

International activities of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union:

EAST VERSUS WEST

by **Kristiina Silvan**

abstract

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) is an administered mass organization for youth in contemporary Belarus and has been supported by the Lukashenka government for decades. It is therefore well positioned to engage in international activities. What's more, it claims to develop "multi-vector international youth collaboration" by participating in international programs and projects. This article aims to map and explain the international activities of the BRYU from the early 1990s until the present day. It asks how the association's international activities look in practice and what explains these patterns. It finds there is a qualitative difference between the BRYU's international activities with actors in Russia, the European Union and China. The article suggests that in comparison to the BRYU's domestic activities, which have been the primary focus of previous research, the youth league's participation in international affairs is limited. It argues that this state of affairs can be explained by its structural subservience to President Lukashenka, for whom the BRYU's international activities are of secondary importance.

KEYWORDS: youth policy, authoritarianism, Belarus.

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) is an administered mass organization¹ for youth in contemporary Belarus. It has been systematically supported by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government for decades,² and, according to the calculations of Andriy Pavlovich and Mateush Yezhovskii, receives up to 98% of the state youth policy funding.³ According to official statistics, about half a million Belarusians, or every fifth 15–30-year-old, is a member of the youth league. Although the majority of members are passive and membership is often not a voluntary choice but a semi-compulsory necessity, the repression faced by other youth groups – especially after the wave of mass protests in 2020 – means that the BRYU enjoys a dominant position in the sphere of youth associations.⁴

Due to its dominant and heavily state-supported presence in the Belarusian youth sphere, the BRYU is well positioned to engage in international activities. Indeed, the association is involved in an array of international programs and projects. These activities, framed as "multi-vector international youth collaboration", are reportedly aimed at strengthening the BRYU's position in the global arena and at promoting a positive image of the Republic of Belarus.⁵ The BRYU's international activities are sporadically reported in the media, especially the state-owned national news agency BelTa. For example, in 2017, the BRYU



Concert arranged near airport Minsk-1 by the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) celebrating “Independent Belarus” in 2007.

PHOTO: HANNA ZELENKO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

sent dozens of its “delegates” to represent Belarus at the World Festival of Youth and Students, a Soviet legacy youth festival organized in Sochi, Russia, and announced that it was planning to finalize collaboration agreements with Kazakhstan, Polish and Russian student labor brigades,⁶ thus offering new opportunities for young Belarusians to work abroad during the summer. In 2019, the BRYU sent a delegation to a Chinese youth innovation event,⁷ while 2021 witnessed the revitalization of the BRYU’s activities with its fellow Komsomol legacy organization in Russia, the Russian Youth Union.⁸

Despite the empirical evidence of the BRYU’s international agenda, scholarly literature pertaining to the activities of the BRYU and its predecessors is limited to the study of the association’s role in the domestic politics of authoritarian rule.⁹ The aim of this article is to address this gap by mapping and explaining the international dimension of the BRYU’s activities. It asks how the association’s international activities are framed in official documents, how they look in practice and what explains these patterns. The study is primarily based on the BRYU’s international activities during the period of “soft Belarusianization” (2014–2020),¹⁰ since it is primarily based on the qualitative data from the author’s previous research on the BRYU.¹¹ However, when relevant, the article also points to developments in the

1990s, after the wave of mass protests in 2020, and since the launch of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, in which Belarus has acted as a co-aggressor. Primary data from the author’s ethnographic field notes and semi-structured interviews with BRYU representatives¹² are complemented with publicly available sources, mainly the BRYU’s official reports and media articles.

THE ARTICLE FINDS that cooperation with Russia covers the lion’s share of the BRYU’s work abroad. Collaborative activities with Russian youth groups have long traditions and they have been further strengthened in the aftermath of the 2020 political crisis, at least in principle. In contrast, the BRYU’s attempts to forge links with European youth organizations, especially during the period of a thaw in Belarusian-Western relations, have been systematically blocked by the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, even before 2020. Even though it was formally closed by the Lukashenka government in 2006, RADA continued to act as the primary representative of Belarusian youth for Europeans in the 2000s and 2010s. Meanwhile, the BRYU’s collaboration with the Communist Youth League of China and the multilateral Youth Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization remain limited. This is somewhat surprising, given that Lukashenka’s strengthening collaboration with Asia’s non-democratic govern-

ments could well have been reflected in new partnerships in the youth sphere, monopolized by the BRYU.

THIS ARTICLE SUGGESTS that in comparison to the BRYU's domestic activities, covered in the secondary literature, the youth league's participation in international affairs is limited. This contrast is puzzling since a growing number of young people are internationally connected¹³ and there is evidence of students' interest in various forms of international activities¹⁴ and receiving education abroad in general.¹⁵ According to one survey conducted in the six largest cities of Belarus in 2018, almost 80% of young people had already been abroad, while 59% hoped to leave Belarus altogether. Every fifth respondent mentioned the higher quality of education as their motivation for moving abroad.¹⁶ Another survey from 2019 found that out of those young Belarusians who had been abroad in the last year ("less than half" of all respondents), over 20% had been to Russia and/or the EU, while 18% had visited Ukraine.¹⁷ There is evidence that suggests that the number of young Belarusians hoping to emigrate has only grown since the "Revolution without a Name" in 2020 and the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.¹⁸

Given its hegemonic status in the youth sphere, the BRYU is in a good position to cater for young people's desire to participate in various projects that connect them with the outside world, which it also claims to do, arguably in an attempt to improve the image of the organization among both its members and non-members and thus increase the level of both active and passive membership.¹⁹ However, the organization's international activities appear to be very underdeveloped. To explain this controversy, the article points to the BRYU's structural subservience to President Lukashenka. It argues that the organization's vertical accountability structure and the prevalence of domestic political challenges is not compatible with an outward-looking agenda. While this was the case even before the 2020 crisis, the mass protests that year and Belarus' participation in Russia's aggression against Ukraine from 2022 onward has contributed to a further inward turning of the youth league.

Youth GONGOs in authoritarian states

Scholars of youth policy have argued that in principle, policymakers around the world have a vested interest in furthering young people's acceptance and reproduction of the existing or desired political order.²⁰ This is because throughout history, young people have mobilized to challenge the political status quo.²¹ As McGlinchey notes, youth movements are typically portrayed in both the media and in social science literature as drivers of *liberal* political reform.²² The assumption of young people "naturally" attuned to liberalism is perhaps why authoritarian regimes around the world are particularly preoccupied with

young people and their political potential. Although there has been a significant rise in the number of authoritarian states in the last decade or so, liberal democracy remains the norm of legitimate governance in the 21st century.²³ The celebration of independent NGOs has been countered by authoritarian regimes by both clamping down on international activism and by establishing associations that look like NGOs but are in fact established and/or administered by authoritarian policymakers.²⁴

If government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) are a phenomenon of the 21st century, administered mass organizations (AMOs) are rooted in the 20th century. In his study of AMOs, "mass civilian organization[s] created and managed by a political regime to implement public policy"²⁵, Gregory Kasza notes that such organizations can organize people by age, gender, workplace, industry, place of residence, or some combination of these criteria.²⁶ He argues that AMOs organized by age – like the contemporary BRYU – were truly prevalent in the 20th century, listing *thirty* youth AMOs that have existed around the world between 1918 and 1991.²⁷ In the Soviet Union, the task of implementing the state's youth policy was given to the

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All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League, also known as the *Komsomol*. In the Belarusian Soviet Republic, youth policy was administered by the local *Komsomol* branch.

WORKS ON YOUTH AMOS and youth GONGOs primarily focus on the organizations' role in domestic politics. According to Kasza, the Soviet youth AMO, the *Komsomol*, was used to mobilize labor for public projects.²⁸ Sokolov notes that physical labor was but one aspect of the "communist upbringing" that the *Komsomol* was tasked with instilling in the youth.²⁹ The tasks of the contemporary Communist Youth League of China, on the other hand, have been summarized as indoctrination, mobilization and preparing to join the Party.³⁰ The aim of Uzbekistan's now restructured pro-presidential youth movement *Kamalot* was arguably to ensure youth support for President Islam Karimov.³¹ Writing about the BRYU, Stephen G. Hall argued that the association had two purposes, both linked to the strengthening of the Lukashenka government: "to instill a sense of a regime-approved Belarusian patriotism into young people" and to support the regime in its attempt to undermine democratic influences.³²

The only strand of literature in which the international agenda of youth GONGOs is explicitly elaborated is in works about the infamous Russian pro-regime youth movement *Nashi* (2000–2012). Writing in hindsight, Yapici argues that *Nashi* had four functions.³³ Three of its functions were domestic ones, linked to ensuring regime survival and reproduction. First, it aimed to counter liberal youth mobilization; second, it sought to diminish the socio-economic repercussions of the 2004 neoliberal reforms; and third, it functioned as a "platform of nepotistic practices to guarantee the loyalty of the youth". As well as these



Official BRYU posters targeting young Belarusians, featuring logos of the association's prominent projects and its slogan "Youth Will Build the Motherland's Future!".

three domestic factors, *Nashi* was designed to be a "dynamic foreign policy actor implementing the decisions taken by Kremlin". Indeed, the role of *Nashi* in the Estonian Bronze statue Crisis of 2007–2008 was perhaps the most significant example of the movement's foreign policy agenda.³⁴ In contrast, the non-conflictual and rather more mundane international activities of *Nashi* – or any other youth GONGO to my knowledge – have not yet been subject to scholarly analysis. This is the gap that this article aims to address with the example of the contemporary Belarusian youth GONGO, which also happens to be an AMO, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union.

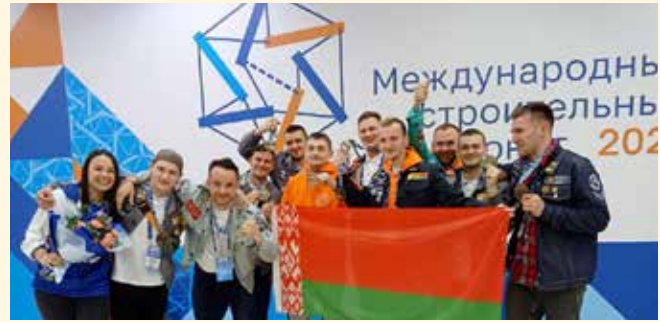
The BRYU's inverted hierarchy and mission among youth

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU, sometimes abbreviated as *BRSM* from the Russian *Belorusskii soiuz molo-dezhi* or Belarusian *Belaruskii respublikanski saizuz moladzhi*) is a government-supported and government-supporting mass membership youth league, not just a GONGO (officially, the BRYU is a "public association", *hramadskaie ab'iadnennie* in Belarusian), but also a classic AMO, according to Kasza's definition.³⁵ It was established in 2002 through a merger between the Belarusian Komsomol legacy organization, the Belarusian Youth Union, and the pro-presidential mass membership "public" association, the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union. In the early 2000s, it became a ubiquitous organization, present in every school

and institute of higher education, and structured according to a Leninist style territorial-industrial hierarchy.³⁶ The association is headed by the First Secretary of the Central Committee, who manages its activities and has the right to hire and fire BRYU employees.³⁷ The first secretary – and the BRYU leadership collectively – are subject to the supervision and evaluation of the Lukashenka administration. The BRYU's support of Lukashenka is downplayed at the grassroots level, arguably in order to attract more members to the league's activities,³⁸ but it has never been explicitly challenged. In August 2021, the BRYU's newly elected leader Alyaksandr Luk'ianov declared that the association would remain loyal to Lukashenka.³⁹ This loyalty is guaranteed by the association's financial dependence on the state, which pays for its 500 employees.

THE SUBSERVIENCE OF the BRYU leadership to Lukashenka is in contrast to its official role as the representatives of the young rank and file in the corridors of power. What's more, the political affiliation of the BRYU to Lukashenka complicates the organization's quest for enrolling the majority of young Belarusians to its ranks⁴⁰ which, in turn, is instrumental for the "formation of a young generation that would form the core of [Belarus's] work-loving, educated and healthy nation"⁴¹. As a result, enrolment in the BRYU takes place in a "voluntary-obligatory" manner, with the vast majority of members joining the organization at school (sometimes unconsciously) having been encouraged by their teachers. The level of BRYU membership is also high at universities, given that its members have a greater chance to be accepted to studies and receive a room in the university dormitory.⁴² This characterizes youth AMOs across the world.⁴³

The dubious enrolment practices of the BRYU create a number of challenges. Members who did not join of their own free will are reluctant to pay their membership fees and are unwilling to participate in the youth league's activities.⁴⁴ In order to improve the organization's tarnished image among its rank and file, Lukashenka has repeatedly ordered the youth league to engage in "real acts". Under the leadership of the BRYU's former first secretary, Dmitrii Voroniuk (2018–2021), there was



Participants and organizers of BRYU events at the Russian-Belarusian University in Mahileu, Eastern Belarus.

indeed a genuine attempt to give young BRYU members more freedom to establish their agenda.⁴⁵ After all, most contemporary authoritarian states have shifted from the unitary mass membership AMO model to a more pluralistic model comprising various government-affiliated youth groups that target different sub-groups of children and young adults.⁴⁶ Such an evolution has not formally taken place in Belarus, but within a unitary and centralized BRYU there was an attempt to create various “movements” or “projects” in the association during the period of “soft Belarusianization”.⁴⁷

IN THIS ARTICLE, I suggest that the BRYU’s international agenda is actually an extension of its domestic agenda. Strengthening its international activities was presumably one of its methods of achieving a larger and more active pool of members (which would keep the Lukashenka administration satisfied), given that offering opportunities for international youth exchange would improve the BRYU’s attractiveness to students and youth at large. Of course, for some young people, the stigma associated with the BRYU would be so great that they would not be attracted to its work, even if it could offer them something they were interested in. However, in my previous research I have argued that the thinking in the BRYU seemed to be that its bad reputation was only based on prejudice, not reality.⁴⁸

What’s more, given that there is reason to believe that reaping the benefits of the “voluntary-obligatory” BRYU membership was less stigmatized in the period of the “soft Belarusianization” than since the summer of 2020,⁴⁹ it seems plausible that the BRYU could indeed have increased its attractiveness to young people by offering its members a chance to engage in some kind

of international activity. In one electoral conference of a BRYU university committee, one of the few questions from the attending members was whether the committee secretary was planning to strengthen the international activities of the branch, suggesting that it would be favorably viewed by the rank and file.⁵⁰

In the next sections, I will address the research questions posed in the beginning of the article by analyzing whether the BRYU seeks to offer opportunities for international travel, work and study for its members and how its proclaimed “multi-vector international youth collaboration” works in practice. One of the findings of the study on which this article is based was that there were major differences in the BRYU’s international collaboration with actors in different parts of the world. Thus, the analytical part of the article is divided into three sections that discuss the different geographical vectors of the BRYU’s “multi-vector” collaboration.

Cooperation with actors in Russia

Out of the many “vectors” of the BRYU’s alleged cooperation, Russia has the overwhelmingly strongest role. Based on the diverse data analyzed in the framework of this article, most of the BRYU’s international activities are directed towards cooperation with actors in Russia. What’s more, these activities also seem to involve the greatest number of BRYU members.⁵¹ The acceleration of Belarus’ integration with Russia after the mass protests in 2020 has also been reflected in the youth sphere by the reinvigoration of the Russian-Belarusian Youth Union (Rus. *Rossiiskobelorusskii soyuz molodezhi*). The association, established in 2000 in an attempt to save the Belarusian Youth Union from a forced merger with the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, was to

be “rebooted and activated” to develop the interactions of young people in the Belarusian-Russian union state and beyond.⁵² At present, it is still too early to tell whether the organization’s reinvigoration has brought about any real change.

The BRYU’s close connections with Russian youth groups are rooted in both the shared Soviet past and Lukashenka’s political orientation towards Russia. Some collaborative activities, such as the summer camp “Be-La-Rus” on the border of Belarus, Latvia and Russia, have been organized annually since 1992. The summer camp is held in a symbolic location: the Kurgan of Friendship memorial site, which was built in 1959 to commemorate the cooperation of Soviet partisans of the three countries. According to the official plans for the 2021 camp, 500 people were expected to participate in the event. 120 of them would be sent by the BRYU, 120 by the Russian Union of Youth, 60 by the Latvian Komsomol legacy organization “Union of Progressive Youth of Latvia”, while 50 places were reserved for guests, such as former youth activists.⁵³

SINCE THE COLLAPSE of the Soviet Union, a similar youth camp called “Friendship” has also been organized on the Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian border by the three Komsomol legacy organizations. According to the BRYU, the event aims to “develop friendly relations among the youth of the Slavic republics, promote a healthy lifestyle, develop young people’s leadership and management skills, popularize national cultures and improve the work carried out by youth associations”⁵⁴. In 2013, the last year in which the Ukrainians participated, up to 2000 people attended the event. Based on publicly available sources, it was the largest Friendship camp ever organized. The number of participants had reportedly dropped to 250 in 2015 and 300 in 2018.⁵⁵

At the same time, the bilateral Russian-Belarusian Youth Forum, organized annually since 2013 by the BRYU and the government-affiliated National Council of Youth and Children’s associations in Russia has been institutionalized. While the forum has a limited scope since it is only attended by a few dozen individuals working in leadership positions in youth organizations in the two countries, it is possible that interaction between the government-affiliated youth group leaders in the two countries would result in bilateral cooperation among the organizations’ rank and file. Moreover, some bilateral youth events, such as the high-brow Belarusian-Russian culture festival “Youth for the Union State”, is not organized by the BRYU but by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union State.

As well as the bilateral collaboration, the BRYU participates, without exception, in all Russia-led international youth initiatives. In 2017, the Belarusian “delegation” to the World Festival of Youth and Students, organized in Sochi, comprised 300 representatives, many of whom were BRYU officials. The BRYU has also signed official partnership agreements with Russian

state and non-state actors in the youth sphere. In addition to the Russian Youth Union, the list includes actors such as the Youth Affairs Committee of the Astrakhan region and the government-affiliated association “Russian Student Labor Brigade.”⁵⁶ The agreement with the Russian Student Labor Brigade is noteworthy since it has practical implications at the grassroots level. As a result of Lukashenka’s orders, the Soviet tradition of summer labor brigades has been resurrected in Belarus quite successfully, with over 20 000 young people working in jobs organized by the BRYU every summer. In 2018, it was reported that 428 young people, making up 18 brigades, worked in the BRYU’s student labor brigades abroad, “mostly in Russia”.⁵⁷ Even though the BRYU’s labor brigades have been subject to a lot of criticism because of the poor working conditions and corruption, it is one of the few activities organized by the BRYU in which young people participate on a truly voluntary basis since it gives young people the opportunity to spend some time away from home and earn some money.⁵⁸

Cooperation with actors in Europe and the West at large

In the 1990s, when government repression towards Belarus’s nascent civil society had not yet reached its zenith, the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, the umbrella organization of independent non-governmental organizations working in the youth sphere, was working hard to establish formal collaboration with Western youth associations, such as the European Youth Forum. RADA was established in 1992 and registered in 1997. As it had criticized the Lukashenka administration, in 2006 it was shut down by a court ruling. Its government-organized replacement, the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations (BCYO), was established in 2003. According to Anna Dapshevichyute, RADA’s current General Secretary, the BCYO was founded due to a conflict between RADA and the BRYU. In a recent interview, she argues that the BRYU was supposed to join RADA, but its membership application was declined “because it did not meet the criteria for transparency and democratic internal processes”⁵⁹.

The BCYO – currently an umbrella association for 20 government-affiliated youth organizations – failed to replace RADA as the official representative organ of Belarusian youth in the West. However, it seems to have only ever existed on paper, while its biggest member – the BRYU – sought to establish ties with youth associations in the West. According to Dapshevichyute, from 2006 onwards, the BRYU was repeatedly trying to present itself as the representative of Belarusian youth. However, she maintains that these attempts were futile: “International organizations are well aware of who really represents the youth of Belarus. We [RADA] have never had any problems showing the real picture of the Belarusian youth sector on the global level”.⁶⁰ It is likely that once Western youth associa-

“THE BRYU HAS ALSO SIGNED OFFICIAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS WITH RUSSIAN STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE YOUTH SPHERE.”

tions became aware of the BRYU's dubious "voluntary-compulsory" membership recruitment practices and its subservience to the Lukashenka administration, a decision was made to not include the BRYU in projects administered in the West.

The BRYU's attempt to engage with Western actors has therefore been effectively blocked by RADA. For example, in 2013, the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, Androulla Vassiliou, declared that funds from the European Commission for transnational cooperation projects in Belarus will not be allocated "to structures like the Belarusian Republican Youth Union."⁶¹ The statement came after the BRYU had claimed to have launched a collaboration with the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum. A few months later, the then leader of the BRYU, Igor' Buzovskii, declared that it would be desirable for Belarusian labor brigades to have the chance to work in the European Union. He lamented that due to the EU's visa and labor regulations, young people could not "see Europe and earn some money in Poland picking strawberries".⁶² Buzovskii's statement suggests an awareness of young people's preference to work and travel in the West rather than the East.

While the BRYU has been eager to establish some cooperation with Western actors, the ties to the West seem to have remained weak even during the latest period of rapprochement between the Lukashenka government and the European Union from 2014 onwards. The plan to send BRYU members to work in Poland did materialize in 2017, when over 80 Belarusians were reportedly working in the Polish agriculture and construction sector.⁶³ In 2018, the BRYU reported that some 500 young people would work in a total of six regions of Poland, mainly in the agriculture sector. What's more, the BRYU's PR team reported that not only did the labor brigades pick fruit, they also got to know Polish youth by playing volleyball and football and organizing quizzes.⁶⁴ While it is hard to say what these organized leisure activities looked like in practice, the way the BRYU described them suggests an attempt to demonstrate the association's benefits to its members.

APART FROM THE LABOR BRIGADES, there is evidence that the BRYU has participated in some European events from 2018 onwards, but this participation has been limited in that that it only involved a few dozen BRYU members, primarily those in the association's leading positions. For example, in 2019, the BRYU was involved in *Enter! Youth Week*, organized by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe. Furthermore, in early 2020 the BRYU was authorized to issue the European Youth Card in Belarus. Had there been no mass protests and subsequent intensification of regime repression in the late summer of 2020, it is likely that the BRYU's cooperation with the West would only have strengthened. Nonetheless, the BRYU's role in supporting Lukashenka during the crisis effectively halted all forms of collaboration.

"AT PRESENT, SIX BELARUSIAN INSTITUTES OF HIGHER EDUCATION HOST CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES."

China and beyond

Given that Belarus shares a border with both Russia and the European Union and, until recently, Lukashenka's administration has sought to create an image of balance between these two powers, it is natural that the Belarusian Republican Youth Union has sought to develop "multi-vector international youth collaboration" primarily in the direction of Europe and Russia. However, given the growing importance of China for Lukashenka's foreign policy following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Beijing's desire to mark its presence in (Eastern) Europe,⁶⁵ it could be assumed that the BRYU would like to deepen its cooperation with the All-China Youth Federation, the national umbrella organization for Chinese youth groups, as well as with the party-led Communist Youth League of China.

THE BRYU DOES INDEED have a cooperation agreement with the All-China Youth Federation, which was signed in 2011. According to the BRYU, the aim of the cooperation agreement is to expand collaboration by exchanging know-how in the spheres of youth entrepreneurship, ideological education and patriotic upbringing.⁶⁶ Based on available media accounts and my interviews with BRYU officials⁶⁷, cooperation primarily takes place on the level of organizational leadership, with the BRYU and the Lukashenka administration inviting Chinese youth policy officials to visit Belarus and the BRYU leadership in turn paying visits to China. Based on the data analyzed in this article, a deeper cooperation between the organizations would appear to be missing,

although in 2018, the Belarusian news agency BelTA reported on the preparations of a planned new annual event called the Forum of Belarusian and Chinese Youth.⁶⁸

To an extent, the BRYU's cooperation with Chinese youth groups seems to take place through the youth policy structures of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Since Belarus is not (yet) a member of the SCO, the BRYU is not eligible to join the SCO Youth Council. Yet it has a partner status, which enables it to participate in the SCO's youth policy activities, such as the SCO Young Leaders' Forum.⁶⁹ The SCO is a comfortable partner for the BRYU, given that the organization is not committed to democratic principles. The BRYU's engagement with the SCO Youth Council and its national member organizations, some of with whom the BRYU also has bilateral collaboration agreements⁷⁰, is limited in the sense that it only involves the BRYU's leadership, not the rank and file.

In contrast to the superficial level of interaction between the BRYU and its Chinese counterparts, the cooperation between the Chinese government and Belarusian universities has been deepening at an accelerating pace. At present, six Belarusian institutes of higher education host Confucius Institutes.⁷¹ In May 2022, Ol'ga Kreinina, Head of the International Marketing and Ranking Office at the International Relations Directorate of the Belarusian State University, boasted that over the last

decade, collaboration with Chinese institutions had enabled 500 students to travel to China to participate in various kinds of programs and projects.⁷² In one academic article that cites impressive figures, Valerii Matsel' from the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus argues that Belarusian-Chinese cooperation in the field has intensified considerably since 2014.⁷³

Conclusions

This article has explored the international activities of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, Belarus' omnipresent government-organized youth organization, and identified differences in the quality of BRYU's collaboration with Russian, European and Chinese youth policy actors. Although no verifiable quantitative data is available that would allow a systematic comparison to be made between these three spaces, the article argues that the BRYU's "multi-vector international youth collaboration" is mostly exercised with Russian actors. The forging of ties with Western actors has been complicated, not by the BRYU's lack of interest, but rather by the organization's affiliation to the Lukashenka government, while the superficial nature of the BRYU's cooperation with Chinese and other Asian youth groups seems to be the result of a lack of genuine interest, at least on the BRYU's side. Before 2020, BRYU's officials would often voice their interest in strengthening multi-level collaboration with Western actors, whereas the cooperation with Chinese actors has remained at the level of abstraction. In contrast, as this article has demonstrated with its examples of joint events, collaboration with actors in Russia seems to come "naturally" to the BRYU.

In the introduction to this Special Issue, the editors suggest that both China and Russia promote student mobility and academic exchange in order to spread illiberal and authoritarian values and norms to the young generation. While the BRYU could arguably be seen as one potential channel for such authoritarian promotion in Belarus, the analysis of the BRYU's international activities from the period when Belarus was the most open to Russia, the West and China (i.e., 2014–2020), suggests that the omnipresent Belarusian youth league did not serve such a function. In general, the article has found that its activities abroad have been both limited and shallow. Apart from the labor brigades, all BRYU international activities have only involved top officials and individuals that have proved themselves in the BRYU's projects at home.

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE to make sense of the lack of development of the BRYU's international activities? The answer lies in the organization's subservience to Alyaksandr Lukashenka. From the very beginning of its existence, the BRYU's leadership has been accountable to Belarus' authoritarian leader rather than its rank and file. For Lukashenka, the BRYU's core mission has always been to strengthen authoritarianism at home. The task of strengthening transnational links, even with Russia, has never been a priority. Even though the BRYU's leadership has demonstrated a level of interest in developing its transnational ties with Western youth associations (in order to make it seem more at-

tractive to the Belarusian youth), its subservience to Lukashenka has prevented such collaboration from being established.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are no signs that the development of international activities is likely to occur in the near future. In the aftermath of the mass protest movement of 2020, the BRYU has only become more insular. Its new leadership has rejected the post-2014 policy of improving the league's popularity among the rank and file and has refocused on the authoritarian top-down model of patriotic education.⁷⁴ The BRYU's only reported project targeting the West since this time has been to advocate against the sanctions imposed on Lukashenka's regime.⁷⁵ Indeed, the room for collaboration with Western actors seems to have vanished, given the many international organizations that have stopped funding the projects of such state-supported organizations. ✖

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