

Chances for political transformation and effective democratisation in Belarus

The Belarusian nation is at the start of a long and arduous journey towards democracy, which will require mobilisation, awareness and civic activity from most of Belarusian society. Only then will it be possible to depose the country's authoritarian leader, build a democratic state and introduce political and economic reforms.

- **Several external and internal political factors will impact on any successful transformation and democratic consolidation, the most important of which are: the state of the political system, the state Belarusian society and the opposition, and the geopolitical situation during the transfer of power and regime transformation.**
- **The success of any transformation will depend mainly on political responsibility and the maturity of democratic elites and society. Research conducted by independent think tanks shows a complex and ambiguous socio-political landscape in Belarus.**
- **The deeper the country integrates with Russia, the slimmer the chances for democratic changes become. The current geopolitical situation in Belarus is precarious and not conducive to quick political changes. The kind of relationship that Belarus has with the Russian Federation favours the current authoritarian system.**
- **If Lukashenko were to leave within the next five years, the Kremlin would likely support any transfer of power scenario, as long as Belarus remains an authoritarian state and that the new leader be Russia-oriented. Russia would then look after its strategic interests in Belarus.**
- **For quick and positive changes in Belarus to happen, its strategic and economic dependence on Russia should be weakened, which is possible if transfer of political power happened quickly enough so that Russia was not**

prepared. A weakening of Russian influence could also result from internal political and economic turbulence in Russia, to the extent that its own problems (crisis) forced Russia to lessen its influence in Belarus.

This will require mobilisation, awareness and civic activity from most of Belarusian society. Only then will it be possible to depose the country's authoritarian leader, build a democratic state and introduce political and economic reforms.

Once the regime in Belarus has been deposed and replaced with a new democratic government, it will be vital to prevent a perpetual cycle of societal, state transformation and internal turmoil, which, to various extents, happened in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Belarusians are afraid that similar crises and internal conflicts like those in other post-soviet countries could happen in Belarus, which makes them distrustful of any changes. Lukashenko's regime takes advantage of these fears and stereotypes and tries to manipulate citizens, trying to convince them that any changes will inevitably bring negative consequences, destabilisation or even a civil war. Thus, if any new leadership became involved in corruption and internal wrangling, this danger would become real. The process of perpetual transformation (which entails institutional paralysis and a never-ending rotation of governments) would keep Belarus in the ["grey zone"](#), and repeated societal, economic and political crises could cause political revanchism from Lukashenko's authoritarian regime.

Several external and internal political factors will impact on any successful transformation and democratic consolidation, the most important of which are:

- 1) the state of the political system in Belarus,
- 2) the state of the Belarusian society and opposition,
- 3) the geopolitical situation during the transfer of power and regime transformation.

It is these factors that will be decisive for whether Belarus will really move on from the current authoritarian system to a stable democratic order, or whether it will simply move from one authoritarian system to another.

A success of transformation will mainly depend on the political responsibility and maturity of democratic elites and society. On the one hand, the societal awakening of 2020 brings hope that Belarus will strive for a Western kind of democracy, and not ["sovereign democracy" based on the Russian model](#). On the other hand, Belarusian society is still

consolidating itself as a nation and is discovering its geopolitical position and political values, as well as deciding what they want their country to look like.

Research conducted by independent think tanks shows a complex and ambiguous socio-political landscape in Belarus.

[According to Chatham House, in mid-2021](#), 56 per cent of respondents in Belarus evaluated Vladimir Putin positively, 17 per cent remained neutral and 27 per cent negatively. 32 per cent wanted to integrate with Russia and only 9 per cent with the EU. 11 per cent of the respondents wanted a closer institutional union with the Russian Federation and 7 per cent would like to become a part of it (if we translate this percentage into the number of citizens eligible for voting, this amounts to over 300,000 people), 44 per cent of Belarusians wanted close economic integration with Russia. Around 60 per cent of respondents thought that after the power transfer Belarus should remain in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO – a collective security organisation and a military alliance of some members of the Community of Independent States). Polls show that most citizens have an unclear vision of the future for their own country, which means that national interests and democratic values have not been consolidated in the minds of Belarusians.

What is more, polls show that the Belarusian society still prefers authoritarian rule. This might be due to an internal need for stability and predictability in political and economic processes. Such mental schemes are based on the conviction that it is not well-functioning state institutions that guarantee general welfare, but a strong rule and leadership. This is why Putin and Russia are mythologised and presented as beacons of progressive authoritarianism. This might be due to the sense of state parochialism and lack of faith that Belarus could be an independent state.

It is already clear that any regime transformation in Belarus will take place in a difficult societal and political context and the end result cannot be easily predicted. Without fundamental changes in political culture and awareness, it will be very difficult to implement systemic changes, especially given ever-stronger integration with Russia.

In light of the current situation in Belarus, the following scenarios of political changes and possible consequences in the coming years can be developed:

I Scenarios of changes

1. Geopolitical frameworks for a political change in Belarus

In the coming years, it is undoubtedly the geopolitical situation that will determine the nature and essence of political changes in Belarus. The deeper the country integrates with Russia, the slimmer the chances are for democratic change. Even now, the geopolitical situation in Belarus is precarious and un conducive to quick political changes. The kind of relationship that Belarus has with the Russian Federation favours maintaining the present authoritarian system.

As the events of 2020 showed, Moscow remains the main external entity directly influencing political processes in Belarus. An economic, political and military alliance with Russia gives Moscow unlimited options for a direct intervention in Belarusian matters. General trends in recent months indicate that Moscow would like to weaken its neighbour's sovereignty as much as possible. Belarus cannot become democratic as a union state with Russia, even if Lukashenko is forced to resign.

Today Russia wants to maintain its influence in Belarus, which is possible only if Belarus remains an authoritarian state. Of course, the Kremlin could be interested in leadership change (transfer of power), but not in state democratisation (system transformation). Moscow has a lot of means to conduct a transfer of power within an authoritarian system, but the Kremlin is not sure whether it would be able to fully control the process in Belarus during a political crisis and prevent dangerous societal protests. This is why the Kremlin is not in any hurry to undertake radical action.

If Lukashenko were to leave within the next five years, the Kremlin might support any transfer of power scenario, as long as Belarus remains an authoritarian state and the new leader remains Russia-oriented and supportive of its strategic interests in their country. In line with Moscow's expectations, the power transfer should result in:

maintenance of closely integrated military-strategical systems (regional army groupings, combined system of air control, localisation of new military facilities/military contingent bases in Belarus);

- continued economic dependence, privatisation of large enterprises, strengthened Russian oligarchy in Belarus;
- creation of strong pro-Russian political entities in Belarus (parties and organisations which can actively participate in political processes during the transfer of power);
- continued denationalisation of the main political and societal institutions, and state security structures ([indeed, it is already difficult to call them national at all](#)).

During a transfer of power in Belarus, Russia could pursue one of two scenarios:

Direct political control (possible in the long-term, via robust integration processes):

In this option, pro-Russian elites which govern Belarus will mainly be at stake, a new president will be appointed. A transitional government which will be created on the foundations of the Security Council could become the proponent of Russian interests. The Security Council [has been granted special powers](#) and can independently pursue any politics during the transfer of power.

At the same time, the process can be controlled and supported by supranational bodies of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, or even the Russian military, whose presence could increase in the coming years. The space for political activism will be limited and the next “president” will be either someone from Lukashenko’s clan (a so called “Azerbaijani option”) or a member of the nomenklatura or a military person (“the Uzbek option”). This would substantially weaken Belarusian statehood and exhaust its societal and economic resources.

Indirect control, possible if the integration status quo is kept (Armenian scenario)

This scenario assumes a soft authoritarian transfer, which guarantees the strategic presence of Russia in Belarus, keeps Belarus in key geopolitical projects, such as CSTO, SCO (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and keeps it linked to Russia with weakened control over its own political processes. Such a scenario could favour greater political autonomy of civil society and create (albeit limited) conditions for a compromise between the opposition and the governing nomenklatura. This does not mean that a seemingly democratic representation in the parliament and local government would be impossible, but state institutions would not be systematically democratized. Such an option would require the opposition to fully accept nomenklatura representatives selected by the President and controlled by Moscow. At the same time, national foundations and Belarusian statehood would continue to be dismantled. In effect, a hybrid regime would come into existence, with strong, pro-Russian oligarchical influence. Anti-national politics would exacerbate socio-cultural conditions and undermine the chances of creating a strong anti-Russian movement. A quick consolidation of Belarusian and Russian interests and increased corruption would further damage Belarus.

A national revolution is not possible with Belarus so closely integrated with Russia, because Moscow would intervene immediately. A similar situation occurred immediately after the elections in 2020, when Putin said that a military reserve would be created, w when Putin

said that a military reserve would be created, which [could be used if people in Belarus started to protest](#). Another challenge for any national revolution and democratic power transfer is the fact that the army and nomenklatura are strongly Russia-oriented. Indeed, they would more likely support a Russian presence in Belarus and the restriction of sovereignty, than a national revolution.

By the same token, Russia would remain a perpetual civilisational challenge for Belarus and would always try to take advantage of the changes in the country.

For quick and positive changes in Belarus to happen, its strategic and economic dependence on Russia needs to be lessened, which is possible if:

- *political transfer of power happens quickly enough that Russia is not prepared*
- *Russia suffers from internal political and economic turbulence to the extent that its own problems (crisis) force it to weaken its influence in Belarus.*

In order to use any situation to the advantage of Belarus and to initiate regime change, a consolidated, national-democratic front would be necessary, with wide societal support.

Right now, the democratically oriented portion of society in Belarus should focus on slowing down the expansion of Russian interests in their country. What is needed for this to happen?

- nation-wide consolidation of the Belarusian society and opposition. Any attempts to endear the movement to the Kremlin and obtain Russia's support would weaken any new opposition;
- anti-Russian and pro-European attitudes should be fostered in Belarusian society;
- the West (especially the EU) should systematically support Belarusian national institutions and counteract the union between Russia and Belarus at the international level. Belarus should become a geopolitical priority for Europe.

Irrespective of what happens, the EU should include Belarus as its geopolitical priority in all its policies.

2. Political system during transfer of power

The nature and direction of political changes depend on the political regime and governing elites. Internal power consolidation will determine the system's ability to oppose the changes. The collapse of state structures will force the governing groups to look for compromises and concessions towards society. The regime's policy of today will greatly influence the nature of future changes. Constant reprisals, terror and lawlessness deepen

societal polarisation, and fuel mutual hatred and violence. All of this could create the perfect conditions for radical revolutionary shocks in the country and a prolonged political confrontation in society, once political control is relaxed.

Of course, the system's stability is relative, because there are several unpredictable factors that can change the politics and political relations in Belarus. One of them would be Lukashenko suffering from a sudden illness, his sudden departure, a military coup, systemic problems in Russia, more confrontations in foreign policy, etc.

But there is a specific political and psychological context in which the elites and the society function in Belarus today.

The current situation in Belarus indicates that Lukashenko is not going to resign from power in the immediate future. On the contrary - he will do anything, not only to maintain his position, but also to leave someone from his surroundings in charge, probably his youngest son, Nikolai. This is why Lukashenko needs to create a certain power structure, which will ensure that his rule and system are stable for a relatively long time, i.e., at least 7-10 years. The political crisis in 2020 has pushed Lukashenko and his surroundings to significantly tighten his regime, towards a totalitarian one, and to destroy civic autonomy.

At the same time, the governing nomenklatura and security forces have consolidated their power. This new political elite will try to stay in charge and continue the authoritarian leadership at the cost of the state's and societal development. Crimes committed by the ruling elites encourage an even greater consolidation and stronger reprisals, because only those remaining in power are guaranteed safety and impunity. In other words, sustaining the neo-totalitarian system is an existential need for those who serve it. This also means that at this stage, the ruling elite is not willing to make any compromises.

On the basis of the current political system in Belarus, the following scenarios of an authoritarian transfer of power can be distinguished:

1. Power transfer within one clan The ruling elites remain in power. The point is to maintain consolidated power in the hands of one of Lukashenko's sons, either Victor or Nikolai. Hence special amendments in the Constitution (2022-2023) which are planned to guarantee that Aleksandr Lukashenko remains in power for the next 5-7 years, with a possible power transfer within the same family. Such a change is only possible if the dictator remains in power and the ruling apparatus in the hands of his family.

2. Military-nomenklatura transfer ("Uzbek option"). The family's influence is limited or

the family is removed from power (after Lukashenko is gone). All political and economic tools are in the hands of the highest-ranking officials and security officers. The new regime will pursue the old practices, which guarantee its survival. But in the long term, the politics of terror is not possible, and the new government requires legitimacy to be stable. In this case, a limited compromise with the opposition is possible (with various groups), provided that the opposition remains influential in the long term. It is hard to predict to what extent such a compromise would be possible and whether its aim would be systemic change, or rather making the opposition play but an ceremonial role, without real impact on power, especially if the opposition remains fragmented.

The longer Lukashenko remains in power, the more difficult it will be to replace him and democratise the country, irrespective of the scenario. On the one hand, a long rule will strengthen the system internally, destroy public institutions, exhaust the intellectual and professional potential of the Belarusian society and, generally speaking, damage society and the economy. On the other hand, societal groups which support neo-totalitarian politics will fully oppose the democratic transfer of power and will try to keep the situation unchanged, thus only accelerating existing negative trends in the country.

The economic and political costs of the changes would continue to rise. If the changes had taken place in 2020-2021, thanks to a psychological impulse, specialised human resources, a relatively stable financial system and industrial production – a regime and economic transformation would have taken less time, cost and effort (society would have consolidated). However, after 2021 (for example if the changes happen in 2025), once the intellectual and professional resources which fuel reforms of the country will have been further depleted, once public institutions will have been further destroyed, along with an economically active middle class, with more crises in state production, more hidden unemployment and discontent – introducing systemic reforms will require more economic and social sacrifice, more resources and time. In other words, reforming a more or less stable social-economic system is simpler than reforming a system which is falling apart. It needs to be underlined that sanctions and economic isolation are already having a destructive effect on the Belarusian economy.

Opposition and society: Engines for change

There is a chance for a democratic transformation in Belarus, but only if the opposition and society are mobilised and consolidated and if they participate in political processes directly. The current stage of historical development of Belarus is the result of destructive politics of terror and the fact that the current regime has been able to strengthen itself.

With time, frustration, passivity, distrust, social conflicts, divisions and indecisiveness will be on the rise in the opposition. New opposition structures have not been ready for a systemic and long-term confrontation with the regime. They limit their activities to NGOs and parties which have minimal presence at the international stage. At the same time, if the opposition does not become strong and united before the transfer of power, it will not become a full player in changes in Belarus. There is a threat that the opposition will miss the opportunity to influence the process, especially if it does not enjoy wide societal support. What is more, a democratic transformation in Belarus will not be possible without a coherent, international strategy and the appropriate people.

Right now, there is a threat that the political crisis and confrontation will continue indefinitely. Within this context, the opposition has the following strategic challenges:

- internal unity, maintaining a wide national-democratic front,
- institutionalisation – creation of political institutions and management mechanisms,
- recruiting employees who will be engaged in the transfer of power and during the transformation – both at the macro- and micro level, including Belarusians who have emigrated,
- maintaining wide societal support for Belarus,
- strengthening national conversations in order to introduce gradual changes to Belarusian awareness, overcoming deep-seated fears related to the national revival.

In other words, changes can be ideologically and structurally supported by creating and developing an institutional matrix, by focusing on values and shaping national self-awareness, especially in terms of political culture. This is the only way for the opposition to maintain their position and be treated seriously during the transformation. This is also the only way for most of the citizens to become the societal basis of fundamental reforms.

An ideal scenario for Belarus would be for power to be transferred to a nationally-oriented, professional and responsible political elite, with the people and financial resources needed to implement quick and effective reforms. But such a scenario is not very probable, and even if it was possible, then only as a result of a revolution with a united political front and readiness for radical actions. The preliminary conditions for such a scenario are as follows:

- a sudden departure (death) of Lukashenko, with the governing elites at a loss as how to proceed next. The opposition would have to be able to exert pressure on them within one or two days, on a revolutionary scale, and force them into concessions;
- if the authoritarian leader is changed, the nomenklatura would be able to maintain power at a critical moment, but lack of political will (problem of control and strong

leadership) could force the elites to negotiate with the opposition. Under such circumstances, democratic forces would force the ruling elites to dialogue by mass protests and blockades and would take over rule completely.

Therefore, two political developments are possible in the long term: nomenklatura-opposition and opposition-nomenklatura.

1. Nomenklatura-opposition scenario: In this scenario, nomenklatura/security forces manage to keep power and their positions, but in order to ease internal tensions in the country and give legitimacy to their rule, they use the opposition for their purposes. Full democratisation will not be possible, the regime will become a hybrid, oligarchic one.

2. Opposition-nomenklatura scenario: This option is possible if the opposition is strong and influential, and are thus able to force the ruling elites into make concessions, including making some of the ruling apparatus part of the new system in order to maintain institutional stability. On the one hand, it seems unavoidable that some administrative and management staff will keep their positions. [There are around 200,000 officials in Belarus](#), and the opposition cannot create its own broad ruling apparatus or even to replace key positions. On the other hand, such a compromise could slow down the democratic process, and if nomenklatura and representatives of the security forces remain in the highest-ranking positions, so too will their culture of operating.

The latter scenario seems more constructive and would help to avoid any radical collapse in society and the country. However, mechanisms would need to be implemented which would minimise the threat of decisions being sabotaged, of corruption, and of authoritarian revanchism.

“Soft” scenarios of changes, from transfer to transformation, are possible if Russia remains an “observer” of internal political processes in Belarus. If not, then Moscow’s intervention is highly probable in any of the scenarios. It is only a matter of what form the intervention might take.

II Transformation strategy

In recent years, various opposition groups have developed their own action programmes and drafts of economic and institutional reforms in Belarus. In order for the transformation to be successful, the following directions should be followed.

As already mentioned, the internal unity of the opposition, in terms of their approach and

method of implementing systemic changes, is the preliminary condition for reforms. This would allow political energy to be focused not on internal disputes and conflicts (redistribution of influence), but on the attainment of joint objectives and social welfare. Unity guarantees wide societal support and makes it more difficult to make the voice of populist politicians heard. It also needs to be underlined that joined mobilisation and collective responsibility would help focus the human, professional and intellectual potential of the democratic community on those matters that are important for the state and society. What is important is that new political elites will most probably not have much time to introduce systemic changes – probably six to twelve months – afterwards systemic crisis will likely erupt, contradictions will become more visible and authoritarian revanchism more possible.

Democratic forces [should prepare a detailed analysis of possible development scenarios in Belarus](#), as well as be ready mentally, politically, and most importantly, practically, for an unexpected turn of events in the country. Something that could be termed a “bank of administrative and management staff” should be created. This staff reserve would help guarantee management stability in central government and in the field during elections. At the same time, the military and special forces should be controlled to maintain order and keep the state safe in the face of external challenges.

Indeed, the opposition could already focus on creating a shadow cabinet as well as alternative state structures already, which could later become the [foundation of the future Belarus](#).

A transformation of the political system would likely take place in a few stages.

- Firstly, a few months after the power transfer, it will be necessary to make key political institutions more efficient, by restoring the democratic Constitution of 1994, which introduced the parliamentary-presidential republic. Next, presidential, parliamentary and local elections will have to take place. Given the limited time for such a transition, possible revenge or sabotage from the nomenklatura, security forces or businesspeople loyal to Lukashenko should be taken into account. Some of these groups should be deprived of electoral rights. This would be a temporary measure, but limiting their political rights for five years would help to avoid corruption and permanent conflict in central and local bodies. The examples of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova show that democratic institutions can quickly turn into a political weapon against democracy and cement an oligarchic system.
- During Lukashenko’s rule, a more or less consolidated business nomenklatura has come into emerged, which is powerful because of strong links with the current

political system. Aleksiey Aleksin (Energo-Oil and Belneftgaz), Aliaksandr Shakutsin, member of The Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus, Alexander Zaytsev (Bremino Group), Michail Mashenski (JV Santa Bremar) and many others. This group has enormous political and financial resources which they would use to maintain their influence and political control during a transformation. As a result, post-Lukashenko, these actors would likely create or support parties, organisations and media groups and will join political administration, which might result in the “privatisation” of politics and the creation of an oligarchic system. Without preventive actions limiting political influence of this group, Belarus might face a serious economic and political crisis, corruption and a weakening of new state institutions. It is highly probable that Belarusian oligarchs will seek support in Moscow, which is why their political activity and financing for political organisations should be temporarily limited.

- Former members of Belarusian special forces should not be underestimated either. This group was ignored in Russia, which led to revanchism and the return of authoritarian rule with Vladimir Putin in 2000. This is why vetting should be one of the safety mechanisms implemented during the process of transformation. It will be of crucial importance in order to heal society and rebuild a sense of justice. But first and foremost, it is very important that people who contributed to reprisals and forged elections should not be able to take up positions in state institutions, e.g.: courts, prosecution, law enforcement, government and education. Of course, this might lead to staff shortages, but without comprehensive vetting it will be difficult to create an efficient legal system, government and local institutions.
- Pro-regime organisations, such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), Belarusian National Pioneer Organization (BRPA) and Belaya Rus should be dissolved with immediate effect. The same goes for the institutions which spread “state ideology”. The state’s policy on media should be revised, unlimited state control of information abolished, information pluralism reinstated and national discourse of Belarusian mass media strengthened.
- In order to strengthen democratic institutions, it is necessary to introduce changes to political culture and improve civic awareness, thus changing people’s attitude towards politics. This will be possible if citizens take an active part in the political life at local and state levels, meaning creating associations and civic initiatives, as well as local committees in schools and at universities. Generally speaking, Belarus needs freedom at universities and the Belarusian education system should be integrated with the European one as quickly as possible.
- An Institute of National Remembrance should also be set up, which will conduct universal decommunization and de-sovietisation of the society, secure access to

archives from the times of the Soviet and Lukashenko's rule. Such an Institute would be tasked with the restoration of historical truth and researching crimes against the Belarusian nation.

- The regime transformation will not be successful without national awareness and democratic values. These can be fostered by spreading Belarusian language and culture, the gradual introduction of the Belarusian language among the state elites, strengthening national education and a focus on building a national state.

In the current geopolitical situation, with aggressive (imperial) Russian politics, should political changes take place in Belarus, a confrontation with Moscow is unavoidable. Russia exerts a serious destabilising effect, negating the existence of the opposition both in Belarus and abroad. On the one hand, new Belarusian political elites can build relations with Russia based on neutrality and equality between the West and the East, but on the other hand, they need strong guarantees from international institutions which will protect the independence and territorial integrity of Belarus. At the same time, it needs to be underlined that the countries developing outside of the sphere of influence of the European Union have historically experienced serious problems with system transformation and strengthening of their democratic institutions. The European Union provides a strong legal and institutional foundation for transformation towards democracy, preventing authoritarian and corruptive phenomena, forcing the ruling elites to obey legal norms. Given the situation in Belarus today – many years of authoritarian rule, weak legal and democratic culture, and lack of hope for integration with the European Union – economic and political support from the EU is necessary for the country to effectively transfer from authoritarian to democratic rule. Otherwise, the transformation will be very difficult indeed.

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This text is published as part of the project “RAZAM-RAZEM-ZUZAM” implemented by the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation, and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany.

