

SCRIPTING THE FUTURE OF BELARUS

EVENT SUMMARY

The EUISS convened a closed-door event on 25 June 2024 in Brussels, bringing together independent experts and EU policymakers to engage in a collective assessment of trends determining Belarus' future. The debate was conducted under Chatham House rules.

Belarus continues to be in a double bind of Lukashenko's brutal authoritarian dictatorship on one hand, and Moscow's smothering embrace on the other. The *stability / stagnation* model of government practised by Lukashenko was challenged in a rupture created by the fraudulent presidential election (2020) and Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine (2022-). The authoritarian rule has been consolidated and there is a certain degree of adaptation by society to the reality of increased terror and repression. The forthcoming presidential "election" (2025), in fact an exercise in authoritarian mobilisation, is unlikely to produce an opportunity for democratic mobilisation even as protest mood remains – at least in absence of black swans such as Russia's defeat in Ukraine or internal destabilisation of the regime in Minsk, for example due to Lukashenko's demise.

Russia's influence in Belarus has increased. It manifests itself in the military domain, control over Belarus' foreign policy as well as in education, culture and media consumption. While both society and public administration were traditionally divided over the preferred geopolitical orientation, as a result of the repression, purges in the state apparatus and Moscow's growing influence in these domains, the orientation on Russia now dominates. While opportunism and *attentism* play a role in this shift, the barriers to free movement and other measures on the part of the EU also have done a part, in particular when integrated in the regime's propaganda narratives. The dilemma of security / openness exists, however it is important to stress that it is the regime that puts in place the new "iron curtain" and is the source of objective impediment to mobility.

The regime is not content with Russia's increased influence. Lukashenko's mindset is a Soviet one – and, like Putin, he believes to be in a state of war with the "collective West". But he does not want to be reduced to a regional governor. He may also fear Putin's move against him at some point. The current state of affairs in which Belarus has turned into Russia's "military garage" but its troops have not been directly involved in Ukraine is not a result of Lukashenko's successful resistance, but rather of Moscow's lack of trust in Lukashenko and Moscow's satisfaction with the "in-between" position of Belarus which it can exploit e.g. for sanctions evasion.

The EU is not at present fully prepared to support a free and democratic Belarus. To get better prepared means, importantly, to focus on the fields of economy and energy – both areas where significant dependence on Russia exists. Efforts could be made to prepare future steps in the field of renewables, also in view of a potential competition with China. In the short term, the EU must persevere in the support of the remarkably resilient democratic opposition – having confidence in it without obsessing with the phantasm of its “unity” – and not to get distracted by Lukashenko’s deliberate efforts to capture attention by instrumentalised migration and other means. The EU should cease to observe and focus more on acting, based not on pragmatic considerations but rather strong value foundations.

The EU should harbour no illusions concerning the regime’s proclivity to change and should not buy into propaganda narratives about ineffective sanctions or the inaptness of the democratic opposition. To steer Belarus toward a democratic future also means adopting a broader view: Ukraine must come first as the outcome of the war will have a direct impact on the future of Belarus. Moreover, seeing Ukraine drawing closer to the EU can have a positive impact on Belarusian society, provided it is not abused by the government’s propaganda. The EU’s support for strong media is important in this context, as is the Union’s own strategic communication toward the Belarusian people. The February 2024 Council Conclusions reaffirming the support for a democratic, sovereign and independent Belarus “as part of a peaceful and prosperous Europe” were a welcome step forward. The perspective of, and a roadmap to, integration once conditions are in place should be further communicated in a clearly understandable language.