



**“The Ways of Ensuring the Viability of a New Belarusian
Government in a Transitional Period”**

Policy Brief

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February 2024

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The policy brief was prepared within the “Bridge Analytics: Connecting Minds, Empowering Analysis” summer school and presented at the school’s final event with the support of the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” and the Mioszowski Centre.

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Summary

- The Belarusian democratic forces have achieved certain successes in terms of developing government-like structures and keeping the Belarusian issue on the agenda of European states. To continue further institutionalization and be prepared for the transformation period, there is a need to train a new generation of officials who could take over the state in the future.
- Although the Belarusian democratic forces have launched the “Personnel Reserve” program which is a definite success, the program is still rather narrow in its scope. This creates a need for the facilitation of regional cooperation, first and foremost within the Lublin Triangle, and cooperation at the EU level aimed at scaling up initiatives to support the Belarusian democratic forces.
- Belarus is strategically important for the Lublin Triangle member states and both NATO and the EU. This is primarily due to the security risks posed by the close integration of Belarus and Russia, as well as the erosion of regional and international security systems. Moreover, achieving certain successes in supporting the Belarusian democratic forces may slow down or even reverse some of the negative geopolitical processes that affect the EU and Ukraine the most.

Introduction

After the rigged presidential elections in Belarus in 2020 and the following unprecedented mass protests, the Belarusian democratic forces have succeeded in ensuring continuous international support of the Belarusian democratic struggle and, even more importantly, in creating government-like structures and relations over the past 3 years.

In December 2023, the Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office, together with the United Transitional Cabinet, the Coordination Council, and numerous experts developed and presented the New Belarus Transition Strategy - the document which outlines paths for a democratic transition of power.

The Strategy touches upon various aspects of the transitional processes in Belarus, and one of the pillars of these changes is preparation for the reformation of the state administration system in the transitional period. Consequently, the Belarusian democratic forces consider the creation and preparation of the [personnel reserve](#) to be one of the steps aimed at introducing a new generation of public servants who will take over the state when the right moment comes.

To achieve this goal, the “Personnel Reserve” program has been launched, which provides the selected candidates with the opportunity to strengthen their competencies through training, including internships, in the central and municipal authorities of a number of the European Union member states.

In this policy paper, the human resources potential of the Belarusian democratic forces is analysed to highlight the current challenges and identify where there is room for improvement. What is more, this paper analyses the need for continuous strengthening of the competence of the democratic forces through the geopolitical importance of Belarus for the West and the political profits European and regional cooperation may bring to both individual states and the EU.

1. The current situation with the human resources potential of Belarusian democratic forces

1.1. Strengths

The Belarusian democratic forces are pretty successful in keeping the Belarusian issue on the political agenda of the European states and launching the “Personnel Reserve” program, which is **an unprecedented phenomenon** at least in the post-Soviet space, is another step towards the goal of further institutionalization of the democratic movement.

The lecturers of the program are prominent Belarusian scholars, thinkers, former diplomats, and state functionaries with vast experience in academia, analytics, and state service. Participants **are free to choose a specialization** and delve into international politics, local government, self-government, or economics.

However, the program itself is not reduced to purely study activities but is also **aimed at giving a push to the careers of the participants**, some of whom can be offered participation in the development of reform concepts and new management methods, and even a position in the United Transitional Cabinet.

The Belarusian democratic forces also pay attention to the issue of education. As a result, Belarusian citizens who live abroad have **access to special study programs, scholarships, exchange programs, etc.** Moreover, in Lithuania functions the European Humanities University, which is oriented at students from Eastern Europe, particularly Belarusians. Although the University is not in any way affiliated with the United Transitional Cabinet or the democratic movement in general, some of its former or current employees take part in political processes within the democratic movement and help develop strategic documents and programs.

Basically, the foundations for the future formation of state apparatus, or at least further development and transformation of the Belarusian democratic forces into a proto-state structure with a wider range of activities, responsibility, and political subjectivity have been laid. However, this process is accompanied by some issues and challenges that should be overcome in order to ensure further institutionalization of the Belarusian democratic forces.

1.2. Weaknesses

Belarusian democratic forces are facing some challenges in terms of providing members of the diaspora with opportunities to receive higher education. This happens because of the **absence of the Belarusian National University** that could function in one of the EU member states with the availability of a wide range of study programs, both in natural sciences and humanities.

What is more, such a university should also be a research institution for Belarusians who fled the country because of repressions or are planning to do so in the nearest future.

Although Alina Koushyk, the Representative for National Revival of the United Transitional Cabinet, announced that the creation of such a scientific and educational institution is one of the [priorities of the Belarusian democratic forces](#) in 2024, it may be complicating to implement such a large-scale initiative in the next few years. Some of the challenges may be related not only to the funding of the institution but also to the availability of competent and well-prepared lecturers.

Another issue is related to the scope of functioning of the “Personnel Reserve” program. Participants of the program take part in study visits to governmental institutions of European states, including Poland, Lithuania, and Germany, attend round tables, conferences, and lectures. Still, it seems that there is a **lack of access to a practical dimension** which is crucial for those who should execute decisions and take a burden of responsibility in the future.

The Belarusian democratic forces do not have representatives from such important areas of state functioning, such as the economy or internal affairs. This could create a vacuum when participants who took courses on economics or internal politics will not be able to find their place within the structure of the United Transitional Cabinet and even contribute to the goals of the Belarusian democratic movement.

Besides this, the “Personnel Reserve” program proposes a limited spectrum of educational courses leaving behind such realms as national and international law, energy, taxation, science and education, security, etc. This means that in the case of the transitional period, there is a possibility that the Belarusian democratic forces will be unable to replace some of the officials, such as judges and prosecutors, or that the firing of these specialists would lead to a personnel deficit.

2. Interests of regional players in supporting the formation of a new generation of Belarusian functionaries

The issue of the formation of a new layer of state functionaries goes beyond purely possible processes in Belarus and includes geopolitical vicissitudes related to the interests of a wider range of players. Belarus's strategic geographical position cannot be overestimated. It is located at the crossroads of geopolitical tensions, bordering Ukraine, Russia, and NATO member states. Russia sees Belarus as a bastion against “coloured revolutions”, a part of the concept of strategic depth which consists in the fact that Moscow wants or needs to be surrounded by a series of friendly, allied states or at least by neutral countries to protect its heartland and allow the projection of its sphere of influence.

Conversely, Belarus is fundamental for NATO in the possible defence of the Baltic states and Poland in the case of military aggression. No wonder that back in the 1990s, Poland supported the establishment of Belarusian statehood and refrained from any territorial claims, perceiving this as a step towards creating a buffer zone against Russia. Belarus is also hugely important for Ukraine which shares a 2,295-kilometer border with the Russian Federation. In the case of the complete absorption of Belarus by the Kremlin, Ukraine risks being semi-surrounded by Russia.

Although before 2020 Belarus tried to be a constructive player, balancing between two main centres of power, in current conditions of geopolitical tensions and changes of the global order, such a foreign policy approach is unlikely to bring success in the long-term run. Consequently, the Lublin Triangle member states share a common interest in preserving Belarus's independence and supporting its transformation into a more democratic and predictable player.

2.1. Poland

For a long time, Poland has been an active player in the Belarusian direction, building and developing the infrastructure of influence on at least a part of Belarusian society. Consequently, it is pretty natural that Poland has become a major destination for Belarusians who fled their country because of political or economic reasons. Poland is also actively engaged in the functioning of the “Personnel Reserve” program, providing opportunities for the organization of study visits and conferences on relevant topics for [democratic reform](#).

Poland as well as Ukraine and Lithuania, is interested in a predictable neighbour rather than a constant source of disturbance and risks. Support of democratic struggle in Belarus is not new for Warsaw. However, this issue has become even more important after the beginning of the migration crisis and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Belarus now serves as a hinterland for Russian intelligence and hybrid activities in Poland. This forced

Warsaw to pay even more attention to the actions of the Lukashenka regime and facilitate cooperation with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team.

Poland has close cultural and historical ties with Belarus. According to a 2019 census, the number of Polish minority in Belarus was estimated at [almost 290,000 people](#). It means that Poles are the second largest ethnic minority after the Russians with around 3.1% of the total population. However, the 2020 rigged elections and a subsequent crackdown on the protests, marked the beginning of the wave of repression against Poles in Belarus. This caused concerns among Polish authorities who have an interest in releasing all Polish political prisoners and weakening pressure on the Polish minority in Belarus.

Despite being a source of problems, Belarus is important for the Polish national identity as a place where many great figures of Polish culture, such as Tadeusz Kościuszko, Adam Mickiewicz, Ryszard Kapuściński, and others, were born. What is more, in the territory of modern Belarus various Polish places of memory and burial are located which makes the country an important part of Poland's national remembrance policy.

Warsaw is interested in strengthening its geopolitical influence and role on the regional level, as well as on the level of the EU. Poland put Russia's war against Ukraine at the centre of its strategy, growing as one of the strongest voices within the EU. Warsaw has been advocating the strengthening of sanctions against both Russia and Belarus, the provision of greater volumes of military aid to Ukraine, etc. Warsaw's active position towards Belarus also improves the geopolitical stance of Poland and converts it into a regional leader.

2.2. Lithuania

As in the case of Poland and Ukraine, **Lithuania also has some security issues** on its Eastern borders. Illegal migrants still try to penetrate into the territory of Lithuania despite the decrease in the intensity of such attempts, while a newly built Belarusian nuclear power plant serves as a stick, constantly reminding Lithuanian authorities about possible nuclear threats. What is more, there is a possibility that the territory of Belarus may be used by the Russians for military action against Lithuania as it happened in the case of Ukraine. Democratic transition and a move toward better relations with Belarus can geographically push the Russian Federation away from Lithuania's borders.

Vilnius may also be interested in unloading the border infrastructure against the background of the increase in the number of crossings of the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. Recently, Lithuania has been forced to announce the closure of two more border crossings with the aim of decreasing the [pressure](#) on personnel and infrastructure. Normalization of relations with Belarus would lead to the stabilization of the situation on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border.

Democratization of Belarus is likely to help counter the issue of smuggling, especially tobacco products. Thus, compared to 2022, cigarette smuggling into Lithuania doubled in 2023, while 82% of smuggled cigarettes were [produced in Belarus](#). Besides this, smuggling is facilitated by the visa-free regime for Lithuanian citizens who can visit Belarus without serious obstacles, buy goods at cheaper prices, and then illegally import part of them into Lithuania.

More positive developments may also be a factor that would help solve the issue of a growing Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania. Recently, the issue of legal migration from Belarus to Lithuania has become one of the most pressing topics in public debates because of the warning that the new arrivals may include people infiltrated by Russian and Belarusian intelligence services and the possibility of the formation of Belarusian [enclaves within Lithuania](#). In the case of democratic transformation, there is a possibility that a part of the Belarusians who fled the country due to political reasons will get back.

From Lithuania's perspective, the democratization and economic development of Belarus may become a contributing factor to the development of mutually beneficiary economic relations between the two states. Geographical position, close cultural and historical ties, the potential of bilateral relations, as well as political interest of the two players are the drivers that could push the economic cooperation between democratic Belarus and Lithuania to its peak.

2.3. Ukraine

Compared to Poland and Lithuania, Ukraine is much less active in the context of cooperation with the Belarusian democratic forces. Ukraine has not introduced study programs and stipends for Belarusian citizens. Ukrainian central and municipal authorities are not engaged in the “Personnel Reserve” program. Only recently, the official Kyiv has made an important step towards more active cooperation with the Belarusian democratic movement by appointing the [Ambassador-at-Large](#) for Belarus. Despite slow progress, Ukraine is potentially interested in supporting democratic forces' struggle to bring up personnel for a new Belarus, seeing it as a part of a wider picture.

The top priority for the official Kyiv in relations with Belarus is security. Even in conditions of missile strikes committed from the territory of Belarus, Ukraine refrained from any sort of military response creating Lukashenka room for possible de-escalation. Now it is possible to say that this approach has worked out, helping Ukraine reach its short-term objectives. However, it does not mean that all kind of threats have been eliminated. The unpredictability of the Lukashenka regime may once again cause serious threats, putting the two nations on the verge of war. A democratic government in Belarus will not be a threat to national security and it will help maintain peace in the region.

At the same time, **it is important for Kyiv to look for the mechanisms of influence of Belarusian society at home and abroad.** Cooperation with the Belarusian democratic forces in the context of preparation of a new generation of functionaries may be pretty beneficial in the long run, establishing close working and personal ties between Ukrainian and Belarusian functionaries.

The democratization of the Republic of Belarus will allow the free development of entrepreneurship, create favourable conditions for investment, and help develop the labour market. Ukraine will benefit from this through increased trade turnover, joint projects, and cooperation in various fields.

What is even more important, Ukraine, facing negative foreign policy conjuncture and issues in the communication of its basic needs caused by internal political debates in the Western states and the so-called war fatigue, **may potentially see the Belarusian issue as an opportunity to act as a constructive regional player.** It means that Ukraine could not only be the shield and frontier - an emotional narrative that receives less and less feedback in the West - but also be a contributor to the transformations in the region, strengthening its subjectivity and gaining political influence.

3. Interests of the European Union in supporting the formation of a new generation of Belarusian functionaries

The Belarusian issue is on the periphery of the EU political agenda, being shadowed by the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and internal turmoil. Moreover, the EU's policy on Belarus has been narrow in its scope for an extensive period. Developments in Central-Eastern Europe, including Ukraine and Belarus, may prove to be crucial for the further existence of the European Union as one of the centres of power in the changing geopolitical reality with new influential players emerging all over the globe and constant divisions resulting from internal crises.

There is a need for a stronger European policy that could prove that the EU's values are still relevant and that the EU is capable of adapting to newly emerging circumstances and being effective in its approaches. A more active and constructive position toward Belarus with the consistent support of the process of formation of a new generation of Belarusian functionaries may become one of the steps towards this goal.

Cooperation with the Belarusian democratic forces may also become a test site for new ideas in the realm of public administration reforms of future or new EU member states. Moreover, taking such a rather creative approach the EU could work on the formula of how democracy can be spread in countries that are not perceived as democratic ones.

This could also possibly help prevent the absorption of Belarus caused by the fact that the Lukashenka regime is facing the degradation of the quality of state officials. Since 2020, the regime has been increasingly relying on loyal functionaries, rather than smart and independent ones, who can show more initiative and creativity but who are more difficult to control.

Lukashenka will die or step back sooner or later, and potentially it may be a huge problem for the transfer of power because political elites who have been acting within a rigid political vertical, may not be ready to take the responsibility upon themselves. Moreover, the regime does not offer any ideology, worldview, or political concept that could be a unifying factor for both the elites and society. Lukashenka himself substitutes ideology which means that it may be complicating for his successor to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the state apparatus and population.

Russia will try to take the leverage in such a situation promoting its people and trying to take over the personnel policy in Belarus. The EU and individual states should be prepared for such a scenario and have a wide range of tools available in order to oppose Moscow's actions.

Recommendations

It makes sense for the Belarusian democratic forces to establish contacts with the members of the Belarusian diaspora who now work in various governmental structures in the EU countries. This would help, if necessary, encourage them to move to Belarus and contribute to the development and reformation of state institutions.

The United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus should strive to establish a close partnership with Moldova that could become a role model for administrative reforms and the development of human resources potential. During the last several years, Chişinău has been able to implement several initiatives aimed at solving the issue of competent personnel shortage. This experience may prove to be useful for the democratic Belarus after the transition of power.

It may be worth considering the establishment of a “shadow cabinet” as a part of the “Personnel Reserve” program. This would be a group of people simulating an actual government with specific ministerial and other state roles. Within the framework of such a group, it would be possible to work out government programs in realms that have not been covered by the Belarusian democratic forces yet. It also may prove to be a good way to fill some of the positions within the United Transitional Cabinet and practice governing.

Ukrainian state authorities should join the “Personnel Reserve” program and provide representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces with opportunities to strengthen their competence. Study visits, training, internship programs, and possibly even concluding short-term contracts with some of the participants would make it possible to establish close long-term ties between Ukrainian elites and the representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces. In addition, such a step would allow to partially overcome the personnel deficit in the civil service in Ukraine.

It also makes sense for Ukraine to launch additional opportunities for Belarusian citizens in Ukraine. This will prevent Belarusians from leaving the country, allow to establish close academic, professional, and personal contacts with Ukrainian colleagues, as well as make it possible to train the next generation of personnel for a democratic Belarus.

Lithuania and Poland should continue providing the Belarusian diaspora with educational and career opportunities, including Belarusian-language educational programs. What is more, Polish and Lithuanian ministries of education can advocate the creation of the Belarusian National University on the EU level. Such a step may prove to be beneficial in terms of receiving funding, institutional, and administrative support for such an institution.

In terms of establishing the Belarusian National University, it is worth including the College of Europe in this process. Especially, due to the fact that its lecturers have experience in preparing personnel for the Eastern Partnership countries and are currently running programs to train Moldovan and Ukrainian officials in European integration.

When it comes to regional cooperation between Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania, a joint road map dedicated to the coordination of all three states' efforts is needed. This would help utilize institutional or other advantages possessed by each state and avoid a conflict of interest that may slow down the development of cooperation.

The Lublin Triangle member states, the EU institutions, and the Belarusian democratic forces should join their efforts in terms of developing a detailed strategy for public administration reform during the transitional period. It should include the development of relevant legislative acts drafts, and the creation of a system of guarantees for Belarusian mid-level officials who have not committed any crimes and are ready to cooperate with democratic forces.

At the same time, the Belarusian democratic forces should pay close attention to the issue of special services. In this case, the experience of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, some of which completely dissolved these structures, while others carried out vetting and allowed some of the former servicemen to return to work, may be extremely useful.

Additionally, the EU can set up a funding mechanism for the support of current activities of the Belarusian democratic forces, including strengthening the human resources potential, as well as reforms of the public sector during the transitional period. The experience of Ukraine in the wake of the Revolution of Dignity shows that there is a huge necessity to be prepared for moments of turbulence before they begin.

It is needed to emphasize that the EU should have an already prepared cohort of advisors who could not only provide the representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces with advice and suggestions but also work together with them. In case of changes, there will be a lack of competent and well-prepared functionaries, especially mid-level servants who can implement the decisions.

There is also a need for a strategy to counter Russian attempts to influence the situation in Belarus during the moment of transformation. There is no doubt that the Kremlin will try to undermine the possible democratization of Belarus by any means: provocations, promoting its people to key positions, hybrid operations, and even the use of force. The goal is to minimize Russia's potential involvement and most importantly - prevent the use of force.

Conclusion

Aliaksandr Lukashenka created an extremely personalistic regime the existence of which is focused on serving the interests of the Belarusian president. Such a scheme of state functioning is convenient for its main beneficiary but not for the state as a whole. Belarus in the case of Lukashenka's death or departure from power may be brought on the verge of significant internal and external threats, some of which will be caused by low quality and inactivity of the state apparatus.

In order to effectively confront these challenges and be able to go through the transition period, the democratic forces need a cohort of well-trained people capable of developing and implementing decisions. Although the first steps have been made in cooperation with some European states, the scope and intensity of such actions leave much to be desired.

Regional cooperation between Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine may help scale up training programs and contribute to the activation of the European Union in the context of developing a comprehensive strategy for Belarus and helping the democratic forces get ready for possible future transformations.

Giving the Belarusian issue a higher place in the hierarchy of the Lublin Triangle's and EU's agenda may help prevent the development of the worst-case scenarios and the subsequent absorption of Belarus by the Russian Federation. What is more, a determined approach toward the Belarusian issue could improve Europe's geopolitical position.