

Paper presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021

Panel BE1: Participation and Mobilization in the Belarusian Context Before and After the 2020 Presidential Elections

“Belarus: From the broad social contract to a narrow security contract”

*Dr. Nadja Douglas, Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS),
nadja.douglas@zois-berlin.de*

Do No Cite Without the Permission of the Author

Abstract

State-society relations in authoritarian settings represent a recurrent topic in the respective literature. Phenomena ranging from loyalty, apathy to dissent, open protest and resistance have been widely researched. The different patterns of regime response or the way authorities mobilise forces themselves have been discussed to a much lesser extent. This contribution analyses the gradual deterioration of the state-society relationship in Belarus. These fragile relations have been brought to the brink of collapse by the authorities' mishandling of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020, which have proved to be a catalyst for the eruption of mass protests in the country. The faltering economy during the last decade and the perceived decline of the country's social welfare system have been important factors in these developments. At the same time, Belarus has developed into a state predominantly driven by security concerns: The broad social contract encompassing the whole of society has been redefined into a narrow security contract between ruling President Lukashenka and the most loyal security structures. This allowed personalities from these structures to gain influence at the highest level of state governance and determine the way the state deals with societal resistance, which is also reflected in a changed security discourse. The intention of this paper is to identify indicators for the increased “securitisation” of state power structures since 2020 and corresponding measures that guide authorities in their endeavour to counteract societal resistance. A further aim is to shed light on how securitised interactions have become emblematic for the dysfunctional state-society relations in Belarus. The paper relies on document analysis, results from a December 2020 nation-wide ZOiS survey, statistical data and problem-centred interviews, conducted by the author with various actors on the ground and via E-mail between 2017 and 2020.

Keywords: Belarus, state-society relations, social contract, domestic security, securitisation theory, authoritarian relapse

Introduction

State-society relations in Belarus have always been somewhat different from those in other post-Soviet countries since President Lukashenka took power in 1994. They were

characterised by the paternalist concept of the “social contract”, a particular welfare state model that ensured socio-political stability in the country over many years. The regime built by Lukashenka thus meant to compensate for the lack of political liberties and participation in the country. There was a tacit consensus that economic stability and security were privileged over individual rights and civic activism.

Nevertheless, the welfare state model has been challenged by repeated deep recessions during the last decade. The socio-economic situation in the country started to deteriorate, with salaries and pensions stagnating, unofficial unemployment rising and labour migration increasing. State authorities, however, remained reform-resistant and failed to address these problems.

The state-society-relationship has further been strained by the authorities’ mishandling of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020, which proved to be a catalyst and trigger for the eruption of mass protests in the country. Factors for the decline have been manifold and cannot be reduced to the events in 2020 only. Wider parts of society, especially younger generations, had become increasingly discontent with various presidential initiatives¹ in recent years. Therefore, the disbelief in the blatantly falsified election results was much more pronounced than during previous presidential elections. In addition, more people had gathered protest experience in past years, for example during the 2017 protests against a decree on the prevention of so-called “social parasitism”, effectively sanctioning the unemployed. It caused nation-wide outrage across various social strata and generations.

In the Belarusian case, extant scholarship on the state-society relationship has dealt with the phenomenon notably in the framework of regime theory. Different labels were attributed to describe the ruling system, such as ‘sultanism’ (Eke/Kuzio 2000), ‘pre-emptive authoritarianism’ (Silitky 2005, Stoner et al. 2010), ‘(neo) patrimonialism’ (Hale 2015, Way 2015), ‘electoral authoritarianism’ (Bedford 2017) and ‘adaptive authoritarianism’ (Frear 2018). With regard to the fusion of the political and economic domains in terms of a limited access order terms like ‘rent-seeking regime’ (Pikulik 2019) as well ‘distributional authoritarianism’ (Wilson 2016, Dimitrova et al. 2020) were chosen. While the civilian side in the context of research on civil society, social movements and protests has widely been researched, the different patterns of regime response or the way authorities mobilise forces themselves have been discussed to a much lesser extent.

Over the past decade, Belarus has developed into a state predominantly driven by security concerns. This is not unusual for an authoritarian state that has passed its zenith (see Haggard/Kaufman 2016, Geddes et al. 2018). Correspondingly, authorities have increasingly invested in the domestic security structures – to a disproportionate extent, compared with neighbouring states.

As a result, the broad social contract encompassing the whole of society has been redefined into a narrow security contract between Lukashenka and the most loyal security structures.

¹ Including for example the tightening of the anti-drug legislation, draconically penalising the possession of (even light) drugs (<https://news.house/40773>) as well as the de facto abolition of deferments for young men drafted for conscription in 2019 (<https://news.tut.by/economics/644035.html>).

This allowed personalities from these structures to gain influence at the highest level of state governance and determine the way the state deals with societal resistance, which is also reflected in a changed security discourse. The trend towards an increased “securitisation” of the Belarusian state has been ongoing but has only become apparent to a greater extent in 2020. The intention of this paper is not to describe the structure and mentality behind the security apparatus, which has partly been realised elsewhere (for example Porotnikov 2019, Marin 2020, Sivitsky 2020, Bohdan 2021), but to identify indicators for the “securitisation” of state power structures and corresponding measures that guide authorities in their endeavour to counteract societal resistance. Securitisation theory, a concept originally framed by the Copenhagen School around Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, implying the transformation of policy issues and fields into security-relevant subjects (Buzan et al. 1998), will provide a prism for the analysis.

The paper relies on document analysis, results from a December 2020 nation-wide ZOiS survey², statistical data and problem-centred interviews, conducted by the author with various actor groups on the ground and via E-mail between 2017 and 2020.

The first part deals with the gradual shift of state priorities, from the revocation of the social contract to a prioritisation of domestic security due to changing economic conditions and threat perceptions. The second part is dedicated to a detailed analysis of the transforming state security discourse in the lights of “securitisation theory”, the way it is used to tighten loyalty among the security structures and the increased exertion of influence by ‘siloviki’ in high state offices. The instruments of the state in mobilising the security to confront societal resistance is centrepiece of the third and final part. A scrutiny of interaction modes between state power structures and citizens, police orders to thwart protests and how all this yielded in a culture of impunity will be matter of an analysis from the societal perspective. The security apparatus in Belarus, as in most countries, is a closed system. In this case, it can rightly be described as ‘black box’. Studying this topic is complicated and delicate. Therefore, the author – other than journalists – was not able to conduct interview with officials from security organs or collect data in this realm. As a substitute, accounts of civic activists with pertinent personal experience, assessments of experts in the field, open-source data and intelligence, as well as survey results were used to complement the picture.

Shifting state priorities and perceptions

Revocation of the social contract

In Belarus, the concept of the “social contract”, a remnant of the Soviet-era welfare idea, has long been considered one of the main reasons for socio-political stability in the country (see various contributions in Haiduk et al. 2009). By means of a policy of redistribution that was meant to share the benefits of an economic surplus across all strata of society, the aim was to maintain a balance between economic gains and social welfare needs. In Korosteleva’s

² The German Federal Foreign Office funded the survey referred to in this paper. The interpretation reflects the author’s views.

words the regime learned “to survive by emulating consensus between the regime’s performance and perceived societal needs” (2012: 43).

The paternalist nature of the ‘Belarusian model’ under Lukashenka is not corresponding anymore to the liberal economic values of wider parts of the population.³ The social contract has gradually been revoked both by the state and by the citizenry. Until the mid-2000s, broad parts of the population benefited from the Soviet-type social protection in Belarus (Chubrik et al. 2009: 35). Consumer prices were controlled, the costs of public utilities subsidized, and state-owned enterprises as well as trade unions were in charge of maintaining jobs and the social infrastructure (Chulitskaya/Matonyte 2018: 542). However, already in 2004 individual contracts with workers had been introduced instead of collective agreements⁴ and in 2007 major reforms of the social protection system entailed restrictions to the general provisions of social benefits (Chubrik et al. 2009: 36-37). As a result of severe economic recessions, the government began to introduce neo-liberal policies and slowly dismantle the welfare state and social obligations to its citizens. This was accompanied by a tight monetary policy, implying stagnating salaries, pensions as well as rising unemployment and labour migration as side-effects. In 2016, a pension reform was announced that foresaw an increase of the retirement age. Reasonable by international standards, it was nevertheless criticised that the minimum eligibility period had also been increased, in some cases retroactively and that years spent with military service, university studies or on maternity leave were excluded as counting towards the pension. A watershed event was in 2015 the introduction of the decree No. 3, on ‘social dependency’, a tax for the unemployed that work less than 183 days per year. This initiative triggered the first nation-wide social protests in spring 2017. The project was tacitly abandoned in 2018. Beyond concrete actions, the state’s social security discourse also began to change since 2006. Lukashenka started to underline the notion of personal responsibility and the limitations to the social obligations of the state. Many of the unpopular neoliberal steps were usually implemented in the aftermath of elections and not mentioned during the campaigns (Chulitskaya/Matonyte 2018: 547).

The current perception of a worsening socio-economic situation in Belarus is reflected in particular in concerns about personal finances. The latest ZOiS survey confirms that over 80 per cent of respondents are ‘very concerned’ or ‘somewhat concerned’ about what would happen to their personal finances over the next six months.⁵ These concerns are not without reason: The economic situation in Belarus is strained. Insecurities about the future of energy subsidies have increased the dependence of the dominant oil-refining industry on Russia. The trends in Belarus’s external trade and exports are negative, the country’s budget deficit is growing, and its external debt remains high.⁶ The Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing

³ See “Market competition and state intervention in social issues”, ZOiS Report 3 / 2022 “Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change”, https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2021/ZOiS_Report_3_2021.pdf, p.22-23, figure 21.

⁴ <https://socialistproject.ca/2020/08/belarus-left-is-fighting-to-put-social-demands-at-the-heart-of-the-protests/>

⁵ See “Market competition and state intervention in social issues”, ZOiS Report 3 / 2022 “Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change”, https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2021/ZOiS_Report_3_2021.pdf, p.22, figure 20.

⁶ German Economic Team Belarus, *Wirtschaftsausblick* Ausgabe 13, January 2021, https://www.german-economic-team.com/belarus/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/GET_BLR_WA_13_2021_de.pdf.

political crisis have amplified many of these problems. The Belarusian authorities in turn have failed to address the underlying structural causes of these problems and their effects on Belarusian citizens.

Against this background, it is not astonishing that Belarusian citizens have lost their confidence in the state and its capacities with regard to social protection:

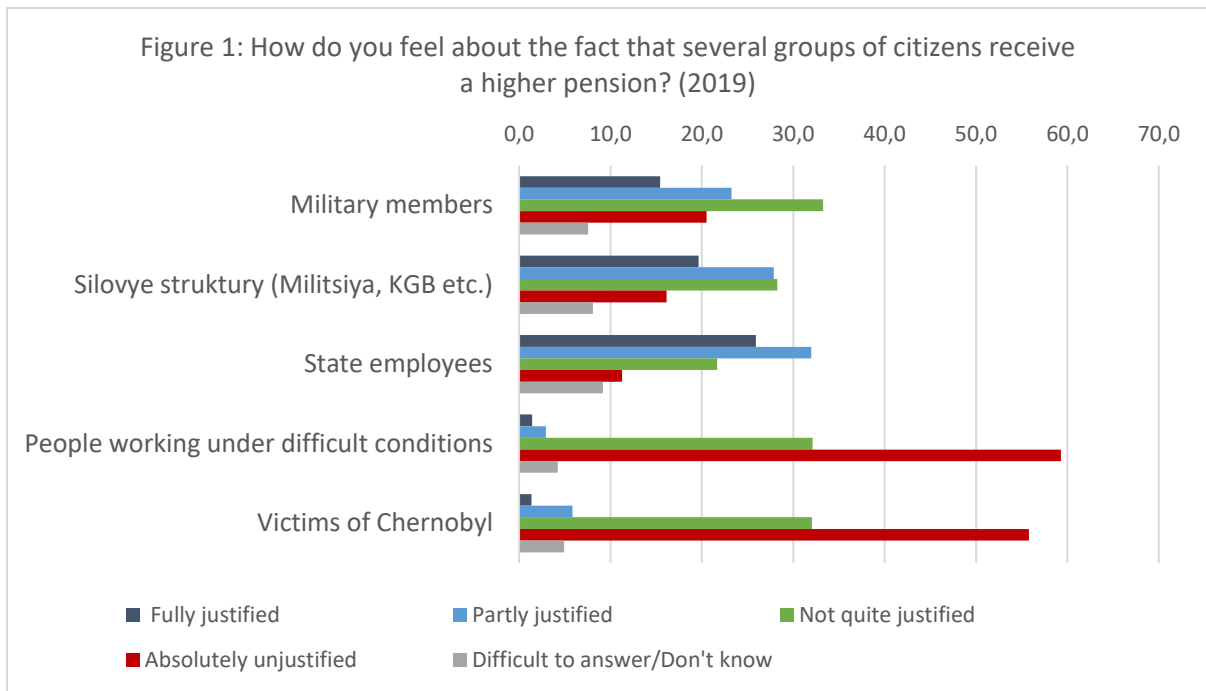
“Today it is the irony of fate: All what the Belarusian regime was so proud of – the high standard of its social benefits – has as such not become part of its social policies. Everything what existed, let’s say ten years ago, of the social policies, has essentially been liquidated. This happened against the background of declining wages and pensions. Nothing but declarations, that we are a social state...I don’t want to say that there is nothing of it left, but it is far from comparable to what has been there in the beginning. This concerns public healthcare, education [...]”. (Interview Yarashuk).

“If we take social statistics, then we see that the economy performs worse and worse, people live worse and worse, but at the same time the ‘government block’ grows” (Interview Kalyakin).

The Belarusian welfare state model used to rely extensively on externally generated energy rents (in the form of access to Russian oil and gas subsidies), which were meant to be spent on domestic policy. This arrangement made it possible for Belarus to avoid a massive restructuring of the economy, closure of inefficient factories and mass unemployment (Balmaceda 2014). In addition, energy rents have been an essential prerequisite for the financing of the *silovye struktury* and hence the regime’s survival (Feduta 2005, quoted in Balmaceda 2014, 523). The maintenance of the “power vertical” gradually became more important for the regime. It eventually led to the creation of a subsidised and pampered elite group that lives in a different world from the rest of society.

Privileges for ‘siloviki’

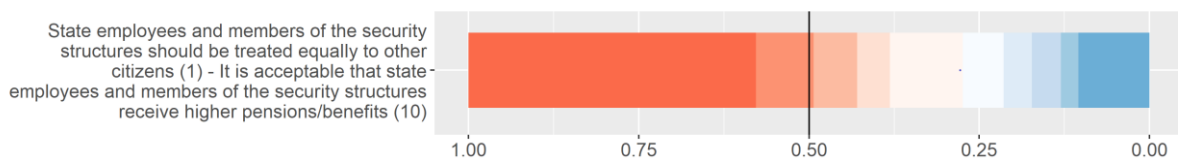
For a long time, it appeared to be entirely acceptable to the Belarusian population that state-sector employees, particularly members of the security apparatus, received a higher pension than ordinary citizens, since they were responsible for ensuring the security and stability of the state. In 2017, former security sector employees received another 40 percent pension increase. “They understand that there are protests ahead. The security structures – representing the power vertical – are now the only group still supporting the current regime,” (interview Anatol Lyabedska). However, by 2019 this acceptance could no longer be taken for granted (see Figure 1).



Source: IPM Research Center, http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/SR_19_01.pdf

This picture completely changed in December 2020, when ZOiS conducted a nation-wide survey. Respondents were namely asked to share their views on a range of political and economic issues, among them the treatment of state employees and members of the security structures in relation to other citizens with regard to pensions and benefits (scale 1 to 10, with 1 being equivalent to equal treatment and 10 acceptance of certain privileges, see figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Views on benefits for state employees and members of the security structures



Source: Data from ZOiS Belarus Survey, December 2020, N=2004 (Age 16-64)

In the end of 2020, almost 62 per cent of the respondents (scale 1-4) preferred an equal treatment of state employees and security personnel equally to other citizens, while 27 per cent (scale 6-10) tended to find certain privileges, such as higher pensions and benefits, acceptable.

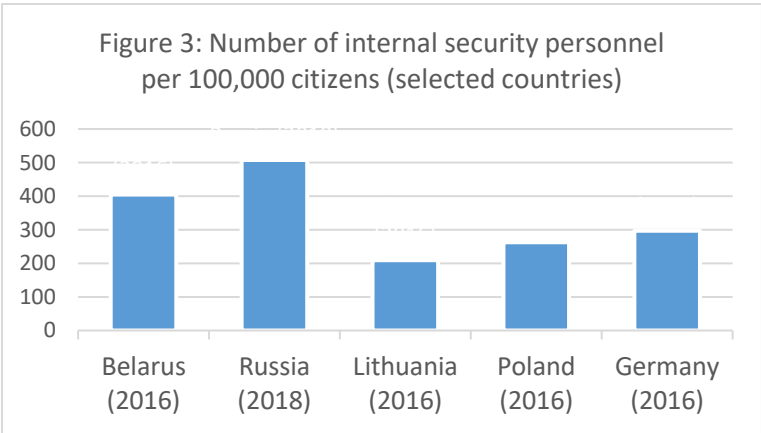
Changing threat perceptions and prioritisation of domestic security

Another factor that caused a shift in state priorities was the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and the resulting Russian-Western standoff. This led to significant changes in Belarus's national defence planning and military build-up as well as in its general threat perceptions (Sivitsky 2020). In December 2014, the government adopted a new five-year Defence Plan and a new directive on state defence, addressing changes in the regional political-military

situation and obliging the military to pay equal attention to security threats from the western and eastern directions as well as ‘hybrid’ threats. The aim was to implement a ‘360 degrees’ concept (ibid.). In addition, in 2015, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence was tasked with developing a new military doctrine, adopted in July 2016, revising the previous version, which dated back to 2001. One of the main goals of this doctrine was to gird the country against a dual threat of ‘colour revolutions’ from within and ‘hybrid warfare’ from outside (IISS 2019: 179). While most neighbouring countries increased their external defence budgets in reaction to the Ukraine crisis, Belarus instead decided to reorganise its armed forces and to invest more in its military sovereignty and autonomy from external actors (Bohdan 2019). Among others, additional financial resources were allocated to the border protection troops (directly subordinate to the Council of Ministers), which, besides being part of the armed forces, can also perform law enforcement functions.⁷ It is one of the best equipped paramilitary units in Belarus and enjoys Lukashenka’s highest esteem, which can be explained by the fact that Lukashenka himself served during his military service in the Soviet border troops (Bohdan 2021: 170).

In 2019, the political and regulatory prerequisites were created for the domestic use of the armed forces, notably by means of newly set-up rapid reaction forces (Bohdan 2020: 174). Some of them have presumably been deployed in the aftermath of the presidential election to suppress the protest movements, especially in the West of the country. In the past, the army’s main value was to be a bargaining chip in the relationship with Russia. Especially the air defence forces were of importance for Russia’s proper defence, which explains why, in contrast to other military branches, this service has taken on greater significance and resources (Bohdan 2020: 168).

Experts have observed that domestic security has, however, been prioritised in recent years (IISS 2019: 179). As of now, Belarus has a larger number of militsiya (87,000) and internal troops (11,000) than members of the armed forces (45,000) under its command (IISS 2021: 183/184). Although the exact numbers of police and MVD troops are classified,⁸ estimates show that the country has one of the highest police density rates in Europe (surpassed only by Russia; see figure 3).



Source: Belarus Security Blog, <https://bsblog.info/o-chislennosti-mvd/>, Naviny.by, <https://naviny.by/article/20180607/1528386029-pochemu-skryvayut-kolichestvo>

⁷ Tut.by, Skol’ko v Belarusi militsionerov? A skol’ko chelovek v armii? Probuem podschitat chislo silovikov, 24 July 2020, <https://42.tut.by/693948>.

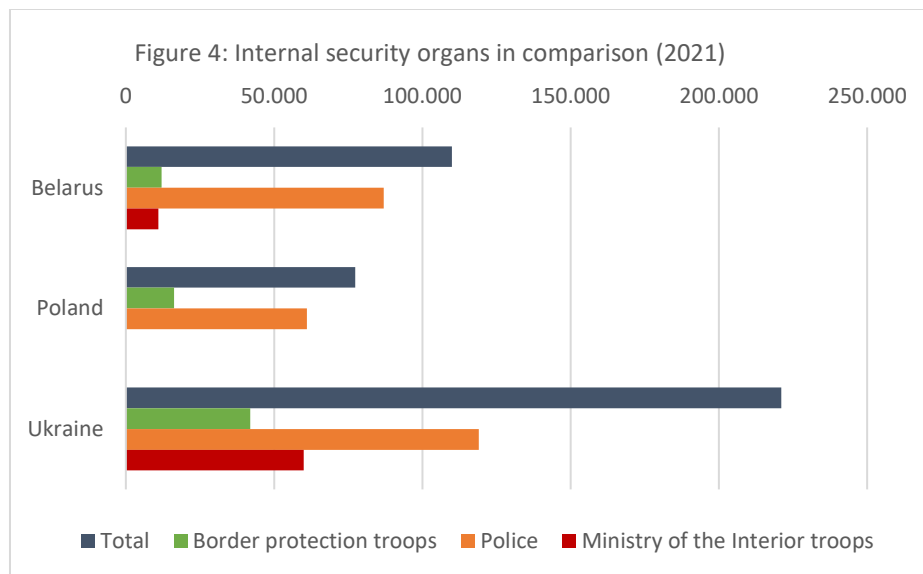
⁸ Naviny.by, Pochemy skryvayut kolichestvo militsionerov v Belarusi, 7 June 2018, <https://naviny.by/article/20180607/1528386029-pochemu-skryvayut-kolichestvo-milicionerov-v-belarusi>.

mulicionerov-v-belarusi, Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20190104-1>

How this fact is perceived in society, reflects the following quote:

“We take the third place in the world as for the number of ‘siloviki’ per capita. But these people produce anything” (Interview Zelko).

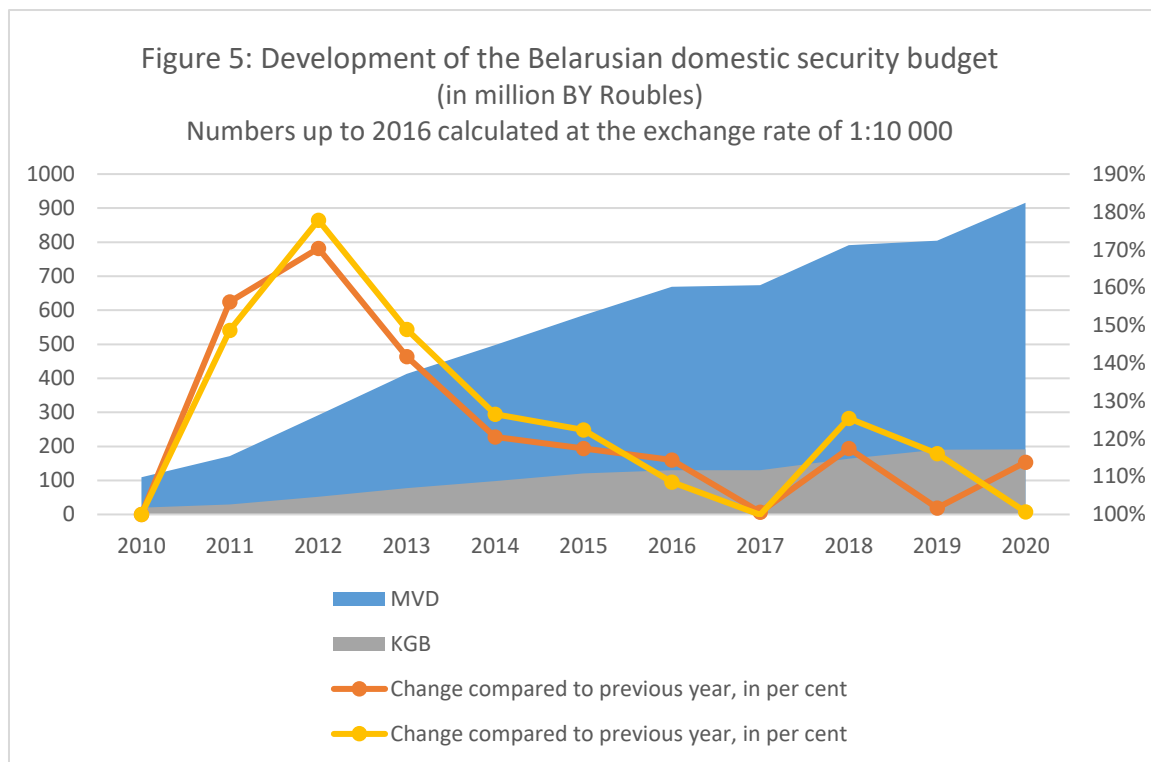
In direct comparison with its more populous neighbours Poland and Ukraine, Belarus has a disproportionate number of internal security organs (see figure 4).



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance 2021

A large proportion of the state budget is spent on domestic security (third largest budget item after defence and healthcare). The entire security apparatus has been growing continuously over the past decade, as have the budgets of both the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) and the KGB (Committee of State Security).⁹

⁹ Radio Svaboda, Byudzhet-2019: eshe bol'she deneg dlya KGB, MVD i armii, 26 October 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29565327.html> (and Figure 7).



Source: Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus,
http://www.minfin.gov.by/ru/budgetary_policy/budgetary_legislation/da8d2db88c99a337.html

In sum, according to the Global Militarisation Index 2020 (Mutschler/Bales 2020) Belarus is among the top twenty countries for militarisation, implying the allocation of a particularly high proportion of resources to security compared with other sectors.

Transformation of the Belarusian security discourse

“Securitisation” of state politics since 2020

In terms of the “guns vs. butter” model,¹⁰ Belarusian authorities seem to have made the long-term decision to invest more in strengthening government structures and domestic security than in producing goods or boosting social welfare. As noted by Wilson, the old paradigm of keeping a balance between the subsidy regime with Russia and the foreign policy game was at the latest since 2014 a story of the past. The maintenance of statehood, national security [and sovereignty] had suddenly become much more prominent in Lukashenka’s system of governance (2016: 78).

Citizen-state-relations from the perspective of “securitisation theory” are described as “tension between the state as a protector of its citizens’ security and the state as a threat to

¹⁰ The term “guns and butter” has been linked traditionally to the challenges around negotiations on defense spending, pointing to a substantial trade-off between defense and social spending. See Investopedia, What Does “Guns and Butter” Refer To?, 11 February 2020, <https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/08/guns-butter.asp>.

its own individuals” (Buzan 1991: 43 ff.). In fact, contemporary Belarus has experienced how this tension inclined more and more towards the state as a source of threat. Yet, Belarus represents an exemplary case, in accordance with critical security studies and the “constructivist turn” (Checkel 1998), of how intertwined security policies are with changing norms, ideas and identity. Therefore, securitisation concepts (Buzan et al. 1998, Balzaq 2011, Butler 2019) provide a promising avenue to analyse the way the Belarusian regime has intended to secure its own survival since August 2020. Clearly, this is not a process that only began in 2020 (maybe it was an essential element of Lukashenka’s rule from the outset), but it manifested itself as clearly as never before in 2020.

In conformity with this approach, security cannot be analysed as a given reality, but through processes produced by speech acts (Buzan et al. 1998). These acts are context-dependent and articulated by decision-making agents with power directed at a distinct audience (Balzaq 2011). The key issue is for whom security becomes a consideration in relation to whom (Buzan et al. 1998: 18). Threats are defined in relation to a referent object. They are successful when they eventually lead to the legitimate adoption of exceptional political measures as a means of assuring security (Buzan et al. 1998: 27). Thus, the issue is moved from the sphere of normal politics into the realm of emergency politics, where the issue is no longer dealt with by the rules and regulations of normal politics [...], but by the ones of emergency politics (ibid). The security issue is staged as an existential threat to the referent object by the securitizing actor who thereby generates endorsement of emergency measures beyond rules that would otherwise bind (Buzan et al. 1998: 5). Such emergency measures, in the Belarusian case, give the right to state officials to use whatever means are necessary to confront the threat.

In the Belarusian context, the security structures are elevated to referent objects in their own right, since from the regime’s perspective they represent the guarantor for the preservation of state sovereignty and are under threat by a situation that undermines the rules, norms, and institutions that constituted the regime hitherto. In other words, the regime securitizes its own survival directly.

While in the official discourse, Lukashenka traditionally claimed existential threats for the entire Belarusian nation and addressed the citizenry and state population at large, in recent speeches, in front of the security structures, he has restricted the target audience to his followers, deliberately excluding regime opponents. The President and his fellow decision-makers targeted the inner circle of the security apparatus to frame and construct the threat of domestic destabilisation, which then allowed them to justify extraordinary measures and strengthen loyalty from the security structures.

Thus in his addresses to the security organs Lukashenka communicated that there was a point of no return, in the sense that if this problem (of suppressing the protests) was not tackled, everything else would become irrelevant. In a way, agency and audience here become blurred, since the ‘siloviki’ embody not only the enacting power but also the audience and the referent object in one.

Lukashenka politicises and securitises in front of this audience the vulnerability of Belarusian statehood and the individual risks this would imply: “I want to make my position clear. It is

unchanging: our duty to present and future generations is to preserve the country. And we will do it, no matter what it takes. We will preserve it for all of us, our children and grandchildren. This is the main task for me and you. A historical mission, if you like. I want to tell you something openly and honestly and I want them [the opposition] to hear it: if uniformed services had not done their work, if on those August days they had faltered, we would have lived in a different country today. And it is a big question whether we would still be alive and whether the country would survive” (Lukashenko during a meeting with the special police force of the Minsk City Police Department on 30 December 2020).¹¹

In the immediate post-electoral period, Lukashenka sought to blame and securitise external factors and threats as being the principal cause for the domestic political crisis: "They want to topple this government and replace it with another one that would ask a foreign country to send troops in support... " (Lukashenka blaming the West for stirring up demonstrations against him in the hope of turning Belarus into a "bridgehead against Russia", 29 August 2020).¹²

In particular Poland became a recurrent theme of takeover scenarios, going as far as incriminating and repressing the ethnic Polish community in Poland:¹³ "Because we cannot be calm about Poland's intention to grab entire Belarus. You know that they will fail even if the entire NATO invades Belarus. Even if we stand alone, they will fail. We will all die for our country. God forbid of course." (Lukashenka on 29 October 2020 during a meeting where he summoned several officials in order to appoint his aides for Brest and Grodno oblast', as well as the city of Minsk).¹⁴

At some point the claim about a foreign siege at the Belarusian Western borders was used in such an inflationary manner that Lukashenka proceeded to directly securitising the actions of the protest movement and oppositionists, blaming them among others for acts of sabotage, in order to discredit them and justify the use of extraordinary means against them:

"Well, how can we treat the fact that they have already started blocking the automation in the railway and locking the rails? This can lead to serious railway accidents, disasters and the death of many people. These are the actions of organized criminal groups with signs of terrorism. Terrorist threats are looming" At the same occasion he drew attention to the fact that the organisers of the protests in Belarus have already passed seven or eight stages described in the guidelines for colour revolutions: "There is very little left. The next stage is radicalization. It is taking place now. Not even an information war, but a terrorist war has been launched against us from several directions" (Lukashenka on 27 October 2020).¹⁵

Although Lukashenka for a long time denied the occurrence of a coloured revolution in Belarus, he nevertheless saw the need to warn the population against this threat, hinting at

¹¹ <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-our-duty-is-to-preserve-our-country-for-future-generations-136273-2020/>.

¹² <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/29/president-lukashenko-claims-nato-has-aggressive-plans-against-belarus>

¹³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-polish-journalist-detained-tensions-warsaw/31169400.html>

¹⁴ <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-still-concerned-about-nato-threat-134613-2020/>

¹⁵ <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-is-facing-a-terrorist-war-134545-2020/>.

the fact that stability and prosperity of the population would be at risk: “Every colour revolution makes a state weaker and the nation poorer. Nowhere have people after such insurgencies started to lead a better life” (Lukashenka, 13 November 2020).¹⁶

During the entire post-electoral period, Lukashenka made considerable efforts to address several audiences simultaneously – domestic and abroad – among them the Russian president and the Russian nation, which he framed as another referent object: “There is a need to contact Putin so that I can talk to him now, because it is not a threat to just Belarus anymore [...] Defending Belarus today is no less than defending our entire space, the union state, and an example to others [...] Those who roam the streets, most of them do not understand this” (Lukashenka on 15 August 2020).¹⁷

Soon, Lukashenka started to broaden the scope of his securitising moves to also address other member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO): “They directly propose to us to change the power, the laws and social values and benchmarks. In the case of non-agreement, they are threatening to impose sanctions, to destroy the economy and infrastructure, to change the moral-ethical foundations of our societies. There are no doubts anymore that civil peace and integrity of Belarus was and is at stake” (Lukashenka on 2 December 2020 during a session of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO, drawing attention to the behaviour of Poland and the Baltic States against Belarus).¹⁸

Securitising moves were not only made by Lukashenka himself but also by other state representatives, for example foreign minister Vladimir Makei: “A revolution brings only chaos and anarchy, which will eventually ruin the state and society. In that case we will be obliged to start again from scratch” (Makei in an interview with the Belarusian TV programme “Belarus’ 1”, 22 November 2020).¹⁹

The chief of the Committee of State Security, Ivan Tertel, made public statements that can be viewed as securitising the situation: “It is apparent that there are attempts to exert pressure on our judicial and law enforcement systems on the part of foreign states, including with the use of the diplomatic corps.” In addition, he pointed to the financing of destructive activities in Belarus “in the interests of other states” and was alluding to assaults planned by the BYPOL initiative²⁰ (Tertel, 10 March 2021).²¹

¹⁶ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/splotitsja-i-vystupit-edinyim-frontom-lukashenko-nazval-glavnoe-lekarstvo-ot-tsvetnyh-revoljutsij-415542-2020/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-lukashenko-idUSKCN25B0G9=>

¹⁸ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-zajavil-ob-ogoltelom-povedenii-polshi-i-stran-baltii-protiv-belarusi-418270-2020/>

¹⁹ https://ria.ru/20201122/revolyutsiya-1585823789.html?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

²⁰ The BYPOL initiative, a self-described union of security forces made up of former law enforcement staff who defected to the opposition, investigates and documents crimes committed by Belarusian security forces, provides a solidarity fund for law enforcement officials quitting service and deals with questions of future reform of the Belarusian security sector (see <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/BYPOL>). In addition, it disclosed Lukashenko’s alleged instructions to police officials and plans to build “resettlement” camps (see <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/01/15/use-your-weapon>).

²¹ , <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/kgb-chief-attempts-from-outside-to-put-pressure-on-belarus-law-enforcement-courts-138071-2021/>

Members of government-close think tanks were flanking the official statements: “But the tensions and the threat that originates abroad and targets Belarus will only grow stronger because the goals have not been achieved, those people are enraged about the state and the entire state system. This is why they will use every method to achieve their goals, split the Belarusian society, and discredit government agencies” (Aleksei Avdonin, an analyst with the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research (BISR), 5 April 2021).²²

Decisive for the success of these securitisation moves is the continued acceptance and collective agreement by the audience on the nature of the threat and support for the measures taken. Acceptance also implies that an order can rest both on coercion as well as on consent, but these moves can never only be imposed (Buzan et al. 1998: 25). The distinguishing feature of these speech acts are a specific rhetorical structure that is also reflected in utterances that point to existential issues of survival and priority of action: “If the problem is not handled now, it will be too late and we will not exist to remedy our failure” (Buzan et al. 1998: 26).

Susceptibility of target audience

The basis for a continuation of Lukashenka’s securitising policy remains the unrestricted loyalty of the security structures. In the initial stages of the post-election protests in 2020, there was speculation about the security apparatus’s fading loyalty towards the regime. Several individual testimonies of former militsiya personnel and ex-members of special units who had decided to quit an apparatus perceived to be repressive had appeared online.²³ Nevertheless, the defectors so far seem to have been mostly lower-rank officers.

On the contrary, higher-ranking officials with command authority have an even greater vested interest in maintaining the status quo for as long as possible. The uncertainty about what will become of them in a post-Lukashenka era has grown. Many have committed serious crimes or are bound to Lukashenka through complicity and therefore remain loyal to him. Moreover, they cannot be certain to fall under a potential amnesty law once there is a new government in power. Some may also fear losing their privileges as members of the security apparatus.

Another important factor to ensure loyalty is indoctrination. Dissemination of disinformation about protesters, depicting them as enemies of the state, foreign agents, sponsored by the West with the goal to overhaul the regime etc. is a widespread tactic.

Most personnel obeys to orders out of fear because of monetary or existential distress. Many representatives of the OMON units are from structurally weak regions of Belarus with almost no other employment alternatives on the civil job market, they have incurred liabilities and

²² <https://eng.belta.by/opinions/view/the-foreign-threat-to-belarus-will-only-grow-stronger-6193/>

²³ Meduza, “Belorusskogo spetsnaza bol’she net”. V sotssetyakh poyavilis’ video, na kotorykh byvchie voennye v znak protesta vybrasyvayut formu, 12 August 2020, <https://meduza.io/news/2020/08/12/belorusskogo-spetsnaza-bolshe-net-v-sotssetyah-poyavilis-video-na-kotoryh-voennye-v-znak-protesta-vybrasyvayut-formu>.

debts vis-à-vis the state by accepting privileges and pre-payments. They are therefore under enormous pressure.

According to iSANS (International Strategic Action Network for Security), there was information regarding resignations in such security agencies as the MVD, KGB and the Investigative Committee. Already at the end of August, the Main Personnel Department of the MVD received more than 300 application for resignation from officers. Staff loss continued but decreased significantly afterwards. As of November 2020, in all district office of the MVD in Minsk the average shortage was 18.1 percent while in the Central District Office it reached 28.9 per cent (iSANS 2020).

Exertion of influence by 'siloviki'

There are several indicators that officials from the security apparatus have gained more influence on state politics. The appointment of senior State Security Committee officials to key posts in the administration and other executive structures is one example. In December 2019, former KGB officer Igor Sergeenko was appointed Head of the Presidential Administration.²⁴ In June 2020, Ivan Tertel, Deputy Head of the State Security Committee (KGB), was appointed Head of the State Control Committee²⁵ (KGK²⁶). Just three months later, he returned to the KGB and was promoted to head the institution.²⁷ The state secretary of the Belarusian Security Council alone was replaced three times since January 2020. Between September and November 2020, Lukashenka in the context of a massive rotation of cadres, reappointed numerous high-level positions in the security apparatus. In addition, he began to build up parallel security hierarchies, appointing high security officials as presidential aids and inspectors to the “problematic” Western regions of Brest and Grodno, as well as the Minsk region, and giving them orders how to deal with the opposition on the local level (Bohdan 2021: 181). Among them was the former Interior Minister, Yurii Karaeev, one of the chief responsables for the crackdown of post-electoral protests.²⁸ As a result, most of the key persons, who were in charge of preparing and implementing the forceful scenario following the presidential election, appear to have been removed from their respective offices without unwanted publicity.²⁹

²⁴ President Respubliki Belarus', Rassmotrenie kadrovyykh voprosov, 5 December 2019, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/prinjatie-kadrovyyx-reshenij-22528/?fbclid=IwAR0aRXI9J4h3FIMaDkPXWTY_cGsvKqDIXiY0uAVSviw-57yuss4ZS8DqWwg.

²⁵ Belta, Predsedatelem KGK naznachen Ivan Tertel', 4 June 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/predsdatelem-kgk-nazanchen-ivan-tertel-393461-2020/>.

²⁶ The KGK is the Belarusian financial and economic supervisory authority. It was responsible for the investigation of the case of former presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka and his interrogation; see Belta, KGK: est dokazatel'stva prichastnosti eks-glavy Belgazprombanka k protivopravnoi deyatelnosti, 12 July 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/kgk-est-dokazatelstva-prichastnosti-eks-glavy-belgazprombanka-k-protivopravnoj-deyatelnosti-394563-2020/>.

²⁷ Belta, Ivan Tertel naznachen predsdatelem KGB Belarusi, 3 September 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ivan-tertel-naznachen-predsdatelem-kgb-belarusi-405322-2020/>.

²⁸ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/napravljajetes-na-otvetstvennye-uchastki-nashej-strany-lukashenko-naznachil-novyh-pomoschnikov-po-413187-2020>

²⁹ Minsk Barometer No. 18, Nov./Dec. 2020, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, https://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/reports/pdf/MB_18_en.pdf.

Matsuzato illustrated already in 2004 how Lukashenka by means of rotating cadres, especially the regions' chief executives, effectively prevents the formation of 'bureaucratic cliques' (2004: 251). Remarkably many high state officials used to come from Lukashenka's native Mogilev oblast' (2004: 251). In a similar vein, Lukashenka has resorted increasingly to reshuffle members of the security apparatus and presumably, comparable to Putin, tries to play off the various security services against each other in order to prevent a single one of gaining too much power. Thus, the presidential security service, in charge of protecting the president and other high state representatives, witnessed a setback when its longstanding director, former chief bodyguard of Lukashenka and at the time deputy secretary of the Belarusian Security Council, Andrei Vtyurin, was convicted in July 2020 for alleged bribery and corruption³⁰.

Next to OMON units and other special forces of the internal troops, the Belarusian Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption (GUBOPiK) has been involved increasingly in 2020 to suppress opposition protests and arresting regime critics. This was done presumably to disburden the riot police forces in order to remedy some of the growing discontent among their ranks. Although there were reports in the end of 2020 about the security structures reaching the limits of their capacity, authorities –with some exceptions – have almost never resorted to deploying the armed forces against the protest movement. One of the reasons might be the lack of confidence by Lukashenka and his inner circle in the disposition and loyalty of the army (Bohdan 2021: 181).

Another common pattern seems to be the adoption of resolute measures by the state against alleged threats by armed groups in order to divert attention from other domestic problems. Among those detained in the aftermath of the events on 25 March 2017 were around 30 ostensible members of the 'White Legion', an organisation supposedly preparing for an armed confrontation with the state (Smok 2017). Another reading of these events is that law enforcement agents staged a complot themselves in order to prove their indispensability to the leadership, because shortly beforehand Lukashenka and Interior Ministry officials had announced and prepared for substantial financial and personal cuts of these services. Hence, the main target of this form of securitisation "was not the Belarusian people but the senior officials" (Interview individual activist).

Mobilisation of security forces and responses to societal resistance

Interaction between security forces and citizens

The growing discrepancy between what is colloquially called the 'government block' and the enlightened citizenship over the years developed into a volatile constellation. Contemporary Belarusian citizens have done away with the obedience to authority known during Soviet times. The majority of activists and active citizens for a while did not feel intimidated anymore by the idea of possibly being arrested and being held in custody. Especially young people have turned to be more confident in themselves than the generation of their parents

³⁰ <https://www.rbc.ru/society/27/07/2020/5f1e8f8c9a794719ca51dca0>

and grandparents and have started to permit themselves to believe that a different political system or order is possible. Another important aspect is that social and interpersonal trust has risen in particular among people who are strong critics of the regime, who have become more politically interested and who took part in protests.³¹ These respondents' experience of solidarity during the protests made them aware that they were not alone, increasing their confidence in like-minded citizens. Strong supporters of the regime, meanwhile, reported declining levels of societal trust.

In 2020, law enforcement structures were ordered to not exercise any restraint anymore and a new dimension was reached with regard to the use of violence against protesters (use of flash grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets as well as severe beating) and subsequent torture in Belarusian detention centres. Widespread personal experiences of disproportionate state-induced violence increasingly affected the way how people think about their country's leadership.

The most frequently given reason for taking part in protests was shock at the violence against protesters. This underlines the fact that repression in an age of social media is a risky strategy for an autocratic regime, as the circulation of images of violence may encourage even more people to take to the streets, including the relatives and friends of the initially injured and arrested protesters.³² Twenty per cent of respondents reported that they, their family members, or their friends had been directly affected by the violence.³³ Young people and individuals from Minsk and cities in the west of Belarus tended to state more frequently that they had endured state violence.

In the ZOiS survey, 70 per cent of respondents reported having been 'very concerned' or 'rather concerned' about the actions of the security forces during the protests. People in the capital and those with low household incomes but high levels of education expressed more concern.³⁴ This notwithstanding, violence is not a new phenomenon in Belarus. The scale of police brutality, also against vulnerable groups, notably young people and pensioners, is however unprecedented in the history of the country. Asked how frequently the security forces used violence before 2020 to suppress opposition, the largest group of respondents — 26 per cent — answered 'always', while 44 per cent acknowledged that the security forces were 'often' or 'sometimes' used to suppress dissent (see figure 6 below). In particular, respondents who had taken an active part in protests shared this view.³⁵

³¹ See "Interpersonal trust", ZOiS Report 3 / 2022 "Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change", https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2021/ZOiS_Report_3_2021.pdf, p. 13/14.

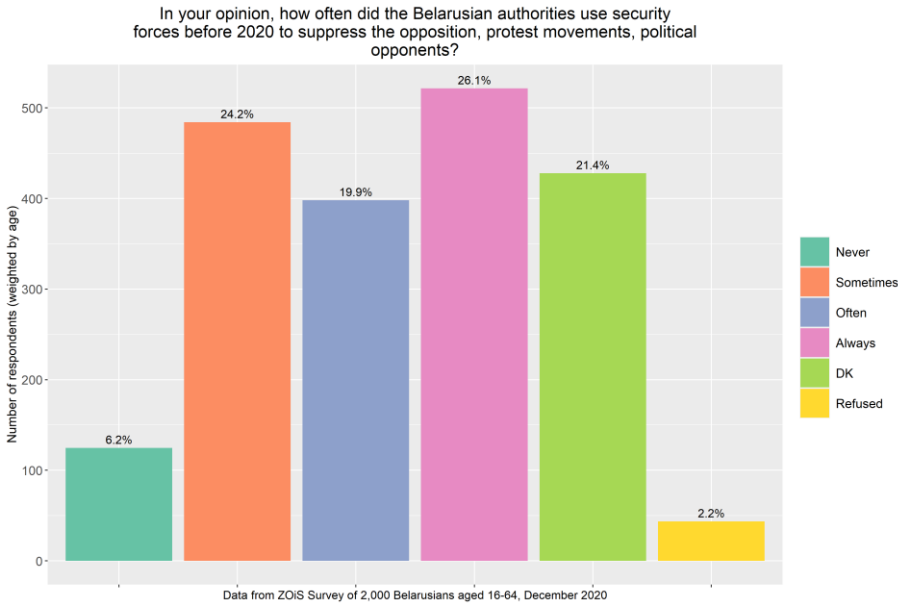
³² Cf. "Reasons for protesting", ZOiS Report 3 / 2022 "Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change", https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2021/ZOiS_Report_3_2021.pdf, p. 7-8.

³³ Cf. "Reasons for protesting", ZOiS Report 3 / 2022 "Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change", https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2021/ZOiS_Report_3_2021.pdf, p. 7-8.

³⁴ Cf. "State violence and fear", ZOiS Report 3 / 2022 "Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change", https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2021/ZOiS_Report_3_2021.pdf, p. 15.

³⁵ Cf. "State violence and fear", ZOiS Report 3 / 2022 "Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social

Figure 6:



Source: Data from ZOIS Belarus Survey, December 2020, N=2004 (Age 16-64)

In view of the extremely high levels of state violence, around 40 per cent of the protesters in our sample said they had initially been afraid to join the protests but had gradually lost their fear. About 25 per cent either became more afraid the longer they took part in protests or stopped protesting out of fear (see figure 7 below).

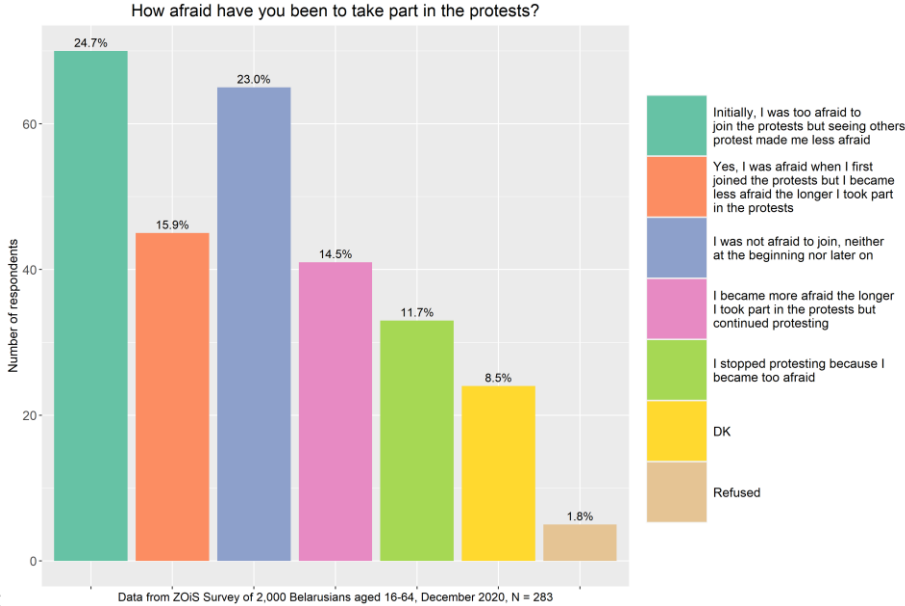


Figure 7:

Source: Data from ZOIS Belarus Survey, December 2020, N=2004 (Age 16-64)

As of 2021, much of the violent repression of citizens has shifted from the streets to pre-trial detention centres and the criminal prosecution system.

and political change”, [https:// www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/ media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ ZOIS_Reports/2021/ ZOIS_Report_3_2021.pdf](https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOIS_Reports/2021/ZOIS_Report_3_2021.pdf), figure 12, p. 15.

Thwarting protests

Lessons from past protests and confrontations with the security forces have taught activists and human rights defenders that the authorities used to be quite selective in their use of repressive methods. They routinely focused on that part of the opposition that openly spoke out about the need for change. A few years ago, this was not yet in the interests of a broad majority of the population, whose priority, instead, was to maintain stability in the country. With regard to other parts of the opposition, the authorities used to practise a policy of “controlled openness” (Bedford 2017) as long as they did not engage in subversive activities. This influenced the negative attitude of wider parts of society towards the formal opposition, which was portrayed and thus came to be perceived as a noisy and irritating subculture. “When people get arrested, militsiya just has one thing in mind that people went out to protest for money only. They simply do not understand that people have values for which they would go out and risk something” (Interview Gubarevich).

The methods of the authorities significantly changed in 2020, when they began to resort to indiscriminate violence and repression not only against protesters, regime critics and human rights defenders, but began to target media representatives, lawyers, independent trade union leaders, medical personnel and sometimes even innocent bystanders.

The Belarusian authorities, especially the Committee for State Security and the Investigation Committee, have studied their opponents diligently also prior to 2020 and have therefore become just as active on social media as civil society. Civic and human rights activists are fully aware that the police scrupulously read Facebook, Twitter and relevant Telegramme channels and usually finds out about planned meetings and rallies instantly (interview Viasna representative). A common tactic is to arrest key opposition figures, organisers of meetings and rallies or political leaders pre-emptively, prior to organised events. The person is then held in custody from five to seven or even 15 days on some pretext, with the result that they cannot make it to the event (interview Andrei Strizhak). Conducting searches without a warrant several days beforehand and interrogations by the law enforcement agencies have always been common practice.

Currently, public assemblies are not authorised anymore, and if they are, then the authorities assign locations with very low public visibility. During protests, police and intelligence officials film and control what is happening. Cars accompany rallies, equipped with mobile tracking devices in order to access participants’ personal data (interview Viasna representative).

During political protests, Belarusian authorities usually reproach demonstrators with the same accusations under Art. 23.34 of the Administrative Offences Code about violations against the right to organising or holding public assemblies/gatherings.³⁶ “Whereas, before, the authorities were punishing people for exercising their legitimate right to peaceful

³⁶ <https://www.23-34.net/?lang=en>

assembly by bringing administrative charges against them, now there are mostly criminal charges brought against participants in peaceful protests.”³⁷

As of March 2021, Belarusian authorities have filed criminal cases against over 1000 citizens, of whom 400 have already been convicted.³⁸ By now, more than 30,000 citizens have been detained for participating in peaceful protests in 2020/21 and around 350 are considered political prisoners.³⁹

Scenarios of domestic destabilisation

The national security apparatus has been on alert, not only since President Lukashenka de facto lost the presidential elections in August 2020. The authorities have been preparing for scenarios of domestic destabilisation already before that. In December 2019, the President signed a new National Defence Plan,⁴⁰ focusing on the development of an independent national security architecture. Another priority identified in the new concept for the development of the armed forces (2020-2030) is the prevention of domestic instability, reflecting scenarios of how modern military conflicts unfold (Sivitsky 2020). The former state secretary of the Security Council, Stanislav Zas’, explained on the same occasion that [...] additional attention was put on the question of destabilisation inside the country, which is also a matter of defence. That is the reality of our times: Everything begins with a destabilisation of the domestic situation, which can then provoke an internal armed conflict.”⁴¹

Accounts of previous mass protests, for example following the presidential election in 2006 and to a minor extent those in 2010, testify to similar concerns of and plans as well as preparations by the authorities already beforehand. In other words, also during these periods securitised propaganda took place.

On the eve of the election in 2006, mobile phone users in Minsk received text messages warning against attending demonstrations organised by the opposition. The chief of the State Security Committee at the time, General Sukharenko, publicly announced that all participants of unauthorised public actions during or after the election would be charged under the Terrorist Act and could be subject to 20 years imprisonment (Zarakhovich 2006, Korosteleva 2012: 45). On 19 March 2006, the day of the election, Lukashenka recalled to full alert all paramilitary forces at hand, including SWAT teams of the Almaz anti-terrorist special units under the Ministry of the Interior as well as the rapid response units SOBR, in order to counteract any civilian insurgence. None of these forces were eventually deployed,

³⁷Remarks by Anais Marin, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus at the side-event on Belarus HRC 46, 18 February 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26765&LangID=E>

³⁸ <http://spring96.org/en/news/102738>

³⁹ <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

⁴⁰ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-utverdil-novyj-plan-oborony-belarusi-na-chem-sdelany-aktsenty-373450-2019/>; Belarus Security Blog, The likelihood of political repression has grown in Belarus, 17 March 2020, <https://bsblog.info/the-likelihood-of-political-repression-has-grown-in-belarus/>.

⁴¹ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-utverdil-novyj-plan-oborony-belarusi-na-chem-sdelany-aktsenty-373450-2019>

or even seen on the streets (Korosteleva 2012: 46). After the announcement of the election results, nevertheless around 30.000 people demonstrated on central October square during the night of March 19 and demanded re-elections. One of the biggest protests since Independence, it raised in many hopes for a Belarusian colour revolution or Maidan (later dubbed “Denim Revolution”⁴²). The ensuing demonstrations on 25 March in fact were the only occasion when the state used force to counteract civic unrest. The relatively controlled and coordinated response from the authorities to these unprecedented levels of public protest was quite unexpected for domestic and international observers (Korosteleva 2012: 46).

Culture of impunity

OMON special purpose units act as the country’s principal riot police, at times supported by Internal Troops and other special forces units operating under the Interior Ministry’s supervision. These forces are trained to defend public order. Officially, their tasks include the fight against extremism, terrorism, or in the case of GUBOPiK against organised crime and corruption; in practice, their principal role is to break up mass gatherings and to “neutralise” subversive elements. At public assemblies, OMON units are responsible for crowd control, a physically and psychologically demanding task. The units mainly consist of young men, often from underprivileged social classes and regions in Belarus, who are exempt from compulsory military service but must prove their physical and psychological fitness as well as unconditional loyalty (Olevskiy 2020).

The question why OMON units act in such a violent and unrestrained manner has been raised repeatedly in the context of the 2020 protests. They are ordered to use force in order to intimidate and deter protesters, a tactic that has proved to be largely ineffective. They are allowed to remain anonymous: there is no regulation requiring them to show their faces or wear identification tags. The lack of insignia or recognisable uniforms means that it is often impossible to identify perpetrators by their unit (Mel’nichuk 2020). The fact that the individual behind the mask or under the balaclava remains anonymous lowers their initial inhibitions against using force. “They know that they have *carte blanche* and that the state will back them up” (interview Anatol Lyabedaska). The regime has accepted the fact that riot force units committed serious crime in order to make the commanders and those who implemented the orders even more dependent on the state.

So far, not a single member of a special unit has been held accountable for the unlawful use of force, nor have any criminal proceedings been brought against security personnel. Complaints about ill-treatment by public order police are rarely investigated. Human rights defenders therefore talk about a culture of impunity.⁴³ What is problematic in this regard is that there is no independent oversight body for the police or other law enforcement

⁴² https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/denim_3441jsp/

⁴³ Amnesty International, Belarus: Police must be held accountable for violence, 31 August 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/belarus-police-must-be-held-accountable-for-violence/>

agencies in Belarus that could have a restraining and disciplining effect on police forces.⁴⁴ The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus has repeatedly reported that the police have been used to protect the regime and to prevent peaceful assembly and protest.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Belarus has experienced an extreme form of authoritarian relapse since 2020. It has transformed from a state emphasising social welfare into a state dominated by domestic security concerns. We can hence talk about a redefinition of the broad social contract encompassing the whole of society into a narrow security contract (between the President and the most loyal security structures). Two parallel trends – the demystification of the Belarusian welfare state, on the one hand, and the unveiling of a brutal police state, on the other – have characterised the eroding relationship between state and citizenry in recent years. These ‘two faces’ of the Belarusian republic have come to the fore during the latest wave of protests in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections.

The securitisation of state politics prior and post-2020 had at least three major purposes: 1) It served the purpose of prioritising and militarising domestic security; 2) It ensured and strengthened the loyalty of the security structures at all levels of hierarchy; and 3) It discredited and demonised both domestic societal resistance and external actors putting pressure on the ruling regime. The securitising language was not only a feature of the ruling president Lukashenka but has also been adopted by various other state representative or state-loyal actors.

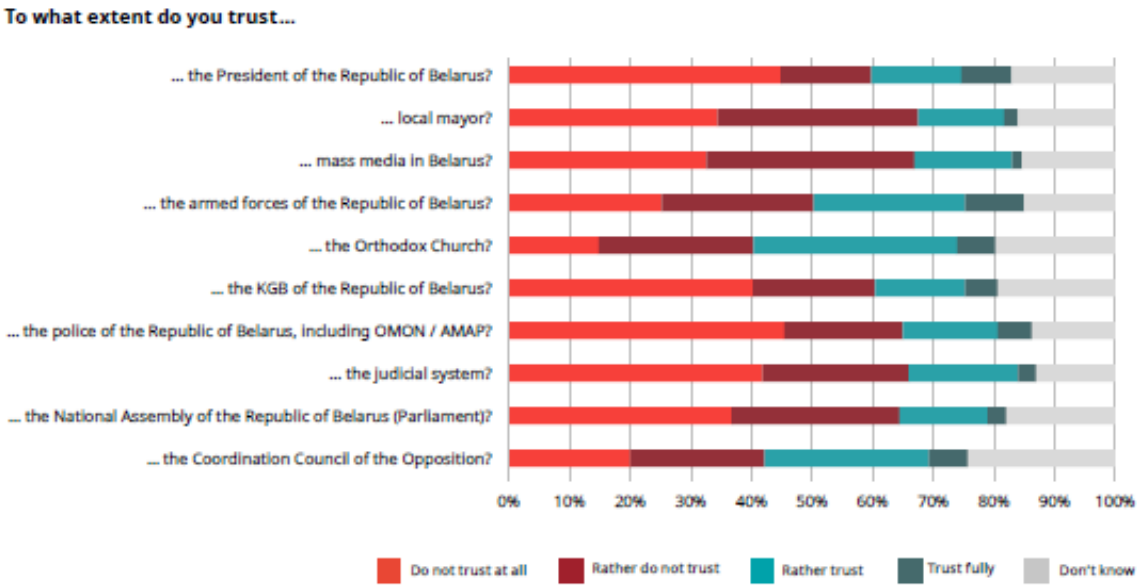
The securitised interactions between state power structures and citizenry are emblematic for the strained state-society relations in Belarus. The two sides in this relationship— an insubordinate citizenry especially in urban settings and a regime on the alert — have cultivated an insurmountable mutual distrust. Evidence for the dissatisfaction with the ruling regime can be found in the low ratings of trust in public officials and the entire political class. They have been low for some time (Kulesh 2018), however the ZOiS survey now confirmed the growing unpopularity not only of the president but also of general state power structures that are increasingly associated with the head of state: the police, including the OMON / AMAP riot police, the national intelligence agency KGB, and the judicial system. These structures have become ‘distrusted’ or ‘somewhat distrusted’ by more than half of respondents (see figure 8). The pronounced distrust of the security apparatus and the judiciary reflects these bodies’ unprecedented use of physical and psychological violence. Distrust is

⁴⁴ There are very few options at the international level. There is no possibility to bring cases of human rights violations by the police before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), since Belarus is not a state party to the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights. The same applies to the International Criminal Court (ICC), which can hold individuals accountable for crimes against humanity and crimes of aggression. Belarus has neither signed nor ratified the Rome Statute of the ICC.

⁴⁵ See latest statements before the UN Human Rights Council, 1 April 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26970&LangID=E>; and at the General Assembly, 26 October 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26426&LangID=E>.

particularly notable among people who have become more politically interested in recent months.

Figure 8:



Source: Data from ZOiS Belarus Survey, December 2020, N=2004 (Age 16-64)

While the authorities, notably Lukashenka, seem to be convinced – or want to convey – that the opposition attempts to undermine and ultimately destroy the ruling regime on behalf of external powers, the opposition and large segments of the population adhere to the consensus that the authorities and the President are using their monopoly on violence for purely personal gains.

The protests in Belarus – in contrast to the situation in neighbouring Ukraine – have not led to geopoliticisation, nor to an overly nationalistic discourse. From that we can conclude that the dominant security discourses have – except possibly for their target audience among the security organs – not fallen on fertile ground. As for now, the currently reform-resistant security structures will remain an important pillar of power under the current regime, dominated by traditionalists and hardliners that have completely internalised the regime’s prevalent security discourse. Similar to society at large, neither the security apparatus is a monolithic bloc and different views are represented in it. It remains to be seen which of them eventually prevail.

Most certainly, the disposition to protest and the level of agreement with the positions and ideas of the Belarusian opposition in exile (Coordination Council of the Opposition, Tikhanovskaya’s team and the National Anti-crisis Management) have decreased considerably in recent months. Nevertheless, the public outrage and negative emotions about the behaviour of the security organs, as well as the lack of understanding or acceptance of social and financial privileges for these groups will remain and hardly be reversed.

In Belarus, the societal dependency on the state was and is more pronounced than in other comparable states. This goes back to the tacit rules of the social contract, in the context of which people for a long time endured restrictions to their political liberties and participation rights in favour of stability and social security in the country. A further deterioration of the economic situation in conjunction with a worsening socio-economic self-perception by Belarusian citizens (see recent surveys by the Belarusian Analytical Workroom) now testify to a permanent revocation of the social contract, providing the ground for further social and political grievances. A way out of the current situation can only be found in a profound social, political and economic transformation of the Belarusian state. The reform of the security sector will have to be at the heart of these endeavours.

References

- Balmaceda, Margarita (2014). Energy policy in Belarus: authoritarian resilience, social contracts, and patronage in a post-Soviet environment, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55(5), 514-536, 523.
- Balzacq, Thierry (ed.) (2011): *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Bedford, Sofie (2017). "The Election Game:" Authoritarian Consolidation Processes in Belarus." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25: 381 - 405.
- Bohdan, Siarhei (2019). Stiller Rück- und Umbau der belarussischen Streitkräfte trotz der Militarisierung in der Region, *Belarus-Analysen* Nr. 44, 25 September 2019, <https://www.laender-analysen.de/belarus-analysen/44/>.
- Bohdan, Siarhei (2020): Monopolisten der Gewalt. In: *Osteuropa* 70 (10-11): 167–181.
- Butler, Michael J. (ed.) (2019): *Securitization Revisited: Contemporary Applications and Insights*, Routledge Critical Security Studies Series, London and New York: Routledge.
- Buzan, Barry (1991): *People, states, and fear. An agenda for international security studies in the post-cold war era*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Buzan, Barry, Wæver, Ole, and Jaap de Wilde (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Checkel, Jeffrey. (1998). The Constructive Turn in International Relations Theory. *World Politics*. 50. 324 - 348.
- Chubrik, Alexander, Kiryl Haiduk, Igor Pelipas, Gleb Shymanovich and Irina Tochitskaya (2009). *Social Protection and Social Inclusion in Belarus*, European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, http://sid.usal.es/idocs/F8/FDO26055/Belarus_Social.pdf.
- Chulitskaya; Tatsiana and Irmina Matonytė (2018). Social security discourses in a non-democratic state: Belarus between Soviet paternalistic legacies and neo-liberal pressures. In: *Public policy and administration* Vol. 17, No 4: 539–554, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Social-security-discourses-in-a-non-democratic-and-Chulitskaya-Matonyt%C4%97/3c5ad225e89f9c1024ab7c148c71f70cc57089fb>.
- Dimitrova, Antoaneta, Honorata Mazepus, Dimiter Toshkov, Tatsiana Chulitskaya and Ina Ramasheuskaya (2020). The dual role of state capacity in opening socio-political orders: assessment of different elements of state capacity in Belarus and Ukraine. In: *East European Politics* 37 (2): 1–24.
- Eke, Steven M. and Taras Kuzio (2000). "Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus." *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3: 523-547.
- Feduta, Aleksandr (2005). *Lukashenko: Politicheskaya Biografiya*. Moscow: Referendum.

- Frear, Matthew (2019). *Belarus Under Lukashenka: Adaptive Authoritarianism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Geddes, Barbara, Wright, Joseph and Erica Frantz (2018). *How dictatorships work: power, personalization, and collapse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hale, Henry E. (2015). *Patronal politics. Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press (Problems of international politics).
- Haggard, Stephan and Robert Kaufman (2016). *Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Haiduk, Kiryl, Rakova, Elena, and Vital Silitski (eds.) (2009). *Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus*, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00006382/01/social_contracts_contemporary_Belarus_en.pdf.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2019). *The Military Balance 2019* [the annual assessment of global military capabilities and defence economics] London: Routledge.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2021). *The Military Balance 2021* [the annual assessment of global military capabilities and defence economics] London: Routledge.
- Korosteleva, Elena (2012). Questioning democracy promotion: Belarus' response to the 'colour revolutions'. In: *Democratization* 19 (1): 37–59.
- Kulesh, Svetlana (2018). *Grashdanskoe obshchestvo v Belarusi: doverie i uchastie naseleniya, oso-benosti vsaimodeistviya s gosudarstvom*, SYMPA / BIPART, http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/civil_society_research_2018.pdf.
- Marin, Anaïs (2020). *The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myths and Realities of Political-Military Integration*. Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Anais-Marine-Union-State-of-Belarus-and-Russia.pdf>.
- Matsuzato, Kimitaka (2004): A populist island in an ocean of clan politics: the Lukashenka regime as an exception among CIS countries. In: *Europe-Asia Studies* 56 (2): 235–261.
- Mel'nychuk, Tat'yana (2020). *Pochemy belorusskiy OMON vedet sebya tak zhestoko? Interv'yu s byvshim boytsom*, BBC News, 17 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53807992>.
- Mutschler, Max M. and Marius Bales / Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), *Globaler Militarisierungsindex 2020*, https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/BICC_GMI_2020_DE.pdf.
- Olevskiy, Timur (2020). *OMON, srochniki, tichari. Siloviki na ulitsakh v Belarusi – kto oni takie*, *Nastoyashchee Vremya*, 12 August 2020, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-lukashenko-rally/30778628.html>.

- Pikulik, Alexei (2019). Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine as Post-Soviet Rent-Seeking Regimes. In: Magyar, Balint (ed.). *Stubborn Structures: Reconceptualizing Post-Communist Regimes* Budapest; New York: Central European University Press: 489-505.
- Porotnikov, Andrei (2019). Glass dome of national defense. In: *Belarusian Yearbook 2019*, Agency for Social and Political Expert Appraisal, Nashe Mnenie, <https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2019/en/index.html>.
- Silitsky, Vitali (2005). 'Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus'. *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 4: 83–97.
- Simão, Licinia (2013): (In)security in Post-Soviet Eurasia: Contributions from Critical Security Studies. In: *em e-cadernos CES* (19), <https://journals.openedition.org/eces/1582>.
- Sivitsky, Arseny (2020). Belarus's Contribution to Security and Stability in Central and Eastern Europe: Regional Safeguards, Strategic Autonomy and National Defense Modernization, Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-contribution-to-security-and-stability-in-central-and-eastern-europe-regional-safeguards-strategic-autonomy-and-national-defense-modernization/>.
- Smok, Vadzim (2017). Was the White Legion really planning an armed attack? *Belarus Digest*, 17 April 2017, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/was-the-white-legion-really-planning-an-armed-attack/>.
- Stoner, Kathryn, McFaul, Michael, Bunce, Valerie (eds.) (2010): *Democracy and authoritarianism in the post-communist world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The International Strategic Action Network for Security (2020). Situation in law enforcement agencies of Belarus and the prospects of weakening the main support base of the Lukashenka regime, Briefing paper by iSANS, https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/situation-in-by-law-enforcement-bodies_brief_isans_20.11.2020_eng.pdf.
- Way, Lucan (2015): *Pluralism by default. Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wilson, Andrew (2016). Belarus: from a Social Contract to a Security Contract? In: *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 8 (1), S. 78–91.
- Zarakhovich, Yury (2006). On Scene: A Revolution in Belarus?, *Time*, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1175372,00.html>.

Interviews

Yury Gubarevich, Movement "For Freedom", Minsk, 6 September 2017

Sergei Kalyakin, "Just World" Party, 11 September 2017

Anatol Lyabedtska, Belarusian United Civic Party, 8 September 2017

Andrei Strizhak, activist, blogger and member of REP Union, Minsk, 14 September 2017

Aliaksandr Yarashuk, Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, Minsk, 6 September 2017

Tat'yana Zelko, "Nashe Pokolonie" Pensioner Association, Minsk, 7 September 2017 (follow-up questions via E-mail in 2020)

Individual activist, Minsk, 15 September 2017 (follow-up questions via E-mail in 2020)

Representative of Viasna human rights organisation, Minsk, 13 September 2017