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# ZOIS REPORT

**BELARUS:**  
FROM THE OLD SOCIAL  
CONTRACT TO A NEW  
SOCIAL IDENTITY

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## Summary

State-society relations in Belarus have been tense for many years. The presidential elections in August 2020 and the mishandling of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic have proved to be the catalyst that brought these fragile relations to a complete breakdown. Over the years, the widening gap between a new generation of an emancipated citizenry and a regime stuck in predominantly paternalistic power structures and reluctant to engage in political and economic reforms has become increasingly evident. The deteriorating 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, the regime has continued to invest in its domestic security structures to a disproportionate extent compared with neighbouring states, allowing the so-called *silovye struktury* ("state power structures") to gain influence at the highest level of state governance.

The report's principal findings are as follows:

- The paternalist Belarusian concept of the "social contract", once considered the main reason for socio-political stability in Belarus, has been challenged by the deterioration of the socio-economic situation over the years and the failure of the authorities to address problems such as stagnating salaries and pensions, unemployment and labour migration.
- Over the course of the last decade, 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 the President and the most loyal security structures).

- The first genuine social protests in 2017, when protesters mobilised in order to oppose a tax levied against the unemployed, can be regarded as the prelude to the events of 2020.
- The feeling of solidarity and belief in self-organisation and self-help, first tested during the Covid-19 pandemic, paved the way for new cultural phenomena hitherto unknown in Belarusian society. A decisive factor for the organisation and decentralised mobilisation of street protests has been digital technology.
- Women played a key role during the 2020 protests, actively showing female solidarity against the paternalist and misogynous style of long-time President Lukashenka, who repeatedly used discriminatory language to denounce women opposition activists, insisting that the country was not ready for a female president.
- Police brutality, arbitrary arrests, allegations of severe human rights violations and torture, and finally the impunity of the OMON Special Purpose Police Units have motivated even more people to show their outrage and join the mass protests.
- The demystification of the Belarusian welfare state, on the one hand, and the unveiling of a brutal police state, on the other, have been the underlying causes (with the Covid-19 pandemic as a trigger) of the erosion of trust in the relationship between state and citizenry and its ultimate collapse.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

After years of recession, rising unemployment and erosion of social standards, President Lukashenka's promise of prosperity—intended to guarantee the loyalty of the populace—has turned out to be an illusion in the view of most Belarusian citizens. Dissatisfaction with a regime that has always portrayed itself as a stable welfare state has grown in recent years. Decreasing levels of trust in the state and its institutions are a further indicator of a dysfunctional state-society relationship.

The President's approval ratings have suffered severe setbacks. In the last five years, the President himself has initiated a number of unpopular measures. They included a tax on the unemployed, which triggered the first countrywide social protests in 2017,<sup>2</sup> the tightening of legislation on the

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1 I thank Ganna Novytska and Simon Muschick, student assistants at ZOiS, for their contribution in compiling the statistical data.

2 Euronews, Protests in Belarus over 'social parasite tax', 26 February 2017, <https://www.euronews.com/2017/02/26/protests-in-belarus-over-social-parasite-tax>.

possession of (even soft) drugs<sup>3</sup> and the restriction in 2019 of young men's right to defer their compulsory military service.<sup>4</sup> These measures particularly antagonised young people, setting them against the political elites and the long-term president. Despite major obstacles to the exercise of freedom of assembly, subdued protests have occurred more frequently in the capital Minsk but also in the regions in recent years. Since 9 August, the country has witnessed the biggest wave of post-election protests, as well as the most brutal crackdown on citizens by the security forces since independence. Protests, initially driven by young people, erupted in the capital Minsk and mobilised significant parts of the urban population across the country.

Belarusian experts have long discussed the hypothetical concept of the paternalist “social contract”, as a remnant of the Soviet-era social contract, considered to be the main reason for socio-political stability in Belarus.<sup>5</sup> Economic stability and security were meant to compensate for the lack of political participation in the country. This arrangement between the state and various social groups was commonly known as the “Belarusian model”. Privileged groups were, notably, government employees (sometimes equated with the Belarusian middle class, constituting roughly two thirds of the population) and the Belarusian nomenklatura, mostly hand-picked officials and directors of state-owned enterprises. 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 some kind of balance between economic gains and social welfare needs. The entire construct relied 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.<sup>6</sup> In addition, energy rents have been an essential prerequisite for the financing of the *silovye* struktury and hence the regime's survival.<sup>7</sup> 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.

The first part of this report analyses which long-term developments have been responsible for the open expression of dissatisfaction with the regime in Belarus, triggered by the rigged presidential elections and ensuing police brutality. The second part of the report traces the evolution of the protest culture in Belarus, illustrating how, during the course of 2020, Belarusian society—through self-organisation and large-scale protests—has finally turned from apathy to social mobilisation and resistance in the common quest for a new identity. The marginalisation of a weak political opposition over the years has shaped the country's political culture, eventually leading

3 Our House, “Children-328”: goals and objectives of the campaign, 2018, <https://news.house/40773>.

4 Charter 97, Belarusian Conscripts Unite Against The “Law On Deferments”, 30 July 2019, <https://charter97.org/en/news/2019/7/30/343075/>.

5 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](http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00006382/01/social_contracts_contemporary_Belarus_en.pdf).

6 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.

7 Feduta, Aleksandr (2005). Lukashenko: Politicheskaya Biografiya. Moscow: Referendum, quoted in Balmaceda 2014, 523.

Economic stability and security were meant to compensate for the lack of political participation.

to decentralised activism and protest driven mainly by the grassroots and individual civic activists. In the third part, the report sheds light on the interaction between state power structures and citizens in order to explain the gradual drifting apart of state and society in contemporary Belarus, once regarded as a showcase for stability in the post-Soviet region.

The report relies on document analysis, public opinion polls,<sup>8</sup> statistical data and problem-centred interviews conducted by the author with various local stakeholder groups between 2017 and 2020. For reasons of accessibility, the report mainly draws on observations and assessments by individual activists or representatives of the expert community and civic organisations in the capital Minsk and the city of Bobruisk, and only utilises state sources to a limited extent.

## Social security vs. state security

There is ample research literature, especially in the field of social movement studies, which presents evidence for social grievances as drivers of the mobilisation of mass protests.<sup>9</sup> Social grievances and socio-economic discontent have been key factors in other protest movements in the post-Soviet region (e.g. Ukraine 2014, Moldova 2014/2015, Armenia 2015). All of these mass protests were a prelude to subsequent regime changes or attempts at liberating these countries from their authoritarian ruling classes. Over long periods, the authorities in many of these countries failed to adequately address problems such as stagnating or decreasing salaries and pensions, unemployment and large-scale labour migration.

## Long-term socio-economic developments

Until recently, the expression of dissatisfaction among the Belarusian population was rather unusual compared to other former Soviet states, particularly Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia, historically some of the poorest countries in the region. The current situation stands in stark contrast to the country's self-image as a "social state".<sup>10</sup> The economic situation in Belarus during the last decade has been characterised by repeated crises (induced by recessions in Russia and Western sanctions in combination with falling oil prices) and insecurities concerning the future of energy subsidies.<sup>11</sup> The external trade and export trend is negative, international oil prices

8 After the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) had to stop conducting national surveys in August 2016, hardly any regular representative polls have been published in Belarus. Experts in the field state that independent sociology has practically ceased to exist in the country. The survey data in this report relies on selected studies funded by donors from abroad. It includes data from the IPM Research Center, the Centre for European Transformation and IISEPS (until 2016). ZOiS commissioned a survey among young people in June – July 2020 and plans another survey in the near future.

9 See, for example, Kurer, Thomas, Häusermann, Silja, Wüest, Bruno and Enggist, Matthias (2018). Economic grievances and political protest. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(5), 1 – 27.

10 See Art. 1, Constitution of the Republic of Belarus of 1994, <http://law.by/databank-business/list-of-legal-acts/?p0=17>.

11 Russia has revoked this arrangement by means of the "tax manoeuvre", which will be phased out by 2025.

are plummeting and the budget deficit and the country’s external debt are growing.<sup>12</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic<sup>13</sup> and the constitutional crisis following the rigged presidential elections have amplified many of these problems. The outlook is bleak, especially since the damage caused by the pandemic, the impacts of ongoing countrywide strikes on state-owned enterprises, the attempts by groups of workers to lower productivity as a sign of protest and layoffs of fractious workers cannot yet be predicted.

### Average wages and pensions

Taking a long-term view based on certain key indicators, it becomes evident that Belarus’s economic woes during the last decade have had serious consequences for its socio-economic situation. Average real wages have not been growing continuously. ► **FIGURE 1** Moreover, comparatively high average wages in the Minsk region (including the city of Minsk and Saligorsk) distort the general picture and conceal very large regional differences. In fact, there are regions where the monthly average salary does not reach 600 BYR, compared to a nationwide average of 964 BYR.<sup>14</sup>

The stagnation of average retirement pensions (► **FIGURE 2**) has led to a situation where the long-term goal declared by the government that the average

**FIGURE 1**  
Trend of average real wage growth rate and inflation rate



Source: Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) <http://www.old.iiseps.org/zarplata3.html>; <http://www.old.iiseps.org/zarplata20.html>; The World Bank, World Development Indicators, Belarus, <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=NY.GDP.DEFL.KD.ZG&country=BLR>

12 German Economic Team Belarus, Wirtschaftsausblick Ausgabe 12, June 2020, [https://www.german-economic-team.com/belarus/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/GET\\_BLR\\_WA\\_12\\_de.pdf](https://www.german-economic-team.com/belarus/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/GET_BLR_WA_12_de.pdf).

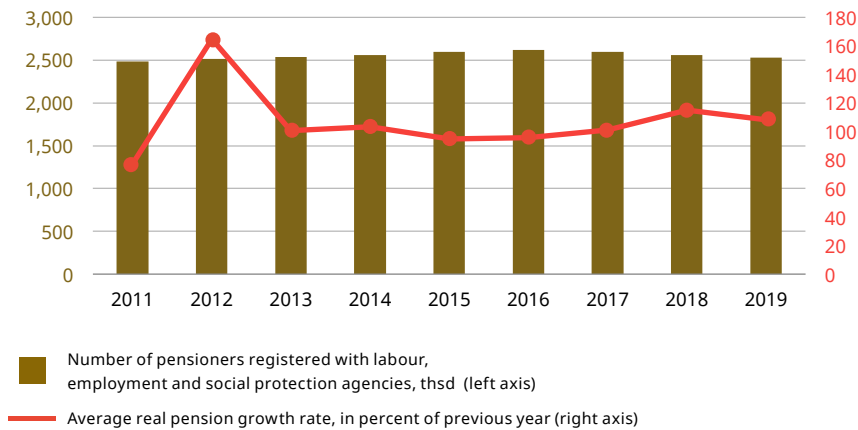
13 The special path chosen by Belarusian authorities to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020 was another driver of growing societal grievances. Instead of introducing a lockdown and containment measures, Belarus concentrated on the mitigation of collateral damage, mainly to the national economy.

14 Tut.by, “Zavetnyyu” tycyachnu rublei zarabatyvayut tol’ko v 4 raionakh Belarusi. 7 faktov o zarplatakh v sentyabre, 29 October 2018, <https://finance.tut.by/news613426.html>.

pension should amount to 40 percent of the average income<sup>15</sup> has not been achieved for years.<sup>16</sup> The average pension (431 BYR) is clearly above the subsistence level (230 BYR),<sup>17</sup> but is only slightly above the minimum wage (375 BYR). This protects pensioners from extreme poverty, but does not secure their previous living standard, particularly if they have dependents relying on the same pension. Moreover, despite the continuously high inflation rate (around 10 percent), pensions in 2017 were indexed at only 5 or 6 percent (interview Tat'yana Zelko).

The demographic problem of an ageing population in Belarus and declining number of people of working age since at least 2006<sup>18</sup> do not promise any relief in the coming years. According to official statements, the pension level has been maintained, and younger retirees are encouraged to work and to make use of special discounts and benefits for pensioners (interview representative of a state association). The 2017 pension reform stipulates a gradual increase in the retirement age by 2022. By then, the retirement age will be 63 for men and 58 for women (from 60 and 55, respectively). This is reasonable by international standards, especially given that life expectancy is increasing. Human rights defenders, however, point out that the number of years in which insurance contributions must be paid has also increased, in some cases retroactively. As a result, people who would have had sufficient contribution years to be entitled to receive a pension under the old rules lose this entitlement under the new regulations. Women who fulfilled social functions, such as care work, are particularly affected (interview Oleg Gulag).

**FIGURE 2**  
**Trend of average real pensions**



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/Demographic-and-social-statistics/social-protection/>

15 International minimum standard; see International Labour Organization (ILO): [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C102](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C102).  
 16 Tut.by, Rost tarifov na ZHKU, udar rublem po trudovoi migratsii i deshevoe zhil'e. Chto vlasti obeshayut belorusam, 20 October 2018, <https://finance.tut.by/news612305.html>.  
 17 24 Belarus, Minimum subsistence level to be increased from 1 August, 31 July 2020, <https://belarus24.by/en/news/society/higher-allowances-and-pensions-in-belarus-from-1-august/>.  
 18 Akulich, Vladimir (2017). Rynok truda: v lovushke nizkooplachivaemoi zanyatnosti, bez-rabotizy i bednosti. In: Anatoliy Pan'kovskiy and Valeriya Kostyugova (eds.) "Belorusskiy ezhegodnik", Agenstvo sotsial'noi i politicheskoi ekspertizy, Vilnius, <https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2017/page27.html>.

### (Un)employment

Official unemployment figures only reflect the numbers of jobless registered with the Belarusian employment agency. The actual unemployment level is much higher. According to opinion poll data and other statistics, only 14 percent of the effective unemployed actually register with the employment agency.<sup>19</sup> This is not surprising since the unemployment allowance in Belarus amounts to “two basic values”, i.e. 54 roubles (approximately 23 euros, as of January 2020).<sup>20</sup> Many dread the paperwork that has to be completed to obtain the allowance. In addition, there are still cases where people who are registered unemployed are summoned to do community work several days a month.

The Belarusian authorities do publish the effective unemployment rates, which are based on annual household surveys and record the numbers of unemployed in accordance with International Labour Organization (ILO) criteria.<sup>21</sup> These effective numbers are significantly higher than the official unemployment rate. ► FIGURE 3

**FIGURE 3**  
**Unemployment trend**



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/trud/>, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, <http://mintrud.gov.by/ru/sostojanie>

19 Tut.by, V Belarusi vsyrosla fakticheskaya bezrabotitsa: trudovye knizhki ne mogu pristroit bol'she 245 tycyach chelovek, 27 February 2019, <https://finance.tut.by/news627905.html> and Akulich (2017).

20 Naviny.by, “Belorusskiy Detroit”. V kakikh regionakh slozhnee vsego s rabotoi?, 10 January 2020, <https://naviny.media/article/20200110/1578636844-belorusskiy-detroyt-v-kakih-regionah-slozhnee-vsego-s-rabotoy>.

21 International Labour Organization, Quick Guide on Interpreting the Unemployment Rate, 2019, [https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms\\_675155.pdf](https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_675155.pdf).



Nevertheless, even the effective unemployment rate is one of the lowest in Europe.<sup>22</sup> The government has not yet followed the recommendations by the World Bank to raise the unemployment allowance to the subsistence minimum. Therefore, unemployment is considered the second most pressing problem in Belarus.<sup>23</sup>

The faltering economy, aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, is already having an effect on the Belarusian labour market.<sup>24</sup> An online survey conducted by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) among urban young people in Belarus between June and July 2020 found that 40 percent had already been compelled to change their employment situation due to Covid-19—some were forced into unemployment and most into part-time employment. Only 53 percent of young people surveyed were in full-time employment.<sup>25</sup>

The faltering economy, aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, is already affecting the Belarusian labour market.

In the city of Bobruisk, for example, once an industrial hub, many of the vast combines and factories that were once a factor of growth have been forced to close or to scale down. Many clerical and manual workers have either lost their jobs or have been working reduced hours for several years, with substantial cuts in wages (interview members of “Just World”).

Instead of raising the minimum subsistence level, minimum wages and unemployment allowance, the authorities responded in 2015 with Decree No.3, entitled “On the prevention of social dependency” (see p. 16 for more details). This new policy of fighting “tuneyadstvo” (social parasitism) was not well received by the Belarusian population and set off a national discussion about the structural causes of unemployment and related social problems. The major problem with the Belarusian welfare system, according to several interviewees, is its focus on average numbers and minimum standards, instead of on the immediate needs of the individual.

With the decree, the authorities were also bent on targeting independent entrepreneurs. For many unemployed people in Belarus, setting up a small business is an obvious choice in order to achieve livelihood security. The very large number of restrictions led many people to circumvent the cumbersome formal registration processes and instead engage in grey self-employment, thereby avoiding paying taxes (interview Andrei Kazakevich). Entrepreneurship has traditionally been a thorn in the side of the regime, due to fears of losing control of the centralised state-run economy. For small entrepreneurs, running a business often still means being exposed to various risks. The state can come up with new regulations that could deprive a small entrepreneur of his or her livelihood at any time (interview Anatol Shumchenko).

22 Eurostat, News release, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/11054062/3-02072020-AP-EN.pdf/ce573d1a-04a5-6762-5b56-cb322cbdc5ac>.

23 Urban, Dar'ya / IPM Research Center, Tsennosti naseleniya Belarusi. Resultaty natsional'nogo oprosa naseleniya, 2019, [http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/SR\\_19\\_01.pdf](http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/SR_19_01.pdf).

24 Naviny.by, Koronavirus mozhet sprovotsirovat rost bezrabotitsy v Belarusi, 19 March 2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20200319/1584617935-koronavirus-mozhet-sprovocirovat-rost-bezrabotitsy-v-belarusi>.

25 Krawatzek, Félix and Maryia Rohava, Belarus's presidential election: an appetite for change, ZOiS Spotlight 30 / 2020, 29 July 2020, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/zois-spotlight/belarus-presidential-election-an-appetite-for-change/>.

## The promise of prosperity has never materialised.

Labour migration is one of the consequences of the regime's failed employment policy. It has hit Belarus more severely in recent years: according to official data, around 83,000 people were working abroad in 2018.<sup>26</sup> A large proportion of the unregistered unemployed are in fact working abroad permanently, or take on temporary or seasonal jobs in other countries, with Russia being the top destination. According to figures presented by Russian experts in 2017, the actual number of Belarusians employed in Russia may already have reached one million.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the promise of prosperity—which, for a long time, guaranteed loyalty and allegiance to the regime—has never materialised. Since 2011, social scientists and economists at the Minsk-based IPM Research Center have been documenting the level of poverty in Belarus. The team, led by economist Aleksandr Chubrik, publishes an annual report on poverty and social integration in Belarus<sup>28</sup> and periodically attempts to present its findings and recommendations to the authorities, although they have yet to receive a response (interview Andrei Yegorov).

### Privileges for certain groups

In terms of the “guns vs. butter” model,<sup>29</sup> the incumbent regime seems 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 (see next section).

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. Owing to the difficult economic situation, the authorities also began to outsource the system of benefits by putting pressure on commercial entities such as banks, in order to oblige them to introduce favourable conditions for law enforcement employees (interview individual activist). 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 Lyabedaska). However, by 2019, this acceptance could no longer be taken for granted. ► FIGURE 4

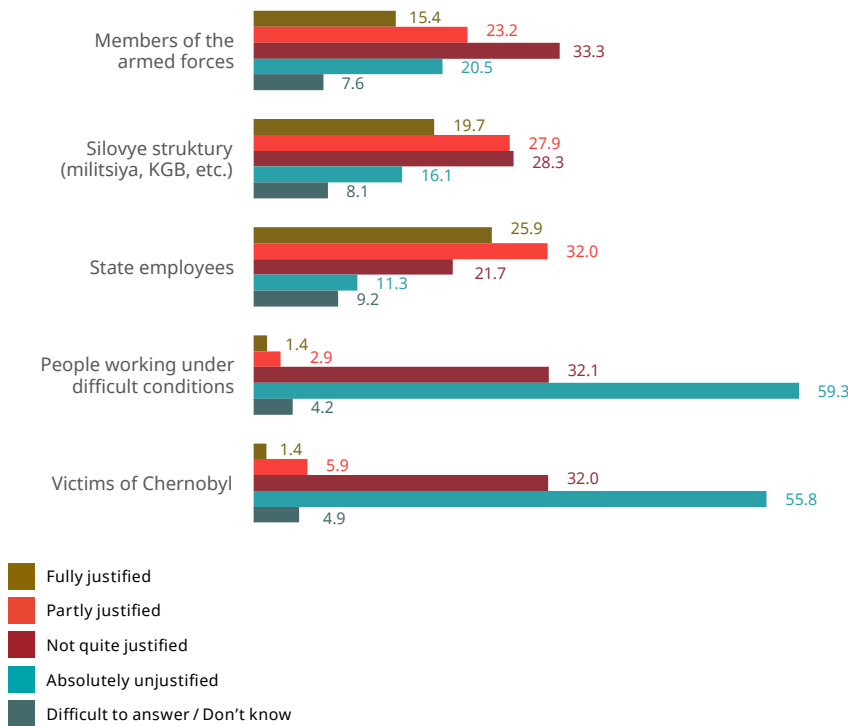
26 Tut.by, Belstat nazval uroven' fakticheskoi bezrabotitsy i chislo uekhavshikh na zarabotki belorusov, 26 February 2018, <https://finance.tut.by/news582804.html>.

27 Naviny.by, Pochemy tuneyadtsev v Belarusi men'she ne stanovitsya, 13 July 2018, <https://naviny.by/article/20180713/1531458067-pochemu-tuneyadcev-v-belarusi-menshe-ne-stanovitsya>.

28 IPM Research Center, Bednost i sotsial'naya integratsiya v Belarusi, <http://www.research.by/analytics/poverty/>.

29 Investopedia, What Does “Guns and Butter” Refer To?, 11 February 2020, <https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/08/guns-butter.asp>.

**FIGURE 4**  
**How do you feel about the fact that several groups of citizens receive a higher pension? (2019), in percent**



Source: IPM Research Center, [http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/SR\\_19\\_01.pdf](http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/SR_19_01.pdf)

### Securitisation of state politics

Over the past decade, Belarus has developed into a state that is predominantly driven by security concerns. This is not unusual for an authoritarian state that has passed its zenith.<sup>30</sup> This trend towards increased “securitisation”<sup>31</sup> of the Belarusian state was already becoming apparent in 2014.

#### Shift of threat perceptions

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict and resulting Russian-Western standoff led to significant shifts in Belarus’s national defence planning and military build-up as well as in its general threat perceptions.<sup>32</sup> As a result, 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”

30 See, for example, Haggard, Stephan and Kaufman Robert (2016). Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

31 Concept framed by the Copenhagen School, implying the transformation of policy issues and fields into security-relevant subjects; see Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (1998). Security: A New Framework for Analysis. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

32 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/belaruss-contribution-to-security-and-stability-in-central-and-eastern-europe-regional-safeguards-strategic-autonomy-and-national-defense-modernization/>.

threats. The aim was to implement a “360 degrees” concept.<sup>33</sup> In addition, in 2015, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence was tasked with developing a new military doctrine, adopted in January 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> In addition, more financial resources have been allocated to the border troops (directly subordinate to the Council of Ministers), which, besides being part of the armed forces, can also perform law enforcement functions.<sup>36</sup> In 2019, according to the Global Militarisation Index,<sup>37</sup> Belarus was among among the top ten most militarised countries; these states allocate a particularly high proportion of resources to security compared with other sectors.

### Prioritisation of domestic security

Experts have observed that domestic security has been prioritised in recent years.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> Although the exact numbers of police and MVD troops are classified,<sup>40</sup> estimates show that the country has one of the highest police density rates in Europe (surpassed only by Russia; ► FIGURE 5). In direct comparison with its more populous neighbours Poland and Ukraine, Belarus has a disproportionate number of internal security organs. ► FIGURE 6

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).<sup>41</sup> ► FIGURE 7

A large proportion of the budget is spent on domestic security.

33 Sivitsky (2020).

34 International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2019). *The Military Balance 2019* [the annual assessment of global military capabilities and defence economics] London: Routledge, 179.

35 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/>.

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

37 Max M. Mutschler, Marius Bales / Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), *Globaler Militarisierungs-index 2019*, [https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx\\_bicctools/BICC\\_GMI\\_2019\\_D.pdf](https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/BICC_GMI_2019_D.pdf).

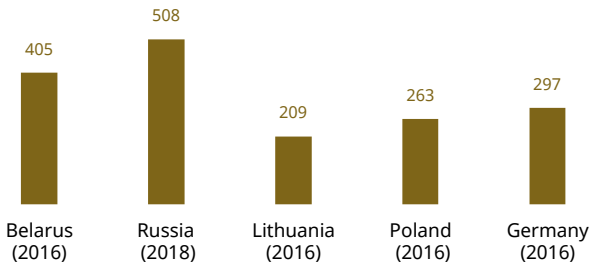
38 International Institute for Strategic Studies (2019), 179.

39 International Institute for Strategic Studies (2019), 189.

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

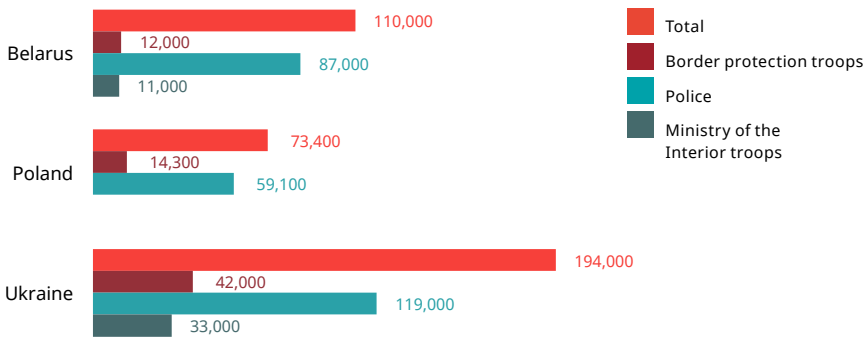
41 Radio Svaboda, *Byudzheth-2019: eshe bol'she deneg dlya KGB, MVD i armii*, 26 October 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29565327.html> (and Figure 7).

**FIGURE 5**  
**Number of internal security personnel per 100,000 citizens**  
 (in comparison, various sources)



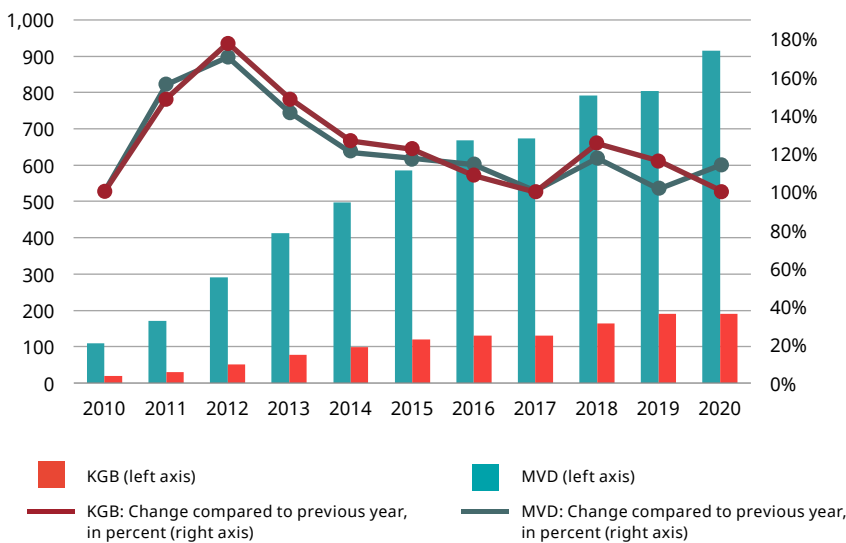
Source: Belarus Security Blog, <https://bsblog.info/o-chislennosti-mvd/>,  
 Naviny.by <https://naviny.by/article/20180607/1528386029-pochemu-skrывayut-kolichestvo-milicionerov-v-belarusi>,  
 Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20190104-1>

**FIGURE 6**  
**Internal security organs in comparison (2019)**



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2019*

**FIGURE 7**  
**Development of the Belarusian domestic security budget (in million BY Rub)**  
 Numbers up to 2016 calculated at the exchange rate of 1:10 000



Source: Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus,  
[http://www.minfin.gov.by/ru/budgetary\\_policy/budgetary\\_legislation/da8d2db88c99a337.html](http://www.minfin.gov.by/ru/budgetary_policy/budgetary_legislation/da8d2db88c99a337.html)

### Fighting the externally driven internal threat

The national security apparatus has been put on alert, not only since President Lukashenka de facto lost the presidential elections. The authorities have been preparing for scenarios of domestic destabilisation for some time. In December 2019, the President signed a new National Defence Plan,<sup>42</sup> focusing on the development of an independent national security architecture. Another priority identified in the new Defence Plan (2020–2024) is the prevention of domestic instability, reflecting scenarios of how modern military conflicts unfold: generally beginning with socio-political turmoil that overwhelms the country and eventually provoking an internal armed conflict.<sup>43</sup>

There are several indicators that officials from the security apparatus have recently gained more power and influence in Belarusian politics. The appointment of senior KGB officials to key posts in the administration and other executive structures is just one example. In December 2019, former KGB officer Igor Sergeenko was appointed Head of the Presidential Administration.<sup>44</sup> In June 2020, Ivan Tertel, Deputy Head of the State Security Committee (KGB), was appointed Head of the State Control Committee<sup>45</sup> (KGK;<sup>46</sup> the financial and economic supervisory authority). Just three months later he then returned to the KGB in a rotation of cadres and was promoted to head the institution.<sup>47</sup> In the end of October, the Head of the Minsk Department of Internal Affairs and one of those responsible for the crackdown of peaceful protests in the capital, Ivan Kubrakov, was appointed Minister of Internal Affairs.<sup>48</sup>

In the initial stages of the post-election protests in 2020, there was speculation that the security apparatus's loyalty towards the regime was no longer unconditional. 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.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the defectors were few in number, and most seem to have been lower-rank officers. Since then, there have been no further signs of opposition among security personnel.

42 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/>.

43 Sivitsky (2020).

44 President Respubliki Belarus', Rassmotrenie kadrovyykh voprosov, 5 December 2019, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/prinjatie-kadrovyyx-reshenij-22528/?fbclid=IwAR0aRXI9J4h3FIMaDkPXWY\\_cGsvKqDIXiY0uAVSviw-57yuss4ZS8DqWwg](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/prinjatie-kadrovyyx-reshenij-22528/?fbclid=IwAR0aRXI9J4h3FIMaDkPXWY_cGsvKqDIXiY0uAVSviw-57yuss4ZS8DqWwg).

45 Belta, Predsedatelem KGK naznacheni Ivan Tertel', 4 June 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/predsedatelem-kgk-naznacheni-ivan-tertel-393461-2020/>.

46 The KGK was the authority responsible for the investigation of the case of 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/>.

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

48 Belta, Kubrakov naznacheni ministrom vnutrennikh del', 29 October 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/kubrakov-naznacheni-ministrom-vnutrennikh-del-413166-2020/>.

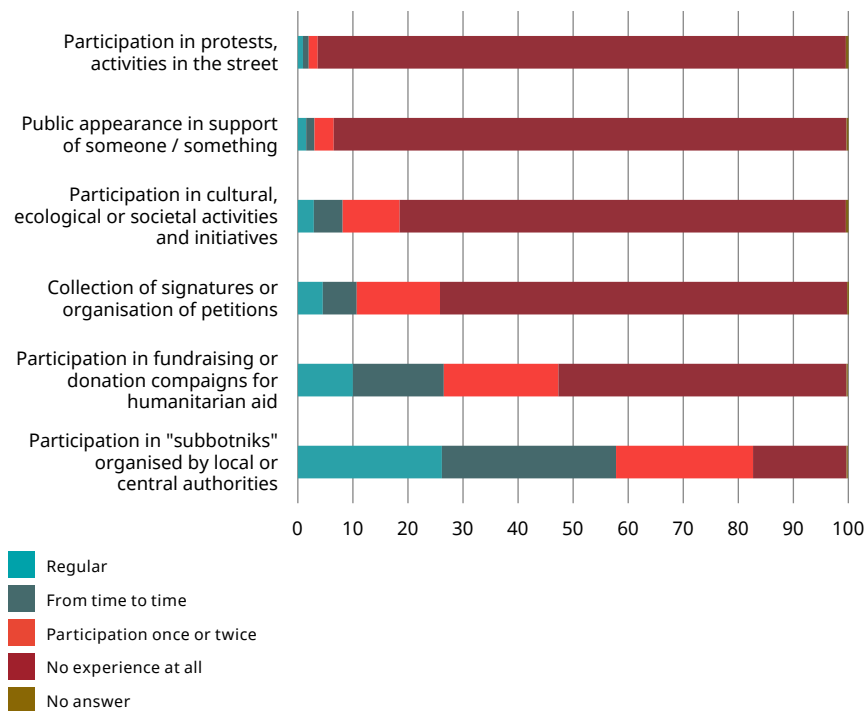
49 Meduza, "Belorusskogo spetsnaza bol'she net". V sotssetyakh poyavilis' video, na kotorykh bychie voennye v znak protesta vybrasyvayut formu, 12 August 2020, <https://meduza.io/news/2020/08/12/belorusskogo-spetsnaza-bolshe-net-v-sotssetyah-poyavilis-video-na-kotoryh-voennye-v-znak-protesta-vybrasyvayut-formu>.

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.

## A protest-averse society begins to mobilise

During thirty years of independence, the Belarusian population has never been particularly prone to protest and acts of disobedience towards the regime. Until recently, only a small percentage of the population had personal experience of participating in protests and street actions; the majority saw acts of solidarity and support mainly as collective activities initiated from above. ► **FIGURE 8** Moreover, protests were often considered to have unpredictable outcomes and their benefits were unclear. Since heavy fines were traditionally imposed for participation in unauthorised protests, the deterrence factor worked well in the past. People were afraid of losing their jobs, their university places or other privileges. Recently, however, this strategy by the state has ceased to pay off, partly as a consequence of solidarity

**FIGURE 8**  
**Do you have personal experience participating in actions of solidarity or support? (2017)**



Source: Centre for European Transformation, [https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2017\\_Innovation-Belarus-RU.pdf](https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2017_Innovation-Belarus-RU.pdf)

campaigns, such as crowdfunding<sup>50</sup>, aimed at alleviating the financial burden on individual protesters facing fines.

### 2017 as a prelude to 2020

The first genuine social protests occurred in 2017, when protesters mobilised in order to oppose a tax levied against the unemployed (also known as the “parasite law”). Belarusian citizens working fewer than 183 days were supposed to pay a fee of 180 euros per year. In total, 460,000 people, i.e. 10 percent of the Belarusian workforce, received a notification from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, requesting them to officially register with the employment agencies in order to avoid paying the tax. However, the majority boycotted the payment (interview Tatsiana Karatkevich). Demonstrations and meetings were organised in cities throughout the country between 17 February and the end of April, attracting several hundred to several thousand people every time. An amended version of the decree was published on 21 December 2017 and was finally revoked in January 2018.<sup>51</sup> More than 700 people were arrested as a result of the protests.

The protesters were self-confident. Many years had passed since the last brutal police crackdown in 2010. Several interview partners explained that there was a hunch among the people that this time round, the regime would exercise restraint and recognise demonstrators’ legitimate right to express their opinion and to gather publicly without fear of physical violence. “Unusually, this time, they did not break up the first protests right away [...] After the protests started in February, they didn’t touch anyone for about a month,” (interview Andrei Yegorov). However, once again, 25 March was a key date: for the opposition to mobilise even more people and for the regime, for fear of losing control, to quell countrywide protests. “This protest was not about the regime, nor about state power; this was a protest where people said: ‘Give us work and we will work’ [...] Only the attempted politicisation of the protests eventually led to their brutal suppression,” (interview Tatsiana Karatkevich).

Another important factor during the 2017 protests was the strong presence of one of the most active independent trade unions,<sup>52</sup> the Union of the Radio Electronics Industry (REP). Its members initiated many of the 2017 protests, especially in the regions, and lobbied for the rights of the unemployed. REP has developed a system of legal aid and has assisted people affected by Decree No. 3 to formulate complaints to the tax authorities at the local and regional level. “By conducting strategic litigation, we exposed the fact that the legal path was basically closed to plaintiffs [...] We made clear that filing an electronic complaint was also futile, that the authorities would not respond. The regime left only one mechanism for action—and that is open protest, which means going out onto the streets and demanding the revocation of the decree.” (interview Andrei Strizhak)

50 See, for example, activities of ByHelp (Belsat, ByHelp: kto mozhet podavats’sya I kogda zhdad pomoshchi?, 1 September 2020, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/byhelp-kto-mozhet-podavatsya-i-kogda-zhdad-pomoshhi/>).

51 RFE / RL, Lukashenka Cancels ‘Parasite Tax’ On Unemployed In Belarus, 26 January 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lukashenka-cancels-parasite-tax/28999724.html>.

52 The Congress for Democratic Trade Unions is the umbrella organisation. It has four member unions and around 10,000 individual members. It is not registered or recognised by the state (interview Aliaksandr Yarashuk, <http://www.bkdp.org/index.php?p=content&id=2>).



In 2020, Lukashenka's open disdain for the unemployed became evident once again, when he described "the so-called protesters" as "people with a criminal past" and "the unemployed".<sup>53</sup>

### From self-organisation to social reinvention

Over time, the growing divergence between what is colloquially called the "government bloc" and the enlightened citizenry developed into a volatile constellation. These two different "worlds" collide, especially at mass gatherings and in the context of protest. Clashes between social or protest movements, or simply a group of angry or aggrieved citizens, and the security forces, usually OMON, have become a familiar sight since August 2020.

Beyond the visible street protests, the feeling of solidarity and belief in self-organisation and self-help, first tested during the Covid-19<sup>54</sup> pandemic, paved the way for new cultural phenomena hitherto unknown in Belarusian society. Ranging from spontaneous gatherings, long solidarity chains, mutual support activities and neighbourhood festivities to collective performances, street art interventions and increased activism on social media platforms, these seemed to grip the entire population. Solidarity actions included crowdfunding for people who have lost their jobs for political reasons (according to various interview partners). Many workers and students followed the call for a nationwide general strike as consequence of the expired "People's Ultimatum" on 26 October.<sup>55</sup> All of this testifies to the break with traditional social isolation and lethargy ("atomisation of people") and a shift towards a new form of collective reflection and the quest for a new common identity in Belarus—at least in urban settings.

Self-organisation and self-help were already tested during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As part of the post-election spirit, the regime's institutions, notably the Central Electoral Commission, police forces and staff of pre-trial detention centres and prisons have come to epitomise the despised state. Okrestina Street, the location of an infamous pre-trial detention centre in Minsk, became a particularly powerful symbol of the brutality of the authorities and officials towards those arrested during protests,<sup>56</sup> as well as a place of solidarity, endurance and resistance, where relatives of the detainees spent many hours and days waiting for the release of their loved ones. They were supported by dozens of volunteers in a provisional tent camp, who organised ad hoc psychological, legal, medical and other aid and documented injuries and evidence of torture.<sup>57</sup> The shared experience brought people from very different social backgrounds together and forged a bond between them.

53 President of the Republic of Belarus, Soveshchanie po aktual'nym voprosam, 12 August 2020, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/soveshanie-po-aktualnym-voprosam-24274/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveshanie-po-aktualnym-voprosam-24274/)

54 Public criticism since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic was unusually vocal, especially due to the authorities' non-transparent information policy. The country subsequently saw an unprecedented wave of solidarity and self-organisation in support of medical staff and the supply of equipment, meant to compensate for what citizens saw as the failure of government.

55 Euronews, Belarusian opposition leader Tikhonouskaya calls for nationwide strike, 26 October 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/25/belarusian-opposition-leader-tikhonovskaya-calls-for-nationwide-strike>.

56 Lenta.ru, "Voply stoyali dusherazdirayushie", 24 August 2020, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/08/24/pitochnaya/>.

57 Nevedomskaya, Tat'yana, "V epitsentre gorya". Istorii volonterov Okrestina i Zhodino, Deutsche Welle, 8 October 2020, <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-jepicentre-gorja-istorii-volonterov-okrestina-i-zhodino/a-55187170>

## Instant messaging apps like Telegram circumvent periodic internet shutdowns.

The current protests are clearly political, which becomes obvious when reading the key objectives of the opposition and the Belarusian Coordination Council.<sup>58</sup> This was not always the case, however. Past protests have been driven much more by claims related to subjective rights. They included protests by car owners against petrol price hikes in 2010<sup>59</sup>, against environmental impacts around a battery factory in Brest since 2019<sup>60</sup>, and hunger strikes by the Mothers 328 movement against prison sentences imposed on their relatives<sup>61</sup>, to name just a few.

Digital technology has been a decisive factor for the organisation and decentralised mobilisation of street protests in Belarus over the last decade, particularly since the rigged elections in August. Instant messaging apps like Telegram enable timely exchange of information and fast and decentralised mobilisation. The advantage of these services is that they circumvent periodic internet shutdowns (such as those which occurred in the week after the presidential elections on 9 August, after the unannounced inauguration of President Lukashenka on 23 September, the day following the expired ultimatum on 26 October and at other occasions). Various channels of the telegram messenger, many operating from abroad, such as Warsaw-based Nexta (meaning “someone” in Belarusian), have at times been the only means of communication and coordination for the protesters. They function through built-in blocking-bypass mechanisms and additional proxy servers. Nexta also became involved strategically by publishing a “Victory Plan”, calling for activists to open six “fronts” against Lukashenka: protest, economic, information, political, judicial and international. In addition, it helped to de-anonymise and expose the identities of political and security officials.<sup>62</sup>

Protesters have shown themselves to be resilient and creative. They often announced the locations of their Sunday protest marches at short notice in an attempt to circumvent the shutdown of mobile internet. The security forces became increasingly unnerved by the tactics of the demonstrators, who were steadily losing their respect for and trust in those state representatives. During scuffles, protesters repeatedly tried to unmask members of the OMON Special Forces in order to film and identify them. With the help of a hacker group calling themselves “Belarusian cyber partisans”, activists published about 1,000 names, addresses and phone numbers of Ministry of the Interior personnel who were allegedly responsible for quelling protests online. This prompted a panicked reaction from the Interior Ministry, which threatened to impose draconian penalties on those responsible for publishing the data.<sup>63</sup>

58 See “About the Coordination Council”, <https://rada.vision/en>.

59 RFE / RL, Car Owners In Belarus Protest Gas Price Hike, 1 June 2010, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Car\\_Owners\\_In\\_Belarus\\_Protest\\_Gas\\_Price\\_Hike/2059180.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Car_Owners_In_Belarus_Protest_Gas_Price_Hike/2059180.html).

60 Rescheto, Juri, Belarusians fight battery factory bankrolled by China, Deutsche Welle, 11 April 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/belarusians-fight-battery-factory-bankrolled-by-china/a-48292282>.

61 RFE / RL, Belarusian ‘Mothers 328’ On Hunger Strike Over Drug Sentences, 4 May 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-mothers-328-hunger-strike-drug-sentences/29208745.html>.

62 Nexta now has more than 2.5 million subscribers; for more information, see: Hurska, Alla, What Is Belarusian Telegram Channel NEXTA?, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 17(132), 23 September 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/what-is-belarusian-telegram-channel-nexta/>.

63 Charter 97, Belarusian Cyber Partisans Declared War on Lukashenka’s Regime, 16 September 2020, <https://charter97.org/en/news/2020/9/16/393340/>.

Police brutality, arbitrary arrests, allegations of severe human rights violations and torture, and finally the impunity granted to members of the OMON special units during the post-election protests<sup>64</sup> have not achieved the intended effect of deterring citizens from protesting; on the contrary, all this has motivated even more people to show their outrage and join the mass protests. Finally, the most characteristic trait of the current opposition movement and collective Belarusian national endeavour is the exemplary and consistent commitment to non-violence. External observers regard the non-violent actions during the Velvet Revolution in Armenia (2018) as one of the decisive success factors not only for regime change, but also for uniting society.<sup>65</sup>

### Grassroots and individual (female) activists take over

The 2020 protesters are not connected in any way to the formal opposition in Belarus, nor do they represent the “underdogs” disdained by the elites. In the past, protesters were part of a subculture of people who did not have much to lose, who were unemployed, pensioners or full-time activists (interview Viasna representative).

The “formal opposition” previously consisted of several centre-right and left-wing parties. This opposition tried to play an active role in society and politics, mostly with the same people, rarely presenting fresh faces, but failed to exert significant influence. The Belarusian public therefore never really saw it as a genuine political alternative or as offering any new prospects for the country. It is conceivable that some of the most active members will join forces with the newly established political party “Razam” (Together), formed by campaign staff of former presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka.<sup>66</sup>

The 2020 protest wave has become so vast in scale precisely because ordinary citizens felt that they were no longer alone with their outrage and that it had become socially acceptable to speak out against the regime and the prevailing circumstances. The distinct phenomenon of “individual activism”<sup>67</sup> has become characteristic of protest in Belarus. For example, there used to be middle-aged or elderly women who rarely got noticed during protests, because they received fines rather than custodial sentences and the media rarely reported about them (interview Evgenia Ivanova). These individual activists are present across the country, but are not affiliated with any political group. As a result, they have often gone unnoticed by sociologists and protest researchers. When asked why these women take part in protests and are ready to speak out, the human rights activist from the organisation “Our House” states: “They feel that the state is failing them,

64 There have been over 2,000 complaints filed with the Belarusian Investigative Committee about the illegal use of force by the police during the protests; see Meduza, ‘This case is real’ Belarusian riot police are using sexual violence against protesters, 17 September 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/09/17/this-case-is-real>.

65 See, for example, Chenoweth, Erica and Maria Stephan (2011). *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press.

66 Rust, Maxim, “Together” or separate? The Belarusian political elite after the elections, *New Eastern Europe*, 17 September 2020, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/09/17/together-or-separate-the-belarusian-political-elite-after-the-elections/>.

67 See, for example, Martin, Deborah, Hanson, Susan and Fontaine, Danielle (2007). What Counts as Activism?: The Role of Individuals in Creating Change, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 35(3):78–94.

because it promised stability. These women were ready to suffer for the sake of stability [...] And stability was such an important pillar of Lukashenka's policy. People did believe in it. And for a period of time there was stability." (interview Evgenia Ivanova)

Women once again played a key role during the 2020 protests. It started when the wives and campaign manager of the three banned alternative presidential candidates joined forces. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the wife of an arrested blogger who had intended to run in the elections, became a presidential candidate herself, endorsed by Maryia Kalesnikava, Babaryka's campaign chief, and Veronika Tsepkalo, the wife of candidate Valery Tsepkalo. Together, they became a successful team that moved the masses already prior to the elections. They actively showed female solidarity against the paternalist and misogynous style of long-time President Lukashenka, who repeatedly used discriminatory language to denounce women opposition activists, insisting that the country was not ready for a female president.<sup>68</sup> During the protests, female activists took up this narrative and saw it as their role to defy the regime, not least by providing a protective shield for male protesters who were the main targets of the OMON units. This changed later on when, during the "Women's Marches" on Saturdays, OMON started to arrest and ill-treat female demonstrators as well.<sup>69</sup>

The media turned the spotlight on many of these courageous young women. However, the figurehead of the protest movement for many years has been Nina Baginskaya,<sup>70</sup> a 73-year-old activist who became famous for her resistance against the security forces, always carrying and defending a white-red-white flag as a symbol of freedom and opposition. Elderly people became a symbol of the protests in their own right, finally challenging the stereotype that pensioners are Lukashenka's main voter base. They also started the first "pensioner protest" in Belarus on 7 October 2020 (interview Tat'yana Zelko).

## Interaction between citizens and the security forces

### Culture of impunity

The extent of repression and police brutality towards activists and ordinary citizens in the aftermath of this year's presidential elections has shocked Western observers, but it is not an entirely new phenomenon in Belarus. However, the scale of police brutality (also towards vulnerable people) and the number of arrests have reached an unprecedented level.

68 Kalinovskaya, Tatiana, In Belarus, 3 Women Unite to Fight Strongman Lukashenko, The Moscow Times, 20 July 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/20/in-belarus-3-women-unite-to-fight-strongman-lukashenko-a70925>

69 Nechepurenko, Ivan, Hundreds of Women Arrested at Protest in Belarus, New York Times, 19 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/19/world/europe/belarus-protests-women.html>.

70 Nienhuysen, Frank, Die Großmutter, die sich gegen Lukaschenkos Polizisten stellt, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 14 September 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/belarus-lukaschenko-baginskaja-1.5029995>.

Post-election protests in 2006 and 2010 were violently quashed by the *militsiya*, Belarus's national police service. The OMON special units act as the country's riot police, at times supported by Interior Ministry troops and operating under the Ministry's supervision. These forces are trained to defend public order. Officially, their tasks include the fight against extremism and terrorism; 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 groups and structurally weak regions in Belarus, who are exempt from compulsory military service but must prove their physical and psychological fitness as well as unconditional loyalty.<sup>71</sup>

The question why OMON units act in such a violent and unrestrained manner has been raised repeatedly in the context of the 2020 post-election 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 also 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.<sup>72</sup> 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 Lyabedska).

"They know that they have *carte blanche* and that the state will back them up."

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.<sup>73</sup> What is problematic in this regard is that there is no independent oversight body for the police or other law enforcement agencies in Belarus that could have a restraining and disciplining effect on police forces.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup>

71 Olevskiy, Timur, 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>.

72 Mel'nichuk, Tat'yana, *Pochemy belorusskiy OMON vedet sebya tak zhestoko?* *Interv'yu s byvshim boytsom*, BBC News, 17 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53807992>.

73 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/>.

74 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.

75 See latest statements before the UN Human Rights Council, 18 September 2020 and 25 September 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26261&LangID=E>; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26296&LangID=E>

## Countermeasures by the state

Lessons from previous protests and conflicts with the security forces have taught activists and human rights defenders that the authorities are quite selective in their use of repressive methods. They routinely focus on that part of the opposition that openly speaks 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”<sup>76</sup> as long as they did not engage in subversive activities. This significantly 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.

The Belarusian authorities, especially the Committee for State Security and the Investigation Committee, study their opponents diligently 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 and Twitter and usually find out about planned meetings and rallies instantly. The activists therefore have to consider this every time they plan a public event and post announcements (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 are also common practices.

For citizens wishing to organise protest activities, the tough restrictions imposed by the municipalities are the most challenging obstacle. “When they eventually authorise [an event], the organisers are required to conclude a contract with at least four different authorities: municipal services, first aid providers, the traffic safety unit and the militsiya—that means all of them come along to the event and someone has to pay for their services,” (interview representative of REP). Public assemblies are rarely authorised, and if they are indeed approved, then the authorities assign locations with very low public visibility. During protests, police and intelligence officials film what is happening and cars accompany the rallies, equipped with mobile tracking devices in order to access participants’ personal data (interview Viasna representative).

During the 2017 protests, it was especially worrying for the central authorities that in many regional cities, people went out to demonstrate in unprecedented numbers: “Why was the regime so worried? For example, in the city of Orsha, there were 400 people protesting in the streets, out of 120,000 inhabitants. In principle, this is not a lot. But they did some investigations and realised that those 400 people were supported by almost the entire population of the city, and hardly anyone [...] was prejudiced against the protests or said that the protests never took place.” (interview Sergei Kalyakin)

<sup>76</sup> Bedford, Sofie (2017). “The election game:” Authoritarian consolidation processes in Belarus. *Demokratizatsiya*. 25 (4): 381 – 406.

A 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 problematic state actions. 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.<sup>77</sup> The arrests of fighters from the Wagner Group prior to the elections in 2020 were reminiscent of these events in 2017.<sup>78</sup>

Since early May, the authorities have opened over 450 criminal cases targeting presidential candidates, members of their campaign teams and peaceful protesters.<sup>79</sup> During almost three months of protest, more than 16,000 citizens have been detained for participating in peaceful protests and there are still around 100 political prisoners, including board members of the Coordination Council who did not go into exile abroad.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

Belarus has transformed itself from a social welfare state into a state dominated by domestic security concerns. Observers 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 for many 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 protest dynamics over the years and the most recent interactions between police and citizenry are emblematic of the collapse of state-society relations in Belarus. The two sides in this relationship—an insubordinate citizenry and a regime on the alert—have cultivated an insurmountable mutual distrust. While the authorities, notably the President, seem to be convinced that the opposition is attempting to carry out a “colour revolution” in Belarus, 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. Despite everything, the protests in Belarus—in contrast to the situation in neighbouring Ukraine—have not led to any geopoliticisation and division of the country, nor to an overly nationalistic discourse.

77 Smok, Vadzim, 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/>.

78 Spiegel Online, Weißrussland wirft russischer Söldnergruppe Planung von Massenprotesten vor, 30 July 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/weissrussland-wirft-russischer-soeldnergruppe-planung-von-massenprotesten-vor-a-c2dbfe2b-8138-4e22-9247-a60c810a4af5>.

79 Viasna, Ugolovnoe presledovanie s nachala izbiratel'noi kampanii. Spisok ot pravozashitnikov “Vesny”, 26 October 2020, <http://spring96.org/ru/news/99641>.

80 Viasna, There are 100 political prisoners in Belarus, as of October 23, 2020, <http://spring96.org/en/news/49539>.

Ongoing developments in collective action in Belarus testify to the revocation of the social contract by the Belarusian population and the deliberate quest for and reinvention of social and national identity. It serves as a “predictor” of major cultural and social transformations in the country.

## Interviews

Oleg Gulag, Helsinki Committee, Minsk, 13 September 2017 (follow-up questions 2020)

Evgenia Ivanova, Nash Dom, Minsk, 10 September 2017 (follow-up questions 2020)

Sergei Kalyakin, “Just World” Party, 11 September 2017

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Andrei Kazakevich, “Political Sphere” Institute, Minsk, 11 September 2017

Anatol Lyabedaska, Belarusian United Civic Party, 8 September 2017

Anatol Shumchenko, Forum of Entrepreneurs, Minsk, 5 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

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

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