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Lukashenka's Constitutional Plebiscite and the Polarization of Belarusian Society

Fabian Burkhardt and Jan Mati Dollbaum

ABSTRACT *Aliaksandr Lukashenka pushed through an overhaul of Belarus's constitution as a response to the protests against the official results of the 2020 presidential election. The goal was to address the desire for change among the population without reacting to the demand for snap elections. With the February 2022 constitutional plebiscite on the most far-ranging changes to Belarus's constitution since 1994, Lukashenka further entrenched himself in power. The results of our online survey suggest that the constitutional changes do not meet the broad societal demand for political change and, in particular, for constraints on presidential power. Despite the persistence of the political conflict, we also show that Lukashenka's supporters and opponents are not irreconcilably polarized in every policy domain. Finally, our results suggest that regime supporters have stronger anti-democratic preferences than opposition supporters when it comes to future political participation of the two camps, making the effects of affective polarization highly asymmetrical.*

KEYWORDS *Belarus, authoritarian regimes, electoral protests, polarization, constitutional referendum*

On February 27, 2022, Belarus's long-term ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka held a plebiscite on constitutional changes. From the perspective of the authoritarian regime, this was a watershed moment: it marked the formal end of the highly volatile period after the contested presidential election in August 2020, which Lukashenka—by all available independent evidence—lost to his unlikely contender Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia. It also marked a deep caesura as Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine amid the five-day early voting period on February 24, 2022, using Belarusian territory and infrastructure and thus making Belarus complicit in the war. Domestically, the constitutional amendments and the plebiscite were a substitute proposed by Lukashenka to avoid snap elections, as demanded by Tsikhanouskaia and her supporters.

This constellation begs the question if the plebiscite marks the factual end of the political conflict around the 2020 presidential election—just as had happened in previous electoral cycles in Belarus—or if the plebiscite is merely a spurious threshold while the conflict persists. We tackle this question by addressing the perspective of the regime with regard to content and procedural conduct of constitutional changes, as well as the perception by the population. We posit that the top-down and bottom-up perspectives are inextricably linked. **[page 98]**

Even autocracies cannot remain stable without at least a minimum of legitimacy. Understood as a relational concept that connects the ruler and the ruled (Gerschewski 2018, 654), legitimacy necessitates a certain congruence of legitimacy claims of the

autocrat—in our case, the process and content of constitutional changes—and beliefs and expectations of the governed. We address this relationship—which admittedly is notoriously difficult to study in a highly repressive regime—with three interrelated research questions.

Belarus under Lukashenka is a personalist authoritarian regime with a rich history of rigged elections, referendums, and post-electoral crackdowns since 1996 (Bunce and Wolchik 2011, 198–211; Frear 2019; Hale 2015, 258–266; Korosteleva 2009; Silitski 2009; de Vogel 2022). Against this backdrop, the drafting of the 2022 constitutional changes naturally was all but inclusive: the opposition was barred from the Constitutional Commission whose 36 handpicked members were appointed by Lukashenka on March 25, 2021 (President of the Republic of Belarus 2021). Moreover, the process of collecting feedback from the Belarusian population and for discussing the proposed amendments—termed by the regime a "nationwide discussion" borrowing directly from Soviet practice—was not participatory. Quite to the contrary, Lukashenka mobilized state companies and public organizations to campaign for the amendments in a top-down manner that disincentivized and punished criticism (Marin 2022). Finally, the legislative electoral framework was flawed, and the five-day voting procedure was conducted under neither free nor fair conditions (Viasna 2022).

Still, at the peak of the protest wave against manipulated elections and the regime's post-electoral violence, Lukashenka had insinuated his readiness to make some concessions to the protesters by reducing presidential powers and by promising not to run for president anymore after constitutional changes would be implemented. These statements led some observers to believe that Lukashenka might be preparing the ground for stepping down and appointing a confidant as successor, even though this was questionable from the very beginning and became even more doubtful in the course of 2021. These mixed signals lead us to our first research question:

1. From the perspective of the regime, what was the purpose of the constitutional reform and its enactment via a plebiscite?

From a societal perspective, the political conflict following the manipulated 2020 presidential election suggests that Belarusians harbor highly polarized views on constitutional changes as envisioned by Lukashenka. While opposition supporters are expected to categorically reject any policy originating from Lukashenka, other societal groups might also be disturbed or disappointed by the changes: If Lukashenka's core supporters seek stability originating from a strong personalist leader, they might be confused by amendments that reduce some presidential competences or empower a quasi-parliamentary structure such as the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA). More politically neutral Belarusians, on the contrary, are likely to be disappointed by cosmetic changes that offer little vision for Belarus's future. Due to the lack of independent public opinion surveys in Belarus, **[page 99]**

very little is known about how polarized ordinary Belarusians are in relation to these constitutional changes, and what such a potential polarization of society might entail for the social base of the autocracy, as well as for Belarus after a demise of Lukashenka's personalist rule. In a second step, we thus reverse the perspective on the constitutional reform process and ask:

2. How do supporters and opponents of Lukashenka view the constitutional changes? Does the political conflict persist a year after the crackdown on the protest movement, or has it subsided?

A high polarization along political camps would mean that Lukashenka could not convince protesters and regime critics, and it would signify that the political conflict persists. In addition, building on the literature on affective polarization and conflict-generated us-vs-them identities, we might expect that political camps seek to bar each other from future political participation:

3. Given political polarization, do regime and opposition supporters support excluding the respective political out-group from politics?

To tackle our research questions, we approach the constitutional referendum from two perspectives and with two distinct empirical strategies. First, we provide a thick historical narrative that analyzes the content of the changes and the process of amending the constitution. We argue that, first, although appearing to make concessions, Lukashenka's main aim behind the constitutional reform was to consolidate his power. Instead of offering a clear path toward reconciliation after the repression of the protest movement, the conduct of the plebiscite demonstrated that the regime had enough authoritarian state capacity to manufacture a landslide victory at the plebiscite without risking a popular backlash.

With the help of an original online survey from fall 2021 representative of the internet-using urban population, we then demonstrate that, second, the constitutional reform does not address most respondents' demands for political change and that opponents and supporters of Lukashenka are highly divided over constitutional amendments concerning the office of the president. At the same time, we observe that political polarization remains concentrated on a narrow set of questions immediately related to the core of the political conflict. Third, our data suggest that Lukashenka supporters are much more in favor of restricting the participation of the opposition than vice versa.

Our article makes contributions to several strands of literature. The 2020 protest movement has garnered considerable scholarly attention that has already resulted in special issues in leading journals such as *Slavic Review*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *Nationalities Papers*, or *New Perspectives*. With our dense description of the constitutional amendment process and an original survey, we fill a gap in this new wave of Belarusian studies that has not been addressed so far. Moreover, the Belarusian case is also relevant for comparative authoritarianism, in particular by illustrating how autocrats use constitutional changes and plebiscites as tools in their "menu of manipulation." **[page 100]**

These are common strategies among authoritarian leaders in the post-Soviet space, Latin America, and Africa to prolong their rule far beyond constitutionally stipulated term limits (Maboudi, Nadi, and Eisenstadt 2021; Qvortrup 2017). Our article also contributes to strands of the comparative literature that investigates claims to

legitimacy and legitimization strategies of authoritarian rulers in highly divided societies (von Soest and Grauvogel 2017).

From a bottom-up perspective, our article adds to the emerging literature on political polarization under authoritarianism (Onuch and Sasse 2022; Şaşmaz, Yagci, and Ziblatt 2022). Specifically, we contribute to the research on effects of intense periods of social conflict (and protest movements in particular) on political orientations and identities (Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015; Pop-Eleches, Robertson, and Rosenfeld 2022), providing one of the first analyses of affective polarization and preferences for out-group exclusion in a consolidated authoritarian regime.

We proceed as follows. After reviewing the literature on authoritarian regime transformation through constitutional change and the links between societal conflict, affective polarization, and support for out-group exclusion, we start with the top-down perspective by examining the road to the 2020 plebiscite from Lukashenka's point of view. We then present our survey data, examining the perspective of Lukashenka's supporters, his opponents, and neutrals on various constitutional amendments, before analyzing their views on the participation of the respective other camp in politics. We conclude by connecting the top-down and the bottom-up perspective, offering an interpretation on the regime's social base given the distribution of preferences we observe in our survey.

Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes

A common view on constitutions in non-democracies is that they are mere sham, mainly because provisions are not upheld in practice (Law and Versteeg 2013). But more-recent research has shown that some constitutional provisions align better with political reality than others. Those provisions that regulate the distribution of power among state bodies describe political reality better than rights provisions. As a rule, personalist authoritarian rulers are also endowed with extensive constitutional competences as the formal foundation of their power (Frye 2002), and redistributions of competences within the executive—for example, between the president and the government—signal to informal networks where the real power in the state is located (Hale 2011). Moreover, in less personalized regimes such as in Mexico during the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), presidential term limits can provide a meaningful constraint to presidential power (Klesner 2019). Also, many African constitutions contain rules about leadership succession that are regularly abided by (Meng 2020).

But even if constitutional provisions do not constrain leaders from ruling arbitrarily, more functionalist views on constitutions under authoritarianism convincingly demonstrate that constitutions can still serve functions such as billboards, blueprints, or window-dressing that clearly impact regime dynamics (Ginsburg and Simpser 2013). But to function as a meaningful signaling device, the perception by the regime elites, the opposition, and the population at large is crucially important. **[page 101]**

Hence, we contend that it is necessary to closely investigate both the content and the process of constitutional changes as major claims to legitimacy of Belarus's strongman after the post-electoral crackdown and as a possible indication about Lukashenka's

potential intentions to prolong his personalist regime even further—or prepare a gradual retirement from power.

Why Rulers in Personalist Authoritarian Regimes Amend Constitutions

The one defining feature of personalist rule is deinstitutionalization. At various stages of a personalist authoritarian leader's rule, the incentives to amend constitutions vary. Early on, authoritarians strive to remove institutional constraints such as parliamentary or judicial oversight, or presidential term limits. Lukashenka is a case in point, with his constitutional coup in 1996 and the removal of term limits by referendum in 2004 (Burkhardt 2016a; Partlett 2020). Just as electoral falsifications, constitutional amendments are part and parcel of the menu of manipulation of authoritarian rule. And indeed, recent research demonstrates that more frequent constitutional amendments like the removal of term limits prolong personalist authoritarian rule considerably (Maboudi, Nadi, and Eisenstadt 2021).

Motivations to tinker with constitutions at a later point in the personalist regime trajectory are different. Over time, the gap between constitutional text and political reality is bound to become larger, which necessitates intervention. For example, as post-Soviet constitutions were created in transformational moments, the chapters on rights might contain some provisions indicating aspirations for a liberal political order. Later, this gap between de jure provisions and de facto political reality can be closed or at least minimized through constitutional change and a stronger emphasis on social rights or conservative values instead of political freedoms, thereby reducing the credibility costs for the authoritarian ruler (Law and Versteeg 2014; Voigt 2021).

Another major driver is the reduction of regime uncertainty induced by the absence of an institutionalized mechanism for leadership succession. In this regard, the redistribution of powers away from the presidency can broaden the power base of the personalist ruler, but necessarily reintroduces at least some additional division of power, binding more elites to the ruler. Further motivations are the creation of insurance mechanisms such as lifelong immunity or other powerful positions in the state that the ruler could take up as a backup option. But while closing the gap between text and political reality requires a maximum of openness to legitimize the amendments, it is crucial to retain ambiguity about the intentions behind amendments on the separation of powers. This is because a perception that a personalist ruler could be preparing to step down creates the impression of weakness which, in turn, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and eventually lead to regime breakdown and elite turnover (Hale 2011). Therefore, authoritarian rulers engage in constitutional "masking" (Baturo and Elgie 2018) by embedding sensitive reforms on leadership succession—or the prevention of it—in larger reforms to conceal the true intent behind such constitutional changes. Typically, such decisions are hammered out behind closed doors, and—even if constitutional commissions are created to purportedly draft amendments—the processes remain under the control of the executive and therefore lack public legitimacy. This is precisely the reason why even dictators often resort to plebiscites to advance their political interests. **[page 102]**

For authoritarian regimes, the two main purposes are to maintain the façade of a democratic process while demonstrating the continued strength of the regime to domestic and foreign audiences (Altman 2010, 91–92).

Plebiscites and Polarization in Authoritarian Regimes

With three referendums held in 1995, 1996, and 2004, post-Soviet Belarus under Lukashenka has a rich history of national referendums compared to other personalist authoritarian regimes (Burkhardt 2016a). Due to the top-down nature of agenda-setting, the avoidance of parliament, and the restrictions of political freedoms in authoritarian regimes, such "referendums" do not amount to instruments of direct democracy and are therefore classified as plebiscites in the comparative literature.

In the course of history, nondemocratic regimes have frequently made use of plebiscites to seek ex-post acclamation for far-ranging decisions (Qvortrup 2017). A successful conduct of a plebiscite signals that a regime is in control of the situation, which in the case of Belarus is of particular importance in the wake of the mass protest movement of 2020. While, under certain conditions, plebiscites may entail claims to legitimacy, most importantly, they are a tool of repression with the aim to discourage the opposition and to prevent its coordination against the authoritarian ruler (Penadés and Velasco 2022)—which is exactly what international and Belarusian nongovernmental observers have found to be the case for Belarus (Anonymous 2022a; Golos, Honest People and Zubr 2022; IFES 2022; Viasna 2022).

While the conduct and the content of the constitutional reform as well as the official results of the plebiscite appear to suggest a further consolidation of the Lukashenka regime, the noninclusive and nonparticipatory nature in fact conceal the true preferences with regard to constitutional changes of supporters and opponents of Lukashenka, as well as those with a rather neutral stance toward the regime.

The Social Basis of Mass Attitudes toward Authoritarian Regimes

The literature on regime dynamics via institutionalized patterns of leadership succession usually takes a top-down perspective by focusing on formal institutions such as constitutional rules, elections, or elites (Brownlee 2007; Frantz and Stein 2017; Meng 2021). But increasingly, the social basis of mass attitudes toward authoritarian regimes is also seen as crucially important to understand trajectories over time, for at least two reasons. First, authorities often claim that citizens actually prefer strongmen and vast executive power stipulated in constitutions to legitimize authoritarian rule. Belarus is a case in point: Ekaterina Rechits, a member of Lukashenka's handpicked Constitutional Commission, argued in May 2021 that "Belarusian society has an inclination toward strong presidential power" (Belta 2021). Second, there indeed could be circumstances when voters might support a strong presidency and executive aggrandizement (i.e., when elected executives undermine constitutional checks and balances)—for example, when the country faces a severe political or economic crisis (Matovski 2021). On the other hand, citizens might not have a strong preference about executive power at all, **[page 103]**

but in a highly polarized environment, they might be inclined to support executive aggrandizement if this caters to their perceived interests and furthers the political career of the candidate or party of their choice (Şaşmaz, Yagci, and Ziblatt 2022).

The emerging research on Belarus after the crackdown on the protest movement describes the country as “divided,” “fragmented,” “polarized,” or “split” along many fault lines, such as media consumption (Astapenia 2022b; Greene 2022); attitudes toward state institutions and symbols; gender, age, or size of settlement (Krawatzek 2021); emotions (Vazyanau 2023); and geopolitical attitudes toward the European Union and Russia (Onuch and Sasse 2022).

But we go beyond assessing the polarization of, in our case, political preferences. Political conflict, especially when accompanied by phases of high societal mobilization (Pearlman 2013), can produce strong collective identities that lead to uncompromising delineations between “us” and “them” (LeBas 2011). Following the emerging literature on anti-democratic effects of such affective polarization, conceptualized as “the gap between in-party affect and out-party dislike” (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss 2022, 288) that is largely driven by partisan identity (Dias and Lelkes 2022) or identification with opinion-based groups (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021), we argue that the excessive repression of the protest movement and the regime’s uncompromising stance toward its demands may have contributed to the desire on both sides of the conflict to exclude the respective political out-group from further political participation. Effects of partisan identity, strong policy preferences, and cues by preferred elites have been shown to drive support for anti-democratic practices such as undermining checks and balances in democracies (Gidengil, Stolle, and Bergeron-Boutin 2022; Kingzette et al. 2021).

Having outlined the literature for our examination of the process and results of the Belarusian constitutional reform, we now address our research questions in turn, beginning with a regime-focused narrative before turning to the population’s perception.

The Road to the February 2022 Plebiscite

The rationale for the constitutional reform stems not only from the falsified presidential election in August 2020 and the protests that followed. In fact, Lukashenka’s rhetoric about a “reform” of the political system goes back at least a decade (Burkhardt and Rohava 2018). The discourse about overhauling the political system by means of constitutional reform—which picked up pace in 2017 and then again in 2019—had always been to alleviate the risks and uncertainties of personalist authoritarian rule. While personalism mainly relies on informal deals with key stakeholders, a redistribution of powers away from the presidency would have broadened the power base of elites (Astapenia 2022a) supporting Lukashenka. But right until August 2020, Lukashenka clearly preferred a regime deinstitutionalized to the maximum: in contrast to other post-Soviet non-democracies such as Russia and Kazakhstan, he did not even attempt to create a dominant party of power (Bader 2009; Charnysh and Kulakevich 2016). The creation of the pro-presidential public association Belaia Rus’ in late 2007 suggests that Lukashenka had at least played with the idea to create an equivalent to

the dominant parties United Russia (in the Russian Federation) or Nur Otan (in Kazakhstan until 2022), **[page 104]**

but eventually decided not to move beyond a broad non-ideological, pro-presidential movement. On March 18, 2023, however, the public association Belaia Rus' announced that it registered as a political "party of supporters of the first president of Belarus Aleksandr Grigor'evich Lukashenko." In light of the long-lasting speculations about when Lukashenka would found his own "party of power," this is undoubtedly a significant development. But it must not be mistaken for a reinstitutionalization of the regime, let alone a preparation of a Lukashenka succession. Rather, it should be viewed in the context of regime repression against remaining associations and parties in Belarus. Lukashenka announced to complete the so-called re-registration of political parties by mid-2023, which amounts to a final crackdown with likely only three to four parties remaining. One indication that the actual status of Belaia Rus' is unlikely to be upgraded to a genuine party of power is the fact that the electoral system remains purely majoritarian, with parliamentary seats being distributed in first-past-the-post districts where the role of party affiliation has been marginal (Zerkalo 2023).

Belarusian opposition actors have been acutely aware of Lukashenka's dilemma of personalist rule. The main opposition forces in Belarus have rejected Lukashenka's "constitutional coup" in 1996 as an illegal power grab, and some key representatives of the "old," pre-2020 opposition—Tsikhanouskaia's representative for constitutional reform, Anatol Liabedzka, is a case in point—were deputies in the Supreme Soviet and direct opponents, retaining an institutional memory of Lukashenka's constitutional takeover in 1996. Ever since, proposing one's own constitutional reform projects has been among the major opposition strategies (Burkhardt 2016a; Vasilevich 2021) to form pre-electoral coalitions and to mobilize against Lukashenka. Traditionally, the main thrust of these reform proposals has been a redistribution of powers in favor of a strong parliament to prevent authoritarian presidentialism in the future and to create a parliamentary or semi-presidential system of government with a developed party system.

But it was only the contested outcome of the presidential election in August 2020 that had a catalyzing effect and nudged Lukashenka to finally start serious preparations for constitutional amendments. Viktar Babaryka—Lukashenka's initial main opposition contender at the 2020 presidential election—announced on June 19, 2020, just one day after he and his son were arrested on trumped-up charges of tax embezzlement and the legalization of illegal income, that he intends to initiate a referendum on restoring the 1994 constitution, reintroducing term limits with a considerably weakened president and empowered parliament (REFORM.by 2020). But the restoration of the 1994 constitution was disputed among opposition forces due to its doubtful legacy. Probably the most damning verdict was advanced by Andrei Arkadyev, who argued the 1994 constitution was an unsuccessful case of semi-presidentialism, a constellation that "predefined the 1996 referendum and its results" (2008, 30) precisely because the competences between the president and the parliament (the Supreme Council) were not clearly delineated and spurred conflict rather than cooperation in executive-legislative relations. Other concerns related to the status of the Russian and

Belarusian languages, Soviet legacies such as a paternalistic state regarding social rights, **[page 105]**

or a widespread negative perception by Belarusians associating the constitution with the economic downturn in the 1990s (EPDE 2020). Therefore, Babaryka's advance was anything but a consensus proposal among those opposing Lukashenka, but it demonstrates precisely that demands to amend the Belarusian constitutions have long been a prominent tool of the Belarusian opposition.

As the single candidate of the unified Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Viktar Babaryka, and Valeryi Tsepkala campaign, Tsikhanouskaia (2020) put free and fair snap presidential elections after a transition period of no longer than six months at the centerpiece of her election program. Moreover, Tsikhanouskaia proposed to call a constitutional referendum on the restoration of the 1994 version of Belarus's constitution, motivating it with the need to reduce presidential powers by reintroducing presidential term limits and the separation of powers. Borrowing from the Babaryka campaign, the restoration of the 1994 constitution was motivated by pragmatism, as the making of an entirely new basic law would have likely turned into a drawn-out and divisive process.

As the Lukashenka regime was adamant to avoid repeat elections at all costs, it applied large-scale violence to repress protests against electoral falsifications in an unprecedented crackdown that triggered 17 member states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to invoke the so-called Moscow Mechanism to record human rights violations related to the presidential election of August 9, 2020 (OSCE ODIHR 2020). This initial ruthless violence brought even more Belarusians onto the streets and kicked off one of the largest nonviolent protest movements in the world (at least in relation to the overall population) in which up to 14% of the populace took part (Douglas et al. 2021). From Tsikhanouskaia's election campaign and the protest movement at large, several new structures began to form that strove to channel opposition to the Lukashenka regime into a coordinated policy. These three new organizations were Tsikhanouskaia's headquarters with a so-called Office and a Cabinet in Vilnius, Lithuania; the National Anti-Crisis Management headed by the former diplomat Pavel Latushka based in Warsaw, Poland; and the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power, which initially maintained a sprawling presence across Belarus, but with its increasing criminalization by the regime its members and affiliates were also either jailed or driven into exile (Talkachova 2021).

Even though some prominent representatives of Belarusian opposition parties and movements were taking up roles in these emerging political structures such as Aliaksandr Dabravolski (United Civic Party), Volha Kavalkova (Belarusian Christian Democracy), Franak Viachorka (Belarusian National Front), and Iuryi Hubarevich (Movement "For Freedom"), it has become commonplace to distinguish between the "new"—that is, those who were mobilized only as recently as 2020—and the "old" opposition whose political experience often dates back to the late 1990s and 2000s and some members of which put identity politics—emphasizing issues of national identity, language policy, and historical memory—at the core of their political agenda (Bedford and Vinatier 2019; Bekus 2010 and 2023; Burkhardt 2016b). As the "old" opposition was either marginalized during the presidential campaign and the post-

electoral protest movement agreed with Tsikhanouskaia's policies or joined the "new" opposition structures altogether, **[page 106]**

it was Tsikhanouskaia's Office and the Coordination Council that had put forward the three major demands that would determine strategy for the coming years: the end of repressions, the release of all political prisoners, and immediate new free and fair elections.

But Lukashenka did not back down and pursued a two-pronged strategy: On the one hand, he repressed protesters domestically and forced opposition leaders and sympathizers into exile. Within the state apparatus, disloyal officials were replaced. On the other hand, Lukashenka offered to amend the Belarusian constitution to persuade his opponents of his willingness to change and gradually open up the political system. Within the OSCE and the United Nations, Belarusian officials attempted to portray the process of drafting the constitutional amendments as a "civilized dialogue" (United Nations 2020). Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, for example, urged Lukashenka to initiate a "national dialogue" on constitutional reform (MID RF 2020) that included the opposition. In hindsight, this must be interpreted as a joint endeavor by Russia and Belarus to buy Lukashenka time, as in the very early phase after the contested elections, the ground below Belarus's strongman was evidently shaking.

Some observers at the time believed that Russia would also push for constitutional reforms in late autumn 2020 to enable a controlled handover of power. Lukashenka's speech at the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) on August 17, 2020, less than two weeks after the contested presidential elections (President of the Republic of Belarus 2020a), is notable in this respect not only because Lukashenka was booed by workers who interrupted him with "Step down!" chants. Lukashenka downright rejected that the presidential election would be repeated as demanded by the Coordination Council, but invited the workers to jointly work on constitutional changes that would redistribute some powers away from the presidency to the government and parliament. Moreover, he promised that he would step down "at some point" in the future, "maybe in one or two years" (Zerkalo 2021).

In fall 2020, Lukashenka suggested that after the constitutional changes were adopted at a referendum, snap presidential, parliamentary, and local elections would be held soon. With the discourse on constitutional changes, Lukashenka suggested that the process leading to an amended constitution would be participatory, that the Belarusian political system would be less authoritarian by trimming presidential powers and, most crucially, that constitutional reform would be accompanied by a presidential transition. At his "inauguration" ceremony on September 23, 2020, which was kept secret until the latest moment for fears of triggering fierce resistance among protesters, Lukashenka dubbed the creation of a "new society" as one of the priorities of his new term that he inextricably linked to a "new Constitution" (President of the Republic of Belarus 2020b). Later, on November 27, 2020, he made this intention even more explicit: "I do not make this Constitution for myself. With the new Constitution, I will not work with you as President anymore" (Belta 2020).

The more Lukashenka managed to stabilize the domestic situation, however, the less explicit he became about what actual goals he pursued with constitutional changes.

Hence, Lukashenka's constitutional project, the final version of which was not published until January 20, 2022 (President of the Republic of Belarus 2022)[1],

[page 107]

marks a watershed to gauge where the Belarusian personalist authoritarian regime is headed: In late 2020 and 2021, two main perspectives dominated on why the Belarusian ruler was pursuing constitutional changes. On the one hand, the proposed changes could signify Lukashenka was preparing for a top-down managed power transition to eventually step down from the presidency, for example, by chairing the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA) that would still allow him to remain in control from the backseat, analogous to the 2017 constitutional changes in Kazakhstan that paved the way for presidential transition from Nursultan Nazarbaev to Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev (Pistan 2019; Silvan 2020). Or, quite to the contrary, analysts saw the constitutional changes as mere smokescreens that would allow Lukashenka to insinuate changes to the political system and therefore to divert attention from the unresolved national crisis, while actually cementing his grasp for power. This would amount to a common pattern of continuísmo in personalist authoritarian regimes by evading term limits (Baturo and Elgie 2019), last observed in Russia with the 2020 constitutional changes and the zeroing of Vladimir Putin's presidential terms (Burkhardt 2021).

We argue that both the process of how the constitutional changes were drafted and the content of the proposed changes clearly demonstrate that Belarus's long-term ruler was set to further entrench himself in power. Officially, the process was supposed to be participatory, but all available evidence suggests that the opinion of critical voices was suppressed and ignored, and that participation in the three-week "public discussion" of the constitutional changes from late December 2021 to mid-January 2022 was mainly organized through workplace mobilization, not even "meeting a minimum standard of inclusiveness" (Venice Commission 2022, 9).

This is why—just as in 2020 during the presidential elections—the Belarusian NGO "Golos" in cooperation with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia's Office organized an alternative vote count via their online platform "Golos" (Voice) (Tsikhanouskaia 2021). Belarusian citizens verified with either a national passport or a SIM card were called upon to repeat their vote at the physical polling stations online and upload a photo of their paper ballot to the Golos platform. The difference between the 2020 presidential elections and the 2022 constitutional plebiscite is striking: In 2020, 1,049,344 Belarusians cast their vote at the Golos platform, while 545,947 (or roughly 52%) also uploaded a photograph as a proof of their vote choice. At the plebiscite in 2022, the respective numbers were markedly lower: 129,493 online votes and 21,174 photographs (equivalent to 16%). Around 55% of those who notified Golos of their vote choice followed Tsikhanouskaia's recommendation and invalidated their ballot at the precinct. The explanation Golos provided for the low turnout at its online platform compared to 2020 was the increased

[1] The presidential decree on announcing the date for the plebiscite also contains all constitutional amendments proposed by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. To a large degree, they correspond to what had been discussed and leaked to the public in the course of 2021, but it was the first time the amendments were officially published for public scrutiny, exactly one month before the voting procedure would start.

level of state repression and a general atmosphere of fear (Golos, Honest People and Zubr 2022). **[page 108]**

But the reasons for the low participation rate in Golos's initiative are more complex. According to a survey conducted by Ryhor Astapenia, only approximately 50% of Belarusians took part in the plebiscite while the majority neither understood how to relate to the referendum (whether it was necessary or why it was conducted after all and whether Lukashenka had the legitimate right to hold it), nor did they expect any meaningful changes afterward (Astapenia 2022d).

Another facet relates to Tsikhanouskaia's strategy to invalidate ballots and how this strategy was perceived by her core supporters. As a survey showed in October 2020, the conviction that constitutional changes should be implemented only after repeat elections under free and fair conditions was shared almost unequivocally among protest supporters (Golos 2020). Given this basic tenet among supporters of the protest movement, it is fair to assume that many rejected the idea of a constitutional referendum before snap elections; therefore, a boycott appeared to be a more natural strategy than actively taking part by invalidating ballots as recommended by the Tsikhanouskaia coalition. And indeed, Tsikhanouskaia's strategy resonated with her core supporters while more-neutral Belarusians—with a sympathetic, but more passive attitude toward the protest movement—tended to opt for a boycott (Astapenia 2022c). At the plebiscite, voters were asked to approve or reject the constitutional changes as a package, despite the broad range of amendments put to the vote. The official results of 82.86% in support of the amendments, with a turnout of 78.63%, were announced by the Belarus Central Election Commission on March 4 (Belta 2022). The amended constitution officially came into force on March 15, 2022.

Leaving the many details of the 11 new and 77 amended articles of the remodeled Belarusian constitution aside (Venice Commission 2022), the key changes about the future role of the presidency suggest that no presidential succession was intended: Even though some powers are devolved away from the presidency and the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA)—a nonpermanent representative body sharing some similarities with the USSR's Supreme Soviet—received some additional powers, Lukashenka amassed even more: He is allowed to take up the position of the chairman of the ABPA's presidium while remaining the president and chairman of the Belarusian Security Council (Anonymous 2022b). Moreover, while constitutional changes introduce term limits for presidents (two terms of five years), this rule will apply only to the presidents elected in future elections. Lukashenka therefore not only further consolidated his formal powers, but also retained the option to run again for president in 2025 and 2030—which in theory allows him to remain in office through 2035. By including a provision that presidential candidates must prove residence in Belarus for at least 20 years before the election, Lukashenka leaves no doubt constitutional changes were aimed at excluding the democratic forces in exile from politics in Belarus.

All of this suggests that in the eyes of the regime, the constitutional plebiscite was a watershed moment marking the conclusion of the phase of active contestation of the 2020 presidential election with an—at least temporary—victory of the regime over the

protest movement. But what are the societal foundations of this new stage of authoritarianism in Belarus? **[page 109]**

If the 2020 protest movement has fundamentally changed Belarusian society, Lukashenka cannot simply return to the status quo ante, as he has done several times after post-electoral crackdowns in 2006 and 2010, which at that time led to a further fragmentation of the opposition (Ash 2015; de Vogel 2022).

The Population's View On Lukashenka's Constitutional Amendments

The data we use come from our original online survey (N = 601) conducted in fall 2021. The survey was implemented through an established panel of respondents (Belarusians who had left the country after 2020 but remained in the sample were filtered out). Since political polling in Belarus after the protest movement of 2020 comes at the risk of repression, we cannot reveal more about the process or the organization. The quota sample was recruited to be representative of the (internet-using) urban population, which means that from the sample descriptions reported below, we cannot draw conclusions about rural residents—similar to other prominent surveys (see e.g., Astapenia 2021). To estimate in how far we match other important characteristics of the Belarusian population, the appendix provides descriptive statistics for the distribution of gender, age, (higher) education, and region of residence and, for comparison, displays the same distributions as recorded by the Belarusian statistical service (Belstat). The results show that we closely match gender and region, while slightly oversampling middle-aged individuals and more strongly oversampling people with higher education. However, weighted analyses that make the sample comparable to the general population on gender, age, education, and region show that the sample descriptions present very good estimates of the means of our analyzed items. Because of these encouraging results and because we are more interested in the relative distribution of preferences *within* political camps rather than point estimates, we proceed with the unweighted sample.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that such surveys miss individuals who are wary of answering survey questions, and that weighting procedures cannot correct self-selection in case the underlying demographic variables are unrelated to it. Moreover, survey responses may be biased by social desirability or preference falsification (Kuran 1991), which is notoriously hard to measure (but see Jiang and Yang 2016). This is particularly important to consider in repressive contexts such as Belarus, where dissent is suppressed and respondents, if they decide to participate at all, might be tempted to hide their true anti-regime preferences. For these reasons, the results are to be understood as approximate values and should be interpreted with caution.

The survey helps us answer our second and third questions—whether people view the constitutional reform within the framework of the conflict following the falsified elections, and whether this conflict led to preferences for mutual exclusion of the respective out-groups from political participation going forward. In presenting the results, we therefore differentiate between Lukashenka supporters, opponents, and neutrals throughout. For this, we asked respondents to choose from a list of political candidates. Those who chose any candidate but Lukashenka or the option "none of

these" were labeled opponents, while those who chose "difficult to answer" are coded as neutrals. The latter category likely mixes those who in reality have no position with those who do have a position but refrain from voicing it. **[page 110]**

We thus limit our interpretations of this category, but since it is comparatively large with 21% of the sample, we report it nonetheless. Beyond this group, 15% of the sample explicitly support Lukashenka and 64% do not.

To understand the distribution of political preferences across these groups, we asked respondents for their degree of support for various constitutional amendments, all of which had been suggested by Lukashenka or by Tsikhanouskaia's team at some point before the survey was fielded. The answers thus refer to realistic options: those proposals discussed by the Lukashenka-controlled Constitutional Commission predominantly also made it into the final draft that was put to vote at the plebiscite in February 2022. And most of the questions from Tsikhanouskaia's team were later included in their own final draft (Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia 2021).[2] We sort the suggested amendments included in the survey in four categories: questions on elections and the separation of powers, national identity, foreign policy, and societal issues.

The first block includes mainly suggestions on reducing the powers of the president and strengthening other institutions such as the government, the parliament—the National Assembly—and the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA). This block contains two of the suggestions with the highest agreement—the abolition of the president's decree power (55% in favor) and the introduction of a maximum number of two presidential terms (71% in favor). Overall, thus, the respondents strongly support restricting the powers of the president.

However, these preferences are distributed very unequally across the political camps. The first panel in Figure 1 displays the distribution by political allegiance, showing that opponents of Lukashenka overwhelmingly favor term limits (86%), while Lukashenka's supporters are against the measure (only 15% in favor). Given this polarized distribution, the introduction of term limits after constitutional changes appears as a concession to Lukashenka's opponents (a largely symbolic concession, however, given the perspective of Lukashenka rule through 2035). A similar pattern (not shown in Figure 1) can be observed for the abolition of the president's decree power (70% of opponents but only 10% of supporters are in favor).

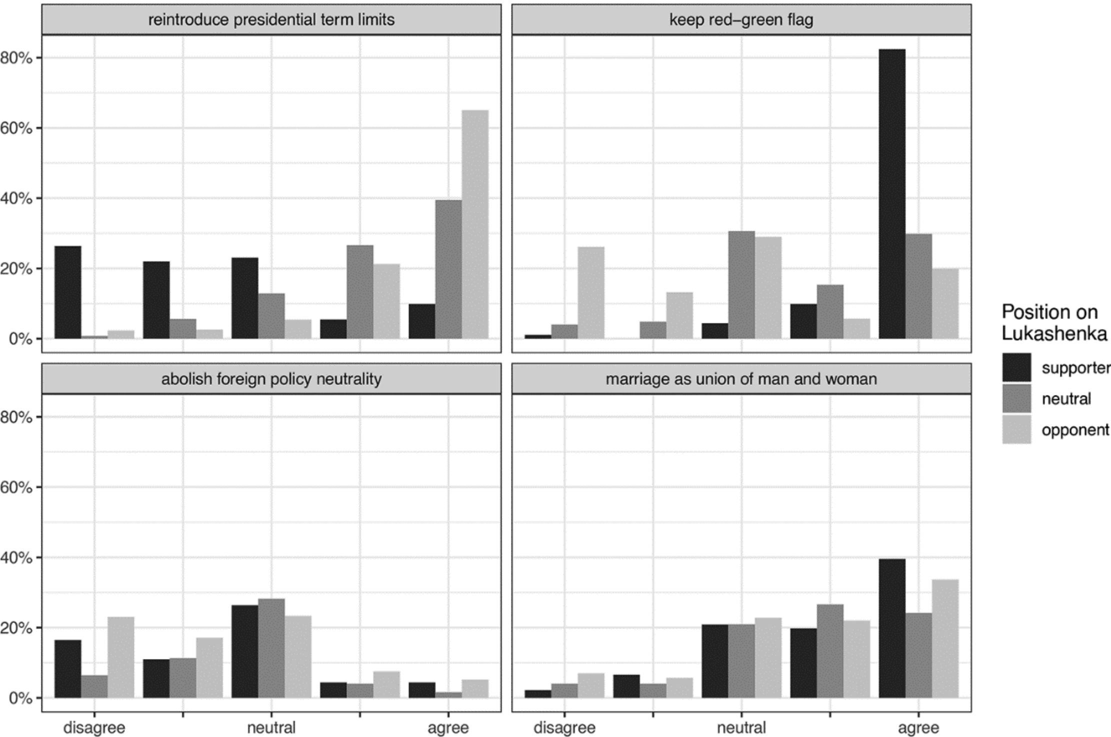
While our respondents' attitudes toward Lukashenka thus seem to determine people's view on amendments concerning the president's power, other suggestions to alter the separation of powers display a less polarized picture. When asked whether they support a mixed electoral system, the proposition to entrust the ABPA with the impeachment of the president, and even the strengthening of local self-government,

[2] The weblink is now defunct, as Tsikhanouskaia's constitutional reform team led by Anatol Liabedzka constantly removed old drafts from the website konstytucyja.online once a new draft was approved by the project team. Therefore, in our bibliography, we cite a link archived by the Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive. The last available draft of Liabedzka's team is from July 14, 2022, and is available at https://kanstytucyja.online/ index.php/new-constitution.html. The weblink to the draft version cited above is now defunct, but the text of the draft version is on file with the authors.

respondents are in favor on average, but their answers do not strongly differ across political allegiances. Suggestions that have less to do with Lukashenka himself, it follows, fail to elicit strong positions in the citizenry, **[page 111]**

even if their effect would be a strengthening of checks and balances—something that is generally welcomed by a majority.

***FIGURE 1**. Distribution of agreement with various constitutional amendments by attitude toward Lukashenka. Not shown are percentages of those who did not answer the question. Source: Authors' online survey (N = 601), fall 2021.*



Turning to questions of national identity, we see a similar pattern of varying degrees of polarization. Most respondents, regardless of their support for Lukashenka, endorse the idea of expanding the use of the Belarusian language. When asked, instead, whether the current red-green flag should be kept, the 40% in favor suggest merely lukewarm support. If disaggregated, the differences come to the fore: Of the Lukashenka supporters, 92% agree. The opponents, on the other hand, are more mixed in their preferences. Given that the white-red-white flag was one of the defining symbols of the protest movement of 2020–21 (Kotljarchuk 2020), it is unsurprising that the flag is a highly salient symbol of the opposing camp for Lukashenka supporters. As Mischa Gabowitsch explains, collective flag-making—flags "jointly sown, carried, or hoisted"—had become one of the "most intense protest experiences" and a "(collective) familiar attachment" to the protest movement (Gabowitsch 2021, 4–5). And it is therefore equally unsurprising that the Lukashenka administration has decided to stick with the current red-green flag. It is striking, however, that the opponents are far from uniform in their preferences, even more so as Tsikhanouskaia has included the white-red-white flag in her constitutional draft as a national symbol. This suggests that the flag issue is predominantly of concern for the protest movement narrowly defined

(indeed, 76% of actual protesters in our sample are against keeping the red-green flag), but less so for the much larger group of regime opponents.

[page 112]

Regarding foreign policy, respondents are again quite united in their preferences across political camps. Only a minority agrees with the suggestion to abolish Belarus's aspiration to achieve neutrality in foreign policy, with most being against, neutral, or avoiding the question altogether (the latter group is about 31% of respondents). The decision to strike out the country's proclaimed neutrality and its status as a country free of nuclear weapons, therefore, contradicts the preferences of the majority (see also Alberque 2022; Astapenia 2021; Matsukevich and Astapenia 2021).

Finally, looking at a gender issue, the pattern repeats itself once again. When asked whether the state should protect the institution of marriage specifically as a union between men and women, we hardly observe any differences across the political divide: A substantial majority on both sides agrees that this is the responsibility of the state—in accordance with the official amendments. It has been well established that the protest movement with its "gendered iconography" (Gaufman 2021) of the female protest trio that strove to invert traditional gender roles and feminize traditional symbols vigorously pitted itself against Lukashenka's demonstrative "militarized" and "hegemonic" masculinity (Grančayová and Kazharski 2022). However, it is equally important to admit that the population as a whole largely adheres to a more traditional view on gender issues. Overall, the Belarusian society has remained "patriarchal," and the feminist agenda of the protest has been questioned as well (Navumau and Matveieva 2021). The implication is that this particular amendment on gender roles resonated much more with broader swathes of society than those on executive power or national identity.

All of this shows that the highly salient questions of the distribution of political power and national identity are strongly contested: flag, decree power, and term limits clearly divide the respondents along their political allegiances. Here, we can therefore speak of political polarization. However, the numbers also show the limits of the polarization hypothesis: After a protracted political conflict with the active participation of a substantive minority, involving harsh repression and uncompromising rhetoric, it would not be surprising to find the position on Lukashenka to produce homogeneous attitudinal groups that hardly overlap. But this is not what we observe: Less salient questions of checks and balances, but also important questions like the country's international neutrality and the state's role in social relations, do not fall along political divides. As far as our survey data go, therefore, the conflict appears to be largely confined to the standoff between the regime's core supporters and opponents.

Preferences for Out-Group Exclusion

Affective polarization describes a situation in which (political) camps are characterized not only by a homogeneous set of beliefs and issue positions, but also by mutual dislike or even hatred of the respective out-group. Affectively polarized partisans tend to view the out-group as dangerous and tend to support undemocratic measures if these measures are directed against that group (Kingzette et al. 2021). Again, the existential

conflict in the months following the 2020 presidential election renders it quite likely that the political camps view each other at least with skepticism or even with hostility. Consequently, research has shown that emotions have played a seminal role both with regard to protest mobilization and in the subsequent phase after the crackdown on the protest movement. **[page 113]**

Olena Nikolayenko argues that a chain of emotions of "moral shock," "moral indignation," and finally the "loss of fear" eventually led to mobilization against the Belarusian regime (Nikolayenko 2022). And Andrei Vazyanau makes the case that after the regime crushed the protests, two—arguably stylized—segregated "emotional communities" have emerged—anti-violence and pro-regime—that now coexist but largely avoid interacting with each other (Vazyanau 2023).

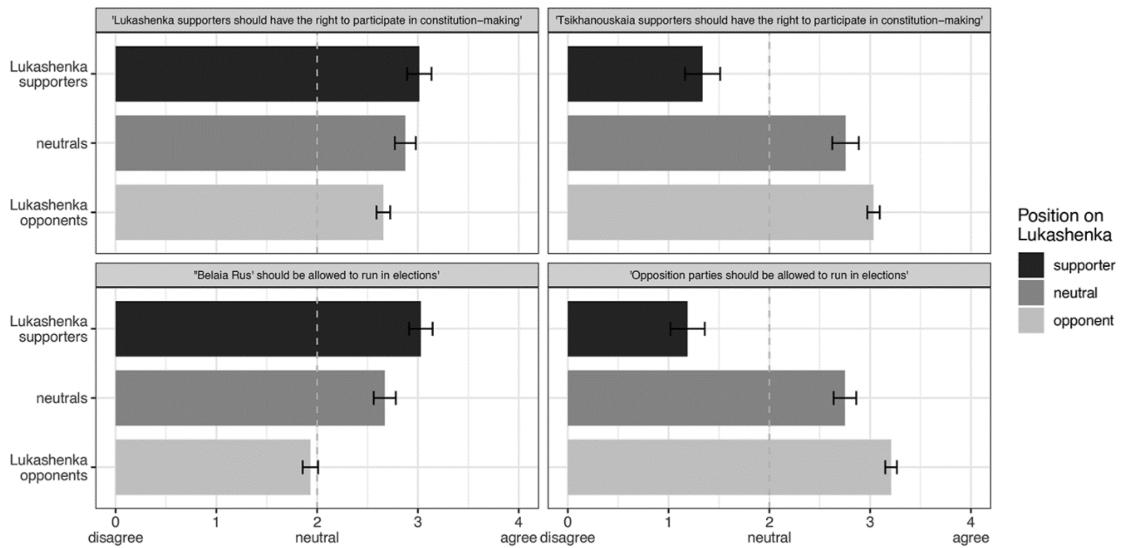
Can we observe the desire to exclude the political out-group among the conflicting sides in our survey data as well? We asked our respondents whether they think that supporters of Lukashenka and supporters of Tsikhanouskaia should, after a hypothetical change in power, be allowed to contribute to the drafting of a new constitution for the country. We also asked whether the proto-party of power Belaia Rus', which currently supports Lukashenka, and the respective parties of opposition politicians Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Viktar Babaryka, and Pavel Latushka should be allowed to compete in future elections. We divide the answers again between Lukashenka supporters, neutrals, and supporters of other candidates.

Figure 2 clearly demonstrates that a form of affective polarization is at play, where in-groups privilege themselves over the out-group regarding inclusion in democratic procedures. As expected, both camps are less enthusiastic about the respective other camp being represented than they are about their own representation.

However, there is an important substantive difference between the groups. Lukashenka supporters are clearly in favor of their own in-group to be represented in politics in the future. They are also clearly against Tsikhanouskaia supporters to have a say in the constitution-making process and against opposition parties to be able to compete in elections (with all values to the right of the dashed line in Figure 2 signaling inclusivity). But this is not mirrored in the opposition group. **[page 114]**

As expected, they want opposition actors to be represented, but they do *not*, on average, seek to exclude regime supporters: Lukashenka's opponents reveal a relatively inclusive stance. Where the pro-Lukashenka Belaia Rus' is concerned, Lukashenka's opponents score lower, but still around a neutral average. The affective polarization therefore appears to be asymmetrical: While all score higher on their respective in-group than they do on the out-group, only Lukashenka supporters also have a clear preference for excluding the out-group. Neutrals, moreover, are also strongly for including all political groups.

***FIGURE** 2. Mean position on questions of political inclusion, by political camp. Source: Authors' online survey (N = 601), September 2021.*



Taken together, these findings fit the diagnosis of a politically polarized society. Nonetheless, the considerable differences between the two camps in the degree to which they support excluding the respective other suggests that the two group identities do not operate symmetrically. Our data support the interpretation that the pro-Lukashenka camp understands the opposition as a social group, whereas the opposition views its adversary in the regime rather than in the regime's supporters (which would also explain that opposition supporters are more strongly against Belaia Rus' as a regime party than they are against Lukashenka supporters participating in constitution making). We take Vazyanau's (2023) observations on the two camps' emotionality to go in a similar direction—and call for probing this interpretation in further research.

Conclusions

What do our findings imply for regime-opposition dynamics in Belarus? First, the large number of "neutrals" in our survey should remind us that we are witnessing a more complex interaction than a mere clash between ardent regime supporters and their counterparts in the opposition. And even if just looking at these two groups, it would be too simple to argue that Belarusians are either squarely in favor or opposed to Lukashenka's amendments as the framing of the plebiscite's single question suggests: Our survey demonstrates that attitudes vary according to policy domain, and often even across political allegiances.

In line with other recent survey data, we do demonstrate that there is clear polarization between political camps. This polarization, however, is confined to the core political conflict around Lukashenka and, as far as our data go, does not radiate into many other seminal political domains. Take Belarus's neutrality in foreign policy: Russia's war against Ukraine is pulling Belarus further into Russia's orbit. But our survey shows that there is a widely-shared preference for neutrality. This steady integration—and therefore the gradual loss of Belarusian sovereignty—will be a long-lasting legacy of Lukashenka's rule that will be a burden for any future government. But the fact that polarization does not extend beyond the core political conflict appears to benefit Lukashenka's rule in the short term. This became also evident in the use of

messengers: Whereas Viber has remained a communication tool for “everyday practical concerns,” the highly politicized Telegram messenger became one of the central drivers of post-electoral protests. This dichotomy serves as a vivid illustration that “Belarusians largely continue to view politics as a sphere that is separate from their everyday lives rather than growing out of everyday concerns” (Gabowitsch 2021, 11).

These observations allow for various, and complex, interpretations of Belarus’s trajectory. On the one hand, the fact that the conflict around the presidency has not produced tightly circumscribed camps, **[page 115]**

inexorably confronting each other on every policy domain, means that the political conflict might not easily reignite around policy-related issues. With, in addition, many of the most visible and resourceful opposition activists now in exile outside the country, this appears to bolster regime stability for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, even spurious concessions Lukashenka makes to the opposition such as the cosmetic redistribution of powers away from the presidency already cost him dearly among his core supporters, undermining his support base that has been shrinking considerably already in the past years. Given that, beyond support for the personalist ruler, not much in terms of policy appears to hold the pro-Lukashenka camp together, the cards might be reshuffled quickly in case of unexpected developments or another focal event like elections.

In such a scenario, the readiness of a large majority in our sample to include all political camps in future democratic processes provides some reassurance that reconciliation in a post-Lukashenka Belarus might be possible, which is no small feat in the wake of the regime’s recent excesses. For the foreseeable time, however, it remains unlikely that such expectations will be put to the empirical test.

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APPENDIX A. WORDING OF QUESTIONS

Table A1 lists the full wording of the statements used to estimate respondents’ preferences for constitutional amendments and for preferences for out-group exclusion.

TABLE A1.

Statement Themes and Exact Wording of Authors’ Survey Statements on Constitutional Amendments and Opinions about Out-Group Participation

Statement Theme	Wording
Statements on constitutional amendments	
Decree power	“The president no longer has the right to issue decrees that have the force of law.”
Term limits	“The same person can no longer serve more than two terms in his or her lifetime.”
Flag	“The national flag remains in its current red-green color scheme.”
Foreign policy neutrality	“The provision on striving for the status of foreign policy neutrality of the Republic of Belarus is removed from the Constitution.”
Marriage	“The state undertakes to protect the institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman.”
Opinions about out-group participation	
Constitution making (Lukashenka supporters)	“The current supporters of Alexander Lukashenko should have the right to participate in the development of the future constitution of the Republic of Belarus in the future if their election to the constitutional commission was free and fair.”
Constitution making (opposition supporters)	“The current supporters of Svetlana Tikhanovskaia should have the right to

	participate in the development of the future constitution of the Republic of Belarus in the future, after the change of power, if their election to the constitutional commission was free and fair.”
Electoral participation (Lukashenka supporters)	“After the amendments to the Constitution and the change of power, the public association ‘Belaia Rus,’ which now supports Lukashenko (if it decides to register the party), should have the right to participate in parliamentary elections.”
Electoral participation (opposition supporters)	“After the amendments to the Constitution and the change of power, political parties of such politicians as Sergei Tikhanovskii, Viktor Babariko and Pavel Latushko should have the right to participate in parliamentary elections.”

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Appendix B. Distribution of Basic Sociodemographic Variables

Table B1 displays the distribution of age, gender, education, and the region of residence in our 2021 survey compared to the 2019 census. Data for the latter come from Belstat, Belarus’s official statistical service, and are available online.[3] Table B2 displays weighted and unweighted means.

TABLE B1

Distribution of Sociodemographic Variables in 2019 Census (Belstat) and Authors’ Survey from 2021

Variable	Category	Belstat 2019, %	Authors’ Survey 2021, %
Age group, y	15-19	6,1	1,8
	20-24	6	5,8
	25-29	8,3	10,6
	30-34	10,5	16,5
	35-39	10,1	15,6
	40-44	9	12,8
	45-49	8,6	15,6
	50-54	8,4	6,8
	55-59	9,4	7,5
	60-64	9,1	4,2
	65-69	6,9	2
	70-74	4,6	0,5
	75-79	3,1	0,2
	80	4,9	0

[3] At the time of writing, the Belstat website was not accessible from abroad. We used Belstat data from these websites: https://myfin.by/wiki/term/demografiya and https://www.sb.by/articles/strana-otrazhaetsya-vtsifrakh.html

Gender	Male	46,6	43,8
	Female	53,4	56,2
Education	No higher education	74,9	45,3
	Higher education	25,1	54,7
Region of residence	Brest	15,3	14,6
	Vitsebsk	13,1	12,4
	Homel'	17,0	14,9
	Hrodna	13,0	11,0
	Minsk Region	9,5	15,1
	Mahliliou	11,6	11,1
	Minsk City	20,5	21,0

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Table B2 reports the means of the five questions on the constitutional amendments in the unweighted sample with the sample treated with two different weighting variables supplied by the data provider: one that takes into account a five-point age group category, gender, and region of residence (weight 1); and one that additionally includes education (weight 2). The numbers indicate that weighting the sample results in very insubstantial differences, with the largest amounting to .15 on a 5-point scale. We therefore deem it justified to report the unweighted results in the main analysis.

TABLE B2

Weighted and Unweighted Means of Agreement (5-Point Scale) with Five Constitutional Amendments and Participation of Political Groups

Statement	Unweighted Mean	Weighted Mean (Weight 1)	Weighted Mean (Weight 2)
Decree power	3,83	3,82	3,78
Term limits	4,13	4,14	4,10
Flag	3,28	3,29	3,43
Foreign policy neutrality	2,46	2,44	2,41
Marriage	3,80	3,89	3,93
Constitution making (Lukashenka supporters)	3,75	3,71	3,62
Constitution making (opposition supporters)	3,74	3,67	3,54
Electoral participation (Lukashenka supporters)	3,21	3,19	3,20
Electoral participation (opposition supporters)	3,86	3,81	3,70

Note: For wordings of statements, see Table A1.

FIGURE B1

Distribution of region of residence, visual comparison between the survey and the 2019 census, data from Belstat.

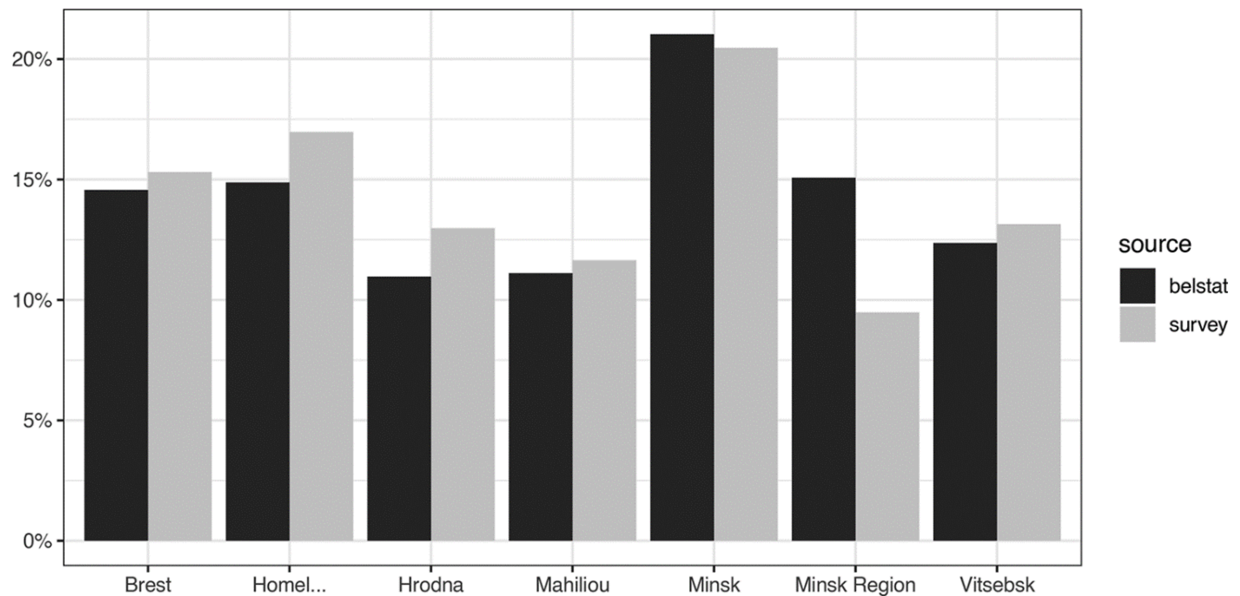

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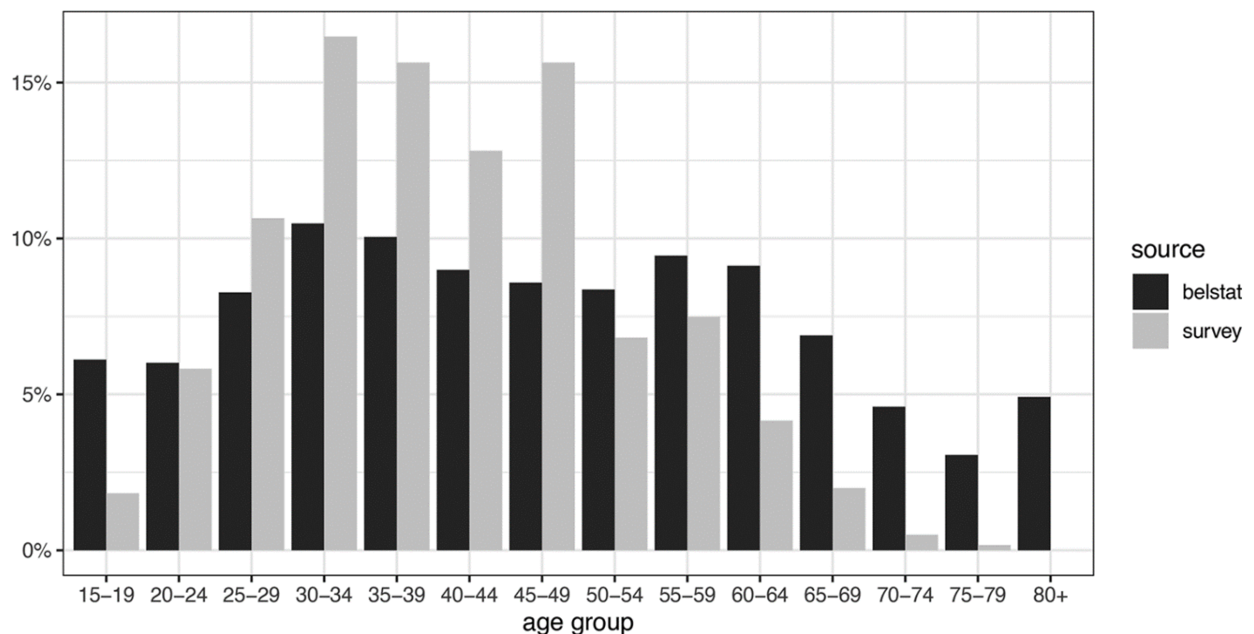
FIGURE B2

Distribution of age groups (over 14 years old), visual comparison between the survey and the 2019 census, data from Belstat.



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