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# A BELARUS STRATEGY *FOR THE WEST*

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## SUMMARY

- *This strategy includes an analysis of the current situation in Belarus and possible scenarios for its development, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Lukashenka regime, and a long-term action plan divided into several stages.*
- *The strategy aims to create foreign policy conditions that will weaken the position of the Lukashenka regime, while also pursuing several key goals to ensure long-term democratic development in Belarus and to strengthen its sovereignty.*
- *Proposed short-term measures include de-legitimising Lukashenka on the global arena and discrediting any contacts with him, coordinating Western actions, establishing a communication channel with the regime, placing a moratorium on new ambassadors to Belarus, containing Russia through pressure and cooperation, driving a wedge between the Lukashenka regime and China, putting pressure on third countries that recognize Lukashenka's legitimacy, applying a highly focused sanctions policy, providing assistance to civil society, and correctly positioning Western efforts to overcome the political crisis in Belarus.*
- *Medium-term measures for after the political crisis in Belarus has been overcome include intensifying full-fledged cooperation with Belarus, reducing its trade and financial dependence on Russia by creating a favourable trade and investment regime, ensuring its accession to the WTO, forming a loan and investment portfolio for it, reducing its energy dependence on Russia, and purchasing electricity from Belarus's NPP.*
- *Long-term measures include neutralising the "military threat" of NATO to Belarus, building strong, long-term ties with Belarus, and securing international guarantees of its neutral status.*

## THE STATUS QUO: THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE REGIME

As of the beginning of spring 2021, the Lukashenka regime has regained control over the socio-political situation in the country. The protest movement has splintered and become disorganised, taking the form of isolated bursts of activity that do not pose a real threat to the system. Moreover, without proper leadership and a clear action plan, there is no guarantee that the protests will succeed even if they return to 2020 levels.

The regime's domestic strategy is ad hoc, based on enthusiastic and exclusive use of force and categorical rejection of dialogue or compromise with civil society. Although the authorities have officially declared their intention to pursue national unity (2021 has even been designated the "Year of National Unity"), in reality they only exacerbate social discord and discredit those who favour change. Lacking a clear plan and unwilling to consider a real transit/transfer of power, the regime is biding its time, focusing on eliminating opportunities for protest in any form and relying on fear and inertia.

The success of this strategy can largely be attributed to the following factors (the regime's strengths):

- *Lukashenka's unlimited power*

Due to the collapse of rule of law and the total subordination of all branches of government (legislative and judicial included) to the acting president, there are virtually no constraints on how protests can be suppressed – neither institutional, regulatory, nor moral.

- *The loyalty of the security agencies, state apparatus, lawmakers, and judges*

The power vertical is monolithic. The regime is not experiencing a personnel shortage, nor is it unable to fill the vacancies left by officials dismissed for political reasons: the system remains operational. The likelihood of a "palace coup" at this stage is minimal.

- *Control over the media*

The government controls the traditional media sector (TV, newspapers, magazines). Social networks and independent media, whose presence is restricted to the internet, remain beyond the control of the regime, and their popularity and demand has increased greatly since the beginning of the current political crisis. In order to counteract this, the regime restricts access to online information resources, actively using social media publications as a basis to harass and repress their authors.

- *The fragmentation of the protest movement*

Large-scale violence and repression have led to the fragmentation of the protest movement, allowing the authorities to target retaliatory measures at specific, isolated hotbeds.

- *Proactive and preventive anti-protest measures*

The authorities have traditionally taken a proactive approach to protests, attempting to nip potential sources of dissent in the bud. In preparation for the spring-summer period, the authorities have doubled down on unauthorized actions and made criminal and administrative penalties radically more severe.

- *The absence of leaders inside the country capable of organising protests and/or destabilising the situation enough to threaten the regime*

The leaders of the protest movement are either in prison (Babaryka, Tsikhanouski, Kalesnikava) or in exile (Latushka, Tsikhanouskaya).

- *Competition among leaders of the protest movement in emigration, fragmentation*

Tsikhanouskaya and Latushka (in Vilnius and Warsaw respectively) have more or less formed their own separate governments in exile. Although they formally coordinate their activities, practically speaking they each follow their own programme, effectively reduplicating each other's functions.

- *The absence of big business independent from Lukashenka*

Along with current legal regulations that restrict possibilities to obtain funding from abroad, the absence of a national "oligarchy" radically narrows the sources of possible funding for both Belarus's political opposition and the independent media.

In terms of foreign policy, the regime's strategy can also be characterised as lacking a clear plan of action: the current government prefers to stall for time in the hopes that the geopolitical situation in the region will change in its favour, forcing or encouraging the West to resume cooperation with Belarus. For this reason, despite its anti-Western rhetoric, Minsk's official position remains multi-vectoral.

The system also has several strengths on the international arena, including:

- *Russian support*

Russia remains a key foreign policy, trade, economic, military, and financial factor, safeguarding the regime's viability in the face of international isolation.

- *Cooperation with China*

Chinese President Xi Jinping was the first to congratulate Lukashenka on his election victory. The authorities actively use Belarusian-Chinese relations as proof of the multi-vectoral nature of Belarus's foreign policy, as well as the impossibility of total isolation.

- *Survival experience and immunity to sanctions and international isolation*

Western countries have been applying sanctions against the Lukashenka regime and alienating it in various ways since 1997.

- *A historical lack of full-fledged, highest-level contacts with the West, which it would be “a pity to lose”*

During his entire time in power, Lukashenka has made only two official (state) visits to the West: one to France (in July 1996) and one to Austria (in November 2019). Likewise, since 1996 the Speaker of the National Assembly of Belarus has made but one official visit to a Western European country (Switzerland, in February-March 2018).

- *General absence of financial and/or property assets or property in the West amongst top Belarusian officials*

This is one feature that distinguishes the political elites of Belarus from those of other post-Soviet countries. This factor makes the Belarusian regime less sensitive to restrictions on entry to Western countries and account freezes. The shadow business of the Lukashenka family is presumed to deal mainly with Russia (trade in equipment), the post-Soviet space (trade in equipment and weapons), African countries (trade in equipment and weapons, mining), and the Persian Gulf (trade in weapons).

The key domestic vulnerabilities of the Lukashenka regime are as follows:

- *Lack of legitimacy at home*

The election of August 9, 2020 was the first whose outcome was not accepted by the Belarusian people since Lukashenka became head of state in 1994.

- *The permanent threat of social upheaval*

Although the regime has managed to suppress the protests, their underlying causes remain unresolved.

- *A limited support base in society, largely consisting of groups that are socially dependent on the government*

Professor of Sociology Oleg Manaev describes Lukashenka’s base as residents of villages and small towns with a low level of education who are predominately pensioners, so-called “government’s people” (security services, officials), or representatives of businesses with close ties to the government<sup>1</sup>. Another sociologist, Andrei Vardomatsky, notes that whereas proponents of change can be characterised by a deep-seated internal desire to participate in decision-making processes, opponents of change have no such need: they are happy for decisions to be made on their behalf<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Deutsche Welle*, “Sociologist: It Is Possible That Neither Lukashenka Nor Tsikhanouskaya Could Win 50% of the Vote Plus One” <https://www.dw.com/ru/oleg-manaev-501-golos-mogli-ne-nabrat-ni-lukashenko-ni-tihanovskaja/a-55131952>.

<sup>2</sup> *Belarusians and the Market*, “Andrei Vardomatsky: The Education Level of Those Who Support Change Is Higher than the National Average”, <https://belmarket.by/news/2021/03/04/news-44881.html>.

- *Economic stagnation, lack of sources to borrow funds*

According to forecasts by the BEROC Economic Research Center, numerous threats to the Belarusian economy have arisen (financial de-stabilisation, aggravation of the political crisis, the pandemic, new tensions with Russia, new shocks to the global economy, sanctions, waves of emigration), each of which on their own could have a severe effect on the economy in 2021, potentially leading to pronounced and pervasive economic contraction (up to 10%) and financial/price de-stabilisation<sup>3</sup>.

Payments on the state debt alone amount to US\$ 3-4 billion annually. Currently, there are no feasible alternatives to cover and service borrowings other than a Russian loan portfolio.

Lukashenka's main foreign policy vulnerabilities relate to the following problems:

- *Lack of international legitimacy*

This limits real opportunities for full-fledged cooperation with other countries – even with ones like China that support the regime. The deteriorating relations between Belarus and the EU/US are deterring Western investment in the Belarusian-Chinese Great Stone Industrial Park, as well as in the other foreign economic interests of Beijing, which sees Minsk in the context of trade with the EU.

- *Complete dependence on Russia, inability to resist the integration agenda being pushed by the Kremlin*

There is no room for manoeuvre or possibility of balancing between Russian-Western animosities. This situation threatens the country's independence and sovereignty, as the regime refuses to make any concessions for fear of losing power, a state of affairs that Russia takes advantage of.

## HOW EVENTS COULD UNFOLD

Analysis of the current situation and the actions of the regime reveals that events are most likely to develop according to the following main scenarios (or a combination thereof):

- *Lukashenka is overthrown following large-scale social upheaval*

This is the violent revolutionary option, according to which Lukashenka is toppled by the “masses.” In this scenario, the general population reacts spontaneously to Lukashenka clamping down on dissent and attempting to strengthen the dictatorial regime through violence and repression. This sequence of events presupposes destabilisation, clashes, and casualties.

<sup>3</sup> BEROC, Economic Outlook, <http://www.beroc.by/upload/iblock/b2f/b2fb1b7e1d0e8241633ddcb01debe7f6.pdf>.

- *The authorities “save an old file under a new name*

This is the most likely outcome based on the current mood of the government, involving superficial changes to the authoritarian system by means of constitutional reform. This scenario is contingent upon the regime coming to terms with the need to defuse tension and attenuate the threat of social upheaval. It also hinges on pressure from Russia, which hopes to use such reforms and their legitimisation as a way of diversifying its channels of control over Minsk. However, it seems that the authorities intend to delay the concrete materialisation of reforms/transfers of power as much as possible, up until the expiration of Lukashenka’s self-proclaimed term in 2025. By redistributing presidential authority, the regime hopes to move Lukashenka to a new position with minimal implications for his actual power, allowing him to depart safely from the political scene at a later date.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WESTERN POLICY ON BELARUS

### *Short-term package of measures (up to five years)*

The main objective of this stage is to resolve the political crisis (bring about the collapse of the authoritarian regime) by successfully exploiting Lukashenka’s vulnerabilities and ensuring free elections in Belarus.

This stage envisages the return of Belarus’s foreign policy to a multi-vectoral orientation and “rational” neutrality, albeit encumbered by membership to the CSTO and its obligations under the Union State with Russia.

Measures that could help bring about this outcome include:

- *De-legitimising Lukashenka on the global arena and discrediting any contacts with him*

The maximum number of international players must join efforts to counteract and boycott the Lukashenka regime; this could be achieved by involving the UN and the OSCE. Given the influence of the US, the EU, and their allies, the resources and capabilities of the above-mentioned international organisations could be successfully leveraged to achieve the following objectives:

- organise global, systemic pressure on the Belarusian authorities and their partners in order to discredit and divide them as much as possible;
- secure assistance from the international community for Belarusian civil society;

- advocate for monitoring groups led by the UN and OSCE to visit Belarus to conduct international investigations on violations of electoral and human rights issues;
- make extensive use of the special rapporteur mechanism to collect data remotely and inform the international community about the regime's human rights violations;
- initiate resolutions containing international legal assessments of the regime's actions and international recommendations and demands.

• *Coordinating Western actions, establishing a communication channel with the regime*

A country or group of countries should be designated as a coordinator or "liaison" in order to achieve the following objectives:

- approve and coordinate the actions of the Western World towards Belarus;
- ensure strict adherence to the measures being applied to the regime, including during negotiations (if such are required);
- organise and coordinate cooperation with third countries to ensure Lukashenka's international isolation.

The fragmentation and subtle policy differences of individual Western countries and their allies, as well as the behind-the-scenes contacts taking place, are actively taken advantage of by the regime to cope with international isolation, which stymies any hope for real change. Examples of actions that undermine the policy of international de-legitimisation of the regime include the presentation of credentials to Lukashenka by the newly arrived ambassadors of the Vatican, Israel, and Japan; the telephone conversation between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Lukashenka; the meeting with a special envoy of the Vatican; and the multiple telephone conversations between Vice President and Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis and Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei.

Countries that have clout, resources, and a history of contacts with Lukashenka should be chosen as liaisons. The United States, Germany, and Austria all meet these criteria (as active players in the region), as do Switzerland and the Vatican (as potential mediators for sensitive missions).

• *Placing a moratorium on new ambassadors to Belarus*

The fact that heads of diplomatic missions to Belarus are presenting credentials to the self-proclaimed president is used by the regime for propaganda purposes, serving as evidence that Lukashenka has been internationally acknowledged as the head of state. This also demoralises the protest movement. One way around this dilemma that would avoid lowering the actual level of diplomatic relations would be to extend the terms of current heads of diplomatic missions.

- *Containing Russia through pressure and cooperation*

The sanctions on Belarus and Russia have led not only to a rapprochement between Lukashenka and Putin, but also to an increase in military risks in the region:<sup>4</sup> the two allies have rallied around the idea of opposing the West as a common enemy – a “puppet master” that orchestrates revolts.

Further confrontation is potentially in the interests of Russia, as this could bring about increased integration, especially in terms of military-technical cooperation between Minsk and Moscow, resulting in greater presence of military and special units on Belarusian territory under the pretext of exercises or threats. Perceived risks could serve as a basis to activate Belarusian-Russian agreements permitting the deployment of special forces on each other's territories.

For this reason, a clear red line must quickly be drawn to limit Russian interventionism and support for the Lukashenka regime, the crossing of which would trigger specific, painful sanctions and restrictions.

On the other hand, the possibility of accommodating Russian interests in other conflict areas important to Moscow should also be considered (an exchange of concessions): thus, the West could ease sanctions against Russia should the Kremlin refuse to support Lukashenka.

- *Driving a wedge between Belarus and China*

A situation in which the Belarusian regime is deprived of support potentially plays into Chinese hands.

Russia has never been enthusiastic about China's “appropriation” of Belarus or the intensification of Belarusian-Chinese cooperation. Conversely, the accelerated integration of Belarus with Russia that is currently taking place, the transformation of Minsk into an integral part of Moscow's foreign policy, and the ever deepening crisis of Lukashenka's international legitimacy all pose a real threat to China's economic interests, which lie in developing cooperation with Belarus as an important transport hub for Chinese goods to Europe and vice versa.

China is most interested in an independent Belarus that can act as a link between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union while enjoying the greatest possible access to both.

- *Putting pressure on third countries that recognise Lukashenka*

The US and the EU (both the entity as a whole and individual member states) should use their authority and influence amongst post-Soviet countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan,

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<sup>4</sup> Sources of risk include growing military presence, as well as military manoeuvres and exercises in Belarus and NATO border countries.

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan) to ensure that the latter refrain from cooperating or maintaining contacts with Lukashenka or offering him support in any form.

An even more significant way of isolating the regime internationally would be to remove Turkey from the list of countries that maintain ties with Lukashenka. One way to go about this would be to take advantage of Russian-Turkish animosities by containing Russian influence in the region and expanding Turkey's. As a NATO member, Turkey is already encroaching upon Russia's geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh), Central Asia, and Ukraine (Ankara insists on the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the return of Crimea).

• *Applying a highly focused sanctions policy*

Sanctions should carry the potential to inflict real, direct damage/impact on the regime, rather than indirect damage, although the seriousness of side effects must be taken into account as well. It would be counter-productive to apply restrictive measures that are felt more by the country itself than Lukashenka and those responsible for the violence and repression. The regime actively uses sanctions and isolation as an excuse to increase repression, limit the actual presence of the West in Belarus, and shift responsibility for its own mistakes and miscalculations in economic policy, which have resulted in the deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country.

It would also be wise to avoid measures that only result in increasing Belarus's dependence on Russia without exerting any fundamental pressure directly on the regime.

Even if tougher sanctions do bring about a radical deterioration of the economic situation in Belarus, the regime itself is not necessarily threatened, as evidenced by the example of Venezuela.

The sanctions policy should leverage real opportunities to exert the maximum amount of pressure on Lukashenka by exploiting his vulnerabilities. This means exerting focused pressure on the connections, contacts, and business interests of the Lukashenka regime that are truly vital to it: not only (and maybe not so much) in the EU and the United States, but also in third countries (Russia, the post-Soviet space, Turkey, the Persian Gulf countries, Asia, Africa). Foreign schemes and links could be uncovered by creating mechanisms to swap information in exchange for financial and other incentives, while also guaranteeing the safety of informants. Individuals and legal entities in third countries could be swayed through sanctions lists, account freezes, and entry bans.

• *Providing assistance to Belarusian civil society*

Assistance could involve:

- easing entry requirements to EU countries by taking unilateral steps to simplify or cancel the visa regime;

- increasing financial support for civil society and its institutions, as well as the independent media, labour unions, and strike committees in Belarus;
- providing humanitarian assistance to victims of repression, implementing rehabilitation projects;
- providing organisational, consulting and financial assistance to incipient Belarusian political parties, supporting pro-national and pro-European parties and movements as a counterweight to pro-Russian ones.

• *Correctly positioning Western efforts to overcome the crisis*

International efforts to resolve the Belarusian crisis must be portrayed as an attempt to preserve the independence and sovereignty of Belarus.

The false notion that Moscow and Minsk share common views, challenges, and threats must be debunked, as this serves as a justification for further rapprochement with Russia, in terms of both defence/security and politics/economics. Thus, independent opinion polls in Belarus must be actively supported as alternatives to official ones in order to assess the real attitude of Belarusian society towards Lukashenka and rapprochement with Russia.

The international community must take a clear position with regard to Lukashenka in official documents on Belarusian issues (statements, reports, communiqués, etc.), naming him as the main threat to the independence and territorial integrity of Belarus.

Special emphasis must be placed on the actions of the regime to divide Belarusian society, as well as the unquenchable thirst for power of Lukashenka, who is ready to defend his position at any cost in order to evade responsibility for his crimes, large-scale human rights violations, and election fraud.

Before the internal political crisis is resolved, the West's agenda with regard to Belarus should be limited to demanding an end to violence, the release of political prisoners, and new democratic elections under international supervision. The West should avoid promoting a new geopolitical orientation for Belarus as much as possible – be it in favour of the West or the East.

## *Medium-term package of measures (up to 10 years)*

The time frame of this package depends on how long it takes for the political crisis in Belarus to resolve itself, which is when the measures should begin to be implemented.

Their main goal should be to strengthen the independence and sovereignty of Belarus by moving towards balanced relations with the West and Russia.

To achieve this, the critical concentration of Russian influence in Belarus must be reduced (displacement through substitution), and relations with the EU and the United States should be normalised.

- *Intensifying full-fledged cooperation with Belarus*

Mutual interdependence should be increased through comprehensive cooperation and by removing barriers to trade and contacts with Belarus. First and foremost, a basic agreement should be signed on partnership and cooperation with Belarus (relations are currently regulated by an agreement dating from 1989).

- *Reducing trade and financial dependence on Russia by creating a favourable trade and investment regime*

For decades, Russia has been Belarus's dominant trade partner: according to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, in 2020 Russia accounted for 48% of the value of foreign trade in goods, 45% of exports, and 50% of imports. The EU has traditionally occupied second place in foreign trade, comprising 18% of Belarusian exports and around 20% of imports as at the end of 2020.

Historically, Russia has been the largest investor in the Belarusian economy.

Belarus's trade, economic, credit, and investment dependence on its eastern neighbour could be reduced by increasing the attractiveness of the European market through improved access conditions. To expand and promote trade with Belarus, the West could include it in import support programmes (i.e., country-based ones such as SIPPO in Switzerland<sup>5</sup>), offer customs relief by making Belarus a beneficiary of the EU preferential tariff system, and provide consulting and assistance on certification issues.

Likewise, the service sector (IT, transport, tourism) requires support, as it is the most promising growth driver for Belarus's economy and trade. Work could be done to promote the brand of both the country and specific industries, focusing on opportunities for Belarus in the field of specialised international exhibitions and global business forums.

- *Ensuring Belarus's accession to the WTO*

WTO membership would protect Belarusian products from discriminatory measures, also providing the country with free access to international mechanisms for resolving trade disputes. The Republic of Belarus has been negotiating its accession to the WTO since 1993. Unresolved issues include the coordination of bilateral agreements on market access with the United States, Ukraine, the EU, Canada, Costa Rica and New Zealand, as well as the completion and approval of a Report from the working group dedicated to Belarus's WTO accession. The negotiation process is currently at a standstill for political reasons.

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<sup>5</sup> Swiss Import Promotion Programme, <https://www.sippo.ch>.

- *Forming a loan and investment portfolio for Belarus*

Cooperation with international financial institutions (the IMF and the World Bank) and credit institutions must be resumed to attract quick and long-term financing. Likewise, frozen projects with the EIB and EBRD must be re-activated, and programmes to stimulate the financial recovery of the Belarusian economy ought to be developed.

Assistance is also needed to improve the position of Belarus within the OECD Country Risk Classification system (it should aim for group 5), which will help it attract export loans from OECD countries. This will allow Belarus to purchase imported equipment to modernise its industrial sector and social services while deepening integration with international production chains.

- *Reducing energy dependence on Russia*

Belarus needs help diversifying its energy (oil and gas) suppliers; it also needs to regain the rights to use the port infrastructure of the Baltic States for transshipment of Belarusian oil products and potash fertilizers.

- *Purchasing energy from the Belarusian NPP*

The politically motivated boycott of electricity produced at the Belarusian NPP introduced by several Baltic states (Lithuania, Poland, Latvia), should be lifted. Likewise, BelNPP power exports should be allowed to pass through European energy networks unhindered.

## Long-term package of measures (over 10 years)

The goal of these measures is to provide additional international guarantees of the inviolability of Belarus's national sovereignty and territorial integrity by deepening cooperation, as well as by securing international recognition of its neutral status,<sup>6</sup> among other guarantees.

To achieve this goal, significant, sustained efforts must be made to increase the importance of the EU and the US to Belarus, and the West and Russia must come to a strategic compromise that guarantees Belarus's neutral status as a means of reducing tensions in the region.

- *Neutralising the "military threat" of NATO to Belarus*

A potential clash with NATO serves as the formal justification for Belarusian-Russian military cooperation. Belarus requires security guarantees from NATO that obviate the need for a common military and defence policy with Russia. Such guarantees could prompt a "transformation" of Belarus's membership in the CSTO to observer status.

<sup>6</sup> Neutrality is officially enshrined in the Belarusian constitution. Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus states that the country aims to be a nuclear-free zone and a neutral state.

- *Building strong, long-term ties with Belarus*

The competitive advantages of the European market for Belarus must be further reinforced. As long as Russia remains the dominant investor, sponsor, and market for the Belarusian economy, the influence of the Russian factor on the domestic and foreign policy of Belarus will continue to prevail.

- *Securing international guarantees of Belarus's neutral status*

Negotiations should be held amongst the EU, the United States, Russia, and China to recognise Belarus's neutral status.

Guaranteeing Belarus's neutrality will remove one source of geopolitical conflict in the region, helping to achieve a balance and creating a "buffer zone" between NATO and Russia. This will also nullify the prospects of Minsk joining NATO or the EU, which would vex Moscow.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# ABOUT THE CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS

The Center for New Ideas is a think tank devoted to developing ideas on how to take advantage of the opportunities and respond to the challenges that Belarus faces in the 21st century.

Our mission is to help society and the government build a more open, prosperous and resilient Belarus. We go about this by engaging with society to discuss reforms and supporting independent research and future leaders.

Dr. Ryhor Astapenia is the founder and research director of the organization and Anton Radnianski is its executive director.

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