

New repressions in Belarus: The art of staying below western radars

On 14 October, a squad of masked riot policemen raided an antifascist concert in Minsk, detaining dozens of people, and reportedly beating some of them. This incident, among several others, demonstrated a relatively new trend in Belarusian domestic politics.

For several months now, the authorities have been steadily expanding the range of targeted and discrete repressions against media, civil society and political opposition groups. At the same time, they carefully calibrate the pressure, so that it does no harm to Belarus and the West improving relations. The government is also working on new legislation that can tighten their control over freedoms of speech and assembly.

Taken together, these practical and legal developments test the limits of EU patience. So far, the test results seem to satisfy Minsk.

Some types of repression remain a no-go

Between August 2015 and March 2017, Belarusian authorities notably softened their treatment of political opposition. Fines for protests replaced detentions and administrative arrests. These soft practices followed the release of political prisoners—[Mikalai Statkevich](#), Yuri Rubtsou and four anarchists—and were meant to contribute to a positive atmosphere for dialog with the West.

These softer practices were a self-imposed restriction, a political offering on Minsk's behalf. Historically, the West has resorted to meaningful pressure only after politically motivated criminal trials, brutal crackdowns on street rallies, or election manipulations, but not after the occasional administrative persecution of protest leaders.

The Belarusian authorities' reaction to the [2017 spring social protests](#) only highlighted this rule. In the following months, power ministries, or *siloviki*, in fact tested the boundaries of what was allowed by the logic of [Belarus-West engagement](#).

It appeared that the EU started to push on Minsk diplomatically when the arrests were large-scale and indiscriminate during the spring protests and when the media became filled with [frightening pictures of street crackdowns](#) on 25 March. Putting people into prison under dubious criminal charges ([the White Legion case, for example](#)) also made the West voice its concern.

Minsk learnt its lesson. Firstly, the authorities released both those convicted under [White Legion](#) and [independent trade union cases](#). However, none of the convicts' charges were dropped. Secondly, the police refrained from demonstrations of power on the streets. To be fair, opposition has also failed to organise spring style protests in a way that would require a harsh crackdown.

To the degree they did not to impede diplomats' work, the *siloviki* have returned to targeted repression and even intensified them in the recent months.

Gradual expansion of pressure

Administrative arrests (up to 15 days) have clearly come back to the arsenal of the authorities. However, the police almost never detain activists during or immediately after a given

rally; the media must not get “tasty” pictures.



Riot police detain Pavel Seviarynets for a previous rally the moment he showed up at a new one, 31 March 2017. Photo: Vadzim Zamirouski, TUT.BY

The police implement court orders to arrest opponents at the time of their, the police's, tactical convenience. It often happens on the eve of the next announced protest. Currently several activists, like [Pavel Seviarynets](#) and Maksim Viniarski, are serving arrests for past demonstrations. The timings of their arrests, though, were evidently picked to prevent them from attending an upcoming rally on 21 October. A protest leader such as [Mikalai Statkevich](#) always has an arrest or two “in stock,” so the police may come for him at anytime.

Since this past spring, the authorities have intensified their pressure on journalists from Belsat, an oppositional satellite TV-channel, broadcasting from and launched by Warsaw. Working without accreditation, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

refuses to grant them, Belsat reporters have been getting fines (between \$200 to \$600) since 2014 for the “illegal production of media material.” This year, however, there have been an outstanding number of fines.

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of fines imposed on Belsat reporters	5	20	10	43
Total volume (\$)	2500	7500	3000	16730

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*.

This crackdown partly owes to the increased pragmatism of the current Polish right-wing government and its particular [efforts for better relations](#) with Minsk. The Polish Sejm was the first EU parliament to engage in official contacts with the Belarusian House of Representatives in 2016, even before an opposition party got a seat. According to some reports, Warsaw diplomats even privately proposed ending [support to Belsat](#) in return for a Polish cultural TV-channel gaining access to Belarusian cable networks. The Belarusian authorities seem to have concluded their pressure on Belsat would not damage relations. They appear to be right.

On a completely different front, the Justice Ministry launched re-attestations of lawyers. On 14 September, the ministry revoked the licence of Hanna Bakhtsina, a barrister who has defended numerous political activists. Decisions on several other lawyers are expected soon.

The police have also returned to a practice that seemed almost forgotten—raids on civil society group gatherings. On 26 September, secret services [raided the apartments](#) of several Belarusian anarchists and environmentalists. On 9 October, police disrupted a lecture by Russian anarchist writer Piotr Riabov in Hrodna. Riabov was arrested for six days for

“swearing in public” and eventually deported from Belarus.

On 14 October, masked police officers raided the “Minsk Edge Day 2017” concert, detaining musicians and members of the audience, apparently for their affiliations with anti-fascist groups. Some of those detained reported beatings.

Looming legal experiments

Recently, the government put forward two new legislative initiatives that can potentially deteriorate the [human rights situation](#) in Belarus.

One of them, the draft law amending the public assembly regulations, was published at the beginning of October. The document will remove the need to seek permission for a rally in several assigned districts of every town and city. This alone seems like incremental liberalisation.

At the same time, the amendments will expand the power of local authorities to refuse applications for rallies from previously convicted individuals, meaning from almost every opposition leader. The draft also outlaws any public announcements of unauthorised protests. Russia’s authorities constantly use the same provision in their law to preventively arrest activists.

The second initiative is the brainchild of the new Information Minister, Aliaxander Karliukevich. On 7 October, he proposed to regulate social networks with additions to law on media. His promises to not infringe upon freedom of speech with these amendments encourage little optimism.

The future of Belarusian domestic politics to some degree depends on how the West will react to these legal novelties. Were they to pass through without a setback in relations or any preceding diplomatic pressure, Minsk will see law making as another safe polygon for future restrictions and

experiments.

A new normal?

The correlation between the current phase of Minsk-West relations and the political climate within Belarus has always been one of conventional wisdom.

Times of good relations with the EU have traditionally meant less domestic repression. In its turn, a thaw that gave more space for oppositional activity in some cases would lead to more protests. The protests would subsequently cause a new crackdown and a new conflict with the West. The story would then repeat itself.

2017 may become a year that defies this cycle. Belarusian authorities have apparently found a way to combine both improving relations with Brussels while at the same time retaining targeted repression, which are finely tuned below Western radars.

The more Brussels' pragmatism towards Minsk starts to look irreversible, the more Belarusian authorities gain confidence and clarity in how many things they can do without breaking the glass ceiling of EU patience.

**Why do the authorities
continue to arrest Belarus's**

top businessmen?

On 12 April, Belarusian authorities arrested Vitali Arbuzaŭ, one of the most successful businessmen in Belarus. He was another casualty in Belarus's ongoing war against tycoons.

Being close to Lukashenka is by no means a guarantee of safety for oligarchs, and many prefer to register their companies and reside abroad. Those who cannot do so must demonstrate their support for the authorities in various ways and never make a misstep.

As the Belarusian state system is dominated by the security services, they spend their time and resources over-zealously pursuing white-collar criminals rather than improving the business environment in the country. This causes serious damage to the investment climate.

In the absence of strong rule of law, large businesses continue to depend on patronage networks and informal arrangements with the country's leadership.

One arrest after another

On 12 April, Belarusian authorities arrested [Vitali Arbuzaŭ](#), a top Belarusian businessman, on tax evasion charges.

In 2017, Vitali Arbuzaŭ ranked 11th in the annual list of the Top 200 Most Successful and Influential Businessmen in Belarus, though in 2016 he was second and in 2013 third. He is the co-owner of the holding Fenox Global Group and venture fund Fenox Venture. Both companies deal with automobile components, medicine, logistics, food retail, investments in R&D, and the IT sector.

In recent years, Belarus has witnessed a series of arrests of

top businessmen. On 19 August, the KGB arrested [Uladzimir Japryncaŭ](#), number 19 in the aforementioned 'Top 200' ranking and the closest business partner of [Juryj Čyž](#), as well as Japryncaŭ's son Kazbek. The KGB stated that Juryj Čyž had informed them of the Japryncaŭ family's illegal activities. They were accused of fraud, and Japryncaŭ junior received eight years in jail; his father received only a fine.

Six months later, on 11 March 2016, Juryj Čyž himself [faced criminal charges](#). Čyž ranked first in the 2013 list of top Belarusian businessmen and was believed to be a close associate of Alexander Lukashenka, as he often appeared near the president in photos planting watermelons or mowing grass. After half a year in jail, and \$13m in damages, Čyž was released. In 2017, his position had dropped to 53rd, a dramatic fall and presumably the end of an important business career.

At around the same time, the KGB arrested another Belarusian tycoon, [Jaŭhien Baskin](#), number six in the 2016 ranking, also on tax evasion charges. Baskin owns the company Servaliuks, which deals in agricultural production.

Position	2017 Rating	2016 Rating	2013 Rating
1	Viktar Kisly	Viktar Kisly	Juryj Čyž
2	Paviel Tapuzidzis	Vitali Arbuzaŭ	Aliaksandr Šakucin
3	Aliaksandr Mašenski	Aliaksandr Mašenski	Vitali Arbuzaŭ
4	Uladzimir Piefcijeŭ	Paviel Tapuzidzis	Paviel Tapuzidzis
5	Aliaksandr Lucenka	Aliaksandr Šakucin	Aliaksandr Mašenski
6	Arkadzi Dobkin	Jaŭhieni Baskin	Jaŭhieni Baskin
7	Dzmitry Labiak	Siarhieŭ Litvin	Siarhieŭ Litvin
8	Aliaksandr Šakucin	Uladzimir Vasilka	Arkadzi Dobkin
9	Aliaksiej Aliksin	Aliaksiej Aliksin	Anatoli Ternaŭski
10	Ivan Michnievič	Aliaksiej Žukaŭ	Valiancin Bajko

He was quick to compensate for the damage and was freed several months later. Incidentally, both Baskin and Čyž were arrested while trying to escape Belarus after they received information about searches in their offices. In the 2017 ranking Baskin scored 21st.

These individuals, of course, were highly important figures. It is important to remember that dozens of smaller-scale businessmen have faced similar troubles since 2015, including Andrej Paŭloŭski (number 26), Dzmitry Ronin (130), Alieh

Zuchavicki (157), and a number of other well-known figures. This illustrates the scale of state pressure on large business. So how do the very wealthy manage to survive under Lukashenka at all?

Stay abroad or watch your step

More prudent businesspeople prefer to stay out of Belarus and register their companies abroad to minimise their risk of arrest. [Viktar Kisly](#), number one in the 2017 ranking and owner of the Wargaming group, moved his head office to Cyprus in 2011 and now resides there himself.

[Arkadz Dobkin](#), creator of another renowned IT company, EPAM (Number six in the 2017 rating), lives in the US, where the head office of the company is also located. The owners of the Belarusian retail giant Evroopt, [Uladzimir Vasilka](#) (Number eight in 2016) and [Siarhiej Litvin](#) (number seven in 2016) left Belarus in 2003 and now reside in Monaco.



Another method for the wealthiest Belarusian businesspeople to stay out of trouble seems to be behaving irreproachably and maintaining good relations with the top decision maker. For example, tobacco trader and retailer [Paviel Tapuzidzis](#) (Number two in

the 2017 rating), often heads the district-level electoral committee during parliamentary and presidential elections. During the 2016 parliamentary election, when answering *naviny.by*'s question about his reasons for doing so, he openly replied 'this can help me save my business'.

Belarus's number three businessman, [Aliaksandr Mašenski](#), also courts Lukashenka's favour and has reportedly joined him on a number of trips and events; he worked as Lukashenka's authorised representative during his 2010 presidential campaign. Number four on the list, [Aliaksandr Šakucin](#), is also a member of the president's entourage; he has held the post of senator in the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament.

What is the main obstacle to business?

According to anonymous sources, since the beginning of the economic crisis in Belarus, Belarusian businesspeople have tried to hide or move their capital. The security services control these activities thoroughly and organise public arrests in order to warn others and prevent growing shadow schemes.

Conducting large-scale business in Belarus almost always involves informal arrangements with the country's ruler. Security forces remain the most influential group in Belarus after Lukashenka, and they see their job as hunting for illegal activities rather than improving the investment climate. Lukashenka is also highly concerned with personal security and stability, and therefore remains unlikely to downgrade the influence of the *siloviki*.

Back in 2011, Lukashenka outlined his approach to 'dishonest' businessmen: 'If you've damaged the state's interests – pay double or triple the sum and you're free'. Lukashenka is believed to personally control the arrests and releases of tycoons. He claims that there are no privileged people in Belarus and everyone is responsible for him or herself. What's more, trials of high-profile businesspeople offer a perfect opportunity to fill gaps in the budget as the economy continues to struggle.

The series of arrests of Belarusian businesspeople stands in contrast with the institutional changes under way in the country. In 2017, Belarus scored 37th in the Doing Business rating, surpassing a number of EU members including Italy, Hungary, Belgium, Greece, and Luxembourg. In trying to increase the country's attractiveness for investment and realising the high risks, the Belarusian government has so far refrained from punishing any foreign businessmen, except for the Russian [Uralkali case](#).

Nevertheless, the overall negative atmosphere contributes to the fact that foreign investment in Belarus remains negligible compared to its neighbours. [Non-transparent game rules](#), dependence on patronage, and the dominance of the security services also frighten investors away. This is a serious challenge for lobbyists advocating a liberal and transparent business environment in Belarus. The Belarusian government should seek to treat the country's top businessmen more fairly if it wants to improve its image internationally.

Zaitsev in Cosmos: Ex-Head of the KGB Got a New Appointment

Now that Vadim Zaitsev has been appointed head of Cosmos TV, peaceful Belarusians can fall asleep serenely in front of their TV – no ideological saboteur will now get to their TV screens.

Vadim Zaitsev, the person who happened to head the Belarusian KGB in the country's most critical time, as well as the Committee for State Security – during the December 2010 presidential election as well as two years before and two

years after – got a new appointment. Since 2012, when Zaitsev was dismissed, everybody wondered where his managerial genius would manifest itself.

Was he assigned to the president's personnel pool? Will he suddenly emerge as an ambassador, and if yes, how remote from Minsk will be the country of his assignment? And finally, a piece of news: chekist Zaitsev has been appointed managing director of *Cosmos TV*, the company which has equipment in houses of many of us.

News agencies are terse about it. It is reported that Vadim Zaitsev has been appointed to head the company "at the suggestion of the Belarusian partner", and that a participatory share of Belarus in the charter of *Cosmos TV Limited* stands at 50%, with the share of the Russian company *Akado* standing, respectively, at 50%.

The online community reacted promptly to the new milestone in the biography of the former chekist: a guide "How to cancel your *Cosmos TV* subscription" is circulating online where users are invited to fill in an application form and to state "appointment of Vadzim Zaitsev as the head of the company" in the field "reason for cancellation".

However, the appointment of the hero of Independence Square 2010 to head a semi-private company prompts quite a different reaction from those people who are prone to thoughtfulness and analysis. In the first place, this is a desire to pinpoint those "escape lines" from the civil service which every Belarusian top official has. Lately, a certain style has started to take shape in these situations. Shame on those who say that we have no tradition whatsoever of employment assistance to civil servants after the state stops needing them at their posts for some reason. The tradition is emerging.

The trend of departure from the big nomenklatura to big business was set already by former Prime Minister Uladzimir Jarmoshyn

The trend of departure from the big nomenklatura to big business was set already by former Prime Minister Uladzimir Jarmoshyn (dismissed in 2001). In 2002, he became head of the representative office of *MTS* in Belarus (now, according to Wikipedia, he is employed by *Vneshekonomstroy*).

In 2004, after the dismissal of Lieanid Jeryn, the head of the KGB, a second career canvas was laid out – to leave for Moscow after the dismissal. According to *UDF.by*, chekist Jeryn "advises" at the *Russian Railways* corporation. Accordingly, Ural Latypau (dismissed from the post of the head of the presidential administration in 2004) initially chose the path of Jarmoshyn, becoming the head of *Lukoil-Belarus* in 2006.

Again, according to Wikipedia, he heads *Direct Management Ltd* since 2009 (development, Moscow). Former head of the *Belarusian Railways* Viktor Rakhmanko (dismissed in 2001 after having been accused of embezzlement) chose the path of Jeryn and was employed by *Gazprom*.

Former assistant to the president Siarhiej Posakhau, according to *UDF*, got employment and worked until recently at *LenSpetsSMU* in Saint Petersburg. Russia was also chosen by former head of the presidential Property Management Department Ivan Tsitsiankou (dismissed in 1999) immediately after his dismissal (first, he worked in logistics at *Itera* and then opened his own business).

Head of the Interior Ministry Uladzimir Navumau also emerged in Russia (his last known position was advisor to Sergey Chemezov, managing director of the state corporation *Rostekhnologii*).

Even a sketchy analysis allows us to see that Russia is a

higher demand destination point than Belarus for former Belarusian "chiefs".

Aliaksandr Zimouski, former head of the *Belarusian Television and Radio Company*, who is banned from entering Europe, turned out in Russia. He says that he works as a "media consultant".

Even a sketchy analysis allows seeing that Russia is a higher demand destination point than Belarus for former Belarusian "chiefs". Possibly, because in Russia (unlike in Belarus) there is plenty of capital which, by their sheer volume, honoraria and bonuses, meets the career ambitions of people who were at the very top of the Belarusian power pyramid. At the same time, there is a feeling that Belarus is now afraid to let go officials of the rank of the KGB boss.

In this regard, a lot has changed here since 2004 (Jeryn's dismissal and his subsequent departure).

After several bitter scuffles in the Union State, Russia is no longer perceived as an unequivocally friendly country which shares its state secrets with Belarus and thus is quite a secure one for the trouble-free retirement for former powerful strongmen. The nervousness provoked in Moscow by news of Uladzimir Navumau's emergence in Moscow (and this is a person who knows quite a lot) is the best proof to this.

However, Vadim Zaitsev's appointment to *Cosmos TV* can be regarded as a continuation of his service to the Motherland – this time, in another segment and in another capacity. As it is known, only now a large-scale wave of fight against satellite dishes has been launched in Belarus.

Residents of tower-blocks say that their housing maintenance services gave them time till the end of July and then they threaten to sue them. The court's decision to dismantle the "illegally installed equipment" will be binding.

Appointment of Vadim Zaitsev, a person clearly loyal to the

state, to the management of one of the major providers of cable and over-the-air television can be seen as a continuation of the tactics of instilling order with satellite TV. Ultimately, the guide "How to Cancel your *Cosmos TV* subscription" will be absolutely useless if, after getting rid of *Cosmos TV*, the audience will have to spend time with the "alternative" in the form of three channels of the state-run Belarusian television.

Rodion Raskolnikov

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