Editorial

As the first issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies for 2021 is being finalized, Belarus is again making headlines around the world. And again, not for a good reason. The country's domestic political crisis, which followed the 2020 presidential election, has seen wholesale repressions against the political opposition, torture and long-term prison sentences for hundreds of people, and meant thousands of Belarusians fleeing the country.

The authorities have recently forced the landing of a passenger plane traversing Belarusian airspace as it flew between two EU capital cities. The action presented a serious security threat to Belarus's neighbours. Some Europeans, however, fear that isolating Belarus from the West will only push it closer to Russia, which will help neither the political nor humanitarian situation in the country.

Effective responses to the challenges posed by Belarus require evidence-based approaches. This issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies helps to understand the roots of the current political crisis in Belarus and its geopolitical implications. The issue also features two articles on the foreign policy of Belarus and the influence of domestic politics on foreign relations. The three full-length articles in this issue each contribute to our understanding of these processes in their own way.

David R. Marples from the University of Alberta in Canada looks at the roots of the 2020 uprising in Belarus. He argues that three of the most important causes of the political upheaval were the so-called Parasite Laws of 2016, Lukashenka's dismissive attitude towards Covid-19 including describing the global response as a psychosis, and the destruction of crosses at the Kurapaty memorial site. Professor Marples concludes that these events changed Belarusian society and destroyed the social contract between Lukashenka and the population. Lukashenka's image has been irrevocably tarnished by the brutality with which he has treated the country's citizens and his failure to attend to their needs during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, examples from Syria and Central Asia show that unpopular dictators can remain in power as long as their armed forces remain loyal and their economies do not collapse.

In the second article of the issue, Paul Hansbury, one of the Journal's associate editors, examines domestic constraints on foreign policy change in Belarus.

He analyzes international trade, diplomacy more broadly and foreign policy concerns for prestige. His article shows that whoever might occupy the office of president in Belarus would be heavily constrained in their policy options owing to domestic interest groups closely linked to Russia, while noting how within the EU security interests had gained some power at the expense of human rights considerations. The scope for convergence in international policies between Belarus and the West remains limited regardless of changed leaders on either side. Although his analysis was written before the 2020 election, recent events have further reduced the scope for a “win-win” situation between Belarus and Western states.

Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina from the Université libre de Bruxelles examines the socio-political trajectories of Belarusian ambassadors appointed to EU countries in the 2010s. She demonstrates that when the relations between the Belarusian authorities and Russia became strained, Belarus tried to expand its ties beyond those with Russia by adopting “multivectoriness” as a new foreign policy. She shows that, while the president has remained the sole “responsible decision-maker”, he is advised and assisted in the realization of his powers in this area by the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Security Council. After the adoption of the new strategy, the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs increased – as have its “economic” powers. The author compares the changes in Belarusian foreign policy decision-making and implementation processes in the 2010s with the previous decade.

The issue also carries two book reviews. Tomasz Blaszcak from Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas reviews the first ever monograph on the history of Belarusian detachments in the Lithuanian Army. The reviewed book, written in Lithuanian, provides a historical account of cooperation between Belarusians, primarily during the inter-war period. Per Anders Rudling from Lund University in Sweden writes a review of the memoirs Professor David Marples, who is also the author of an article for this issue of the Journal. The review tracks the main stages of Marples’ career as well as his contribution to the study of history of Belarus and Ukraine.

The articles in this issue of the Journal all resulted from papers presented at the London Annual Conference on Belarusian Studies, which the Ostrogorski Centre organizes with University College London and the Francis Skaryna Library. This year the conference took place in an online format because of Covid-19 restrictions and recordings of its informative panels are available online. It welcomed over 25 speakers from various parts of the world. The next iteration of the conference will take place in early 2022.

Beginning with this issue, the Journal of Belarusian Studies will publish two issues per year, and we are currently reviewing submissions for the next issue. We invite readers and researchers to submit research manuscripts and book reviews for consideration.

Yarik Kryvoi
Editor-in-Chief