucja* (Warszawa, 2020), pp. 24–25.

are indeed the ‘generational experience’ that unifies them around the idea of free elections. This new generation, however, does not ask questions about the following decades or a vision of Belarus’ growth or people’s lives in the country based on new values and the rules resulting from them. At present, the Belarusian youth constitutes a great and real power that can be used to overthrow Lukashenko’s regime. It can be supposed, however, that it is not the youth that has the power to create a new face of Belarus after future elections. Kazimierz Wóycicki noticed that social media is an effective control tool for those who know how to use it. The actors of the political game take to the streets to make peaceful protests, but they are not the agents who sketch out plans for the development of the situation and discuss possible scenarios.⁶⁷ Who are the real agents, and what are their plans then? Is it the group united around Tikhanovskaya? Let us try to answer this question.

The institutionalisation of the opposition’s actions: A new homeostat emerging

Sergei Tikhanovsky was replaced by his wife Svetlana as a presidential candidate. It is not such a big surprise if one recalls the silent history of the Soviet republics’ women who took their men’s duties on their shoulders after the former had been killed in a war or arrested as ‘enemies of the people’. Women often carried the burden of supporting their families and countries: they raised children and worked in farm factories. The fact that men held managerial positions resulted from the patriarchal cultural code and meant only that women were not allowed to govern, not that they were unable to do it. Tikhanovskaya has partly included herself in the stereotype by saying that she does not have political ambitions, just replaces her husband.

I was under no illusions about my political career. I did not want to be a politician. But fate decided that I was on the front line of the battle with lawlessness and injustice [...]. I am ready to accept the responsibility and take the role of a national leader in order to make our country peaceful and put it into a normal rhythm, in order for us to release all political prisoners and prepare, within a short period of time, law regulations for new presidential elections – true, honest, that will be accepted by the world community.⁶⁸

Tikhanovskaya’s declaration that she “never wanted to be a politician” belonged to the past. In a video recording of 17 August 2020,⁶⁹ as the Coordination Council was established, Tikhanovskaya announced that she was ready to head a provisional

⁶⁷ More about possible outcomes of the protests: Budzisz, *Iluzja wolnej Białorusi*, pp. 307–312.

⁶⁸ Wóycicki, *W pogoni za wolnością*, p. 17.

⁶⁹ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s speech at the Women Political Leaders Summit in Brussels, 7 June 2023, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/news/ea57828e947f6d6.html> (accessed 15 Apr. 2024).

government. It is a declaration of political engagement, even if not expressed directly. Here, a question arises of whether that marks the emergence of a new style of making politics. The highest state posts in the countries of central and eastern Europe are held by men, and people have gotten used to perceiving policy in its male aspects. It is worth mentioning that the difference between the male and female styles of managing is well-known in business. Why not assume that it will also become visible in politics? The emerging pattern is so new that Lukashenko neglected its power of influence. Nevertheless, Belarusian society is agitated by the emotional content of Tikhonovskaya's speeches and appeals. The "lack of political experience" attributed to the opposition's female leaders means that women do not fit into the male pattern of a politician. And that, in turn, may be a sign that a homeostat with new attributes is being born, and it will replace the previous one to restore and maintain the social balance because the 'male' homeostat has ceased to be effective.

The protests that broke out after the presidential elections in August 2020 were spontaneous and full of enthusiasm. They did not have any leadership or organisational structures. Human potential was not precisely directed by political agendas prepared in advance, but it was based on values and a draft of their materialisation. This weakness of the movement proved to be its strength at the same time: when Tikhonovskaya was kidnapped and exiled in Lithuania, the movement did not cease to exist because she was not perceived as its central figure. She was more of a triggering factor of the protests than a condition for their continuation.

Creating the Coordination Council was the first attempt at institutionalising the civic movement. Below is its definition:

The unified representative body of the Belarusian people. It was created on the initiative of Svetlana Tikhonovskaya to organise the process of overcoming the political crisis and ensure social cohesion, as well as protect the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Belarus. The Council operates under the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus. The Coordination Council doesn't aim to seize power through unconstitutional means and doesn't call for organisation or preparation of actions that violate public order.⁷⁰

There are some working groups within the Council structures, such as the Regional Group responsible for providing support in implementing initiatives at the local level, the Group of Support for the Belarusian Language and Culture focusing on preserving the Belarusian heritage and counteracting all kinds of actions against it, the Business Support and Economic Groups analysing the economic situation, providing people with accurate information and supporting business initiatives, as well as counteracting the falsification of media information on the

⁷⁰ 'Coordination Council', <https://rada.vision/en> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

condition of the Belarusian economy,⁷¹ the Fem Group, the Working Group on Political Prisoners and Human Rights Violations, the Christian Vision Group, the Education Group, and some others. Their diversity shows that they address all the problems that Belarus faces. Expanding women's presence in governing tasks is the purpose of the Fem Group, which would support our opinion on the emerging new quality of the homeostat, different from that based on patriarchal patterns of power.

Thanks to the documents published on the Coordination Council's website, it is possible to learn more about the organisation. In the Resolution of 19 August 2020, the reasons for the appointment of the Council were given: "The people have lost confidence in the current government and are calling for it to resign"; "Many foreign states have not recognised the results of the presidential election in the Republic of Belarus".⁷² The purpose of the body was specified as follows: "The Coordination Council aims to facilitate the transfer of power and ensure social cohesion based on the Constitution".⁷³ The need to continue the foreign policy course was also stressed: "The Coordination Council does not intend to change the constitutional order or the foreign policy of the country".⁷⁴ The authors declare that the Council is based on constitutional principles and does not intend to take over the state power unconstitutionally: "The Council operates in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus. The Council does not aim to seize state power in an unconstitutional manner, nor does it call to organise and prepare actions that disrupt public order".⁷⁵

The appointment of the Council revealed an inner split within the opposition. Valery Tsepkalo, a former presidential candidate, criticised the general criteria for creating the body, saying he was not invited to cooperate.⁷⁶ That seemingly insignificant fact shows some inconsistency of Lukashenko's opposition and challengers for the highest state post.

Lukashenko's statement that creating the Coordination Council is an "attempt at taking over power" is not only an emotional expression but a reflection of a fact.⁷⁷ Actually, in light of the mechanisms of a system reconfiguration, a new

⁷¹ See 'The Economic Group of the Coordination Council', <https://rada.vision/en/working-groups/the-economic-group> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁷² 'Resolution of the Coordination Council', <https://rada.vision/en/resolution> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ 'Rules of Procedure of the Coordination Council', <https://rada.vision/en/rules> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁷⁶ 'Цепкало пожаловался, что его не пригласили в координационный совет Белоруссии', *MKRU* (19 Aug. 2020), <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/08/19/cepka-lo-pozhalovalsya-cto-ego-ne-priglasili-v-koordinacionnyy-sovet-belorussii.html> (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁷⁷ 'Opposition's Coordinating Council described as attempt to seize power in Belarus', Belarus. by – Official Website of the Republic of Belarus (18 Aug. 2020), <https://www.belarus.by/en/>

homeostat replaces the old one and starts organising the functional balance of the system based on its perception of what is ‘wrong’ and ‘right’. The reconfiguration process includes marginalising the previously central elements and eliminating those inconsistent with the content of the new homeostat. Lukashenko struggles for his ‘to be or not to be’ by taking such steps as launching criminal proceedings against the Council on the charge that it endangers national security. He uses administrative bodies and law enforcement structures to influence the media, society and workers in industrial plants. The opposition’s representatives do not have such measures at their disposal. They act in two ways. On the one hand, they are trying to weaken the president’s forces – by organising strikes and using social media networks to disturb the work of the militia and other official law enforcement units. On the other hand, they are trying to create administrative structures, such as the Coordination Council mentioned above. Re-election and taking over power would mean gaining access to the administrative state structures now in Lukashenko’s hands. Nevertheless, as changing the attributes and quality of the political system – and not only its structure – is the opposition’s purpose, a problem of staffing will surface after the power takeover.

The present identity of the Belarussian state authorities is defined.⁷⁸ It is the legacy of the Soviet period with its roots going back to the ‘Asian model’ of Russian state power. It is based on strong leadership and personal authority, the cult of strength, and is centralised and hierarchical.⁷⁹ Lukashenko has ceased to be part of this model in the eyes of both the Belarussian people and Putin. Russia would prefer a pragmatic person who has pro-Russian views and is opposed to Western values, as opposed to the ambitious and unpredictable Lukashenko.⁸⁰ Its clearly defined identity gives the present homeostat consistency and is the temporary power source.

The Belarussian opposition does not have roots in the national political tradition. As Bogdan Cywiński has noticed: “The Belarussian identity was a socio-cultural fact, not reflected in any political postulates, until the war”.⁸¹ It is one of the reasons for which the working group supporting the Belarussian language and culture within the Coordination Council structures was created. The opposition also refers to democracy, human rights, and entrepreneurship as individual initiatives.

government/events/oppositions-coordinating-council-described-as-attempt-to-seize-power-in-belarus_i_0000117653.html (accessed: 18 March 2024).

⁷⁸ W. Karbalewicz, W. Kudela-Świątek, ‘Cechy białoruskiego reżymu autorytarnego’, *Politeja*, vol. 22: *Studia białoruskie* (2012), 81–96.

⁷⁹ Such an opinion is also expressed in the research by a Belarussian academic Pavel Usov, see id., ‘Szanse na transformację polityczną i skuteczną demokracyzację Białorusi [ANALIZA]’, *Kultura liberalna*, vol. 47 (2021), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2021/11/25/pavel-usov-demokracja-bialorus-analiza/> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

⁸⁰ ‘Ekspert: Putin oczekuje od Łukaszenki oddania władzy’, *Kresy24.pl* (2 Nov. 2021), <https://kresy24.pl/ekspert-putin-oczekuje-od-lukaszenki-oddania-wladzy/> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

⁸¹ B. Cywiński, *Szańce kultur. Szkice z dziejów narodów Europy Wschodniej* (Warszawa, 2013), p. 232.

The semantic scope of these terms was worked out in Western Europe and fit into its pace of socio-historical development. The translation of their content may be alien to Belarusian reality. Consequently, the politicians using more familiar rhetoric would be chosen as the nation's leaders.

Summary

The economic, information-related and social potential of the Belarusian opposition, whose assessment was defined as the research purpose of this article, is as follows: the economic situation of Belarus is unstable and worsening. It depends on Russia's subsidies to a great extent. The subsidies, however significant, do not affect the living standard of the Belarusian people. Both pro-western and pro-Russian Lukashenko's opponents would need financial support from the outside but at the cost of a partial loss of influence on the post-revolution order. The Belarusian people also do not want this support as they are determined to stay a nation that is independent in all possible meanings of the word. Moreover, such a solution – providing financial support – is undesirable both for Russia and Western Europe. All countries are facing the crisis caused by the pandemic. Besides, Belarus is perceived as an element of the game for global influence and not an equal partner. Thus, looking at the struggle between Lukashenko and Tikhanovskaya, the former has all the economic measures of power implementation at his disposal.

At first glance, the information-related potential of the opposition seems greater than that of the official state authority. The range and dynamics of social media, the pace of information spreading and the state's limited ability to block it create the impression that the opposition has the upper hand. This, however, is not confirmed by further in-depth analyses. Information potential needs to be estimated not only from the angle of tools and range but also from the content and the durability of ideas. Meanwhile, although social media has successfully mobilised people and provided them with information, they do not have any modelling power. The protestors hardly understand the ideas of democracy and civil society promoted by Tikhanovskaya. Freedom is perceived mainly as liberation from dictator Lukashenko. There is a lack of a consistent vision of the state and nation governed by an elite that promotes democracy, liberalism, and the rule of law according to the Western-originated semantic scope of these words.

The opposition's social potential comes from the specificity of Belarusian society and the values proposed to it by the Coordination Council. It is worth noting that the protestors are young and well-educated people who have no opportunity to use their knowledge and prosper under Lukashenko's rule. Middle-aged women are also among the protestors. They speak out on behalf of their husbands who have been imprisoned or stay home to avoid being fired for participating in strikes and protest marches. The opposition promises that it will compensate those who have

suffered repressions, but such promises are based on weak foundations, and they concern an uncertain future. Even if the picture of protesting crowds is impressive, one needs to be aware that it is not the overwhelming majority of Belarusian society. People who constitute a part of the regime do not want to risk their relatively secure position and stabilisation. They are the group on the other side of the barricade. The opposition has little to offer them but another promise – of liberation and avoiding the consequences of serving the regime. People who are politically indifferent and passively accept changes also have to be considered.

The Belarusian opposition's quality results from education, life experience and accepted values of its leaders – Svetlana Tikhonovskaya,⁸² Maria Kolesnikova, Veronika Tsepkalo and other members of the Coordination Council. Temporarily marginalised persons like Viktor Babaryka are its other wing. Thus, Lukashenko's opponents present views on state transformation either on the basis of Western values or in the spirit of a pragmatic pro-Russian attitude. Cultural transformation is the core of the ideological platform, not only the political one. Consequently, the first stage in constituting a new government will be a struggle for power and choosing cultural patterns for the order of a new reality.

Conclusion

At present, the opposition does not have sufficient potential to take over power and secure its position to redirect Belarus towards a new political course different from the current one. Lukashenko's regime has both a consistent ideological platform and tools to stay as the homeostat, i.e., the decision-making centre of elements both harmful and beneficial for preserving the functional balance of the system. Rejecting Lukashenko itself is not going to cause a change in the quality of the homeostat system. Even if his ideological approach in international relations was replaced with a pragmatic one, the power pattern of economic centralisation, the state's militarisation and maintaining strong central power may remain unchanged. Russia is still interested in keeping Belarus within its sphere of influence. The support of the West is limited to expressions of concern and indignation towards Lukashenko's regime and mediation proposals – at the same table with Vladimir Putin. Belarusian advocates of Western values as a basis for a future order will have to emigrate, and many of them already have.

Thus, the final conclusion is that Tikhonovskaya, as a symbol of a certain political order based on the values of liberalism and individualism, will not replace Lukashenko, who, in turn, symbolizes a patriarchal and collectivist culture in terms of his style of exercising power.

⁸² Detailed description of the planned action can be found at Tikhonovskaya website (accessible in Belarusian, Russian, and English): 'Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Official web-site of the leader of democratic Belarus', <http://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/> (accessed: 16 March 2024).

Some other structures are emerging in Belarus⁸³ that will strengthen the political opposition's influence and support the emergence of civil society. Nevertheless, as they are in the initial formation stage, the issue requires further profound research.

Abstract

Answering the question of whether it is possible to install a government based on such values as democracy, civil society liberties, market economy, etc., instead of those represented and supported by Lukashenko's advocates is the main objective of research in this article. Three elements of the entire socio-political system were analysed: information, society politics and power. A combined methodological approach involving qualitative and quantitative analyses was applied: content analyses of the leading social actors, on the one hand, and, on the other, data from analytical research centres studied within the systemic approach taken.

The analyses show that Lukashenko's regime and the opposition represented by Svetlana Tikhonovskaya are vying for power and, primarily, a new way of perceiving the relations between the individual and the state. Another finding is that the driving factor of change is not information potential or economic resources but a clear message formulated in political agendas. Belarus is a place where global influences intersect, and therefore, its future is important for the EU, the United States and Russia.

The conclusion is that, at present, the opposition does not have sufficient potential to redirect Belarus towards a new political course.

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⁸³ Such as NAM (National Anti-Crisis Management), <https://www.belarus-nau.org/en> (accessed: 16 March 2022); Partisan groups like: 'Chorny Busel', <https://belsat.eu/news/17-12-2021-u-set-sive-z-yavilasya-infarmatsyya-pra-ataku-na-bazu-unutranyh-vojskau-u-valoushchyne/> (accessed: 16 March 2024); 'Што трэба ведаць пра суполкі "Буслы ляцяць" і "ДНС", якія ўлады прызналі экстрэмісцкімі фармаваннямі', *BelSat* (21 Oct. 2021), <https://belsat.eu/news/20-10-2021-shto-treba-vedats-pra-supolki-busly-lyatsyats-i-dns-yakiya-ulady-pryznali-ekstremistskimi-farmavannyami/> (accessed: 16 March 2024); "'Cyber partisans" share results of their work', *BelSat* (26 Aug. 2021), <https://belsat.eu/en/news/26-08-2021-cyber-partisans-share-results-of-their-work/> (accessed: 16 March 2024); 'Меморандум о создании Коалиции', *Telegram* (13 July 2021), <https://telegra.ph/Memorandu,-o-sozdanii-Koalicii-07-13> (accessed: 16 July 2022).

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