

EMBRACE

Working Paper 02



Pathways to Change: Analysing Democratic Transition Scenarios in Belarus under Regime Instability and Weakened Russian Influence

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Introduction to the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-2025) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings. The EMBRACE consortium consists of 14 partner organisations based in 13 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development.

Empirical data was gathered in twelve case study countries through a variety of research approaches, investigating episodes of political closure and opening to identify, analyse and explain behavioural, institutional and structural blockages, and the conditions under which they can be overcome. A new quantitative dataset was generated on the larger trends of EU Democracy Promotion and its effects on democratisation over the last two decades in all 23 neighbours.






The research is structured around four thematic clusters: the re-configurations for democratic policy shifts after popular uprisings; democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes; the nexus between democratisation and peace; and the geopolitics of EUDP and the competition that the EU encounters in its democracy promotion efforts.

1 Executive Summary

This policy report analyses potential scenarios for democratic transition in Belarus, considering the hypothetical context of **regime instability** and **weakened Russian influence**. This report explores four scenarios after potential peaceful mass mobilisation: Violent Crackdown, Regime Collapse, Negotiated Transition and Gradual Reform. Each scenario is assessed for its likelihood, necessary conditions, and potential outcomes. Key findings include:

- **Peaceful Mass Mobilisation** is considered very unlikely due to the regime's entrenched power and effective suppression of protests.
 - **Violent Crackdown** remains a moderate possibility, particularly if the regime feels severely threatened.
 - **Regime Collapse** has a low likelihood but could lead to rapid democratic change if specific conditions align.
 - **Negotiated Transition** is deemed low to moderate in likelihood, potentially becoming more plausible if Russia's influence wanes significantly.
 - **Gradual Reform** is considered moderately likely, especially if economic pressures necessitate some liberalisation.

The report provides detailed recommendations for EU policy responses to each scenario, emphasising the need for strategic flexibility, sustained support for democratic forces, and international coordination. Two approaches are proposed for the Gradual Reform scenario: a cautious approach maintaining pressure on the regime, and an engagement approach encouraging reforms through incentives. Key recommendations for the EU include:

-  Maintaining strategic flexibility to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances
-  Providing sustained support for Belarusian civil society and opposition
-  Enhancing international coordination on Belarus policy
-  Developing comprehensive contingency plans for potential instability
-  Improving strategic communication efforts towards Belarus

The report concludes that there are considerable opportunities for democracy change in Belarus, in a hypothetical scenario where Russia has potentially lost the war in Ukraine and is significantly weakened, and coupled with increased instability within the Belarusian regime. However, significant obstacles to democratic transition remain. The most likely short to medium-term outcome may be limited gradual reforms aimed at regime preservation rather than genuine democratisation.

2 Introduction

This report, "Pathways to Change: Analysing Democratic Transition Scenarios in Belarus Under Regime Instability and Weakened Russian Influence," was prepared as an input for the workshop on '*Scenarios on the Future of Belarus, 2025-2030*', organised by the Clingendael Institute on 7 October 2024.

The analysis presented herein aims to provide a comprehensive examination of potential democratic transition scenarios in Belarus, specifically **considering a context where Russia has potentially lost the war in Ukraine and is significantly weakened**, coupled with **increased instability within the Belarusian regime**.

The political landscape in Belarus has been dominated by the authoritarian rule of President Alexander Lukashenka for nearly three decades. However, recent events, including the contested 2020 presidential election and Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, have raised questions about the sustainability of the current regime and the potential for democratic change. This report explores four scenarios after potential peaceful mass mobilisation: Violent Crackdown, Regime Collapse, Negotiated Transition and Gradual Reform, all set against the backdrop of a weakened Russia and increased Belarusian regime instability.

Each scenario is evaluated for its likelihood, the necessary conditions for its occurrence, and potential outcomes, taking into account the hypothetical context of Russia's defeat in Ukraine and its diminished influence in the region. The analysis draws upon a wide range of academic sources, expert opinions, and recent developments in Belarus and the broader region. By examining these scenarios, the report aims to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of authoritarian resilience, the prospects for democratic change, and the broader implications for regional stability and international relations in eastern Europe, particularly in a potential post-war context where Russian influence has waned.

The report also offers detailed recommendations for how the European Union should respond to each scenario, emphasising the need for strategic flexibility, sustained support for democratic forces, and international coordination. These recommendations are designed to inform policymakers and stakeholders about potential courses of action that could support democratic transition in Belarus while navigating the complex geopolitical context of a weakened Russia and an unstable Belarusian regime. The report acknowledges the significant obstacles to democratic transition, including the entrenched nature of Lukashenka's regime and the weakened state of the opposition. However, it also explores how the hypothetical shifts in regional dynamics, particularly the weakening of Russian influence following a defeat in Ukraine, could create new opportunities for change in Belarus.

By providing this comprehensive analysis, the report aims to support the development of nuanced and effective strategies for engaging with Belarus during this critical period of potential transition. It is our hope that this work will contribute to informed decision-making and policy formulation, ultimately supporting the aspirations of the Belarusian people for a more democratic and prosperous future in a changing regional landscape.

3 Peaceful Mass Mobilisation Scenario

Likelihood: Very Low

Conditions:

- Significant weakening of the Lukashenka regime's repressive capabilities
- Renewed public willingness to engage in protests despite recent crackdowns
- Emergence of new opposition leaders within Belarus or organisations capable of unifying and mobilising people
- Weakening of Russia's influence and support for Lukashenka

The likelihood of peaceful mass mobilisation in Belarus remains very low. This assessment is based on several key conditions that would need to change significantly for such mobilisation to occur. These conditions include a substantial weakening of the Lukashenka regime's repressive capabilities, a renewed public willingness to engage in protests despite past crackdowns, the emergence of new opposition leaders or organisations capable of unifying and mobilising people, and a weakening of Russia's influence and support for Lukashenka. As these are the assumptions connected to this paper – low regime stability and low Russian influence – the mass mobilisation scenario serves as the starting point for subsequent events.

Critical Analysis:

A critical evaluation of the situation reveals that even if Russia loses the war in Ukraine, the likelihood of peaceful mass mobilisation remains minimal. The Lukashenka regime has effectively suppressed protests through harsh repression, including mass arrests and forced exile of opposition figures (Bedford, 2021; Viasna, 2024¹). The security apparatus has purged the public space of any manifestations of protest, creating a climate of fear and leading to the deterioration of civil society. Even with low regime stability, as this scenario assumes, the repressive capabilities within Belarus remain significant. Furthermore, the regime has tried to destroy the social fabric and solidarity between Belarusians, which enabled the protests of 2020 occurring across generational and social boundaries. These factors make large-scale peaceful mobilisation highly unlikely in the near future.

While Russia's potential loss in Ukraine might slightly increase the chances of mobilisation by weakening Moscow's ability to support Lukashenka, the entrenched nature of the regime and the decimated state of the opposition would still present significant obstacles². Several potential outcomes could arise if mobilisation were to occur, including a negotiated transition where the regime agrees to hold free and fair elections, a regime collapse resulting in Lukashenka stepping down or fleeing and an

¹ Bedford S. The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society. *Nationalities Papers*. 2021;49(5):808-819. doi:10.1017/nps.2021.33; Viasna, 2024, Infographics: Four years of mass repression

² Moshes, Arkady, and Nizhnikau, Ryhor. 2021. "The Belarusian Revolution: Sources, Interim Outcomes, and Lessons To Be Learned." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 29 (2): 159–181

interim government being formed, partial reforms where the regime makes limited concessions without fundamental change, or a violent crackdown leading to increased repression.

Potential Outcomes:

- Violent crackdown: Protests are ultimately suppressed, leading to increased repression
- Regime collapse: Lukashenka steps down or flees, interim government formed
- Negotiated transition: The regime agrees to hold free and fair elections
- Partial reforms: The regime makes limited concessions without fundamental change. This does not limit the mobilisation of people on the streets.

3a Violent Crackdown Scenario

Likelihood: Moderate

Conditions:

- Large-scale demonstrations similar to those in 2020 could prompt the regime to respond with force, despite its weakened position.
- Severe economic difficulties, potentially exacerbated by reduced Russian support, could lead to widespread unrest and a subsequent crackdown.
- If Lukashenko or his inner circle believe their grip on power is seriously threatened, they might resort to violence as a last-ditch effort to maintain control.
- Defections or splits within the security apparatus, or the emergence of new, charismatic opposition leaders, could trigger a violent response as the regime attempts to reassert control.
- Increased international isolation, perceived foreign interference, or a significant reduction in Russian support could push the regime to take more desperate measures, including a violent crackdown.

Renewed mass protests could trigger a violent response from the regime. If large-scale demonstrations similar to those in 2020 were to resurface, the regime might feel compelled to respond with force, despite its weakened position. A severe economic crisis, potentially exacerbated by reduced Russian support, could lead to widespread social unrest. This situation might prompt the regime to attempt a crackdown to maintain control. If Lukashenka or his inner circle perceive a serious threat to their survival, they might resort to violence as a last-ditch effort to cling to power. This perception of existential threat could lower the threshold for a violent response. The emergence of new, charismatic opposition leaders capable of mobilising large numbers of people could trigger a violent response from the regime. Such figures might be seen as a direct challenge to Lukashenka's authority. Defections or splits within the security apparatus could lead to a crackdown. If parts of the security forces begin to side with protesters or refuse orders, the regime might attempt to reassert control using loyalist units. Increased international isolation or the perception of foreign interference could push the regime to

take more desperate measures. This external pressure might be seen as justification for a harsh internal response.

A significant reduction in Russian support for the Lukashenka regime might prompt a violent crackdown. This could be seen as a show of strength and an attempt to maintain power independently. The escalation of localised protests beyond the regime's control in certain regions could trigger a broader violent response. Given the potential for inconsistent repression across the country, the regime might feel compelled to act decisively. If non-violent resistance tactics start to effectively paralyse government functions, the regime might resort to violence to break this resistance. The perceived success of civil disobedience could be seen as an existential threat.

The exposure of regime secrets or corruption through fragmented information control could spark public outrage. This might lead to a violent regime response to suppress the spread of damaging information. The regime's paranoia about Western-backed "colour revolution" efforts could lead to pre-emptive violent action against perceived threats. This fear might lower the threshold for using force against any form of dissent. In the face of weakening control, the regime might initiate a crackdown to demonstrate its continued ability to maintain power. This could be an attempt to reassert authority and deter further challenges. It is important to note that in this scenario of weakened Russian support and low regime stability, a violent crackdown would be a high-risk strategy for the Lukashenka regime. The potential for such action to backfire and accelerate the regime's downfall would be significantly higher than in previous situations where the regime had stronger backing and internal stability. Increased repressions without social or economic stability against a larger portion of the population would further damage the claim that Lukashenka and the regime are upholding the social contract between the people and the regime as well³.

With reduced Russian support and lower regime stability, a key characteristic of this scenario is that security forces might be more hesitant to use extreme violence. They may still employ crowd control tactics, but potentially with less lethal equipment due to resource constraints. Mass detentions might be more targeted, focusing on key opposition figures and organisers rather than large-scale arbitrary arrests, due to limited capacity and fear of escalating public anger. The regime's ability to maintain a consistent level of repression across the country might be compromised, potentially leading to varied levels of crackdown in different regions. With weakened regime stability, there might be increased instances of security personnel refusing orders or defecting to the opposition. The regime's ability to impose a complete information blackout might be limited, with some channels remaining open due to technical limitations or internal resistance. The regime might hastily expand "extremism" laws or introduce new emergency legislation to justify its actions, potentially overreaching and further delegitimising itself.

The crackdown would likely heavily involve regime loyalists and elite security units, as trust in regular police and military might be uncertain. With Russia weakened, the regime might increasingly blame and target organisations or individuals with perceived Western connections.

Critical Analysis:

This scenario of a violent crackdown in Belarus, given the conditions of weakened Russian support and low regime stability, presents a complex and potentially volatile situation. The scenario is plausible given the history of the Lukashenko regime's responses to threats and the current geopolitical context. However, the likelihood of a large-scale violent crackdown may be moderated by the regime's

³ Lukashenka's Social Contract, 2024

weakened position and resource constraints. The scenario correctly identifies the potential for splits within the security apparatus as a key factor. This internal fragmentation could significantly impact the regime's ability to implement a coordinated crackdown, potentially leading to inconsistent levels of repression across the country. The emphasis on limited resources and potentially less lethal equipment is a crucial point, as this constraint could force the regime to be more selective in its targets and methods, possibly reducing the overall scale and intensity of the crackdown compared to previous instances. The assessment of fragmented information control is realistic in the current digital age. The regime's inability to impose a complete information blackout could significantly impact the effectiveness of any crackdown and potentially accelerate public resistance. The prediction of hasty expansion of "extremism" laws is consistent with authoritarian tactics. However, this could indeed backfire by further delegitimising the regime both domestically and internationally. While the scenario appropriately considers the impact of reduced Russian support and increased international isolation, it could further explore how these factors might influence the international community's response to a violent crackdown. The scenario rightly points out the high-risk nature of a violent crackdown under these conditions, as the potential for such actions to accelerate the regime's downfall is a critical consideration that could influence decision-making.

Potential outcomes:

- Accelerated international response: With Russia's influence diminished, Western countries might be quicker and bolder in their response, potentially offering more direct support to opposition forces.
- Regime fractures: A violent crackdown in this context could lead to splits within the regime, with some factions possibly seeking to negotiate with the opposition or pursue their own interests.
- Increased civil resistance: Perceiving regime weakness, protesters might be emboldened, potentially leading to more widespread and sustained civil disobedience.
- Rapid political changes: The combination of internal pressure and reduced external support could lead to sudden political shifts, including potential regime collapse or negotiated transition.
- Economic crisis: Without Russian economic support to fall back on, a crackdown could trigger a severe economic crisis, potentially hastening the regime's downfall.
- Regional power vacuum: A destabilised Belarus without strong Russian backing could create a geopolitical vacuum, potentially drawing in other regional actors or international peacekeeping efforts.
- Opportunity for democratic transition: The weakened position of both the regime and Russia could create a unique opportunity for genuine democratic reforms, if managed effectively by opposition forces and the international community.
- Further isolation of the regime's international position. Without Russia as a backer and increased ostracism from the West due to violent repressions, Belarus only international partners would be autocratic and isolated states such as North Korea, Venezuela and Zimbabwe⁴.

⁴ Belarus Change Tracker, 2023, p. 13

3b Regime Collapse Scenario

Likelihood: Low

Conditions:

- Significant weakening of Lukashenka's power base, possibly due to economic crisis
- Internal splits within the regime
- Renewed public willingness to engage in protests despite past crackdowns
- Emergence of new opposition leaders or organisations capable of mobilising people
- Weakening of Russia's influence and support for Lukashenka

The triggering events for this scenario might include a significant weakening of Lukashenka's power base, possibly due to economic crisis, loss of Russian support, or internal splits within the regime. Renewed mass protests or strikes that the regime is unable to suppress effectively could also play a role. Additionally, defections from key security services or government institutions might contribute to the collapse.

The collapse process could involve Lukashenka fleeing the country suddenly, similar to other autocrats like Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine. Alternatively, he might be forced to step down by his own inner circle to prevent further instability. There could be a brief power vacuum as different factions vie for control. The security apparatus could act as a stabilising or destabilising force depending on how it aligns with emerging political factions.

In the formation of an interim government, a coalition of opposition figures, moderate regime members, and civil society representatives might quickly come together. This could include figures like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and members of her United Transitional Cabinet, who have been preparing for such a scenario in exile since 2020. The interim government would likely declare its intention to hold free and fair elections within a specific timeframe, possibly the 180 days mentioned in the New Belarus Transition Strategy⁵. Key challenges for the interim government would include maintaining order and preventing potential violence or chaos during the transition, dealing with potential Russian intervention or pressure, implementing immediate reforms to create conditions for free elections (including releasing political prisoners, restoring rights of opposition parties and media, and reforming electoral legislation), and managing the economy during a potentially turbulent transition period.

The international dimension would likely involve the interim government seeking immediate international recognition and support. Western countries and the EU might offer financial and technical assistance for the transition process. Russia's reaction would be crucial - it might attempt to influence the process to maintain its interests in Belarus.

Potential outcomes of this scenario, if successful, could lead to the first truly democratic elections in Belarus's post-Soviet history. It could result in a significant reorientation of Belarus's foreign policy, potentially closer to the West. Indeed, the assumption that there is weak Russian influence, combined with a regime collapse, offers the best chances for the democratic forces in exile to step in as the alternative to the collapsed regime. Whereas Lukashenka's power rests to a large degree on Russian

⁵ The New Belarus transition strategy, 2023

security guarantees and financial aid, this would be (near) absent at a time of low Russian influence in the country.

As such, the democratic forces could fill the gap left behind by the collapsed regime, and return to the country with a comprehensive plan addressing the following pressing issues. First, the release of political prisoners and the organisation of new elections. Second, a social and economic program to avoid economic collapse until a new government is in place, with support from the West. Third, a program to address human rights violations committed by the ousted regime. The collapse of the regime could also create conditions for an outsized role for (exiled) Belarusian civil society, underground circles of anti-regime activists, and exiled political figures. However, it also carries risks of instability, potential Russian intervention, or a counter-coup by regime loyalists.

Critical analysis:

While this scenario offers the most rapid and complete break with the Lukashenka regime, it also carries significant risks. The abrupt nature of such a collapse could lead to instability or violence. The security apparatus, while weakened, remains a significant political force and potential source of instability. Meanwhile, China could increase its economic presence in Belarus, taking advantages of the power vacuum. Moreover, Russia would likely view such a scenario as threatening to its interests and might intervene directly or indirectly to shape the outcome. Societal divisions potentially remain deep, with pro-Russian and pro-Western camps competing for influence. There may be concerns about the spread of disinformation or polarising content in the new, less regulated environment.

The success of this scenario would depend heavily on the ability of opposition forces to quickly form a cohesive interim government, maintain order, and navigate complex international dynamics, particularly with Russia. The likelihood of this scenario remains low in the short term, given Lukashenka's current grip on power and Russian support. However, it could become more plausible if there are significant shifts in internal dynamics or external factors, particularly Russia's ability or willingness to support Lukashenka's regime. The outcome also depends on the degree of preparation of international and domestic actors to support regime change or leave a vacuum. In case domestic and international actors are not prepared, the regime collapse will not lead to a democratic and sovereign Belarus, but an opportunity for Russia to regroup and reassert control over Belarus, even if it is significantly weakened after losing the war against Ukraine.

3c Negotiated Transition Scenario

Likelihood: Low to Moderate

Conditions:

- Significant weakening of Russia's influence due to its loss in Ukraine
- Increased internal or external pressure on the Lukashenka regime
- Emergence of moderate factions within the regime willing to negotiate
- International mediation and support
- Willingness of the exiled opposition to engage in talks
- A clear position from the EU on the position and future of Lukashenka

The conditions for a negotiated transition include a significant weakening of Russia's influence due to its loss in Ukraine, increased internal or external pressure on the Lukashenka regime, emergence of moderate factions within the regime willing to negotiate – possibly including Lukashenka, international mediation and support, and willingness of the exiled opposition to engage in talks.

A negotiated transition becomes somewhat more plausible if Russia loses the war in Ukraine, but its likelihood remains low to moderate. Russia's defeat could significantly reduce its ability to prop up Lukashenka's regime, potentially forcing him to consider negotiations. However, Lukashenka has shown no inclination towards dialogue or compromise, and the opposition is largely in exile or suppressed. The international community's role could be crucial in this scenario. If Russia's influence wanes, Western countries might have more leverage to push for negotiations. However, the deep economic and military ties between Belarus and Russia would still pose significant challenges to any transition process. The preconditions for this scenario include a significant weakening of Russia's influence, potentially due to setbacks in Ukraine or internal issues, increased pressure on the Lukashenka regime from both internal and external sources, and economic challenges that make the current system unsustainable.

Key actors in this scenario would be moderate factions within the Lukashenka regime willing to change the regime, exiled opposition leaders (particularly Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team), international mediators (possibly from the EU, OSCE, or neutral countries), and Russian representatives, as Russia would likely seek to maintain some influence.

The negotiation process might involve initial secret talks between regime moderates and opposition representatives, gradual involvement of international mediators to facilitate discussions, establishment of a formal negotiation framework (possibly including roundtable talks), and negotiations on key issues such as political reforms, elections, and power-sharing arrangements. The negotiation process could also involve roundtable talks between regime representatives and opposition figures, with possible relocation of negotiations to Belarus after initial talks abroad. Russian diplomats might be involved to maintain leverage in post-transition Belarus, although without the strong position they previously held, while Western countries such as Germany and France could facilitate the process. Countries such as Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Poland – major centres of Belarusian diaspora – could also be actively involved.

Potential outcomes could include an agreement on a transitional period with power-sharing between regime and opposition, commitment to free and fair elections within a specified timeframe, constitutional reforms to ensure democratic governance and limit presidential powers, and guarantees of amnesty for certain regime figures to encourage their participation. More concretely, the transitional government would draft or amend the constitution to ensure democratic governance, reforming state institutions (particularly law enforcement and judiciary), and preparing for elections through voter registration, party registration, and other necessary steps, and a commitment to hold free and fair elections within a specific timeframe (possibly within 180 days), release of political prisoners, restoration of civil liberties and media freedoms, formation of a new, trusted Central Election Commission, international observation of the election process, and guarantees of safety and legal immunity for certain regime figures.

The international dimension would involve Western countries offering financial support and a potential "Marshall Plan" for Belarus⁶, lifting of sanctions contingent on the implementation of agreed reforms, and assurances to Russia regarding Belarus's geopolitical orientation, such as no immediate NATO or EU membership. Membership in either organisation is also not a short-term goal of the democratic forces⁷.

Challenges in this scenario would involve overcoming deep mistrust between the regime and opposition, balancing the interests of various stakeholders (including Russia), ensuring the safety and participation of exiled opposition leaders, and maintaining unity within both the regime and opposition camps during negotiations. The international dimension would likely include Western countries offering incentives such as economic support and sanctions relief, negotiating with Russia to ensure it doesn't derail the process, and a potential role for neighbouring countries (e.g., Poland, Lithuania) in supporting the transition, given their outsized role in supporting Belarusian NGO and the democratic forces, and their own experience with transitions in 1988 and 1989.

A critical question in Belarus's potential transition is Lukashenka's role during and after negotiations. Typically, incumbent leaders participate in such processes, often seeking personal safety and financial guarantees. Lukashenka might even push for continued political involvement, as suggested by the establishment of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly under his chairmanship.

However, including Lukashenka in negotiations would require significant compromises from democratic forces and opposition groups, who have called for his non-recognition and accountability for human rights violations. Given these stances, the likelihood of neither Lukashenka wanting to negotiate nor the opposition engaging with him remains high.

The EU could play a pivotal role in this scenario. Having pursued a policy of non-recognition since 2020, the EU might consider advocating for Lukashenka's exclusion from negotiations if he loses Russian backing and alternative regime factions emerge as potential negotiators. Lithuania's recent request to investigate Lukashenka for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court⁸, supported by Belarus's Democratic Forces, signals a shift away from viewing Lukashenka as a future interlocutor.

This move provides the EU with both moral and legal grounds to exclude Lukashenka from negotiations. It also sends a clear message to Belarusian elites to abandon Lukashenka in favour of a more moderate approach. Given Lukashenka's actions since 2020 and Belarus's involvement in the war

⁶ The European Union outlines a €3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus, 2021

⁷ Platform 2025, adopted at the Conference of New Belarus 2024

⁸ Referral of the Situation in Belarus to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court by Lithuania, September 2024

against Ukraine, he now offers the EU little beyond conflict. Consequently, the EU could potentially push for Lukashenka's removal and possible prosecution, along with regime hardliners, while supporting democratic forces in negotiations with moderate factions within the Belarusian authorities. This approach aligns with the evolving situation and Lukashenka's diminished strategic value to the EU since 2020.

Critical Analysis:

The likelihood of this scenario remains low to moderate due to several factors. Lukashenka has shown little inclination towards genuine reforms or power-sharing. Despite some tactical advantages gained by Belarus during the Ukraine war, Russia's structural control over Belarus has increased, making a negotiated transition without Russian approval unlikely. The Belarusian regime has been securitising and militarising the state while synchronising its policies with Russia, making it harder for moderate factions to emerge and push for negotiations. Years of repression have significantly weakened independent institutions and civil society in Belarus, potentially limiting their ability to participate effectively in a negotiated transition. Furthermore, moderate people within the Belarusian regime have no incentive to risk their jobs and personal security to reach out to international partners and the democratic forces to find a way to negotiate regime change. The security apparatus could still act as a destabilising force, with hard-line elites potentially attempting a military coup. Moreover, societal divisions potentially remain deep, with pro-Russian and pro-Western camps competing for influence. There may be concerns about the spread of disinformation or polarising content in the new, less regulated environment.

However, there are some factors that could increase the possibility of this scenario. Increasing economic challenges could force the regime to consider negotiations as a way to alleviate sanctions and attract Western support. A significant weakening of Russia's position could create more space for Belarus to pursue independent policies. Skilled international mediation could help bridge the deep mistrust between the regime and opposition. The EU could also emerge as an alternative to Russia and the repressive regime, while the democratic forces could allow moderate and lower-level members of the regime not to face lustration actions. A fractured regime with low capabilities of repressing its own people might also allow moderate factions to switch their allegiance and engage in talks. It could also use the format of the *table ronde* to push for a greater inclusion of Belarusian civil society in the process of transition.

In conclusion, while a negotiated transition remains challenging given the current political landscape in Belarus, it offers a potential path for peaceful change if certain conditions align. The success of such a scenario would heavily depend on shifts in both internal dynamics and external factors, particularly Russia's influence and the regime's willingness to engage in genuine dialogue.

Potential Outcomes:

- Agreement on a transitional period with power-sharing between regime and opposition
- Commitment to free and fair elections within a specified timeframe
- Constitutional reforms to ensure democratic governance and limit presidential powers
- Guarantees of amnesty for certain regime figures to encourage their participation, while also maintaining the possibility to exclude Lukashenka and hardliners within the regime from the negotiations

3d Gradual Reform Scenario

Likelihood: Moderate

Conditions:

- Economic pressures necessitating some liberalisation
- Incremental changes in leadership or policy direction
- Limited opening of political space without threatening regime stability
- Reduced Russian influence allowing for more independent policy-making

The motivations for limited reforms could include economic pressures necessitating some liberalisation, the need to ease international isolation and sanctions, an attempt to regain some legitimacy among the population, and pressure from Russia to implement certain changes. Potential limited concessions might involve minor constitutional amendments to create an appearance of power-sharing, limited economic liberalisation to attract foreign investment, selective release of some political prisoners, and superficial relaxation of media controls. Gradual reform becomes more plausible if Russia loses the war in Ukraine, making this scenario moderately likely. Economic pressures, particularly if Russian support diminishes, could push the regime towards limited reforms. The need to maintain some level of international legitimacy in a post-war context might also encourage superficial changes. However, any reforms would likely be aimed at regime preservation rather than genuine democratisation. The regime's fear of losing control, as evidenced by the extreme measures taken during recent elections, indicates a strong resistance to even gradual liberalisation. Russia's potential defeat could create some space for more independent policy-making in Belarus. However, the deep integration between the two countries through various "Union State" programs would continue to limit the scope for truly independent reform. In terms of the regime's approach, Lukashenka would likely remain in power, potentially grooming a successor. The regime would continue to use repression selectively to maintain control and attempt to co-opt or neutralise opposition through limited inclusion.

Key characteristics of these reforms would be that they are carefully managed to avoid threatening regime stability, with changes being largely cosmetic without altering the fundamental power structure. The regime would maintain control over key institutions, especially security services. The implementation process would likely involve gradual introduction of reforms over an extended period, selective engagement with moderate opposition figures or civil society groups, and possible creation of new state-controlled bodies to oversee reforms. This scenario would involve slow, incremental changes initiated by the current regime, with an emphasis on economic and social reforms before political liberalisation, and a controlled opening of political space without threatening regime stability. Potential reforms could include economic liberalisation such as gradual privatisation of state-owned enterprises, easing of regulations on private businesses, and attracting foreign investment in specific sectors. Social reforms might involve improvements in education and healthcare systems, limited expansion of social welfare programs, and gradual relaxation of cultural and media controls. Political changes could include minor constitutional amendments, allowing limited opposition participation in local governance, and gradual expansion of civil society space.

The timeframe for such reforms would likely be a long-term process, potentially spanning several years or even a decade, with reforms implemented in phases, each phase contingent on the success of previous ones. Key actors in this scenario would include Lukashenka or his chosen successor leading the reform process, moderate elements within the regime pushing for gradual changes, technocrats and economic advisors influencing policy directions, and controlled opposition figures allowed limited participation.

Critical Analysis:

This scenario of gradual reform in Belarus faces both opportunities and significant challenges. Opportunities include the potential for economic reforms to address challenges and attract investment, controlled political opening allowing for limited political pluralism, and improved international engagement potentially leading to increased economic cooperation and easing of sanctions. However, challenges are substantial. The regime's resistance to change and limited political will for meaningful reforms, especially in the political sphere, pose significant obstacles. Russian influence and Belarus's deep integration with Russia may limit its ability to pursue independent reform paths. Years of repression have significantly weakened independent institutions and civil society, making it difficult for them to push for or capitalise on gradual openings. Public scepticism after years of authoritarian rule may also limit the impact or support for regime-led reforms. While gradual reform might seem more plausible than abrupt changes, its likelihood in Belarus remains low to moderate. The regime's prioritisation of control and stability, combined with its close alignment with Russia, suggests that any reforms would be limited in scope and impact. Potential outcomes could include modest improvements in economic conditions, slight expansion of civil liberties and political participation, and gradual development of independent institutions and civil society. However, without a fundamental shift in the regime's approach to governance, such reforms are unlikely to lead to genuine democratisation in the short to medium term.

Furthermore, previous episodes in Belarus provide evidence that while the regime under Lukashenka is willing to partially reform in exchange for economic and diplomatic opportunities with the West, this stopped short of genuine and meaningful reform⁹. Such an episode happened between 2014 and 2019, when a relative open civil space emerged in Belarus. However, with the 2020 protests in Belarus and a prospect of real change, the regime went back to its autocratic reflexes with a violent crackdown, large-scale repression and reversal of any incremental progress of reforms from the decade before. The danger with gradual reform and an acceptance of the West of this path lies in a repeated cycle of liberalisation and repressions. The maintenance of sanctions and pressure from the EU is a key leverage to avoid this.

Potential outcomes:

- Modest improvements in economic conditions
- Slight expansion of civil liberties and political participation
- Gradual development of independent institutions and civil society
- Lukashenka remains in power as president or as a political figure in the country

⁹ Bosse, G. (2021). Authoritarian consolidation in Belarus: What role for the EU? *European View*, 20(2), 201-210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17816858211061839>

Recommendations to the EU

This section outlines recommendations for how the European Union (EU) should respond to each of the five scenarios:

I. Peaceful Mass Mobilisation Scenario

While this scenario has a very low likelihood, if it were to occur, the EU should implement the following strategies:

A. Immediate Diplomatic Support

1. Issue strong statements condemning any violent crackdowns by the regime (European Parliament, 2020¹⁰).
2. Mobilise EU diplomatic missions in Minsk to monitor the situation and provide real-time updates.
3. Convene an emergency meeting of the European Council to coordinate a unified EU response.
4. Prepare a unified EU response in anticipation of mobilisation to avoid a late response that lags behind events in the country, as happened in 2020
5. Demand the immediate release of political prisoners.

B. Mediation and Dialogue Facilitation

1. Offer EU-led mediation services to facilitate dialogue between protesters and regime representatives.
2. Engage with the OSCE to potentially lead or support mediation efforts.
3. Appoint a high-level EU Special Representative for Belarus to oversee dialogue processes.
4. Demand free and fair elections under international monitoring missions. Voters in the Belarusian diaspora should not be excluded from the vote

C. Comprehensive Support Package

1. Prepare a detailed economic and technical assistance package to support a potential democratic transition
2. Include provisions for immediate humanitarian aid, if necessary.
3. Develop plans for long-term economic cooperation and integration with the EU, including the prospect of EU candidate status

¹⁰ European Parliament resolution of 17 September 2020 on the situation in Belarus

D. International Coordination

1. Establish a Belarus Contact Group with key international partners, including the US, UK, and Canada.
2. With limited Russian influence, the EU can attempt to engage in diplomatic efforts to prevent potential Russian intervention, based on coordination with countries around Russia which are also weary of Russian influence, such as Kazakhstan and Armenia.
3. Work with international financial institutions to prepare stabilisation funds for Belarus
4. Prepare a framework for Belarusian legal reforms to facilitate the withdrawal of Russian military assets from Belarus, including nuclear weapons, considering the Belarusian constitution needs to be altered for the latter to happen

E. Civil Society and Media Support

1. Increase funding for independent media outlets and civil society organisations in Belarus.
2. Provide technical assistance and flexible funding to help these organisations operate effectively during mass mobilisations
3. Support the Belarusian IT sector in exile in creating secure communication platforms for activists and journalists
4. Work to create space for a safe and meaningful return of exiled NGOs, as well as the re-establishment of NGOs banned since 2021
5. Programs and financial support for independent media outlets and civil society organisations in their efforts to counter disinformation and polarisation
6. Support initiatives that bring together diverse Belarusian voices, like the EU-funded Belarus Dialogues project.

II. Regime Collapse Scenario

For this scenario, which has a low likelihood, the EU should:

- A. Rapid diplomatic recognition: The EU should quickly recognise the interim government, if elections were free and fair, to provide legitimacy and prevent a power vacuum:**
 - 1. Issuing a joint statement from all EU member states recognising the new government
 - 2. Inviting interim government representatives to Brussels for high-level meetings
 - 3. Establishing diplomatic channels with key figures in the new administration

- B. Immediate financial support: Offer emergency financial assistance to stabilise the economy and prevent economic collapse during the transition:**
 - 1. Providing a short-term financial package to address immediate budgetary needs
 - 2. Offering loan guarantees to maintain confidence in the banking sector
 - 3. Supporting currency stabilisation efforts through cooperation with the IMF

- C. Security assistance: Provide support to maintain order and prevent violence, potentially through an EU civilian mission or security sector reform assistance:**
 - 1. Deploying EU security experts to advise on maintaining public order to non-repressive bodies of law enforcement
 - 2. Offering training programs for Belarusian law enforcement on democratic policing
 - 3. Offer expertise on demilitarization and security sector governance

- D. Election support: Offer technical and financial assistance for organising free and fair elections within the proposed 180-day timeframe:**
 - 1. Sending EU election experts to advise on electoral law reforms
 - 2. Providing funding and logistical support for voter registration systems
 - 3. Deploying a comprehensive election observation mission

- E. Sanctions relief: Gradually lift sanctions against Belarus as democratic reforms are implemented and human rights are respected, to incentivise further progress:**
 - 1. Creating a clear roadmap linking specific reforms to the lifting of particular sanctions
 - 2. Implementing a phased approach to sanctions relief based on verifiable progress
 - 3. Offering technical assistance to help Belarus meet criteria for sanctions removal
 - 4. When sanctions are relieved, incentives should be prepared for further adherence to human rights and implementing democratic reforms

F. Enhance Eastern Partnership engagement:

1. Fast-tracking Belarus' participation in Eastern Partnership programs
2. Offering twinning projects between Belarusian and EU institutions
3. Increasing people-to-people exchanges, particularly for students and young professionals

G. Civil society support: Increase funding and support for Belarusian civil society organisations to help rebuild democratic institutions:

1. Establishing a dedicated EU fund for Belarusian civil society development
2. Offering capacity-building programs for NGOs on advocacy and organisational management
3. Assist human rights organisations' work on the release of political prisoners
4. Supporting networks between Belarusian and EU civil society organisations
5. Provide flexible, long-term funding for Belarusian independent media outlets operating in exile
6. Support digital security training for Belarusian activists and journalists, like the EU-funded Digital Defenders Partnership

H. Media freedom assistance: Provide support for restoring independent media and countering disinformation:

1. Funding for independent media outlets and investigative journalism projects
2. Training programs for journalists on ethical reporting and fact-checking
3. Technical assistance for establishing a public broadcasting service

I. Counter Russian influence:

1. Expand support for Russian-language EU-oriented media content targeting Belarus, like current EU funding for Euronews Russian
2. Support energy diversification projects that could reduce Belarus's dependence on Russia, drawing on EU experience in other Eastern Partnership countries

J. Economic reform support: Offer expertise and resources to assist with economic reforms and transition to a market economy:

1. Providing advisory teams to key economic ministries
2. Offering technical assistance for privatisation processes and competition policy
3. Supporting the development of small and medium-sized enterprises

K. Diplomatic engagement with Russia: Engage in dialogue with Russia to mitigate potential interference, while firmly supporting Belarus' sovereignty:

1. Initiating high-level EU-Russia talks specifically on the Belarus situation
2. Demand the retreat of Russian military from Belarus
3. Proposing multilateral discussions involving the EU, Russia, and Belarus

L. Prepare for potential instability: Develop contingency plans for potential scenarios like refugee flows or regional instability:

1. Enhancing border management capabilities in neighbouring EU countries
2. Preparing humanitarian assistance packages for potential refugee situations
3. Developing crisis response mechanisms with regional partners

M. Long-term support package: Develop a comprehensive long-term support plan, similar to the €3 billion package mentioned for a democratic transition¹¹:

1. Creating a multi-year financial assistance program tied to reform benchmarks
2. Offering a clear path towards closer EU integration, including potential candidacy status
3. Developing sector-specific support programs in areas like energy, agriculture, and digital transformation
4. Anticipate which sectors will be hit hardest from a sudden collapse and disengagement from Russia (e.g. suspended membership in Russian-led organisations like the Eurasian Economic Union)

¹¹ The European Union outlines a €3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus, 2021

III. *Negotiated Transition Scenario*

For this scenario, which has a low to moderate likelihood, the EU should:

A. Active Mediation Engagement:

1. Propose an EU-led mediation team, potentially working through the OSCE framework
2. Appoint a high-level EU Special Envoy for Belarus to lead negotiation efforts
3. Offer to host negotiations on neutral ground within the EU

B. Incentives for Democratic Reforms:

1. Develop a roadmap for the gradual lifting of sanctions tied to specific democratic reforms, lowering repressions and the release of political prisoners
2. Offer increased economic cooperation, including potential access to EU markets and investment programs
3. Offer a European alternative to the Belarusian-Russian Union State treaty to provide incentives for businesses and state-enterprises
4. Propose a comprehensive EU-Belarus Partnership Agreement contingent on democratic reforms

C. Technical Assistance for Constitutional Reforms:

1. Provide expert consultations on constitutional reform processes, drawing on experiences from Central and Eastern European countries.
2. Offer assistance from the Venice Commission for legal reforms (Venice Commission, 2021)
3. Support the development of new electoral laws and institutions.
4. Include the democratic forces and experts in exile in consultations on democratic reforms

D. Capacity Building for Opposition and Civil Society:

1. Expand funding for training programs on negotiation skills, democratic governance, and public administration
2. Facilitate exchanges and study visits for Belarusian opposition and civil society leaders to EU institutions and member states
3. Support the creation of think tanks and policy research centres focused on Belarus's democratic transition
4. Provide flexible, long-term funding for Belarusian independent civil society
5. Support digital security training for Belarusian activists and journalists, like the EU-funded Digital Defenders Partnership

E. Security sector reform:

1. Develop targeted training programs on human rights and civilian oversight for potential future Belarusian security personnel
2. Offer expertise on demilitarization and security sector governance, drawing on EU experience in other post-Soviet states

F. Long-term support package: Develop a comprehensive long-term support plan, similar to the €3 billion package mentioned for a democratic transition¹²:

1. Creating a multi-year financial assistance program tied to reform benchmarks
2. Offering a clear path towards closer EU integration, including potential candidacy status
3. Developing sector-specific support programs in areas like energy, agriculture, and digital transformation

G. Engagement with Russia:

1. Initiate high-level diplomatic dialogue with Russia to address concerns about Belarus's geopolitical orientation
2. Propose a joint EU-Russia working group on Belarus to ensure transparency and build trust
3. Consider offering assurances about Belarus's neutrality or limited engagement with NATO in exchange for Russian non-interference
4. Negotiations begin on the withdrawal of Russian military assets from Belarus, including nuclear weapons

H. Counter Russian influence:

1. Expand support for Russian-language EU-oriented media content targeting Belarus, like current EU funding for Euronews Russian
2. Support energy diversification projects that could reduce Belarus's dependence on Russia, drawing on EU experience in other Eastern Partnership countries

¹² The European Union outlines a €3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus, 2021

IV. *Gradual Reform Scenario*

In this moderately likely scenario, the EU could pursue **one of two approaches**, depending on the level of Russia's influence and power.

a) **Cautious Approach Policy Recommendations**

This policy prioritises maintaining pressure on the Belarusian regime while remaining sceptical of superficial reforms.

Key Elements:

1. **Maintain Sanctions:** Continue the existing sanctions regime against Belarus, only considering gradual easing if there is substantial and verifiable progress on human rights and democratic reforms
2. **Support Civil Society:** Increase funding and support for Belarusian civil society organisations, independent media, and pro-democracy activists, both within Belarus and in exile, especially long-term funding
3. **Strict Conditionality:** Make any engagement or concessions strictly conditional on concrete and verifiable improvements in human rights, democratic practices, and distancing from Russia's aggressive actions
4. **Close Monitoring:** Establish a robust monitoring mechanism to assess the genuineness and impact of any reforms implemented by the Belarusian regime.
5. **Coordinate with Allies:** Work closely with the US, UK, and other democratic allies to maintain a united front in dealing with Belarus, including coordinated sanctions policies and diplomatic initiatives
6. **Support Regional Security:** Enhance support for EU member states bordering Belarus, particularly regarding border security and countering disinformation
7. **Prepare for Various Scenarios:** Develop contingency plans for different potential outcomes in Belarus, including continued authoritarian rule, increased Russian control, or potential democratic transition

This cautious approach aims to maintain pressure on the Lukashenka regime while protecting EU interests and supporting the Belarusian people's aspirations for democracy and human rights.

b) Engagement Approach Policy Recommendations

This policy emphasises constructive engagement with Belarus to encourage and support gradual reforms.

Key Elements:

1. **Targeted Incentives:** Offer specific incentives tied to meaningful reforms, such as easing certain sanctions or increasing economic cooperation in response to concrete steps like releasing political prisoners or allowing greater civil society freedoms
2. **Economic Cooperation:** Provide technical assistance and expertise to support market-oriented economic reforms, particularly in areas like privatisation of state-owned enterprises and improving the business environment for private companies
3. **Dialogue Mechanisms:** Establish regular dialogue channels with Belarusian authorities on specific issues like trade, environmental cooperation, or regional security, contingent on continued progress in reforms
4. **People-to-People Contacts:** Facilitate educational exchanges, cultural programs, and visa liberalisation for ordinary Belarusians to maintain connections with Belarusian society
5. **Regional Integration:** Encourage Belarus's participation in regional initiatives and cooperation frameworks, particularly with EU member states bordering Belarus, to reduce isolation and foster interdependence
6. **Diplomatic Engagement:** Gradually increase diplomatic engagement, including high-level visits and participation in international forums, as reforms progress
7. **Support for Diversification:** Offer alternatives and incentives for Belarus to diversify its economic and political ties away from total dependence on Russia, including increased trade opportunities with the EU

This engagement-focused approach aims to encourage and support gradual reforms in Belarus by offering tangible benefits and increased cooperation, while still maintaining the ultimate goal of democratisation and respect for human rights.

c) Evaluation of the cautious versus the engagement approach

A reflection on the pros, cons, and challenges of both approaches includes the following considerations:

Cautious Approach in Post-Russian Defeat Scenario

Pros:

1. Maintains pressure on the Belarusian regime when it is potentially more vulnerable due to reduced Russian support
2. Could accelerate internal changes as the regime seeks new international partners
3. Aligns with a potentially stronger Western position in the region following Russia's defeat
4. Supports civil society at a time when they might have more room to manoeuvre
5. Prevents the regime from easily pivoting to the West without genuine reforms
6. Leaves the initiative in Belarusian hands, with a 'hold-back' approach from international partners

Cons:

1. Misses potential opportunities for significant shifts in Belarus's foreign policy orientation
2. Risks pushing Belarus to seek alternative partnerships (e.g., China) rather than moving towards the West
3. Could be seen as overly punitive at a time when regional dynamics are rapidly changing
4. Might hinder economic recovery in Belarus, potentially leading to instability
5. Could be perceived as inflexible in a new geopolitical context

Challenges:

1. Calibrating the approach to the new regional dynamics without losing leverage.
2. Responding to potential overtures from Belarus without compromising on core principles
3. Balancing pressure with the need to prevent instability in a key border state.
4. Coordinating with allies who might be more inclined towards engagement in the new context
5. Addressing potential humanitarian needs if Belarus faces economic crisis due to loss of Russian support

Engagement-Focused Approach in Post-Russian Defeat Scenario

Pros:

1. Capitalises on a potential "window of opportunity" for influencing Belarus's direction
2. Offers an alternative partnership to fill the void left by a weakened Russia.
3. Supports economic stabilisation, potentially preventing a crisis on the EU's border
4. Encourages Belarus's integration into European structures at a critical juncture
5. Provides concrete incentives for reforms when the regime might be more receptive

Cons:

1. Risks moving too quickly to normalise relations without securing genuine reforms.
2. Could be seen as rewarding the regime despite its past actions and ongoing human rights concerns
3. Might create tensions with Ukraine and other Eastern European states if perceived as too conciliatory
4. Could disappoint opposition forces who might expect more pressure on the regime
5. Risks overestimating the regime's willingness to reform even without Russian backing

Challenges:

1. Balancing rapprochement with Belarus against relations with Ukraine and other allies
2. Ensuring that engagement leads to genuine democratic reforms and not just geopolitical realignment
3. Managing expectations within the EU and among Belarusian civil society
4. Developing effective conditionality mechanisms in a rapidly evolving situation
5. Addressing potential resistance from hardliners within the Belarusian regime

d) Comparative Analysis

In this scenario, both approaches face new opportunities and risks. The cautious approach maintains consistency but might miss a unique chance to influence Belarus's trajectory. The engagement approach could seize the moment but risks moving too fast without securing genuine changes. Key considerations in this scenario include:

1. The speed and extent of Belarus's potential pivot away from Russia
2. The internal stability of the Belarusian regime without strong Russian support
3. The attitudes of Ukraine and other eastern European EU members towards Belarus
4. The potential for genuine reform willingness within the Belarusian leadership
5. The capacity of Belarusian civil society to push for changes in a new context
6. The degree of unity of Belarusian society to accept and rally behind a unified opposition

The key challenge would be striking the right balance between seizing the opportunity for change and ensuring that any shifts in Belarus are genuine and sustainable. The EU would need to be prepared to rapidly scale up engagement if positive changes occur, while also maintaining the ability to re-impose pressure if reforms stall or reverse.

V. Violent Crackdown Scenario

For this scenario, which has a moderate likelihood, the EU should:

A. Rapid and coordinated sanctions:

1. Implement swift, targeted sanctions against Belarusian officials and entities directly involved in the violent crackdown
2. Expand the existing sanctions list to include more individuals responsible for human rights violations, as was done in February 2024 when the EU imposed sanctions on an additional 38 individuals and 3 entities¹³

B. Enhanced support for civil society:

1. Significantly increase financial and technical support for Belarusian civil society organisations, independent media, and human rights defenders
2. For instance, build on the €30 million support package announced in December 2023 for Belarusian civil society and democratic forces

C. Diplomatic pressure:

1. Engage in high-level diplomatic efforts to condemn the violence and push for de-escalation
2. This could include organising an emergency meeting of EU foreign ministers, similar to the one held in August 2020 following the disputed elections

D. Humanitarian assistance:

1. Prepare and offer humanitarian aid for victims of violence and repression.
Activate the temporary protection mechanism for Belarusians fleeing to the EU

E. International investigation:

1. Call for and support an independent international investigation into human rights violations, similar to the OSCE Moscow Mechanism invoked in 2020 to investigate alleged human rights abuses in Belarus
2. Fund projects that document human rights violations for future transitional justice processes, similar to the EU's support for the International Accountability Platform for Belarus

¹³ Belarus: EU prolongs restrictive measures for another year, 2024

F. Contingency planning:

1. Develop and implement contingency plans for potential scenarios, including a refugee crisis

G. Support for democratic transition:

1. Offer concrete support for a potential democratic transition, including technical assistance for free and fair elections
2. This could involve expanding the €3 billion comprehensive plan for a democratic Belarus announced by the EU

H. Strategic communication:

1. Enhance efforts to counter disinformation and provide accurate information to the Belarusian public.
2. This could include supporting innovative media initiatives, such as TikTok-based news programs targeting audiences inside Belarus

These recommendations aim to address the immediate humanitarian concerns, support democratic forces, and prepare for potential longer-term changes in Belarus, while taking into account the complex geopolitical situation with a weakened Russia.

5 General Recommendations

Across all scenarios, the EU should:

A. Maintain Strategic Flexibility

1. Establish a rapid response mechanism within EU institutions to quickly adapt policies to changing circumstances in Belarus
2. Regularly review and update the EU's Belarus strategy, incorporating lessons learned and new developments

B. Sustained Support for Democratic Forces

1. Continue and potentially increase support for Belarusian civil society, independent media, and opposition figures, both inside Belarus and in exile
2. Develop long-term funding mechanisms to ensure sustainability of support beyond the immediate crisis period

C. International Coordination

1. Establish a permanent international coordination mechanism on Belarus, including the EU, US, UK, Canada, and other like-minded partners
2. Regularly convene high-level meetings to align strategies and share information on Belarus

D. Contingency Planning

1. Develop comprehensive contingency plans for potential instability or humanitarian crises in Belarus
2. Prepare EU border states for potential refugee flows, including plans for reception centres and integration programs

E. Strategic Communication

1. Enhance the EU's strategic communication efforts towards Belarus, including increased Belarusian-language content
2. Counter disinformation through fact-checking initiatives and support for media literacy programs
3. Promote EU values and the benefits of democratic change through targeted outreach to different segments of Belarusian society.

By implementing these recommendations, the EU can develop a comprehensive, flexible, and effective approach to supporting democratic transition in Belarus while navigating the complex geopolitical context. This strategy recognises the need for a nuanced and adaptable response that can address various potential scenarios while maintaining a consistent commitment to democratic values and human rights.

6 Conclusion

This report has examined potential pathways to democratic change in Belarus, considering a context where Russia has potentially lost the war in Ukraine and is significantly weakened, coupled with increased instability within the Belarusian regime. Through the analysis of four main scenarios after potential peaceful mass mobilisation – Violent Crackdown, Regime Collapse, Negotiated Transition and Gradual Reform – we have explored the likelihood, necessary conditions, and potential outcomes for each pathway.

Our findings indicate that while Russia's potential loss in Ukraine could create opportunities for change in Belarus, significant obstacles to democratic transition remain. However, the role of the democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus emerges as a critical factor across all scenarios. These groups represent the backbone of potential democratic change and serve as vital partners for the international community in promoting reform.

The democratic opposition, led by figures such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, has succeeded in maintaining international attention on Belarus and advocating for democratic values. Their efforts in creating government-like structures in exile and running alternative embassies demonstrate a commitment to preparing for a potential democratic transition. Similarly, civil society organisations, despite facing severe repression, continue to play a crucial role in maintaining connections with Belarusian communities both inside the country and abroad.

The EU's support for these democratic forces and civil society groups is paramount. The recent launch of a Consultative Group between the EU and Belarusian democratic forces and civil society underscores the importance of these actors in shaping EU policy towards Belarus. Furthermore, the EU's financial support, which has reached €140 million since 2020, demonstrates a tangible commitment to sustaining these vital democratic institutions.

Looking ahead, while gradual reforms aimed at regime preservation may be the most likely short-term outcome, the EU must remain prepared for more dramatic scenarios. The possibility of a Violent Crackdown or sudden Regime Collapse underscores the need for comprehensive contingency planning. In all scenarios, supporting and amplifying the voices of the democratic opposition and civil society will be crucial in promoting genuine democratic change.

In conclusion, while the path to democratic change in Belarus remains challenging, the resilience and dedication of the democratic opposition and civil society offer hope for the future. By maintaining a nuanced and adaptable approach, consistently supporting these democratic forces, and leveraging international cooperation, the EU can play a significant role in shaping Belarus's trajectory towards democracy and respect for human rights. The continued engagement with and support for these groups will be essential in navigating the complex political landscape of Belarus and working towards a free and democratic future for the Belarusian people.