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country report

Belarus Office



New Iron Curtain rising on the EU border with Belarus

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After introducing the latest EU sanctions package against the Republic of Belarus, the Baltic States Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania imposed an entrance ban for almost all passenger cars with Belarusian license plates. Belarusian cars currently present in these countries were given limited time to either leave or reregister locally. Aimed at closing loopholes in the sanctions which were introduced to punish the regimes in Minsk and Moscow for their aggressive behaviour and to strengthen border security at NATO's eastern flank, the passenger car ban sparked strong negative reactions, also from the democratic community of Belarus. They warn that shutting the EU's door for regular citizens, most of whom voted for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in 2020, will only further alienate the Belarusian population from the West. As trade with the Lukashenka regime continues, his propaganda machine will know how to use the "travel ban" to strengthen the pro-Russian narrative claiming that "nobody in the West wants you Belarusians".

Since the fraudulent presidential elections of 2020, the Western community has incrementally adopted an unprecedented sanctions regime against the Republic of Belarus. They responded to the aggressive actions of the Lukashenka regime which included the repressions against political, social, and cultural dissent, orchestrating a migration crisis at the EU borders, and ongoing threats to regional security, including with Russian tactical nuclear weapons. Particularly the regime's explicit support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has sparked strong responses and efforts to "harmonize" sanctions against Moscow and Minsk, to reduce leeway for sanctions evasion.

While the primary intent has been to punish and weaken the Belarusian regime and encourage (or enforce) a different behaviour – the results of which have been mixed so far at best – the "collateral damage" on the general population of Belarus and especially private business – a main driver of democratic changes – has been raising more and more concerns. Ordinary Belarusians, particularly those who look to the West as a model of democracy and freedom, feel increasingly alienated, rejected, and unfairly punished, perceiving sanctions as punitive not

just to the regime but to their own livelihoods and futures.

In almost every statement regarding Belarus, EU officials and politicians from member states rightly emphasize a clear distinction between the regime and the Belarusian people. They consistently praise the democracy movement, publicly underline their continued support, and eagerly take selfies with the iconic president-elect Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Apart from substantial support packages for Belarusian civil society, they have created more sustainable and sometimes exemplary formats of cooperation and dialogue with the democratic forces to directly include their point of view and expertise. The Belarusian democratic forces in turn use such platforms persistently, to lobby for their interests. This includes explaining how the regime has been helping Russia to bypass sanctions and proposing ways to close the loopholes in trade with Belarus, which were misused in favour of Russia. At the same time, many Belarusians who found refuge from the political regime in EU countries feel that their life in exile is getting more and more complicated on a practical level due to the implementation of new sanctions regulations and

a growing suspicion towards them coming from parts of the host societies.

Sanctions Package No. 8

The eighth sanctions package which was adopted on June 29, 2024, by the European Council, thus harmonized sanctions against the Lukashenka regime with those imposed on Russia closing many previous loopholes. However, the first steps of implementation, especially by the Baltic States, have been perceived by the Belarusian community as more punitive for “ordinary” citizens of Belarus than the regime itself. This concerns mainly the provisions of Article 1ra, which prohibits *“to purchase, import, or transfer into the Union, directly or indirectly, goods which allow Belarus to diversify its sources of revenue, thereby enabling its involvement in the Russian aggression against Ukraine”*.

In Article 1ra, the new regulation leaves some leeway for the application of the restrictions.

Under section #4 it reads:

“The competent authorities of a Member State may allow the import of goods which are intended for the strict personal use of natural persons travelling to the Union or of their immediate family members, limited to personal effects owned by those individuals and which are manifestly not intended for sale”

And section #5 formulates:

“The competent authorities may authorize, under such conditions as they deem appropriate, the entry into the Union of a vehicle falling under CN code 8703 not intended for sale and owned by: (a) a citizen of a Member State or an immediate family member who is resident in Belarus and is driving the vehicle into the Union for strict personal use; or (b) a citizen of Belarus holding a valid visa or residence permit allowing entry into the Union, who is driving the vehicle into the Union for strict personal use”

Latvia was first to introduce a full ban on the entry of cars with Belarusian license plates into the EU on July 16, citing the intend to reduce the “risks of evasion of sanctions”. **Estonia** followed suit the next day. **Lithuania** introduced a similar ban on July 18th, with the specific provision that until August 16th, cars with Belarusian registration will be allowed in if the car is not intended for sale, doesn’t belong to a company or legal entity or nor is designated for commercial use, and its owner has a valid visa or a residence permit in Lithuania.

Poland introduced much softer restrictions on July 10: passenger cars with Belarusian registration are allowed to enter the EU but only if the owner is onboard and the car is not intended for sale. Thus, in contrast to the Baltic states, Poland for now uses the flexibility of #5 Article 1ra cited above. This could change, given that Poland and the Baltic States agreed to coordinate their border policy on Belarus closely. But so far, the Polish Minister of Foreign affairs

Sikorski made clear that Poland was not planning to ban or confiscate Belarusian passenger cars. However, Warsaw has presented clear conditions to the Lukashenka regime to ease the artificial migration crisis, release political prisoners from the Polish minority in Belarus, especially Andrzej Poczobut, and extradite the illegal migrant, who murdered a Polish soldier. If no agreement is reached, Poland threatens with a full blockade of the Belarusian border, at least for freight traffic. To this end, Warsaw is even trying to exert pressure on Minsk through Beijing which has a clear interest in keeping the borders open for trade transit.

Reactions by Belarusian Democratic Forces

On July 16, the leader of the democratic forces Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya¹ called the new restrictions on the entry of Belarus-registered vehicles *“a hasty and harmful decision”*. In her assessment, they *“primarily hurt the people, not the Lukashenka regime. Therefore, we are trying to convince our partners to revert or amend this*

decision.” She explained that “for Belarusians, the border with the European Union is a border with the free world. It should be open to Belarusians who do not support the regime and see the future of their country in Europe.” The same day, her Chief Advisor, Franak Viacorka, lamented that “the decision-makers who imposed the restrictions did not consider the political consequences. The restrictions impact pro-European sentiments among Belarusians, further legitimize the regime, and lump Belarus together with Russia and Belarusians with the regime because it is easier that way.”

Tsikhanouskaya used the Summit of the European Political Community in the UK on July 18, to address the new restrictions in conversations with the political leaders of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. A few days later, during a meeting in Vilnius with ambassadors, special envoys, and Foreign Ministry officials of the same countries plus Estonia, representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces presented proposals on possible exceptions to be made for Belarusian passenger cars.

Such exceptions seem possible under the new package and the European Commission pointed out on July 24th that a full blockade for passenger cars is in fact not a prerogative by Brussels. The member states have leeway in the application of the new regulations. As the Commission’s responsible press secretary Francesca Dalboni, stated to Belarusian independent media that member states “*must assess each specific situation and apply prohibitions and exceptions accordingly, in good faith and in coordination with each other*”. Exceptions might be granted “*for humanitarian purposes, diplomatic missions and personal use of EU citizens and members of their families living in Belarus, as well as Belarusian citizens holding a valid visa or residence permit.*”

Polish Senator: new restrictions “very immoral”

Criticism of the new regulations came not only from the Belarusian democratic forces but also from Western politicians. The deputy head of the

Polish Senate, Michał Kamiński, pointed out that the transportation of cargo from Belarus to the EU remains intact, being an important source of revenue for Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his associates. Such trade also – symbolically – includes the export of luxury cars that are often used by cronies of Lukashenka. Kamiński called it “very immoral” to restrict the entry for ordinary Belarusian citizens as such trade continues.

The reactions from the Belarusian expert community and on social media were similarly negative. They point out that the Lukashenka regime can easily circumvent the entry ban for its own supporters by issuing them diplomatic license plates. But the overall criticism is very basic and nurtured by the perception of many Belarusians that “the West” no longer sees in them the betrayed and repressed democratic majority of an aspiring European neighbour as they did in 2020 – but puts them under a general suspicion to be agents of the very same regime that they were not strong enough to overcome.

Also, people struggle to understand how the additional entry restrictions are supposed to “strengthen the EU’s border security”. Mobility is already strongly restricted – there are no flight and train connections, trade flows are restricted, several land border crossings are shut altogether and the notorious queues at the remaining checkpoints can keep people lined up for over 24 hours. Now, people wonder how ordinary citizens – families, workers, students – in civilian passenger cars could possibly pose a security threat to a member of NATO, the most powerful military alliance in history. Before 2020, Belarusians had the highest share of Schengen Visa worldwide. Their increasing mobility, especially towards the Western direction, was often praised as a positive trend and experts agreed that the option to frequently travel to EU countries and get to know their way of life had a direct influence on the substantial value shift in society over the previous decade. This in turn was a major prerequisite for the pro-democratic mood that demanded change and a fresh start in 2020.

Mind the long-term effects

Obviously, since those days, the geopolitical situation and official relations between Minsk and the West have deteriorated dramatically with the regimes in Moscow and Minsk not just waging a conventional war against Ukraine but actively trying to undermine the security and political stability of the Western countries.

But precisely because a hybrid war is taking place for the hearts and minds of citizens in the West and Belarus, it is important to consider the implicit "political messaging" that indivisibly goes along with such decisions and their mid-and long-term effects. Sociologists measuring public opinion including geopolitical orientations of Belarusians, warn that such restrictions and the way they are presented and perceived in Belarus will slowly but inevitably erode the mood in society away from pro-European attitudes. For Lukashenka's propaganda machine, such measures are a welcome occasion to tell the people that "nobody is waiting for them in Europe" and Russia and China are their only "true allies". As if to mock the Western countries additionally and to strengthen the narrative of the "new iron curtain being erected solely by the West" Lukashenka even softened the entry regulations for citizens of the EU and other European countries shortly after the Baltic States announced the new restrictions. They can now enter Belarus without a visa for 30 days through any land border crossing.

Given that the regime lacks the political support and economic resources to establish a new positive "social contract" with the old one broken in 2020, driving people into apathy by invalidating any "Western democratic alternative" and nurturing hopelessness and disappointment is one of their strongest political weapons.

Such probably unintended – but apparently (reluctantly?) accepted – consequences of sanctions threaten to undermine long-term

Western security interests. On the one hand, if the population, especially the youth and intellectuals, loses faith in the Western democratic model, it could stymie efforts to foster a democratic transition, even in the case of an unforeseen window of opportunity in the future. On the other hand, the Belarusian population finds itself under pressure from all sides. Their own regime does not tire in its efforts to punish the "traitors" of 2020 through repressions - again: this was the majority of the population. The ongoing restructuring of state institutions intends to make sure that no "democratic mistakes" might challenge the autocratic power structure even again. The Russians who have been increasing their economic and political grip on the country massively, continue their efforts to subdue Belarus under their political rule. And under the existentially threatening conditions of a new perilous East-West confrontation and a hot war being waged in the immediate neighbourhood – a war that the people of Belarus according to sociological data reject with an overwhelming majority – perceptions can be coined for a generation or more of "who is our friend and who is not". If people feel abandoned and rejected and "shut up with Putin and Lukashenka" in this historic moment it might take years if not decades of tremendous efforts to reverse such a disappointment and rebuild trust and a stable positive image of the West among Belarusians.

Thus, the West must consider how to mitigate these adverse effects and reinforce the message that freedom, democracy, and Western values are ultimately in the best interest of the Belarusian people and that Belarusians are welcome. The sanctions regime and overall policy need to formulate and communicate more clearly the vision of what should be archived with the measures as well as how the relations with Belarus and the Belarusian people should develop. Every existing measure and each new step need to be reflected in the light of such long-term strategic considerations.



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