

## Post-election protests in Belarus as a tool of political technology. Working hypothesis

**Abstract** The author analyzes the course of the elections in Belarus in 2020 and the socio-political protests caused by election fraud. On the basis of the anomalies noted in the activities of the security service of the Republic of Belarus the author puts forward a hypothesis about the possible involvement of the Russian secret services in provoking the post-election crisis in order to reduce the margin of political maneuver for the Lukashenka regime.

**Keywords** Belarus, post-election protests, anti-Lukashenka opposition, KGB, FSB, GU, GRU, Russian Federation, geopolitics, political technologies.

The popular protests following the rigged 2020 presidential elections in the Republic of Belarus (RB) and their political and military repercussions triggered by the Kremlin's full support of the Belarusian regime<sup>1</sup> resulted in a complete change

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<sup>1</sup> As early as August 14, 2020, during a meeting in Sochi between the presidents of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, Vladimir Putin expressed his full support for Alexander Lukashenko (including a \$1.5 billion loan). In return, he received assurances of full loyalty to Moscow from the RB president. However, according to Arsen Sivitsky (director of the Minsk-based Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies at the Foreign Policy Research Institute), for example, the Kremlin continues to signal to the West its readiness to get rid of Lukashenko in exchange for agreeing to keep Belarus in Russia's sphere of influence. Cf. B. Whitmore, *Dialog of dictators: How Putin and Lukashenka really*

in RB President Alexander Lukashenko's previous foreign policy of skillfully balancing between the Russian Federation (RF) and the West<sup>2</sup>. The most glaring manifestation of the end of this political paradigm was the leaving of 30,000 troops of the Russian Armed Forces on the territory of the RB after the completed exercises<sup>3</sup> and their use in the attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022<sup>4</sup>. However, even before this final chord of Russia's vassalization of Belarus, most Western analysts were inclined to the thesis that the RB, as a result of the events of 2020-2021, had in fact become a Russian military-political buffer with only formal attributes of statehood<sup>5</sup>.

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*talk to each other*, Atlantic Council, 19 V 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/dialog-of-dictators-how-putin-and-lukashenka-really-talk-to-each-other/> [accessed: 12 IV 2022]. Gustav Gressel (European Council on Foreign Relations) expresses a similar belief. Cf. *Is Belarus closer to the West or to Russia?*, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/belarus-european-union-russia/a-54613952> [accessed: 8 IV 2022].

<sup>2</sup> A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election: Lukashenko's Gamble and its Geopolitical Implications*, Geopolitical Monitor, 12 VIII 2020, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/belarus-presidential-election-lukashenkos-gamble-and-its-geopolitical-implications/> [accessed: 10 IV 2022].

<sup>3</sup> P. Slunkin, A. Wilson, *How to train your dictator: Putin's control over Lukashenka*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 III 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-to-train-your-dictator-putins-control-over-lukashenka/> [accessed: 7 IV 2022]; Y. Vindman, *How to Keep Belarus Out of the War. NATO Should Put the Squeeze on Russia's Chief Accomplice*, Foreign Affairs, 31 III 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-03-31/how-keep-belarus-out-war> [accessed: 9 IV 2022].

<sup>4</sup> Unverified information from Ukrainian sources indicates that the RB Armed Forces are participating in the fighting, but the soldiers are wearing the uniforms of the Russian Armed Forces. Such information appeared repeatedly in the accounts of witnesses to the events in Bucha. They claimed that there were troops among the Russian soldiers who spoke with a Belarusian accent. Currently, there is no way to resolve whether this is true. The fact is that Belarus is making its territory available for the operations of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, and on 2 III 2022 was one of five countries voting at the UN against a resolution condemning the Russian Federation. Cf. P. Slunkin, A. Wilson, *How to train your dictator...*

<sup>5</sup> It is worth quoting the statements of experts indicted before 24 II 2022 by Judy Dempsey of Carnegie Europe: Jan Claas (Leibnitz Center for Contemporary History): „Lukashenko formally kept power but actually became a vassal of Russia. The silent invasion and de facto occupation of Belarus might be Putin's biggest triumph in the ongoing crisis. It gives Russia's military long-desired strategic depth”; Ben Hodges (Center for European Policy Analysis): „Belarus lost its sovereignty the day Alexander Lukashenko declared himself the winner by 80 percent of the presidential election and began to crush the protestors in his own population”; Dominik P. Jackowski (Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to NATO): „Yet, the recent decision about Russian troops staying in Belarus indefinitely after the exercise is a game changer for NATO and the Eastern flank allies. It turns Belarus into a de facto new Russian military district”; Kamil Kłysiński (Centre for Eastern Studies): „The result has been an unprecedented rise in the importance of Russia for Belarus, which is now its exclusive and clearly dominant political, economic, and military ally. The sovereignty of Belarus has become de facto illusory”; Linas Kojala (Eastern Europe Studies Center): „The current regime of Alexander Lukashenko can hardly be defined as a sovereign polity”; Linas Linkevičius (former Minister of Foreign Affairs and National Defense of Lithuania): „Lukashenko not only

This leads to the conclusion that the public revolt following the rigged elections and the ostracization of Lukashenka by the West due to the brutal suppression of the revolt have brought strategic advantages to Russia. Following a wave of protests that lasted from August 2020 to March 2021, the Russian Federation – without the use of force – forced Lukashenko to abandon his previous policy of balancing East and West and make an unambiguous geopolitical choice<sup>6</sup>. An expression of the position adopted is the approval of the stationing of Russian troops on the territory of the RB<sup>7</sup> and *de facto* participation in the aggression against Ukraine. RB's previous foreign policy, despite the pro-Russianism of the Belarusian president (who unexpectedly adopted anti-Russian rhetoric in 2020<sup>8</sup>), was uncomfortable and even harmful to Russia. The Russian Federation has not been able to force greater integration of the Union State of Belarus and Russia (USBR)<sup>9</sup>, or even acquiescence to the establishment of a base of the Russian Armed Forces on Belarusian territory<sup>10</sup>. Ahead of the 2020

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stole the election but began to sacrifice the remnants of his country's independence and sovereignty in order to prolong his time in power"; Barbara von Ow-Freytag (Prague Civil Society Center): „While all eyes are focused on Ukraine, Belarus has quietly become the first victim of Vladimir Putin's project “USSR 2.0.”; Wojciech Przybylski (The Institute for Human Sciences): „Belarus's feeble sovereignty under Alexander Lukashenko has ended upon officially accepting an indefinite presence of Russian troops on February 20”; Kristi Raik (Estonian Foreign Policy Institute): „In the shadow of the latest dramatic turns in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the gradual suffocation of Belarus's sovereignty has gained limited attention, although its implications are no less dramatic for Eastern European security”; Gwendolyn Sasse (Carnegie Europe): „The price for Lukashenko's political survival is Belarusian sovereignty with regard to Russia”. All these statements were quoted from: J. Dempsey, *Is Belarus's Sovereignty Over?*, Carnegie Europe, 24 II 2022, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/86512> [accessed: 6 IV 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Lukashenko mentioned this, probably for the first time, during a speech delivered on Aug. 16, 2020. This was the day after his phone conversation with Putin. Cf. M. Clark, *Belarus warning update: Lukashenko seems to lack strategy as peaceful protests grow*, The Institute for the Study of War, 16 VIII 2020, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-seems-lack-strategy-peaceful-protests-grow> [accessed: 11 IV 2022].

<sup>7</sup> The establishment of bases of the Russian Armed Forces on the territory of the RB is a condition for Belarus' total dependence on Moscow. Cf. Ф. Лукьянов, *Что надо сделать Москве, чтобы привязанность к ней Белоруссии не зависела от Лукашенко*, „Россия в глобальной политике”, 10 VIII 2021, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/chto-delat-moskve/> [accessed: 13 IV 2022].

<sup>8</sup> A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

<sup>9</sup> Confirmation of Lukashenko's reluctance to strengthen the USBR was provided not only by the failed meeting in Sochi in December 2019, but also by RB Ambassador to Russia Vladimir Semyashko's making public the scale of the Russian Federation's demands. Russia has demanded the transfer of almost all RB presidential powers to the union level. Cf. A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

<sup>10</sup> K. Kirillova, *Is Minsk Toying With Moscow? On the Complicated Relationship between Lukashenko and the Kremlin*, The Geopolitics, 21 VIII 2021, <https://thegeopolitics.com/is-minsk-toying-with-moscow-on-the-complicated-relationship-between-lukashenko-and-the-kremlin/> [accessed: 12 IV

elections, Lukashenko has repeatedly described himself as a defender of Belarusian independence. He even went so far as to arrest 33 Russian mercenaries (so-called “Wagnerites”) and suggest that they were planning to provoke riots in Minsk<sup>11</sup>. The Belarusian president is a difficult but nonetheless known partner for Russia, and as a result, it was in the Kremlin’s interest not to overthrow him, but to force him to explicitly choose the pro-Russian option<sup>12</sup>.

This raises the question of whether the Kremlin merely took advantage of the unexpected dynamics of the social protests in Belarus, or whether it played an active role in the events. It may even have inspired the processes that led to the failure of Lukashenko’s balance policy and the loss of sovereignty for the Belarusian state. The author of the article has attempted to analyze the sequence of events to determine whether there is a possibility that the special services of the Russian Federation<sup>13</sup> were behind the outbreak of public protests or their course.

## Political situation of the Lukashenko regime

The conflict between Lukashenko and opposition circles (of democratic-liberal or nationalist provenience<sup>14</sup>) began already during his first term, which manifested itself, among other things, in the banning of the publication of “Пахоніі” (English: “Pahonya”) – one of the first independent Belarusian dailies. In 1999-

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2022]; *Is Belarus closer to the West...*; B. Zogg, *From Belarus with love: the limits of Lukashenko’s dalliance with the West*, War on the Rocks, 3 IV 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/from-belarus-with-love-the-limits-of-lukashenkos-dalliance-with-the-west/> [accessed: 6 IV 2022].

<sup>11</sup> K. Kirillova, *Is Minsk Toying With Moscow?...* Lukashenko’s anti-Russianism ahead of the election came as a surprise to analysts, as it was the first time in his career that he accused Russia of planning to interfere in the election to change power. Cf. A. Shraibman, *Embattled Lukashenko Loses Friends in East and West*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 VII 2020, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/82245> [accessed: 6 IV 2022]. Lukashenko began accusing the West of such interference only after Aug. 15, 2020, i.e., after his phone conversation with Putin. Cf. M. Clark, *Belarus warning update...*

<sup>12</sup> K. Kirillova, *Is Minsk Toying With Moscow?...*; A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

<sup>13</sup> Belarusian propaganda seems to have overlooked the benefits to the Russian Federation of the 2020 popular revolt and promotes the thesis that the main target of the color revolution at the time was Russia. Cf. K. Kirillova, *Is Minsk Toying With Moscow?...*

<sup>14</sup> According to a report by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, in 2003, of the 18 officially registered parties ranging from national to liberal, half were in opposition to the president. Cf. A. Feduta, O. Boguzkij, W. Martinowitsch, *Politische Parteien in Belarus als notwendiger Bestandteil der Zivilgesellschaft*, Minsk 2003, p. 19.

2000, resentment at the president exercising power in an increasingly authoritarian manner caused a strong polarization of society, some of which created what Belarusian philosophers Valentin Akudovich and Mikhail Boyarin called a culture of resistance, based on (...) a *sense of solidarity, a desire for freedom and the presence of the enemy*<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, the most important figure for this specific ideological and political formation was Lukashenko as a symbol uniting various opposition factions, often in personal and ideological conflict. The president was ideally suited for the role, as he combined the qualities of a *homo sovieticus* and an authoritarian personality. Such an image of the leader mobilized liberal-nationalist circles against him, but on the other hand was attractive to large segments of society. Lukashenko's supporters included not only government officials and power sector officials who were dependent on him, but also a huge social electorate, for whom the president was a symbolic bulwark against the economic collapse and ideological chaos familiar to Belarusians in the early 1990s. In the 1990s, opposition environments to Lukashenko existed mainly in large cities and included those social groups for whom an authoritarian, statist state governed according to Soviet models was unacceptable. These included nationalist circles, the intelligentsia, groups advocating political and economic liberalism and, later, youth susceptible to Western models. However, in Sovietized Belarus, where rural traditions were strong, these circles were relatively few in number and conflicted with each other for ideological and ambition reasons, resulting in a weak opposition and successive elections won by Lukashenko<sup>16</sup>. In the 2001 elections, he received 75 percent of the vote, and larger-scale post-election protests took place only in Minsk. It seems that despite the restrictions imposed by the authorities (for example, depriving the Center for the Defense of Human Rights "Spring" of accreditation to observe the elections), there was no need to falsify the results. Indeed, Lukashenko's electorate was the aforementioned numerous social groups to whom globalization and Western values were associated with a threat to the existing world image<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> From: H. Wałyniec, *Stara vs. nowa: Jak zmieniała się białoruska opozycja od 2000 do 2020?*, Outriders, 23 III 2021, <https://outride.rs/pl/stara-vs-nowa-jak-zmieniala-sie-bialoruska-opozycja-od-2000-do-2020-r/> [accessed: 2 IX 2021].

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A.M. Dyer, *Sytuacja białoruskiej opozycji*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2 IX 2020, [https://pism.pl/publikacje/Sytuacja\\_bialoruskiej\\_opozycji\\_](https://pism.pl/publikacje/Sytuacja_bialoruskiej_opozycji_) [accessed: 28 IX 2021]. This ongoing weakness of the opposition until 2019 was also recognized by the government side. The sudden emergence of a new opposition, supported in the media by bloggers, came as a big surprise to the authorities. Cf. «*Подавляющее меньшинство»: обратная сторона «Страны для жизни» Тихановского*», YouTube, 27 IV 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IATYaXiUFaQ> [accessed: 15 VIII 2021].

<sup>17</sup> One can venture to say that at the core of Lukashenko's political existence (as well as that of many other political leaders and organizations) lie social fears triggered by the breakdown of traditional

After 2001, Lukashenko probably recognized that a far greater threat to his power than the democratic-liberal movements was nationalism, aroused in Belarusians a decade earlier. For this reason, he carried out the aforementioned re-Sovietization of the state, which was manifested, among other things, in the top-down removal of symbols of national identity from public space, as well as the introduction of restrictions on teaching in the Belarusian language<sup>18</sup>. In 2004, after a referendum amendment to the constitution, Lukashenko was allowed to run as many times as he wanted, transforming Belarusian democracy into a quasi-dictatorial system in which the incumbent president was able to use a centralized power apparatus to get another term in office. In 2005, the Belarusian leader disbanded Белый легион<sup>19</sup> (English: the White Legion) – an organization of ex-military men with a nationalist and anti-Russian bent – subjected to repression participants in rallies held at the mass grave in Kuropaty, during which Stalinist crimes were recalled. Even alternative gatherings held on the occasion of Independence Day (Russian: День воли) and marches commemorating the Chernobyl disaster were met with harassment from the authorities. This meant that the authorities were not going to tolerate any grassroots social movements, even formally devoid of political character.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine inspired national-liberal-intellectual pro-democracy movements in Belarus, resulting in the so-called Denim Revolution<sup>20</sup>. However, these events did not have the potential to be sufficient to force political change. During the 2006 elections, the opposition had a well-organized organizational base both in Minsk and in the provinces, but preventive arrests by the militia significantly weakened it. Moreover, it has again failed to field a joint presidential candidate. Lukashenko officially won 82.6 percent of the vote. A protest against the election results was attended by 30,000 people in Minsk<sup>21</sup>.

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values associated with globalization processes. From this point of view, fundamentalism (understood as disagreement with any change in worldview) present in many a traditional society has been and remains a mechanism for ensuring the persistence of many political structures.

<sup>18</sup> H. Wałyniec, *Stara vs. nowa...* These measures have not met with public opposition, as Belarusians are heavily Russified – 70 percent of the population uses Russian at home. Cf. B. Zogg, *From Belarus with love...*

<sup>19</sup> *The White Legion*, Magna Polonia, 22 III 2017, <https://www.magnapolonia.org/bialy-legion/> (translation of article from the website /naviny.by.nn.by/) [accessed: 8 IX 2021].

<sup>20</sup> The name emerged after an incident that occurred on Sept. 16, 2005. Militia then took away activist Mikita Sasim's national flag, and he raised his denim jacket as a symbol of protest. More broadly: *Партизанская республика. Акции протеста в Минске 19-25 марта 2006 года*, Е. Михайловская (ed.), Москва 2006.

<sup>21</sup> H. Wałyniec, *Stara vs. nowa...* Cf. documentary film on those events: Ю. Хашцевацький, *Плошча*, YouTube, 5 II 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_9gJLzclgOU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9gJLzclgOU) [accessed: 10 IX 2021].

The same mistakes were repeated in 2010, when opposition circles again failed to field a single representative. The post-election protest escalated into chaotic attempts to storm the seat of government, to which the forces of order responded by arresting 700 people<sup>22</sup>. Lukashenko then won 79.65 percent of the vote, and state television aired a propaganda video to prove the existence of a plan for a forceful coup allegedly being prepared by the opposition<sup>23</sup>.

The 2011 economic crisis and government-induced inflation<sup>24</sup> triggered further street speeches. However, the protests died down this time as well. According to some commentators, the not-quite-explained attack on the Minsk subway conducted on April 11, 2011, in which 15 people were killed and several hundred injured, was helpful in calming the mood<sup>25</sup>. Two workers were eventually convicted of the crime, but state propaganda placed the blame on the opposition, which was expected to strongly influence the decline in public support for the protesters<sup>26</sup>.

The economic crisis and Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 forced Lukashenko, on the one hand, to return to national rhetoric (reflected in the increase in the number of Belarusian-language programs aired on state television and in the propaganda mass media's emphasis on Belarus' separateness from Russia, and even in the president's declarations of his love for national literature and culture)<sup>27</sup>, and on the other hand, to turn toward the West. In a wave of propaganda thaw to improve relations with the West, an amnesty was announced in 2015 for

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<sup>22</sup> Yury Hashchevsky's 2011 film *Обыкновенные выборы* contains footage that could prove that the aforementioned assault was the work of police provocateurs, and opposition leaders called for not succumbing to the provocation. Cf. Ю. Хашчеватский, *Обыкновенные выборы*, YouTube, 6 II 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-o-tBAA1BQ> [accessed: 12 IX 2021]. However, the government's version of these events, presented in another video, identified the alleged provocateurs as authentic opposition activists and used their full details. Cf. *Плошча. Железом по стеклу. Полная версия*, YouTube, 29 III 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPvpOmK1K0M> [accessed: 12 IX 2021]. Based on the length and breadth of the prospectus filled with demonstrators, Hashchevsky estimated their number at a minimum of 60,000. The vast majority of them did not participate in the incidents, whether they were provocative or spontaneous.

<sup>23</sup> *Плошча. Железом по стеклу*, YouTube, 22 I 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kifor398Ewk> [accessed: 1 IX 2021].

<sup>24</sup> Its source was a pre-election increase in salaries and pensions. This was achieved through the printing of rubles, which began to rapidly lose value because of this.

<sup>25</sup> Originally, the Belarusian authorities reported 400 victims, but eventually the casualty rosters included 204 people. Cf. *Обновленные списки погибших и пострадавших при теракте в минском метро*, <https://www.ganc-chas.by/by/page/world/710/> [accessed: 10 IX 2022].

<sup>26</sup> H. Wałyniec, *Stara vs. nowa...*

<sup>27</sup> Cf. B. Zogg, *From Belarus with love...*; A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

political prisoners, including former presidential candidate Nikolai Statkevich, who was serving a sentence for an alleged attempted coup in 2010. These measures led to a weakening of the old opposition, which – sensing the public mood – chose to boycott elections in 2015. Opposition candidate Tatiana Karatkevich, who broke out of the boycott, was, according to historian Anton Lavitsky, both a cause and an effect of the change in the existing political scene, as (...) *her appearance and her public image as a democratic alternative to some extent buried the “culture of resistance”*<sup>28</sup>. Lukashenko, taking advantage of the weakening of protest sentiment and public polarization caused by tactical liberalization<sup>29</sup>, won 83 percent of the vote. The old opposition seemed to have lost the contest for power as a result of Lukashenko’s clever use of political balancing between East and West, the concessionary liberalization of<sup>30</sup> and the nationalizing rhetoric of state propaganda. At the same time, the Belarusian economy, thanks to hidden concessions from Russia (in the form of selling energy carriers at lower prices<sup>31</sup>), regained relative stability. However, the 2017 demonstrations against plans for an unemployment tax proved that – despite the public’s apparent discouragement and its increased acceptance of the government – there was still considerable potential for a mass uprising. This time, the backers of the protest were increasingly the youth as the group most open to Western influence.

### Impact of the Internet on Belarusian society as a cause of changing attitudes

Government propaganda – due to a system of state cronyism managed by people who are incompetent and unwilling to change – failed to recognize the possibilities of the Internet. The information space shaped by Lukashenko’s propagandists was based almost entirely on state television, central and local newspapers, and post-Soviet models, with a clear tendency to cultivate “folksiness” (in the realities of the post-Soviet, national-less regime, this was only folksiness for show). The information-propaganda potential of the network has not been appreciated either in terms of shaping the message or countering opposition propaganda<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> From: H. Wałyniec, *Stara vs. nowa...*

<sup>29</sup> B. Zogg, *From Belarus with love...*

<sup>30</sup> In 2015, opposition representatives entered parliament for the first time in a decade.

<sup>31</sup> B. Zogg, *From Belarus with love...*

<sup>32</sup> Cf. blogger Roman Protasevich’s opinion on the absolute domination of the opposition media online: “*Погрыз в политике вместо того, чтобы заниматься журналистикой.*” *Протасевич*

This opportunity has been effectively seized by the opposition, which has set its sights on creating alternative, and relatively inexpensive, sources of information, based on Telegram and YouTube channels. A number of independent bloggers have emerged<sup>33</sup>, who – with their new media techniques, modern language and narrative style – have reached the younger generation better than the coarser state propaganda. Two channels in particular were very popular – Страна для жизни (English: Country for Living), created in 2019 by blogger Sergey Tikhanovsky, and Nexta, founded in 2018 by another blogger Stepan Putila<sup>34</sup>. This activity was accompanied by increased activity by foreign news outlets, including the TV station Belsat<sup>35</sup> broadcasting from the territory of Poland, the Russian TV station Дождь (English: Rain), as well as radio stations: Радио Свобода (English: Radio Free Europe) and Эхо Москвы (English: Echo of Moscow). This online offensive, in the face of which the state centers were largely helpless, brought a clear mobilization of the opposition electorate. This was manifested by queues at signature collection points for presidential candidates, which surprised the authorities.

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дал интервью RT, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-HqMwE9Wcg> [accessed: 12 IX 2021].

- <sup>33</sup> Among others: Sergey Tikhanovsky, Nastia Rogatko, Anton Motolko, Artiom Shrajbman, Sasha Asterman, Roman Protasevich. According to state propaganda, these people were financed from abroad (both from the West and the Russian Federation), but also from the domestic opposition. For example, Tikhanovsky allegedly received \$400,000 from Belgazprombank, i.e. from banker Viktor Babaryka. Cf. *Как нагнеталась ситуация в Беларуси перед выборами? Фильм первый. Заговор*, YouTube, August 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRsYuRGyV94> [accessed: 10 IX 2021].
- <sup>34</sup> Political support for Putila in the form of an interview given to him by Poland's prime minister was interpreted by Belarus as evidence of Poland's active participation in Belarusian protests. Cf. *Протасевич и революция: почему Запад защищает террориста и как Польша лжет Минску. Понятная политика*, YouTube, 7 VI 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wC0WKHJ\\_fiE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wC0WKHJ_fiE) [accessed: 20 IX 2021]. Interestingly, Belarusian propaganda cannot decide whether the Polish government or the opposition in Russia is responsible for interfering in the situation in Belarus through the Nexta channel, as it also accuses businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky of financing Putila. Cf. *Кто и зачем давит на Беларусь? Технологии, инструменты, заказчики. Понятная политика*, YouTube, 31 VIII 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQCnqKfg\\_vU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQCnqKfg_vU) [accessed: 18 IX 2021].
- <sup>35</sup> Belsat is treated by the Belarusian government as a propaganda station, used by the RP (with financial support from the US, Sweden, Canada, Norway, the Netherlands, Lithuania and England) for subversive activities in RB. Cf. *Вся правда о Белсат: кем финансируется, как врет в эфире, цензура и оскорбления. Понятная политика*, YouTube, 7 XII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SF6LhNt2SzM> [accessed: 20 IX 2021].

## The new opposition as a political factor

In addition to the qualitative change in the possibilities of shaping the information space, another factor emerged in the form of the entry of new actors into the power game: the aforementioned Tikhanovsky, banker Viktor Babaryka, and IT manager Valery Tsepkalo, who politically and in the media displaced the old opposition. These people, considered to be Moscow's candidates<sup>36</sup>, oriented to modern technology and money, unlike the old opposition, did not scare away the youth with anachronistic messages and the cultivation of folk-Soviet patterns. Instead, they used modern means of communication and political marketing, while taking advantage of the phenomenon of multiplication of the messages of the main opposition channels by bloggers with smaller reach, who reached local audiences with their content. Thanks to this, faith in the possibility of political change was rekindled in society, and the aforementioned culture of resistance was also largely rebuilt. The best example of this was the mass action initiated by Tikhanovsky under the slogan “Стоп таракан” (English: “Stop the Cockroach”) carried out in the media and on city streets, whose catchy slogan was accompanied by a telling symbol in the form of a slipper to squash an insect symbolizing Lukashenko<sup>37</sup>. In addition, the Nexta channel published online two professionally produced (using large information and financial resources) videos<sup>38</sup> that repeated the successful media tactics of Russian blogger Alexey Navalny. They portrayed Lukashenko in an extremely unfavorable light – not as a politician, but as a corrupt apparatchik holding the helm of power through dishonest methods. Also, a documentary prepared by “Deutsche Welle” and aired in 2019, featuring testimony from a member of the Lukashenko commando responsible for the 1999-2000 political assassinations<sup>39</sup>, has helped to rebuild a climate of public opposition and growing public delegitimization of the system of power.

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<sup>36</sup> K. Kirillova, *Is Minsk Toying With Moscow?...*; A. Shraibman, *Embattled Lukashenko Loses Friends...* The assessment of Tsepkalo and Babaryka as candidates promoted by the Kremlin was not just a social engineering ploy by *Lukashenko*, as many of their public statements showed pro-Russianism, although Babaryka slightly distanced himself from Moscow's strategy. Cf. A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Белорусы выходят с тапками по всей стране. Свергнем таракана*, YouTube, 12 VI 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NW0bH02mSyI> [accessed: 7 IX 2021].

<sup>38</sup> *Лукашенко. Уголовные материалы*, YouTube, 25 X 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IL6rMikkJg> [accessed: 11 IX 2021]; “*Золотое дно*” *Лукашенко от Nexta*, YouTube, 8 III 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km-gl2bjrBQ> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].

<sup>39</sup> *Эксклюзив DW: Убийства противников Лукашенко в Беларуси - исповедь соучастника*, YouTube, 16 XII 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmE0uM3WuQ4> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].

Summarizing the above, it should be noted that Lukashenko's regime had to deal with several risk factors:

- a determined but relatively sparse domestic opposition, but which has failed to realistically threaten the president's position in 26 years, and was ousted in the new elections by quasi-politicians with business backgrounds and likely ties to Moscow;
- negative electorate (mainly metropolitan), for whom authoritarian rule meant further ossification of the economic and political system.

In addition, Lukashenko and his nomenklatura, represented by officials in ill-fitting suits and by representatives of the power sector devoted to him, as well as the partisan-martyrdom propaganda they created, modeled on that carried out in the USSR<sup>40</sup>, were no longer able to reach people raised on popular culture based on that existing in the West. This is because for the metropolitan youth and young intelligentsia, Western patterns became not counterculture (as they were in the late USSR), but the prevailing culture. As a result, the world of ideas and canons promoted by Lukashenko and his supporters was seen as a manifestation of an anachronistic, degenerate subculture and treated with contempt.

### Synergy of factors to spur political change

On top of the socio-political factors described above were two additional ones – in the form of the country's economic weakness, which even with a relatively small fluctuation in the economy could turn into a crisis<sup>41</sup>, and the conflicting influences (overt and covert) of the Russian Federation and the West. The policy of balancing Russia and the West, successfully practiced by Lukashenko since at least 2014<sup>42</sup>, has in fact convinced some Western politicians that it is possible to “pull” Belarus out of the Russian sphere of influence, as happened with Ukraine and Georgia<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

<sup>41</sup> Between January and February 2020 alone, Belarus' GDP – due to fluctuations in oil prices on world markets – decreased by 0.6 percent. Cf. A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...* The restriction of exports to the Russian Federation played a major role. It can be hypothesized that the Russian Federation, by increasing the price of oil for BR, was aiming long before the elections to weaken Lukashenko's position by reducing GDP and thus the standard of living of Belarusians. Cf. M. Clark, *Belarus warning update...*

<sup>42</sup> P. Slunkin, A. Wilson, *How to train your dictator...*; B. Zogg, *From Belarus with love...*

<sup>43</sup> Cf. B. Zogg, *From Belarus with love...* This was a logical consequence of Lukashenko's changed attitude toward Moscow after 2014 and his surprisingly bellicose rhetoric, which included accusing the Russian Federation of violating international law. One of the clearest manifestations of such

It was not difficult to predict that, with the country ruled for a quarter of a century by an authoritarian and hard-to-control man, the way to advance the geopolitical interests of Russia and the West might be either to force Lukashenko into a clear-cut option (e.g., ending the process of creating the USBR), or to exchange power for a deal that pursues the political line desired by external actors. While the possibility of depriving Lukashenko of the alternative was mainly in the hands of the Russians, the option of replacing power with a new deal was within the reach of both geopolitical players, i.e. both the Russian Federation and the West.

Economic processes – from the point of view of political technology and secret services – cannot be controlled, but modern history has proven that efficient secret services and an extensive propaganda apparatus are capable (at least to some extent) of influencing the dynamics of social processes. Especially if the key is the organized opposition, which can be subjected to agentic control. It is difficult to control a massive and unorganized social rebellion triggered, for example, by an acute crisis, but if it is part of a political game played by hierarchical and role-based organizations, the secret services have considerable leverage over the intensity of the rebellion and its directions. In Belarus, due to the synergy of social, economic and political factors, there was the potential to change the government through appropriate influence on society – both through overt propaganda and agentic influence on opposition structures.

### Working hypothesis

On the basis of what has been described above, a working hypothesis can be put forward, underpinned by the aforementioned dynamics of social change in Belarus. Indeed, in the earlier episodes of the power struggle, Lukashenko's main opponents were, as mentioned, the intelligentsia and a small number of groups of liberal-democratic provenance, with a strong nationalist strand, but remaining in the zone of Russian cultural influence. In the run-up to the 2020-2021 social revolt, however, Belarusian urban youth became a potential driver of change. At the same time, young Belarusians – like most residents of the cultural periphery<sup>44</sup> – are generally uncritical recipients of Western popular culture, mainly American. This leaves

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a policy was the visit of U.S. politician Mike Pompeo to Minsk in 2020, during which assurances were given that the U.S. was ready to cover Belarus' energy needs. Cf. A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

<sup>44</sup> According to post-colonial theory based on the division: metropolises (economic-political-cultural) and dependent peripheries. So this term has a political-culturalist meaning, not a pejorative one.

the West with a very large soft power to influence the situation in cultural provinces, including Belarus. This is because, along with music, fashion, Americanization of customs and youth slang, positive attitudes are built towards political and social patterns coming from the West, which in the consciousness of the audience appears as a carrier of important and desirable values<sup>45</sup>. And the youth – by virtue of their age, lack of social anchors in the form of jobs and families of their own, and high mobility – have traditionally been the main participants in mass speeches.

If Russian analysts have concluded that the only trigger for political change in Belarus in a situation of systemic weakness in the old opposition is the culturally Westernized youth, then a rational way out of the political stalemate caused by Belarus' balancing policy would be to use the social upsurge to force Lukashenko to permanently adopt an eastern course<sup>46</sup>. At the same time, the aim was to prevent street revolutionaries from taking power. This is because there was no doubt that after Lukashenko's overthrow, Belarusian youth could (if only in the long run) make it easier for pro-Western politicians to come to power. Thus, the political technology solution may have been to use Westernized youth and residents of large cities to force such actions by the Belarusian authorities that would lead to a strong Western response. It was (and is) an easy task for Russian planners in a situation where Western politicians publicly declare a community of values as the basis of politics, shifting this area of social life from the realm of rationalism into the realm of emotions and moral

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<sup>45</sup> Such a process occurred in the People's Republic of Poland, where the imagined West (to which, without relying on experience, such qualities as being civilized, full of respect for freedom and law, modern and wealthy were attributed) was contrasted with the imagined East (i.e., Russia, which was treated with contempt as a primitive, civilizationally and culturally backward country). These two social perceptions caused a surprising situation: The Poles were the political periphery of Russia, while at the same time cultivating the belief that they stood civilizationally superior to it (due to their belief in greater cultural proximity to the West). This fostered a social delegitimization of communist rule (rejected as the embodiment of Eastern barbarism) and a mythologized perception of the West (contact with the realities of Western life in many countries of the former socialist camp triggered the phenomenon of thought chaos). In Ukraine, the same process of socially constructing mythologized perceptions about the West was behind the downfall of President Viktor Yanukovich. He lost power as a result of Ukrainians' belief that he was the only obstacle blocking immediate entry into the European Union and NATO, which was exploited by the opposition at the time.

<sup>46</sup> Russian political-military thought has long focused on attempts to hybridize kinetic force (i.e., strictly warfare) with soft power (i.e. mainly manipulation of an opponent's information space) to achieve specific political goals. Using the typical analytical technique of predicting the likely direction of an adversary's reasoning, it should be assumed that Russian planners are able to rationally assess the situation and develop methods and forms of action appropriate to it. Cf. A.A. Бартош, «Серые зоны» как ключевой элемент современного операционного пространства гибридной войны, „Военная Мысль” 2021, No. 2.

judgments<sup>47</sup>. Human rights, democracy, the rule of law, respect for minorities and civil liberties are undoubtedly inalienable in Western political culture, but at the same time they make it relatively easy to manipulate Western politicians. They must respond (at least at the declarative level) in accordance with the catalog of values presented to the public, so as not to lose face<sup>48</sup> and political credibility. Simplifying, it can be said that the special services of the Russian Federation had the ability to provoke a course of events favorable to Russia. In a situation where a culture of social resistance has been restored, it was possible to provoke mass protests by pro-Western circles in Belarus without much difficulty. In turn, these – due to the large number of young people among the demonstrators – could easily be transformed into street fights with the forces of law and order, which – in view of the massiveness of the uprising – had to react in a violent manner<sup>49</sup>. At the same time, as a result of agential influence in the organized opposition, it was possible to channel these demonstrations to prevent them from turning into popular uprisings. Then it was enough to wait for the expected Western reaction in the form of condemnation of the Belarusian authorities and the introduction of sanctions, which would have devastated the lagging RB economy without Russian help. Having achieved the intended goal (i.e. provoking antagonism between the West and Lukashenko), the Belarusian authorities could be forced to agree to the political and economic concessions expected by Russia, i.e. Lukashenko's permanent abandonment of the policy of balancing Russia and the West<sup>50</sup>. And only then was it necessary to pacify the protest mood with punitive-administrative, propaganda and deceptive-provocative measures. With such a strategy, the most economical solution would be to harness the energy of mass speech to achieve geopolitical goals and only later suppress the protests. If the RF was indeed following such a plan, it was Machiavellianly intelligent. Indeed, the actions of Western-backed pro-democracy organizations could be used to force the Belarusian authorities to reject pro-Western policies. In this unintended way, the West would provide Russia with a tool to influence Lukashenko.

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<sup>47</sup> This attitude was the source of the West's masked reluctance to return to a sanctions policy against the Russian Federation in 2020, which changed in 2016. Indeed, the West had to come to the defense of democracy and civil rights, even though in doing so it increased Belarus' dependence on Russia. Cf. A. Shraibman, *Embattled Lukashenko Loses Friends...*

<sup>48</sup> In Goffman's sense – understood as a fixed, public image attributed to both a specific individual and the role he or she plays.

<sup>49</sup> Contrary to the impression created in the Western media about the peaceful nature of the protests, their course in the initial phase had the character of massive fighting with OMON and militia.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. В. Кравченко, *Россия «мягко» аннексировала Беларусь: что это означает для Украины*, ZN,UA, 10 IX 2021, <https://zn.ua/international/rossija-mjahko-anneksirovala-belarus-chto-eto-oznachaet-dlja-ukrainy.html> [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

## Role of the power sector

The reasoning so far suggests that the key to the strategies described is the Belarusian KGB<sup>51</sup> (or the power sector, broadly defined). His actions should first lead to an internal political crisis, resulting in the collapse of the Belarusian authorities' relations with the West, and then to its smooth extinguishment, so that rebellious sentiment does not spill over into all of Belarus and further into the Russian Federation.

The Belarusian power sector, especially the GRU military intelligence<sup>52</sup> and KGB intelligence and counterintelligence, from an analytical point of view must be treated as delegations of their Russian counterparts, i.e., GU<sup>53</sup> and FSB<sup>54</sup>, respectively (especially 5th FSB Service<sup>55</sup> – the unit responsible for reconnaissance work outside the Russian Federation). This is due both to formal ties within the USBR and to decades of close operational cooperation, with the Belarusian KGB playing a supporting role to Russian services. Also of great importance are the high degree of family and social ties and the belief in the geopolitical inevitability of ties with Russia that is common among the Belarusian officer cadre. Given the daily routine cooperation between the military and civilian special services of the RB and the Russian Federation, informal-family ties, shared Soviet traditions, and the importance of Belarus to the security of Russia's western flank, a very high level of infiltration of Belarusian services is to be expected. At the same time, it can be assumed that the infiltration of the GRU and KGB by the Russians may follow the patterns practiced in the People's Republic of Poland, i.e. locate in the gray zone between friend-family-business relations and formal cooperation. An additional reinforcing factor (as in the case of the Polish People's Army and the People's Republic of Poland Security Service) is the lack of criminalization of actions taken in support of Russian services<sup>56</sup> and the awareness of representatives of Belarusian

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<sup>51</sup> Rus. Комитет государственной безопасности Республики Беларусь, English: State Security Commission of the Republic of Belarus.

<sup>52</sup> Rus. Главное разведывательное управление Генерального штаба Вооружённых сил Республики Беларусь, English: Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus.

<sup>53</sup> Former GRU, now Главное управление Генерального штаба Вооружённых сил Российской Федерации, English: Main Board of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

<sup>54</sup> Rus. Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации, English: Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation.

<sup>55</sup> Rus. Служба оперативной информации и международных связей ФСБ, English: FSB's Operational Information and International Relations Service.

<sup>56</sup> What's more, the officers' close ties to the Russian service play an important role in their service promotions.

power structures regarding the lack of alternatives. They realize how important Belarus is to the military security of the Russian Federation.

Although this is only a working hypothesis, the totality of actions taken by the Belarusian power sector (especially the KGB) during the political turbulence may indicate that the exacerbation of the post-election social conflict may have been triggered deliberately<sup>57</sup>.

## Power sector actions against the opposition

An analysis of the activities of the RB's power sector shows conclusively that it had good agent intelligence in opposition circles. Operational and reconnaissance activities underpinned criminal and administrative decisions aimed at increasing control over the opposition:

- On May 15, 2020, the Central Election Commission refused to register Tikhanovsky's candidacy, and on May 29, 2020, the militia – using provocation – arrested him<sup>58</sup>;
- On July 11, 2020, searches were conducted at the headquarters of Belgazprombank<sup>59</sup>, as part of an investigation into money laundering, corruption and criminal offenses<sup>60</sup>. Shortly thereafter, Babaryka was arrested on embezzlement charges. This was accompanied by black PR

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<sup>57</sup> Information on the coordination of the protests and calls for them were widely circulated on the Internet (this was later used by the Belarusian authorities in accusing the West of provocation), which was turned off only briefly. This made it possible to constantly mobilize protesters. Cf. "2020". Фильм 2-й "Блицкриг. День выборов". Голосование перешло в беспорядки, YouTube, 5 VIII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04f0lj5Dlyk> [accessed: 15 IX 2021]; M. Clark, *Belarus warning update...* The theses of the state centers were in this case confirmed by various bloggers who boasted of their effectiveness in activating crowds.

<sup>58</sup> Н. Бутович, *Светлана Тихановская о задержании мужа на пикете в Гродно: «Пикет носил законный и мирный характер. Имеет место провокация». Возможная кандидатка в президенты заступилась за главу своей инициативной группы, „Комсомольская Правда”, 30 V 2020, <https://www.kp.by/online/news/3891128/> [accessed: 12 IX 2021]. Cf. video recording of the arrest confirming that it was the result of provocation: *Задержание Тихановского в Гродно*, YouTube, 29 V 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFITZFAif-8> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].*

<sup>59</sup> Entirely controlled in equity by Gazprom.

<sup>60</sup> A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

in the press<sup>61</sup>. At the same time, a video appeared online showing a man resembling Tsepkało having sex with two prostitutes<sup>62</sup>;

- On July 14, 2020, the Central Election Commission refused to register the candidacies of Babaryka and Tsepkało.

On July 16, 2020, the electoral staffs of Tsepkało and Babaryka united with the electoral staff of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, whose candidacy was put forward by the opposition after her husband's candidacy was denied registration. It is not clear why a person unprepared in terms of merit for political office was bet on<sup>63</sup>. Indeed, it was possible to select someone from among former political prisoners who were popular in opposition circles. Belarusian political scientists assume that the authorities allowed Tikhanovskaya to participate in the election because they believed that patriarchal and post-rural Belarusian society would not accept a woman as president. Similar statements were made by Lukashenko.<sup>64</sup> However, this explanation contradicts several facts.

- The authorities allegedly did not treat Tikhanovskaya as a real threat, but made preparations for massive election rigging, which was the cause of the riots that erupted on post-election night;
- on election day, security forces were assembled in major cities to quell unrest<sup>65</sup>, so large-scale street protests were anticipated;

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Ю Терех, *О яблонях и яблоках*, "Беларусь сегодня," 23 IV 2020. Tierieh, among others, suggested that Babaryka's election campaign was financed with foreign funds. In subsequent publications, he went into detail and claimed that Russia's Gazprom and FSB were supposed to be behind Babaryka. The accusations against Gazprom present in the Belarusian press and Lukashenko's speeches have clearly irritated the Kremlin. On his behalf, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov demanded evidence, not calumny. Cf. A. Foster, *Belarus Presidential Election...*

<sup>62</sup> *Схемы Бабарико и девушки Цепкало. Компромат*, YouTube, 9 VII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4rGxWGuyBo> [accessed: 5 VII 2021].

<sup>63</sup> Tikhanovskaya's blunders during public appearances are a favorite topic of state propagandists. An example is her statement about the \$900,000 found in Sergey Tikhanovsky's mother's apartment. In an attempt to convince the public that the money was planted by the KGB (although the authorities aired a recording of her conversation with her mother-in-law, during which the latter openly said that the money belonged to Sergey), she stated that "(...) if we had such money, (...) then Sergey would certainly not be fighting for some ordinary people's rights". Cf. *ЭКСКЛЮЗИВ!!! Телефонный разговор Тихановской и матери Сергея. Свекровь знала про 900 тысяч долларов*, YouTube, 28 IV 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDEMtJ9AKFo> [accessed: 16 IX 2021].

<sup>64</sup> *Александр Лукашенко: В Беларуси Конституция не под женщину. Я убежден Президентом будет мужик*, YouTube, 30 V 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR6BWaB2wL8> [accessed: 10 IX 2021].

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *6 дней протестов за 6 минут. Как развивались события в Белоруссии*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHoaOIW7RGU> [accessed: 19 IX 2021].

- on August 5, the KGB operationally recorded – and this is crucial to this analysis – a meeting between Tikhonovskaya and her associates, during which a plan for the forcible seizure of power was openly discussed<sup>66</sup>. According to § 357 p. 1 of the RB Criminal Code, mere planning to seize power by extra-constitutional means is a crime prosecuted *ex officio* and punishable by 8 to 12 years of imprisonment<sup>67</sup>. Despite obtaining evidence of a crime, Tikhonovskaya was not detained before the election. After the outbreak of mass protests, she was persuaded (in a vague way) to leave Belarus, even though it must have been realized that this would lead to the establishment of an opposition power center in exile, using Tikhonovskaya as a figurehead for a symbolic president in exile;
- violent interventions by security forces occurred the night after the election. As mentioned earlier, footage posted on YouTube shows that a significant force of police and OMON were prepared when the results were announced. However, the degree of preparedness of the security forces was not matched by Lukashenko's frivolous behavior<sup>68</sup>. Its irrational reactions cannot be explained by a real threat, since – despite the enormous scale of public resistance – events have not once entered a heated phase of confrontation with the authorities in the form of attempts to acquire weapons or take over decision-making centers. This is analytically significant because – contrary to opposition propaganda claiming that the protests were exclusively peaceful<sup>69</sup> – there

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<sup>66</sup> Встреча Светланы Тихановской с доверенными лицами, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x01MTapIMlg> [accessed: 8 IX 2021].

<sup>67</sup> Уголовный Кодекс Республики Беларусь. Статья 357. Заговор или иные действия, совершенные с целью захвата государственной власти: „1. Заговор или иные действия, совершенные с целью захвата или удержания государственной власти неконституционным путем, – наказываются лишением свободы на срок от восьми до двенадцати лет”, [https://kodeksy-by.com/ugolovnyj\\_kodeks\\_rb/357.htm](https://kodeksy-by.com/ugolovnyj_kodeks_rb/357.htm) [accessed: 14 IV 2022].

<sup>68</sup> The Belarusian president flew in a helicopter to watch the scale of the demonstrations, shouted to the OMON protesters that they were pretty boys, as well as appeared in public with a Kalashnikov in hand, shielded by his 15-year-old son Kola posing as a commando. Cf. Лукашенко: Вы красавцы! Мы с ними разберёмся! Рабочий день Президента, YouTube, 23 VIII 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZPYb3pbYHA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZPYb3pbYHA) [accessed: 7 IX 2021]; Лукашенко с автоматом и его сына в бронжилете сделали мемом, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zkrjp4aBE4> [accessed: 7 IX 2021]. Cf. M. Clark, *Belarus warning update...*

<sup>69</sup> “In Belarus, the demonstration stops at a red light on the roadway – it only takes up half of the road. Pictures of the protests show people getting on the benches, but taking off their shoes beforehand. After the demonstration is over, Belarusians collect garbage.” Cf. *Z przerwą na czerwone światło, czyli jak protestują Białorusini*, Polsat News, 16 VIII 2020, <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-08-16/z-prerwa-na-czerwone-swiatlo-czyli-jak-protestuja-bialorusini/> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].

is abundant footage showing violent clashes between OMON officers and demonstrators in the early days of the protests<sup>70</sup>.

With such a large number of demonstrators (there were between 100,000 and 230,000 in Minsk on August 23, 2020<sup>71</sup>) a forcible seizure of power was possible. At the beginning of the social uprising, there were street fights in which the demonstrators were the attacking party, yet the opposition did not once take decisive action. The large emotional mobilization of the protesting crowd, which according to the rules of psychology should turn into collective aggression, has nowhere led to situations that realistically threaten power<sup>72</sup>. And yet the transcript of conversations held during the aforementioned meeting of Tikhanovskaya's staff shows that there were plans to seize government buildings.

After stifling the mass protests, the authorities began criminal and administrative repression. In this way, they forced oppositionists to flee the country, however they must have realized that this would result in the establishment of foreign opposition centers, in the long run threatening the regime<sup>73</sup>. This was accompanied by an information offensive that, unlike the propaganda prior to the protests, was carried out professionally by young and cynical but effective propagandists who were able to tailor messages to specific audiences and effectively infiltrate the information space both in the traditional media and on the Internet<sup>74</sup>.

The last element, combining information warfare with the realization of political goals, were provocative-deception operations carried out between the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2021. The largest and most significant were the agent games codenamed "Tishina" and "Mankurty."

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. *О протестах в Беларуси, неудавшейся революции, силовиках и радикалах. Противостояние. Фильм АТН*, YouTube, 23 III 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfqQZ9PR7Cg> [accessed: 15 VIII 2021].

<sup>71</sup> *Dziesiątki tysięcy ludzi na proteście w centrum Mińska*, Bankier, 24 VIII 2020, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Bialorus-Wielki-protest-w-centrum-Minska-7948615.html> [accessed: 11 IX 2021]; M. Clark, *Belarus warning update...*

<sup>72</sup> For comparison: in 2014, Lugansk was seized by pro-Russian militias, despite the fact that – even after seizing the SBU headquarters and the region's administration – the rebels initially had a maximum of 500 people ready to take their places at so-called block-posts (improvised checkpoints for entry into the territory).

<sup>73</sup> By comparison: the Soviet secret services throughout the interwar two decades had to fight the émigré opposition centers, which were used by the Western secret services, becoming a serious threat to the communist government.

<sup>74</sup> Among others: Grigory Azarionok (program „Паноптикум”, English: “Panopticon”), Igor Tur (programs “Будет дополнено”, English: “It will be supplemented; „Антифейк”, English: “Anti-Fake”), Sergey Gusachenko (program “Понятная политика”, English: “Transparent Politics”).

## Unusual actions of the power sector

As already mentioned, on August 5, 2020, the KGB obtained operational documentation regarding the commission of a serious crime by Tikhanovskaya and her staff in the form of a plan to take over government buildings by force. Under Belarusian law, preventive arrests could (and indeed should) have been made, followed by staged trials in which operational recordings and detainees' testimony compromising the opposition as putschists would have been used. So why didn't the power sector react and Tikhanovskaya was allowed to run for election? The public mood, after all, was not only apparent to analysts. Even if the poll results popularized by the opposition indicating three percent support for Lukashenka were untrue<sup>75</sup>, the mass participation of the population (at least in large cities) in opposition rallies, the appearance of many opposition political blogging channels online and the huge number of their subscribers, as well as the activation of news centers operating from abroad (Belsat, Nexta, Radio Free Europe) clearly indicated anti-regime sentiment much stronger than in previous years. The arrest of Tikhanovskaya's staff, coupled with a media blitz that would have used operationally acquired footage, could have stopped (or at least greatly dampened) the outbreak of public discontent. However, elections were allowed to take place, and then – due to the great ineptitude of the falsifications<sup>76</sup> (the dissemination of them online was not permanently blocked<sup>77</sup>) – public sentiment was quickly radicalized. This ended in street speeches, the most dangerous to the authorities

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<sup>75</sup> Belarus lacks objective opinion polls. Both government surveys and polls commissioned by the opposition contradict the basic methodology of the social sciences, while being used for the current political struggle. Thus, in a situation of election rigging, there is no methodologically correct way to assess the distribution of political sympathies.

<sup>76</sup> The census of violations and attempted election fraud was published online by the Zubr platform for monitoring voting processes in Belarus. Cf. <https://zubr.in/> [accessed: 12 IX 2022].

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *нр. Кто и как украл у беларусов выбор. Фальсификации как причина санкций*, YouTube, 14 VII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZuAfOBOoO0>; *Фальсификация выборов в Беларуси*, YouTube, 11 VIII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yO40xyW1tM>; *Как фальсифицируют выборы в Беларуси*, YouTube, 7 VIII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPEBakCIU5s>; *Доказательство фальсификации на Президентских выборах в Беларуси (2020)*, YouTube, 11 VIII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPbADBmSTLM>; *Фальсификация президенских выборов в Беларуси 2020 снятая на камеру Отказ подписать протокол выборов*, YouTube, 18 VIII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcYToPFI9dI>; *Фальсификация выборов президента республики Беларусь 09.08.2020*, YouTube, 28 VIII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMgSoWqcNuw>; *Фальсификация выборов в Беларуси!*, YouTube, 19 VIII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkR1CaasrnE>; *Беларусь. Как принуждают к фальсификации выборов*, YouTube, August 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBm0Gi81IfU> [access to all materials cited in this footnote: 17 IX 2021].

in the entire history of Belarus to date. Further actions by the authorities against Tikhonovskaya were also illogical. Instead of calming the mood to safely manage the crisis, everything was done to further antagonize the public and at the same time make Tikhonovskaya a symbol of public resistance<sup>78</sup>.

Socio-technical measures such as vote recounting (which was meaningless in a situation where the authorities fully controlled the Central Election Commission and its field apparatus) and tactical liberalization, combined with intensified government propaganda<sup>79</sup> and preventive actions by the coercive apparatus, were also not undertaken. The option of force was chosen, which was attempted to mask unsuccessfully with political PR efforts<sup>80</sup>. The coercive apparatus acted very brutally, and information about the torture of detainees deepened social polarization<sup>81</sup> and effectively made Lukashenko a political pariah in the eyes of the West<sup>82</sup>. In addition, after the authorities chose the option of force, for reasons that are not clear, Tikhonovskaya was forced into exile instead of being arrested on charges of planning a forceful coup (for which the authorities had evidence)<sup>83</sup>.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Светлана Тихановская - символ нерешимости белорусов. Про интервью с Гордоном, YouTube, 24 II 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ad68W4CK3OU> [accessed: 16 IX 2021]; Тихановская: “Я не стала лидером, но я стала символом”, YouTube, 4 VIII 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vp9X22Irbw> [accessed: 16 IX 2021].

<sup>79</sup> Which was able to influence the mood in an effective way, mainly through a combination of KGB operational information and modern media techniques. One example is the video discrediting Tikhonovsky, which pointed to his profiting hugely from opposition activities and highlighted the numerous criminals on his electoral staff (20 percent of the 252 activists were said to have criminal records under sections of the CC). Cf. “Страна для жести”: о “банде” Тихановского и подготовке террора в Беларуси, YouTube, 21 VII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8mt519EBMY> [accessed: 1 IX 2021].

<sup>80</sup> The poor level of propaganda programs aired on Belarusian television is evidenced, among other things, by a video clip in which detainees from the “Okrestino” detention chorused to the camera that no one had beaten them.

<sup>81</sup> In this context, it is interesting to hear about the involvement of Russian “experts” in the systemic use of torture in the RB. Cf. Российский спецназ учил пытать белорусов, YouTube, 22 X 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZMPPAzLxvg> [accessed: 25 X 2021].

<sup>82</sup> Cf. G. Faulconbridge, *Britain says jailing of Belarus protest leaders shows Lukashenko’s pariah status*, Reuters, 6 IX 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/britain-says-jailing-belarus-protest-leaders-shows-lukashenkos-pariah-status-2021-09-06/> [accessed: 12 IX 2021].

<sup>83</sup> KGB Chairman Ivan Tertel warned Tikhonovskaya that the KGB had compromising material against her, and claimed that she had been informed of the presence of foreign secret service agents among her closest associates. Cf. Председатель КГБ Тертель рассказал про план западных кураторов в отношении Тихановской, YouTube, 2 VIII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUHIUckiRx0> [accessed: 1 VIII 2022]. Despite the fact that Tikhonovskaya – as expected – became a center for the crystallization of the opposition, the KGB did not publish any previously unknown compromising materials about her. Tertel’s declarations regarding the identification

After all, it was hard not to foresee that – in the situation of non-recognition of the election result by the West – this would result in the emergence of an émigré center of power<sup>84</sup> supported by Western countries, which would become a point of reference for the previously antagonized factions of the émigré and domestic opposition, and at the same time a convenient means of pressure on Lukashenko<sup>85</sup>.

One could understand these actions under the assumption of systemic ineptitude of Belarusian services and administration. The processes taking place in the RB's state structures – in the form of negative selection, the placement of relatives of politicians and their acquaintances who are promoted, leaving out experienced officers, the proliferation of post-Soviet bureaucracy and corruption (including both services to specific politicians and corruption in the militia and administration), and the criminalization of services (e.g., involvement in large-scale smuggling) – could explain the nonsense of the decision to use force. However, the operational and tactical efficiency during the provocative-deception actions carried out by the KGB at the time and during the campaign that followed them in the media contradicts the thesis of the systemic inefficiency of the Belarusian special services. An organization capable of carrying out such complex operations, based on multi-threaded and multi-level agent games, and then using them in an extremely efficient information offensive, cannot be dysfunctional. So, either we are dealing with the deliberate tactics of an efficient service, or the operations described were actually carried out not by the KGB, but by the FSB<sup>86</sup>. In both cases, we can take it for granted that this served the interests

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of foreign agents in Tikhonovskaya's entourage reinforce the thesis that the Belarusian authorities' actions are illogical.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. interview with Lithuania's foreign minister: *Почему Литва помогла Тихановской и считает Лукашенко экс-президентом? Глава МИД Литвы*, YouTube, 2 IX 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubLQf4q6KBU> [accessed: 14 IX 2021].

<sup>85</sup> Her acceptance as a legitimate president by the leaders of European countries and even the US is a serious problem for a regime delegitimized in this way, especially since any such meeting is widely publicized. Cf. *Тихановская в Норвегии. Яра. Встреча с диаспорой. Дневник Президента*, YouTube, 15 VIII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8Rm66ijuN4> [accessed: 15 IX 2021]; *Президент США Джо Байден впервые встретился с Тихановской в Белом доме. Что они обсуждали?*, YouTube, 29 VII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6J1UFDuaGgM> [accessed: 16 IX 2021]; *Встреча Тихановской с президентом Словакии*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmD4jWухwCw> [accessed: 16 IX 2021]; *Тихановская встретилась с Байденом. Встреча с главами миссий ЕС в ООН. Дневник Президента*, YouTube, 28 VII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9VNaAnBZP4> [accessed: 16 IX 2021]; *Федута: Пресс-конференция Светланы Тихановской и президента Эстонии Керсти Кальюлайд. 31.05.21*, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGREF\\_5XN2g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGREF_5XN2g) [accessed: 16 IX 2021].

<sup>86</sup> Rumors of heavy infiltration of the Belarusian opposition by the FSB are often repeated both in Belarus and in Western media hostile to Lukashenko. Cf. *ФСБ в рядах белорусской оппозиции*.

of the Russian Federation, i.e. to force Lukashenko to permanently abandon his policy of balancing in favor of de facto incorporation of Belarus by Russia.

## Conclusion

If the hypothesis presented in the article is correct, the West's policies have proven counterproductive. The financial, organizational and political support of the opposition circles in Belarus to remove the RB president from power has actually forced Lukashenko to abandon his policy of balance and enter the Russian sphere of influence in the belief that the West is pursuing his removal by all means<sup>87</sup>. It is possible that with the help of the special services (as in the classic Chekist operations of the 1920s) The Russians were protecting their own geostrategic interests with Western money.

If this was a complex FSB operation, an influx of large numbers of Russian and Belarusian agents into Europe is to be expected, who will be located in emigration centers, taking advantage of the legend of oppositionists giving access to Western politicians and secret services<sup>88</sup>. At the same time, it can be assumed that this will be (or rather, already is) both KGB agent network built up in opposition structures for almost a quarter of a century, as well as "defectors" from Belarus and double agents, slipped to Western services and the exile opposition as willing to abandon the hated regime<sup>89</sup>. Thus, we may be facing a repeat of the situation from the interwar period, when white emigration was agentically transformed by Soviet special services into a channel for both disinforming the West and infiltrating Western secret services

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*Тимановская на белорусском ТВ. УТРО*, YouTube, 4 VIII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMHwNAlcXC4> [accessed: 20 IX 2021].

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *Раскроем тайну "черных пауков"! Персонал, секретные части, спецзадания, НАТО, США. Понятная политика*, YouTube, 21 I 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2-Hhs-yAqo> [accessed: 12 VII 2021]; *Зачем Дуда вмешивается в дела Беларуси? Новые сливы с e-mail Михала Дворчика. «Будет дополнено»*, YouTube, 9 VII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgNN8uqfNYg> [accessed: 18 VIII 2021].

<sup>88</sup> There are increasing signs that the process of locating agents in the opposition emigration is already underway. It is possible that the KGB (and therefore the FSB) already has fully developed networks in all major émigré formations. Cf. *Bellingcat tipped about FSB agents among Belarusian opposition in Kyiv*, Ukrinform, 3 VIII 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3291472-bellingcat-tipped-about-fsb-agents-among-belarusian-opposition-in-kyiv.html> [accessed: 21 IX 2021]; *Belarus Watch Briefing. Issue #11*, Ukraine World, 31 VIII 2021, <https://ukraineworld.org/articles/russian-aggression/issue-11> [accessed: 21 IX 2021].

<sup>89</sup> This version was used in the operations described in this article, but it does not exhaust the operational possibilities in this area.

and political-economic circles cooperating with the emigrants<sup>90</sup>. Indeed, Western support for Belarusian opposition emigration centers gives Russian planners room to play deception games at both the operational and strategic levels. It should be emphasized that even if this is a working hypothesis, the threat is real, and the West must be aware of it.

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<sup>90</sup> This phenomenon may already be taking place in Ukraine. Among other things, after the murder of a Belarusian House activist in Kiev, it came to light that Sergey Korotkih alias “Bocman” (neo-Nazi, commander of the reconnaissance unit of the “Azov” battalion, headed the protection of strategic infrastructure within the State Protection Service), who is a protégé of Ukrainian politician Arsen Avakov, is almost openly accused of being an FSB agent. Exile oppositionists believe there are close ties between Ukraine’s SBU and KGB, which would explain the blocking of attempts to explain the murder of journalist Pavel Sheremet. Cf. *ФСБ в рядах белорусской оппозиции...*; А. Приценко, *Украинские связи Боевой организации русских националистов: контакты и контексты в домайданной и постмайданной Украине*, <https://www1.ku.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/forumruss25/11GrytsenkoBORN%20neu%20L.pdf> [accessed: 21 IX 2021].

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