

The New Belarus: Societal Change, Regime Repression, and Western Reactions

Workshop of Social Science Working Group of the German Association for East European Studies (DGO) and the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS)

Berlin, 06./07.10.2021

Since the summer of 2020, the Lukashenka regime has used ever more repression against political opponents and civil society. Despite temporary steps of cautious regime opening, the Belarusian regime has again taken a path that is familiar from other post-Soviet regimes like Azerbaijan, Russia, or most states of Central Asia. These regimes are characterized not only by strict hierarchies of power that include the administrative, economic, judicial, and political spheres, but also by the unrestrained use of violence against any form of dissent or opposition towards the established order. Voicing oppositional views or expressing doubt about the regime is interpreted as a quasi-blasphemous act by the authoritarian ruler and his security apparatus.

However, Belarusian society has cultivated forms of civic awareness that potentially transverse the repression-based authoritarianism of the elites. The effects of this dissonance point in different directions. The gap between a political elite which demands loyalty and the recalcitrant parts of society results in excessive violence by the security apparatus. The long-term effects of a state using brute force are bound to be a further erosion of collective trust in the regime as a whole. A further decline in legitimacy seems inevitable, and each further act of repression may contribute to the future instability of the regime. Even if Belarusian borders to the West are currently hard to cross, mobility and migration have not stopped, including via Russia and Ukraine. Due to the nature of digital communication, in particular the younger population cannot be isolated from ideas that challenge authoritarianism and corruption.

At the same time, the vicinity of Belarus to the European Union is counterbalanced by Russian interests. As the Ukrainian case has shown, the Kremlin does not refrain from intervening in neighbouring countries when they threaten to weaken its influence or set a potentially dangerous precedent for developments in Russia. The political, economic and societal developments in Belarus are thus closely linked to developments in Russia.

All these questions turn “Western” or EU reactions to the recent developments into a complex matter. Political actors are faced with the challenge of introducing sanctions against the political elites and the Belarusian economy, while also considering the effects on ordinary citizens. Moreover, it is unclear to Western political and societal actors to what extent their responses have to factor in their own relations with Russia or if the price of a Western policy is an even closer relationship between Belarus and Russia. The EU’s overall commitment to supporting Belarus in the short-, medium- and long-term is still uncertain.

The workshop pursues first and foremost an analytical aim: it intends to offer empirical work on recent political and societal developments in Belarus, its international relations and the reactions of the European Union, its member states, and European civil society to the hardening of Belarusian authoritarianism. We also hope to increase the understanding of the actual and potential ambivalences of Western responses by bringing together young and more established scholars from different regions and disciplines, including international relations, political science, sociology, anthropology etc.

Program

Wednesday, October 6, 2021

13:30	Introductory Remarks
Session 1: Societal change in Belarus	
13:45	Svetlana BODRUNOVA (St. Petersburg): A self-critical public: the Belarusian opposition on YouTube before the protests of 2020 Félix KRAWATZEK / Julia LANGBEIN (Berlin): The erosion of the social contract before 2020 Gwendolyn SASSE (Berlin): Social and political attitudes in Belarus 2020-2021 Aliaksei BRATACHKIN (Minsk/Frankfurt (Oder)): Memory politics in Belarus
15:30	Coffee Break
Session 2: Protests and the political regime	
15:45	Ulrich SCHMID (St. Gallen): Isolation and Normality. The legitimizing power of ideologies in Russia, Belarus, and Poland Petra STYKOW (München): The dynamics of the 2020/2021 protests Jan BEHREND (Potsdam): Belarus as a laboratory of repressive politics
17:15	Coffee Break
Round Table 1: German and European strategies towards Belarus (non-public)	
17:30	Inputs by Tobias TUNKEL (Auswärtiges Amt) and Dirk SCHUEBEL (External Action Service)

Thursday, October 7, 2021

Session 3: Belarus in international and comparative perspectives	
09:15	Mikhail MINAKOV (Washington, D.C.): The Belarusian protest movement of 2020 in comparative perspective Siarhei BOHDAN (Berlin): Military developments in and around Belarus Rahim RAHIMOV (Baku): Belarus and Azerbaijan: Political Siblings or Partners of Convenience?
10:45	Coffee Break
Round table 2: Where to go from here – political and scientific strategies for the years to come	
11:00	Sebastian BOLLINIEN (Berlin): Potential scenarios for democratic power transition Boris GINZBURG (Berlin): The influence of democratic sanctions Timm BEICHELT (Frankfurt/Oder): Strategies of scholarly cooperation
12:30	Concluding remarks & Lunch