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Abstract

Belarusian events after the Presidential elections of August 9 came as a surprise to everyone, be it in Minsk, Vilnius or even Moscow. The protests with 'Belarusian characteristics' still running well into October despite the Belarusian authorities' brutal conduct and numerous arrests. Belarusian political nation has been born, and there is not a chance of returning to pre August 9 status quo. Belarus is changing. Lithuania is sharing not only its longest border with Belarus but also history. Naturally, Lithuania is interested in its neighbour and it is actively discussing about the events and possible scenarios of Belarus' developments. In this paper we will be looking at the extent economic and political relationship between the two countries before and after the August 9 events. We will also look on how Lithuanians perceiving its government principle stance against New/Old President A. Lukashenko, and some ideas from Lithuanian think tanks and commentators on the possible scenarios of Belarus's further developments.

Key words: Belarus, Lithuania, Russia, Lukashenko, presidential elections

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1. Lithuania's interest in Belarus

Moldova was the first to recognise the independence of the Republic of Lithuania on May 31, 1990, Moldova itself was still in the Soviet Union. In the end, it was the small and brave Iceland, which recognised our independence on February 31, 1991, and due to this reason, Lithuania will forever be grateful to Iceland. Lithuania was among the first countries to declare that it will not recognise the results of the Belarussian presidential elections and so, will not recognise Alexander Lukashenko as Belarussian president. Will Lithuania become Belarus' "Iceland" or does 20th century "Icelandic" idealism not have a place in 21st century politics?

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda told the show BBC Hard Talk that *"30 years ago, Lithuania declared independence. At the time, we were waiting for the light at the end of a dark tunnel and the small country of Iceland far away from Lithuania recognised our independence and we have not forgotten this. We believe that we must do the same that Iceland did thirty years ago."*¹ Nausėda added: *"Lithuania and Belarus are linked not only by their geographic neighbourhood. Our country feels emotional proximity to the people who are fighting for their freedom in Belarus. We feel their pain and suffering on the Belarussian streets. We know that force has been deployed against those people, that they are being tortured,"* the president said, adding that the price of protecting democratic values in Europe is not and cannot be too great, *"It is not an economic analysis of costs and benefits. It is fundamental values, which we firmly believe in."*

As Lithuania is currently the most active supporter of change in Belarus, it would be good to review the reasons why Lithuania is so active, what the Lithuanian people think of it and how Lithuanian economics and policy experts think about the events in Belarus and its future.

Emotional ties are not the only reason for Lithuania taking an interest in the events in Belarus. There is only a distance of a little more than 30 km between the Lithuanian capital Vilnius and the Belarussian border. Lithuania shares its longest land border with Belarus (679 km), even Poland's border with Belarus is shorter (418 km). It is a close neighbour in all senses, and it relates not just to trade ties with Lithuania, but also the security of the Eastern border of the European Union and the NATO.

This is not to even mention historical ties. Already back in the Middle Ages, Lithuania's grand dukes began the creation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from conquests of the contemporary Belarussian territory, and the majority of this territory remained in their domain until the very last partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century.

Over thirty years ago, at a time when Iceland displayed its courage by recognising Lithuanian independence, just 35 km from Vilnius to the East, completely different moods abounded. Lithuanians fervently desired independence, shedding blood by standing in front of Soviet tanks and drying for Lithuania's European path on January 1991. Meanwhile, the Belarussians did not want to change. Their society was not prepared for independence and did not await it. In a 1991 referendum, an entire 83% of Belarussians spoke in favour of retaining the USSR.² Even if collapsing, based on Soviet standards, the Belarussian (just like the Baltic States') economy was at a peak, but for the Baltic States' citizens, being the best in a third-tier league was little consolation.

The Belarussians were content with it, though. In 1994, the new democratically elected president of Belarus took to restarting the collapsing economic model in the country, implemented price restrictions, combatted crime. The economy began rising by double-digit figures every year, albeit it was difficult to handle inflation. State regulation exhausted its potential within a few years and was unable to handle the challenges that arose. A slowdown began. Growth continued up until the year 2008, but the citizens' real incomes no longer grew.³ What did continue growing was the democratically elected president's appetite over twenty-six years.

Unfortunately, the common Belarussians' appetite for democracy did not increase. The same old and boring track kept on playing: yet another elections falsified to Lukashenko's favour, yet another protest in Minsk by a few hundred Belarussians, yet another set of arrests and yet another term in office for Lukashenko as president to the next presidential elections. Lithuania has been investing its energy in supporting opposition forces to the point where *"opposition figure"* became a profession. One is left wondering – where are those opposition *"leaders"* who have been cultivated so long and hard? Where are they?

1 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cszbx5>

2 <https://www.delfi.lt/plius/pasaulis/ko-verta-lukasenos-ekonomika.d?id=85269783>

3 <https://www.delfi.lt/plius/pasaulis/ko-verta-lukasenos-ekonomika.d?id=85269783>

Economic ties between the two neighbours are weak and there is nigh on no political cooperation and interaction. The last time Belarussian President Lukashenko visited Vilnius was in September 2009, while the Lithuanian president's last visit to Belarus was in October 2010.⁴ Belarussian opposition representative, human rights centre Viasna head Ales Bialiatski conceded in 2011 that Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė's visit to Minsk and Alexander Lukashenko's reception in Lithuania was "*an advance that did not prove justified.*" "*By the way, A. Lukashenko's relations with President D. Grybauskaitė were quite decent and I have criticised this because I did not believe in the liberalisation that Belarussian officials supposedly were implementing. I believe that it was an excessive advance. Both D. Grybauskaitė's visit to Minsk and A. Lukashenko's visit to Lithuania were advances that did not prove justified,*" A. Bialiatski said.⁵ After these, there were no further attempts to "reboot" Lithuanian-Belarussian relations.

2. The Belarussian 'surprise' to all

While the Lithuanian Academia, news media and state elite maintained an interest in events in Belarus, no one could have predicted what occurred after the latest presidential elections in Belarus. As most analysts describe Belarus the last state of the Soviet Union system or a Soviet kolkhoz, it is worth taking a look at the events in Belarus during the final years of the Soviet Union's existence.

In 1985, the USSR appeared to compare favourably with the USA, and US analysts were confident that it would survive. They were convinced that the economy was strong enough to sustain the Soviet Army and that the USSR's worldwide influence would continue.⁶ The Soviet people appeared content, and this led to the misconception that their loyalty was permanent. The West believed that the nationalities within the USSR were sovietised. In the early 1980s, some commentators predicted that the three Baltic nations would disappear. Even Moscow was convinced that there was not a Baltic nationality problem because they were dissolved into "*Homo Sovieticus*", or "*Soviet People*" (Советский народ).⁷

One must admit that many of us here in Lithuania thought similarly of Belarus and the Belarussians – a lost case that is all. Andrius Kubilius, Member of the European Parliament, former Prime Minister of Lithuania admitted recently: "*The beginnings of these revolutions are hard to spot for outside observers. Back in April, I personally didn't believe that a revolution could happen in Belarus. Still, then I began feeling the winds of change and strayed into Belarussian independent websites, Telegram channels and blogs, which, to my surprise, revealed the enormous scale of the intense independent thought and independent initiatives that had spread to all regions of Belarus. This fundamentally changed my understanding of the Belarussian public arena and very quickly helped me realise that the Lukashenko regime was standing on very fragile ground.*"⁸

He also observed that after the Belarussian revolution, it also became clear that revolutionary changes in the post-Soviet authoritarian space can be born very suddenly, instantly spreading across the country, without any of the traditional features of 19th or 20th century revolutions – no parties, ideologies or clear-cut leaders are necessary. On-line revolutions are real people's revolutions and they cannot be stopped by conventional methods of government force.

Foreign policy is the continuation of domestic policy and Lithuania is a very active foreign policy player. While it is small in terms of territory and population size, Lithuania's influence in foreign policy is disproportionately large compared to its size. It matters not what power is in control of the Lithuanian government, Lithuania's foreign policy direction and level of activity remains unchanged. Lithuania's people and voters typically also support such active foreign policy by the country because it guarantees Lithuania's safety and belonging to the transatlantic community. But how do Lithuania's people view Lithuania's active participation in the events in Belarus?

Lithuanian foreign policy decision-makers maintain the position that the August 9 presidential elections in Belarus were not legitimate and so, they abstain from recognising Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as their victor. That said, the Lithuanian Parliament passed a resolution where the opposition leader is described as "*a leader elected by the Belarussian people.*"

4 http://grybauskaitė1.lrp.lt/lt/prezidento_veikla/vizitai/uzsienyje/2010_m._splio_20_d._prezidentės_dalios_grybauskaitės_darbo_vizitas_baltarusijoje.html

5 <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/baltarusija-dgrybauskaites-vizitas-i-minska-buvo-avansas-kuris>

6 Hobsbawm E. Age of Extremes (London, 1994, p. 249).

7 As late as September 1992, a Russian political figure, Arkady Volsky, claimed that scientists had proved that there was a single genetic code for "*the Soviet people.*" For more see Senn Alfred Erich, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania*, (London, 1995, p. 27).

8 <https://lithuaniatribune.com/when-will-a-belarusian-democratic-revolution-take-place-in-russia/>

3. Lithuanians' attitude to its government reactions to post-President election Belarus

A survey performed by Vilmorus on commission by the news agency BNS asked, "Do you agree or disagree with the Lithuanian government's reaction to the events in Belarus?" 38.5% of respondents expressed support for the Lithuanian government's position. 25% stated that the Lithuanian government's response was overly severe. 6% of respondents thought that the response was overly lenient. Almost 31% had no opinion.⁹

Another survey was conducted on commission by the Eastern Europe Studies Centres (RESC). It was found that most Lithuanian citizens support Vilnius' current position, support sanctions against Minsk and believe that the EU is reacting to the events there suitably. 46% of respondents agree with Lithuania's publicly declared position on events in Belarus, while 15% disagree and almost a third neither agrees nor disagrees. Furthermore, 44% support sanctions against the Minsk regime even if they would result in losses for the Lithuanian economy, while a fifth of respondents disagree and 29% neither agree nor disagree. 45% of respondents support offering asylum to individuals suffering from repressions, 17% are against and a third neither agreed nor disagreed.

That said if Lukashenko remained the leader of Belarus, 41% of respondents think that Lithuania should continue developing political and economic relations with Minsk, with 18% being against this. 41% of respondents also think that we should seek closer ties to the current Belarussian government, while 21% disagree. The study was performed on August 22 – September 4 by Baltijos Tyrimai on commission by the RESC.¹⁰

4. Lithuanian Belarusian economic ties

Lithuania's South-eastern neighbour Belarus is only our 11th most important trading partner, but in some areas, its significance is large. Belarussian cargo comprises around a third of railway and port volumes, in recent years Belarussians have comprised an ever-larger part of the workforce in the transport sector and tourists arriving in Lithuania are spending ever more money.

According to data from the Department of Statistics, in recent years, trade volumes between Lithuania and Belarus have been on the rise.

Belarussian imports to Lithuania were 2.4% larger in 2019 than in 2018, reaching 783 million euro. Exports grew by 6.4% last year, reaching almost 1.2 billion euro and Lithuanian origin exports rose by 4%, reaching 160 million euro.

For comparison, imports from Lithuania's main trading partner Russia reached 4.4 billion euro in 2018, exports – 3.9 billion euro. Lithuania's other key trade partners are Latvia, Poland, Germany, the United States and the Netherlands.

Based on goods type, in 2019, Lithuania imported mostly lumber, mineral fuels, fertilisers, iron and steel, as well as manufactured metal goods from Belarus. Meanwhile, Lithuania mostly exported cars and mechanical equipment, land transport vehicles, pharmaceutical products, optical devices and electrical machinery to Belarus.

According to data from the Bank of Lithuania, in Q1 this year, service export to Belarus reached 144.75 million euro, which was 5.2% of all service exports. Transport services were the most exported at a value of 89.89 million euro. Belarussian service imports in Lithuania reached 127.33 million euro, which was 8% of all service imports.¹¹

Perhaps Belarussian cargo transit through Lithuanian territory should be mentioned separately because the self-styled Belarussian President Lukashenko promised as a potential means of "punishing Lithuania" to divert cargo from Lithuania to elsewhere. "I tasked the government with forming a proposal to reorient all cargo to other ports that are currently transported via Klaipėda. We'll see then how they live. 30% of Lithuania's budget is comprised of income from our cargo being transported through Lithuania. What else do they need? They have had enough. We'll put [Lithuania] in its place," A. Lukashenko said on September 1, during a visit

9 <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/skeptiskas-pozioris-i-vilniaus-politika-minskui-dalis-lietuviu-nori-daugi-au-demesio-savoms-problemoms-56-1379864>

10 <https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Baltarusija.pdf>

11 <https://www.delfi.lt/verslas/verslas/baltarusiu-svarba-lietuvai-apkrauna-uosta-vairuoja-vilkikus-leidzia-atostogas.d?id=85019749>

at a company in Orsha, tut.by reported.¹²

Yes, stevedoring of Belarussian fertiliser in Klaipėda Seaport comprises around a third of all bulk cargo and is a significant source of income for the port. All freight is transported from Belarus to Klaipėda on trains of the Lithuanian state-owned Lietuvos Geležinkeliai [Lithuanian Railways]. According to the company, it transports around 18-19 million tonnes of Belarussian cargo every year. In total, Lietuvos Geležinkeliai transports a capacity of 50 million tonnes of freight every year. Last year, 14.1 million tonnes of Belarussian cargo was stevedored at Klaipėda Seaport, this comprised around 30% of the port's turnover (46.3 million tonnes). Based on calculations by Ernst & Young Baltic, Lithuania's budget received approximately 155 million euro income from Belarussian cargo last year. This comprised only around 1.4% of total budget revenue, which was at 10.783 billion euro. As such, whether consciously or having been misled by his advisor, Mr Lukashenko's claim that Belarussian cargo transit through Lithuania comprises a third of Lithuania's budget is untrue to say the very least.

It is having declared on September 1 that he will teach Lithuania a lesson by diverting Belarussian cargo from Klaipėda Seaport to other ports, on September 17 A. Lukashenko announced that he is completely shutting the border with Lithuania and Poland. The economists' highlight that upon border closure with Belarus, the most to suffer would be companies exporting to this country, the transport sector, which ships goods to other countries through Belarus and Lithuanian companies, which import cheap raw materials.

SME Finance credit company economist Aleksandras Izgorodinas believes that firstly, it is necessary to evaluate the influence of border closures on Lithuanian exports and imports. According to him, while theoretically, Lithuanian exports would suffer, practically, the impact would be minor. *"If we looked at Lithuanian exports to Belarus, 86% is comprised of re-export, products we did not produce that enter Belarus through Lithuanian territory. If we are to look at Lithuanian origin goods export, it's only 0.9% of goods departing to Belarus and this country ranks only 25th in our export structure,"* A. Izgorodinas told 15min.¹³

He added that in terms of Lithuanian goods exported to Belarus, most of this is comprised of machinery, iron and dairy produce, plastics and paper. Upon also including Lithuanian origin goods export and re-export, we find Belarus up in 7th place. *"The fact that 86% of export [to Belarus] is comprised of re-export means that Belarus is a fairly important country in terms of transit and transport. 5.5% of the transport services export flows travel to Belarus – this country holds 6th place in the export structure,"* the economist highlights.

As such, hauliers who transport goods to Belarus or through this country to Russia and Ukraine would face significant suffering due to a border closure. On the other hand, economists are certain that the impact would be temporary because the transport companies would rapidly find alternative routes through Poland and Latvia. Vilnius Industry and Business Association president Sigitas Besagirskas told that the biggest blow to Lithuania would be the impact on Klaipėda State Seaport and Lietuvos Geležinkeliai where Belarussian cargo comprises a sizeable segment of all cargo.

Nevertheless, the economists emphasised that the decision to close borders would boomerang back at Belarus itself. *"Its economy is particularly dependent on funds from export because the domestic market is weak, has suffered much from the coronavirus and mass protests. Thus, it is crucial to maintain exports and bring currency into the country, which is needed to maintain stability. It will harm Lithuania, but it will be even more harmful to it in return because they could ship goods through Russia, but it will be more expensive. They will need to reorient,"* A. Izgorodinas stated in the same publication.

S. Besagirskas points out that Belarussian companies operating in the Lithuanian market will also indirectly suffer. For example, Lithuanian farmers favour the cheap Belarussian MTZ tractors, which have earned a significant part of the market in Lithuania. If there would be border closures, the supply of not only tractors but also their parts will be disrupted. This could spur on farmers to opt for a more reliable supplier in the future.

As such, economists, having presented a number of examples why for Belarus, the closure of borders would be a greater blow than to Lithuania, hope that this time as well, A. Lukashenko's threats will remain empty words. *"The likelihood that the threats will be upheld is minuscule because, looking at historical events, we see that every major bout of threats would turn into not the imposition of sanctions, but nit-picking on*

¹² <https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujiena/finansai/a-lukashenka-prabilo-apie-ekonomines-sankcijas-lietuvai-persiede-per-musu-krovinius-662-1368174>

¹³ <https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujiena/bendroves/ekonomistai-apie-baltarusijos-grasinimus-uzverti-siena-kas-labiausiai-nukentetu-lietuvoje-663-1378652>

details, which would trouble us to no small extent. A. Lukashenko is pragmatic and he calculates that for Belarus, these sanctions would cost dearly. It will likely be the same as usual – more thorough checks on trucks, border restrictions for a few days, but no radical closures because Belarus' economy would suffer as well," S. Besagirskas summarises.

Data received thus far indicates that the economists were correct. The Klaipėda Seaport Directorate and Lietuvos Geležinkeliai quickly calculated how much would be lost, but a month later – cargo continues to move as before. The port has recorded even increased volumes. Lithuanian hauliers have also acclimated themselves to more stringent checks and lines on the border, having quickly replaced trucks with Lithuanian license plates with vehicles registered in Belarus.

That said, Belarus has announced that it will not import oil through Klaipėda Seaport in October, albeit this was a temporary decision in its conflict with Russia.

Based on preliminary data, cargo volumes rose by 9% in Klaipėda Seaport. If last September, 3.6 million tonnes of cargo was handled, this September, based on preliminary data, this increased to 4 million tonnes. That said, this is preliminary information, even if it should not change much. This jump was partially related to grain handling, but there a decrease in Belarussian cargo was also not observed.

"Our statistics currently do not indicate a decline. Meanwhile, September has been particularly 'fertile' for the port, we had grain, as well as liquid and bulk fertilisers," the port director general's public relations assistant Dovilė Ringis told 15min news portal.

Lietuvos Geležinkeliai has previously calculated that annually, the loss of Belarussian cargo would cost around a hundred million euro. However, this area has also seen no changes so far. According to the company's representative Martynas Burba, preliminary data suggests that September saw not less, but likely even more cargo than August. In August, just the volume of Belarussian cargo travelling to Klaipėda reached 1.3 million tonnes.

5. Trade of not to trade

Immediately after the threats, Belarussian state press began writing how the Baltic States will suffer due to the sanctions. A. Lukashenko's press service channel Pul Pervovo even warned that due to Belarussian sanctions, goods suppliers might choose other, alternative goods transport routes, not through the Baltic States. However, A. Lukashenko's rhetoric has also changed over the past month. For example, on September 16, he declared that cargo would be reoriented from the Baltic States to Russian ports if the latter country offers similar conditions.

Currently, goods travel to Russia, transiting on trucks through Lithuania or Latvia. However, experts observed even before that border closures would also strike a blow against Belarus itself because the Baltic States would employ a respective response. Both the Lithuanian president and prime minister have mentioned this already.

Independent experts in Belarus think that with the country suffering from crisis, it needs calm political relations with its trade partners. *"As of late, we have heard much political rhetoric, but there must be economic goals to the Belarussian government's actions. Otherwise, political rhetoric could greatly weaken the entire country's economy,"* Belapan.by quotes Irina Tochickaja, the scientific director of the Belarus-based IMP Research Institute.

According to her, in the economic domain, Belarus should not abandon its trade ties to EU countries. *"We shouldn't seek to divert all our export to Russia because this carries with it vast risks. Time has shown that weakening in the Russian economy immediately is reflected in Belarus' economy and so, the geographic diversification of Belarussian exports is crucial,"* the expert emphasised.

Furthermore, according to her, it would not be worth it for Belarus to trade with other countries solely through Russia. *"This world is very competitive, and Belarus cannot allow itself to choose more expensive logistics instead of the more affordable European countries,"* she said.

"The Belarussian government adheres to political and not economic motives," the head of the Minsk Dialogue Council Yauheni Preiherman stated. According to him, the government is trying to act based on solely political logic, trying to shift cargo from West to East. By the way, A. Lukashenko's proposal for V. Putin to build a port in Leningrad Oblast is also from the political and not economic domain. A. Lukashenko thinks

that such a port would essentially belong to Belarus, even if being in another country. Also, it is believed that if the crisis in Belarus deepens and the EU continues to support the protests, the Belarussian country will begin acting on political and not economic motives.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Luminor Bank's Žygimantas Mauricas warned that Klaipėda Seaport should reconsider its strategy and rethink its future relations with Belarus. *"You should not place all your investment funds on the Belarussian card, and this could be a good impetus for Klaipėda Seaport – to think about its future and thus ensure competitiveness by other means,"* Ž. Mauricas told BNS news agency.

"While developing our infrastructure, both the port and railways, we must take note of the political instability of such countries and take it into account. I believe that it is necessary to diversify those activities and not rely too much on flows from East to West because we see that the geopolitical situation is worsening," he added.¹⁵

Why has nothing been done during this period to reduce the Lithuanian port's dependence on Belarus? Vidmantas Janulevičius, president of the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists, did not hide the fact that he had the same question.

"I also had questions about whether we can diversify our risk and not depend on 30%. I asked several stevedoring companies and the answer would be this - unfortunately, we are in this physical location and serve the traffic from which the largest amount of cargo comes. Today, that flow goes from East to West. Since the sanctions were imposed, that flow from West to East has been relatively negligible. As a result, we are dependent on transit cargo," Mr Janulevičius said, *"Unfortunately, we are in this physical location and service that flow from which the largest amount of cargo comes. Today that flow is going from East to West."*¹⁶

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, arrivals from Belarus comprised a significant portion of the Lithuanian tourism pie. According to the Department of Statistics, in 2019, one day visitors from Belarus were only less numerous than those from Latvia (1.1 million arrivals, 35.1%) and Poland (605.1 thousand arrivals, 18.5%), with 583.2 thousand arrivals, making for 17.8% of the total. The expenses of Belarussian tourists in Lithuania reached almost 1 billion euro in 2019.

The National Tourism Business Association's president Žydrė Gavelienė told Delfi news portal that Belarus should remain as a priority market even after the pandemic. *"Based on historical data, Belarus comprises a very important segment for Lithuanian tourism. It includes both business and SPA tourism. There is also touring tourism, there's both groups and individual tourists arriving. There would be very numerous weekend tourists arriving in Vilnius and Lithuania in general. The pandemic has had its impact, but by spring or summer next year, it should be resolved upon a vaccine arriving,"* she commented.

Nevertheless, it should be also noted that in 2019 tourism industry created almost 3% of Lithuania's GDP.

6. Investment in Belarus

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' data, Lithuanian foreign direct investment in Belarus for 2019 reached 121.5 million euro. The most investment was directed toward wholesale and retail trading, purchases and sales of private real estate, manufacturing, transport and warehousing.

The Belarussian Statistics Service calculated in 2018 that the country had 615 Lithuanian capital companies operating in it. This February, it was announced that the lumber company VMG Group has decided to increase investment in its development project in Belarus' Vitebsk Free Economic Zone to 200 million euro.

The energy company Modus Energy has also invested in Belarus. It has been reported that in late 2018, four biogas plants were completed. According to the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists, Lithuanian companies have also invested in the food industry and car trading in Belarus.

¹⁴ <https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujiena/finansai/menuo-po-a-luksenkos-grasinimu-kroviniu-lietuvoje-tik-padauge-jo-662-1385628>

¹⁵ <https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujiena/transportas/ekonomistai-klaipedos-uostui-reiketu-maziau-kliautis-srautu-is-rytu-i-vakarus-667-1369860>

¹⁶ <https://www.15min.lt/max/naujiena/verslas/a-lukaska-sankcijomis-grasino-jau-ne-karta-bet-klaipedos-uosto-imonis-alternatyvu-neieskojo-1224-1369838>

7. One think tank, three different scenarios for Belarus

Lithuanian experts once again turned to Belarus and are focusing great attention on analysing processes in this country. Is Lukashenko truly the main guarantee of Belarus' sovereignty against Russia?

Vilnius Eastern Europe Studies Centre introduced an analysis by Lithuanian experts on September 4 on three potential scenarios for events in Belarus.¹⁷ The scenarios are as follows: the regime survives, and repressions intensify, long-term resistance and the regime's exhaustion, sudden escalation and a fundamental breakthrough.

Based on the regime survival and intensified repression scenario, the scale of protests gradually decreases in Belarus, physical and psychological exhaustion sets in, protesters increasingly struggle to maintain motivation to gather into mass events.

Their motivation is further weakened by intensive arrests of the most active protesters, other means of oppression. In this scenario, the mass scope of the protests either is unchanged, or declines and the protests in companies are typically short-lived and cause no major breakdowns in the economic system.

The scenario would see the Coordination Council¹⁸ unable to gain sufficient resources and become a universally recognised and legitimate political institution; information sources remain decentralised.

Also, A. Lukashenko would be able to retain the loyalty of power structures. He would not recognise the legitimacy of the Coordination Council, reject the possibility of changing the Constitution, organise new presidential elections or seek other opportunities to change the political system.

In this scenario, systemic and mass-scale persecution of the most active protesters, strike committee members is envisaged according to the analysis.

In such a case, Russia would offer hybrid-type support for A. Lukashenko, but in return, would demand greater pliability from him for the Kremlin's demands, including more rapid integration into a union state. The West would apply sanctions against individuals and A. Lukashenko would be politically isolated.

However, the emerged civil society would gather into underground organisations, silent resistance groups, periodically performing civil disobedience manifestations. The broader society loses trust in A. Lukashenko and a new opportunity and leaders are awaited for the outrage to re-emerge, the analysis notes. According to Lithuanian experts who participated in the survey, this scenario is the most likely.

In the case of a long-term resistance and the regime's exhaustion, Lithuanian experts believe that the protests themselves cannot inherently force the regime to change if a radical escalation does not occur.

In this scenario, it is expected that the forms of protest could gain a strategic form, seeking to rally society for long-term resistance and exhausting the regime. According to experts, a necessary precondition for this is the strengthening of the Coordination Council and other opposition forces, as well as their strategic planning.

In this scenario, the forms of resistance would transition into disrupting the regime's economic and social functioning through a growing scale of protests, ever greater problems in tax collection, pension payment, civil servant and power structure wage payment and etc. It would be impossible to neutralise such resistance by force, but exhausting the system could take months.

Russian interference by offering financial and economic support could be a critical factor in supporting the regime's survival and A. Lukashenko's reliability in the eyes of his supporters. However, the Kremlin's support could also be limited – with resistance lasting, it itself could find resources scarce, the experts believe. Seeing an increasing risk of economic collapse, A. Lukashenko could try entering negotiations over some of the opposition's proposals such as changing the Constitution, organising elections. *"Balancing between Russia (in return for financial aid) and the opposition could be the core challenge A. Lukashenko would face and the process itself might last a long time,"* the analysis reads.

¹⁷ https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/v01_Baltarusijos-scenarijai_paper_A4.pdf

¹⁸ The Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power (Belarusian: Каардынацыйная рада, romanized: Kaardynacyjnaja rada; Russian: Координационный совет, romanized: Koordinatsionnyy sovyet)[1] is a Belarusian non-governmental body created by presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to facilitate a democratic transfer of power. More about the Council: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coordination_Council

The third scenario of rapid escalation and fundamental breakthrough, where over the first 2-3 weeks after the elections, a fundamental breakthrough occurs where A. Lukashenko loses power, did not happen, mainly due to the support of power structures. However, experts believe that this does not mean that an unplanned escalation cannot happen.

"In the case of a bloody escalation or given commands to use firearms against peaceful protests, the perception of power structure leaders of the protests and the legitimacy of A. Lukashenko and the leadership of power structures could change," the analysis writes about the third potential scenario.

According to experts, if a breakdown were to begin in the interior affairs and military structures, A. Lukashenko could quickly find himself losing a core support base. The withdrawal of just one or several detachments and their leaders from the structure of violence could become an impulse. Given a significant breakdown, A. Lukashenko would be forced to enter real negotiations with the protesters' representatives or seek quick means to withdraw. It is emphasised that the likelihood of such a scenario is not significant; Russia is interested in preventing events from escalating in a way where it cannot interfere in time. The experts believe that Russia's influence is vast. While the Kremlin chooses to retain A. Lukashenko's regime, the support of power structures should be guaranteed.

The analysis also indicates other factors, which could be included in all the scenarios and adjust their proceedings. Moscow could choose to replace A. Lukashenko if it were to become too expensive to support him, including reputation costs. Several measures could be employed to this end – from convincing him that he should step down all the way to a military coup.

With the economic situation worsening, A. Lukashenko could propose feigned reforms such as to initiate the process of changing the Constitution, initiating a reduction in the president's powers, proposing ideas for various referenda or even the preparation for new elections. Apparently, the goal here would be to form the illusion that A. Lukashenko is prepared for change.

With pressure rising from protesters and tension rising in the country's economy, a revolution could occur. A domestically formed group of revolutionaries could seek ties to both the opposition and Moscow. The analysis indicates that this scenario is unlikely.

8. Democracy in Belarus is welcome in the West and in the Kremlin

Docent Dr Nortautas Statkus, the director of General Jonas Žemaitis Lithuanian War Academy Science Centre, is a fairly new voice in Lithuanian public discourse. Dr Statkus does release public writings often but his insights are typical of great interest and worth careful consideration.

In his article, Lukashenko will go but not so soon – *"it's all just beginning"*.¹⁹ The author explains that Lithuania's national security also depends to a large extent on what happens in Belarus because after the conclusion of the Russian-Belarusian union state, the joint Russian-Belarusian military forces at the eastern and southwestern borders are, like a pair of *"pliers"* squeezing Lithuania *"like cheese between two Russian borders"*. According to the former Lithuania's Ambassador to Belarus Petras Veitekūnas, the integration of the Belarusian and Russian armies is close to 90% of even more. The Belarusian state intelligence apparatus is integrated into the Russian sphere even more.

Nevertheless, According to Dr Statkus, if Belarus were to take the route of a democratic and liberal free economic market, it could become the missing link in the Baltic and Black Sea democratic states regional link and the Lublin triangle could become the quadrangle. The future of this country will be determined not only by the decision of its people and the elite of Belarus but also by the attitude of external players.

According to Dr Statkus, by annexing Belarus, Russia would gain less; it would provoke the outrage of the United Nations, the disapproval of the United States, major European countries, China, the active resistance of a large part of the Belarusian population (at least 20%) and Belarusian administrative problems (public order, social, education and health systems). By incorporating Belarus into the allied state, Russia secures its strategic interests but does not incur negative costs.

The author is convinced that the people of Belarus are also not ready to say goodbye to state sovereignty. Even in the absence of reliable polls, it can be said that most Belarusians do not want to be incorporated into Russia. However, most want friendly relations with Russia while maintaining sovereignty, with only

¹⁹ <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/nortautas-statkus-lukashenka-pasitrauks-bet-ne-taip-greitai-viskas-tik-prasideda.d?id=85214137>

about 18 % in favour of a union state and accession to the Russian Federation supported by no more than 6% of the Belarusian population. Between 17% and 20 % are in favour of a pro-European path for Belarus.

And here Dr Statkus comes to a very important point. According to him, as long as there is an authoritarian regime in Belarus, neither pro-Western nor pro-Russian parties are free. Therefore, Russia needs to implement the reform of the Belarusian Constitution in its favour, which will create a field of domestic politics. It would create space for pro-Russian political forces to seek victory in the new elections, preferably already under Russian control. Paradoxically, both Russia and the EU want new elections and welcome Mr Lukashenko's withdrawal. Only the EU sincerely wants free and democratic elections and for Mr Lukashenko to leave as soon as possible. Russia wants to keep him in office until the alliance treaties are signed, and a new constitution is adopted, paving the way for pro-Russian forces to come to power under the guise of democracy.

Therefore, the author states the interests of Russia and the major EU countries coincide in the short term – to avoid bloodshed by ensuring a peaceful change of government in Belarus. It is important for Russia that the people of Belarus democratically elect a candidate in its favour and that the election results can no longer be called into question in the West. I believe that the EU would be prepared to accept such a democratic choice by Belarus. A similar thing already happened in Moldova in June 2019 when both Russia, the USA and the EU agreed to remove oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc and he was forced to leave Moldova. The coalition in parliament consisted of pro-Russian and pro-European parties (the latter was later removed from the coalition).

China is another important player in Belarus, which is often underestimated, notes Dr Statkus. The Chinese Foreign Ministry, according to the words of its representative on August 19, supported the independence, sovereignty, security and peaceful development of Belarus, in the hope that opposing external forces would not cause chaos in the country. For China, Belarus is an important point in its trade transit to Europe, where the two Belt and Road routes through Russia and Kazakhstan intersect. The Covid-19 crisis has created the need to shorten logistics chains. China is considering moving production closer to sales markets, and Belarus, which is on the EU border, is interested in China. Belarus's economic and political model supports China's proposed path of development for the world, so stability in Belarus is a concern for China. This raises concern in America.

The most important question remains, Dr Statkus emphasises, is how to redistribute powers to the authorities under the new Constitution and what place Lukashenko himself will have in the new system. Will he choose Nazarbayev's path and take the place of the leader of "White Russia" with his successor being someone of his immediate environment? Maybe he will go the way of Iran and be elected the supreme leader of the country? Or will he have to fill the post of head of a new supranational institution of the Union state? Today, it is difficult to predict the future configuration of the Belarusian political system.

The new Constitution will have to be submitted to the people for approval by Lukashenko himself. If the Constitution is approved, Lukashenko will be partially rehabilitated in the eyes of the public, but will not retain the power he has had so far. These presidential elections, and the mass protests that followed, activated the seemingly apolitical population of Belarus's major cities and provincial centres. They want change and representation of their interests, Dr Statkus concludes.

9. The Kremlin factor

An absolute majority in Lithuania agrees that the survival of Lukashenko's regime depends on the Kremlin and President Putin's office. When for a time now, during the latest manoeuvre by the Lukashenko regime toward the West, opinions emerged in the West that Lukashenko's presence in power is the only guarantee of Belarus' sovereignty. Professor Vytautas Landsbergis, the first head of state of restored independent Lithuania and leader of the independence movement, had the following to say on September 11: *"I have no time for such legends. These legends have been used for brainwashing over many years – A. Lukashenko began acting out a patriotic role, defending the Independence of Belarus. It's a joke. He would gladly hand everything over so that he can remain in power a little longer."*²⁰

MEP and former Lithuanian Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius was a member of the Lithuanian Sąjūdis and can easily compare the recent Belarussian revival with the Lithuanian revival thirty years ago.

²⁰ <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1206346/vytauto-landsbergio-patarimas-su-lukashenkos-rezimu-kovojan-tiems-baltarusiams-broliukai-negalima-gatveje-bureliais-zaisti-demokratijos-vienykites>

According to Kubilius, what Belarusians have been able to achieve thus far is a historical miracle. It is an entirely new type of democratic revolution, you could even describe it as an on-line revolution and it is one, which even now needs neither traditional political leaders nor lengthy programme speeches, which lay out the revolution's goals. This is why it is very difficult to dismantle it. It is its strength, not a weakness. The peaceful nature of the revolution, its democratic, not geopolitical purpose is also a strength and not a weakness because Belarusians have to discover the very narrow path toward the victory of democracy, which the Kremlin would have no public pretext to quash.

Kubilius makes a direct parallel to Lithuania's national movement. Just as the Sajūdis once claimed it is in favour of Gorbachev's Perestroika, which would gradually lead to complete independence. Through its energy of peaceful protest, the Belarussian revolution has inspired in the Western world energy of solidarity and now, through concrete actions, the West must aid the revolution in maintaining its energy over a longer period. Just like the Sajūdis managed to convince many people in the West to marvel at Lithuania's peaceful revolution and how every favourable word or action from the West would inspire us to further action.

In the long run, Lukashenko's support by Putin might have recognisable geopolitical consequences for Lukashenko, which the Kremlin will not be happy with: the Belarussian people will turn away not only from Lukashenko (which they have displayed already), they will also turn ever more from Putin, the Kremlin and likely all of Russia. The exact same way as when in 2014 in Ukraine, Putin chose to back Yanukovich, not the Ukrainian people. This way, "thanks to" Putin, a pro-Western Ukraine emerged. Equally, a pro-Western Belarus could appear if Putin fails to realise for a long time just how toxic his support for Lukashenko seems to Belarussians, according to Kubilius.

Kubilius also highlights that Lukashenko is lingering and not stepping down, thanks to Putin's support is an important factor. It might even be the most important because Putin holds the keys to the door that Lukashenko will have to withdraw through. It would be unwise to disregard such a factor. As such, it comes as no surprise at all that the leaders of the Belarussian Coordination Council and even Tsikhanouskaya herself say that they expect that Putin will have enough wisdom to refuse to support Lukashenko unconditionally.

Kubilius thinks that Putin is in no rush to make use of the key and open the door for Lukashenko's withdrawal. One can only guess at what price Putin is demanding. For Belarus' geopolitical association with Russia to be unchanged? For the West to forget Putin's "sins" in Ukraine? Or perhaps that the West would welcome Putin back into its embrace? We cannot know the answers to these questions, but it is clear that only the other two factors can influence Putin, namely: a) protests on the streets of Minsk where there will be increasingly many anti-Putin posters; b) consistent efforts by the West to convince Putin that he will be better off if he will convince Lukashenko to step down.

Kubilius returns to his historical experience and is convinced that there is no need to be surprised that unpleasant work must be undertaken on this question and that efforts must be made to convince Putin. Gorbachev too did not want to recognise Lithuanian Independence for a long time. We had to ask and convince Western leaders to exert pressure on Gorbachev. They, while concerned with Gorbachev's stability, were unable to withstand the pressure of their countries' parliamentarians and news media who supported Lithuanian Independence. Thus, George H. W. Bush, only when pressured by the US Congress, was forced to discretely convince Gorbachev to lift the energy blockade of Lithuania in summer 1990.

It is clear that Putin is no Gorbachev, and it is also clear that the current Kremlin regime is far more brutal and cynical than the Kremlin regime before the fall of the empire.

However, the contemporary Kremlin regime has weaknesses and major weaknesses too. Firstly, Kubilius points out; it is evident that the periphery of Putin's empire is experiencing ever more challenging to contain fires: in one corner, there's a democratic revolution in Belarus; in another, there's the unbaiting Khabarovsk, which might be joined by Novosibirsk, Irkutsk and Tomsk, all of which need only a spark. Then to the South, Kremlin's traditional spheres of influence in Armenia and Azerbaijan are ever more resolutely encroached by Turkey, which makes no effort to hide its post-imperial ambitions. This situation opens new opportunities for the West to talk to Putin, not in a pandering voice, but one that formulates for him clear alternatives.

Mr Kubilius goes as far as to let French President E. Macron play his "grand narrative" of calling for a new dialogue with Russia. Even before E. Macron's visit to Vilnius on September 28 and 29 he suggested that one can suspect that he is truly prepared to convince Putin regarding Lukashenko's withdrawal by

explaining to Putin that this is the only way E. Macron's greatest "*grand narrative*" of returning Russia into the embrace of Europe can be implemented. This is because, in order to achieve it, Putin must play the role of "*good cop*" in removing Lukashenko.

One can have great doubts about E. Macron's plan to return Putin to the European fold. Still, if the French president's efforts in this direction can help the Belarussian democratic revolution be realised, E. Macron can only be applauded for it. Because a victory of democracy in Belarus, despite how it might develop in the near future, will have vast geopolitical consequences first and foremost for the further development of Russia itself. And for the sake of this, it is worth to create opportunities for Macron to fight for his "*grand narratives heroically*." It is just important that in the Kremlin, he would defend the core interest of the Belarussian people – first, new elections and only afterwards a new Constitution and not the contrary – trying to convince the Belarussian people to accept the Lavrov/Lukashenko scheme – first (over two years) a new Constitution and only then new elections Kubilius is convinced.

10. Belarus and the Forth Wave

In *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*, the famous book that he published back in 1991, the renowned American academic analyst Samuel P. Huntington substantiated one clear historical pattern with clear arguments: in a global world, democracy spreads like ocean tides – in due course, a wave of democracy begins to surge throughout the world and floods more and more new countries with democratisation. However, democracy is not able to take root in all of the new countries flooded by the high tide of democratisation, so when low tide comes, some of the new democracies – especially those flooded for the first time – turn back to authoritarian rule and wait for a new wave of democratisation.

According to Huntington, the world experienced three waves of democratisation in the 20th century: the first began after World War I and lasted until the end of the 1920s; the second began after World War II and lasted until the 1960s, and the third began in the second half of the 1980s and lasted until the 2000s.

Lithuania and the whole of Central Europe, are also the products of this third wave. We were fortunate that the global wave of democracy that flooded us did not leave us with the low tide that followed. The process of European integration that began in the early 1990s also helped. In Russia, meanwhile, the low tide of democracy returned the country itself to Putin's authoritarian rule in the 2000s. In Belarus, this low tide came even earlier. According to Huntington, this is the fate of states that have no previous experience with democracy – the first attempt at democracy in these countries is quite short.

Kubilius, who himself was educated as a physicist, noted that Huntington's popularisation of the three waves of democratisation theory, which is based on a number of concrete facts, including the history of change and transformation in our region over the past 30 years, also leads to a conclusion that supports another historical pattern and allows us to look optimistically at the future of democracy in our region. If the world experienced as many as three waves of democratisation in the 20th century that recurred approximately every 20 years, then it is now time to start preparing for the fourth wave of democratisation since the third wave ended around 2000. And this fourth wave, which is currently flooding Belarus, will inevitably flood the expanses of Russia as well. Such is the historical pattern.²¹

There is still a lot of aspects that are important for Lithuanian Belarussian relationship, like the Belarussian Nuclear Power Station in Astravets, wish could be seen on a clear day from an air balloon above Vilnius. Former Minister of Energy Arvydas Sekmokas has summarised it very well on why Lithuania is concern about it: "The power plant was built in breach of environmental conservation and nuclear safety requirements and without upholding construction safety requirements. This shows that the plant is dangerous and an accident in it is just a matter of time. Of course, you can discuss the scale of the accident. However, in any case, Lithuania would not escape danger."²²

It was announced that the plant will start producing first electricity on November 7. On October 12, the Belarussian Energy Ministry said that a controlled fission chain reaction was launched in the first reactor, according to the Belarussian state news agency BelTa. "The unit was brought to minimum control power (MCP)," according to the ministry, which added that various tests will be conducted in the future.

21 <https://lithuaniantribune.com/when-will-a-belarusian-democratic-revolution-take-place-in-russia/>

22 <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/verslas/1056348/energetikos-ekspertai-nenorime-bet-i-baltijos-salis-baltarusiska-elekt-ra-vis-tiek-pateks>

Meanwhile, Belarus says it has postponed the full launch of the first reactor at its Astravyets nuclear power plant by two years to 2022, according Radio Free Europe.²³ The bottom line is that we do not know what is happening in the plant and around it.

Lithuania already has in place the so-called “anti-Astravyets” law and other necessary legislation allowing it to bar market access to electricity from the Belarusian nuclear plant. In preparation to boycott Belarusian electricity after the country launches its Astravyets nuclear plant, the Baltic states have drafted a common methodology for electricity trade that includes a system of certificates of origin, as sought by Lithuania.

The methodology, agreed after lengthy negotiations, includes the requirement for electricity imported to the Baltic market “to have a proof of origin that it has originated from non-Belarusian producers,” Lithuania’s transmission system operator Litgrid said in a press release on September 25²⁴. Energy Minister Žygimantas Vaičiūnas said the methodology is now fully in line with Lithuania’s “anti-Astravyets law”.

The month of August has often been marked in modern Russian history by typically tragic and historical dates. The attempt to depose Gorbachev, wars in the Caucasus, the financial crisis, the catastrophe of the submarine Kursk, the Beslan tragedy in North Ossetia, the war against Georgia and etc.²⁵ The Belarussian revolution also began in August. The answer to this revolution’s goals, at least in the short and intermediate-term, lies in the Kremlin. While the Belarussian nation was not in time for Huntington’s third wave thirty years ago and its ebb washed it back out to Russian shores, the Belarussians have a chance to fix their mistakes and become Huntington’s fourth wave of democracy, sweeping away not only Lukashenko, but also reaching the Kremlin’s walls. It is an opportunity that the Belarussians can make use of right now and turn from a “*Boring Soviet kolkhoz*” into a “*Boring European democracy*.”

The Baltic States, which were at a very similar level of development with Soviet Belarus back then, should be an excellent example for Belarussians. Yes, the transformation was incredibly painful for the Baltic States, but the Belarussians are hurting now. The Baltic States, Poland and all other European Union countries need an independent and democratic Belarus for a straightforward reason. We want a neighbour with whom we could celebrate freedom, free trade and welfare that liberal democracy and liberal economies create. We want to be friends with a free country and celebrate one another’s companionship. We also expect that this August will be remembered not for tragedies and the loss of life, but will become the continuation of a historical chain of events that will create a democratic and thriving Belarus, which will become an excellent example to Russia. Everything is in the Belarussians’ hands. We, the West, must be prepared to aid the Belarussians when they are prepared for it themselves. And Lithuania is prepared to be Belarus’ “*Iceland*.”

11. Policy suggestions

Lithuania will keep the Belarusian agenda on the EU and NATO tables despite possible changes in the government. The Western community should continue policy of no recognition of the Presidential election result and demand a new, fair and democratic elections in Belarus: no Constitutional reforms first and elections latter. The West should clearly indicate that if the Kremlin will continue and increase its interference into the Belarusian politics, it will face further sanctions. It is for the Belarusian people to decide about their country’s future. The West should impose sanctions not only on the top brass Lukashenko’s henchmen but also on the administration apparatus and the law enforcement officers who are breaching the human rights in Belarus. The West should help independent Belarusian media and identify the pockets of civil society which brought the Belarusian democratic revolution to life and assist them in every possible way. The efforts to work with the old guard professional positioners of Belarus proved to be ineffective. The methods of helping the new generation opposition should be developed and used. We should adopt the personal sanctions to the Lukashenko regime henchmen, but we should allow the Belarussian citizen travel to the EU without visas. We should recognise and work with any government Minsk who follows the Human Rights, be it a Pro-Western, Pro-Russian or of a neutral geopolitical leaning. The most important issue should be to let the Belarusian people to decided themselves; in a fair and free elections.

²³ <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1251918/steam-spotted-rising-from-belarusian-nuclear-plant-near-lithuania>

²⁴ <https://www.litgrid.eu/index.php/naujienos/naujienos/del-bendros-baltijos-saliu-perdavimo-sistemu-operatoriu-tarp-zoninio-pralaidumu-apskaiciavimo-nustatymo-ir-paskirstymo-su-rusija-salygu-ir-metodikos-viesos-konsultacijos/31238>

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_curse#:~:text=The%20August%20curse%20has%20been,from%20fact%2Dbased%20to%20supernatural.

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