

P O L I C Y B R I E F

**BALTIC
AND NORDIC
RESPONSES
TO THE 2020
POST-ELECTION
CRISIS
IN BELARUS**

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The 2020 Belarus' post-election crisis took the international community by surprise. A half year has passed since the first of the massive protests took place in Minsk. Protests endure, so does the widespread and violent crackdown by the Belarusian authorities. Meanwhile, international attention has partly switched to other crises. In light of this, questions remain both on what the international community could have done differently for the cause of a peaceful change in Belarus and how to move forward.

In light of this, the policy brief "Baltic and Nordic Responses to the 2020 Post-Election Crisis in Belarus" takes on and compares the reactions of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden in light of the Belarus 2020 post-election crisis and assesses implications for the bilateral and multilateral cooperation of the Baltics and Nordics with Belarus.



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PREFACE

The 2020 Belarus' post-election crisis in many ways took the international community by surprise. It was by no means the first time when clashes between the institutions of the authoritarian state and citizens unfolded. However, this time the scale of protests and the brutality of the crackdown was unprecedented.

A half year has passed since the first of the massive protests took place in Minsk. Opposition leaders are either jailed or exiled. But protests endure, and so does the widespread and violent crackdown by the Belarusian authorities. Meanwhile, international attention has partly switched to other crises. In light of this, questions remain both on what the international community could have done differently for the cause of peaceful change in Belarus and how to move forward.

The Baltic states are among the most immediate neighbours of Belarus. The road from the grip of the Soviet Union to the status of fully fledged membership in the European Union (hereafter – the EU) and NATO has transformed the Baltics into, by and large, Western countries with “Eastern memories”. This aspect grants them a particularly clear understanding of aspirations of Belarusians.

The Nordic countries are less engaged with Belarus, both historically and recently. At the same time, they have often punched above their weight in international relations, and have often been the voice of conscience when it comes to fostering liberties and freedoms around the globe. It is important to note that the Nordic support was instrumental in the Westernisation and democratisation of the Baltic states.

This policy brief assesses the reactions of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden in light of the Belarus post-election crisis. The reaction of liberal democracies to popular uprisings in authoritarian countries of today echoes the dilemmas faced by the democratic countries during the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

The following analysis and scorecards underline that geography and prior interaction matter most. The Baltic and the Nordic countries approached the crisis differently. Some of them overperformed, while others could have done more.

Due to the geographic proximity, in Autumn 2020, the crisis in Belarus became one of the top national agenda issues in the Baltics. Lithuania, in particular, but also Latvia became frontrunners in driving international response via the EU, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the United Nations, as well as other formats.

Lithuania's activity did not come as a surprise, given its dynamic relationship with Belarus in the past, put succinctly in the headline of the Lithuanian chapter – *Lithuania: from another (failed) attempt at rapprochement with the regime to the pacesetter of EU's sanctions policy.* Meanwhile, Latvia's gradual stiffening towards Belarus was to some extent unexpected, following decades of lively political dialogue and economic interaction. This dynamic is encapsulated in the headline for the country chapter – *Latvia: u-turning from economics first to gradual blackout.* Still, economic interaction and expedience seemed to be on both countries' mind, as their sanctions against Belarus did not directly target economic realm.

For Estonia, Belarus has never been among the foreign policy priorities. Therefore, its response was comparatively modest, and measures were initiated more out of solidarity with the neighbours rather than out of a genuine interest in solving the crisis. Therefore, the chapter takes the headline *Estonia: from a side-role player to an accidental hero.*

For most of the Nordic countries, Belarus was a country that barely existed prior to the crisis. Rhetoric became their main foreign policy instrument. Before the crisis, most of them mainly had engaged with Belarus indirectly – via international organisations, therefore their response to the crisis was also delivered mostly via multilateral formats. On the one hand, the role of the Nordic countries was instrumental at achieving progress in the respective formats, in the EU in particular. On the other hand, it indicated a lower level of interest than could have been expected given their history of values first.

Similarly to the case of the Baltic countries, reactions of the Nordic countries were not entirely homogenous. Sweden, the most active in its relations with Belarus prior the crisis, and Finland, which had re-invigorated the dialogue with Belarus after the revision of the EU policy in 2015, initially favoured a dialogue with A. Lukashenka. Things changed to a non-recognition approach and urge for sanctions, as the respective headlines of the country chapters denote it – *Sweden: an attempt to normalize diplomatic relations turns to non-recognition* and *Finland: from observing from a distance to advocating a collective response.* Denmark, another EU member, immediately advocated collective sanctions – *Denmark: from Belarus as a white spot to its perception as a “shameful spot”.*

Norway and Iceland, on their part, joined the EU sanctions, but were not among the headliners in the Belarusian crisis, as the chapters *Norway: from insignificance to increasingly deep concern* and *Iceland: from minimal engagement to condemning the election* describe.















Regional coordination via the Nordic and the Nordic-Baltic-Eight formats could have been conducted in a more comprehensive manner, though they did serve as a catalyst for position alignment and the Nordic cooperation increased practical support to the Belarusian civil society projects (through the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Vilnius). However, politically none of the Nordic countries went as far as the Baltics did, namely, by sanctioning the Belarusian authorities.

All in all, the Belarusian crisis illustrated that the dilemmas of liberal democracies lie not only between economic cooperation and moral causes, but also between doing something and doing enough. In a broader context, the crisis yet again underlined that Russia still calls the shots in places both near and far from its borders - however far the Belarusian Western neighbours would be ready to go, Russia seems to be ready to go even further.

Denmark

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		1	2	3	4	5
		negligible		comprehensive		
INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	■	■			
	ECONOMIC	■	■			
	SOCIETAL	■	■			
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	■				
	ECONOMIC	■				
	SOCIETAL	■	■			
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimisation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	■	■	■	■	
	Societal resonance in Denmark	■	■			
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	■				
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	■				
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	■				
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	■	■	■	■	
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	■	■	■		
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	■	■	■		

* see page 36 for scorecard explanation

FROM BELARUS AS A WHITE SPOT TO ITS PERCEPTION AS A "SHAMEFUL SPOT"

Traditionally, Belarus has been a 'white spot' on the Danish mental map due to, e.g., its close proximity to Russia. The Danish government has been less concerned with official diplomatic relations and more with business and the Belarusian civil society. After the election of 2020, Danish media, society and government have followed events in Belarus closely. The government has condemned the regime's actions and has been at the forefront of determining EU sanctions against it.

INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, the bilateral political interaction between Denmark and Belarus has been very modest. In 2009, Denmark and Belarus exchanged visits and consultations at the level of Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs regarding the expansion of trade and investment. However, the relations rolled back after the presidential elections in Belarus in 2010, resulting in the decline of trade. After the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, Denmark was responding optimistically to the diplomatic manoeuvres from Minsk, finding it important to sustain the positive development in Belarus-EU relations. Political dialogue between Belarus and Denmark before the elections in 2020 was conducted mainly through international organisations and via inter-parliamentary meetings.

Unlike Sweden, Denmark does not have an embassy in Minsk, and the Danish Ambassador in Moscow, who is also accredited to five Central Asian countries, represents Danish interests in Belarus. Since November 2014, Belarus' interests in Denmark have been represented by the Belarusian embassy in Helsinki, focusing mostly on economic relations.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark has been providing assistance to Belarus during the last decade in order to promote democratic development and to prevent human trafficking. Belarus was included in the Neighbourhood Programme (5,3 million EUR for the period 2008-2011), mainly strengthening the few independent media and journalists and their ability to broadcast balanced information.¹ The Foreign Ministry's Programme Against Human Trafficking in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (3,9 million EUR for 2009-2011) focused on preventive activities, law enforcement, and capacity building of authorities and civil society organisations. Finally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark was implementing a civil society programme in Belarus (1,7 million EUR for 2008-2009) promoting respect for human rights.²

Turning to trade and investments, the major Belarusian exports to Denmark are rapeseed oil, medical appliances, plastic ware, timber, wood containers and fertilisers. Denmark enjoys surplus in trade with Belarus, with big companies such as "Carlsberg" and "Grundfoss" being present on the Belarusian market. The accumulated volume of investments from Denmark to Belarus as of January 1, 2020 amounted to 31,7 million EUR, of which 30,6 million EUR were direct investments.³ In contrast to the Swedish IKEA who has been fighting for years to open a wholesale in Belarus, the Danish Jysk has been more successful, opening several stores around the country.

At the societal level, the Danish Culture Institute (DCI) has been arranging annual Nordic Lights Film Festivals in Minsk in cooperation with the Nordic Council of Ministers since 2015. In 2020, DCI co-managed a virtual Hans Christian Andersen artwork competition for children and youth from all over Belarus as well as other smaller projects. Regarding sports, Denmark and Belarus have competed in virtually all sports on the Olympic agenda under the auspices of the independent international sports federations. There is no direct flight connection between Minsk and Copenhagen, affecting the tourist flows negatively. The share of Danish tourists in Belarus is negligible. A low-cost flight from Copenhagen to Kaunas by Ryanair created an infrastructure of flight buses to Minsk and was used by travellers from Belarus to Denmark before the COVID-19.

POST-CRISIS COOPERATION

Official Danish relations with Belarus have been negligible after the elections. The volume of trade between Denmark and Belarus remained roughly the same as in the previous years.⁴ The main advantage for smaller Danish companies in Belarus has been its participation in the Eurasian Customs Union with Russia, offering the same trade benefits and cheaper

prices. However, the effects of the crisis are likely to be more visible in the future. It is difficult to estimate the effect of the crisis on the volume of tourist flows because it coincided with the COVID-19 restrictions.

REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS

Denmark swiftly condemned the incident with the Danish journalist who was attacked by the law enforcement authorities in Minsk while filming the protests. On August 18, 2020, the Ambassador of Belarus to Finland and Denmark Aleksei Samosuev officially apologised for the incident.⁵ Jeppe Kofod also condemned the Belarusian regime's assault on the press and peaceful protesters and expressed the intention to take the matter further in the EU.⁶

The country has been one of the drivers behind applying the EU pressure on Belarus. Denmark as an EU member state has been in favour of a strict EU sanctions scheme and condemned the initial deadlock for imposing coordinated sanctions. The situation in Belarus was discussed in the Committee of Foreign Affairs on August 14. Mr. Kofod suggested raising the issue among even more countries than just the EU 27 and has therefore instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to investigate whether there are opportunities for further reactions from, e.g., the OSCE or the Council of Europe. The Danish reaction towards the secret inauguration on September 23th was also immediate and sharp. Denmark and the rest of the EU refused to recognise A. Lukashenka as the leader of Belarus.⁷

Denmark also used regional formats to condemn the events. The Nordic foreign ministers issued a joint statement from their meeting (N5) on Bornholm (Denmark) on September 17, 2020.⁸ They supported a "swift imposition of sanctions by the EU", but no specific Nordic sanctions were decided upon. During the annual summit between the Presidencies of the Baltic Assembly and the Nordic Council held digitally on December 14, 2020, it was made clear that Baltic and Nordic parliamentary co-operation supports the people of Belarus in their pursuit of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, civil society and media pluralism.⁹ Apart from the Nordic arena, Danish representative in the UN Human Rights Council supported the resolution condemning the violations of human rights. Within the OSCE Permanent Council, Denmark continued following the EU position and has taken a parallel stance by invoking the Moscow Mechanism on September 17, together with 16 other participating states. Furthermore, the Danish Delegation was the one presenting the Moscow Mechanism Report during the 1288 PC meeting on November 5. Jeppe Kofod has also argued that sanctions should be supplemented by pressure from NGOs and free media.¹⁰















At the practical level, following the elections on 20 August, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately allocated 67 200 EUR to NGOs International Media Support (IMS) and Danish Institute Against Torture. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has granted 6,7 million EUR for the creation of the New Democracy Fund (2020-2022) to provide support to civil society in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Danish Publishing House "Politiken" gave a Freedom award (13 300 EUR) to S. Tsikhanouskaya on October 22, 2020. During her visit, she had a number of meetings with top Danish officials: Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod, representatives of the Danish Parliament and the Nordic Council of Ministers. The prestigious Sonning Prize in literature (134 000 EUR) will be given to the Belarusian writer and member of Coordination Council S. Alexievich in April 2021.

Turning to the societal level, the first demonstration in Denmark took place on June 24, 2020, where about 20 Belarusians living in Denmark protested against arrests of opposition leaders in Belarus before the elections. There were several demonstrations in August and September, mainly in Copenhagen in front of the Danish Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Copenhagen City Council and individual pickets in front of the Embassy of Cyprus

in Copenhagen. Two demonstrations were held in Århus and one in Herning. The last big demonstration took place during Ms Tsikhanouskaya's visit to Copenhagen on 22-23 October. A few flash-mobs took place in November-December, the most significant one in front of the Russian Embassy after Raman Bandarenka's death.

The Danish Culture Institute in Riga responded to the events of August 2020 by creating several documentary performance-theatre productions addressing the role of women in the current protests and the general situation of gender equality and sexism, with a particular focus on issues related to violence, community and empowerment. A series of projects within Cultural Rights and Public Spacemaking are also being planned.

In the sphere of sports, the discussion of moving the World Ice Hockey Championship 2021 from Belarus has been the most prominent. The Danish Ice Hockey Federation did not denounce its participation completely even after Raman Bandarenka's death in November 2020. Due to the continuous international pressure and not the least the boycott by the sponsors, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) decided on January 20 to move the championship from Minsk "due to security reasons". Denmark has offered to host the championship in Herning, but the IIFC decided to host the events in Riga.

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INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	■	■			
	ECONOMIC	■	■	■		
	SOCIETAL	■	■	■		
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	■				
	ECONOMIC	■	■			
	SOCIETAL	■	■	■		
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimisation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	■	■	■	■	
	Societal resonance in Estonia	■	■			
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	■	■	■		
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	■	■	■		
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	■	■	■	■	
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	■	■	■	■	
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	■	■			
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	■	■			

FROM SIDE-ROLE PLAYER TO ACCIDENTAL HERO

Estonian government did not have enough inner coherence to come up with policies that would have had an impact on the situation in Belarus. Yet on the diplomatic arena and within the different international structures, the diplomacy did play its role. As for a major part of the Estonian population compassion and solidarity towards Belarus was not an urgent issue, the government allowed itself a mixed response.

INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

Estonia's relations with Belarus cannot be described with adjectives "close" or "friendly" even during the period before the August 2020 presidential elections. On the contrary, Minsk has frequently served as a pinpoint of Estonian public criticism towards the renaissance of sovietism, including the critical stand on the human rights situation in Belarus.

Since the establishing of the diplomatic relations on April 6, 1992, only few significant visits have taken place, and the last time the Estonian Minister of Foreign affairs visited Minsk was 12 years ago. Other members of the Estonian cabinet who have visited Minsk carried a portfolio of agriculture and rural life. A similar dynamic took place in the other direction as well – Deputy Prime Minister V. Maciusheuski was briefly in Tallinn in 2017 with the topic of discussion being "the Eastern Partnership of EU", not bilateral relations.¹¹

Trade volumes also have not been remarkable, yet the imports from Belarus amount to 70-80 million euros annually. Belarus is ranking 27th among trade partners and the volume is less than 2 % of the total trade amount (35,4 billion EUR).¹² Latest trade statistics are not yet available for the last quarter of 2020, hence the assessment of the possible impacts of the democracy crisis cannot be given.

The scale of tourism between the countries does not reach the levels that would be separately indicated by the Estonian Office of Statistics and the figures are included into the group of CIS.¹³ Belarusian statistics provide an even more complex picture, stating that about 40% of tourists come from Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Ukraine, Germany, China, Spain, Estonia, UK and Israel.¹⁴

REACTION TO THE CRISIS

Given the low activity in bilateral relations, the change in policies in political, economic or cultural fields is not so easy to notice or quantify. However, the change in rhetoric by Estonian authorities towards more focused sanction policies and calls for giving democratic opposition fair treatment, may indicate that an impact to those three areas could exist.

RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS

Since August 2020, Estonian response has been mostly through multilateral diplomacy. First it followed the leadership of the Lithuanian government and the joint Baltic response was formulated. On the presidential level, the Baltic 3 were joined by Poland.¹⁵ It is relevant to note, that due to its internal political situation, the traditional "leading country" Poland somewhat restrained from applying its full energy and potential in the beginning of the crisis. Perhaps that explains why the NB8 group of governments were quicker.¹⁶ The most prominent effort to keep international focus made by Estonia nests in the country's role as a rotating member of the UN Security Council, which duly discussed the subject at the meeting in November: "*Estonia has promised to keep what is happening in Belarus under international attention and keep the UN Security Council focused on the situation if necessary,*" Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu stressed.¹⁷

In sanctioning those responsible for violence against peaceful demonstrators and election fraud, Estonia was not the quickest and not the most far-reaching country. The composition of the Prime Minister J.Ratas' government could be one of the reasons behind such policy. The Center Party traditionally has a strange spiritual link to the so called "Russian world", and the Estonian National Conservative Party, which ideologically could be compared to self-styled Trumpists, consciously or unconsciously were















courting the local Russian speakers at the same time. By the end of September, the list was adopted at the cabinet meeting and restrictions for travelling were applied to 130 Belarusian officials, with A. Lukashenka at the top. To be fair, the first list consisting of 30 people was adopted already at the end of August.¹⁸

The Estonian Ambassador was called home for consultations from Minsk in October, after Belarus demanded that the Polish and Lithuanian embassies reduce the number of diplomats working in Minsk and the joint EU response was agreed upon.¹⁹

Active lobbying was launched in October to cancel the Ice Hockey World Championship in Belarus and on January 18th 2021 the decision was taken by the governing body, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF).²⁰ Even though the outcome was probably influenced by official sponsors rather than national governments, it was presented as a result of Estonian Foreign Minister's efforts. Credit on social media was claimed by Mr. M. Luik, a political adviser of Minister Reinsalu.²¹

Events in Belarus, the violence against peaceful protests, women in particular, was akin to a moment of truth for the Estonian civil society as well. The government of the time had displayed hardly veiled male-chauvinist attitudes towards women, however, despite that attitude, a delegation of women was invited to Estonia in November and was received on a relatively appropriate level. The initiative was taken by the Women` Support Center in Pärnu. Another reality check caused by the Belarus crisis was the solidarity of Estonians with the Belarusian movement for democracy. On April 23, 2020 a human chain in support of the cause was organised in all Baltic capitals and elsewhere in the world. The main organiser in Tallinn, Petra Lizaveta Maliukevich, politely explained the small number of participants was due to rainy weather. But when around 30 000 people gathered in Vilnius, in Tallinn it was probably 20 times less.²² The demonstrations in front of the Belarus Embassy in Tallinn drew a modest crowd as well.

The political action initiatives have not been supported wholeheartedly by the majority of Belarusians living in Estonia. There are approximately 12 000 residents of Belarusian origin in Estonia, represented by several NGOs, e.g., the cultural association "Spadtsõna". The "Estonian Friends of Belarus" Facebook group has less than 1000 members and their events generally do not resonate in media, for instance calls to mourn the death of R. Bandarenka in Tartu received 15 *likes*. A group of 32 Estonian cultural dignitaries addressed the Government with a public letter, demanding humanitarian support for Belarusian students, recruitment of IT personnel from Belarus and support in the treatment of the victims of the repressions. No massive programme has been launched since that demand. On the contrary, it has been reported that in December visa restrictions were applied to entrepreneurs by Estonian consulate in Minsk.²³

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INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	■	■	■		
	ECONOMIC	■	■			
	SOCIETAL	■	■			
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	■	■			
	ECONOMIC	■	■			
	SOCIETAL	■	■			
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimisation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	■	■			
	Societal resonance in Finland	■	■	■	■	
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	■	■			
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	■				
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	■				
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	■	■	■	■	
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	■	■			
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	■				

FROM OBSERVING AT A DISTANCE TO ADVOCATING A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE

No qualitative shift has taken place in the Finnish policy towards Belarus amidst the ongoing crisis. Although official bilateral relations seem to have been put on hold, the approach to engage with Belarus from a distance through multilateral institutions has remained unaltered. If compared with the responses of its neighbours, Finland's stance has been reactive rather than proactive, demonstrating eagerness to work through multilateral institutions rather than advancing bilateral or regional responses.

The given policy approach can be explained by the weakness of bilateral cultural, societal and economic ties with Belarus prior to 2020, as well as Finland's geopolitical position as a neighbour to Russia with no membership in military alliances. Due to the close relations between Russia and Belarus, it can be hypothesised that the Finnish response to the crisis in Belarus was informed and affected by the Finnish policy towards Russia.²⁴

INTERACTION PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

Bilateral interaction between Finland and Belarus in political, economic, and social spheres has traditionally been limited.²⁵ Interpersonal and business connections to Belarus have been weak, with Finland hosting a very small and until 2020 unorganised Belarusian diaspora. Finnish companies have shown some interest in the Belarusian markets, but bilateral trade has been modest.²⁶ For the last twelve years, Finnish export to Belarus has typically ranged from 0,1 % to 0,2 %, with a peak of 0,5 % in July 2017. Import from Belarus has been equally limited and has never surpassed the 1 % threshold of total import. In 2019, the import from Belarus to Finland totalled 24 million EUR, while total export stood at 77 million EUR.²⁷

Instead of bilateral interaction, Finland's engagement with Belarus has primarily taken place on multilateral platforms such as the European Union, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe.²⁸ Finland has in general been supportive of Belarus' participation in European and Nordic programmes and projects, including the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, especially in areas such as environment, women's rights and culture.²⁹ Finland has periodically drawn international attention to Belarus' bleak human rights situation, e. g. during the UN Universal Periodic Review in 2015.³⁰ The Belarusian poet and activist Uladzimir Nyaklyayeu lived in Finland under Finnish PEN's residency programme in 2000–2004.³¹

Bilateral political interaction with A. Lukashenka's regime was activated (in fact, for the first time in history) after the EU's gradual revision of its Belarus policy from 2015 onwards. 2018 witnessed the establishment of parliamentary friendship groups in both countries, and in 2019, Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto paid a visit to Minsk with his Swedish counterpart Ann Linde, with meetings with President Lukashenka and Prime Minister Uladzimir Makei. Wille Rydman, the Finnish MP and Chairman of the parliamentary Belarus-Finland Friendship Group, explained the need to engage with Lukashenka's regime from a geopolitical perspective:

*"The human rights situation in Belarus is obviously still unacceptable. It is still in Europe's interest to advocate Belarus's status as a sovereign state. The risk with isolating Belarus from us as a form of a punishment is that the country's human rights situation might not improve and that rather the Russian dominance over Belarus could become even more pressing. Closer relations to the West can on the other hand create at least a small incentive to create positive reforms in the country."*³²

The introduction of visa free entrance to Belarus, first during the 2014 Ice Hockey Championship, has attracted some Finnish tourists to Belarus, chartered by the convenient direct *Belavia* flight from Helsinki to Minsk.³³ There is no available data on the flow of tourists between Finland and Belarus,³⁴ but in mainstream blog posts written before the COVID-19 pandemic Belarus would be described as an exotic, cheap, and boring destination for Finnish travellers.³⁵

POST CRISIS COOPERATION

The political turmoil that followed the fraudulent presidential election of August 9 has not triggered a qualitative shift in the Finnish–Belarusian relations. Finland has continued to channel its Belarus policy through multilateral institutions and remained cautious in its

official response to the crisis. Finland has channelled its response, mirroring the official European stance, through multilateral institutions like the EU, the Council of Europe, the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, as well as the Nordic Council.

REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS

On August 10, Foreign Minister Haavisto stressed that it was still too early to officially comment on the events in Belarus, although he did admit that the official election results were "*overshadowed by doubt*".³⁶ During the negotiations of the first round of EU sanctions, Finland was allegedly among those member states that insisted on keeping a seat for Lukashenka at the negotiation table, thus opposing adding him on the EU sanctions list. Speaking in hindsight, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin acknowledged that it would have been justified to add Lukashenka on the EU sanctions list, since he has not shown a willingness to engage in dialogue or to find any solution to the situation in Belarus.³⁷ Especially early on, the need to officially engage with Lukashenka's administration was voiced both by the Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto, who stressed the need for ("a genuine") dialogue between the Lukashenka government and his opponents.³⁸ Since August, the situation in Belarus has been discussed in the Finnish Parliament on multiple occasions.

Engaging with Belarus through international organisations has consistently been the Finnish approach in the post-crisis era.³⁹ Finnish nationals were appointed as rapporteurs on Belarus in both the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Nordic Council. Finland was among the participating states that invoked the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism to examine alleged human rights violations in Belarus. What is more, the Finnish approach to supporting Belarusian civil society both prior to this year's political crisis and after has been to channel such assistance primarily through multilateral institutions, such as the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and the Northern Dimension programmes.⁴⁰ Direct support is limited, and no post-crisis assistance has been reported in public.⁴¹ In a similar vein, neither unilateral nor multilateral regional sanctions, nor practical support to the Belarusian opposition have been reported in official sources.⁴² While Finland did not act proactively to delegitimise Lukashenka's presidency and support the civil society or the political opposition, it has diligently echoed the EU's position on Belarusian matters.

Head of the Finnish Liaison Office in Minsk has participated in all joint support events of EU representatives. However, its public communications, including in the social media, only features "usual" posts in the sphere of cultural diplomacy (e. g. several posts on a big Moomins exhibition), without any mention of the ongoing repression that are featured in some other embassies' outlets.⁴³















In contrast, the societal reaction to the Belarusian crisis has been significant, considering the limited pre-existing links between the two countries. The election and its aftermath have been covered extensively in the Finnish media, perhaps explained by Finland's strong human rights community and the official discourse that argues that Finland aims to pursue a "*human rights-based foreign and security policy*".⁴⁴ Several support marches have been organised in Helsinki regularly by members of the newly organised diaspora and Finnish human rights community, but each of them has attracted only a few dozen people.⁴⁵ Perhaps surprisingly, public debate has been particularly vigorous on the ice hockey sphere, with *Jokerit* ice hockey team fans pushing for a boycott of the team's scheduled Minsk game on September 3.⁴⁶ The public pressure over hockey has also had an impact on the level of high politics. From November onwards, the Finnish Ice Hockey Association was officially against the organisation of the 2021 International Ice Hockey Championship in Belarus unless the political situation in the country would improve.⁴⁷ Once Lukashenka had demonstrated his intention to make no political concessions, Finland was allegedly working actively to remove the Championship from Minsk.⁴⁸

Economic interaction between Finland and Belarus after the fraudulent election of August 2020 has continued largely unchanged. However, in December 2020, Liaison Office of Finland in Minsk published a gloomy report on the Belarusian market opportunities for Finnish companies. The report points to the potential risks for Finnish companies that continue operating in Belarus or consider entering the Belarusian market.⁴⁹

Iceland

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		1	2	3	4	5
		negligible		comprehensive		
INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	■				
	ECONOMIC	■	■			
	SOCIETAL	■				
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	■				
	ECONOMIC	■	■			
	SOCIETAL	■				
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	■	■			
	Societal resonance in Iceland	■				
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	■				
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	■				
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	■	■	■		
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	■	■	■		
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	■				
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	■				

FROM MINIMAL ENGAGEMENT TO CONDEMNING THE ELECTION

Relations between Iceland and Belarus have remained minimal over the years and the post-crisis political, economic and societal relations seem to remain unchanged, – i.e., they have stayed minimal. The Icelandic government has taken a stand on the international arena and joined in on sanctions and statements through its multilateral cooperation.

INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE ELECTIONS

Political relations between Iceland and Belarus have remained minimal over the years, and there have never been official visits between representatives of the two states. Iceland has an Honorary Consul in Belarus, Aliaksandr Mashenski, who was appointed in 2005, and the Icelandic Embassy in Moscow has representation in Belarus. There is thus active political interaction between the two states – although it is not as robust as Iceland's relations with most other European states. In recent years, however, Belarus has shown increased interest in strengthening the two states' bilateral relationship.⁵⁰

There have been some economic relations between Iceland and Belarus, as exports from Iceland to Belarus were 35 million EUR in 2019, while imports from Belarus were 13 million EUR. That same year, total exports from Iceland were 5 billion EUR and total import was 6 billion EUR, based on the currency exchange towards the end of the year 2019. This means that exports from Iceland to Belarus were 0,7% of Iceland's total exports and that imports from Belarus to Iceland accounted for 0,2% of Iceland's total imports.⁵¹ An indication of increased interest in trade between the countries can be seen in the decision to let the Icelandic Food and Veterinary Authority begin a special assessment, in collaboration with Icelandic companies, on the feasibility of trading animal products with the Eurasian Economic Union. It is, however, uncertain whether this will eventually lead to an increase in trade between the countries in question.⁵²

Societal relations have remained minimal throughout the years. The Red Cross in Iceland has, however, operated two projects in cooperation with the Red Cross in Belarus with a grant from the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs from 2010-2017. Tourism has also remained low throughout the years. According to Statistics Iceland, the number of tourists from Belarus to Iceland was around 300 individuals a year in 2013-2015 but had increased to 2419 in the year 2019.⁵³ The number dropped significantly in the 2020 with only 208 visits from Belarus to Iceland, most likely due to COVID-19.

POST CRISIS COOPERATION

Post-crisis political cooperation with Belarus as of the end of 2020 seems to remain unchanged – i.e., it remains minimal. The Icelandic government has nonetheless criticised the Belarusian government for the systematic human rights violations in Belarus and taken part in multilateral sanctions and joint statements and discussions in regional and international cooperation. Economic effects of those actions remain to be seen.

REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS















The Icelandic government has repeatedly raised its worries over the news that an extensive election fraud has taken place in Belarus, that the presidential elections had been seriously flawed, not in accordance with international standards, and that no international regulators had been able to monitor the execution of the elections. The Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs released a statement on Twitter condemning the election: "*We stand in solidarity with the people of [Belarus]. The violence and persecution by the #Lukashenka regime cannot be tolerated.*"⁵⁴ Actions from other politicians have remained minimal, but Rósa Björk Brynjólfssdóttir, a member of Parliament and 1st Deputy Chair of the Icelandic Foreign Affairs Committee, wrote an article where she encouraged the Icelandic government to fully support human rights in Belarus "*with words and actions that matter and have an impact.*"⁵⁵

The Icelandic government has repeatedly expressed its grave concern over reports of widespread fraud in the presidential elections Belarus and criticised that the election did not meet international standards with no international observers present. However, the

Government of Iceland has not specifically declared that it does not recognise Lukashenka as the official president of Belarus since in Icelandic law such recognitions are normally only granted to states, but not to specific governments or political leaders. Furthermore, the Icelandic government has not directly supported the Belarusian opposition, e.g., by hosting of exiles. The Icelandic government has not granted the Belarusian opposition any direct financial support.

The Icelandic government has adopted EU sanctions and was among the 17 participating States of the OSCE that established independent research on the human rights violations of the Belarusian government. Furthermore, Iceland has participated in discussions on the Belarusian crisis in the Permanent Council of OSCE. Iceland has also been part of the Nordic response to the crisis, that is the joint statement of the Foreign Ministers of the NB8 states and the Nordic states,⁵⁶ and took part in the Nordic Council meeting with S. Tsikhanouskaya in September 2020, where the Council officially declared its support to the opposition in Belarus.⁵⁷ Iceland has furthermore participated in discussions on the Belarusian crisis within the UN Human Rights Council, which is in line with Iceland's UN Human Rights Council membership – and might thus explain the emphasis Iceland has put on condemning the human rights violations by Lukashenka's regime. Moreover, the Minister addressed an open meeting of the UN Security Council with a joint statement of the Nordic states on Belarus where he condemned the elections. *"We cannot stand idly by and hesitate in our criticism, when faced with such grave human rights violations and restrictions of freedoms"* stated the Minister.⁵⁸

There is some interest amongst the Icelandic public on the crises in Belarus, but it does not appear to have a strong opinion on the matter. Lukashenka is not taken seriously as a leader, and Belarus appears to be a bit too distant for the Icelandic public to truly invest in developments within the country. There were for example no support rallies held in Iceland. There is scarce evidence of a particular reaction of the Icelandic public to the events in Belarus, and it is thus difficult to evaluate how strong a stance the Icelandic nation has towards the situation. Furthermore, Iceland has not participated in direct practical support to the Belarusian society, e.g., with loosened visa policies or projects of civil society. However, Amnesty International in Iceland issued a special call for the end of violence against peaceful protesters.⁵⁹

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INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	█	█	█	█	
	ECONOMIC	█	█	█		
	SOCIETAL	█	█	█	█	
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	█				
	ECONOMIC	█	█	█		
	SOCIETAL	█	█	█		
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimisation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	█	█	█	█	
	Societal resonance in Latvia	█	█	█	█	█
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	█	█	█	█	
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	█	█	█	█	
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	█	█	█	█	
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	█	█	█	█	█
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	█	█	█		
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	█	█			

U-TURNING FROM ECONOMICS FIRST TO GRADUAL BLACKOUT

Given the positive bilateral relationship before the Belarusian elections of 2020, Latvia approached the situation quite pragmatically. Political and practical response was clear – signalling condemnation of the fraudulent elections and the subsequent crackdown, though the tone was tactically modest to avoid "burning bridges" entirely with authorities of Belarus. Currently, Latvia can be considered an extensively proactive player in addressing the Belarus crisis of 2020 compared with the Nordic countries and the EU countries at large, yet not an absolute frontrunner.

PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

Latvia's long-term approach vis-a-vis Belarus has been pragmatic and focused on the common economic and cross border cooperation interests rather than on extensive criticism over the domestically problematic areas in Belarus. However, concern over the human rights violations was regularly voiced, thus upholding the official EU position.

In the past 10 years, the political dialogue was particularly intense. It was dominated by economic grounds and Latvia's ambition to move forward with the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative as the national foreign policy niche within the EU. Exchanges of official bilateral visits took place almost annually from 2009 to 2020,⁶⁰ sometimes even causing incomprehension on behalf of the EU counterparts. E.g., in 2008, a controversial meeting of two Prime Ministers was held on Latvia-Belarus border while sanction regime was in force on Belarusian authorities.⁶¹ The last bilateral (annual) meeting between the Foreign Ministers of the two countries was held as recently as in July 2020 in Riga.⁶² Earlier the same year Latvia's Prime Minister visited A. Lukashenka in Minsk seeking closer cooperation in transport and logistics.⁶³ In 2020 Lukashenka was about to visit Latvia himself, but the endeavour was cancelled due to COVID-19.⁶⁴ This would have been his second visit to the EU (first was to Austria) after lifting travel restrictions in 2016.

Cooperation with Belarus is important for particular economic sectors and in terms of societal contacts since the countries share a border, and Belarusians are the second largest ethnic minority (after Russians) in Latvia.⁶⁵

Most economic interaction has been taking place within the transit and logistics sector. Belarus freights constituted about a fifth of Latvia's rail transit in recent years, thus being the second largest rail cargo supplier (the main and leading is Russia), with other suppliers way behind.⁶⁶ The country was also perceived as a strategic partner in attracting China's goods going to Europe under the loosely defined Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁶⁷ and 17+1 format.⁶⁸ More recently, cheaper electricity from the Astravyets Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) has provided economically favourable prospects for Latvia, but also lead to deteriorated relations with the neighbouring Lithuania. Construction of NPP some 20 km from Lithuania's border raised safety concerns in the country. While Lithuania was actively lobbying for boycotting electricity purchase at the EU level, Latvia was negotiating economic gains with Belarus instead.

Despite geographic proximity and close political cooperation, Belarus has not been among the key trade partners for Latvia. In 2019, it was the 16th with total trade turnover of 633,3 million EUR. Moreover, Latvia have had a negative trade balance with Belarus for years. Export to Belarus in 2019 was at 238,7 million EUR and accounted for 1,3 % of the total export volume, while import reached 394,5 million EUR, i.e., 2,1% from the total import volume. Accumulated foreign direct investment from Belarus stood at 78 million EUR or 0,5 % of all accumulated investments up to 2019. Latvia had invested 79 million EUR in Belarus by then, which constituted 5 % of its total external investments.⁶⁹

People-to-people exchange in terms of tourism was in favour of Latvia. Around 23 thousand Belarusian guests stayed in Latvia for more than one day in 2019 (number 8 among overnight travellers visiting Latvia).⁷⁰ In the same year, 10,5 thousand guests from Latvia had chosen Belarus as their travel destination, listing the country number 4 among incoming tourism countries.⁷¹ Furthermore, both nations have been regularly exchanging cultural experiences and pursuing cooperation under the EU Cross-Border Cooperation Programme and the "Country of Lakes" Euroregion. At least three cities in Latvia (Daugavpils, Liepāja, Ventpils) have twin cities in Belarus.

POST-CRISIS COOPERATION

Post-crisis cooperation with Belarus has been limited to minimum and Latvia's political stance has changed significantly. Rhetoric accents shifted from praising strategic economic partnership⁷² to condemning human rights violations and urging for societal aid.⁷³

In terms of economics, significant downfalls were not expected due to the modest trade relations prior to the crisis.⁷⁴ The most vulnerable cooperation area has been transit, as it could have been leveraged to retaliate against Latvia's proactive position on Belarus. Until now, shifts in cargo directions have not been implemented. Other dropdowns have not been witnessed apart from long-term tendencies and COVID-19 pandemic effects. In contrary, Latvia took an active position in attracting fleeing entrepreneurs from Belarus. Around 70 enterprises considered moving to Latvia and 17 had made their decision by October 2020.⁷⁵

REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS

Due to geographic proximity, the Belarus crisis attracted wide publicity in Latvia. A lively political debate has been taking place and societal solidarity movements were launched already before the 2020 elections. Protest campaigns gathered people in front of the Belarus Embassy in Riga and support marches were held. Some of them were organised by the Belarusian community. Even if not numerically large, events were symbolic, e.g., solidarity march with Belarusian women,⁷⁶ cross-border solidarity chain along Latvia's border with Belarus,⁷⁷ launching of charity campaign *#FreeBelarus*⁷⁸ and, most recently, staging a light show on the Daugava river in the colours of the white-red-white flag.⁷⁹

Political response followed. Latvia was among the first countries calling for coordinated EU repose⁸⁰ and individual sanctions against Belarusian officials.⁸¹ Significant efforts were dedicated at main international and regional formats – EU (rising issue at the Council of the EU, the European Council),⁸² OSCE (supporting invoking of the Moscow Mechanism – sending a mission to examine and assist in resolve of a crisis related to human rights violations),⁸³ UN (supporting establishing of a UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Belarus).⁸⁴ The Belarus crisis was kept on the agenda at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,⁸⁵ NB8 meetings⁸⁶ and the Baltic Assembly.⁸⁷

Since the EU's decision-making process on the collective sanctions was slow, response measures were exponentially escalated nationally and regionally. Initial statements and calls for action⁸⁸ were supplemented by travel ban on A. Lukashenka, his eldest son and more than 150 Belarusian officials across the Baltic countries.⁸⁹ Temporary suspension of diplomatic ties of the highest rank followed.⁹⁰ Latvia's withdrawal from major state-level cooperation projects took place, including the organisation of a joint Ice Hockey World Championship in 2021⁹¹ and the intention to purchase electricity from the newly built Astravyets NPP.⁹²















Latvia's Embassy in Minsk pursued active foreign policy on the spot. It joined initiatives of the diplomatic corps, such as ambassadors' solidarisation visit to S. Alexievich, the Belarusian writer, Noble laureate and opposition activist, and laying flowers at the Pushkinskaya metro station, where a protester had been killed.

At the same time, Latvia's economic interests were kept on the priority list when response actions were initiated. Upon Latvia's request, a regime-affiliated influential businessman A. Aleksin was not included in the EU sanction list since some of his companies are important employers in the peripheral regions of Latvia.⁹³

Subsequently, despite a seemingly extensive response, Foreign Minister E. Rinkēvičs described it as "*not a punishment instrument but rather a political gesture and pressure.*"⁹⁴

The implementation of "stick policy" was accompanied by a campaign of assistance to civil society.⁹⁵ Psychological and medical assistance, judicial services and alternative media were supported.⁹⁶ In total, 200 000 EUR were granted for the purpose.⁹⁷ Additionally, visa policy was loosened for prioritised employment groups, e.g., IT specialists.⁹⁸ and scholarships were granted to the Belarusian students and researchers for studying and working in Latvia.⁹⁹

It is important to note that throughout the crisis Latvia has been selective in terminology. The country did not announce illegitimacy of A. Lukashenka until the secret inauguration on 23 September.¹⁰⁰ Media questions in this respect were answered cautiously. The day of terminating duties according to constitution was named as the delegitimation date of Lukashenka.¹⁰¹ Parliament issued an official statement on delegitimation on 1 October.¹⁰² S. Tsikhanouskaya has not been called "leader" or "winner" or "president - elect" and was hosted in Riga for the first in November 2020 during the Riga Conference.¹⁰³ The Mr and Mrs Tsapkala – members of opposition and the Belarus Coordination Council, were granted refuge in Latvia, yet no public attention nor official announcements were made in this respect. In other words, Latvia did not entirely close the door for A. Lukashenka, nor did it open it for other potential leaders.

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		negligible		comprehensive		
INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	■	■			
	ECONOMIC	■	■	■		
	SOCIETAL	■	■	■	■	
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	■				
	ECONOMIC	■	■	■		
	SOCIETAL	■	■	■	■	
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	■	■	■	■	■
	Societal resonance in Lithuania	■	■	■	■	■
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	■	■	■	■	
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	■	■	■	■	
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	■	■	■	■	
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	■	■	■	■	■
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	■	■	■	■	
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	■	■	■	■	■

FROM ANOTHER (FAILED) ATTEMPT AT RAPPROCHEMENT WITH THE REGIME TO THE PACESETTER OF EU'S SANCTIONS POLICY

Lithuania's reaction to the crisis in Belarus could be described as comparatively fast and comprehensive. Policy measures focused on setting pace in the EU in offering to mediate among the authorities and opposition in Belarus, proposing closer relations between sovereign Belarus and the EU, and when these efforts failed – turning to the introduction of targeted sanctions, often in coordination with neighbouring countries as well as providing support – funding, political backing, asylum, platform for resistance – to the opposition activists in and from Belarus. Thus, Lithuania's official policy towards Belarus has made yet another U-turn from recent rapprochement efforts to the most active champion of sanctions towards Belarus authorities.

LITHUANIA'S INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

In terms of strategic approach towards Belarus, Lithuania's long-term priorities have been stable, and consisted of two interconnected elements: the support for political and economic reforms, which would lead Belarus towards establishing liberal democracy and market economy, as well as the backing for its closer integration with the EU and the West more generally. Support for reforms has been practiced by maintaining close contacts with opposition in Belarus and such initiatives as the hosting of European Humanitarian University in Vilnius. However, the actual official policy towards Belarus has been fluctuating between attempts to initiate closer cooperation, positioning Lithuania as a mediator between the EU and Belarus, hoping to reduce latter's reliance on Russia if not to transform its domestic institutions, and the champion of sanctions towards Belarus authorities.

These shifts in tactical approaches towards Belarus depended not only on domestic policy changes in Belarus (i.e. regime's dealings with opposition) and its relationship with Russia, but also on election cycles in Lithuania with newly elected presidents eager to re-start bilateral relationship. For example, the start of the presidency of Dalia Grybauskaitė in 2009 was marked by an attempt to revitalise political relations with Belarus and bring it closer to the EU. These attempts to move towards a more pragmatic relationship compared to the previous policy of Valdas Adamkus, which focused on upholding democratic norms in Belarus and voicing open criticisms for their violation, were explained with the encouraging signs of the release of political prisoners in Belarus and the growing tensions between Moscow and Minsk. The former was interpreted as a sign that Lukashenka was willing to soften his stance on civil freedoms, while the latter was seen as an opportunity to reduce the reliance on Russia. This led to renewed contacts on the highest political level, including a couple of meetings between D. Grybauskaitė and A. Lukashenka.

This policy of rapprochement soon ended with a failure when presidential elections in Belarus in the end of 2010 exposed (once again) the repressive nature of the regime, including the renewed persecution of the opposition. After this, Lithuania's policy towards Belarus not only returned to the previous criticising stance, but became strongly supportive of wider EU sanctions towards the regime. The lack of official contacts might have contributed to the belated "discovery" of the Astravyets Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) – the plant being constructed close to Lithuania-Belarus border (about 40 km from Vilnius), and has since 2017 been treated by political elites in Lithuania as a national security threat. Preoccupation with this issue led to Lithuania's stricter stance on EU and Belarus relationship, trying to link any progress on closer relations, for example, abolishing EU sanctions towards officials and entities in Belarus and facilitation of visa regime with demands to solve the issue of Astravyets NPP. However, while an agreement among Lithuania's political elites formed regarding the boycott of electricity produced at the Belarus nuclear power plant, there was ambivalence with respect to whether the objective of Lithuania's policy was the improvement of the safety of the plant or preventing its coming into operation altogether. The latter objective prevailed in the domestic debates, whereas the former, including the measures aimed at assessing the safety of the NPP and improving it, appeared in the discussions with EU institutions and other international organisations.

President Gitanas Nausėda, elected in 2019, also attempted a re-set of relations with Belarus amidst (yet again) deteriorating relationship between Minsk and Moscow and the approaching presidential elections in Belarus. He initiated domestic political debates with Lithuania's parliamentary parties on ending the isolationist stance towards Belarus and arranged a phone talk with A. Lukashenka on April 23, 2020, in the run up to the EU's Eastern partnership summit in June. The topics covered included the need to ensure smooth transit between Lithuania and Belarus at the time of COVID-19 pandemic, cooperation in managing pandemics, also bilateral economic cooperation initiatives, mutual historic

legacies going back to the times of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy as well as EU's Eastern partnership ambitions in the fields of trade, environment and people-to-people contacts.¹⁰⁴ Although Lithuania's concern with the construction of Astravyets NPP was given a central place in the press release, it was accompanied by the offer to share experience of energy diversification with Belarus to help reduce its dependency on Russia's infrastructure and resources. In his first annual address to the Lithuanian parliament on June 18, 2020, president Nausėda spoke of a renewed dialogue with Belarus, though mentioning the red lines linked to nuclear safety and human rights issues, and stressing that sovereignty of Belarus is a national security issue for Lithuania.¹⁰⁵

The tactical swings in Lithuania's official policy and periodic termination of high-level political contacts between Lithuania and Belarus did not affect the bilateral economic relationship. In 2019, Belarus was no. 7 among Lithuania's export destinations (1,15 billion EUR or 3,9% of total exports) and no. 14 among import partners (783 million EUR or 2,5% of total imports).¹⁰⁶ In terms of foreign direct investments, it was the no. 7 location for Lithuanian investors (140 million EUR) and no. 18 in terms of inflows into Lithuania (165 million EUR). Still, Belarus is important for particular sectors such as transport, especially transit by railway and Klaipėda seaport, also tourism, including spa resorts close to the Lithuania-Belarus border. In 2019, Belarus was the top 4 country of incoming tourism in Lithuania (around 178 000 tourists, or 9,2% of the total, arriving from Belarus).

POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS

In the end of July, as new repressions against the opposition and competitors of A. Lukashenka were implemented, the tone of Lithuania's policy makers started changing again. On July 27, 2020, president Nausėda urged the president of the European Council J. Michel to take action with respect to the threat posed by the planned operation of the Astravyets NPP and the worsening human rights' situation.¹⁰⁷ On the evening of August 9, joint statement of Lithuanian and Polish presidents urged the authorities of Belarus to fully observe democratic standards, refrain from violence, respect the fundamental freedoms, human and civil rights, including national minorities rights and freedom of speech.¹⁰⁸ The perspective of closer cooperation of Belarus with the EU was mentioned as an incentive if Minsk observed democratic norms.

There was no official response from Minsk. In the coming days, the tone of Vilnius, often speaking jointly with Warsaw, started changing. On August 10, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine appealed to authorities in Belarus not to use force and to release prisoners detained during opposition protests. The so-called Lublin trio offered to act as mediators between the authorities and the opposition in Belarus. On August 12, president Nausėda urged Belarus authorities to stop violence, release prisoners and start dialogue with the society by establishing a National council of Belarus which could include officials and civil society.¹⁰⁹ The next day, a joint statement of Lithuanian, Polish, Latvian and Estonian presidents was presented, which elaborated the same three points of deescalating and stopping violence against the nation of Belarus and respecting democratic norms, immediately releasing political prisoners, and immediately starting a dialogue with citizens of Belarus.

In the end of August, Minister of Foreign Affairs L. Linkevičius publicly acknowledged that Belarus authorities were not willing to engage in dialogue with EU member states. After the EU finally announced the adoption of the first round of sanctions targeting 40 officials from Belarus in early October, A. Lukashenka recalled for consultations Belarus ambassadors from Vilnius and Warsaw. This decision was followed with a demand for Lithuania and Poland to reduce the number of their diplomats in Minsk. On October 5, Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recalled for consultations the ambassador to Belarus, a decision made

in coordination with Poland which recalled its ambassador as well. A week later six more Lithuanian diplomats were recalled from Minsk and Hrodna.

REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS

Lithuania's reaction to elections in Belarus and the following repressions was quick, although initially limited mostly to official statements coordinated with neighbouring EU countries and more intense cooperation with the opposition in Belarus. Two days after the fraudulent elections, the candidate of the opposition S. Tsikhanouskaya arrived to Lithuania. From August 11, Lithuania started applying a special "humanitarian" regime of grating entry to citizens of Belarus affected by repression and persecution and to opposition activists. In late 2020, Lithuanian prosecutors said they had launched a pre-trial investigation into crimes against humanity under a complaint by a Belarusian citizen.¹¹⁰ By January 18, 2021, 787 citizens of Belarus have been granted permission to come to Lithuania on humanitarian grounds, with 365 already residing in Lithuania.¹¹¹ Also, gradual steps were made to attract IT companies established in Belarus to Lithuania.

A public demonstration of support for the opposition in Belarus started the next day after the official results of elections were announced. On August 10, several hundred people gathered in one of Vilnius squares to express their solidarity with the protesters in Belarus. Public demonstrations in Vilnius took part in the following weeks with a slogan "For free and democratic Belarus". Attracting the biggest participation and media attention, including praise from external observers such as Edward Lucas, was the Freedom way, which took place on August 23, during the 31st anniversary of the Baltic way.¹¹² A human chain of estimated 50 000 people standing from the Cathedral in Vilnius to the border with Belarus (around 32 kilometres) was organised by activists and NGOs in Lithuania with the wide participation of official figures including current and former presidents of Lithuania to show the support for the opposition in Belarus.¹¹³















The next day after the elections, Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs publicly expressed his disappointment about the fact that elections can't be described as transparent, democratic and free, mentioning that if Belarus authorities do not release people detained during demonstrations, the subject of sanctions will be raised again. Next day he declared that the EU should consider the introduction of sanctions targeted towards Belarus officials responsible for election fraud and violence. On August 14, Lithuanian parliament held an extraordinary session to debate the situation in Belarus and discussed the need to form a delegation which would visit Minsk and mediate between the Belarus authorities and the opposition. A member of the opposition I. Šimonytė, who became the Prime Minister after the October 2020 parliamentary elections in Lithuania, stated that "*expressions of concern are not sufficient anymore. Lithuania should show example to Europe and not only refuse to recognise the legitimacy of A. Lukashenka, but to introduce national sanctions targeted at the representatives of the regime responsible for repressions and election fraud and urge the EU and the US to introduce sanctions as well.*"¹¹⁴ On August 18, in an extraordinary session the Parliament of Lithuania by overwhelming majority adopted a resolution which described elections in Belarus as fraud suggesting Lithuanian government, EU institutions, EU and NATO member states not to recognise A. Lukashenka as a legitimate president of Belarus.¹¹⁵ The declaration also suggested introducing sanctions targeted at officials responsible for the election fraud and violence against people as well as to seek the introduction of EU-wide sanctions. At the same time, Lithuania's officials continued working through international organisations such as OSCE, the Council of Europe and especially through the EU.

However, as the process of consensus building among all EU member states proved to be slow, national sanctions coordinated among Baltic States were prioritised. Although initially a much longer list of potential targets was considered, after internal debates between the

president's office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as coordination with Latvian and Estonian counterparts, 30 officials from Belarus including A. Lukashenka were included in the list. Later Lithuania expanded the national list of sanctions to include 130 officials. No economic entities such as state-owned enterprises of Belarus were included, although this issue kept resurfacing in public debates and was suggested publicly by S. Tsikhanouskaya in early 2021.¹¹⁶

In September, Lithuania together with Poland and Romania proposed to adopt an EU economic assistance plan for democratic Belarus if its citizens decided to undertake political and economic reforms.¹¹⁷ The plan would have included trade facilitation measures, assistance for Belarus in joining the World Trade Organisation, visa-free regime, economic and energy diversification, provision of funding for reforms and other measures. Lithuanian ambassador together with other EU member states' ambassadors in Minsk tried to protect a member of the opposition Coordination Council, Nobel Laureate S. Alexievich from being arrested. This was not left unnoticed by official Minsk, as A. Lukashenka first threatened to redirect transit from Lithuania, then to close borders with Lithuania and Poland.¹¹⁸ However, these threats were not followed with concrete actions and were regarded as not credible in Lithuania because of the potential economic cost to Belarus. Economic relations between Lithuania and Belarus continued, although characterised by increased uncertainty.

After the violent death of a protestor in Minsk, president Nausėda publicly urged the EU to adopt a third round of sanctions by extending them also to the enterprises that supported the regime in Belarus.¹¹⁹ This statement was coordinated with the Polish president. In mid-December, the EU once again extended the list of Belarus officials by adding 29 natural persons and 7 legal entities. Although Lithuania was consistently urging the EU to extend the list, it appeared as a surprise to Lithuania's decision makers that a spa "Belorus" operating in the Lithuanian resort Druskininkai – a major employer in town – was affected when at the end of December its accounts were frozen by Swedbank.¹²⁰ Although some ministers of the Lithuanian government publicly expressed their willingness to go further in extending the list of sanctions to include such state-owned enterprises in Belarus as "Belaruskali" (an important client to Lithuanian Railways and Klaipėda seaport), this step was explicitly linked with the need for an EU-wide agreement regarding such economic sanctions.¹²¹

		1	2	3	4	5
		negligible		comprehensive		
INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	█				
	ECONOMIC	█	█			
	SOCIETAL	█				
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	█				
	ECONOMIC	█	█			
	SOCIETAL	█				
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimisation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	█	█	█	█	
	Societal resonance in Norway	█	█	█	█	
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	█	█	█	█	
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	█				
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	█	█	█		
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	█	█	█		
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	█	█	█		
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	█	█	█		

FROM INSIGNIFICANCE TO INCREASINGLY DEEP CONCERN

In its policies towards Belarus, Norway has chosen an active, but not a leading position, similar to the position of Denmark. Compared to Sweden, however, which has a long history of relations with Eastern Europe (partly due to its long coastline along the Baltic Sea), Norway has been less consistent and dynamic in its relations with Belarus.

INTERACTION PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

Since Norway established diplomatic relations with Belarus in 1992, the former Soviet republic's influence on Norwegian foreign policy makers has been negligible. Norway's ambassadors to Belarus have been side-accredited to the country from Kyiv (until September 2020) and from Vilnius (since September 2020). Likewise, the Belarusian ambassador to Sweden is side accredited to Norway. Official meetings are infrequent and irregular, mainly limited to multilateral contact through organisations such as the OSCE and the UN.

In the past 20 years, Norway and Belarus have had three political consultations on a ministerial level: the Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleh Krauchanka has visited Norway twice, in 2017 and 2020, and State Secretary Audun Halvorsen has visited Belarus once, in 2018. Norwegian support for projects supporting civil society in Belarus has been cut significantly over the past 7 years: from approximately 2 million EUR annually before 2014, to about 51 000 EUR in 2019.¹²²

Even though economic relations between Belarus and Norway are limited, since 2015 there has been an increase in trade between the two countries. The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry assesses trade to an approximate total of 260 million EUR in 2019. Norwegian exports to Belarus consist mostly of sea products (97 %), while Belarus mainly exports animal and vegetable oils (57 %) and chemical products (33 %) to Norway.¹²³ The Norwegian company YARA International is one of the largest importers of potash fertiliser from Belarus.

Norwegian social contact with Belarus is insubstantial, mainly limited to a handful of cultural and sporting events, arranged by third parties. Since visa-free access to Belarus was introduced in 2017, the number of Norwegian tourists to Belarus rose from 1387 in 2016 to 3840 in 2019.¹²⁴ Despite this notable increase, tourist traffic from Norway remains modest.

There are two main reasons why Belarus in the past has not been of particular significance to Oslo: 1) Norway's eastern policy is mainly directed at Russia, as the two countries have a shared border in the Arctic and considerable political, economic, and societal cooperation; 2) other, more pressing issues in Eastern Europe have taken precedence over the general situation in Belarus. Most notably, the Norwegian cuts in support for Belarusian civil society coincide with its increased support for Ukraine since 2014. The unprecedented severity of last year's political repressions in Belarus, however, has led Oslo to signal a heightened interest in the country's internal affairs, as well as a wider societal reaction in Norway to the Belarusian crisis.

POST CRISIS COOPERATION

According to the Norwegian ambassador to Lithuania and Belarus, Ole T. Horpestad, political contacts between Oslo and Minsk have been reduced to a minimum, due to the Belarusian government's handling of the post-electoral crisis. It should also be noted that, in September 2020, the Norwegian side-accreditation to Belarus was moved from Kyiv to Vilnius. This was largely for practical reasons: Vilnius is physically closer to Minsk and has a vibrant Belarusian community. Additionally, several members of the Belarusian opposition and other side-accredited embassies to Belarus are situated in the city.¹²⁵

As of January 2021, few notable changes can be observed in the already limited economic and societal cooperation between Norway and Belarus. The president of the Norwegian Ice Hockey Association (NIHF) Tage Pettersen has advocated for moving the 2021 World Championship from Minsk, out of concern for 1) the human rights situation in the country after the presidential election; and 2) the lack of a clear Belarusian response to the















COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁶ YARA International has also expressed concern for the situation in Belarus, and demanded that "Belaruskali" – a major Belarusian mining company – stop reprisals against employees who go on strike. The company still receives criticism, however, for continuing its trade with "Belaruskali".¹²⁷

REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS

Since August 2020, Norwegian criticism of the Belarusian leadership has been active and consistent, and Norway has joined all EU sanctions against Belarus. Prime Minister Erna Solberg has called Lukashenka "a dictator" and expressed hope that his time as president is coming to an end.¹²⁸ Solberg was also amongst the first European leaders to meet S. Tsikhanouskaya in Vilnius in September 2020.¹²⁹ Other meetings with the leader of the Belarusian opposition have been conducted on a ministerial level and she has been officially invited to Norway. Moreover, the Norwegian government has increased funding for civil society organisations, such as the Human Rights House Foundation and the European Endowment for Democracy.¹³⁰

Norway has stopped short of imposing any unilateral sanctions against Belarus, however, and Norwegian NGO's have pushed for a more assertive response from Norway to the post-electoral events, among them the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the Human Rights House Foundation.¹³¹ An attempt by the Norwegian parliamentary opposition to create an official strategy to promote democracy in Belarus was also rejected by the Norwegian parliament in December 2020.¹³²

Regular rallies of support and sympathy for the Belarusian cause have been organised in major cities throughout the country, most notably in Oslo and Bergen,¹³³ and the situation in Belarus has received widespread media coverage in national media outlets.

		1	2	3	4	5
		negligible		comprehensive		
INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS						
	POLITICAL	■	■	■		
	ECONOMIC	■				
	SOCIETAL	■				
POST-CRISIS COOPERATION WITH BELARUS						
	POLITICAL	■				
	ECONOMIC	■				
	SOCIETAL	■				
REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN BELARUS						
	Delegitimisation of A. Lukashenka's presidency	■	■	■		
	Societal resonance in Sweden	■	■	■		
	Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk	■	■	■	■	
	Unilateral sanctions imposed	■				
	Multilateral regional sanctions imposed	■	■	■	■	
	Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats	■	■	■	■	
	Practical support to the Belarusian society	■	■	■		
	Practical support to the Belarusian opposition	■	■	■		

FROM ATTEMPT TO NORMALISE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS TO NON-RECOGNITION

Compared to other Nordic countries, Sweden has had a relatively active role in the critique of the Lukashenka regime after the fake elections in August 2020, but not nearly as active as Latvia and especially Lithuania. Sweden has followed the EU policy on sanctions and delegitimising Lukashenka's presidency. Sweden has also terminated some bilateral projects, but the country has not taken a strong, leading role in campaigning for more comprehensive sanctions.

INTERACTION WITH BELARUS PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

From the viewpoint of the Swedish general public and the Swedish economy, Belarus is not a visible player. There is virtually no tourism from Sweden to Belarus, and the trade is negligible. Less than 0,1% of the Swedish exports go to Belarus, and less than 0,1% of the imports come from the country. Total exports in 2019 were 56 million EUR, total imports were 31 million EUR. Total Swedish direct investment in Belarus in 2019 was 27 million EUR, total Belarusian direct investment in Sweden was none.¹³⁴

Belarus can hardly be called a focal point of Swedish foreign policy, either. However, Sweden is a major donor to Belarusian civil society in the field of human rights, specifically mass media and freedom of expression. Since the middle of the 1990's, thousands of Belarusian journalists have been involved in professional exchanges and educational activities financed by the Swedish state, primarily in Belarus, Lithuania and Sweden.

Programmes financed by Sweden continue to support professionalisation and financial sustainability of media, advancement of media literacy and e-learning in Belarus. The total extent of the Swedish support to independent media in Belarus is not publicly known, as the publication of such information could be detrimental for the recipients in Belarus.

The total amount of Swedish aid to Belarus in 2020 was approximately 10 million EUR. More than half of the amount is used for projects related to advancement of democracy and human rights. Other significant recipients are environmental projects and economic development. Around one-third of the Swedish state financing had previously gone to projects connected to official Belarusian state actors such as the universities, but the majority of these programmes have been terminated following the 2020 crisis. Any new programmes in light of the crisis are yet to be announced.¹³⁵

Diplomatically, the relations between Sweden and Belarus have had some hiccups in recent years. The Swedish representation in Minsk was opened in 2003 as a section office of the Swedish Embassy in Moscow. In 2008, it became a full-fledged embassy, and Stefan Eriksson, the head of the office, was appointed ambassador. However, the Ambassador's regular contacts with opposition activists did not please the Belarusian authorities, and in August 2012 Belarus refused to renew his accreditation.¹³⁶

Sweden retaliated by refusing accreditation for the new Belarusian ambassador and throwing out two Belarusian diplomats already in the country. The Belarusian Embassy in Stockholm was temporarily closed.¹³⁷

The Swedish Embassy in Minsk stayed closed until the summer of 2013, when Martin Åberg was accredited first as Chargé d'Affaires and later as full Ambassador. The new ambassador was considerably less active in contacts with the opposition than his predecessor, apparently on direct orders from Stockholm, in an attempt to restart the diplomatic relations.

Since 2017, Christina Johannesson is the Swedish Ambassador in Minsk. In November 2019, Ann Linde was the first Swedish Foreign Minister since 1992 to make an official visit to Minsk, together with her Finnish colleague Pekka Haavisto, during the Finnish presidency of the Council of the European Union. The visit can be seen as a continuation of the attempt to normalise relations, and it was criticised by Swedish human rights groups.¹³⁸

POST-CRISIS COOPERATION

The fraudulent presidential elections in August 2020 and the Belarusian authorities'

crackdown on popular protest immediately led to strong, critical statements from the Swedish government. Official contacts with the authorities have been limited to the minimum. Instead, the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister have met representatives of the democratic opposition.

Trade and tourism were mostly negligible before the crisis and have remained so, especially as the ongoing pandemic severely restricts international travel.

REACTIONS TO THE CRISIS

The Swedish government was quick to react to the events in Minsk directly after the fraudulent elections in August, both in public statements and in direct contact with Belarusian authorities. A statement put out by Ann Linde, Minister of Foreign affairs, on August 10 focused on the popular demand for democratic change and urged president Lukashenka to immediately release everyone who was arrested in connection with the elections.¹³⁹

After this, A. Lukashenka seems not to have been called "president:" in any statements put out by the Swedish government. On August 14, the Foreign Minister put out a new statement, now unequivocally stating that the presidential election was neither free nor fair.¹⁴⁰

In September, following Lukashenka's "inauguration", Linde seems to have been among the first EU Foreign Ministers to go out with a statement to the effect that Lukashenka lacks legitimacy as a president. On September 23, the day of the "inauguration", she (seemingly in a hurry) tweeted the following: "*Lukashenka's hastily and unannounced [sic] inauguration reaffirms his lack of legitimacy as a democratically elected leader. Election on 9 August was neither free nor fair. We will continue to hold him accountable for violence & repression against opposition and peaceful demonstrators.*"¹⁴¹

The official declaration by the EU high representative Josep Borrell to this effect was published on September 24. On that day, Linde published a longer Swedish language post on Facebook, stating that Lukashenka is an "*illegitimately elected president and lacks any form of democratic legitimacy*".¹⁴²

In the same post she also answered critics who had attacked her for not wanting to sanction Lukashenka and claimed that Sweden has been working on sanctions against those responsible for the fraudulent elections and the following violence ever since election day.

Still, according to sources AFP has spoken with, Sweden and Finland initially were reluctant to sanction Lukashenka, hoping for a dialogue with him. In an interview with the Swedish public broadcaster SVT on September 24, Linde seems to partially confirm this, saying that after the "inauguration" there no longer were any prerequisites for dialogue with him.¹⁴³

On September 14, Ann Linde met with Volha Kavalkova.¹⁴⁴ On September 27 she had a meeting with Valery and Veranika Tsapkala.¹⁴⁵ On November 10, she met Julia Mickiewicz, one of the organisers of the women's protests who was jailed for 15 days in October for participating in the protests.¹⁴⁶ On November 17 she met with S. Tsikhanouskaya.¹⁴⁷

On November 18, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven had a meeting with Tsikhanouskaya. In official government statements she was called "the exiled leader of the Belarusian opposition". According to Government press releases on the meeting, "*Ms Tsikhanouskaya received strong public support as a candidate in the presidential election in Belarus. The election was neither free nor fair, and was marked by widespread electoral fraud and political oppression.*"¹⁴⁸

In other words, the Swedish government has publicly announced that it considers Lukashenka an illegitimate leader of Belarus – and Tsikhanouskaya "the leader of the opposition". Consequently, in the Swedish government's view, Belarus at the moment seems to lack a legitimate leader and a new presidential election must be held. However, the official statements to this effect have not been particularly visible to the general public.

In December 2020, a new report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden on the state of human rights, democracy and rule of law in Belarus found severe problems in all these fields.¹⁴⁹

On sanctions, the Swedish government has followed the EU decisions but it has not taken any unilateral action. The government has, however, frozen all financing of development projects where Belarusian state actors are recipients.¹⁵⁰

The Swedish Embassy in Minsk has been participating in the common EU efforts against the repression, and the Swedish Embassy was especially active in protecting Nobel prize winner Svetlana Alexievich. Otherwise, the Embassy has not been publicly visible, but it seems to have been actively collecting information and supporting contacts with activists.

In connection with the protests, two Belarusian citizens (Vitaly and Vladislav Kuznechik) entered the Embassy grounds on September 11 in order to seek asylum in Sweden. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has publicly stated that it is not possible to apply for asylum at an embassy, but the two individuals have been allowed to stay at the Embassy. The Belarusian authorities seek to arrest both for assaulting a policeman, and the UN Committee against torture has reportedly appealed to Sweden to ensure that no harm comes to them.¹⁵¹

There have been some support rallies for the Belarusian opposition in Sweden, organised by Swedish civic organisations and Belarusians who reside in Sweden. There has also been a sharp increase in cultural events dedicated to the situation in Belarus and in the attention of the mass media.

The ultimately scrapped plans to hold the 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship games in Belarus were openly criticised by a few politicians, most notably former Prime Minister Carl Bildt, and at least one player (Erik Gustafsson) said he would not participate if the games were to go ahead.¹⁵²

However, as time goes by and no end to the crisis is visible, the public attention seems to be waning. Still, several civic organisations continue to work intensely, building opinion for democratic change in Belarus and supporting contacts with Belarusian activists.

*SCORECARD EXPLANATION

To assess the Baltic and Nordic responses to the 2020 post-election crisis in Belarus, a scorecard was designed and subsequently filled out by a researcher from the respective country.

The scorecard maps each country's interaction with Belarus along three main sections: interaction prior to the crisis, post-crisis cooperation, and reactions to the crisis.

The first and second section looks at the interaction along the domains of political, economic and societal cooperation (subsections 1 through 6 in the scorecard). Political cooperation refers to exchanges of official visits, joint projects, engagement in multilateral formats; economic cooperation denotes trade volume and direct investments, whereas societal cooperation includes tourism, culture and sports exchanges.

The third section assesses the speed and scope of the individual country's reaction to the crisis (subsections 7 through 14 in the scorecard). The "delegitimation of A. Lukashenka's presidency" subsection takes into account speed, comprehensiveness and the visibility of actions of a country. "Societal resonance in the respective country" considers support rallies and media coverage. "Actions taken by the diplomatic representation in Minsk" consider engagement with opposition and participation in events. "Imposed unilateral sanctions" grade national travel restrictions, the freezing of assets, as well as trade and economic cooperation restrictions. "Imposed multilateral regional sanctions" are subdivided into travel restrictions, assets freeze restrictions, trade and economic cooperation restrictions. "Bringing the issue for consideration in international organisations and formats" pertains to raising the Belarus issue at the main international formats, including European Union, Council of Europe, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, United Nations and others. "Practical support to the Belarusian society" was assessed according to the scope of financial and practical support to projects of civil society and media and facilitation of visa policies. "Practical support to the Belarusian opposition" considered hosting of exiled opposition members and providing financial support.

The answer options are arranged on a five-point scale, where 1 equals "negligible" and 5 is "comprehensive". The scope of research includes information from August 2020 until the beginning of 2021.

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