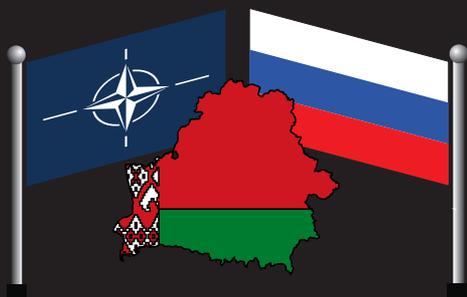


THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF BELARUS ON NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

GLEN E. HOWARD and MATTHEW CZEKAJ,
Editors



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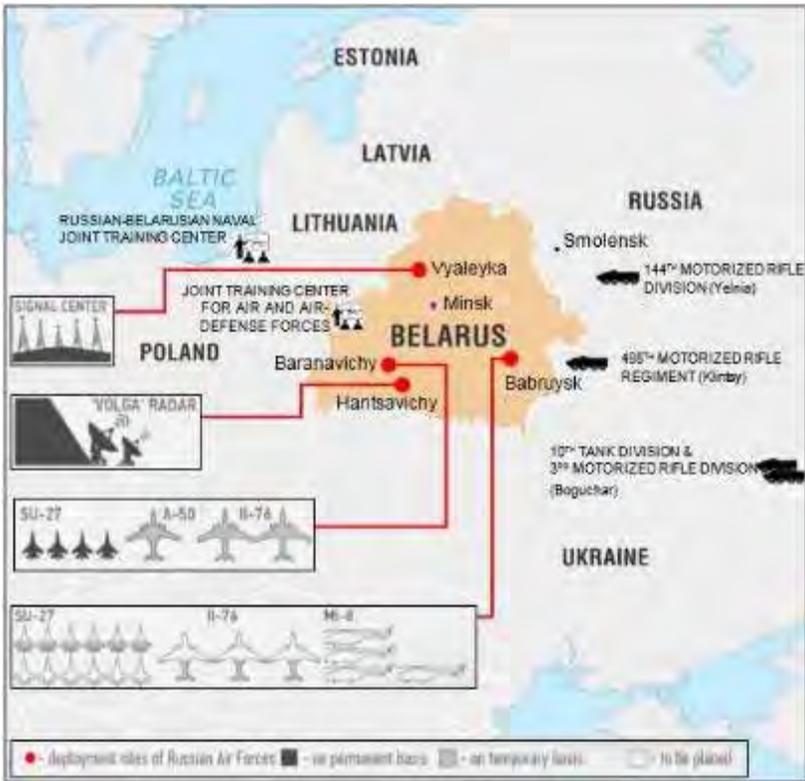
(Source: Wikwand.com)

To see high-quality versions of these maps and figures, please visit our website at: <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Belarus-on-NATOs-Flank-MS-Just-Maps-HD.pdf>.

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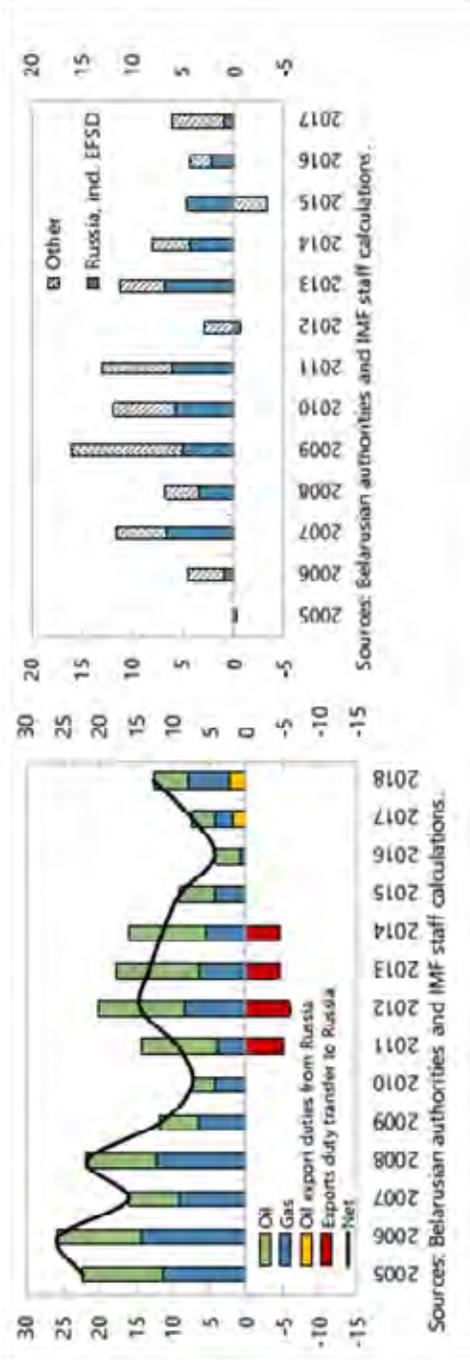


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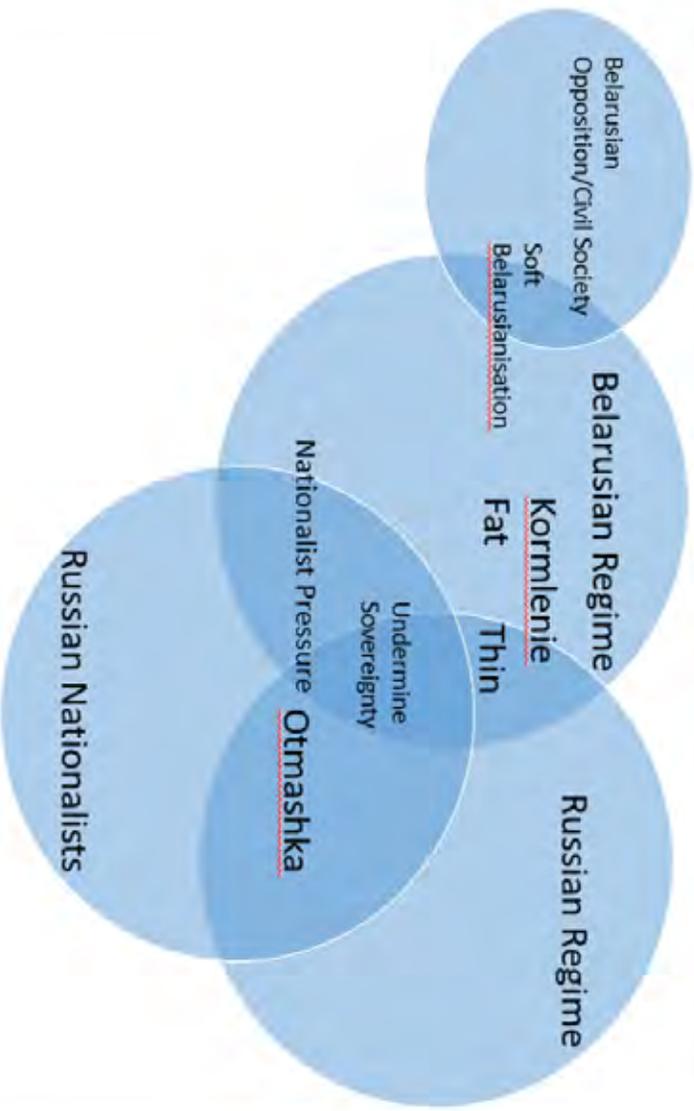
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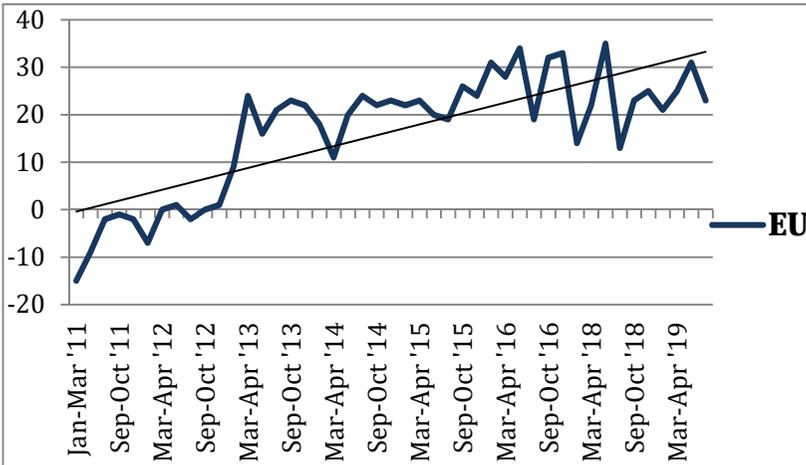


(Graph originally appeared on Belarus Digest)

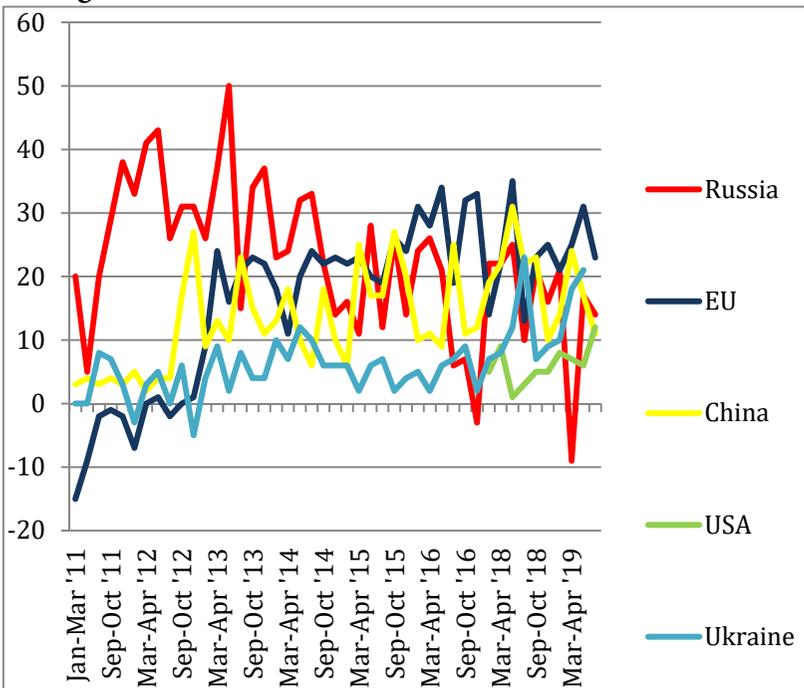
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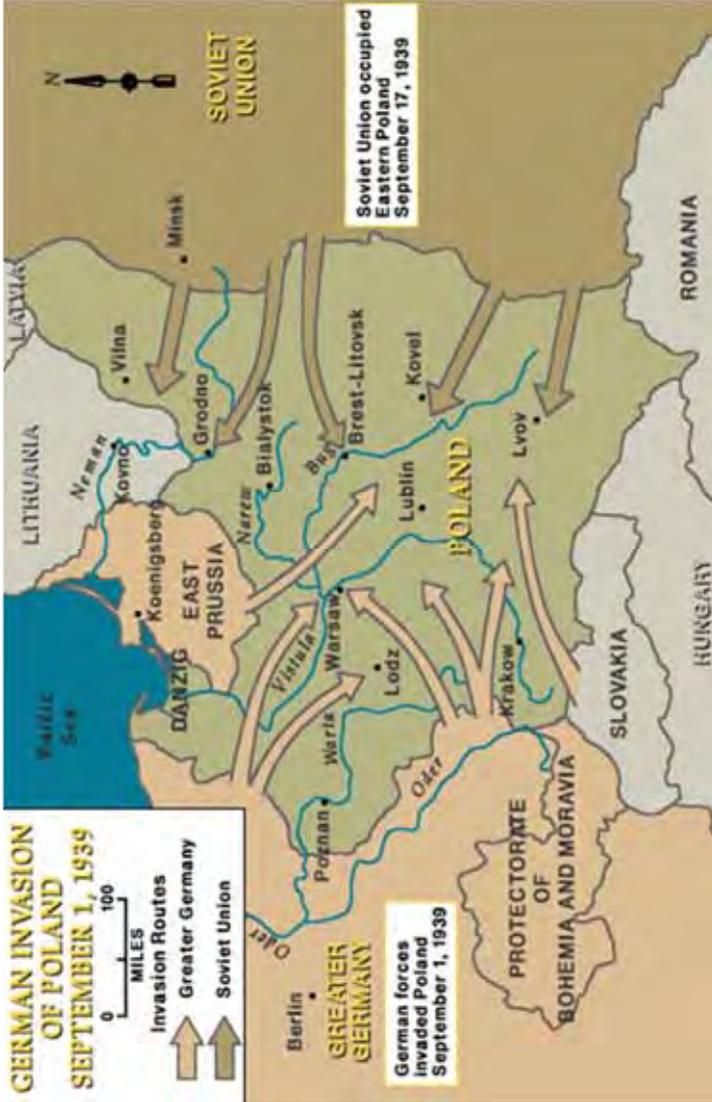
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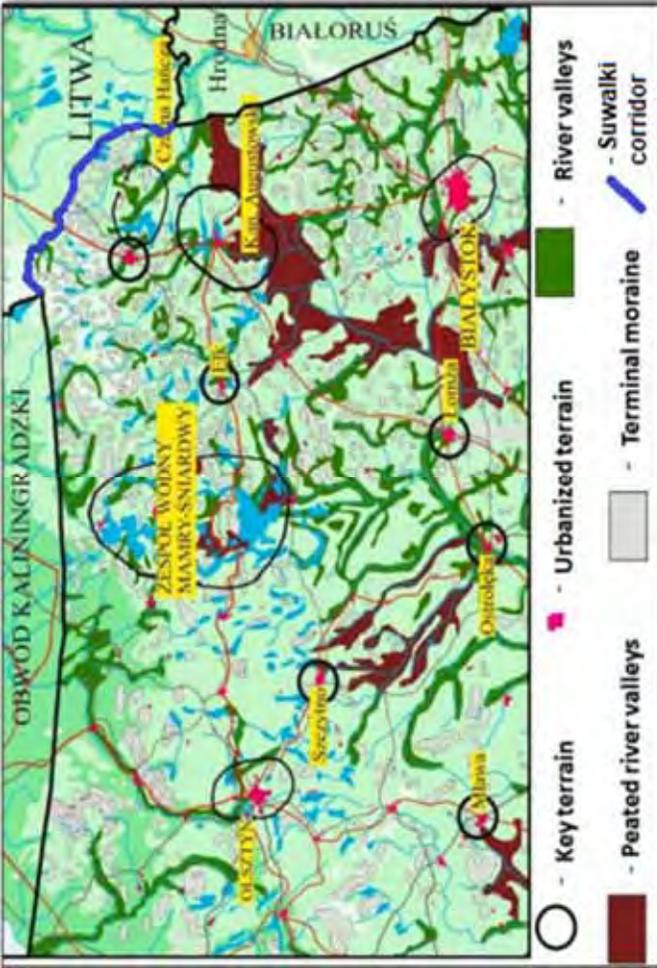


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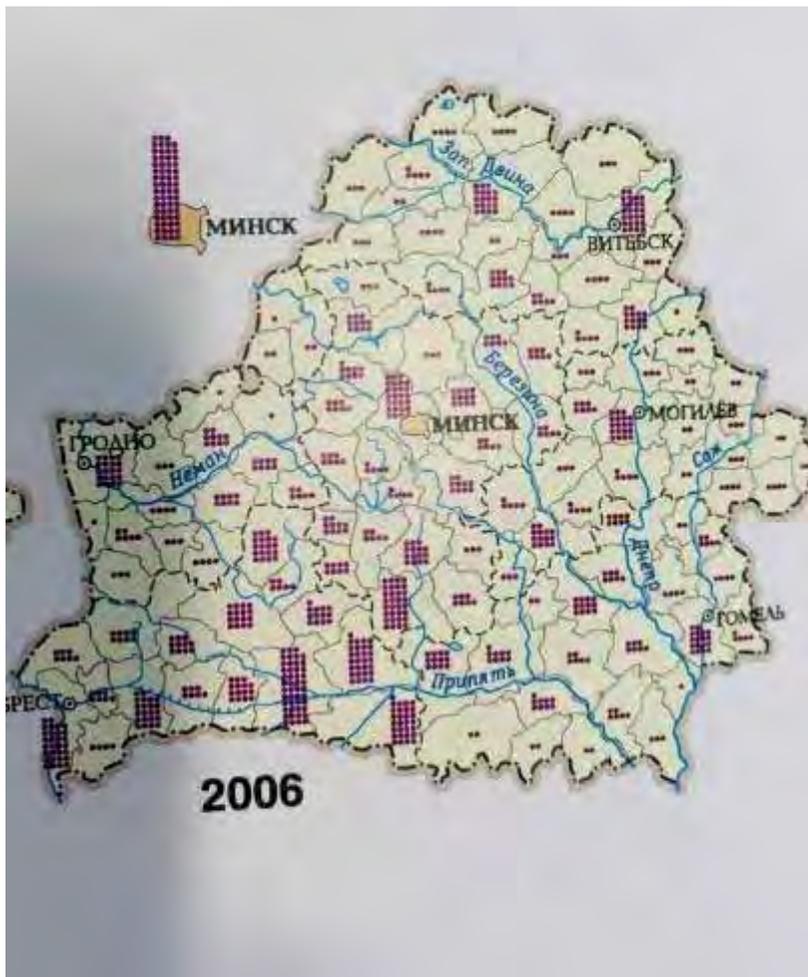
(one dot = one parish)



(Source: *Konfessii i kultovye sooruzheniya Belarusi*, Minsk: BGU 2007: 50.)

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Foreword

On behalf of Jamestown, I would like to welcome you to this collection of essays exploring the strategic puzzle that is Belarus, a country little known outside of a few experts on Europe's East. Increasingly, this unique and widely misunderstood state has risen to the attention of policymakers and planners in NATO who spend their days poring over maps, seeking to identify where the future fault lines of conflict along the Alliance's flanks will surface next. This should hardly come as a surprise. After all, when Samuel Huntington wrote his classic work *The Clash of Civilizations*, in 1996, he clearly placed Belarus astride a major civilizational fault line between the Western and Orthodox "worlds."

A quarter century later, Huntington's civilizational clash thesis has fallen out of favor with much of academia or been caricatured beyond recognition; and yet Belarus undeniably remains a frontier state of sorts, situated as it is centrally along NATO's eastern flank. This country's importance in the eyes of the West grew dramatically in the years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, as the United States and its allies awakened to the dangers posed by a revanchist Russia. Until then, Euro-Atlantic attention to Belarus had been mostly non-existent. And even when the country was on the agenda, Western policymakers and civil society activists primarily viewed Belarus through the prism of its authoritarian ruler, Alyaksandr Lukashenka. But by focusing on the personality, not the state, the West largely saw Belarus in a one-dimensional manner instead of noticing the subtle internal changes that were happening or fully recognizing the special geographic and historical characteristics that made this country so unique and strategically important. All neighboring nationalities—whether Poles, Lithuanians, Russians or others—have naturally carried their own biases and historical views of Belarus, which shaped their regional

perspectives. Yet few have adequately considered that Belarusians themselves possess their own distinct outlook and identity, shaped by three decades of uneasy coexistence with their respective neighbors.

In most Western capitals, policies regarding Belarus still tend to be limited to addressing the latter's domestic autocracy and human rights abuses—much rightfully deserved. But these enduring formulations fail to advance a deeper understanding of this country within the regional balance of power. Notably, Belarus's geopolitical mooring could become upended overnight if the government in Minsk abandons its sovereignty and allows the establishment of permanent Russian military bases on its territory. The forward deployment of several Russian tank divisions on Belarus's western border would dramatically and directly affect the security of three NATO member states: Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. Why does this matter? In 1939, few Americans likely thought much about Czechoslovakia, but when Adolf Hitler invaded this strategically positioned Central European country, it awakened the world to the dangers of expansionist Nazi Germany and the threat it posed to the rest of Europe. Virtually overnight, Berlin shifted the regional balance of power, exposing the Polish Republic from the southwest and further facilitating the launch of Germany's invasion of Poland less than six months later, in September 1939. Today, NATO and its allies face a similar historic predicament in North Central Europe when it comes to Belarus. For better or worse, this elevates Belarus to a highly important piece on the East European chessboard.

Likewise, prior to 2014, no one in Europe paid much attention to the strategic Polish-Lithuanian border area, now commonly known as the Suwałki Gap (or Corridor, as some experts have referred to it). But in the years since, this thin strip of land, stretching from Russia's Kaliningrad exclave to Belarus, has become an important piece of geography due to wider recognition of its role as the only overland connection between Poland and the Baltic States. The Suwałki area's relative significance approaches—though for different reasons—the

level of importance for decades accorded to the infamous Fulda Gap in Germany, which was expected to serve as a narrow corridor for invading Soviet tank divisions during the Cold War. First identified by former Commanding General US Army Europe Benjamin Hodges, shortly after the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, Suwałki entered our strategic lexicon as part of a new geographic understanding and concern regarding Russia's threat to NATO's Baltic flank. Situated next door to Suwałki, Belarus thus occupies a critically strategic role as a potential landward threat to NATO's communications jugular—a possible bridgehead from which Russian forces could separate the three Baltic republics from the rest of the Alliance.

Throughout its history, Belarus has held an important historical role as an invasion corridor across the plains of North Central Europe. Located along three strategic axes—the Baltics, Poland and Ukraine—the prime location of Belarus in this environment was long overlooked by post-Cold War Western planners, much in the way Belgium was ignored by many European powers on the eve of World War I. Belgium and Belarus may be as different from one another as night and day, but not in terms of strategic geography. The strategic significance of Belgium, thanks to German military strategist Helmuth Von Moltke, virtually changed overnight when he devised a plan for defeating France in the opening stages of World War I by first invading this tiny kingdom. A handful of countries in Europe can be compared to Belgium in terms of aspiring to hold a neutral status despite their location, and Belarus is certainly one of them. What the two countries symbolize is that small states strategically located often become part of someone else's imperial plans. Belgium endured immense suffering through two world wars but ultimately escaped its security dilemma by joining NATO. Like Belgium, Belarus endured the First and Second World Wars, suffering immensely in the latter by losing one-third of its population. In 1991, Belarus found itself independent once again but suddenly wedged between East and West, with eventual NATO members Poland and Lithuania on one side, and

a briefly chastened but ultimately revanchist neo-imperial Russia on the other.

So what makes Belarus unique strategically in the history of Europe's East? The first issue that comes to mind is the location of the "Smolensk Gate" and the role it has played as an overland invasion corridor. Situated across the modern-day Belarusian-Russian border, between the Dnepr and Dvina rivers, it has repeatedly acted as a funnel for invading armies moving eastward or westward. As a result, Belarusian lands, which fan out from the western "entrance" of the Smolensk Gate, played a central role in various invasion strategies by its larger neighbors since the 15th century. Napoleon used Belarus as a central route in his 1812 invasion of Russia, passing through the narrow Smolensk Gate on the way to attacking Moscow. From the opposite side, the Smolensk Gate has repeatedly served as an eastward invasion highway to both Warsaw and Berlin. By the same token, Belarusian lands proved crucial to Napoleon's miraculous "Great Escape" in the crossing of the Berezina River during the devastating winter of November 1812, as part of the hasty retreat of the *Grande Armée* from Russia. Napoleon, in one of his feats of ingenuity in that campaign, managed to preserve the remnants of his force, including the bulk of his officer corps, by crossing the Berezina so that his army could live to fight another day.

Like Afghanistan, throughout its history Belarus also has been the graveyard of invading armies, its numerous swamps having repeatedly bogged down invaders. It served as the geographic backdrop to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's famous novel, *August 1914*, which describes the opening stages of the First World War that culminated in the colossal Russian defeat at Tannenberg on August 30, 1914. Part of this pivotal battle was fought in modern-day Belarus, in the areas around Lake Narach. World War I cemeteries adorn its shoreline, and former trench lines can be found by tourists exploring the Belarusian lake. Thirty years later, Belarus became a graveyard for German armies when Stalin destroyed Hitler's Army Group Center in

Belarus in 1944 as part of *Operation Bagration*—a defeat some have suggested was greater than the one in Stalingrad.

A prisoner of geography, Belarus is always somehow caught in the middle. Some longtime experts like Vladimir Socor believe it is a mere miracle of history that Belarus was created as a nation-state in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, becoming a natural buffer between Poland and Russia. Belarus's brief episode of quasi-independence in 1918 ended before it could develop any strong sense of national state identity; but in the three decades of its existence following the breakup of the Soviet empire, it has steadily gained a sense of national identity, despite living in the shadow of Russia. Indeed, its closeness with Russia in language and culture as well as their shared Soviet history notwithstanding, Belarus does aspire to a level of sovereignty in the way Austria has ultimately managed to survive (and thrive) in the shadow of a united Germany.

Belarus in many ways has a split identity. On the one hand, it feels a sense of shared heritage of having been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the 15th and 16th centuries, whose historical legacy includes the small Polish minority that still resides on the western territories of modern-day Belarus. But on the other hand, that westward affinity is countered by the far more numerous Russian-leaning population in its eastern half—which has only recently begun rediscovering the linguistic roots of the long-neglected Belarusian language. Following centuries of existence inside Russian imperial structures (albeit less enduringly for western Belarusian lands), close economic and cultural links with Russia naturally persist. That reality, combined with Belarusians' exposure to a dominant and pervasive Russian information sphere, make the Moscow-leaning dimension almost inescapable for tiny Belarus. And yet, the allure of trade opportunities with neighboring Poland along with access to the Baltic ports of Klaipeda and Riga have given Belarus a western orientation as well that drives it toward Europe.

Making sense of this is, of course, a dilemma for those Western policymakers eager to punish Belarus for not being Western enough or like its counterparts in the Baltics. But while officials in Brussels and Washington demand that Belarus abide by democratic rule of law norms, Moscow mandates that Minsk be a loyal and subservient ally to Russia. For this reason, Minsk finds itself pivoting back and forth, falling short of the expectations of both the West and Moscow. And relatedly, Belarus zig-zags between periods of domestic instability, internal crackdowns, and repression only to resurface afterward to renew some form of rapprochement with the West. This pattern could be observed in 1999, when the Russia-Belarus Union Treaty was about to be signed, as well as in March 2006 and, perhaps most famously, in the aftermath of the post-election crackdown in December 2010. In each case, Belarus repeated its tendency to veer inward only to eventually—sometimes years later—come out of this isolation eager to restore its familiar pattern of multi-vectorism. This has been a notable constant of Belarus's one-man rule under Lukashenka, oscillating back and forth between Europe and the Kremlin. Understandably, due to its East Slavic and overwhelmingly Russophone population, Belarus has long-rooted ties with Moscow that make it nigh impossible to escape Russian cultural influence. Yet it remains a sovereign nation that feels it simultaneously belongs to the Western and Slavic worlds, similar to its Balkan cousin Serbia.

Belarus watched up close Russia's invasion of Ukrainian Donbas and annexation of Crimea in 2014, and it understands well the imperial pretensions of its massive eastern neighbor. But unlike the Poles, Lithuanians or Ukrainians, Belarusians do not wear their anti-Russian sentiments on their sleeves. Geography shapes their temperament in ways that compel Belarus to be a neutral but loyal buffer state. This seeming contradiction makes Belarus an integral part of the regional contested balance of power, forcing it to continually try to withstand repeated Russian requests for permanent military bases that the Kremlin views as the ultimate sign of allegiance.

If there is one crucial takeaway for Western policymakers from reading this book, it is that understanding Belarus requires a multi-dimensional approach that can grasp all the important challenges it faces as a country. Multi-vectorism has been one of the few constants in Belarus's foreign policy precisely because it has allowed this country to navigate between stormy and calm periods in relations with the West. It remains a core component of Belarusian national security, embedded into its constitution along with the notion of neutrality—regardless of how contradictory this may sound to Western observers who point out Minsk's treaty obligations under the Belarus-Russia Union State or Collective Security Treaty Organization without understanding its nuanced attitudes toward both.

When assessing the troubling situation since the protests and bloody crackdowns following the August 9, 2020, Belarusian presidential election, it remains to be seen whether multi-vectorism will ultimately survive Minsk's current sharp pivot back to Russia's embrace amid growing international isolation. But it is important to recognize that throughout its more than quarter of a century of independence, Belarus has repeatedly experienced this same pattern of internal repressions, spoiled rapprochements with the West and retreats into closer relations with Moscow, only to eventually pivot back to the West to stave off economic collapse all while avoiding any complete break in its ties with Russia. And as unprecedented in their scope as the current circumstances may appear in the moment, the unchanged long-term trends and geopolitical realities that predate August 2020 all suggest that, eventually, this too shall pass.

What Is the Goal of This Volume of Essays?

The purpose of this collection of analyses is to capture the various intriguing, but generally under-examined, strategic dimensions and complexities that define Belarus today. Our goal is to move beyond the oft-repeated phrase “Last Dictator of Europe” and peer beneath such dismissive clichés to explore the strategic undercurrents

influencing this poorly understood country. By the same token, the aim of this volume is not to analyze the brutal crackdown that occurred in Belarus following the events of August 9, 2020, nor is the purpose to scrutinize the state of the Belarusian opposition movement and its future. Instead, this collection of essays is designed to identify more enduring, long-term trends and, thus, help readers conceptualize whether Belarus will internally transform, edge closer to Russia, or simply continue to adhere to the multi-vectorism that has permitted Minsk to balance between East and West for three decades. To explore these various key dimensions of Belarus, we have broken down the topics of this volume into the following themes:

- The growing importance of Belarus on NATO's Baltic flank;
- De facto non-alignment as an optimal foreign policy model for Belarus;
- Belarus's split identity and the tug of war for Belarusians' collective memory;
- The perennial debate among Western policy analysts about the imminent union of Russia and Belarus;
- Belarus's role in East European energy geopolitics;
- Belarus's contribution to security and stability in Central and Eastern Europe;
- Belarus and the European Union and where another rapprochement might lead;
- Belarusian relations with the Baltic States;
- The geopolitical link between the Baltic and Black seas and the role of the planned E40 waterway;
- The role of Belarus as a pivot of Poland's grand strategy;
- Belarus's place in Russian military planning in the Western strategic direction;
- The Belarus factor in Kaliningrad's security lifeline to Russia;
- The changing religious landscape of Belarus and its impact on Belarusian nationalism; and
- Four scenarios for Belarus in 2025–2030.

As explained above, understanding Belarus requires recognizing and observing the multi-dimensional chess game of constant moves and counter-moves by an embattled national leader who, nevertheless, remains a survivor after uninterrupted rule since 1994. With an almost paternalistic sense of responsibility for his country—however ruthless the methods or tangled the motives—President Lukashenka has striven to create a state where none existed before and established an element of state sovereignty above all things that has withstood assimilation and absorption by a larger neighbor. Whether or not Belarus succeeds in preserving its independence, only time will tell. Yet Jamestown's purpose in offering this collection of writings is to help policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic better comprehend the underlying components of Belarus's foreign and defense policies that may analytically point us in the right direction.

Glen E. Howard
Washington, DC
June 2021

The Growing Importance of Belarus on NATO's Baltic Flank

Glen E. Howard

(Originally published September 5, 2019)

Introduction

No country better stands to transform the strategic military balance in the Baltic Sea Region than Belarus. Wedged between Russia and America's NATO allies in northeastern Europe, Belarus until recently has not been considered in discussions about the North Atlantic Alliance's Baltic flank. On August 29, then-US National Security Advisor John Bolton became the highest-ranking Washington official to visit Belarus in the past 25 years. His trip marked a growing recognition in US policy circles of the increasing strategic importance of Belarus to European security in the Baltic and its vital role in the regional balance of power. Bolton's visit was immediately followed, several days later, by a trilateral meeting between the national security advisors of Belarus, Poland and Ukraine, in Warsaw, to discuss regional security. Prior to the US National Security Advisor's visit, Belarus made a major strategic decision to begin imports of oil from the United States to diversify its energy supplies as well as to work with Poland on reviving a dormant pipeline to import the (more costly) US oil. Belarus is rapidly emerging as a new interlocutor in regional security with the West at a time when Russian pressure is mounting for Minsk to remain eastwardly focused, especially as the United States creates new military basing arrangements in Poland. Currently, there are no permanently based Russian ground or armored formations inside Belarus, and any increased US military presence in

Poland will have important repercussion for Belarus in its ability to withstand sustained economic and military pressure from Russia.

Why Belarus Matters

A variety of strategic issues explain why Belarus matters to NATO and more specifically to the United States. First and foremost, Belarus is a strategically important neighbor of Ukraine due to its unique geography bordering Russia and several NATO member states in the Baltic. The Russian annexation of Crimea in February 2014 and the invasion of eastern Ukraine in August 2014 has dramatically altered how Belarus and Russia interact with one another. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has supported the Minsk peace process ceasefire, publicly criticized the Russian annexation of Crimea, and refused to recognize Crimea as part of Russia. Additionally, he has refused to recognize the Russian annexation of Georgia's provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Lukashenka has also publicly stated that Belarus will never become an invasion corridor threatening Ukraine. In fact, Lukashenka has gone further by indirectly voicing his support for Ukraine to join NATO, stating on June 1, 2018, that he would prefer Ukraine to join NATO rather than see it taken over by nationalism and turned into a "bandit state where everyone against everyone rages."¹ These modest steps reflect a level of defiance in how Minsk interacts with Moscow and complicates Russian decision-making in terms of how it views Belarus as an ally.

Belarus's growing geographic importance has an important role in the balance of power in the Baltic and is a key borderland of NATO. Belarus lies along an important historic invasion corridor that was both the path of invasion and retreat for Napoleon in 1812. Moreover, it was the launching pad for the Soviet conquest of the Baltic States in 1944, during *Operation Bagration*, after the Red Army destroyed

¹ Sjarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, June 13, 2018.

Hitler's Army Group Center in Belorussia, a defeat that some historians regard as more devastating than the German defeat at Stalingrad.² In 2016, Belarus reminded policymakers of its strategic importance when President Lukashenka rejected President Putin's November 2016 announcement that it would establish an airbase in Belarus. Virtually overnight, Belarus was thrust into the spotlight as an important strategic buffer state between NATO and Russia.

Central to understanding Belarus is the fact that President Lukashenka refuses to align against Russia or NATO, preferring to play a non-aligned role and even took the step of joining the Non-Aligned Movement in 1998. In many ways Belarus is seeking to play the role of strategic buffer in an East European version of the role played by Belgium. During the Thirty Years' War, the battle between France and Spain over the Low Countries resulted in the emergence of the Netherlands and Belgium as strategic buffers between Spain and France in the 16th century. Belarus occupies a similar position, and some experts have even referred to it as a Slavic Switzerland.

Eager to maintain a neutral stance, Lukashenka has in his own style stood up to Russian demands and even taken unprecedented steps to curtail the size of Russian military exercises during Zapad 2017, when he rejected Moscow's last-minute demands to bring in additional Russian forces to participate in the drills. Prior to Zapad 2017, President Lukashenka placed a limit on the size of the participating Russian forces at 5,500 in order to comply with the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, a decision that so irritated President Vladimir Putin that both he and Russian Minister of Defense Sergei

² For an excellent account of the massive defeat of Army Group Centre in Belarus in June 1944 see: Paul Adair, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat: the Collapse of Army Group Centre, June 1944*, Arms and Armour Press: London, United Kingdom, 1994, pp.69–80.

Shoigu shunned the exercise in Belarus as originally agreed.³ Instead Lukashenka watched the exercises independently and separately from Putin, who observed the exercises by himself in St. Petersburg.⁴ In a truly Lukashenka way of doing things, the Belarusian leader even went so far as to downplay the incident, claiming that both leaders had agreed beforehand to watch the exercises separately. Previously, both leaders had watched the exercises jointly since the Zapad exercises were revived in 2009, and again held in 2013—a clear reflection of the tense state of relations by 2017.⁵

President Lukashenka further irritated Moscow by announcing Belarus would abide by the 2011 Vienna Document of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on Confidence and Security Building Measures to which Belarus was a signatory.⁶ During the exercises, from September 14 to 20, Minsk adhered to the agreement requirements and requests by inviting military observers from seven European countries, five of whom were NATO member states, to monitor the Zapad 2017 exercises.⁷ According to a statement from the Belarusian Ministry of Defense, the invited delegations were from Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Sweden, and Norway. These realities underscored the growing strategic importance that tiny Belarus has begun to play in the great power competition in the Baltic.

³ Grigory Ioffe, “What Are the Limits of Belarus Sovereignty,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 4, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/limits-belarus-sovereignty/>.

⁴ *Baltic Defense Review* 39/2017, September 20–26, 2017.

⁵ Originally cited by *Interfax*, September 20, 2017.

⁶ <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/publications/witness-zapad>.

⁷ *Interfax*, August 22, 2017.

Tensions between Minsk and Moscow have been on the rise since the Russian invasion of Crimea in February 2014. In the ensuing years, President Lukashenka has consistently rejected Kremlin demands to establish an airbase in Belarus, after which Moscow apparently suspended these requests. Under the terms of the Russian-Belarusian Union Treaty, Moscow has permission to rotate its air force planes in and out of Belarus for exercises, but does not have the right to keep these planes in Belarus longer than 24 hours—a continued source of irritation for the Kremlin. Russia must constantly rotate its aircraft in and out of Belarus for short periods of time, something that certainly complicates Russian operational planning in its homeland air defense.

Unable to get its way with Belarus due to Minsk's insistence that Moscow respect its sovereignty, the Kremlin has waged a form of psychological warfare against Belarus. Questions over a permanent airbase in Belarus are only the tip of the iceberg, as much of this feuding is not public. Prior to the Zapad 2017 exercises, for example, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that it would be procuring as many as 4,162 train cars to move military equipment to Belarus as part of the preparations. The announcement sparked outrage in the Baltic States: Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė characterized the train car announcement as heralding a future war against the West.⁸ However, the Russian statement was viewed somewhat differently in Minsk. From Belarus's vantage point, it appeared presage a massive movement of Russian men, arms and equipment that would be tantamount to the 1968 Czechoslovak invasion. As such, Belarusian officials were stunned by the defense ministry's declaration, which appeared in the form of a Russian newspaper article rather than as a formal diplomatic request. Later,

⁸ For an excellent analysis of the wagon debate caused by this article, see: Ihor Kabanenko, "Rekindled Train Wagon Debate Calls Into Question Planned Size of Zapad 2017 Exercise," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 27, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/rekindled-train-wagon-debate-calls-question-planned-size-zapad-2017-exercise/>.

however, post-Zapad analysis by some Belarus experts determined that the article in question had been deliberately planted as a disinformation operation, aimed at causing alarm in the West and to intimidate Belarus.

Reacting to the announcement, Belarus took the precautionary move (also, effectively, a measure of defiance of Moscow) of countering Russia by inviting Western military experts from neighboring Poland and the Baltic States, as well as representatives from the OSCE, to monitor the joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises on its territory in a major gesture of transparency toward the West. Later, when President Putin unexpectedly and at the last minute sought to deploy more troops to Belarus in the middle of the exercise—which was not a part of the original detailed military plan worked out by the two countries in advance—Lukashenka objected and refused their entry. Stinging from Lukashenka's move, Putin abruptly canceled his planned participation to watch the joint Zapad 2017 exercises in Belarus.⁹

The Belarus Enigma

Among American and European military experts, Belarus is largely an unknown entity. Human rights advocates and democracy promoters often have simplified Belarus to being nothing more than a close ally of Russia with little or no sovereignty. Extensive funding of the Belarusian opposition movement by US and European non-governmental organizations (NGO) has created a cottage industry of experts who frequently cloud Western understanding of Belarus. At one time, the US NGO Freedom House had as many as 50 people working in its Vilnius office whose sole responsibility was to promote democracy in Belarus. A major source of information on Belarus is the *Charter97* website, operated by the Belarusian opposition, that

⁹ <https://jamestown.org/program/limits-belarus-sovereignty/>.

often publishes misleading information about the country. In fact, opposition groups in the West were the source of the term “the Last Dictator of Europe,” which was affixed to the Belarusian president. While Lukashenka is certainly no model for a progressive leader, comparisons of him to the late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il are grossly overblown, and he has demonstrated a pragmatic side that is willing to work with the West.¹⁰ Known for his sense of humor, Lukashenka has occasionally mocked Putin by referring to himself as the “next to last” dictator in Europe—ostensibly after the Russian leader.

For policymakers in NATO, this unbalanced focus on human rights proved to be a detriment in properly reacting to the changing strategic environment along its Baltic flank, as perhaps no neutral third country after Ukraine was becoming as important to NATO planning. After the 2014 invasion of Crimea, Belarus has assumed even greater geopolitical importance in Central Europe's balance of power, especially after President Lukashenka announced that his country would resist becoming an invasion corridor to Ukraine. Western strategic thinking about Belarus finally began to markedly shift in September 2015, when President Lukashenka rejected Putin's announcement that he had ordered the Russian Ministry of Defense to create a new airbase in Belarus, which would have been a flagrant violation of the country's sovereignty. From this point onward, Western experts began to take Belarus more seriously as it sought to avoid becoming a Russian *platzdarm* of offensive operations against NATO.

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe A. Wess Mitchell accelerated this change in US strategic thinking when he took office at the State Department and publicly placed Belarus in the same category as Ukraine and Moldova as “bulwarks against Russian neo-

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-24229633>.

imperialism.” Mitchell made the comments during a major speech on Europe’s East, at the Atlantic Council, on October 18, 2018. This re-categorization of Belarus as one of three frontline states against Russia in a new geopolitical formulation, adopted by the Trump Administration, had been long overdue and reflected the rising geopolitical importance of the country.¹¹

The Role of Belarus in Strategic Geography

Until recently, Belarus failed to register in the geopolitical thinking of Western experts on Europe and Eurasia. One of the first Western analysts to point out the strategic importance of Belarus was Paul Goble, who noted that the shortest distance between Berlin and Moscow lies through this country. A closer examination of Belarus’s history underscores that the country has been a major invasion corridor between the East and the West for centuries, in particular due to the fact that a key land route leading eastward to Moscow via the so-called Smolensk Gate (see **Map 2**, p. ii) traverses Belarusian territory. From Napoleon’s epic march on Tsarist Moscow to Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union, Belarus has been a key invasion corridor throughout its history. The Berezina River in Belarus, for example, was the site of Napoleon’s great escape during his epic retreat from Moscow, when Dutch engineers under his command constructed a bridge overnight in the frigid waters, allowing 25,000 of his men to escape from the clutches of the Russian army. In a major deception operation launched to deceive Russian Field Marshall Prince Mikhail Kutuzov and Admiral Pavel Chichagov, who were defending the Berezina, Napoleon dispatched Marshal Nicolas Oudinot with a force of cavalry 20 miles upstream, away from his route of retreat. Oudinot led the Russian Admiral to believe that the French would cross the Berezina in a completely different location. This enabled Napoleon, with the assistance of his Dutch engineers

¹¹ For a full copy of his remarks, see: <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2018/>.

under the command of Jean Baptiste Eblé, to build bridges across the Berezina, allowing the remnants of the Grande Armée to escape. Napoleon's so-called "miracle on the Berezina" permitted the French General to retreat to Vilnius with the most elite units of his army to regroup and fight another day.¹²

Strategically, Belarus lies along a "land bridge" linking Central Europe with Moscow, in the heart of Russia. A key chokepoint on this overland route, just east of modern-day Belarusian territory, is known as the Smolensk Gates. This 45-mile-wide neck of land between the headwaters of the Dvina and Dnepr rivers funneled invading armies marching both east and westward, and it has been fought over for centuries. The Polish Army took the Smolensk invasion route in the 17th century, during its invasion of Russia; and two hundred years later, in 1812, Napoleon's forces burned the nearby city of Smolensk to the ground. All but forgotten to history today, the Smolensk Gate nonetheless remains the entryway to one of three major invasion corridors into the European heartland, as described by Belarusian analyst Zmitser Bandarenka (with one of the other invasion corridors passing through Iran and Asia Minor into the Balkans, and the third route traversing the Black Sea steppes). Bandarenka noted, "We know from history that once the Russian empire crossed the border of the Dnepr, its next stop was the Carpathians and the Vistula, or even the Elbe and Danube."¹³

The geopolitical importance of Belarus stems directly from the fact that it squarely abuts the Smolensk Gates. Indeed, the coat of arms of Mogilev/Mahiliou, the administrative capital of Mogilev Region (which borders on Russian Smolensk), features an armored guardian

¹² Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Battle of the Berezina: Napoleon's Great Escape*, Pen and Sword, 2010.

¹³ "Russia-EU: The Battle for the Smolensk Gate", Interview with Zmitser Bandarenka, July 3, 2015, <https://charter97.org/en/news/2015/7/3/158238/>.

of the gates; and above his image is the well-known symbol of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—the “Pursuit” (*Pahonya*)—thus, referencing Belarus’s long history within this former Eastern European state. Instead of being a crossroads between East and West, Belarus should be considered the last frontier of Europe, a claim that would strategically imply its role as a buffer state. Others have noted that, historically, when Russia was repelled from this corridor, Muscovy turned its expansionary focus to other geographic areas. For example, when the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania Stephen Bathory fought off the invasion of Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century, he deterred the Russian forces at the Smolensk Gate; this led the Russian ruler to turn his expansionist policies toward the Urals and Siberia, halting Russian westward expansion for 75 years.¹⁴

Western policymakers have increasingly started to grasp the strategic importance of Belarus as an East-West invasion corridor and a springboard for a possible Russian attack on Poland and the Baltic States. Belarus also strategically sits astride the eastern edge of the Suwałki Gap, the narrow 60-mile stretch of territory connecting Poland and Lithuania that is flanked on the other side by Russia’s highly militarized Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad. Since the Russian “hybrid” invasion of Crimea in February 2014, followed by the Russian invasion of Donbas in April 2014, Belarus has risen increasingly in strategic importance to NATO and is rapidly becoming a strategic buffer between the North Atlantic Alliance and Russia.

Wedged between the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine and Russia, Belarus has also increasingly become the subject of Kremlin attention. Although Belarus is in a Union State with Russia, and maintains close economic and political relations with its large eastern neighbor, it has been careful to avoid becoming dominated militarily and has tried to

¹⁴ Ibid.

keep a careful distance from Moscow by seeking stronger economic relations with the European Union. Meanwhile, Russia has sought to punish Belarus for not allowing permanent Russian bases on its territory by refusing to provide Belarus with new jet fighters and other forms of sophisticated military equipment that Minsk has long sought from Moscow.

Consequently, Minsk has attempted to balance its ties with Moscow by developing closer military relations with Beijing and even has gone so far as to develop a joint weapons system with China known as the Polonez (Polonaise). The Polonez is a Multiple-Launch Rocket System (MLRS) developed with the assistance of China that has a 200-kilometer range that is being expanded and tested to a range of 500 kilometers. The new extended range of the Polonez would enable Belarus to have a long-range rocket system capable of striking the suburbs of Moscow from Vitebsk, or Vilnius, depending on your threat perspective. The fact that China would help Belarus develop a long range MLRS speaks volumes about the latter's mistrust of Russia, despite the fact that Polish officials have said the system is in fact directed at Warsaw.¹⁵ To bolster its export capacity, Belarus has even started selling the Polonez to Azerbaijan in an effort to develop its weapons export revenue for the Chinese-designed system built on the chassis of a Belarusian tractor. Over ten Polonez systems were exported to Azerbaijan in 2018, according to reports from the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*.¹⁶

Belarus watchers in the West have noticed a rise in bilateral tensions with Russia since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Belarus, for example, has adopted a new military doctrine implicitly aimed at deterring Russian hybrid war. And it explicitly refused to recognize

¹⁵ Belarus Digest, December 7, 2015.

¹⁶ <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2018/04/19/belarus-sells-its-polonezes-to-azerbaijan-how-will-armenia-react>.

the Russian annexation of Crimea or support its denied war in Donbas. Minsk has also chosen not to recognize the independence of the Russian-occupied separatist Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Despite his authoritarian rule, President Lukashenka is increasingly becoming a Belarusian version of Yugoslav leader Jozep Broz Tito who is determined to defy Putin, as Tito defied Stalin, and maintain a level of sovereignty and independence similar to the former Yugoslav leader.

Baltic Awakenings

Belarus's Baltic neighbors have slowly begun to recognize Lukashenka's changing role as a barrier to Russian expansion, despite the past 20 years of poor-to-modest relations with Minsk. A noticeable warming trend in relations between Belarus and the Baltic States particularly started to emerge since the Russian invasion of Crimea. Moreover, ties between Warsaw and Minsk have increasingly improved since the election of Law and Justice in Poland, in 2015. Relations with Vilnius, on the other hand, remain problematic, particularly over questions of their shared historical legacy and, more immediately, Belarus's decision to build a nuclear power plant (with Russian assistance) less than 25 km from the Lithuanian border. Lithuania is fearful of the environmental threat it could pose, and the fact that the nuclear plant is located approximately 32 kilometers from the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. Moreover, any potential stationing of Russian armored forces to Belarus near the border with Lithuania—for instance, under the pretext of securing the Belarusian nuclear plant—would alter NATO defense planning in the Baltic and likely evoke calls for a permanent US military base in Lithuania to augment the forward-deployed Enhanced Forward Presence multinational NATO battle groups that are operating in each Baltic State.

Meanwhile, relations with Latvia and Estonia today actually rank among Belarus's best, while relations with Poland continue to improve following years of poor relations. Riga, specifically, has

championed closer security ties with Minsk in NATO circles. For example, in September 2018, the Chief of the General Staff of Belarus traveled to Riga to hold high-level meetings with his counterpart in Latvia. Only a month earlier, a delegation of the Polish Ministry of Defense, headed by Colonel Tomasz Kowalik, traveled to Belarus to hold talks with officials from the Belarusian Ministry of Defense on “planned military cooperation with Poland.” The two-day meeting took place in Brest. It. Combined with an earlier meeting held the year before, were unparalleled developments in the recent history of Polish-Belarusian military contacts.¹⁷ Ironically, news of the meeting was released by the Belarusian Ministry of Defense on its website first and only later appeared in the Polish press. The July 2017 talks concerned, among other topics, the exchange of military observers deployed for military exercises as well as historical matters, although a disclaimer was later issued claiming that no talks on military cooperation were discussed.¹⁸

Zapad 2017: Belarus Walks the Tightrope

The Zapad 2017 military exercises, held from September 14 to 20, proved to be a watershed in Belarus-Russian relations and a new defining moment that demonstrated the limitations of Moscow's ability to bully and intimidate Belarus. As the strategic-level drills approached, the Belarusian government unexpectedly began to flex its diplomatic muscles by announcing that it would limit the number of Russian troops being deployed to Belarus for the duration of Zapad 2017, unlike in previous years. Belarusian officials also insisted that all Russian forces deployed to Belarus would return to their bases after the completion of the exercise. In an unusual move, Belarus opted to comply with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in

¹⁷ First cited by the Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* in Baltic News Service, August 31, 2018.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Europe's (OSCE) restrictions capping the number of troops that could participate in the exercise in Belarus and subsequently notified OSCE officials in Vienna that it would limit the number of Russian troops allowed to participate in Zapad.¹⁹

Specifically, Minsk limited the number of Russian troops that participated in the exercise on Belarusian soil to a total of 10,200 men, in compliance with OSCE requirements, while the entire number of participants in the exercise on Russian territory were estimated to total 75,000 to 100,00 men.²⁰ According to the Belarusian government's data breaking down the number of participants in their segment of the exercise, the number of men from Belarus who took part were a little more than 7,000 men, while the number of Russian forces participating in the exercise equaled 3,000. This development irritated Moscow and subsequently resulted in President Putin canceling his visit to Belarus to watch the culmination of the northern segment of the exercise in St. Petersburg. By comparison, Moscow prevented OSCE observers from traveling to Russia to watch the Zapad exercises on its territory—in a major contrast to the transparent role played by officials in Minsk. In fact, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg openly criticized Russia for not allowing Alliance observers to monitor the military exercises in Belarus, whereas foreign ministry officials in Minsk gave the green light to NATO officials to send monitors to observe the exercises despite the fact that Moscow had already said no to the idea.²¹ Belarus sent out invitations to NATO member states Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to

¹⁹ *Baltic Defense Review*, September 20–26, 2017.

²⁰ For a thorough breakdown of the Russian and Belarusian forces who participated in Zapad 2017 see: <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/66967>.

²¹ *Defense News*, August 27, 2017.

watch the Zapad 2017 exercise.²² This example reflects the nuances with which Belarus operates in its security relations with Moscow as it balances that relationship with its relations with the West while maintaining a distance from Moscow in an effort to be militarily transparent.

Sovereignty Before Airbases

In October 2015, a major controversy erupted between Russia and Belarus, sparked by Russian President Vladimir Putin's statements that Moscow had planned to create a new airbase in Belarus. These remarks had followed a carefully orchestrated Russian drumbeat of reports that sought to pressure and intimidate Belarus into adhering to the Kremlin's demands. For Belarus, talks on airbases have always revolved around negotiations with Moscow to obtain new fighter aircraft for its aging air force. On August 1, 2014, talks with Viktor Bondarev, the Russian air force commander, began when he announced Russia would open a base at Baranavichy after Russia signed an intergovernmental agreement with Belarus. Later, on December 23–24, at a bilateral meeting of defense ministers, officials from Minsk refused to legally formalize the creation of a Russian airbase after Russian officials demanded that their ally allow more Russian aircraft to be based inside Belarus.

Under the terms of its Union State agreement with Moscow and as noted above, Belarus does not allow Russian aircraft to stay in Belarus longer than 24 hours before they are required to return home. In other words, the Russian air force must constantly rotate its airplanes in and out of the Republic. This complicates Moscow's planning and guarantees a level of sovereignty in Belarus decision-making that extends to other areas, such as the 2009 Joint Air Defense Agreement between the two countries, whereby Belarus retains the ultimate

²² *Baltic News Service*, August 2, 2017.

authority to decide on whether to use force against any foreign intruder.²³ Officials in Moscow do not have the final say in whether Belarusian air defense reacts and fires on a foreign intruder; Minsk simply consults with Moscow. This nuance in their decision-making is not well understood by NATO or US defense circles, based upon conversations with Western defense officials by the author. President Putin has been asking the Russian parliament to amend the 2009 agreement with Belarus that would allow Moscow to position air-defense weaponry on the border with the EU, meaning the Polish-Lithuanian border. However, Belarus has refused to agree to this new modification agreement.²⁴

Russian demands for a new airbase in Belarus and Belarus's rejection of those requests are closely tied to, but not entirely dependent upon, the ongoing tension between Minsk and Moscow over Russia's reluctance to strengthen the Belarusian air force. Belarusian security analyst Siarhei Bohdan has indicated that part of the dispute over the airbase is related to whether Russia would provide Belarus with new fighter aircraft: before there can be any discussion on a new airbase in Belarus, Moscow must agree to this condition. Bohdan wrote that Belarus has been awaiting delivery of over 20 new aircraft from Moscow and it has not added any new aircraft to its air force since

²³ Another well-known Belarus military analyst, Alexander Alesin, has pointed out this nuance in the 2009 agreement: many parts of the agreement are not exactly clear as to which side has authority to make the final decision with regard to air intrusions. Prior to the Zapad 2017 exercises, Putin announced that Russia would place air-defense weaponry in Belarus on the border of Poland, something officials in Minsk refused to comment on. Alesin's comments and views on the air defense agreement are cited here:

<https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/accidents/2017-08-11/razmeschenie-putinyim-pvo-na-belorussko-ukrainskoy-granitse-v-belarusi-sdelali-vajnyie-utochneniya/103919>.

²⁴ <https://www.unian.info/politics/2077109-putin-seeks-joint-air-defense-with-belarus.html>.

1991. Prior to the 2014 Ice Hockey Championships in Belarus, Lukashenka asked Russia to “give” 12 new aircraft as a gift to Belarus, and Moscow then reportedly agreed to give three or four aircraft in an effort to fulfill this request.²⁵

When these requests went unfilled by Russia, President Lukashenka opted to ask Moscow to overhaul and upgrade a dozen MiG-29 aircraft in Belarus's possession after noting his request for new aircraft was refused. Currently, Belarus has about 29 operating MiG-29s and several aging Su-25s. Fuel shortages in the air force plagued Belarus in the past; and as a result, until 2011, Belarusian pilots obtained anywhere between two to five hours of flight training a year, which would be on the same level as Ukrainian pilots today, if not slightly higher. But in 2011, Belarus increased that figure to 100 hours a year per pilot. More importantly, according to the Berlin-based Belarus analyst Siarhei Bohdan, the key issue for Moscow is the glaring hole in Russia's air-defense network posed by the absence of airbases in Belarus. Until this hole is filled, he argues, Moscow will continue to feel vulnerable in defending the Russian capital in the event of any potential NATO attack.²⁶ As Bohdan noted, if Minsk were, in fact, a valued military ally, Moscow would be willing to bestow all of its latest and most sophisticated weaponry on Belarus in an effort to improve its defenses against a NATO attack. The military analyst further pointed out that Iran receives more sophisticated weaponry from Russia than Belarus, including more up-to-date S-300 air-defense missile systems. Meanwhile, Belarus continues to receive second-hand military equipment from Moscow. Belarus operates the older S-300PS, while Iran received the much newer and more sophisticated S-300PMU variant.²⁷

²⁵ Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, August 20, 2015.

²⁶ Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, November 16, 2015.

²⁷ Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, February 3, 2016.

Discussions on Russian access to an airbase in Belarus first began in 2013, when Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told the media, after his meeting with the president of Belarus, that such a Russian military airfield would be established on Belarusian territory within two years. Several days later, Lukashenka carefully denounced the statement, saying that his discussion with Shoigu focused on supplementing the Belarusian army with Russian fighter jets rather than opening a full-fledged airbase. Those interpretations caused an immediate wave of resentment in the Russian media; but the issue soon faded from the headlines. However, from time to time it has reappeared, with new, often controversial details, which point to an uneasy negotiation process occurring behind closed doors.²⁸ In response to the statement made by Putin about airbases in Belarus, President Lukashenka said, "We do not need a base these days, especially military air forces. What we need are certain types of weapons. This is what I told [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and, before that, [Prime Minister Dmitry] Medvedev," said Lukashenka. He further explained, "We need aircraft, not bases. We have great pilots and excellent schools of military and civil aviation. Why would I want to create a base? Why would I want to bring foreign aircraft and pilots here? What would ours do then?"²⁹

Preparing for Hybrid Warfare

In early 2016, Belarus took perhaps one of its most significant steps since gaining independence by redesigning its military doctrine to adapt to new hybrid threats after a thorough examination of its external challenges. On January 22, 2016, President Lukashenka approved the landmark changes following a year-long review by the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Yauheni Preiherman, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, October 7, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/minsk-breaks-silence-on-russian-airbase-issue/>.

Ministry of Defense initiated in response to the events in Ukraine in 2014. In fact, this was the first ever change in modern Belarus's military doctrine—a clear indication that the previous revolutions in Libya, Egypt, and Syria did not have the same impact that Ukraine did on Belarus's thinking. Most importantly, the document revealed a change in the mindset of Belarusian officials, showing their view of a possible Russian intervention in Belarus, as the threat of “hybrid warfare” and “color revolutions,” come to dominate the country's security thinking.³⁰ Belarusian Minister of Defense Andrei Raikou claimed that Belarus did not consider any foreign state an enemy, “But,” he added, “we of course will not concede our territory and will use any force and means, including military to avoid that.”³¹ On July 20, 2016, Belarus adopted a new military doctrine that referred to the threat posed by hybrid warfare, a clear, albeit unstated, reference to the threat posed by Russia and its use of non-linear warfare.

The adoption of the new military doctrine reflected Belarus's classic style of balancing its ties with Russia. Though a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which squarely places Belarus in a collective security alliance with Russia, Minsk has adopted a new military concept that is obviously oriented against the country it is ostensibly aligned with. Combatting the dual threats posed by either a colored revolution or a hybrid threat conveniently masks the Russian threat represented by the latter. On October 30, 2018, speaking before the military leadership of the Belarusian Armed Forces, Lukashenka said, “Having allies is an important factor in ensuring our military security. Nonetheless, we shall build the mechanism of collective protection in accordance with our national interests.”³² Indeed, by balancing the two threats, both viewed as

³⁰ Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, February 3, 2016.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Digest*, February 3, 2016.

internal, Lukashenka has demonstrated how he closely walks the Russia tightrope, even in security relations that never openly identify Russia as a threat. Belarus uses the two perceptions of the threat to adapt to the new regional security environment and to legitimize its preparation for a hybrid threat to the country. This is a clear sign that the events in Crimea and Donbas—i.e., Ukraine—were viewed by Belarus as an existential threat to its survival.

At the same time, Lukashenka has also laid out a military vision for the country's defense that goes beyond conventional deterrence, and he has been adamant about his country's need to prepare for a new form of warfare that focuses on greater military mobility. Lukashenka outlined this concept in September 2017, when he noted, "There will be no war between fronts. Instead, the fighting will be local. We need highly mobile forces for defense, and wars fought around the world recently suggest we should have mobile units."³³

The Belarus Conundrum

Throughout its entire period of independence, the greatest impediment to Belarus interacting with the West has been its economic interconnectedness with Russia, something that, until 2014, Minsk had made no urgent effort to move away from. That said, in a January 2013 meeting with a delegation from Jamestown, President Lukashenka asserted that, for the first time in his country's history, trade with the European Union had surpassed that of Russia. Today, nearly 50 percent of Belarusian trade still remains dependent on Russia, but trade with European Union member countries has been growing, now making up almost a third of its total. The Belarusian leadership understands the need to diversify its relations and lessens its dependency on Russia. However, Western policymakers need to understand that Belarus will not take the Baltic nationalist path and

³³ Baltic News Service (BNS), September 21, 2017.

go for a clean break in relations with Moscow; it will adhere to a distinct Belarusian path in its ties to Russia unless Putin forces the issue and demands that Minsk accept an either “you are with us or against us” approach. Critics of Belarus also fail to take note of an intense period of Belarusization on the use of its national language in national education, public forums and its sovereignty that has gathered intensity since 2014. These nuances in Belarus's security ties with Russia are not well known among Western policy analysts, and account for the rising level of nationalism emanating from Belarus.

Lukashenka remains adamant and unyielding when it comes to his country's sovereignty and independence. At the same time, the Belarusian leader will not take overly antagonistic steps to irritate Moscow. He recently declined to attend the 2019 Munich Security Forum for this very reason; likewise, Lukashenka has repeatedly turned down offers to visit Brussels at the invitation of the European Union.³⁴ Instead he prefers to travel to Moscow to meet with Putin and try to resolve bilateral issues. Lukashenka even skied with Putin after meetings in Sochi. The Putin-Lukashenka relationship is one that follows a pattern similar to that of Russia's neighbors Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Both of those countries pursue a multi-vector diplomacy with the West while maintaining a high level of sovereignty and independence. Losing Belarus as a strategic ally, however, would be a major blow to Moscow at a time when Russia has fewer allies to rely upon among its neighbors. Ultimately, Russian efforts to establish an airbase or force other forms of political-military coercion on Belarus will always backfire.

³⁴ “Belarusian Leader Skips Munich Conference Because Of Talks With Russia's Putin,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarusian-leader-skips-munich-conference-because-of-talks-with-russia-s-putin/29772181.html>.

Belarus Is Not Ukraine

Domestically, politics inside Belarus differ significantly from those in Lithuania or Ukraine. It is not a country seeking NATO membership, and the majority of the population neither consistently voices support for NATO nor harbors strong anti-Russian sentiment. Belarus is developing closer economic ties to the European Union as the more westward-leaning part of the country uses its close ties to Poland and Lithuania to integrate itself economically with the Baltic. Long-standing ties with Russia and its relative infancy in terms of being a nation-state, enable Belarus to become a unique bridge between East and West.

Vladimir Socor, a noted expert on Belarus, points to the fact that the country is, in important ways, an accident of history but also a gift to the West in the shape of a strategic buffer between the Baltic States and Russia. Belarus as a state was born out of the Brest-Litovsk agreement, signed in present-day Belarus on March 3, 1918. Out of this agreement, Belarus experienced a period of short-lived independence from 1918 to 1920. Until this temporary independence, Belarusian territory had been largely dominated by landowning Polish gentry, who spearheaded resistance to Soviet rule, but ethnic Belarusians were treated as second-class citizens. This allowed for Bolsheviks to establish a common cause with the latter and rewarded the Belarusians for their loyalty. "Liberation" by the Soviets enabled ethnic Belarusians to assume senior-level positions in government whereas most of the land-owning Polish minority were relocated to Poland.

Socor also emphasizes that the Second World War and Belarusian resistance to Nazi occupation, which resulted in 80 percent of the country being destroyed, were also defining moments in modern-day Belarus's state identity. Belarusian resistance to Nazi rule fostered one of the most concentrated partisan movements in German-occupied

areas of the Soviet Union.³⁵ Indeed, the reputation of Belarus as the “*partizanski respublik*” is something that deeply resonates in the nation-state identity of Belarusian society today, and it is something President Lukashenka has cultivated, if not significantly nurtured, since the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea.

US-Belarusian Relations

US-Belarusian relations have been largely estranged for nearly a decade. Ties were nearly severed following the ill-fated decision by Belarus to withdraw its ambassador to the United States in December 2010, in response to the Western denunciation of its crackdown on demonstrators in Minsk, which occurred after a group of Belarusian anarchists threw Molotov cocktails at the Russian embassy in Minsk. Five of these demonstrators were imprisoned as a result. Lukashenka was walking a tightrope in ties with Moscow over how it handled this display of anti-Russian sentiment. Aside from this outburst, the majority of the demonstrations were peaceful. The United States reacted harshly to the crackdown that followed and reciprocated by withdrawing its ambassador to Minsk, bringing about a cold chill in bilateral relations.

Owing to these developments, no US ambassador has been stationed at the US Embassy in Belarus since December 2010. The chain of strategic indifference to Belarus by the United States continued until the March 28, 2016, visit to Minsk by then–Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia and Eurasia Michael Carpenter. Carpenter reversed Pentagon policy of mostly ignoring Belarus and singlehandedly revived bilateral military-to-military relations. His trip was the first US Department of Defense–led visit to Minsk by a

³⁵ For an account of the role that Soviet partisans played in Belarus in the massive defeat of Army Group Centre in June 1944 see: Paul Adair, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat: the Collapse of Army Group Centre, June 1944*, Arms and Armour Press: London, United Kingdom, 1994, pp. 69–80.

senior-level Pentagon official in over ten years: all previous visits by US Defense Department officials had been part of multi-member, State Department-led groups, where democracy promotion and human rights issues dominated the bilateral agenda.³⁶

Despite the lengthy chill in US-Belarus relations, the government of Belarus has made significant efforts to engage the United States and even dropped its precondition that there would be no return of a US ambassador to Belarus unless US sanctions were removed. In early 2012, Belarus made its first overture to the United States. President Lukashenka began to allow the transit of lethal and non-lethal military equipment through Belarus as part of the reverse transit of American materiel via the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), when the US military drawdown from Afghanistan was launched by the Obama Administration. Belarus's participation in the program, between 2012 and 2014, was a discreet but consciously proactive level of support for the United States and NATO, even though Belarus was under the full weight of US sanctions.³⁷

In another move of transparency that defies the image of Lukashenka being a North Korean-style dictator who seeks isolation from the West, Minsk introduced visa free travel to Belarus for up to 80 countries, including the United States and most of its NATO allies in the European Union. The move was a major step forward to allow greater trade and tourism for Belarus as it sought to balance its ties with the West. The visa free travel announcement simultaneously created tensions with Moscow that only has been recently resolved.

³⁶ On September 10, 2014, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia and Eurasia Evelyn Farkas visited Minsk as part of a US governmental delegation consisting of US State Department officials from various regional bureaus.

³⁷ For a rare analysis of Belarus defense cooperation with the United States compiled from discussions with Belarus officials, see the two part series by Vladimir Socor: "NATO's Silent Partner in the East," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 8, 2013.

When Belarus made its announcement in January 2017, Russian authorities were caught by surprise, fearing overland travel by Westerners to Russia via Belarus as there are little or no border posts safeguarding the border.³⁸

The above gestures by Minsk notwithstanding, for the past ten years US-Belarusian relations remained largely frozen. In addition to a lack of ambassador, until recently there has been no US military attaché based in the country to give Washington a better understanding, despite the periodic large-scale Zapad and Union Shield Russian-Belarusian military exercises. This has affected US understanding about the country and its delicate relations with Russia. Then-Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell's visit to Minsk, in November 5, 2018, however, has led to a major change in relations between the two countries. Mitchell sought to develop a roadmap for building closer US relations with Minsk for the strategic purpose of signaling to Putin that the US is no longer going to ignore Belarus. In a speech on October 19, 2018, at the Atlantic Council, two weeks prior to his November visit to Minsk, Mitchell lauded "Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus as bulwarks against Russian neo-imperialism."³⁹

Repercussions for NATO

Alarmed by the warming relations between Washington and Minsk as evidenced by the Mitchell visit in November 2018, Moscow is desperately trying to find ways to keep Belarus in its strategic orbit while simultaneously intensifying the information war component of

³⁸ Grigory Ioffe, "Visa Free Travel to Belarus and the Dawn of a New Era in (Dis)Information Wars," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, January 18, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/visa-free-travel-belarus-dawn-new-era-disinformation-wars/>.

³⁹ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/state-department-official-sounds-warning-on-russian-chinese-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.

this campaign against Minsk. On June 12, 2019, Polish President Andrzej Duda visited the United States and signed a new agreement to base US forces in Poland. Although the size of the US force remains unclear, this development will likely result in Moscow putting greater pressure on Minsk economically and militarily. Due to this development, Moscow could renew its calls for Minsk to allow a permanent Russian airbase on its soil or possibly to demand the forward deployment of a Russian Motorized Rifle Division (MRD) in Belarus. Economically, Moscow may suspend its oil deliveries to Belarus, which are strategically important to the country, but also vital to Ukraine. Nearly 40 percent of Ukrainian oil imports come from the refined oil produced by Belarusian refineries, and any suspension of Russian oil would have a detrimental impact on the Ukrainian economy.

The Russian military threat demanding forward deployed forces in Belarus is real. To date, Belarus has refused to comply with these requests and has limited Russian deployments and exercises in order to maintain its sovereignty and independence to short-term durations: as noted above, Lukashenka explicitly declared that all Russian forces would return to their bases after the completion of Zapad 2017. But should the Belarusian government be compelled to drop its opposition; such a development would significantly affect NATO's military strategy for defense of the Baltic States. The Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, for example is less than 30 kilometers from the Belarusian border. Any major Russian armored deployment along that frontier would, therefore, force NATO and US policymakers to reconsider the current posture of US forces in the Baltic.

Rising tension between Belarus and Russia has important repercussions for NATO's eastern flank. Belarus has had a short history as an independent state, and since gaining independence in 1991 it has followed a path of developing close economic and military relations with Russia in exchange for the latter accepting Belarusian

sovereignty. Following the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, Belarus has increasingly distanced itself from this relationship in its own nuanced way, weary of a repeat of the Donbas scenario that led to the splintering of eastern Ukraine. Uncertain about Moscow's intentions, Minsk has maintained a high level of independence in its relations with Russia, enabling Lukashenka's Belarus to remain free of permanent Russian military bases unlike its quasi-ally Kyrgyzstan, which maintains a similarly close security relationship with Moscow and allows the Kremlin to maintain a fully functioning, Russian-operated airbase at Kant. Both countries have close economic and security ties with Russia, but Belarus refuses to bend to Russian demands for a permanent airbase.

Meanwhile, Moscow continues to increase its military presence on the Belarus border. Two recent developments highlight the growing concern in Belarus about a Donbas scenario being considered by Russia. Specifically, Russia has created and deployed two new Russian motorized regiments near Belarusian territory: one at Yelnia, near Smolensk, and the other at Klinty. Additionally, both of these Russian units are located adjacent to strategic railheads important to Belarus, with Yelnia, in particular, near the major Belarusian city of Gomel. These units were deployed following Lukashenka's refusal to allow Moscow to create a new airbase on Belarusian territory.

Writing about the new military bases near Belarus, US military analyst Michael Kofman pointed out in his blog, on January 12, 2016, that Minister of Defense Shoigu had announced the formation of three new divisions, none of which were in response to US deployments in Europe, NATO exercises or the prospect of new multi-national battalions being sent to the Baltic States. According to Kofman, "The thinking in the Russian General Staff is more about a Ukraine and Belarusian contingency or perhaps a color revolution in Belarus."⁴⁰ It

⁴⁰ See the commentary by Michael Kofman on the formation of this new division,

is no accident that Yelnia on the Belarus border is directly proximate to the Smolensk Gates, described by one retired US Air Force officer as a “military tank superhighway.”⁴¹

Conclusion

One of the themes of this paper has been the focus on Belarus representing a strategic buffer between Russia and NATO's Baltic flank. *The inherent value to NATO is a Belarus that remains free of Russian ground troops or new Russian airbases that would severely reduce the readiness and warning time for NATO forces deployed in the Baltic.* Whether Belarus is *de jure* militarily aligned with Russia is beside the point as Belarus serves NATO interests by being *de facto* neutral and non-aligned.

For this reason, NATO needs to intensify its ties to Belarus. Engagement between Brussels and Minsk to date have been limited by Lithuania, which harbors deep resentments and has obstructed any opportunity for Belarus to even develop a modest relationship with the North Atlantic Alliance. Lithuania's opposition to Belarus revolves around the construction of a Russian nuclear power plant in Belarus at Astravets, which is about 32 kilometers from the Lithuanian capital. The nuclear power plant will be finished and come online by the end of 2019, and Lithuanian efforts to block its construction will have amounted to nothing. To add embarrassment to Lithuania's position, the Belarusian nuclear power plant was recently certified as safe and secure by an EU inspection team in July 2018, using a new nuclear safeguard check list developed after an earthquake ripped through the 2011 Fukushima reactor in Japan. The Belarusian nuclear plant passed the EU test, noted *Radio Free Europe* in a report on the

<https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2016/05/07/russias-new-divisions-in-the-west/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

visit. Aside from Vilnius, no other EU member government has voiced opposition to the Astravets facility.⁴²

Geopolitically, Belarus greatly resembles the Yugoslavia of the 1950s, before Tito's final break with Moscow. Yugoslavia was in a pivotal position in the Balkans and subsequently became a bulwark against Soviet expansion into Greece. The rupture in relations between Tito and Stalin ended up allowing the West to resist Soviet efforts to spread to the Adriatic and Mediterranean. Belarus can occupy a similar position with regard to the Baltic. Given the rise in tensions between Minsk and Moscow, Lukashenka could become another Tito if Putin continues to insist on treating Belarus as a subordinate country and refuses to honor its sovereignty. On several occasions, from 2015 onward, Lukashenka publicly rebuked Russia's request to create a new airbase in Belarus. Two weeks after Moscow's initial request went public, demonstrations erupted in Minsk, with up to 1,000 demonstrators voicing their opposition to the base—a rare public outburst and a strategic tool Lukashenka could utilize to justify his refusal to grant Russia further basing privileges.

In a meeting with a Jamestown delegation visit to Belarus on November 3, 2018, led by former US Commanding General US Army Europe Benjamin Hodges, Lukashenka reiterated this point noting, "Why does Russia need an airbase in Belarus? Russia is only five minutes flying time from Belarus." He underscored the point that Belarus can ensure the security of its own airspace. Moreover, in a cryptically nuanced, Lukashenkaesque statement, the Belarusian leader went on to say that, "While Belarus and Russia remain military partners and are allies, we also have a budding defense relationship with China; and the Chinese will do things with Belarus militarily that

⁴² Rikard Jozwiak, "Planned Belarusian Nuclear Plant Passes 'Stress Test,' Neighboring Lithuania Still Worried," *RFE/RL*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/planned-belarusian-nuclear-plant-passes-stress-test-neighboring-lithuania-still-worried/29336314.html>.

Russia would never even consider doing.” This remark was an obvious jab at Moscow, underscoring the limits Russia imposes on cooperation with Belarus despite the fact that the two countries are supposed to be treaty allies.

By remaining free of Russian ground troops, Belarus enhances the security of Poland and Lithuania and allows NATO to adequately defend the Suwałki Gap by giving the Alliance greater defensive depth along its periphery. And by remaining free of Russian ground forces and staying *de facto* non-aligned, Belarus serves NATO purposes without ever having to join the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. Recently, at an event hosted by the Atlantic Council, in Washington, DC, Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Kravchenko remarked that his country wants to be friends with everybody, including NATO.⁴³ By engaging Belarus, NATO actually can help this small state become a bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism, as envisaged by former Assistant Secretary Mitchell, in his October 2018 speech. Belarus does not have to choose sides. If the United States establishes a new military base in Poland, all eyes will be on Minsk and its leadership, which is already forced to walk the Russian tightrope. As the geopolitical importance of Belarus looms ever larger, the pressure on this strategically placed East European state will continue to grow ever more intense.

⁴³ Grigory Ioffe, “Beyond Lies: A New Stage in the Belarus-Russia Information War,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 14, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/beyond-lies-a-new-stage-in-the-belarus-russia-information-war/>.

De Facto Non-Alignment: Modeling an Option for Belarus

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Belarus occupies a pivotal geographic position on the historical invasion route between Muscovy and the heart of Europe. In this sense, Belarus is a strategic prize of the first magnitude for Russia, if the Kremlin were to exercise control over this territory. A country such as Belarus—relatively small, certainly peaceful, situated between rival powers or power blocs—can be confronted with one or several of the following four scenarios.

One scenario would be that of *outpost*, a staging area in an alliance system for an aggressive anti-status quo power. Under such a scenario, a country like Belarus would be integrated into an alliance system dominated by the *anti-status quo* power. Another scenario would be that of *bastion*—a defensive scenario, in contrast to the explicitly aggressive outpost scenario. This would also entail the smaller state (Belarus, in this case) being integrated into an alliance system, though it would be one in which the bastion country would be protected. One distinguished Western official visiting Minsk, who made a significant contribution to the opening to Belarus, declared in Minsk that Belarus could be a bastion against Russian re-expansion alongside Ukraine

* Girard Bucello contributed to the formulation and drafting of this report. The text draws together from public remarks Vladimir Socor made at a Jamestown Foundation conference (Vladimir Socor, “De Facto Non-Alignment: Modeling an Option for Belarus,” presentation at conference The West and Belarus: A Mutual Rediscovery, hosted by The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, DC, November 21, 2019), and during a closed-door workshop the following day.

and Georgia. This was likely a rather premature statement. Belarus does not wish to be a bastion. A third scenario would be that of *battleground*, or contested ground between great powers and power blocs. Belarus has experienced this scenario many times in its history. From the time of the Lithuania–Muscovy wars, all the way through the Napoleonic wars and the two world wars, this has been the fate of Belarus. The final scenario would be that of *buffer*—a peaceful area, whether by formal or informal agreement, between rival great powers.

It is important to note that countries in Belarus's situation do not have a discretionary choice among these scenarios. Such countries certainly have preferences, and they have—to a limited extent—options. At this time, the much preferable scenario for Minsk would be that of acting as a buffer in which Belarus conducts a policy of *de facto* non-alignment. Such options, however, are not discretionary, and the ultimate outcome is likely to be suboptimal from the point of view of the country affected.

The above scenarios are predicated on two core assumptions. The first is that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Russian President Vladimir Putin will each be reelected to another term of office in their respective countries, and that neither of them will make any significant changes to their current policies after being reelection. The second assumption is that it is impossible to package Belarus with other countries in Europe's East in a project of region-wide security between East and West in an effort to fashion any sort of non-aligned, neutral belt of states. No country in Europe's East, including Belarus, could or should be packaged together with others; each country presents its own problems, its own challenges and its own solutions, which differ widely from country to country.

As stated above, Belarus has a preference for acting as a buffer while employing *de facto* non-alignment. It is crucial to differentiate between neutrality and non-alignment and, furthermore, to draw a distinction between a protected and unprotected buffer. Belarus

would be, by definition, an unprotected buffer—not part of an alliance system and not part of an international legal settlement. The only protection would come from Belarus’s own capacity to conduct a policy of *de facto* non-alignment.

The core elements of neutrality are non-membership in a military alliance, a deliberate absence of preemptive commitments in peacetime to support another state military in case of war, the absence of any deployment of foreign troops on the country’s territory and the renunciation of any participation in wars other than those fought for the defense of national territory against outside aggression. Belarus officially aspires to become a neutral state under its constitution and under its national security concept. However, as one can quickly recognize, Belarus does not fully meet these criteria. It meets some of them to some degree but not all, nor does it fully meet any single criterion.

Nonetheless, at the same time, the foreign policy of Belarus involves significant elements of non-alignment with a view to strengthening Belarus’s independence and sovereignty. Minsk understands that this policy of *de facto* non-alignment is a prerequisite to full sovereignty and independence and allows for a full normalization of relations with the West. This paper proposes to identify the elements of a Belarusian *de facto* non-aligned policy, to consider their potential for growth, and to aggregate these elements into a tentative model of Belarusian *de facto* non-alignment.

Belarus is formally bound by alliance treaties and commitments to Russia: namely, the Union State of Russia and Belarus and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This, needless to say, precludes strict, legally defined neutrality on the part of Minsk. The status of Belarus as a strategic partner of Russia is not in question at this stage, nor is its formal membership in Russia-led institutions. Minsk does not intend to cast this status into question. It wants to conduct a policy of *de facto* non-alignment without jeopardizing its

formal participation in Moscow's diplomatic and security projects. Broad consensus exists in Belarus for the continuation of a strategic partnership with Russia. However, Minsk seeks to define this strategic partnership in ways consistent with Belarus's own national interests.

It is crucial to make note of certain "red lines" for Belarus that Russia has drawn—steps that, were Minsk to take them, would constitute a fundamentally negative shift in Russian–Belarusian relations. The first such red line would be Belarus's exit from existing Russia-led institutions—or even vague threats to this effect. For Minsk to do so would be an intolerable blow to Russia not in terms of tangible state interests, but rather in terms of prestige. Moscow's image would suffer if Belarus were to be seen as spinning out of Russia's orbit—to say nothing of Putin's personal image. Even allusions to a possible exit from these institutions, therefore, would be far too risky for Belarus to entertain—an assessment that Minsk has surely reached on its own accord.

Another red line for Russia would be Belarus's official proclamation of neutrality, be it as a current status or as an aspiration. Neutrality as an aspiration exists already, in the National Security Concept of 2010 and in the Constitution of 2003. Crucially, however, it has not been reasserted at the level of policy or of official rhetoric since then. It exists only on paper, and a reassertion of neutrality as an aspiration would be incompatible with Belarus's membership in Russia-led institutions and military agreements. It is for these reasons that this paper discusses a *de facto* non-alignment—with a heavy emphasis on *de facto*. Official non-alignment, as outlined above, is too risky, as it would cross the red lines that Russia has set out.

Belarus and Russia

A discussion of the relationship between Belarus and Russia is in order, as Belarus's position with respect to Russia's red lines is not solely due to concerns over the reaction from Moscow. Belarus and

Russia have not had historical grievances—indeed, much the opposite is true. Russia enjoys a privileged position in the historical memory of Belarusians, as Russia has long been seen as the source of modernization, urbanization and development in Belarus. Consequently, the pursuit of anti-Russian policies and politics is extremely unwise.

One should not, however, confuse a historical fondness for Russia in Belarus with a disposition on the part of Minsk to tether itself to Moscow's policies or echo its talking points. Rather, Belarus has shown a marked degree of diplomatic independence from Russia. It has not promulgated Russian proposals on security projects and has avoided being drawn into Russia's conflicts. These are policies Minsk intends to continue. Beyond this, Belarus does not wish to be part of the Russian World. It views itself as an independent and sovereign state with a European identity. As a result, it has no desire to participate in Russia's geopolitical or civilizational projects, such as neo-Sovietism, pan-Slavism, neo-Slavism, Russian imperialism, Eurasianism or pan-Orthodoxy.

These differences are not purely abstract or theoretical: they are reflected in clear breaks with Russia on salient policy positions. When Moscow imposed sanctions against Ankara in response to Turkey's downing of a Russian jet in 2015, Belarus did not participate in the sanctions regime. Similarly, Belarus did not join Russian counter-sanctions imposed against the European Union and other Western countries in 2014. Minsk also has not recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the breakaway regions of Georgia, as independent, and it has been ambiguous with respect to the status of Russian-occupied Crimea.

In Belarus, Lukashenka has monopolized the authority to define the terms of Belarus's relations with Russia in political and strategic terms—as well as, oftentimes, in tactical terms. He has secured both a role as guarantor of Belarus's sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia and as

guarantor of Russian–Belarusian friendship—not just with respect to the office of the presidency, but with respect to himself as an individual. He has also continued the approach of First Secretary of the Communist Party of Byelorussia Pyotr Masherov in extracting resources out of Moscow. Lukashenka is unique among post-Soviet leaders, as he has been able to skillfully and openly outplay the Kremlin, obtaining soft terms for loans and discounted prices on energy products, as well as favorable market access for Belarus.

As mentioned previously, Belarus is situated in a crucial geopolitical position, occupying what has historically served as an east-west invasion corridor. From the perspective of Moscow, Belarus shields Russia from an invasion originating in Europe. Belarus likewise shields several North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) frontline states (namely, Lithuania and Poland) from Russian military aggression. It similarly shields Ukraine's northern border from Russian invasion as well. The geopolitics of the country's position is compounded by another important factor: Belarus is Russia's only formal ally to its west. This fact colors Russia's perception of Belarus's importance to its security and, by extension, the deftness with which Western policymakers must treat Belarus's pursuit of *de facto* non alignment.

To note only that Belarus is Russia's sole formal ally on its western border, however, is to omit crucial context as to the nature of Belarus's military relations with Russia. Moscow has sought to establish a number of bases in Belarus for the deployment of air assets, air-defense units and ballistic missiles. Minsk, however, has turned down Russian proposals for the establishment of an airbase on Belarusian territory, and it refused to agree to the deployment of medium-range ballistic missiles in Belarus. With respect to the basing of Russian forces on Belarusian soil, Minsk has asserted that such a deployment would be unnecessary, as Belarus is entirely capable of defending itself against attack, and Russian military aviation is capable of reaching Belarus within five minutes, precluding the need for a Russian airbase

in the country. Furthermore, Belarus does not fall under Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) umbrella—in contrast to the Baltic and Black Sea regions, which do. In this way, by formally remaining within the Moscow-led alliance framework, Belarus does not jeopardize relations with Russia. At the same time, however, Minsk engages in *de facto* non-alignment through its refusal to permit its territory to be used to base foreign military forces.

Belarus is also exercising *de facto* non-alignment in other aspects of its defense policy and military posture. Within the context of its formal agreements with Russia, it has hosted a number of joint exercises with Russian forces. In doing so, Minsk has taken multiple steps to reassure Western states and limit the extent to which the exercises could be viewed as threatening. For example, though the Zapad 2017 exercise, hosted by Belarus, did feature offensive military scenarios, it also involved a number of good-faith gestures on the part of Minsk toward Western policymakers by inviting in military observers from NATO-member countries as well as capping the number of Russian forces that could participate on Belarusian soil.

Furthermore, Minsk has diverged in substantive ways from Moscow in its threat assessments. Belarus, for example, did not view the deployment of a US armored battalion to Lithuania as destabilizing to regional security or threatening to Belarusian national interests, in contrast to claims from Russia. More broadly, Minsk has not viewed NATO as being in opposition to Belarus, nor as a threat to it—a view starkly at odds with that of Moscow, which views the North Atlantic Alliance with hostility. Belarus's primary concern with respect to NATO is that an increase in US or other NATO member-state forces in Poland or the Baltic States could provoke action on the part of Russia that would jeopardize Belarusian sovereignty. The disparity in threat assessments as well as Belarus's actions to temper aspects of joint military exercises that might otherwise be seen as provocative demonstrate aspects of *de facto* non-alignment in Belarusian policy within the context of a formally non-neutral security arrangement.

Belarus and the West

Belarusian leaders understand that closer relations with the West are indispensable to the continuation of Belarus's sovereignty and to the successful modernization of the country. This represents a significant shift in the Belarusian perspective: as mentioned previously, Russia, rather than the West, has been viewed as the agent of modernization and prosperity for Belarus. This is no longer the case. Belarus has expressed its long-term aspiration for "multi-vector relations," with Lukashenka stating that Belarus seeks to develop "relations with the European Union, China, the United States [and] Russia," with Belarusian foreign relations "equally close to all centers of power." Such an aspiration represents hedging behavior on the part of Belarus, analogous to the diversification of a financial investment portfolio to mitigate risks in any one sector. This is not the same as *de facto* non-alignment; nevertheless, it can act in support of such a policy.

Belarus has also begun to consider its security in a European context, rather than solely within the context of Russia, and views its security as inseparable from the security of Europe. Regarding the EU and the transatlantic relationship, Lukashenka stated to a Jamestown Foundation delegation in 2018 that Belarus is "convinced that the security of the entire continent depends on the cohesion among [...] countries and the continuation of the military-political role of the United States in European affairs." As stated, Belarus does not consider NATO to be a threat. It joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1995 and, as part of its PfP membership, holds annual meetings with the Alliance on its participation in the Planning and Review Process (PARP). It has granted the use of its airspace to NATO for cargo flights to Afghanistan since 2004, and Belarusian rail transit has played a crucial role in the Northern Distribution Network since 2011. Belarus has even put forward a number of projects within the context of PfP, including a proposal to create a PfP training center in Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defense and an

expression of willingness to host disaster response exercises organized by the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center.

With respect to the European Union, Belarus seeks an increase in trade with the EU as part of its “Three Thirds” plan for export diversification (the three parts referring to Russia, the EU, and the rest of the world). As a precondition for expanded market access, however, the EU has made a number of demands that appear idiosyncratic. Benchmarks for improved Belarusian-US relations, meanwhile, are low: the restoration of full diplomatic relations and the removal of sanctions are the two main actions that Washington could and should take toward normalization.

The Sustainability of *De Facto* Non-Alignment

It is important to answer the question as to why Belarus is uniquely situated to pursue a policy of *de facto* non-alignment in ways that other countries in Europe’s East are not. In this regard, one can look to the structure of Belarusian domestic politics. Belarus benefits from a centralized political power structure that is decidedly not present in several of Russia’s other neighbors. Lukashenka’s monopolization of the roles of guarantor of Belarusian sovereignty and of Russo-Belarusian friendship is only possible because of the highly centralized nature of political power in Belarus. The Lukashenka system has excluded the liabilities that, for example, Ukraine and Moldova have to struggle with—namely, political factionalism and competing political parties, which Russia plays off against each other as a means to exert influence over domestic policies.

Ukraine and Moldova are classic examples of the premature introduction of the parliamentary system of government in countries not prepared for the system—in countries lacking both the institutions to support genuine democratic governance and the awareness of a concept of national interest as contrasted against factional interests. Ever since 1991, Ukraine and Moldova have

struggled to define national interest—and actually, they have no effective conception of it. However, both countries have deeply entrenched conceptions of factional interests, of group interests, of local interests. Political parties in both countries are preoccupied with tactical political games. The election in Ukraine of Volodymyr Zelensky with a 73 percent majority, as well as the election of a majority of his party, Servant of the People, in the Verkhovna Rada, is precisely a corrective to the Ukrainian factionalism and disorder that voters sensed.

Belarus, by contrast, has avoided the pitfalls of factionalism thanks to its strong presidency. I believe that Belarus (together with Azerbaijan, which has a similarly strong presidency) is among the most successful of Eastern Partnership countries in terms of state consolidation, political stability, successful modernization, and development of the concept of state interest—of which, by contrast, there is a great shortfall in the cases of Ukraine, Moldova or even Georgia, all of which have experimented far too early with parliamentary democracy, multi-party systems and checks and balances. As a result, Russia will not be able—at least in the next five years, barring any especially improbable and unforeseen developments—to employ the same kinds of divisive tactics in Belarus that it currently uses in Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia.

The Current State of Belarusian *De Facto* Non-Alignment

Belarus has sought to promote itself as a mediating party, a platform for negotiations and meetings—most notably in recent years through hosting the “Minsk Process” conflict resolution talks pertaining to Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas. It seeks to encourage an identity for itself as a donor of regional stability. In doing so, Belarus seeks to avoid taking sides in any confrontations between Russia and the West. It also is putting forward independent political and diplomatic initiatives. Among these is a proposal to craft a political declaration on the non-manufacture and non-deployment of medium-range

ballistic missiles as Belarus continues to abide by the terms of the now-defunct Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

At present, Belarus avoids and resists being turned into a Russian outpost. It does not offer a staging area for a third party's hostile actions against Belarus's neighboring countries, nor has it been a conduit of military threats and challenges to neighboring countries. Belarus will not host Russian combat forces on its territory and will practice military transparency, to include the invitation of NATO observers to Russian-Belarusian exercises on Belarus's territory.

Belarus does not proselytize for Russian proposals on European security. Belarus conducts and expresses its own assessments of threats and of the international diplomatic and security environment, and then it launches its own independent diplomatic initiatives. Belarus does not become embroiled in Russia's conflicts nor in Russia's geopolitical or civilizational projects. Belarus stays out of the Russian world, acting as an independent state with a growing sense of its own European identity, upholding its national interests in the region and in Europe writ large. Belarus is interacting with the West directly in its own right rather than as a member of a Russia-led bloc, and it is proceeding in this from its national interests, which are closely tied with the modernization of Belarus.

Unlike during the Soviet period, and even the early post-Soviet period, Belarus does not regard Russia as an agent of modernization and prosperity in Belarus. Rather, Minsk looks to the West as the agent of prosperity and modernization in Belarus. Belarus is led by an awareness that its own security and independence is inseparable from that of Europe in the transatlantic context—as distinct from the Eurasian context. Belarusian leaders, including Lukashenka, have expressed this awareness in their dialogues with Western interlocutors, including their dialogue with a Jamestown Foundation delegation. And finally, Belarus's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union shall remain limited to the economic sphere without

supranational authority and without political integration with Russia or the other member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union.

As observers of Belarus's international affairs will recognize, these are already features of foreign policy that Minsk is currently conducting. These elements have emerged in the last two years, and the task ahead for Western states is to assist Belarus in consolidating its foreign policy on this basis.

Recommendations for Western Leaders

In support of Belarusian *de facto* non-alignment, there are a number of policies that Western leaders can and should adopt. First, Western relations with Belarus should be de-ideologized, and when visiting Belarus, officials representing Western states—be they politicians, career civil servants or analysts—should heavily stress Belarusian independence and sovereignty. One cannot dispute that there are domestic pressures, whether in Washington or in Brussels, for Western officials to talk about democracy and human rights. They must, however, prioritize their roles as statesmen over their positions as politicians, promoting a primary message of Belarusian independence and sovereignty. Needless to say, Western officials stressing Belarusian sovereignty will limit the ability of Western states to present political demands in Minsk—but this is a tradeoff that must be made, as the primary objective at the moment is to secure Belarus vis-à-vis Russia. A failure on the part of the West to secure this territorial base as a sovereign piece of territory that will build its own future will obviate any efforts towards democratization in Belarus. Statehood is a primary objective. Institution-building is a primary objective. Democratization can only come later, after the aforementioned prerequisites are met.

Second, as alluded to previously, it would be extremely detrimental for Western leaders to pursue an anti-Russian policy with respect to Belarus for two reasons. The first pertains to Russia: given the

importance with which Moscow views its relations with Minsk, Russia should not be led to believe that it is “losing” Belarus to the West, an outcome that it would consider unacceptable. The other pertains to Belarus itself: there is weak societal demand for de-Russification. As mentioned, Russia has always enjoyed a favorable status in the historical memory of Belarusians. A process of Belarusianization must be guided from above—*within* Belarus.

Finally, Western leaders should take great care not to place Belarus in situations where it must take sides between Russia and the West. Minsk has been supportive of Russia in United Nations General Assembly votes on Crimea, for example. This should not be surprising. On issues that are of high priority for Russia, it is unwise to expect Belarus to side with the West. Minsk must be permitted to use its own risk calculus to determine when it can break with Moscow on international issues. However, Minsk can be expected to act firmly on issues that affect Belarus directly—its core interests and its national sovereignty. As Belarus has limited political ammunition vis-à-vis Russia, it must use it selectively on core national interests while it continues to hedge on more peripheral issues.

Split Identity and a Tug-of-War for Belarus's Memory

Grigory Ioffe

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Executive Summary

World War II continues to be at the center of Belarusians' collective memory. However, Belarus is a country with two historical narratives that have been at odds with each other since the inception of the Belarusian national movement. While the neo-Soviet/Russo-centric narrative has captured the imagination of the majority of Belarusians, the Westernizing narrative has gradually but steadily been making headway, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Some kind of symbiosis of the two narratives is underway. As this process unfolds, however, policymakers focused on Belarus ought to evince patience and draw lessons from the strategic blunders and the Achilles heels of the Belarusian Westernizers, such as the whitewashing of local Nazi collaborators during World War II.

Introduction

Belarusian national identity is still crystallizing despite Belarus's 28-year history of existence as an independent state. The continued absence of a clear-cut identity is a function of several variables. These include the belated emergence (at the start of the 20th century) of a national movement; location between two older and well-established national cores, that of Poles and Russians, linguistic cousins, each of which is closer to Belarusians than to each other; and the pervasive

influence of Russia over the course of the last 200 years. One of the implications of this influence is that today, the overwhelming majority of Belarusians communicate primarily or exclusively in Russian, the language of a nominally different ethnic group. While all fifteen Soviet republics became independent states as a result of the Soviet Union's breakup, in Belarus, there was no separatist movement, so it gained its independence without fighting for it. That sets Belarus apart from two of its neighbors, Lithuania and Latvia, as well as from the western part of Ukraine. Though Poland, Belarus's western neighbor, has never been part of the Soviet Union, escaping Russia's sphere of influence had been one of the refrains of Polish nationalism since the uprising of 1794.

In contrast to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and western Ukraine, anti-Russian sentiment never developed in Belarus. Rather, Belarusian attachment to culturally close Russia and Russians has always run the risk of diluting any sense of difference from them. In his 2018 book, Yury Shevtsov, born and raised in the westernmost part of Belarus, referred to Belarusian culture as a territorial (regional) version of Russian culture.¹ While this may be a radical formulation, likely to be rejected by many Belarusians, the number of those effectively siding with it is nonetheless quite significant. The impediments to the development of a cohesive Belarusian identity were analyzed in detail in this author's earlier publications, especially in his 2008 book.² The book by Per Rudling³ contains the best analysis of the early years of Belarusian nationalism. The works by Nina Mechkovskaya, Valer

¹ Yury Shevtsov, *Voina na Ukraine: Transformatsiya Evropy*, Moscow: RGGU 2018, 148.

² Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2008.

³ Per Ander Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press 2014.

Bulgakov and Yulia Chernyavskaya, as well as articles and interviews of Valyantsin Akudovich represent genuinely Belarusian sources that informed this author's views on Belarusian identity. Some of these works are quoted below.

Two Opposing Collective Memories

The historical memory of every community is a flip side of its identity.⁴ As such, the collective memory of Belarusians cannot help but bear an imprint of Belarusian identity's birthmarks and tribulations. To this day, Belarusians do not have a cohesive historical memory. Instead, it comes in two pronounced versions, though there have been some selectively successful attempts at consolidating them. What follows are the results of a national survey devoted to Belarusian national memory as well as closer analysis of its two opposing versions.

Results of 2016 Survey on National Memory

The survey in question was conducted in 2016 by the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences.⁵ It revealed that only about one-tenth of respondents see events from Belarus's early history—that is, when the territory of contemporary Belarus was integral to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), Rzeczpospolita (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) and the Russian Empire—as formative for the country today. Among younger Belarusians, i.e., those between the ages of 18 and 35, as many as 19 percent attach

⁴ International Encyclopedia of Political Science, Edited by: Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser & Leonardo Morlino, Sage Publishing: Newbury Park 2011.

⁵ N.F. Denisova and N. M. Brovchuk, "Istoricheskaya pamyat' belorusov: sotsiologicheskii analiz," *Vesti Natsiyanalnai Akademii Navuk Belarusi, Seriya Gumanitarnykh Navuk*, 2018, Vol. 63, #1: 21–32.

importance to the GDL; whereas among the older group (56+), only 11 percent do.

Overall, the most important historical event in Belarusians' collective perception turns out to be the Soviet Union's victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945)—the name given to World War II (following Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union) in Russia and Belarus. Out of the older generation, 74 percent marked this event as important, more than any other event. Out of those between 36 and 55 years old, 70.5 percent did, and so did 64.5 percent of the youngest polled group. The survey revealed that the second-most important historical event to Belarus, based on the frequency with which it was invoked by the respondents, was the breakup of the Soviet Union. Out of the aforementioned age groups (listed in descending order of age), 59.2, 50.3, and 49.8 percent, respectively, attached importance to it. The third most important event was the Chernobyl catastrophe: 49.6, 45.6 and 43 percent, respectively, called it important. Neither the 1917 Communist Revolution nor the unification of Belarus in 1939 appear to be as crucial as those three events, although 32 percent of 56-year-olds and up did find the revolution significant. It is remarkable that the acquisition of Belarusian statehood appeared less important than the breakup of the Soviet Union, although both events are two sides of the same coin. Still, only 43.7, 40.0 and 37 percent, respectively, of the respondents attached importance to Belarus's becoming an independent state. However indirectly, this upholds the idea that the Soviet Union was the entity that Belarusians deemed their homeland and within which they began to perceive themselves as a community.

The authors of the survey concluded that in Belarusian society, perception of the past is relatively homogenous and that differences between the generations are not overly significant. These assertions require one qualification, however. Most, if not the overwhelming number, of Belarusians adhere to the neo-Soviet/Russo-centric view of Belarusian history, so it is not surprising that the national survey showed no polarization. But even a superficial familiarity with

Belarusian media—state-run, opposition-minded and those outlets broadcasting from abroad, including online media⁶—as well as communication with average Belarusians confirm that their historical memory is not as homogenous as would appear from the aforementioned survey. Along with the neo-Soviet version, the Westernizing one, sometimes called national-democratic, is prevalent, as well. Moreover, it is represented and articulated in the media at least as strongly as the neo-Soviet variety, and its online presence is even more abundant than that of the former.

Collective Memory of Belarusians: The Neo-Soviet/Russo-Centric Version

The neo-Soviet strain of collective memory is often criticized for being a product of indoctrination and for the precious little attention it pays to pre-Soviet history—as if Belarus did not exist prior to 1917. Both criticisms have some validity. The element of indoctrination is real, as secondary schooling in history is subject to government control. But just as in Russia, where liberal ideas disseminated during the Boris Yeltsin period were not absorbed by mass consciousness as readily as national-patriotic concepts, likewise in Belarus there is more harmony between the watchful eye of the state and public demands for certain “truths” about history.⁷ Indeed, that overlap is more extensive than liberal and nationalist critics of the neo-Soviet “memorial cult” are

⁶ More than 70 percent of Belarusian adults regularly use the Internet. See “Belorusskaya internet auditoriya v 2017 godu,” *Infropolicy.biz*, July 14, 2017, <http://www.infopolicy.biz/?p=9776>.

⁷ At a panel on Belarus, during the November 2019 annual convention of the Association for the advancement of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, in San Francisco, scholar Samuel Charap of the Rand Corporation asked this author, “Is propaganda solely on the supply side or is it also on the demand side?” Charap’s question notably stemmed from apparently a similar perception of the aforementioned harmony between the state’s and society’s understandings of Belarusian history.

ready to admit. No less important is the fact that Belarus's pre-Soviet history is not easy to imagine and canonize because ethnic-Belarusian self-awareness itself is a product of the 20th century. Even the self-name—Belarusians—was internalized *en masse* during the Soviet period. Therefore, if that time frame is recognized as formative by most members of the national community, this recognition matches their actual experience and that of their ancestors. This is all the more true since the neo-Soviet strain of national memory does not reject the pre-Soviet history in principle. Rather, it downplays early history, which is what the aforementioned survey revealed. In that sense, the physical transfer of the Francis Skarynatoponym offered a powerful metaphor.

Francis Skaryna (1470–1550) was an educator, pioneer printer, and Bible translator. Born in Polotsk and educated in Kraków, his first printed edition of the Bible, “The Psalter,” was released on August 6, 1517, in Old Ruthenian. The culmination of his life's work was printing a translation of the Bible in twenty-three books, between 1517 and 1519. Belarusian historiography first laid claim to Skaryna in 1922 and then again in 1948.

In 1991, the main street in Minsk was named Skaryna Avenue, but in 2005, Skaryna was exiled as it were to the city's northern periphery, where a significant but secondary street was named after him; whereas, the main street was renamed Independence Avenue. This reshuffling of street names effectively signified the political establishment's continued desire to pay respect to Skaryna, but with a new sense of proportion. The acquisition of independence, the Great Patriotic War, and the October 1917 Revolution, the names of whose major actors are still prominently borne by streets in downtown Minsk (along with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels)—all those assets of collective memory are seen as more important.

The neo-Soviet/Russo-centric strain of that memory assigns the role of Belarus's precursor to the Polotsk Principality, integral to Kievan

Rus. The descendants of the Krivichi tribe, key to the formation of Belarusians, are described as a bone of contention between the culturally close Russians and the more culturally remote Poles. The 1596 Union of Brest, which marked the transfer of local Orthodox Christians to the patronage of the Roman Catholic Pope and the formation of the so-called Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church, is viewed as resulting from Polish ploys. “Having understood that one cannot convert the Orthodox into Catholics in a straightforward way, the Vatican and ruling circles of Poland concocted a new plan of unification of Catholic and Orthodox churches under the auspices of the Vatican. The leading Orthodox clerics in Belarus and Ukraine supported this plan... Leery of losing their land estates, they were ready for betrayal,”⁸ reads a popular college-level textbook of Belarusian history. As such, the mass conversion of the Uniates back into Orthodoxy, in 1839, is construed as their rightful return to the bosom of the native church. The anti-Russian uprisings of 1794, 1830–1831, and 1863–1864 on Belarusian lands are perceived as Polish, with the Belarusian peasantry taking the side of Russia.

After World War II, the personality of Kastus (Konstanty) Kalinovsky, referred to as a fighter for the class interests of Belarusian peasants, appeared in official history textbooks. The fact that he published the newspaper *Muzhytskaya Prauda* (*Peasant's Truth*) was acknowledged—but not the fact that he called upon the local peasantry to consolidate under the patronage of Poland in order to fight Russia. In the town of Kobrin, Brest Oblast, there is a military-history museum named after Alexander Suvorov. To a significant extent it is devoted to Suvorov's crackdown on the 1794 uprising led by Belarus-born Tadeusz Kościuszko. There is little doubt this museum is part and parcel of a Russo-centric pantheon of Belarusian historical memory. “When Belarus joined Russia, the Belarusian

⁸ I. I. Kovkel and E. S. Yarmusik, *Istoriya Belarusi s Drevneishikh Vremyon do Nashikh Dnei*, Minsk: Aversev 2000, 41.

people were liberated from nasty [sic] national and religious oppression”⁹—this thesis is integral to the refrain of the Russo-centric view, as far as pre-Soviet history is concerned.

The 1917 Revolution is held in high regard by the Neo-Soviet strain of historical memory. Moreover, in Belarus, where November 7 (considered the start of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917) is still a national holiday, this event is higher in status than in Russia itself. Speaking on November 7, 2018, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka underscored that the Revolution laid the foundation for national revival and self-determination of many peoples.¹⁰ The fact that Belarusians *en masse* did not fight for self-determination either in the aftermath of the Revolution or seven decades years later finds a peculiar interpretation in the popular course of history. “When Soviet power was taking shape and nation-building experience was absent, the working class of Belarus treated any detachment whatsoever from Soviet Russia with suspicion.”¹¹ Hence the more-than-skeptical attitude toward the Belarusian People’s Republic. Proclaimed on March 25, 1918, this would-be state languished for the remaining nine months of German military occupation and failed to convince anybody, including the occupiers themselves, of the fact of its existence, although it did solicit protection from the Kaiser. In contrast, the Soviet quasi-statehood bestowed upon Belarus on January 1, 1919, in Smolensk, at the congress of the Bolshevik Party’s western section, is regarded as the legitimate and sole forerunner of fully-fledged statehood that Belarus gained 72 years later, in 1991, in

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰ “Lukashenko: Oktyabrskaya revolutsiya zalozhila osnovy dlya natsionalnogo vozrozhdeniya mnogikh narodov,” *Belta*, November 7, 2018, https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-oktjabrskaja-revoljutsija-zalozhila-osnovy-dlja-natsionalnogo-vozhzhdenija-mnogih-narodov-324601-2018/?utm_source=belta&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=accent.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. The cultural anthropologist Yulia Chernyvskaia underscored that the Communist ideal of equality matched the ethos of a peasant community and, therefore, was favored by Belarusians.¹²

Still, according to the majority perception, even the 1917 Revolution pales in comparison to the professed importance of the Great Patriotic War. During the Soviet period, the persistently repeated thesis was that every fourth resident of Belarus had perished in that conflict. Today, it is believed that every third did. The pivotal element of this national memory is the Belarusian underground partisan movement, largely organized and steered from Moscow. Somehow, the memory of the war eclipsed even the unification of Belarus on September 17, 1939, when, as a result of the implementation of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, Poland was divided between the two invading signatories. As a result of this Polish partition between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, western Belarusian lands that had been appended to Poland in 1921 were suddenly reunited with the rest of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The enormity of the casualties, the cruelty of the occupiers, and a wide and efficient network of partisan detachments, especially in the eastern part of Belarus, form the centerpieces of wartime memories. Such historical landmarks as the Brest Fortress, Khatyn, the sprawling and informative Museum of the Great Patriotic War, and the recently (2018) opened memorial at Trostenets (the fourth-largest Nazi death camp in Europe), sustain these memories. It may be somewhat more difficult to grasp why the memory of the war is not just a tribute to its casualties and to the eventual victory in that titanic conflict but also a symbol of its formative influence on Belarusians as a national community. To wit, July 3, when the Soviet Army liberated Minsk

¹² Yu. V. Cherniavskaya, *Belorusy: Ot tuteishikh r Natsii*, Minsk: FUAInform 2010: 451.

from the Germans in 1944, is now commemorated as Independence Day in Belarus. From 1992 to 1996, independence was celebrated on July 27, the anniversary of the declaration of state sovereignty adopted in 1990. But at the November 1996 referendum, 88 percent of Belarusians endorsed the transfer of this national holiday from July 27 to July 3. "This decision reflects the historical memory of Belarusians and the continuity of generations," Lukashenka declared during the Independence Day celebration in 2017. "In the hearts of Belarusians, independence is connected with liberation from fascism."¹³ In such a way, not detachment from Russia but expulsion of the German Nazi occupiers is perceived as a step toward independence.

This can seem confounding to outside observers. It is, after all, impossible to deny that Belarus's independence was a direct result of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the entity once created by Russia, which also played the key role in that union. Perhaps three circumstances can clarify this confusion. One of them is the failure of ethnic nationalism to consolidate the Slavic-speaking population of the region around genuinely Belarusian symbols. This has been reaffirmed by several researchers, including Yulia Chernyavskaya.¹⁴ The Polish Belarus watcher Ryszard Radzik once remarked that "not all distinctions between groups of people bear a national character" and that this formula matches contemporary differences between Russians and Belarusians: while differences do exist, it is hard to say if they rise to the national level.¹⁵ The second circumstance is that a pervasive and effective underground partisan movement in the

¹³ "Lukashenko obyasnil, pochemu Den Nezavisimosti Belarus prazdnuyet 3 iyulya," *Sputnik.by*, July 3, 2017, <https://sputnik.by/politics/20170703/1029588443/lukashenko-obyasnil-pochemu-den-nezavisimosti-belarus-prazdnuet-3-iyulya.html>.

¹⁴ Yu. V. Chernyavskaya, *Op. cit.*, 68; 87–90.

¹⁵ Ryszard Radzik, *Kim są Białorusini?* Toruń: Adam Marszałek 2004, 84.

formerly overwhelmingly peasant Belarusian community is perceived as the first ever expression of its collective will. “During the Second World War,” writes Yury Shevtsov, “there was a powerful outburst of Belarusian national feeling. Belarusians generally opposed the Nazis and, as a rule, supported the Soviet partisans. The Nazis tried to rely on the non-Soviet interpretation of Belarusian nationalism, and a notable portion of Belarusians supported the Nazis. In Belarus, the war against the Nazis turned into a war of two types of national identity... During the defeat of Nazism, supporters of the non-Soviet version of Belarusian identity were for the most part killed or fled the country... The hatred of the victorious version of the Belarusian culture for the Nazi collaborators is, as a rule, automatically transferred to the historical Belarusian symbols used by them and to everything connected with the non-Soviet version of Belarusian identity and ideology.”¹⁶

After the war, Belarusians became a majority in their urban areas for the first time in history; previously, Jews, Russians and Poles dominated nominally Belarusian cities and towns. This is the third circumstance highlighting the formative influence of the war on Belarusian nation building. A joke made the rounds during the 1960s and 1970s that the principal battle won by the partisans was the battle for the post-war corridors of power. The period when the regional administration was led by outsiders had eventually come to an end. Before the war, only one person with local roots, Vassily Sharangovich, ascended to the helm of power in Minsk, and merely for three months. An entirely different era began with the appointment of Kirill Mazurov (1956–1965) and then of Piotr Masherov (1965–1980) as first secretaries of Belarus’s Communist Party. During the war, both led partisan detachments. Along with them, many former partisans obtained leadership positions.

¹⁶ Yury Shevtsov, *Obyedinionnaya Natsiya: Fenomen Belarusi*, Moscow: Europa 2005, 75.

Moreover, the so-called “lieutenant prose” of Vasyl Bykov (Bykaŭ) enriched the self-knowledge of Belarusians. Perhaps the most prominent Belarusian writer of all times, Bykov took part in the war as a petty officer, from summer 1942 to the end of hostilities, and sustained several wounds.

Three occurrences of post-war history dominate Belarusian national memory. These are the industrial growth of the 1960s–1980s, the implementation of a massive program to drain the Polesye swamps, and the meltdown of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The accelerated development of the industrial sector in Belarus led to modernization and quality-of-life improvements that were historically unprecedented for the area. This helps explain part of the reason why Belarusians *en masse* are so attached to their Soviet past. What actually transpired in Belarus was hyper-industrialization, whereby state-run enterprises with more than 500 employees collectively came to account for more than half of the entire labor force. Elderly and middle-aged Belarusians retain warm feelings toward the last 20 years under Soviet rule. In contrast to big-city Russia, in Belarus, these sentiments do not conflict with those of Soviet-era dissidents; in Belarus, there were precious few, if any, dissidents at all. Exceptionally genial memories are retained of Piotr Masherov. These positive recollections first of all relate to the industrial success stories of the late 1960s and 1970s that occurred under his rule, when Belarusian cities were growing fast and, for the first time in their lives, many people moved out of communal apartments or wooden huts with brick stoves into modern, single-family apartments.¹⁷

¹⁷ Two additional Masherov myths also persist. One has to do with suspicion that his death in a car crash was not accidental but engineered by some Moscow-based authority in order to eliminate a leader who was genuinely close to ordinary people. The second myth has to do with Masherov's putative French origin. Reportedly, Masherov's great-grandfather—Macheraut—was a soldier in Napoleon's army who

As for the drainage of wetlands in Polesye during the 1960s and 1970s, it added much-needed and reasonably fertile arable land—allowing for future success stories in Belarusian agribusiness. Also, like in ancient Egypt, where life depended on the quality of the irrigation system and its control from a single center, so here, in Polesye, life came to depend on the quality of drainage and its centralized control.¹⁸

In its turn, the Chernobyl disaster led to the emergence of a large group of people who could not imagine their existence without the ever-present care of the state. In a country that gained independence unexpectedly just five years after Chernobyl, this gave an additional boost to a nostalgic sentiment about the Soviet Union and to the most persistent opposition to privatization and other aspects of market reform.

In today's Belarus, an already sizeable proportion of the population (about 27 percent) has lived its entire life under a single political leader, Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Initially, attitudes toward Lukashenka polarized Belarusians. Gradually, that polarization weakened but never disappeared entirely. Thus, Minsk-based intellectuals continue to roll their eyes and pass ironic judgments whenever Lukashenka is mentioned. The nub of the matter is not just his exceptional longevity at the helm of power but also his state farm (*sovkhos*) origins and authoritarian tendencies. Most middle-aged and elderly Belarusians, however, remember well what they voted for in the 1995 and 1996 referendums, held during the early years of Lukashenka's presidency. Thus, in 1995, they overwhelmingly opted for the restoration of the official status of the Russian language (in a predominantly Russian-speaking country) and also for the return of

stayed in eastern Belarus after the French military's 1812 retreat, converted to the Orthodoxy, and married a peasant woman.

¹⁸ Yury Shevtsov, *Op.Cit.*, 129.

Soviet-era national insignia. These replaced the short-lived (1992–1995) white-red-white flag and coat of arms featuring the *Pahonia* (Chase), which were rooted in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania tradition but failed to endear themselves to most contemporary Belarusians. In 1996, they voted for giving exceptional prerogatives to the then-widely popular head of state, at the expense of the unpopular parliament. The national legislature was perceived as an imitational structure, whose genuine importance to this day has not been internalized by Belarusians or (as it seems) by Russians or Ukrainians either.

Collective Memory of Belarusians: The Westernizing Version

Since the late 1980s, the neo-Soviet strain of national memory has coexisted with the Westernizing one. The latter, however, is no younger than the neo-Soviet version. The first indigenously produced survey of Belarusian history was published in 1910; and by its author's, Vatslav Lastouski's, own assertion, the work was meant to help liberate Belarusians from the Russian yoke.¹⁹ Later on, however, Westernizing narratives of Belarusian history were hard hit on two occasions and never fully recovered.

The initial blow came in the 1930s, when close to 300 Belarusian-speaking writers and college professors fell victim to mass Stalinist repressions. Subsequently, the Westernizing version of Belarusian history espoused by many of these purged academics was adopted by collaborationist structures under German occupation in World War II, which were then defeated by the partisan movement and the Soviet Army.

¹⁹ Vatslav Lastouski, *Karotkaya Gistoryya Belarusi*, Vilnya: Drukarnia Marcina Kukhty 1910; Reprinted: Minsk: Univesytetskaye 1993.

The third resurgence of the Westernizing historical discourse came about during Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* and is firmly associated with Zenon Poznyak (Zianon Pazniak), an archaeologist and discoverer of the mass graves of the victims of mass executions in the Kuropaty forest tract in the late 1930s. Having emigrated from Belarus in 1996 because of the danger allegedly hanging over his life, Poznyak excluded himself from domestic political life. He is now remembered by many—including those who give him credit as the founder of “true” Belarus—as a dreamer, a tribune, a demagogue, a conspiracy theorist and an utterly impractical politician.

Resurrected thanks to the efforts of some of Poznyak's associates who were originally united in the Belarusian Popular Front, the Westernizing movement today has a solid presence online. It is sustained by the *Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty (BSRL)*, the newspaper *Nasha Niva*²⁰ as well as by some other less significant outlets. The contribution of the *BSRL* to sustaining national memory is incomparably greater than that of any other service of *Radio Liberty* in respective countries. This is because in Belarus, there is no equal (or commensurate to *BSRL*) source of news, analysis and promotion of an alternative view of history in the national language. It seems doubtful, however, that the Westernizing strain of national memory dominates the consciousness of more than 8–10 percent of Belarusians.

Although this percentage is noticeably higher among younger people and among residents of Minsk, Oleg Manaev, the founder and head of Belarus's most reputable polling firm, IISEPS, has long noticed that the transition to older age groups is accompanied by a transition to more Russo-centric and neo-Soviet beliefs. Apparently, as Belarusian age, the latter viewpoints increasingly appear to them as more organic

²⁰ *Nasha Niva* inherited its name from a remote predecessor newspaper, published in 1906–1915, in Vilnia (Vilnius).

and suitable for everyday life in Belarus; so they face a dilemma—“either adapt to them or leave the country.”²¹

The main building blocks of the Westernizing version of Belarusian historical memory are as follows:

1. Relations between Belarus and Russia are those between a colony and the metropolis; by all means, it is necessary to break the umbilical cord, which still connects Belarus with Russia.
2. Belarus is a European community that should return to Europe.
3. During the Second World War, two equally alien forces fought each other on the territory of Belarus—Nazism and Stalinism—and Belarusians fell victim to this clash.
4. Post-war material progress tied Belarus to Russia even more. Meanwhile, Belarusians should shake off the layers of Soviet history and recall their European roots.

One of the canonical texts propagating this specification of historical memory regarding the pre-Soviet period is *Ten Centuries of Belarusian History: 862–1918*, by Vladimir Orlov and Gennady Saganovich (2003). Just as in the Russo-centric version, the Polotsk Principality is believed to be the forerunner of Belarus. But in contrast to the Russo-centric narrative, the Westernizing strand of historical memory questions the alleged subordination of Polotsk to Kiev: as the Westernizing historians point out, Kievan Prince Vladimir assassinated the local Polotsk ruler Rogvolod and took his daughter Rogneda by force. Under this telling, Rogneda thus turns into a

²¹ Oleg Manaev (Ed.), “Molodiozh i Grazhdanskoye Obshchestvo v Belarusi,” Saint Petersburg: Nevsky Prostor 2011: 15–18. Manaev reiterated the same observation at the November 2019 convention of the Association for the Advancement of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, in San Francisco, while responding to a question by George Krol, the US ambassador to Belarus in 2003–2006.

symbol of Belarusian desire for independence and opposition to invaders. Westernizers routinely stress that governance in Polotsk was more democratic than anywhere to the east of it—i.e., in what was to become Muscovy. As Orlov and Saganovich argue in their *Ten Centuries of Belarusian History*, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), which had captured Polotsk and other parts of modern-day Belarus, was indeed “privatized” by ethnic Lithuanians; but then life in it took on “Belarusian national forms.” Unlike the Russo-centric tendency to refer to “Belarusian lands” inside the GDL and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (which incorporated the GDL in 1569), the Westernizing tradition specifically refers to the latter two larger entities as “our country” or “our state.” Hence, Orlov and Saganovich write, “To fight Olgerd [GDL’s ruler], the [Russian] voivode Dmitry Minin headed the advance regiment, which was formed from Muscovites and residents of nearby cities. In the battle of Volo Lamsky... our [sic] banners utterly defeated this army and proceeded straight to Moscow.”²²

Here is how *Ten Centuries of Belarusian History* describes the 1368–1372 war of Grand Duke Olgerd against Moscow:

In Belarus [sic], the grand dukes issued Magdeburg Rights Certificates... Vilnia received the first such certificate in 1387, then did Brest (1390), a year later—Grodno, in 1441—Slutsk, in 1498—Polotsk, and in 1499—Minsk... In Muscovy, and then in the Russian Empire, where rough feudal order reigned supreme, Magdeburg Rights, under which European cities lived, never existed. Not surprisingly, after capturing Belarus at the end of the 18th century, Empress Catherine II

²² Vladimir Orlov and Gennady Saganovich, *Desyat Vekov Belorusskoi Istorii: 862–1918*, Vilnius 2003, 66.

immediately issued special decrees on the abolition of self-government and of all urban liberties.²³

Perhaps the most prominent assertions made in the Westernizing historical narrative is that Russia had not fought anybody as much as it has Belarusians. Although it is clear that Russia was fighting not “Belarus,” which simply did not exist, it still fought “our country.” In 2018, the *BSRL* published a table from which it follows that the “Russian-Belarusian wars” lasted a total of 72 years. Accordingly, these wars took place in 1368–1372, 1406–1408, 1445–1449, 1492–1494, 1500–1503, 1507–1508, 1512–1522, 1534–1537, 1563–1582, 1609–1618, 1632–1634 and 1654–1667.²⁴

During one of these cycles of war, on September 8, 1514, GDL forces commanded by Konstantin Ostrozhsy defeated Muscovy troops at the Battle of Orsha. “The brilliant victory of our swordsmen gave the initiative to the Grand Duchy... In December 1514, the great *hetman* [military leader] Konstantin Ostrozhsy triumphantly entered the capital of our state, Vilnia,” Orlov and Saganovich write in their history of Belarus told from the Westernizing perspective.²⁵ “In 1992, on the anniversary of the Battle of Orsha, the Belarusian military took the oath of allegiance to its people on Independence Square in Minsk.”²⁶ That particular 16th century conflict was the last of the wars from the aforementioned list that turned out particularly bloody. And during this conflict, not only did many Orthodox priests openly collaborated with the Muscovite occupiers, but most of the Belarusian

²³ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

²⁴ The table published in the *BSRL* referenced Vadim Deruzhinsky, *Tainy Belorusskoi Istorii*, Minsk: FUAInform 2011.

²⁵ Vladimir Orlov and Gennady Saganovich, *Desyat Vekov Belorusskoi Istorii: 862–1918*, Vilnius 2003, 88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

artisans were additionally exiled to Moscow. Thus, Orlov and Saganovich argue, “ordinary” Belarusians were essentially victimized twice by being forcibly deprived of their elite. “Belarus, exhausted by the war, no longer resisted Polonization.”²⁷ Indeed, from time to time, the idea of Russian-Polish treacherous cooperation against Belarus comes up in the Westernizers’ discourse. For example, when the army of Ivan the Terrible captured Polotsk in 1563, only “Polish knights” avoided being taken into captivity, as promised to them.²⁸ Many years later, after the defeat of the Kościuszko uprising, when the final partition of Poland took place, “the language of instruction in the absolute majority of Belarusian schools and colleges was Polish. This may seem strange, as it shows that the Polonization of Belarus achieved great success within the Russian Empire. In St. Petersburg, it was believed that in the occupied lands it was better to deal with the Poles.”²⁹ That narrative is meant to explain—rather illogically—why the Belarusian language (first codified in 1918) failed to be introduced in schools and colleges as early as 1795.

In the Westernizing version of national memory, the weak national consciousness of proto-Belarusians is wholly attributed to the intrigues of external forces. And though that may sound reasonable on its surface, the totality of that attribution is questionable. After all, it was only “in the 1890s [that] in Belarus, the voice of the first truly national poet, who was later named the spiritual father of Belarusian national revival, Frantsyshak Bogushevich, a participant of the 1863 uprising, was heard for the first time... Addressing [his] compatriots, the poet convinced them that they were Belarusians [...] because their

²⁷ Ibid, 111.

²⁸ Ibid, 102.

²⁹ Ibid, 160.

language is Belarusian and the land is called Belarus.”³⁰ Something similar is known about such progenitors of the Belarusian revival as the brothers Ivan and Anton Lutskevich, publishers of the early-20th-century *Nasha Niva* newspaper and members of the Wilno/Vilnya-based masonic lodge. “It was a meeting with the devoted Renaissance writer and artist Karus Kaganets (Kazimir Kastrovitsky) that finally convinced the Lutskevich brothers that they were indeed Belarusians.”³¹ To wit, this happened at the very beginning of the 20th century. Meanwhile, the Westernizing version of national memory denies the exclusively Polish character of the uprisings of 1794, 1830–1831 and 1863–1864. The point is made that the “Belarusian gentry” and even peasants participated in them, although the Russian “authorities succeeded [...] in deceiving a significant part of the peasantry, who came to believe that the landlords [*Pany*] were fighting for the return of serfdom.”³² Moreover, Tadeusz Kościuszko, Adam Mickiewicz, and Stanisław Moniuszko, who were born and lived on the territory of modern-day Belarus, not to mention Kastus Kalinovsky, are included in the pantheon of Belarusian national memory, albeit with some reservations. Naturally, the Russian commander Suvorov, who squelched the 1794 uprising, is labeled the worst enemy of the Belarusian people.

In October 2017, a minor international scandal was sparked, when a group of Belarusians living in Switzerland erected a monument to Kościuszko. The pedestal’s inscription read, “To a distinguished son of Belarus from grateful compatriots.” At the request of Polish

³⁰ Ibid, 167.

³¹ Ibid, 194.

³² Ibid, 192. Incidentally, Yulia Chernyavskaya affirmed, in her seminal 2010 book, that the “only 100 percent negative character of Belarusian folklore, including fairy tales, is a *Pan*,” i.e., a landlord (Chernyavskaya, op. cit., 42). Up until the beginning of the 20th century, most landlords in Belarus had a Polish identity.

diplomats, this inscription had to be eliminated. Yet, in an accommodating spirit, the Foreign Ministry of Poland stated, in its official commentary, that Tadeusz Kościuszko is a hero of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and the United States, a universal hero of humanity, and not just a “son of Belarus” or a “Polish general.” According to Warsaw, it was unacceptable for the Polish side that there was no mention of Kościuszko’s relations with Poland on the nameplate.

To be sure, the major national holiday of Belarus, from the point of view of the Westernizing version of Belarusian historical memory, is the anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic (BPR), proclaimed on March 25, 1918. This event is interpreted as the beginning of genuine Belarusian statehood. Though an ephemeral and unrecognized entity existing for only a few months, the BPR symbolized the first attempt to achieve independence. The BPR existed under the conditions of German military occupation and became a government in exile when this occupation ended. But clearly, for Belarusian Westernizers, the patronage of Kaiser Germany is preferred to the patronage of Russia. The first celebration of Freedom Day, as the Belarusian opposition took to calling this event, took place on March 25, 1990. Since 2000, annual demonstrations on this day repeatedly resulted in clashes with police and arrests. But starting in 2018, this violent tradition was interrupted, which will be discussed below.

The Westernizing interpretation of World War II diverges sharply from the neo-Soviet version. Herein, Belarusian Westernizers replicate other national movements of Central and Eastern Europe, especially Lithuanians and Latvians. The corresponding attitude may be expressed as follows: Belarusians were caught between two fires or, more precisely, between two mutually hostile totalitarian regimes. Partisans committed no fewer atrocities than the Germans. And for the most part, Belarusian collaborators defended the Belarusian path to independence.

That viewpoint on the war obtained a second wind in the early 1990s, when Belarus-based Westernizers reestablished contacts with aging but still active 1944 Belarusian emigrants in North America. As a result, acclamatory judgments about Wilhelm Kube, the commissioner-general of the Belorussia General District in 1941–1943, now appear with amazing regularity in the Westernizing discourse. Kube was assassinated at his Minsk residence by Elena Mazannik, who was acting on behalf of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, and was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for her accomplishment. The authors of eulogistic articles about Kube claim that he appreciated Belarusian culture. Indeed, there is a lot of information, first summarized by the recently deceased Belarusian-Polish historian Jerzy Turonek (Yury Turonak), showing that Kube contributed to the Belarusianization of schools and sought to rely on Belarusian cadres. Yet, the Belorussia General District commissioner-general pursued pragmatic goals. Without at least minimal support from the local population, it was next to impossible to administer a region with an underground partisan movement. So Kube had to treat local cadres differently from what had been suggested by Herman Goering in his pre-war directive. “In Belarus,” this directive read, “it will probably be difficult to find a stratum of leaders loyal toward us, since Belarusians have a lower intellectual level than local Russians, Jews and Poles.”³³ Based on extensive and fresh, as of then, data, Nickolas Vakar noted in 1956 that “leveraging Belarusian nationalism has never been considered” by the occupying administration “as seriously” as “some Belarusian sources” want to present.³⁴ At the end of August 1942, that is, a year before his death, the same Kube wrote

³³ Yury Turonak, *Madernaya GishTORIYA Belarusi*, Vilnius: Instytut Belarussystyki 2006, 540. [Belarusian translation of Jerzy Turonek’s 1990 Polish-language book *Białoruś pod okupacją niemiecką*, Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza 1993].

³⁴ Nicholas Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956, 177.

in *Deutsche Zeitung im Osten* that “Belarus is [...] no more than a vague geographical term.”³⁵

The above-mentioned Turonek (1929–2019), who was born near Wilno/Vilnius and spent all his life in Poland, wrote that “the attitude of the German civil administration to the Belarusian issue was better than the attitude of the Soviet government. The fact that Belarusian schools [that is, ones whose language of instruction was Belarusian] only functioned in the occupied Belarusian capital, and in the same city liberated from occupation [schools became] almost exclusively Russian, is quite symbolic and does not require commentary. The fact of the Nazi genocide does not alter this assessment, since the number of victims of the NKVD in Kurapaty alone near Minsk does not yield to the scale of the SS-related atrocities during all punitive actions in Belarus.”³⁶

Although the latter assertion is dubious in the extreme, there is no denying that Stalinist purges in Belarus and elsewhere require careful analysis, including the count of casualties. What is baffling in the aforementioned quote from Turonek, however, is how top-down or deductive his judgment is of Stalin’s terror—which he considers far greater than Hitler’s terror—and how detached it is from what Belarusians themselves might have thought about it during the war as well as after. Turonek’s most important work, *Białoruś pod Okupacją Niemiecką (Belarus Under German Occupation)* undermines any potential charges of his systematic bias since in it he presents the leading Belarusian Nazi collaborators in a not very attractive light. Rather, herein, his genuine point of view is revealed. Some call it “crypto-fascist” (as a prominent contemporary Belarusian historian did in a private communication with this author), but the validity of

³⁵ Ibid, 263; Orlov and Saganovich, *Desyat Vekov Belorusskoi Istorii: 862– 1918*, 102.

³⁶ Yury Turonak, *Madernaya GishTORIYA Belarusi*, Vilnius: Instytut Belarussystyki 2006, 241.

such labeling is debatable, too. Yet, it is hard not to recognize Turonek's point of view as the Achilles heel of the Westernizing version of Belarusian historical memory, at least when it comes to the likelihood of its inclusion into the collective consciousness of contemporary Belarusians. Similarly, the idea of Belarus as a Russian colony is almost equally dubious because it runs counter to the perception of several generations of Belarusians.

A recent (2018) attempt at "deconstructing" the collective memory of the Belarusians, undertaken by the British scholar Simon Lewis, has, oddly enough, more to do with philosophy and some quasi-scientific strain of literary criticism than with Belarus itself. Lewis suggests that prior to his research work, literary critics saw in World War II partisan writer Vasil Bykov's "lieutenant prose" a description of universal human suffering, but passed over its Belarusian particulars. To Lewis, this is unacceptable. "Analysis shows," he writes, "that Bykov's literary experience is both deconstructive and constructive; in other words, he is destroying the monolithic image of the partisan republic and winning back an alternative space for Belarusian identity."³⁷ According to Lewis, Bykov achieves this effect by showing that the suffering of Belarusian peasants during the World War II stemmed not only from Nazi atrocities but also from the cruelties of the pre-war Stalinist collectivization. Thus, "Nazism and Stalinism were structurally similar."³⁸ To Lewis, this observation is at the heart of Bykov's novellas *The Dead Doesn't Hurt*, and *The Sign of Misfortune*, from which he, likewise, draws the conclusion that falling victim to Stalinist crimes often nudged people to subsequently participate in collaborationist formations.

³⁷ Ibid., 85.

³⁸ Ibid., 103.

Unfortunately, such “revelations” can appear eye-opening only to someone not quite immersed in the Soviet context. Throughout his research, Lewis discovers this context for himself and shares his discovery with his English-speaking readers, spicing them up with constructivist vocabulary and quotations from Polish poet, philosopher and expert on Soviet totalitarianism Czesław Miłosz. The elephant in the room, however, is sorely neglected. What, indeed, is more important, the connection between Stalin’s crimes and collaborationism—a causal link, characteristic of the *entire* occupied Soviet territory—or the fact that in the Belarus Lewis is writing about, this very link was weaker than in other places? If the focus of one’s inquiry is the collective memory of Belarusians, the answer is obvious. Indeed, the very scale of collaborationism in Belarus was significantly smaller than in the three neighboring countries: Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania. And this is despite the fact that in the latter two, Stalinism—this putative driver of collaborationism—was absent in the 1930s, when the bloodiest crimes were committed in the name of Stalin and under his direct supervision. In Belarus, however, many people who suffered from the Soviet system still actively and deliberately resisted the Germans, as the late Belarusian writer and former partisan Valentin Taras revealed in his discussion with Yanka Zaprudnik, who left Belarus in 1944 with the retreating Wehrmacht units.³⁹

No less important for national memory is that creative work (e.g., writing fiction), on the one hand, and historical policy of the state, on the other, are two areas that are not intimately connected. Yes, in some particularly expressive forms and/or during some critical times, one of them can offset the other. But as a rule, they are like non-intersecting planes. Attention to an individual human destiny (in

³⁹ “Partizanka i kalyabaratsyya u Belarusi,” Prague Accent, Talk Show of the Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty, *Svaboda*, March 28, 2005, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/793911.html>.

fiction) and glorification of patriotic behavior (as an element of the propaganda efforts of the state) take place separately from one another. Consequently, Bykov's widely known and appreciated prose has not, by any means, undermined the partisan myth or the Russo-centric narrative of the Great Patriotic War in general. Yes, some party bosses, incidentally based in Minsk, were routinely outraged by Bykov's prose; but Bykov invariably found protection in the face of other bosses—for the most part in Moscow.

One of the main reasons why the centerpiece of the Westernizing version of Belarusian national memory—its anti-colonial narrative—is not accepted by the majority of Belarusians, may be the self-isolation of its advocates from the majority of the population, that is, their voluntary internal emigration. This idea was best expressed by the Minsk-based oppositionist Valantsyn Akudovich, in his essay “Without Us,”⁴⁰ written in 2001 but retaining much of its relevance today. The very title of the essay written by someone residing in Minsk, not in exile, is a powerful metaphor suggesting that Belarusian Westernizers—at least until recently—were much like internal emigrants. Akudovich wrote:

The country of Belarus lives without us. Homes, roads and bridges are built without us, cars, trains and airplane fly without us, factories, plants, and banks operate without us... And if it were not a few political broadcasts on state-run radio and TV, today few would know (except for ourselves) that there is still some “true” Belarus [...] and “true” Belarusians, that is, us. [...]

⁴⁰ Valantsyn Akudovich, “Bez nas,” *Nasha Niva*, June 4, 2001, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=95570>; Also available at <http://knihi.com/storage/frahmenty/post-akudovicz.htm>.

All of the above is hardly pleasant but is not new. Moreover, we learned by heart who caused all this trouble separating us from the Belarusian people: Polish messianism (Polonization), Russian imperialism (colonization and Russification), Communism (Sovietization), KGB (FSB), Lukashenka (Kremlin), but first of all [...] the nationally unconscious [...] Belarusian people...

Our conceptual break with the “Belarusian people” stems not so much from a different attitude to language, history, ideology, but from an attitude to the place where Belarusians have lived for the last two hundred years. We [...] believe that [...] our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were slaves of Russia, and we, the descendants of these slaves, have obtained freedom and independence—thanks to the constant resistance of the very best of our ancestors (and in part contemporaries). The Belarusian people (perhaps ninety percent of the entire population of Belarus) think very differently. Unlike us, they did not gain freedom, but lost a great power, with which the whole world had to reckon, and for those residing in that great country it was possible not to worry about the rest of the world. [...] Belarus occupied one of the most important places in the empire, was industrially modernized and enjoyed almost the highest level of wellbeing (only short of Moscow itself). At the same time, oddly enough, one cannot say that the Belarusian people are resolutely opposed to independence. No, but they do not want to give up their great history as part of the Russian Empire. Especially since we offered them to exchange the role of a great warrior and creator [...] into the role of a colonial slave that has not even managed to free oneself from that slavery.

A masochistic streak runs through Akudovich’s essay: almost like Sholem Aleichem’s character Motl, who used to say “I’m fine, I’m an orphan.”

Meeting Halfway Amid a Brawl

Despite the seemingly negative prospects for the Westernizing version of Belarusian historical memory, upon closer examination it appears to have a reasonably good outlook. That said, this is not because the Westernizing version more fully bears out popular perceptions or is more organic for Belarusians—rather, it is because it is oriented toward the West. A tenacious Western lean has been etched into the minds of most educated East Europeans. It is, indeed, as stable as the East-West spatial trend or gradient of social wellbeing sustained for at least six hundred years within geographical Europe. For centuries, Europe's East has looked up to the West, and this is not going to change in the foreseeable future, regardless of what Russian strategists may think. But the Westernizing version has one more tangible reason for cautious optimism: Whenever relations between Russia and Belarus deteriorate, the latter's inherently Russo-centric historical policy turns to Belarusian Westernizers and borrows some of their ideas and images of the past. This borrowing is not an outcome of some insidious Western indoctrination. Rather, it is a reaction to pervasive Russification. Indeed, the Russian language, Russian channels of information, Russian investment and a Russian-like outlook have diluted Belarusians' sense of being a community apart from Russia so much that the pendulum has finally begun to move in the opposite direction. It continues to do so despite official statements to the contrary, like a recent (autumn 2019) article about Belarus's historical policy in *Belaruskaya Dumka*, the journal of the Presidential Administration.⁴¹ For Belarusians to adopt a collective identity of themselves, an accepted sense of detachment and/or difference from Russia and Russians is a necessary prerequisite. That does not necessarily spell hostility, but it does, by its very nature, reflect some degree of alienation.

⁴¹ Alexander Kovalenya, et. al., "K voprosu ob istoricheskoi politike," *Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 8, 2019.

By now, the GDL and even the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania (Rzeczpospolita) have already been integrated into the official historical discourse—not yet in the capacity of “our country,” to be sure, but no longer in the role of invading forces either. Notably, here is how Vladimir Konoplev, the chairperson of the Belarusian Handball Federation, described the three-partite Belarus-Lithuania-Poland application for the venue of the 2026 European handball cup: “To win, you have to go a long way and try hard,” said Konoplev. “We, as representatives of the formerly united power, the Commonwealth, decided to try and see what we could do against the background of other European countries.”⁴² In 1996–2004, Konoplev was the speaker of the Belarusian House of Representatives. Still earlier, he was a police officer from Lukashenka’s native corner of Belarus and a member of the election headquarters that brought Lukashenka to power.

In June 2019, the opening ceremony of the European Games in Minsk included a theatrical performance with scenes from Belarusian history that had previously not been glorified by the official (neo-Soviet) historical narrative. These included Léon Bakst’s costumes; paintings by Mark Chagall; as well as a showcase of Vitovt, also known as Vytautas the Great (1350–1430), the ruler of the GDL, and his knights. The performance was accompanied by the recitation of poems written by Yanka Kupala, Maxim Bogdanovich, and Adam Mickiewicz, who was born in what is today modern-day Belarus. Moreover, the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences has already released the first of its five-volume *History of the Belarusian State*. The narrative presented in this work broadly reflects that of Vatslav Lastovsky’s, the author of the first Westernizing course of Belarusian history (1910), which itself was then popularized and expanded by

⁴² “Kanapleu: ‘My . . . pradstauniki byloi adzinai dziarzhavy, Rechy Paspalitai,’ ” *Narodnaya Volya*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.nv-online.info/2019/02/19/kanaplyou-my-pradstauniki-byloj-adzinaj-dzyarzhavy-rechy-paspalitaj.html>.

Orlov and Saganovich in their 2003 work cited above. Thus, the Polotsk principality is treated as equivalent to Novgorod and Kiev in a political sense—a hint at three ancestral homelands of three independent East Slavic states. The GDL and Rzeczpospolita take the baton of Belarusian statehood over from Polotsk. “We consider statehood,” proclaim the authors “as an internal potential [sic] ability of the ethnonational community and its elite, ensuring the right and possibility of a long independent historical existence and development.”⁴³ That is, the history of Belarusians is, by definition, the history of their statehood.

In addition, knightly tournaments are now regularly reenacted in Belarus, recreating the atmosphere of the medieval GDL. Although the display of the white-red-white flag is still taboo outside the officially authorized gatherings of the opposition, the coat of arms featuring the *Pahonia* has a wide circulation, appearing on souvenirs, caps and T-shirts. The restoration and renovation of the well-visited Nesvizh Castle and a number of Catholic churches across the country has Westernized the cultural landscape of western Belarus, which had already stood apart from that of nearby central Russia. Perhaps the clearest sign of the regime's growing tolerance toward the Westernizing version of national memory was the officially permitted concert in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic, held on March 25, 2018, next to the Opera House, in downtown Minsk. It was a public event with thousands of spectators. Moreover, in November 2018, a commemorative monument approved by the Ministry of Culture was finally installed in Kurapaty, a site of executions during the Stalinist purges.

⁴³ O. N. Levko and V. F. Golubev (Eds) *Istoriya Belorusskoi Gosudarstvennosti v Pyati Tomakh*, Volume 1: *Belorusskaya Gosudarstvennost: Ot Istokov do Kontsa 18-go Veka*, Minsk: Belaruskaya Navuka 2018, 6.

Other lines of convergence also exist between the two versions of national memory. Thus, the historian Alexey Bratochkin drew attention to the possibility of a “conservative consensus” based on a general rejection of “liberal values,” including migrants from other cultures and same-sex marriages. “Those who control the interpretation of history in the ideological apparatus of the Lukashenka regime and those who are formally representative of the other camp (especially the conservatives among the opposition politicians) may have more in common than there are differences between them,” observes Bratochkin.⁴⁴ He also notes that both strains of collective memory have sidelined the Holocaust. To be sure, in today’s Belarus, the Holocaust is not hushed up, as it was throughout the Soviet period: there is an impressive monument in Minsk (“The Pit”) and, since 2018, also in Trostenets. In July 2019, a memorial wall was added to the local Museum of Jewish Resistance, in Novogrudok, commemorating the September 1943 escape of dozens of people from the Novogrudok ghetto.⁴⁵

However, the Holocaust of Belarusian Jews, of which at least 600,000 perished during the war, is poorly integrated into both versions of national memory, remaining a “history of the other.” Incidentally, even Vladimir Makei, Belarus’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, who attended the opening of the memorial in Novogrudok—together with the relatives of Donald Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner (whose grandfather was among those who fled the ghetto back in 1943)—acknowledged that he himself learned about the Jewish resistance only as a grown man. In an interview with the *BSRL*, the Israeli historian

⁴⁴ Alexei Bratochkin, “Kultura pamyati v Belarusi (1988–2016): Ot raskola k konservativnomu kontsenzusu?” *Gefter*, November 25, 2016, gefter.ru/archive/20174.

⁴⁵ “Vladimir Makei i predstaviteli zyatia Trampa priyekhali v Novogrudok nf otkrytiye memoriala bezhavshim iz getto,” *Tut.by*, July 8, 2019, <https://news.tut.by/society/644677.html><https://news.tut.by/society/644677.html>.

Leonid Smilovitsky, who grew up in Belarus, noted that in the National Historical Museum of Belarus, the Jewish theme is not reflected at all. “If Jews accounted for 40 percent of the urban population and 80 percent of the intelligentsia, when they made up 10 percent of the total population back in 1941, roughly a million people, do you need this to be somehow reflected in the state historical museum?” Smilovitsky rhetorically asked. The new Museum of the Great Patriotic War (opened in 2014) has no Holocaust Hall, although the original plans envisioned it.⁴⁶

Yet, paradoxically, some degree of convergence of the two versions of national memory is taking place against the background of their ongoing mutual confrontation. For instance, in December 2018, *Nasha Niva*, a mouthpiece of Belarusian Westernizers, published an article about an eighth-grade textbook of Russian literature, in which the 1863 uprising on Belarusian lands was referred to as Polish.⁴⁷ The *BSRL* supported *Nasha Niva* by publishing the article titled, “In Belarusian Schools, They Claim the Kalinovsky Uprising Was Polish.”⁴⁸ The *Nasha Niva* article’s tone is indignant; but essentially every world and/or regional history course taught outside Belarus refers to the 1863 Uprising as “Polish.”

Responding to the newspaper’s charges, the Ministry of Education refuted the “list of standard theses with which the Belarusian nationalists operate in order to present what they want to ring true.”

⁴⁶ Syarhei Shupa, “Profesar Smilovitsky: Galakost – neotyemlemaya chast istorii usei Belarusi,” *Svaboda*, November 24, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29611153.html>.

⁴⁷ “Minobrazovaniya vstupilo v polemiku s belorusskimi istorikami, dokazyvayet, chto vosstaniye 1863 goda bylo polskim,” *Nasha Niva*, December 16, 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=222276&lang=ru>.

⁴⁸ Dzmitry Gurnevich, “U belaruskikh shkolakh uchat, chto vosstanie Kalinovskago bylo polskim,” *Svaboda*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29638534.html>.

First, the issue of local uprising leader Kastus Kalinovsky's ethnicity is debatable. He called upon the locals to stab the rotten *Moskali* (Russians) and, at the same time, wrote, "[W]e live on Polish soil." Second, the uprising was, in fact, crushed with the significant assistance of the Belarusian peasantry. Third, there is no guarantee that, had the uprising actually been victorious, Belarus would have materialized at all as a national project. Fourth, Kalinovsky and his associates perceived local vernaculars as dialects of the Polish language. Only after the uprising was suppressed, did some of its participants become aware of themselves as Belarusians. Particularly expressive is the repudiation of such an argument as "in the BSSR [Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic], Kalinovsky was introduced into the pantheon of Belarusian national heroes." "Indeed, when it benefits nationalists," reads the ministry's response, "they recall the theses of Soviet historiography, while the rest of the time they write exclusively about a 'genocide of the Belarusian nation,' 'embellishment of repression,' 'hidden NKVD archives,' and so on." Meanwhile, the ministry claims, it was not only the Soviets who used Kalinovsky for propaganda purposes. German SS commander Franz Kushel did that, too, in his newspaper *Belarus na Varte*, published in 1943–1944, in Nazi-occupied Minsk.⁴⁹

The Westernizers' objections to the Ministry's response are not particularly convincing. The main argument of the historian Alexander Pashkevich is that the "overarching academic treatise" *Social and Political Life in Belarus, 1772–1917*, published under the auspices of the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences, qualifies the 1863 Uprising differently—i.e., not as exclusively Polish—thus, making the Ministry of Education's point of view unacceptable. Meanwhile, the central claim by the historian

⁴⁹ "Minobrazovaniya na zashchite 'russkogo mira': vosstanie Kalinovskogo – polskoye," *Belorusskii Partizan*, December 17, 2018, <https://belaruspartisan.by/life/448437/>.

Vasily Gerasimchik, cited by the *BSRL*, is even less convincing and boils down to the assertion that since the Polish character of the uprising is not recognized as such in Belarusian eighth-grade history courses, the education ministry is effectively undermining the unity of the educational process.⁵⁰

Amidst this internal Belarusian debate on national memory, an article by Lev Krishtapovich about the aforementioned first volume of the *History of Belarusian Statehood* represents an illustrative example of a strong polemical attack on the Westernizers themselves.⁵¹ Seven years ago, Krishtapovich was one of the main ideologues of the power vertical, and now he is sharply criticizing an influential publication, trumpeted as the new word in Belarusian historical science. According to him, the scholarly work's definition of the history of statehood is flawed (see above) and because of what he calls "schoolboy" logic—i.e., the inherent proposition that, if the state exists today, it should by definition possess ancient history. As the Belarusian essayist Kirill Ozimko quipped on his Facebook page, the *History of Belarusian Statehood* is merely the beginning, "the next stage is going to be the history of the ancient Belars who helped the ancient Uks to dig the Black Sea."⁵² But whereas two critical arrows, launched by Krishtapovich, hit the target, the third—criticism of the geopolitical bias of the "new" view on history—is not compelling at all because the pro-Russian leanings of Krishtapovich himself are too radical even for the majority of Belarusians with their Russo-centric worldview. The radicalism of Krishtapovich's opinions can be

⁵⁰ Dzmitry Gurnevich, op. cit.

⁵¹ Lev Krishtapovich, "Kvaziistoriya pod vidom istorii belorusskoi gosudarstvennosti," *IMHOclub*. March 2, 2019, https://imhoclub.by/ru/material/kvaziistorija_pod_vidom_istorii_belorusskoj_gosudarstvennosti?comment=1364860.

⁵² Kirill Ozimko's Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/ozimko>.

observed in his point of view that “the framework of overarching Russian history and the Russian World [*Russkiy Mir*]” is supposedly the only means of “shaping and expressing Belarusians’ collective will.” Also, defaming the Soviets’ Belarusianization of the 1920s as “anti-Belarusian activity” and the BPR as an “anti-Belarusian project,” as Krishtapovich does, go beyond common sense; likewise his likening of Tatar-Mongol oppression in “northeastern Russia” to “Polish-Lithuanian domination” in “western Russia” is artificial. According to Krishtapovich, the latter was purportedly crueller and more difficult to overcome “because of its totality,” while the Tatar oppression “did not affect the national and spiritual-cultural life.”⁵³

One proven public way of confronting the “wrong” version of history is to profess bewilderment when faced with it. Thus, on June 23, 2019, the opposition-minded newspaper *Belorusskie Novosti* published the article “Gorki’s Authorities Want to Open a Memorial Plaque Honoring the Emperor of the Occupying Army.”⁵⁴ Gorki is a county (*raion*) seat in Mogilev Oblast. In 1708, Russian Tsar Peter I visited the town. The authors of the above article take pains to explain there is no reason to celebrate that visit, as it took place during the Great Northern War, and Tsar Peter actually ordered Mogilev’s destruction without any particular strategic need. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the locals in Gorki, which lies along the Russian border, do not detach themselves from Russians, and so they also see Peter as their one-time leader. One day earlier, Elmira Mirsalimova, a resident of Vitebsk and an ardent promoter of the Russian World, paid a family visit to the Brest Fortress to honor its defenders in conjunction with the anniversary of the Great Patriotic War’s beginning. *En route*, the family stopped at Kossovo, Brest Oblast, where an impressive

⁵³ Lev Krishtapovich, op. cit.

⁵⁴ “Vlasti Gorok khotyat otkryt pamyatnik imperatoru-okkupantu,” *Belorusskie Novosti*, June 23, 2019, <https://naviny.by/new/20190623/1561280760-vlasti-gorok-hotyat-otkryt-pamyatnyy-znak-imperatoru-okkupantu>.

monument to Tadeusz Kościuszko (who was born in that town), was erected in 2018. "It was hard to explain to my daughters," acknowledges Mirsalimova, "why monuments to Polish heroes exist on our soil."⁵⁵ In both cases, explanations are redundant and the bewilderment is phony, yet it serves as a means of distancing oneself from the "wrong" historical memory.

Conclusion

A community's historical memory is the flip side of its identity. Disputes over collective memory reflect a tug of war for symbolic capital between politicized social groups (or groups of influence) in order to promote a certain normative image of the future. Thus, historical memory is historical only in the nominal sense of the word. Being a memory, it is about the past. But its purpose is to manipulate public consciousness for the sake of the looked-for future.

While the opportunities for such manipulation do exist, they are not boundless. One may criticize the Belarusian authorities for authoritarianism, but their fundamentally Russo-centric view of Belarusian history is not invented by them but rather finds itself within the realm of the possible. The dimensions of that realm are set by the actual experience Belarusians acquired over the last 150 years, if not more. At the very beginning of the 20th century, Belarusians still possessed the identity of inhabitants of a no-man's land, equidistant from Russians and Poles—a situation accurately and vividly described by Yanka Kupala in his 1922 play "Tuteishia" ("Locals"). Among the peasantry, which made up the overwhelming majority of the population of the Belarusian lands, there was no critical mass of supporters of their own collective identity. In order to obtain it, they

⁵⁵ Elmira Mirsalimova, *Facebook*, June 23, 20196
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100020986359715>.

first had to gain self-consciousness; and to accomplish that, they had to break the umbilical cords connecting them with Russians and Poles.

Ultimately, this task was solved only in relation to the Poles. A long stay within Russo-centric state formations, first in the Russian Empire and then in the Soviet Union, did not result in Belarusians coming to view Russians as the “Other.” This was the case for several reasons. Not just their proximity to the Russian heartland, but a proximity magnified by a common language of communication, common religion, and a long absence of high-culture producers among Belarusians—all these circumstances Russified Belarusian identity and did the same to their historical memory. This Russified collective consciousness did not replace any other. Rather, it filled a void. In contrast, attempts to incorporate into the historical memory of the Belarusians ideas about their old-time affiliation with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth did not overcome the gravitational pull of Russian culture.

A couple of years ago, the Belarusian art critic Vyacheslav Rakitsky expressed concern about how emotionally the Belarusian creative intelligentsia perceived the arrest of the Russian theater director Kirill Serebryannikov. Rakitsky could not recall another past event as actively discussed by them. In his estimation, this upsurge of feelings stemmed from the fact that “people of art and those who are close to them still exist in the theatrical context of the neighboring country, whereby they perceive everything Russian as their own, whereby all their aesthetic guidelines are shaped in Moscow or St. Petersburg.”⁵⁶ But in reality, the same observation would equally aptly apply to Belarusian athletes, economists, journalists, political scientists,

⁵⁶ Viachaslau Rakitsky, “Chamu arysht raseiskaga rezhysera uskhvalyavau belaruskuyu teatralnuyu supolnasts,” *Svaboda*, August 28, 2017, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/chamu-arysht-rasejskaha-rezhysera-uskhvaliavau-belaruskuyu-teatralnuju-supolnasc/28701238.html>.

educators, specialists in other areas of knowledge, as well as those “who are close to them.”

The main attempts at laying a Westernizing foundation for Belarusian historical memory were undertaken in the 1920s, during World War II, and in 1990–1994. But in all three cases, the Belarusian Westernizers were ultimately confronted by the apparatus of a powerful state and, during the war, also by its army and partisan formations. Every ethnic nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe overcame difficult and, as it seemed at times, insurmountable obstacles. However, in the Belarusian case, these obstacles were not overcome, thus hampering the development of a titular ethnic nation on Belarusian lands. Be that as it may, the independent existence of the Republic of Belarus inevitably nurtures a civic nationalism among Belarusians.

Although the memory of the Great Patriotic War and other events shared with Russians play a crucial role in the historical policy of the modern-day Belarusian state, that latter consciously seeks a Belarusian specificity within that common history. Through the efforts of the political elite and of many educated Belarusians, the corresponding ideas are being popularized among the wider population. For example, the so-called Immortal Regiment movement—which the Russian Wikipedia entry defines as an “international [sic] public civic-patriotic movement to preserve the personal memories of the generation of the Great Patriotic War”—was notably rebuffed in Belarus. As Lukashenka stated, “the very idea of such actions originated in Belarus, and Russia just plagiarized this idea... ‘Belarus Remembers’—that was how our initiative was labeled from the beginning. When I became president, this was my first action, and the veterans asked me to march from the central department store to Victory Square, and we always laid wreaths. Some

were carrying portraits. [...] Why should we abandon our Belarus Remembers [tradition] and grab the Immortal Regiment?"⁵⁷

However strange it may seem, the foreign policy of Belarus also plays a significant role in the Belarusianization of history. While recognizing the diversity and vital importance of ties with Russia, this policy is gently but consistently distancing itself from what is perceived by many in Europe as the Russian imperial syndrome. In addition, the historical memory of the Belarusians is slowly but steadily absorbing elements of the Westernizing discourse, heretofore alien to it. And not only the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but also the Belarusian People's Republic, the *Pahonia* coat of arms, knightly tournaments, and Belarusian ornaments. The convergence of two versions of historical memory are occurring under the receding dominance of the Russo-centric version. This convergence is one of the driving forces of civic nationalism of the Belarusians.

The August 2019 national survey by the Belarusian Analytical Workroom, headed by Andrei Vardamatsky, revealed that the share of Belarusians who would favor union with Russia over accession to the European Union, 54.5 percent, was 9 percentage points lower than just one year ago, whereas the share of those leaning toward the European Union (25 percent) increased. While it is unclear whether or not this is a steady trend—fluctuations of both indicators have occurred before—one specific outcome of this survey bodes well for the Westernizers. Specifically, pro-European attitudes had previously dominated only the youngest (18–24 years of age) group; but this time, the same preference was for the first time uncovered for the majority of 25–34 year olds, too. According to Vardamatsky, the most significant factor behind those changes appears to be a tonal shift in

⁵⁷ "Bolshoi razgovor s prezidentom," *Tut.by*, March 1, 2019, <https://news.tut.by/economics/628163.html>.

the Belarusian state media regarding Russia's policy toward Belarus. As these domestic media narratives grow more critical, the pull of Russia on Belarusian society seems to be weakening.⁵⁸

In the future, much will depend on a combination of factors, including economic development, interstate relations with Russia, circumstances surrounding the inevitable (sooner or later) change at the helm of power, as well as the civic maturity of Belarusian Westernizers themselves. At present, the latter leaves much to be desired; but the availability of such thinkers as Valantsyn Akudovich in their ranks may help temper unrealistic expectations and encourage them to proceed with advanced knowledge and patience. Belarus is becoming more and more Belarusian as a result. This process is in full swing.

⁵⁸ Yury Drakakhrust, Interview with Andrei Vardamatski, November 7, 2019, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30256600.html>.

Should the West Be Wary of an Imminent ‘Union’ of Russia and Belarus?

Andrew Wilson

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Executive Summary

Speculation that Belarus might be the next flash-point for tensions with Russia has recurred periodically since the war in Ukraine began in 2014. The latest scenario sees Russia trying to use the twentieth anniversary of the nominal “Union Treaty” signed between the two states in 1999 to upgrade it into something more substantial in 2019, using economic pressure on Minsk to force concessions of sovereignty. Belarus was never likely to break with Russia as sharply as Ukraine, but Russia may be seeking to bind it close before it even tries. This study argues that the old pattern of relations is indeed shifting, but a true “Union” faces too many practical difficulties; that said, internal and external pressures on Belarus are likely to accumulate from 2020 onward.

Introduction

In September 2019, the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* published claims that Russia and Belarus planned to establish an “economic confederation,” with a common currency, customs union and

supranational institutions.¹ Moreover, the paper claimed the plan would be unveiled at a special summit on December 8, 2019, on the twentieth anniversary of a previous “Union Treaty” between the two countries, signed in 1999. Belarus, the paper argued, would submit because of the threat of losing \$2 billion a year from changes to Russia’s oil tax regime.

In fact, nothing was signed at the meeting, which took place in Sochi on December 7, although Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka were scheduled to meet again on December 20. Lukashenka prefaced the meeting by stating to parliament that “having lost Ukraine, Russia is extremely leery of losing [...] Belarus, so Russia feels it cannot support Belarus without advance knowledge of what kind of policy Belarus will conduct”; but “I am no kid who has only worked three–four–five years as president, so I do not want to sacrifice what we have done, creating a sovereign independent state, by putting it in a box with a cross on top [i.e., a coffin].”²

The proposed “economic confederation” would, indeed, undermine Belarusian statehood, making it the latest post-Soviet state to be targeted by Russia. This study, therefore, argues that Belarus will resist Russian pressure, even if it cannot claw back much of the \$2 billion—but on the assumptions listed below. If any of these prove invalid or change with developing circumstances, a real threat to Belarus’s sovereignty could be possible. The old paradigm was that both sides, Belarus and Russia, obtained enough out of the relationship to want to preserve it, whilst always being frustrated that they never received

¹ Dmitrii Butrin, “Druzhba nalogov. Rossiya i Belorussiya namereny v 2021 godu pereity na edinyi Nalogovyi kodeks i ne tol’ko,” *Kommersant*, September 16, 2019, www.kommersant.ru/doc/4094365.

² Grigory Ioffe, “Belarus-Russia Integration Summit Ends With No Signature,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, December 9, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-russia-integration-summit-ends-with-no-signature/>.

everything they wanted. It is this peculiar equilibrium that will be tested in the next phase of the relationship, during President Lukashenka's likely sixth term in office, 2020–2025 and Putin's fourth and possibly final term, 2018–2024.

Belarus: Assumptions

The priorities of the Lukashenka regime are to protect Belarusian sovereignty and preserve the system he has built since 1994. To stay in power, in other words.

- That means possibly ameliorating the most autocratic elements of the regime but not allowing enough political space for any serious challenge to its power. It also means preserving as much as possible of the “social contract”—welfare, jobs in state industry, etc.—that has won Lukashenka support in the past.
- However, the Belarusian economic model is not completely self-sustaining. The regime's sovereignty strategy is undermined by the temptation to use its sovereignty and foreign policy as assets to trade for foreign subsidies.
- Stability regularly seems under threat because subsidy-trading is always done hand-to-mouth. The Belarusian economy is always in need of fresh funds. Long-term strategic thinking is difficult, so long as strategies of sovereignty preservation and system preservation are what drives the regime. A division of labor has therefore appeared with the new government installed in August 2018, led by Siarhei Rumas. His job is to maximize the benefits of pragmatic reform to grow the private economy and exports to the European Union; while sovereignty strategies maintain the flow of subsidies to the old state sector, which exports to

Russia or uses subsidized energy from Russia to make export profits to the West.

- So-called “soft Belarusianization” is a regime-led strategy to bolster support for state independence and increase the breathing space for the new private economy.
- The regime will carefully stage-manage the current election cycle: the vote for a new parliament in November 2019 will be followed by a presidential election in August 2020. The elections will not be drivers of change, but they will hold a mirror up to the dilemmas discussed in this paper.

Opposition and Civil Society, Two Economies

- Belarus lacks an “opposition” strong enough to challenge the regime. And the regime is little constrained in its foreign policy and economic strategies by the active opposition. It is more constrained by “passive: opposition; and Belarusian public opinion is still largely Russophile.
- As with the last presidential election in 2015, part of the old opposition accepts the argument that now is not the time to challenge Lukashenka or election fixing, considering the current threat to state sovereignty from Russia.
- Civil society is, however, strong enough to also push “soft Belarusianization” from below. It is not entirely a top-down phenomenon.
- The growth of the private economy, the IT sector in particular, is slowly changing the above dynamics. The regime increasingly has to balance slimming the less efficient state sector that provides necessary public support, and maintaining the private sector growth that provides necessary revenues and resources.

Belarus: Strategies and Dilemmas

Foreign Policy Diversification

The key internal challenges to what is locally called *sistema* (a system of informal, personalized loyalty networks that dominates administrative governance in many post-Soviet states) are economic. But preserving sovereignty is essentially a foreign policy task. The academic literature is full of specialized terms for how small states with powerful neighbors like Belarus run their foreign policy: such as balancing, hedging, bandwagoning and sheltering. Belarus does all of these, but none alone quite captures its unique situation. Russia's foreign policy, in contrast, is driven by hyper-realism. It sees a world ruled by *konkurentnosposobnost* ("ability to compete"), where only strong states survive, and their sovereignty has to be earned. Russia, therefore, has a "frenemy" problem; it does not respect even its allies' sovereignty if they are regarded as weak. In fact, they are a security threat because they can be dominated by other players just as easily as by Russia.

Belarus needs Russia, particularly economically; but a simple bilateral relationship is too unequal. Sovereignty would soon be lost. On the other hand, the act of asserting sovereignty is also dangerous. It is "an exercise in minimizing risk, but it's risky in itself," noted Minsk-based analyst Yauheni Preiherman.³ The end-game of foreign policy diversification is not yet "balance." Belarus is maneuvering in order to preserve its freedom of maneuver.

Yet, Belarus has *de facto* been able to trade certain aspects of its sovereignty. Lukashenka, first elected in 1994, predates Putin, first elected in 2000. Belarus made neo-Soviet nostalgia state policy before Russia, and its existence helps legitimize Putin's version. But there is increasing Russian resentment at subsidizing a welfare model that is

³ Interview with Yauheni Preiherman, November 29, 2017.

more generous than Russia's, especially when the Russian economy is under so much strain.⁴

Belarus also sells foreign policy loyalty toward multilateral projects or other states, which is paradoxically the best way of forcing Russia to see the value of Belarusian sovereignty. The security relationship is still extremely close. Belarus is needed to maintain the credibility of the struggling Eurasian Economic Union (a Moscow-led regional political-economic integrationist projects that brings together Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan).

But the terms of foreign policy trade have been drastically redefined, first by the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, and then more fundamentally by the undeclared war against Ukraine since 2014. Belarus's dilemma is now much more complex. It has to hedge its bets to avoid similar aggression—without worrying Russia that it will bandwagon with the West. That said, excessive loyalty to Russia is also a risk to sovereignty: both because Russia demands more of its friends than before 2014, and because some Russian demands would undermine other Belarusian strategies. A common currency would make it difficult to subsidize domestic industry; the appearance of Russian custom officials at Belarus's western borders would undermine the appearance of neutrality in the Russo-Ukraine conflict.

Belarus has cautiously reached out to the European Union, the United States and China since 2014, but it has carefully wrapped its diversification strategies in multilateral moves. The country will not join the EU or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) but has built on its success in hosting the Minsk Agreements in 2014–2015 to pull in other players to Minsk's would-be diplomatic hub: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the

⁴ E-mails from Andrey Skriba, October 31, 2019, and Kirill Koktysh, November 2, 2019.

Central European Initiative, etc. The “Minsk Dialogue” project, begun in 2015, seeks to make the Belarusian capital a major part of the international diplomatic circuit.

However, a lot of this bargaining is done within, and usually settled inside, a black box. Belarus remains central to the Russian oligarchy’s opaque survival strategies, for whom Belarus is metaphorically an offshore state. Its great historical good fortune is Soviet-built oil refineries, which process huge amounts of Russian crude oil. Belarus’s geographical good fortune is to be situated between Russia and the EU at a time of sanctions and counter-sanctions. If a way of dividing profits can be found, a deal can normally be done. The details may remain obscured, however.

The current problem is that Russia is taking away \$2 billion a year via the so-called “oil tax maneuver”—oil export duties replaced by a mineral extraction tax. Belarus hopes to compromise without giving away too much on sovereignty. According to Dzianis Melyantsou of the Minsk Dialogue, “[T]he level of secrecy around the negotiations on the so-called integration roadmaps is so unusually high that this makes me think that talks are harder than ever in history. But Minsk now is not in that bad a position, because of its new international image, normalization with the West, projects with China, etc. So there are leverages on this side as well. So my cautious forecast is that they will sign some limited integration plans in some areas, but [the] implementation of these documents will take ages. [The year] 2020 will be tough for Belarus as the Kremlin is seeking how to narrow Lukashenka’s corridor for maneuver. But I don’t believe in coercive scenarios, as they are too risky for Putin and no one really needs to ruin relations completely.”⁵

According to his colleague Yauheni Preiherman, the key point is that the “negotiations remain within the framework of the [old 1999]

⁵ E-mail from Melyantsou, November 14, 2019.

Union State Treaty... The Russians wanted to go beyond it, but then Lukashenka and Putin agreed to stay within that framework [...] of parity.⁶ For the time being there is no danger of Belarus losing its sovereignty [...] even though many in Russia would love to use the occasion to force Minsk into agreements that will undermine its sovereignty. The real danger is longer-term—if Minsk fails in diversifying its economy and foreign relations, its negotiation position vis-à-vis Moscow will get weaker, which will inevitably lead to increased appetite there.”⁷

Soft Belarusianization

Logically, Belarus could have shifted its priorities toward sovereignty much earlier, in the 2000s. Lukashenka was first elected President in 1994; and he spent his first term as a neo-Soviet nostalgic defeating the local nationalist opposition and seeking to do the same in all-Russian politics. The West was then the enemy; true sovereignty for Belarus could only be found under the umbrella of the ‘Union State’ negotiated with Russia in 1999. But the election of Vladimir Putin as Russian President in 2000 meant that the job of Russia’s “savior” was already taken. The two men did not get on personally. Lukashenka withdrew a little and oversaw the writing of a fairly vacuous, but still neo-Soviet, “state ideology” of Belarus in 2003.

But the time was not right for more radical moves. The defeat of the Belarusian national(ist) movement in the 1990s was too recent. The dismantling of democracy—a new constitution unilaterally imposed in 1996, the delay of the 1999 elections until 2001, the “disappearances” of prominent Lukashenka opponents in 1999–

⁶ Yauheni Preiherman, “Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia,” *Minsk Dialogue*, April 1, 2019, <http://minskdialogue.by/en/research/memorable-notes/treaty-on-the-establishment-of-the-union-state-of-belarus-and-russia>.

⁷ E-mail from Preiherman, November 16, 2019.

2000—meant that support from the West was unlikely. The most important factor, however, was Russia's economic boom years of high oil prices from the Iraq war in 2003 until the global economic crisis in 2008, which were also good for Belarus.

Other events shifted Belarus toward a more sovereign course: namely Russia's wars against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine beginning in 2014. Belarus had previously bandwagoned with Russia to strengthen its security, often depicted as threatened by an expanding NATO. Now, the Russian threat to Ukrainian sovereignty could be replayed in Belarus. Russia's more general confrontation with the West threatened Belarus's attempts to present itself as "neutral." Significantly, "soft Belarusianization" measures that came after 2014 were accompanied by parallel "soft securitization" measures: a small but significant increase in defense spending, stronger internal defenses against hybrid war, etc.⁸ The regime needed extra props of support—not just for statehood as an abstract principle, or the social contract, expectations for which had to be adjusted downward—but also cultural and identity props.

Has Soft Belarusianization Reached Its Limits?

So-called "soft Belarusianization" is different to two earlier periods of whole-hearted state support for the Belarusian language and culture—in the Soviet 1920s and in the early years of independence, in 1991–1994. Today, it involves a more eclectic approach to national identity than Lukashenka's earlier neo-Soviet, Slavophile period. Notably, it rehabilitates certain symbols of national identity, particularly if less political, as well as campaigns in support of the native language, regional pride, etc. ("Be Belarusians!" "My first word," "The Year of

⁸ Andrew Wilson, "Softly, softly Belarus," *New Eastern Europe*, September 2, 2018, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/09/02/softly-softly-belarus/>.

the Local Homeland”).⁹ History is increasingly selectively and eclectically politicized. In 2018, Lukashenka allowed unprecedented centenary celebrations of a nationalist totem, the short-lived Belarusian People’s Republic of 1918; but the state notably also celebrated the centenary of the founding of the Belarusian KGB.

Nonetheless, Lukashenka does not want to empower the opposition or enable it to set the agenda. Nor does he want to provide too many easy targets for Russian propaganda. In 2017–2019, Lukashenka halted opposition campaigns over the Kurapaty forest, a mass grave of Stalinist-era victims and a potential mobilizing symbol, and he vetoed plans for a Belarusian language university, which could generate rebellious students.

Soft Belarusianization also makes sense economically. The old and often troubled relationship between civil society and the Belarusian state is now more trilateral, and the regime allows relations between private business and non-governmental organizations (NGO) to develop, which includes support for some of the patriotic campaigns listed above.¹⁰ Soft Belarusianization is also about national branding. Business has found that such branding is commercially useful and would not want to walk that back. Lukashenka has also found that branding Minsk as a center of diplomacy and Belarusians as a

⁹ Piotr Rudkouski, “Soft Belarusianisation: The Ideology of Belarus in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict,” *OSW Commentary*, no. 253, November 3, 2017, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-11-03/soft-belarusianisation-ideology-belarus-era-russian-ukrainian. See also Vadim Mojeiko, “Soft Belarusization: A New Shift in Lukashenka’s Domestic Policy?” *Belarus Digest*, April 21, 2015, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/soft-belarusization-a-new-shift-in-lukashenkas-domestic-policy/>.

¹⁰ Vadim Mojeiko, “Civil society: between repression and collaboration with business,” *BISS*, June 20, 2019, <https://belinstitute.com/en/article/3687>.

“peaceful people” (the name of yet another campaign) has helped with foreign policy diversification.

Two Elections

Nothing surprising can be expected from either national election in 2019–2020. A significant part of the opposition does not want to rock the boat, while protests against falsification are difficult to organize, as the regime’s chosen method is hiding the count behind closed doors. On the other hand, Belarus cannot democratize in a crisis—certainly not quickly enough to win the support of the West in the case of a real security threat. Minsk might, therefore, choose to make some token moves sooner rather than later.¹¹ But habits of domestic control remain ingrained. Indeed, the November 17, 2019, parliamentary elections showed a tentative step, not toward democracy, but toward “managed democracy.” Only 5 out of 110 deputies were elected as representatives of political parties in 2012. The regime allowed the number to go up to 15 in 2016 and to 21 in 2019. But all were members of “loyal” parties. At the same time, the two “permitted” opposition members elected in 2016 were not reelected in 2019. According to some observers, Belarus may be seeking to copy Russia’s system of “Kremlin parties.” The (so far) civic organization Belaya Rus could play the part of United Russia under such an arrangement; the Communists and Liberal-Democrats would be Belarus’s loyal opposition. A few democrats might exist around the fringes. But as Lukashenka reportedly said to the leaders of Belaya Rus, “Guys, I understand why you need me, but I am not sure why I need you.”¹²

¹¹ Artyom Shraibman, “The Path to Politics: Belarus Prepares for Double Elections,” *Carnegie.ru*, August 20, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79689>.

¹² Stephen Hall, “Tracing Authoritarian Learning in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine,” pp. 72–73.

Belarusian presidential elections tend to have a predictable formula of “1+3.” Lukashenka usually has a fake sparring partner, Sairhei Haidukevich, the Belarusian equivalent, literally, of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, as he heads the Liberal-Democratic Party of Belarus. Then, there is the opposition, but never the same candidate—the risks of running are high. The fourth candidate is the one everybody talks about, a rumored regime stooge, playing with the very idea of opposition, muddying the possibility of protest.

The Political Economy

Russia is trying to push Belarus along the road to a Union State with some tough love. Subsidies have been on a downward trend over ten years, though they recovered a little from the low-point in 2016, after Lukashenka secured a temporary deal with Putin to help defuse the 2017 protests (see **Graph 1**, p. iv).¹³

More broadly, Belarus’s GDP growth still tracks Russian performance,¹⁴ although Belarus has had three major recessions since the global economic crisis: in 2009, 2011 and 2014–2015. Current growth levels do not recapture the heady levels of the 2000s. It is hard to assess how much this affects Lukashenka’s popularity (the last independent pollster, IISEPS, was forced out of business in 2016), but he probably retains some credit from previous growth.

¹³ Olga Hryniuk, “Reality Check Non-Paper: Belarus’s Slow and Subtle Transition,” *Belarus Digest*, December 7, 2018, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/reality-check-non-paper-belarus-slow-and-subtle-transition/>. See also <https://financialobserver.eu/cse-and-cis/belarus-economic-dependence-has-its-upsides/>.

¹⁴ “Belarusian Economic Growth Decomposition,” February 2014, www.researchgate.net/publication/265216042_Belarusian_Economic_Growth_Decomposition/figures?lo=1.

The structure of the economy is now changing, however, resulting in a gradual shift from one-sided dependence on Russia to asymmetrical dependence on both Russia and the European Union. This was symbolized by Lukashenka's visit to Austria, Belarus's leading economic partner in the EU, in November 2019—his first official visit to an EU state since 1996. The private-sector workforce in Belarus now outnumbers Belarusians employed at state-owned enterprises (SOE), which produce almost half of the country's GDP. SOEs have been kept afloat since the 1990s with state-directed credit and now account for 45 percent of national debt. After a sharp jump in recent years, that debt has stabilized at around \$28 billion; but foreign exchange reserves are only \$7 billion. Russia accounts for more than 40 percent of exports; but Belarus's trade with the EU is now booming, mainly in services, up by 20.6 percent in 2018 to €10.93 billion (\$12.19 billion).¹⁵ The IT industry alone already accounted for over 5 percent of GDP by 2018;¹⁶ the future would be murky under a more Russia-dominated economy.

Russia: Assumptions

Belarus is more interested in the old *status quo*. Therefore, if *Kommersant's* aforementioned predictions on economic confederation come true, the pressure will have come from the Russian not the Belarusian side.

- The Kremlin has empowered Russian nationalists to escalate attacks on Belarus, not usually on Lukashenka but on the supposed “pro-Western” faction under Foreign Minister

¹⁵ See the data at “European Union, trade in goods,” European Commission, June 3, 2019, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_belarus_en.pdf.

¹⁶ See the report “IT Industry” by the National Agency of Investment and Privatization at <https://investinbelarus.by/upload/pdf/IT%20industry%202018.pdf>.

Uladzimir Makei. This serves the needs of three very different sets of strategists.

- One faction within the Kremlin is trying to wring better value-for-money out of the relationship with Minsk: more loyalty for fewer subsidies.
- Amongst natural hard-liners, Belarus still has allies among the Russian *siloviki* (security services personnel); although they have not given up on the idea of a Russian military base on Belarusian territory. The same faction that pressed for a tougher line with Ukraine is now doing the same vis-à-vis Belarus.
- Nationalist rhetoric is often instrumental. According MGIMO expert Kirill Koktysh, there is “at least one lobbying group in Russia that attempts to fulfil its raider attack on numerous Belarusian enterprises, accusing Minsk of all possible sins, starting with the lack of loyalty and ending with suspected plans to repeat most of Ukraine’s political pro-Western moves... Russian governing elites use this group as an additional factor of pressure on Minsk.”¹⁷
- Unlike with regard to Ukraine, Russian policy toward Belarus is restrained by two other factions. One is made up of the remnants of leftist and neo-Soviet parties that still see value in the rhetoric of Slavic fraternity with Belarus; this group is at the forefront of current Russian protests over pensions. Another is the sizeable group of former Belarusian ministers and businessmen-bureaucrats in Moscow, such as the Khotin

¹⁷ E-mail from Kirill Koktysh, November 2, 2019.

family and Dmitrii Mazepin¹⁸ they are, by definition, interested in keeping an open relationship.

- President Putin has made a number of foreign policy gambles in recent years, but only when he perceived weakness. The annexation of Crimea was launched against a weak state, in a vacuum of local power. A mess of competing projects in eastern Ukraine in 2014 largely floundered while they awaited proper Kremlin approval. The Kremlin will similarly probe for weakness in Belarus; but the Belarusian state under Lukashenka is not hollowed-out as the Ukrainian state was under Viktor Yanukovych. Opportunism is always a factor, but there are relatively few opportunities for Russia in a state that is strategically stable and reasonably successful in juggling limited resources. The 2017 protests against the Belarusian government's "social parasite" tax against resulted from a rare miscalculation by Lukashenka.

Russia: Strategies and Dilemmas

Most Russians see Belarus's room for maneuver as limited. Minsk may flirt with the West, but, in the words of Kirill Koktysh of MGIMO, its underlying loyalty "is largely guaranteed by economic factors, both Russian (market) and Chinese (the Belt and Road project, where Belarus is an important logistics center)."¹⁹ Ironically, Belarus sought out partnership with China to diversify its options, but so far the gains have been limited, and the northern overland branch of "One Belt, One Road" trade tends to transit through Russia. Koktysh continues, "That means that Russia can allow itself to take a risk playing the game 'same level of loyalty for less expenses,' undertaking the tax maneuver,

¹⁸ See "Belorusski sprut: 'Khotinskii' biznes Aleksandra Lukashenko v RF," *Resursnaya Federatsiya*, September 13, 2016; <http://resfed.com/article-2117>

¹⁹ E-mail from Kirill Koktysh, November 2, 2019.

which for Minsk will mean a loss of annual income worth about a couple of billion dollars.”²⁰ The savings also make sense to Russians, who increasingly resent subsidizing Belarus’s more generous welfare economy.

The counter-argument for a more fundamental rethink of the relationship is that Putin’s domestic popularity is on the slide; so he needs another “small victorious war” or equivalent. But logically this would fit the Russian rather than the Belarusian election timetable, and Russian parliamentary elections are not due till 2021, with presidential elections in 2024. Alternatively, it is argued that Putin wants to make the Russia-Belarus Union State a reality in order to become its president after 2024. But he could have done this with the Eurasian Economic Union, except that its central institutions have been left deliberately weak so it can remain a vehicle for pushing Russian national interests.²¹ The idea of Putin taking the Union State Presidency was first mooted in 2007, but it was deemed too small a position for the “power-behind-the-throne.” The “castling” between Putin and Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, swapping their roles of prime minister and president, became the strategy instead. Nevertheless, “the very fact of this discussion makes Belarusian elites more afraid of any further integration,” notes Andrei Skriba of the Higher School of Economics (HSE), in Moscow.²²

Some Russians fear that the West will overreach and try and draw Belarus into a more genuinely “multi-vector” foreign policy. Lukashenka personally “never makes any geopolitical moves without

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, “The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power,” *RIIA*, May 2, 2017, www.chathamhouse.org/publication/eurasian-economic-union-deals-rules-and-exercise-power.

²² E-mail from Andrei Skriba, November 31, 2019.

understanding how at the next step he will be able to convert it into real resources. [T]he West is not going to take up the burden of financing the Belarusian economy (including paying compensation for markets that can be lost in case of Minsk's pro-Western orientation)," according to Koktysh of MGIMO.²³ But Russia would like to lock in rivals and successors. According to the HSE's Skriba, "Currently, Belarus-Russia relations look like a cold peace. Belarus has little chances to replace Russian economic assistance and subsidies, and military and security cooperation also seem quite stable. On the other hand, however, Russians understands that Lukashenka's" reputation as a dictator may be a wasting asset. "To make future relations more predictable, Moscow is looking for a more institutionalized integration that could involve more economic and social aspects. [This would] make it much less possible for any future Belarusian president to change [Minsk's] foreign policy priorities."²⁴

Information War

The main evidence for the theory of a more serious existential Russian threat to Belarus comes from the current information war. According to a recent report by iSANS, "Many of the media involved in the information attack on Belarus are sponsored and promoted by 'patriotic businessmen' close to Vladimir Putin or associated with the Presidential Administration." The attacks, moreover, have spread beyond the core propaganda outlets run by the "usual suspects," like *Regnum.ru* and *Zapadrus.su*, to social media, Telegram in particular.²⁵

²³ E-mail from Kirill Koktysh, November 2, 2019.

²⁴ E-mail from Andrei Skriba, November 31, 2019.

²⁵ "Coercion to 'Integration': Russia's Creeping Assault on the Sovereignty of Belarus," *iSANS*, 2019, https://isans.org/wp-content/docs/Belarus_report_eng_iSANS_10.03.2019_BRIEF_VERSION.pdf.

Beginning in 2018, Russia has also been bypassing Minsk to target the Belarusian regions with new platforms.²⁶

The language used in such forums is certainly extreme. It includes attacks on *mestechkovyi natsionalizm* (“small-town nationalism”)²⁷ and *Bat’kiny natsisty* (“Batko’s Nazis”—Batko or “father” being Lukashenka’s nickname).²⁸ Other commonly repeated themes are that Belarusian statehood is a historical mistake; the Belarusian language does not exist; the West wants to make a “second Ukraine” out of Belarus; “Western values” are incompatible with Orthodox values and a cover for LGBT propaganda; and more.

Significantly, however, the attacks seem to be foreign policy-led, frequently concentrating on Foreign Minister Makei and/or coinciding with Belarus not cooperating fully with Russia in foreign policy. Russia’s framing of soft Belarusianization as a threat can actually be interpreted as a warning to Minsk about too much foreign policy independence.²⁹ One attack lists the sins of “the Makei project” as “separation from the Russian world [*Russkiy mir*], withdrawal from the frontal clash between Russia and the West,” and Belarus “becoming a second Switzerland, where officials rule the quiet people

²⁶ Andrei Yeliseyev, “Fundamental Shifts in Anti-Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda: Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Changes,” *EAST Center*, April 17, 2019, <http://east-center.org/fundamental-shifts-in-anti-belarus-disinformation-and-propaganda/>.

²⁷ Kamil Kłysiński and Piotr Żochowski, “The End of the Myth of Brotherly Belarus? Russian Soft Power in Belarus after 2014: The Background and its Manifestations,” *OSW Studies*, no. 58, November 2016, www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace_58_ang_end_of_myth_net.pdf, quote on p. 17.

²⁸ Vladimir Zotov, “Bat’kiny natsisty,” *Lenta.ru*, April 3, 2018, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/04/03/belonazi/>.

²⁹ Anaïs Marin, March 29, 2019.

and capitalize their political and bureaucratic assets. As a result of this soft play on “sovereignty,” Belarus will become, in a few years, an element of the Polish (in fact, American or Wilsonian) concept of the *Intermarium*” as a means of tearing it away from Russia.³⁰

This information warfare is backed up by so-called “active measures.” Russian nationalist groups linked to the Orthodox Church have proliferated in Belarus in recent years, as in Ukraine just prior to and immediately after 2014. Russian “government-organized NGOs” (GONGO) are also active in Belarus, like the CIS-EMO, *Soyuz* (“Union”) founded in 2018, and the Belarusian Public Associations of Russian Compatriots (KSORS), all with “at least an indirect connection to Russia’s Embassy in Belarus.”³¹ If Belarus were to democratize, it is not necessarily pro-Western groups that would benefit. Russian-backed groups might be better-placed to mobilize first.

The rising tide of information war and active measures tells us little about any kind of underlying strategy. They can be used by any of the three Russian groups listed above—bureaucrats concerned with lowering subsidies to Belarus, the *siloviki*, and oligarchic business raider groups. **Figure 1** (see p. v) attempts to illustrate the situation. The Belarusian regime can keep the opposition parties largely at bay, but there are elements within civil society more broadly who cooperate with the authorities or are state-sponsored GONGOs; and there is some mutual interest in “soft Belarusianization.” The Belarusian regime wants to keep its “feeding” subsidies (*kormlenie* in Russian) fat and generous. One faction in the Russian regime wants

³⁰ Yurii Baranchik, “Belarus: elita uzhe vybrala preemnika Lukashenko,” *Regnum*, August 6, 2016, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2164093.html>.

³¹ Andrei Yeliseyev, “Fundamental Shifts in Anti-Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda,” *EAST Center*, April 17, 2019, <http://east-center.org/fundamental-shifts-in-anti-belarus-disinformation-and-propaganda/>.

to cut them down. They are prepared to give “license” (in Russian *otmashka*) to Russian nationalist groups to pressure Belarus to give in. Combined genuine pressure on Belarus from both the Russian regime and Russian nationalists could be a real threat to Belarusian sovereignty. Unfortunately, these strategies often overlap and may look the same from outside.

The West

Both the US and EU have to juggle concerns about human rights and state sovereignty when forming their Belarus policies. The human rights situation in Belarus has improved enough since around 2015 to shift Western attention first toward “sanctions relief” (for the US in 2015, the EU in 2016), and then increasing dialogue. Minsk timed its moves well to take advantage of the West’s concerns about domino effects after the war in Ukraine began in 2014.

Belarus and the West have now reached a narrow equilibrium of balance over human rights issues and sovereignty support. Minsk calibrated its gradual crackdown against protests after its ill-judged “social parasite” tax in 2017 so as not to break off relations with the West. However, the Brussels and Washington have little to offer for the rapprochement to progress further, apart from visa facilitation and possible energy supply agreements. Neither the EU nor the US can do much to help Belarus’s struggling state-owned enterprises.

In 2018–2019, the trend in Belarus has actually reversed back toward greater autocracy, particularly with media crackdowns—in part because of Minsk’s worries about Russian moves. But Belarus will not risk isolation with an increasingly assertive Russia. The government in Minsk knows the West will support diplomatically its peaceful attempts at foreign policy diversification; but hard power support in a major crisis cannot be assumed. Possibly the most dangerous moment might be something in the middle, with Russian pressure sufficiently disguised as to excuse Western inaction.

Belarus's Neighbors

Ukraine cares almost exclusively about sovereignty when it thinks about Belarus, rather than human rights. Ukraine could not fight a war on two fronts, if Russia was able to use Belarus to pressure it from the north. Security cooperation between the two states has been surprisingly good since 2014. Trade has kept flowing; and travel via Minsk compensates for the disrupted direct travel between Russia and Ukraine. Kyiv needs Minsk as a diplomatic hub.

This is also true, though to a lesser extent, for Poland and the Baltic States, which value Belarus as a buffer against Russia. Lithuania is an exception, as its key concern is the nuclear plant that Belarus is building just across the border at Astravets. Lithuania's all-or-nothing opposition to the project makes constructing EU consensus on policy change toward Belarus more difficult. Both Latvia and Lithuania need Belarus to offset declining Russian trade through their Baltic seaports.³²

Conclusions

A grand unveiling of a major new deal over the coming months is unlikely, although a "road-map" might emerge. The key risk is asymmetric expectations, and Russian pushing too far, too hard. Russian pressure on Belarus has persisted for 20 years, with each bilateral crisis longer and more serious than the last. But a deal has always been made in the end. This time, however, the two sides are increasingly looking for different things: to leave the last word to

³² Paul Goble, "Russia Shifting Cargo Traffic Away From Baltic Ports to Its Own," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, December 5, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-shifting-cargo-traffic-away-from-baltic-ports-to-its-own/>.

Andrei Skriba, "Minsk is looking for additional financial support, while Moscow—for guarantees of its privileged interests."³³

³³ E-mail from Andrei Skriba, November 31, 2019.

Belarus's Role in East European Energy Geopolitics

Rauf Mammadov

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Executive Summary

The role Belarus plays in energy geopolitics is one of the most unusual in the world. While not a petroleum supplier, it sells refined oil products to many countries. And while not a natural gas producer, it delivers the fuel to numerous countries via pipelines built during Soviet times. Its unique situation stems from Belarus's location next to its nearly sole energy supplier, Russia, and the fact that its economy is heavily based on these hydrocarbon resources. Belarus's dependence on below-market-price Russian energy means it has had no choice but to pursue a foreign policy that keeps it tightly within Moscow's orbit.

Neither Belarus's membership in the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union nor its interminable negotiations with Russia on forming a political and economic union—which Belarus wants to avoid—have prevented the two countries from succumbing to periodic oil and gas pricing disputes. Although in each successive case, they ultimately managed to resolve their disagreements, the solutions either patched over key issues or proved temporary, leading to renewed disputes down the road.

The countries are now embroiled in yet another pricing row, with Russia flexing its energy-supply muscle again to try to force Belarus into a political and economic union. As in the past, some interim solution to

the dispute is likely. But if Belarus truly wants to end its dependence on Russian energy and avoid existentially deeper integration with the Russian Federation, it will need to diversify its oil and gas imports as soon as possible.

Introduction

Belarus is one of the few countries that lacks oil and natural gas but whose economy revolves around them. One important factor that helps explain this seeming contradiction is the fact that the country has several major pieces of petroleum-industry infrastructure left over from Soviet times—two refineries and networks of pipelines that deliver Russian oil and gas to Europe. The Moscow-owned pipelines that send Russian oil and gas to and through Belarus have long enabled Russia to be essentially the sole supplier of its neighbor's energy. At the same time, the Naftan and Mozyr refineries have allowed Belarus to create value-added products like gasoline to sell to Russia and other countries. But together, these refineries' operations now account for 19 percent of Belarus's total export revenues.¹

Naftan, which opened in 1958, is the oldest and largest refinery on Belarusian territory. The state-owned facility, which can convert 12 million tons of crude oil a year into other products, stands in a strategic location on the Divne River. The government has upgraded Naftan several times to improve its operating efficiency, from 70 percent in the 1970s to 95 percent today.

The Mozyr Oil Refinery, which refines eight million tons of oil a year, began operating in 1975. In 1994, it became part of a Belarusian-Russian joint venture known as Slavneft. The company retains majority ownership of Mozyr, with the Belarusian government

¹ "Belarus-Country Profile," The Observation of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/blr/#Exports>.

holding 42.5 percent and employees and other individuals 14.5 percent.²

Both refineries receive their oil from Russia, through the Druzhba pipeline. The world's longest oil pipeline, it runs from western Siberia to Belarus and on to Europe. The pipeline supplies Belarus with 24 million tons of oil a year, while sending another 40 million tons to Europe. Russia sends a quarter of all its oil exports to Ukraine, Belarus and Europe through the Druzhba, with a third going mainly to Poland and Germany.³

Belarus also buys around 20 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Russian gas a year and annually transits 39 bcm of Russian gas to Europe. Those volumes flow mostly through the Yamal-Europe pipeline, owned by Russian state-run gas giant Gazprom.⁴ Of the 39 bcm of Russian gas earmarked for European customers and transiting Belarus, 32 bcm goes to Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. Belarus and Ukraine account for all the gas transported via on-land pipelines to Europe.

Gazprom additionally has a controlling interest in the Northern Lights pipeline, the Belarusian section of which is operated by the Russian gas producer's local subsidiary, Gazprom Transgaz Belarus (formerly Beltransgaz). The Belarusian section of Northern Lights delivers 7 bcm of Russian gas to Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and to Russia's European exclave of Kaliningrad. Gazprom obtained a

² Slavneft Official Website, <http://www.slavneft.ru/eng/company/geography/mozir/>.

³ European Council, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/energy/bloc-2c.html>.

⁴ Global Intelligence Report, "Yamal-Europe Natural Gas Pipeline," Oilprice.com, February 14, 2011, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Natural-Gas/The-Yamal-Europe-Natural-Gas-Pipeline.html>.

majority stake in Beltransgaz in 2012, in exchange for discounts on the price of gas it was supplying to Belarus.⁵

The fact that the Belarusian economy is so dependent on its large eastern neighbor's energy raw materials has created recurring spasms of tension between them since the late 1990s, just a few years after the Soviet Union disintegrated. That energy dependence is also putting pressure on Minsk to yield to Moscow's desire for Belarus to become what amounts to a Russian fiefdom. To date, Belarus has been able to dodge some of the Kremlin's most brazen integration demands—like putting Russian military bases on Belarusian soil. But unless Belarus can truly diversify its economy away from oil and gas, its future remains uncertain. One factor currently playing in Belarus's favor is that its first nuclear plant, which is expected to become fully operational in 2021, will somewhat reduce its dependence on Russian oil and gas. The first reactor of the nuclear plant is now in an operational testing stage, while nuclear fuel is scheduled to be delivered from Russia in the first quarter of 2020.⁶

The importance of the energy sector to Belarus's overall economy is difficult to overstate. In fact, it is the key to its survival. The Belarusian state obtains a substantial share of its revenue from selling products derived from Russian crude, re-exporting Russian oil and from charging Russia a transit fee to send billions of cubic meters of gas a year to Ukraine and Europe through Belarus's pipeline networks. The Belarusian Statistics Committee says Belarus makes \$1.1 billion a year

⁵ Elena Mazneva, "Gazprom annexes Belarus to Russia," December 29, 2011, Vedomosti.ru, https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2011/12/30/igra_na_trubah.

⁶ "Nuclear fuel for BelAes to be delivered in 1Q of 2020," Sputnik Belarus, December 19, 2019, <https://sputnik.by/economy/20191219/1043523369/Yadernoe-toplivo-na-BelAES-zavezut-v-pervom-kvartale-2020-goda.html>.

from selling refined oil products and \$1 billion a year from sending Russian oil and gas to other countries.⁷

The Belarusian economy also benefits from Russian oil and gas in another way: The prices it pays for these commodities for its domestic use are much lower than the going rates internationally. And while Russia has periodically increased the prices, Belarus is still securing a favorable deal—although it protests every time there is an up-tick. Oil and gas-dependent economies like Belarus's come with a serious downside, of course. Namely, fluctuations in global energy prices mean that Belarus can quickly go from being in good financial shape to having to scramble for revenue.

Russia's Energy Ripple Effects on Belarus

Because Belarus's economy is so dependent on Russian oil and gas, economic changes affecting its neighbor can spill over into Belarus, potentially with disastrous consequences. One poignant example involves the recent change in the way Russia taxes its oil industry. The shift has increased the price that Belarus pays for Russian oil, reducing its revenue. More detailed implications of this change on Belarusian state revenues are discussed below.

Belarusian-Russian energy relations have experienced dozens of ups and downs since the two countries became independent in the early 1990s. Although their energy disputes far outnumber similar Russian conflicts in this domain with Ukraine, the Moscow-Minsk standoffs mostly avoided spiraling out into major blow ups. The reason for this is tied to Belarus's heavy economic dependence on Russia. Its

⁷ "How much does Belarus make in oil exports," Express.by, April 27, 2019, <https://ex-press.by/rubrics/ekonomika/2019/04/27/skolko-belarus-zarabatyvaet-na-tranzite-rossijskoj-nefti-menshe-chem-na-korovax>.

neighbor is not only (essentially) the sole supplier of Belarus's oil and gas but also its largest trading partner by far.⁸ In addition, Belarus has been chronically indebted to Russia for its entire history as a sovereign state. Lacking the financial resources to provide the array of social services its citizens need or to make necessary structural improvements, it has often resorted to borrowing from Russia.

In recent years, Moscow has leaned harder on Minsk to take steps toward confederation that would hew to the Kremlin's wishes. Belarus's longtime leader, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, has so far resisted moves that could undermine his country's independence, however—such as allowing permanent Russian military bases on his country's soil. Russia is keenly aware of Belarus's important geopolitical location, bordering on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) right flank in Europe's East. And the ongoing hostility between Russia and the West has encouraged the Kremlin to find new ways to shore up that strategic direction. If Russia and Belarus were to become a confederation, Russia could more easily deploy troops along Belarus's border with the European Union.

The Belarusian economy enjoyed modest growth in the early 2000s. But the pace of expansion started slowing in 2014 and reached an alarming level of only 1.2 percent—almost no growth—in 2019.⁹ Belarus's status as both a petroleum-product importer and exporter means that a drop in oil and gas prices helps its non-petroleum sectors

⁸ Russia is the largest trading partner of Belarus, whereas Belarus is Russia's fourth-largest trading partner. Trade turnover between the two countries equaled \$21 billion in 2019. See: Daniel Workman, *Worlds Top Exports*, January 2, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>.

⁹ "Economy of Belarus grew 1.2% in 2019," Belta Belarus, January 16, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/vvp-belarusi-v-2019-godu-vyros-na-12-376167-2020/>.

but also reduces the revenue it obtains from selling value-added petroleum products abroad.

Diversification Efforts Sputter

Aware of its vulnerability to Russian economic upheaval, Belarus has sought to diversify its economy as well as reduce its dependence on the eastern neighbor's energy resources. But so far, those efforts have largely failed, and in many ways the government's approach has defied economic logic, implementing certain policies that will actually make economic diversification more difficult. Rather than creating a fertile environment for a free-market economy, for example, it has been strengthening the state's role in major economic segments.

Since the Belarusian economy relies so heavily on cheap Russian oil and gas, Minsk presumably has an overwhelming incentive to avoid any and all disruptive gas battles like the ones Ukraine has fought with Russia. But in fact, Belarus was subject to several such disputes in recent years. Indeed, it was actually the first country that the Kremlin opted to "punish" by cutting off its oil and gas supplies in February 2004.¹⁰ The shutdown generated headlines at the time, although not nearly as many as when Moscow stopped pumping natural gas to Ukraine and Western Europe during a rancorous dispute with Kyiv nearly two years later. The 2005/2006 supply disruption left gas-short Europe shivering during the winter, and prompted European leaders to start looking for alternatives to Russian energy.

Moscow and Minsk sniped at each other about Russian oil and gas prices as well as Belarusian gas-transit fees on and off since becoming independent before a major dust-up arose. One reason their bilateral

¹⁰ Sergei Danilochkin, "Belarus: Moscow And Minsk Back Down From Gas Crisis As Temporary Supplies Resume," Radio Free Europe, February 19, 2004, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1051606.html>.

energy-related squabbles stayed in bounds for so long—as compared with the periodic Ukrainian-Russian disputes—was that Belarus never showed any signs of wanting to integrate with the West, unlike Ukraine. On the contrary, Belarus has, to date, joined every political-economic integrationist institution that Russia has proposed or supported, including the Customs Union and the subsequent Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Belarus and Russia began talking about political integration in 1999, when they signed the Union State treaty, pledging to take steps necessary to achieve this goal.¹¹ Not wanting to do anything that might discourage Belarus from pursuing eventual integration, Moscow gave Minsk favorable (highly subsidized) energy deals for five years. But disagreements over the terms of bilateral energy cooperation turned nasty in 2004. From that point on, Russia started taking a tougher line regarding mutual oil and gas talks.

Breaking with more than a dozen years of tradition, 2004 was significant in that it marked the first time Gazprom refused to sell gas to Belarus at subsidized prices—that is, below the international market rate. And since that time, Russia has had no further qualms about periodically reducing or cutting off gas to Belarus for up to weeks at a time, with the biggest flare-ups of this sort occurring in 2010 and 2017.

Faced with this new reality, Minsk has countered on a number of occasions by disrupting the delivery of gas that Russia sends through Belarus to Europe—Gazprom's main market.¹² And in 2007, Belarus

¹¹ Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://mfa.gov.by/en/courtiers/russia/>.

¹² Gazprom's total exports equaled 239 bcm in 2019, excluding the sales of gas purchased by the company abroad. Of that volume, 199 bcm was delivered to Europe. See: "Gazprom konkretiziroval itogovyye dannyye po dobyche gaza v 2019 godu," Interfax, January 2, 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/business/690081>.

introduced a new retaliatory tactic: It began siphoning off some of the oil Russia was sending to European customers through the Druzhba pipeline, the main branches of which run across Belarus and Ukraine.¹³

Meanwhile, several recent energy developments are likely to sharply exacerbate Russia and Belarus's petroleum-and-gas-sector disagreements going forward. First is Russia's construction of new pipelines in the Baltic and Black seas (the latter, via Turkey) to deliver its gas to Europe without having to transit through Belarus and Ukraine. Lukashenka railed against Russia's first trans-Baltic Sea pipeline—the 55 bcm Nord Stream One, built in 2007, which directly links Russia and Germany—because of the huge threat he recognized it posed to his country's livelihood.¹⁴ The Nord Stream Two pipeline, which mostly follows alongside its namesake predecessor, will double this export route's annual capacity to 110 bcm. Russia promises Nord Stream Two will be completed in 2020. Once it comes online, it will make Belarus's overland gas pipeline network even more dispensable, thus further reducing Minsk's leverage in future gas disputes with Moscow.

Belarus gained an unexpected bargaining chip this past year when, in April 2019, Transneft sent millions of gallons of contaminated oil through the Druzhba pipeline, causing massive damage to Belarusian refineries and spoiling Russia's reputation as a dependable supplier to Europe—but this leverage will be short-lived. Minsk has demanded more than three-quarters of a billion dollars from Russia for the revenue it lost when Transneft had to shut down the pipeline to clean

¹³ "Russia oil row hits Europe supply," BBC News Service, January 8, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/6240473.stm>.

¹⁴ At one point, Lukashenka called the first Nord Stream pipeline "the most idiotic project" the Russians were pursuing. "Lukashenko names the most idiotic project of Russia," Lenta.ru, January 14, 2007, <https://lenta.ru/news/2007/01/14/project/>.

it. Although compensation is in the cards, Minsk is unlikely to obtain anywhere near the damages it wants. And once the issue is resolved, Belarus will lose a lot of the leverage it currently has to prod Russia into favorable energy-dispute fixes.

Oil Imports and Transit Rows

Belarus and Russia's oil-import and oil-transit disagreements have become more contentious in the past five years as Russia's own revenue picture has deteriorated. One factor in this deterioration has been lower global oil prices. For instance, the Russian economy shrank by 3.7 percent in 2015, when oil prices plummeted to their lowest since 2012, while inflation reached 12.7 percent.¹⁵ Falling energy prices meant less money, which was exacerbated further by Western sanctions imposed on Moscow to punish it for its seizure of Crimea, its support for eastern Ukrainian separatists, and its overseas adventures in Syria and elsewhere. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, over the past five years Russia lost \$50 billion merely due to the sanctions—a substantial amount for the Kremlin to use for both domestic projects and foreign affairs.¹⁶

Looking for additional revenue anywhere it could find it, Russia asked Belarus to pay higher prices for oil in 2016. When Minsk balked, Russia reduced its oil exports to Belarus by 30 percent in the first quarter of 2017.¹⁷ Although the reduction was temporary, it

¹⁵ "Upshot of Russian Economy in 2016: Surplus shading into zeitnot" Interfax, December 29, 2016, <https://www.interfax.ru/business/543640>.

¹⁶ Elena Gosteva, "Putin has calculated the costs: Who lost more?" *Gazeta.ru*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2019/06/20/12429169.shtml>.

¹⁷ "Russia reduces oil supply to Belarus by 30%," *Neftegaz.ru*, April 3, 2017, <https://neftegaz.ru/news/transport-and-storage/211414-rossiya-v-1-kvartale-2017-g-snizila-postavki-nefti-v-belorussiyu-na-30-i-dumaet-cto-delat-dalshe/>.

underscored the critical role that Russian oil plays in Belarus's economy.

The Russian-operated Druzhba oil pipeline is a strategic asset and major revenue generator for both Russia and Belarus. In fact, a quarter of Russia's total oil exports flow through the Druzhba. In return for allowing part of the pipeline to remain on Belarusian soil, Minsk receives below-market prices for oil for its domestic use, transit fees on EU-bound oil flowing through the Druzhba, as well as revenue from re-exporting Russian crude and selling refined products to neighboring countries.

Because Belarus's economy is so closely tied to Russia's, lengthy oil- or gas-supply disruptions can cripple it. During the 2016–2017 dispute, Minsk tried offsetting the losses it was suffering from a 30 percent reduction in Russian supplies by importing crude through Black Sea ports in Ukraine and Baltic ports in Poland. But the higher oil prices and shipping expenses cost Belarus an additional \$1 billion.¹⁸ At one point, Belarus hoped to import oil through the planned Odesa–Brody Pipeline. But the project, which would have run from the Black Sea port of Odesa to the western Ukrainian city of Brody, near the Polish border, was shelved in 2013.

A positive energy-related development for Belarus's economy is that a major retrofitting of its refineries is likely to be completed this year. Both were originally designed to handle the poor-quality crude that Russia produced during Soviet times. The upgrading, which began in 2017, will allow them to handle better-quality oil.

¹⁸ "Russia and Belarus regulate the gas crisis," Neftegaz.ru, April 4, 2017, <https://neftegaz.ru/news/politics/211387-nuzhno-idti-na-ustupki-rossiya-i-belorussiya-uregulirovali-neftegazovyy-spor-i-dogovorilis-o-sozdani/>.

Nevertheless, an enormous cloud continues to hang over Belarus's economic prospects, including when it comes to the long-term profitability of its refineries: the change in Russia's oil tax law (analyzed in greater detail in the next section of this study).¹⁹ Without some kind of relief from Moscow, Minsk is likely to take a huge hit to its economy, affecting what it can spend on health care, social programs, pensions and other important efforts. The problem is rooted in Russia's decision to shift oil taxes from exporters to producers—that is, the companies that actually extract the oil. When Russian refineries protested that the higher taxes would hurt them by raising the cost of the crude they buy, the Kremlin gave them a tax rebate. Belarus, on the other hand, cannot afford to give its refineries a tax rebate—it would cost the government too much revenue. With the new tax regime in Russia, Belarus will be losing on average \$17 per ton (assuming an oil price of \$60 per barrel).²⁰ To try to recoup some of the revenue it is losing as a result of higher Russian crude prices and last year's contamination of the Druzhba pipeline (described in detail in the following section), Belarus suggested increasing the tariff by 21 percent. In August 2019, Minsk increased the transit fee by 3.7 percent.²¹ And the government is now considering adding an environmental tax to Russian oil transit in order to recoup the

¹⁹ "Russia's Oil Sector Is Facing A Massive Tax Overhaul," Oilprice.com, June 11, 2018, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Russias-Oil-Sector-Is-Facing-A-Massive-Tax-Overhaul.html>.

²⁰ Olga Dolgaya, "Andrey Buynakov: Politics of sales are changing," Belchemoil.by, November 27, 2019, <https://belchemoil.by/news/ekonomika/andrej-bunakov-politika-prodazh-menyaetsya>.

²¹ "Belarus increases the transit fee for Russian oil," Belsat.eu, August 7, 2019, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/belarus-povyshaet-tarif-na-tranzit-rossijskoj-nefti-no-nena-tak-mnogo-kak-hotelos-by/>.

incurred costs.²² Most recently, on January 30, 2020, Minsk announced that it would raise the tariff by an additional 6 percent, starting from February 1.

Two Unresolved Oil-Sector Spats

The two major still-unresolved oil disputes between Minsk and Moscow are 1) what to do about the revenue Belarus is losing from Russia's oil-tax maneuver and 2) how much Russia should pay Belarus for its Druzhba contamination losses. Belarus not only wants Russia to come up with a way to reverse the oil-revenue shortfall it is experiencing from the tax change but also to compensate it for the revenue it has already lost as a result of the contamination accident. But the sides remain poles apart on the amount of reimbursement Minsk should receive.

Oil-Tax Reform Disagreement

Russia began changing the way it taxes oil in 2015, in response to a plunge in global prices and the sanctions the West imposed on it. It is gradually reducing its tax on oil exporters to zero while increasing its tax on producers.

Although the change is expected to generate an additional \$23.6 billion a year for Russia's budget by 2025, it jarred the oil industry by lowering its profit margins.²³ This was a problem not just for the industry, but also for the Russian government because the domestic oil sector needs to be healthy for Russia's economy to thrive. The

²² Aleksandr Yarevich, "Has Belarus levied environmental tax on oil transit?" *Naviny.by*, January 13, 2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20200113/1578926895-belarus-vvela-nalog-na-tranzit-nefti-kasaetsya-li-rossii>.

²³ "Budget overhaul: How much will gasoline cost?" *Gazeta.ru*, October 28, 2019 <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2019/10/28/12782102.shtm>.

producer tax meant less money for Russian oil companies to spend on maintaining existing operations, bringing new fields to production, and expanding distribution networks. The government's solution was to give the industry tax breaks for refinery modernization.

To maintain their profit margins, Russian producers began charging more for crude to offset the higher tax they were paying. Russian exporters, in turn, passed the higher cost on to Belarusian importers, slashing Belarus's revenues. The shift in the oil-tax burden from Russian exporters to producers has been a huge financial blow to Belarus, costing it an additional \$400 million in 2019.²⁴ Moreover, Minsk has also been unable to take advantage of the drop in Russia's oil export duties because, as a member of both the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union, it was exempt from the duties in the first place. Meanwhile, the refinery-modernization tax breaks that Russia gave its producers do not apply to Belarus, because its refineries are not Russian companies.

The Belarusian discontent over Russia's tax reform led to another bilateral dispute at the end of 2019. The oil-import contract expired on December 31, 2019, and the parties could not find a compromise. As a result, on January 3, 2020, Russia cut direct oil supplies to Belarus while maintaining the transit through the country.²⁵ Belarus claims that its economy will lose \$10.5 billion–\$11 billion between 2019 and 2024. In recompense, Minsk demand from Moscow either yearly compensation for the losses or a \$10 discount on imported oil. To date, the parties have agreed on a methodology for the compensation, although the actual amount that may be coming Belarus's way is still

²⁴ "Tax overhaul may cost Belarusian budget \$400 million," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.kp.by/online/news/3634899/>.

²⁵ "Russia suspends oil supplies to Belarus," *RIA Novosti*, January 3, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200103/1563086307.html>.

subject to further negotiations.²⁶ The next round of talks is scheduled for February 1, 2020; and Minsk and Moscow have to additionally come to some agreement on the amount of compensation Belarus should receive for the contamination of the Druzhba pipeline in summer 2019.

With traditional suppliers such as Rosneft, Gazpromneft, Lukoil, Tatneft and Surgutneftegaz balking at offering Belarus a discount, Lukashenka started seeking alternatives to them both in Russia and abroad—something he has done in previous disputes, with no sustainable success. On January 4, 2020, Belneftkhim, the Belarusian state concern for oil and chemicals, announced it had signed a contract with Russneft for supply of 750,000 tons of oil for the Mozyr refinery.²⁷ But the contract is signed for only the first quarter of 2020, and even that volume will not suffice to fully supply Belarusian demand. Lukashenka's efforts to find willing suppliers abroad has yet to yield any progress absent a small volume purchase from Norway. On January 21, the Belneftkhim refinery announced the purchase of 80,000 tons from Norway via the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda.²⁸

Lukashenka's government also addressed letters to Poland, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and the Baltic States, hoping to secure a commercially feasible supply contract. However, the talks with these suppliers have yet to yield any positive results. Poland was the first to disappoint Belarus, announcing that it was technically impossible to reverse the

²⁶ "Moscow and Minsk agree the methodology of compensation," *RBK*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/12/2019/5df7491e9a79476e63ff800e>.

²⁷ "Supply request for oil from Russia processed for Russneft and Neftis," *Interfax Belarus*, January 4, 2020, https://interfax.by/news/policy/ekonomicheskaya_politika/1269577/.

²⁸ "Belarus starts buying oil from Norway," *Korrespondent.ru*, January 21, 2020, <https://korrespondent.net/business/economics/4184591-belarus-nachala-zakupat-neft-u-norvehyy>.

flow of the Druzhba pipeline.²⁹ The Kazakhstan option remains the only direction on which Belarus has had any success in talks, but even the Kazakhstani alternative comes with its own challenges. For instance, on January 21, Lukashenka complained that Moscow was not allowing Kazakhstan to use its territory for the transit.³⁰ And even if Belarus ultimately signs a deal with Kazakhstan, Minsk will have to pay Nur-Sultan³¹ \$5 a ton more than Russia's price.³² This would be a major increase for Belarus, given that it imports 18 million tons of oil a year for its domestic consumption. Belarus faced a comparable situation during a 2012 dispute with Russia. Azerbaijan and Venezuela were willing to sell it crude, but the cost would have been considerably higher than Russian oil.

Lukashenka seeks alternative supplies to gain a bargaining chip with Russia. In 2019, he sent a shot across Russia's bow when he announced that Belarus was talking with Poland and the Baltic States about obtaining oil through the so-called Northern Route.³³ In addition, it was reported that Belneftkhim is trying to implore the United States

²⁹ "Polish operator assesses possibility of oil supply to Belarus via Druzhba," RIA Novosti, January 14, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200114/1563417715.html>.

³⁰ "Lukashenka: Russia does not allow Kazakstan to supply oil to Belarus," RIA Novosti, January 21, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200121/1563671127.html>.

³¹ Kazakhstan's capital city of Astana was renamed Nur-Sultan in 2019.

³² "Kazakhstan's dilemma: How to sell oil to Belarus while not angering Russia," Sputnik.by, October 28, 2019 <https://sputnik.by/columnists/20191028/1043082445/Kazakhstanskaya-dilemma-prodat-neft-Minsku-i-ne-possoritsya-s-Moskvoy.html>.

³³ "Belarus is seeking to buy U.S. crude oil", Radio Free Europe, August 22, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lukashenka-us-oil-purchase-russia-reliance/30124113.html>.

to remove sanctions against it so it can import US oil.³⁴ The US Treasury Department placed sanctions on Belarus during the George W. Bush administration, in 2007. But the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations have waived the sanctions on a number of Belarusian energy enterprises since 2015. The most recent exemption, for 18 months, was provided on October 22, 2019.³⁵

Another alternative is resurrecting the idea of the Odesa–Brody Pipeline—a possibility that Belarusian and Ukrainian officials discussed last November. Ukrainian officials said the sides actually established a joint commission to oversee the delivery of oil from Brody to the Mozyr refinery.³⁶

The key to whether Belarus goes with an alternative, of course, is whether it is price-competitive with Russian supplies—a big “if.” Nonetheless, President Lukashenka rigorously rebuked the price competitiveness argument, claiming that he was not bluffing when he talked about alternative supply options. The Belarusian leader went further, saying that even though Saudi or US crude was more expensive, its quality was much better than Russian oil.³⁷

³⁴ “Belarus has intensified efforts to lift us sanctions”, *Belarusinfocus.info*, August 22, 2019, <https://belarusinfocus.info/belarus-west-relations/belarus-has-intensified-efforts-lift-us-sanctions-and-diversify-foreign>,

³⁵ “Belarus Sanctions Regulation,” The US Treasury, October 22, 2019, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/belarus_gl2g.pdf.

³⁶ “Minsk seeks to import oil via Odessa–Brody route,” *Oilcapital.ru*, November 25, 2019, <https://oilcapital.ru/news/export/25-11-2019/minsk-hochet-poluchat-neft-po-marshrutu-odessa-brody>.

³⁷ “This is not a bluff: Lukashenko on alternative oil import options,” January 24, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/eto-ne-blef-lukashenko-rasskazal-o-vidah-na-alternativnye-postavki-nefti-377114-2020>.

Druzhba Contamination Dispute

On April 19, 2019, Belneftkhim announced a sudden deterioration in the quality of oil being imported to the Naftan and Mozyr refineries via the Druzhba pipeline.³⁸ On April 24, Belarus suspended the export of Russian oil to other countries, and Germany, Poland and Ukraine cut Russian oil imports within the next three days.³⁹ Tests of the oil transported by the Druzhba pipeline revealed it had higher-than-permitted levels of organic chlorides.

Belarus and Russia created a joint commission to determine how much compensation Minsk should receive from Moscow for its Druzhba export/transit losses and the damage to its infrastructure from the contaminated oil. But those talks have made little headway to date because of the huge gap between what the sides believe the figure ought to be.

The debacle has also hurt Russia's credibility in Belarus and Europe. Until the contamination occurred, Russia enjoyed the reputation of a dependable oil supplier to the continent. In the six decades that the Druzhba pipeline has been operational, there had not, until now, been any similar incidents that might call into question the reliability of the pipeline.

Gas Transit-Fee Rows

The 39 billion cubic meters of Russian gas that Belarussian pipelines deliver to Europe annually is a mutually beneficial business for both

³⁸ "Belarusian oil refinery blames Russia for the oil quality," *UAWire*, April 23, 2019, <https://uawire.org/belarusian-oil-refinery-blames-russian-oil-for-the-equipment-damage>.

³⁹ "Belarus has stopped exporting oil to its neighbours," *Currenttime TV*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-petrol-export/29899296.html>.

countries.⁴⁰ It accounts for a fifth of the gas that Russia delivers to Europe, and it generates half a billion dollars in transit-fee income for Belarus. Although this amount does not constitute significant part of Belarusian budget revenues, Russian gas transit does equip Minsk with additional leverage in gas import negotiations with Gazprom.

Belarus imports 20 bcm of Russian gas a year for its own use.⁴¹ Belarus has no domestic oil or gas reserves to speak of, but its economy is highly energy-intensive. So it has no choice but to import Russian gas, since it is the cheapest available. Russia gave Belarus a huge price discount until their first energy dispute in 2004. But Gazprom has increased the price of Belarus's supply several times since then.

Belarus's Weak Negotiating Leverage Vis-à-Vis Russia

The two partners have had three major transit-fee rows since 2004. Each time, Russia demonstrated its stronger negotiating position over Belarus by reducing the amount of Europe-bound gas flowing through Belarusian pipelines for a few weeks at a time. Besides failing to find a price-competitive alternative to Russian gas, Belarus has tried—unsuccessfully—to reduce its domestic gas consumption, which has held steady at 18–19 bcm per year since 2004.⁴² The bottom line is that natural gas continues to be vital to Belarus's economy and its people's standard of living. As an example, its state-

⁴⁰ "Gazprom expects to maintain gas transit through Belarus at 39.3 bcm in 2018-2019 – report," Interfax, June 15, 2018, <https://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?pg=5&id=838995>.

⁴¹ "Russian, Belarusian ministers to discuss gas price next week," TASS, November 6, 2019, <https://tass.com/economy/1087306>.

⁴² BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-full-report.pdf>.

owned utility, Belenergo, burns gas to generate 97 percent of its electricity.⁴³ Gas is also the country's main fuel for heat. Although total energy consumption in the country decreased rapidly between 2012 and 2015, it has remained stable since then. While its per capita natural gas consumption remains twice as high as the average figures in Europe—1,880 versus 903 cubic meters, respectively.⁴⁴

Belarus is the only Eurasian Economic Union country that imports gas directly from Russia, and it pays the lowest price of any member—\$127 per 1,000 cubic meters.⁴⁵ Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, members that do not border Russia, pay \$165. By comparison, European countries pay \$230–\$250 per 1,000 cubic meters.⁴⁶ Before a meeting between Presidents Lukashenka and Putin on December 6, 2019, the Belarusian leader even mulled accepting a price tag of \$110 for Russian gas.⁴⁷

Belarus has reciprocated Russia's price generosity by charging Gazprom the lowest gas transit fee of any EEU country. But it complains that the price Russia charges it still violates the economic bloc's fair-competition provisions. As proof, Lukashenka notes that

⁴³ "Belarus-Addressing challenges facing the energy sector," World Bank, June 1, 2006, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/239061468004774448/Main-report>.

⁴⁴ "Energy Consumption in Belarus," World Data, <https://www.worlddata.info/europe/belarus/energy-consumption.php>.

⁴⁵ "Russia Gazprom cuts gas price for Kyrgyzstan," Reuters, April 1, 2016, <https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL5N1742LF>.

⁴⁶ "Gazprom may increase gas output by 80-115 bcm by 2035," TASS, February 25, 2019, <https://tass.com/economy/1046377>.

⁴⁷ "Lukashenka: It is not Minsk's fault," Oilcapital.ru, December 6, 2019, <https://oilcapital.ru/news/markets/06-12-2019/lukashenko-minsk-ne-vinovat>.

gas in Russia's Smolensk Oblast, which borders Belarus, costs only \$70 per 1,000 cubic meters.

Since Belarus and Russia's first energy spat in 2004, Gazprom has increased Belarus's gas prices to near the bottom of the range it charges European countries, minus delivery costs. It has also built other pipelines to deliver its gas to Europe—namely, Nord Stream and TurkStream—diminishing Minsk's bargaining power in price negotiations. Meanwhile, Russian oil and gas companies have acquired sizable stakes in Belarusian energy operations, further reducing Minsk's leverage in its oil and gas dealings with Moscow. As one crucial example, unlike the situation in Ukraine, Belarus does not own the pipelines that carry Russian gas to Europe—Russia does.

Gazprom has also weakened Belarus's bargaining position by creating a liquefied natural gas (LNG) receiving terminal and a floating regasification unit in Russia's European exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast as well as by expanding its gas storage facilities there. This makes the detached Russian territory less dependent on gas from Russia proper having to pass through Belarus.⁴⁸

External and Market Forces Playing in Belarus's Favor

Although Russia's new Nord Stream Two and TurkStream pipelines to Europe will further reduce Minsk's leverage in bilateral gas-price negotiations with Moscow, Belarus still has some cards to play, thanks to several macroeconomic and geopolitical developments.

First of all, the European Union recently dealt Russia a setback that will require it to continue using Belarusian pipelines to deliver a

⁴⁸ "Gazprom brings energy security of Kaliningrad Region to new level," Gazprom, January 8, 2019, <https://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2019/january/article472626/>.

significant proportion of its gas exports to Europe. Namely, an EU court rejected Gazprom's demand that it be allowed to use 100 percent of the capacity of a pipeline link between the Nord Stream One pipeline, which originates in Russia, and overland European pipelines serving Germany and the rest of Europe. The overland link around which the EU case revolved, the Opal pipeline, connects Nord Stream, which runs from Russia under the Baltic Sea to Germany, with Germany's domestic network as well as serves several other European countries.

Russia is now concerned that the court decision on Opal will set a precedent for links between its Nord Stream Two pipeline, which is supposed to be completed in 2020, and other pipelines in Germany and beyond. Until Gazprom sorts out the court decision, it will likely continue having to send gas through Belarus (and Ukraine)—or at least keep that transit corridor in reserve.

Another reason Gazprom is likely to continue using Belarus's pipeline network is that it has a major stake in—and thus is profiting from—one of the country's two pipeline companies, the aforementioned gas transit infrastructure operator Beltransgas. Russia has no incentive to walk away from this profitable business venture at this time.

A geopolitical factor figuring into Gazprom's calculus on whether to continue using Belarusian pipelines is Russia and Ukraine's gas pipeline standoff. As a result of the increasingly fractious relations with its once-friendly neighbor, Russia has been rushing to finish Nord Stream Two and recently inaugurated TurkStream Two, both of which bypass Ukrainian territory. However, until Nord Stream Two begins delivering an additional 55 bcm per year of Russian gas to Europe directly, Gazprom will need every alternative it has to supply the continent, including its Belarusian pipelines.

Another consideration in Russia's calculus on whether to continue using Belarus as a transit country is the decline in Europe's own gas

production, mainly in the North Sea and the Dutch Groningen field. Belarus's Yamal-Europe pipeline annually delivers 32 bcm of Russian gas to northwestern Europe—the very region where the North Sea and Groningen production is declining.

Gazprom knows that if it fails to keep serving this market, liquefied natural gas companies are likely to eat into some of its share. So far, the state-owned gas giant has maintained its dominance, with pipeline gas still accounting for 86 percent of EU imports. But the United States, Qatar and even Russia's Novatek are trying to boost LNG sales to Europe, threatening Gazprom's market share.⁴⁹

US LNG exports, in particular, have soared in the past two years, now making the United States the world's third-largest exporter. In 2018, more than 70 percent of US LNG ended up in Asia, versus 13 percent in the EU.⁵⁰ But the situation changed dramatically in 2019. Price differences between LNG going to Asia and liquefied gas supplies destined for Europe fell. Meanwhile, US companies collectively added more LNG-exporting capacity, and US and EU leaders pledged to strengthen their strategic cooperation, including in energy. The result is that Europe now obtains 32 percent of the United States' total LNG exports.⁵¹

Novatek's Europe incursion has been particularly nettlesome for Gazprom, since it is a Russian company. Novatek is today Russia's second-largest gas exporter and the largest exporter of Russian LNG.

⁴⁹ "Liquefied gas report," European Commission, August 8, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/energy/en/topics/oil-gas-and-coal/liquefied-natural-gas-lng>.

⁵⁰ The US Energy Department, LNG Report, March 3, 2018, <https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2018/03/f49/LNG%20Monthly%202017.pdf>.

⁵¹ "U.S-Europe LNG trade," European Commission, November 19, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/eu-us_lng_trade_folder.pdf.

It sells mainly to Europe, despite the fact that the company's Yamal LNG terminal is located in Russia's Far East. Novatek has begun using next-generation LNG ships that can traverse the Arctic Ocean even in winter. Three of Yamal LNG's trains (liquefaction and purification facilities) are currently operational, and, although with delay, it plans to finish the fourth unit in the first half of 2020.⁵² Furthermore, Novatek and its partners are about to make a final investment decision on the construction of the three-train Arctic LNG 2 production project.⁵³ This means Gazprom will have to keep on its toes to prevent Novatek from whittling away at its market share in the world's two most lucrative gas markets—Asia and Europe. One way it plans to do this is to increase its own LNG capacity from the current 16.5 million tons annually to 19.8 million within five years.⁵⁴

Thanks at least in part to all these geo-economic and market-force trends working in Minsk's favor, on December 31, 2019 (only few hours before their previous natural gas deal expired), Belarus and Russia agreed to extend their gas contract for one more year.⁵⁵

⁵² "Troublesome start for first Arctic LNG plant manufactured in Russia," The Barents Observer, January 23, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2020/01/troublesome-start-first-arctic-lng-plant-made-russia>.

⁵³ "2019 Rewind: Year of FIDs," Oil & Gas 360, January 2, 2020, <https://www.oilandgas360.com/https-www-lngworldnews-com-2019-rewind-year-of-fids/>.

⁵⁴ "Arctic LNG," Novatek, <http://www.novatek.ru/en/business/arctic-lng/>.

⁵⁵ "Kontrakty na postavku gaza v Belarus' i tranzit cherez territoriyu respubliki prodleny do 2021 goda," Gazprom, December 31, 2019, <https://www.gazprom.ru/press/news/2019/december/article497273/>.

Enter a Nuclear Power Plant

Natural gas's stranglehold on Belarusian power production will begin diminishing next year, when Russia's Rosatom commissions Belarus's first nuclear plant. The facility, financed by \$10 billion in Russian loans, is in the northwestern Belarusian city of Astravets. Its capacity of 2.4 gigawatts will be enough to power 1.7 million homes.

The commissioning will be the culmination of nine years of work. The facility's first reactor is expected to be operational in early 2020.⁵⁶ The plant will boost Belarus's state revenues by giving it the ability to sell even more electricity to neighboring countries. Belarus imported electricity from Russia until 2018. But that year, it became self-sufficient in electricity generation for the first time, even allowing it to sell one billion kilowatt hours of excess power to, primarily, the Baltic States.⁵⁷ The new nuclear plant, which alone will generate 17 billion kilowatt hours,⁵⁸ will enable Belarus to export even more, particularly to Ukraine and Lithuania. Indeed, the Ukrainian parliament set the stage for buying Belarusian electricity in September 2019 by replacing a law that had heretofore prevented such imports.

With memories of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in Soviet Ukraine still fresh, however, many people living in countries near Belarus have

⁵⁶ "Russian built nuclear power plant in Belarus nears completion," Emerging Europe, September 27, 2019, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/russian-built-nuclear-power-plant-in-belarus-nears-completion/>.

⁵⁷ Belarus consumed 37 gigawatt hours (GWh) of electricity in 2018 and exported 1 GWh. See: "Electricity export from Belarus increases sevenfold in 2018," Belmarket.by, February 23, 2019, <http://www.belmarket.by/v-2018-godu-eksport-elektroenergii-iz-belarusi-vyros-bolee-chem-v-7-raz>.

⁵⁸ "Will it be possible to consume electricity generated from BelAes in domestic market?" UDF.by, September 25, 2019, https://udf.by/news/main_news/199606-udastsja-li-osvoit-jelektrojenergiju-belajes-na-vnutrennem-rynke.html.

opposed the Astravets plant. This has been especially the case in Lithuania, whose leadership and regular citizens alike have lambasted the fact that the plant is being built only 50 kilometers from their country's capital, Vilnius. To underscore its unhappiness, Lithuania at one point warned it may not to purchase any Belarusian electricity. It also threatened to stop allowing its power-transmission lines to carry Belarusian-produced electricity to Estonia and Latvia. Ironically, Lithuania is already importing Russian gas through its first LNG terminal at Klaipeda.⁵⁹

In 2019, Belarus exported two billion kilowatt hours of electricity to Ukraine and the three Baltic States, which constituted 80 percent of its total power exports. Currently, Belarus's electricity trade with the Baltics is conducted via Nord Pool, a European power exchange platform mainly used by Scandinavian and Baltic countries.⁶⁰ No cross-border electricity transmission link exists between Belarus and Latvia, so generally exports must first pass through the Lithuanian grid. Nonetheless, Riga has signaled that it would import electricity from the Astravets nuclear plant even if Lithuania refuses to permit its transmission lines to be used to deliver that power. Without finally building direct Belarusian-Latvian transmission line connections and other necessary infrastructures to facilitate the electricity trade, Estonia and Latvia could theoretically import Belarusian power through Russia.

⁵⁹ "Presidential aide calls for not using Klaipeda LNG terminal for Russian gas imports," *Baltic Times*, October 24, 2019, https://www.baltictimes.com/presidential_aide_calls_for_not_using_klaipeda_lng_terminal_for_russian_gas_imports/.

⁶⁰ "Belarus names the conditions for direct electricity supply to Latvia," *Sputnik News*, November 27, 2019, <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/economy/20191127/12823409/Belarus-nazvala-usloviestroitelstva-LEP-dlya-pryamykh-postavok-elektroenergii-v-Latviyu.html>.

In addition to the transit bottlenecks, Minsk's electricity exports face serious competition from Russian suppliers in the region. To address this market weakness, Belarus has partnered with Chinese companies and financial institutions. According to recent reports, Chinese State energy company Power China and its subsidiary North China Power Engineering (NCPE) will be helping Belarus to sell electricity from its nuclear plant. NCPE, which has already constructed and modernized other elements of Belarus's electricity infrastructure, is contracted to build 23 transmission and inter-connection facilities linked to the Astravets nuclear plant. Belarus has also received a \$5 billion loan from the Export-Import Bank of China for this project.⁶¹

Conclusion

It is difficult for countries that must import oil, natural gas and other power-generating commodities to achieve the energy security their economies need. Belarus is a prime example. Its lack of oil and gas reserves has made its economy dependent on energy from its hydrocarbon-rich, internationally ambitious neighbor, Russia. Painfully aware of this vulnerability, landlocked Belarus has tried but failed to diversify its economy. It continues to derive much of its revenue from selling value-added products that its two refineries make from Russian crude and from the transit fees it charges to deliver Russian oil and gas to Europe. This means Belarus's energy security continues to depend on a complex web of relations with Russia.

Part of the complexity stems from the fact that Belarusian-Russian energy relations have never been based on business interests alone. They have been linked to other issues as well, including Moscow's

⁶¹ "Chinese companies help Belarus to sell Astravets power," Baltic Times, December 12, 2019, https://www.baltictimes.com/chinese_companies_help_belarus_to_sell_astravyets_power/.

desire for the two countries to be politically and economically integrated.

With Belarus so dependent on Russian oil and gas, and Moscow wanting to use its petroleum muscle to bend Minsk to its political will, the two have become embroiled in off-and-on energy disputes for 15 years. Despite Russia holding most of the cards, in the majority of cases Belarus found ways to obtain outcomes it could live with. The resolutions always failed to last, however. Within a few years, another dispute would pop up, Belarus losing additional ground with each settlement. Some of the past resolutions have created long-term problems for Minsk. This is particularly true of agreements that involve Russian companies taking over pieces of Belarus's critical energy infrastructure in lieu of cash payments.

Belarus and Russia have been working on political and economic integration for 20 years, but the talks have made little headway to date. Then-Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev inserted himself into the process in 2018 to try to kick-start the negotiations again. But whether his initiative leads to a timely resolution of the issues preventing further integration remains to be seen.

A lot is riding on the results of those talks, not just for Belarus and Russia but for the European Union, too. The Russian economic publication *Kommersant* reported in December 2019 that Moscow and Minsk are working on establishing joint markets and even a joint oil and gas regulatory agency by 2021. Yet, two issues could stall such integration efforts: the price Belarus pays for Russian gas and the compensation it is demanding for the Russian oil-tax changes that have hammered the Belarusian economy.⁶²

⁶² "Belarus and Russia have not agreed on gas price yet," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, November 29, 2019, <https://www.kp.by/online/news/3689276/>.

One implication of a Belarus-Russia confederation would be that Moscow could deliver its oil and gas directly to the EU without using a middle man, since it would have greater control over its pipelines in Belarus than at any time since the two countries' independence. Another energy-related benefit deeper integration would bestow on Moscow would be more ability to dictate how Belarus regulates its oil, gas and electricity markets. These developments would offer Russia more control over its oil and gas transit costs to Europe, increasing its clout in regional energy geopolitics.

Integration would create both pluses and minuses for Belarus. On the positive side, Russia would probably pump more money into Belarus's chronically capital-poor economy. But in exchange for the largesse, Russian companies would likely take over more of Belarus's key energy assets.

Despite plans to bring the Nord Stream Two and TurkStream gas pipelines online in the near future, for now Russia continues to need Belarus's energy-transit link to Europe. This will remain the case unless major geopolitical changes envelop the region or there is regime change in Minsk or Moscow. To decrease its dependence on Russia, Belarus must diversify its economy and its sources of energy supplies. It has failed to achieve both objectives in the past, and the task is unlikely to prove any easier going forward.

Belarus's Contribution to Security and Stability in Central and Eastern Europe: Regional Safeguards, Strategic Autonomy and National Defense Modernization

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Executive Summary

Belarus has been widely commended for hosting a neutral platform for diplomatic negotiations over the Russian-Ukrainian war; but its major contribution to regional security and stability is related to the so-called security guarantees Minsk formulated toward all neighboring states immediately in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the subsequent Russia-West geopolitical standoff. The post-2014 geopolitical environment has, thus, become a testing ground for Belarus's foreign policy identity, marked by deliberative positive contributions to regional security and stability. The security guarantees assert that Belarus will not voluntarily allow its territory to be used by third countries to commit military aggression against neighbors and other foreign states. Though a strategic political and military ally of Russia, Belarus has managed to abstain from engaging in the conflict with Ukraine as well as Moscow's confrontation with the West. Moreover, Minsk has so far withstood the Kremlin's growing geopolitical pressure aimed at compromising these security guarantees

and transforming Belarus into a source of security challenges and threats to other countries.

Specifically, Russia is pushing to reshape the architecture of its political and military alliance with Belarus to limit the latter's strategic autonomy and undermine its national defense capabilities. However, the Kremlin has a much more far-reaching agenda: its final goal is to force Belarusian authorities to make strategic concessions that predominantly guarantee Russian interests but undermine the national sovereignty and independence of Belarus. This is the essence of the so-called "integration ultimatum" explicitly formulated by the Russian leadership at the end of 2018. In fact, however, this ultimatum's roots date back to 2015, when the Kremlin tried pushing several initiatives aimed at deeper political-military integration with Belarus.

In response to these Russian efforts, Minsk seeks to reassert and enhance its commitments to regional and international security, while preserving and expanding Belarus's strategic autonomy within the alliance with Russia. Additionally, Minsk is working to modernize the Belarusian Armed Forces and develop its domestic defense industry, taking into consideration lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Russia's changing strategic attitude toward Belarus. These interrelated pillars are important preconditions for the continued existence of Belarus as a sovereign and independent state. In turn, only in this capacity can Belarus maintain its role as a regional security and stability donor. Preserving this status quo requires not only a consensus among regional and global players but their strategic and comprehensive assistance.

Introduction

Europe's present security environment—born out of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict of 2014, and subsequent political and military confrontations between Russia and

the West—has been an important test for Belarus's foreign policy. In conceptual and practical terms, Minsk's strategy is to be seen as a donor of regional security and stability based on three interrelated pillars.

First, immediately after the outbreak of the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Minsk put itself forward as a neutral party willing to host negotiations over the war's resolution. But just as importantly, Belarus also formulated so-called security guaranties toward all states on its borders. Accordingly, the government pledged that it would not allow third countries (including Russia) to use Belarusian territory to commit military aggression against any of its neighbors. Later, these security guaranties were expanded and supplemented by additional confidence- and security-building measures with partners throughout the region. Together, these went beyond the 2011 Vienna Document and other international arms-control regimes.

Second, Belarus has successfully managed to abstain from engaging in both the Russian-Ukrainian war itself as well as in having to take sides in Moscow's subsequent geopolitical standoff with the West. Minsk was able to hold to this stance despite remaining Moscow's strategic military and political ally as well as facing considerable pressure from the Kremlin. The key to preserving this *de facto* neutrality has been Belarus's considerable level of strategic autonomy within its political and military alliance with Russia. In the Russia-Belarus Union State, for instance, Minsk and Moscow legally hold equal weight, and decisions are taken on the basis of consensus. The Belarusian side also notably plays the leading role in controlling and commanding various joint military components, including the Regional Group of Forces. This helps Minsk exercise veto power and block any unilateral Russian decisions that may be inconsistent with Belarusian national interests. Therefore, Belarus never permitted itself to become engaged in Russian military operations abroad (either against Georgia in 2008, or Ukraine in 2014, or in Syria in 2015, etc.).

Third, Belarus has been actively modernizing its Armed Forces and national defense industrial sector, taking into consideration lessons learned from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the Kremlin's changing strategic attitude toward Belarus. Moreover, Belarus's new strategic security concept was developed immediately and adopted already by the end of 2014, with a focus on implementing a "360-degree" defense concept, paying equal attention to security threats from western and eastern directions.

Since 2015, the Belarusian Armed Forces have been exercising Donbas-like "hybrid" conflict scenarios during large-scale national drills and combat-readiness checks. Furthermore, Belarusian authorities have been steadily increasing the number of military personnel, especially the combat element, and providing the Armed Forces with new and modernized equipment. Special attention has been paid to further development of a territorial defense system. The main task for the Belarusian leadership today is to create a highly mobile military capable of fighting multiple, dispersed, hostile armed formations, while taking into consideration the changing nature of modern warfare. Meanwhile, the domestic defense industry has been tasked with developing indigenous missiles, satellite programs, surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and armored vehicle projects in order to decrease and ultimately eliminate Belarus's critical dependence on Russian military equipment and supplies. China has notably been playing a decisive role in strengthening Belarus's national defense capabilities (particularly, missile and satellite programs).

However, since 2015, the Kremlin has been increasingly trying to undermine these three pillars, promoting several initiatives aimed at revising and reshaping the architecture of the bilateral political and military alliance within the Union State. In particular, Russia has been pushing to establish a permanent military presence in Belarus, expand Russia's command and control (C2) over the Belarusian Armed Forces, and to create a capability gap by refusing to supply its ally with

new military equipment on preferential terms. The Kremlin presents this capability gap as a major security vulnerability of the Union State and Russia's western flank, and it regularly circles back to the idea of deploying permanent military bases in Belarus to close it.

If and when implemented, these strategic intentions threaten to transform Belarus from a contributor to regional security and stability into a source of regional threats and challenges to other countries. However, the growing pressure from the Kremlin is currently only succeeding in pushing Belarus to be more self-sufficient and rely on its own security and defense capabilities as the main precondition for preserving national sovereignty and independence.

Belarus's Contribution to Regional Security and Stability

In light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the resulting confrontation between Russia and the West, Belarus has been behaving in the international arena according to a model closely resembling the *modus operandi* of neutral states.¹ Indeed, from the very beginning of the war in Ukraine, Belarus abstained from engaging in the crisis despite its role as the Kremlin's strategic military and political ally. Additionally, the Belarusian side immediately provided a negotiating venue in Minsk for the Customs Union–Ukraine–European Union summit in August 2014, then for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Trilateral Contact Group, and finally for the Normandy Four (Ukraine, Russia, Germany, France) summit in February 2015, facilitating the adoption of the Minsk I and Minsk II ceasefire accords.

¹ "Glen Howard: The West wants Belarus to be a Slavonic Switzerland," *Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BelTA*, August 18, 2016, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/glen-howard-the-west-wants-belarus-to-be-a-slavonic-switzerland-93640-2016>.

Since late 2016, the Belarusian leadership has been actively promoting a new grand peacekeeping initiative—similar to the Helsinki Process of the 1970s, which resulted in the adoption of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act—to foster pan-European dialogue on measures to strengthen trust, security and cooperation. According to Belarusian officials, such a broad dialogue could be aimed at overcoming the existing contradictions in relations between the countries in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions, including the United States, the EU, Russia and China. Although Minsk's grandiose initiative still lacks substance and is irrelevant to current geopolitical tendencies or ongoing informal discussions within the framework of the OSCE Structured Dialogue, it clearly demonstrates Belarus's efforts to avoid involvement in Russia's confrontation with the West.

Today, Minsk is widely associated with being a neutral platform for diplomatic negotiations, and the country has far-reaching ambitions to become a new Switzerland or Finland in Europe's East. Nevertheless, it remains problematic to call Belarus a "neutral state," especially because of its formal membership in military and political alliances with Russia, such as within the frameworks of the Union State and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Instead, it may be more useful to define Belarus as a regional stability and security donor because this concept accurately represents a composite element of Belarus's foreign policy identity. Its roots date back to the National Security Concept of 2010, but it continues to play a decisive role in determining Belarus's *modus operandi* within the current geopolitical environment.

According to the 2010 Concept, Belarus considers itself a responsible and predictable partner as well as a contributor to international and regional security. The country is identified as a successful, independent and sovereign European state that does not belong to any of the world's power centers, adopts a peaceful foreign policy, and intends to set up conditions for acquiring a neutral status. Furthermore, the document notes that Belarus seeks to develop a "belt

of good neighborliness” along its external border in all its dimensions: military, political, cultural, informational, social and economic.²

That said, Belarus's contributions to regional stability and security do not end with initiatives aimed at facilitating diplomatic negotiations on the Russia-Ukraine conflict or Russian-Western tensions. The most important contribution is related to its so-called security guaranties—pledges to prevent foreign countries from establishing military bases on Belarusian territory or using it to commit acts of aggression against third states. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka formulated these promises in Kyiv, immediately after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as during his meeting with then-acting president of Ukraine and chair of the Supreme Rada, Oleksandr Turchynov, in Lyaskovichi, Gomel region, at the end of March 2014. Recalling this meeting four years later, in 2018, Turchynov revealed some interesting details. According to him, Ukraine then lacked enough troops and reserves to defend the entire country. So to reduce the number of possible directions of a Russian offensive, he met with Lukashenka on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. The latter provided security guaranties that Minsk would not permit the Russian Armed Forces to use Belarusian territory to attack Ukraine from the northern direction. But Lukashenka also added that in “extreme cases” he would warn Kyiv 24 hours in advance, if the Kremlin tried to do this illegally.³ Later, similar security guaranties

² “National security concept of the Republic of Belarus,” National Center for Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus, November 9, 2010, <http://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=P31000575>.

³ Oleksander Turchynov, “Turchynov: When the seizures of our military units began, I tried to fly to the Crimea by helicopter to organize the defense of the airfield. Avakov kept me,” interview by Dmitry Gordon, *Gordon*, April 11, 2018, <https://gordonua.com/publications/turchinov-kogda-nachalis-zahvaty-nashih-chastej-ja-pytalsja-na-vertotelete-vyletet-v-krym-chtoby-organizovat-oboronu-aerodroma-menja-uderzhal-avakov-239748.html>.

were communicated to all neighboring countries, including Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

In September 2015, the Kremlin unilaterally announced plans to deploy a Russian military airbase with direct subordination to Moscow on Belarusian territory without Minsk's prior consent.⁴ Although initial debates on Russian permanent military presence go back to the late 2000s–early 2010s, Russia's move in 2015 was completely provocative and unacceptable to the Belarusian government. President Lukashenka rebuked the overture in a tough manner, emphasizing that there were no relevant geopolitical or military-technical motivations for such a step. Thereby, Belarus confirmed its commitment to regional security guarantees in a practical way. The most evident reason for the Russian base refusal was it would have compromised Minsk's status as a peacemaker and intermediary in negotiations, and it would have provided Russia with direct and uncontrolled access to Belarusian territory. The leadership in Minsk also took lessons from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, observing how Russia had used its pre-deployed Black Sea Fleet military bases to attack Ukraine and undermine its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Nevertheless, Moscow's plans clearly indicated a strategic intention to establish a permanent military presence on and access to Belarusian territory, thus transforming Belarus into its military outpost in the center of Europe. On the one hand, although Minsk and Moscow are formally strategic military allies according to defensive pacts within the Union State and the CSTO, Russia still does not have military

⁴ "The Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus about the Russian air base on the territory of the Republic of Belarus," State system legal information of the Russian Federation, September 7, 2015
<http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102378121&intelsearch=%E2%EE%E5%ED%ED%E0%FF+%E1%E0%E7%E0+%E2+%E1%E5%EB%E0%F0%F3%F1%E8>

bases in Belarus (there are two non-combat military-technical facilities leased by Russia). Furthermore, Belarus and Russia have no “military Schengen zone”⁵ between them: during peacetime, the Kremlin is not allowed to use Belarusian territory without an official invitation and permission from Minsk. Without such official authorization, any Russian military activity in Belarus could be considered an act of aggression.

On the other hand, if Belarus had agreed to deploy a Russian military airbase in 2015, the Russian military buildup would not have stopped there. It would likely have resembled the Syrian model, whereby the deployment of a Russian Air Force Group was soon followed by the appearance of other military units, including air-defense, special operations and ground forces. In both cases (Syria and Belarus), Russia proposed to sign a very general framework agreement that would allow it to deploy additional forces under the umbrella of the extraterritorial airbase.⁶ Moscow was able to actually follow through on these plans in Syria; but so far, not in Belarus. Recently, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov once again put this issue on the bilateral agenda, declaring that Minsk's refusal to host a military airbase was an “unpleasant episode” that publicly aired disagreements

⁵ An initiative originally advocated by Commander of United States Army Europe, Lieutenant General (ret.) Benjamin Hodges. “Military Schengen” is inspired by the EU's Schengen Area, but designated to facilitate the free movement of military units and assets (free military mobility) throughout Europe via the removal of bureaucratic barriers and the improvement of transit infrastructure.

⁶ “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the deployment of an aviation group of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic,” Electronic Fund of Legal and Normative Technical Documentation, “Konsortium Kodeks,” January 18, 2017, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/420329053>.

between the allies.⁷ As such, Russia may be preparing to use this leverage in the future, especially in the context of the so-called deeper integration ultimatum to Belarus.

Even though the Kremlin has effectively sought to turn Belarus into a source of security threats and challenges to the whole region, Minsk has, to date, managed to withstand and preserve its role as a regional security and stability donor. On October 8, 2019, Alyaksandr Lukashenka reaffirmed his country's security guarantees to its neighbors as well as announced other voluntary commitments—compliance with international arms-control and nuclear non-proliferation regimes even against the background of their collapse, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Budapest Memorandum. In this regard, Belarus is not going to deploy on its territory treaty-banned missiles either with conventional or nuclear warheads—at least not until neighboring countries do this first.⁸

Finally, since 2014, Belarus has taken a number of additional measures aimed at strengthening regional confidence and transparency in the military sphere that go beyond the Vienna Document of 2011. These activities are based on a range of security cooperation agreements and additional trust-building measures with its neighbors on the bilateral level, including Lithuania (2001), Ukraine (2001), Latvia (2004) and

⁷ Sergei Lavrov, “We won’t start the war, I promise you that,” interview by Vladimir Soloviev, Elena Chernenko, *Kommersant*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4103946>.

⁸ Alyaksandr Lukashenka, “Minsk Dialogue Forum “European Security: Stepping Back from the Brink,” The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, October 8, 2019, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/minsk-dialogue-forum-european-security-stepping-back-from-the-brink-22182/.

Poland (2004).⁹ The Belarusian side considers commitments to international arms-control regimes (Vienna Document, Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, Treaty on Open Skies, etc.) and the conclusion of bilateral security agreements with other countries as well with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an efficient way to avoid miscalculations and misperceptions and reduce military risks. For instance, Minsk invited more than 80 observers to the joint Belarusian-Russian strategic exercise Zapad 2017 even though the parameters of the drills on Belarusian territory were below the threshold figures that trigger the notification protocols of the 2011 Vienna Document. Observers came from neighboring countries as well as from international organizations such as the United Nations, the OSCE, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the International Committee of the Red Cross and, for the first time, NATO.

This *modus operandi* has deep roots in Belarus's strategic culture, and it has been bringing some practical economic and political dividends in recent years. Indeed, Belarus has managed to convert its contribution to regional security and stability into a source of normalizing relations with the West and of strengthening its strategic partnership with China.

Belarus's Strategic Autonomy Within Its Political and Military Alliance With Russia

Although a strategic military and political ally of Russia, Belarus wields enough checks and balances to block any unilateral decision by Moscow within their joint alliance. That is how Belarus has managed to stay out of Russia's conflict with Ukraine and confrontation with the West.

⁹ "Arms control," Ministry of Defense of Republic of Belarus, accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/arms_control/.

Upon coming to power in 1994, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka almost immediately announced that economic and political-military integration with Russia would be among the strategic priorities for Belarusian foreign policy. In the mid-1990s, he signed a number of treaties and agreements with Moscow, culminating in the conclusion of the 1999 Treaty on Establishing the Union State of Belarus and Russia. That same year, Minsk and Moscow formed a joint Regional Group of Forces (RGF), composed then of the Belarusian Armed Forces and the Russian 20th Guards Combined Arms Army, previously withdrawn from post-Soviet Germany to the Russian Federation in 1994.

This collection of treaties and agreements signed by Minsk and the Kremlin over the course of the 1990s added up to a strategic deal of sorts: Accordingly, Belarus pledged to join the various ongoing integration processes with Russia and agreed to renounce its Euro-Atlantic aspirations—in contrast with a number of other neighboring post-Soviet states that had already decided to join NATO and the European Union. In light of NATO and the EU's eastward enlargement, Belarus suddenly took on a crucial role for Moscow, ensuring Russia's national security in the western strategic direction, particularly with respect to the Kaliningrad exclave. In turn, Russia was obliged to grant Belarus preferential oil and natural gas supplies, offer privileged access for Belarusian industrial and agricultural products to the Russian market and financial assistance, as well as supply the Belarusian military with significantly discounted (if not outright free) arms and equipment. Simply put, Russia agreed to trade economic and military-technical support in exchange for a certain level of geopolitical loyalty from Belarus. And security and military

integration was to become one of the cornerstones of this bilateral strategic deal.¹⁰

However, despite this deep level of integration, Belarus has managed to preserve a considerable degree of strategic autonomy within its political-military alliance with Russia. The Belarusian government succeeded in ensuring that the institutional architecture of the joint military components was designed in a way that gives Minsk the option to exercise veto power over any Kremlin decisions inconsistent with Belarus's national interests. This is one of the main reasons why Belarus never became involved in any recent Russian military adventures, including the war with Georgia (2008) and ongoing conflict with Ukraine.

As one example of Minsk's "veto" in joint military activities, all political and military decisions within the Union State are taken and approved by the Supreme State Council, the main collective decision-making body. It consists of the presidents, prime ministers, and heads of lower and higher chambers of parliament of both states, while all decisions are taken on the basis of consensus. The Supreme State Council is responsible for coordinating joint plans for the development and use of Russia's and Belarus's armed forces and military infrastructure.

¹⁰ Arseny Sivitsky, "Belarus — Russia: from a strategic deal to an asymmetric dependence," Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, May 28, 2019, <http://csfps.by/en/posts/20190528>.

Second, according to the 1998 Joint Defense Concept of Belarus and Russia¹¹ and the 2001 Military Doctrine of the Union State,¹² joint military components and action plans are activated only by a consensus decision of the Belarusian and Russian leaderships within the Supreme State Council in wartime. The same rules apply during a period of growing military threat (“threatened period”).

To date, the Union State includes two joint military components—the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) and the Unified Regional Air-Defense System (URADS). Both are usually trained during Zapad (“West”) joint strategic exercises as well as during Schit Soyuz (‘‘Union Shield’’) joint operational exercises. Zapad exercises take place every four years (last held on 2009, 2013 and 2017), on the territory of Belarus and partially Russia; while Schit Soyuz drills, carried out on the territory of Russia, are held every two years following a Zapad exercise (2011, 2015, 2019).

As noted above, the Regional Group of Forces was originally formed in 1999. Today, it consists of all ground and special operations units of the Belarusian Armed Forces as well as the 1st Guards Tank Army (military unit 73621, Moscow region, Bakovka) of the Russian Western Military District. The 1st Guards Tank Army was established in 2014 and substituted the 20th Combined Arms Army (military unit 89425, Voronezh) after the latter was deployed on the border with Ukraine to assist Kremlin-backed separatists in the military conflict in Donbas.

¹¹ “Joint Defense Concept of Belarus and Russia, International Law (Conventions),” January 22, 1998, http://www.conventions.ru/view_base.php?id=14630.

¹² “Military Doctrine of the Union State,” Electronic Fund of Legal and Normative Technical Documentation, “Konsortsium Kodeks,” December 26, 2001, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/456089527>.

The RGF does not exist in peacetime. During a threatened period, however, the force's Joint Command is formed on the basis of the Ministry of Defense (General Staff of the Armed Forces) of Belarus. In practical terms, this means that the position of RGF commander is permanent (non-rotational) and always occupied by the chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus; under his command and control is the Belarusian Army and the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army. In turn, he is subordinated and reports directly to the Supreme State Council of the Union State.

In 2009, Minsk and Moscow signed the agreement “on Joint Protection of the External Border of the Union State in Airspace and the Creation of the Unified Regional Air-Defense System of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation.” However, it came into force only in 2013, due to prolonged political wrangling by the two sides. Today, the URADS includes all Air Forces and Air-Defense Forces of the Belarusian Army as well as the 6th Air Forces and Air-Defense Forces Army, located on the territory of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation (military unit 09436, St. Petersburg).¹³

In contrast to the RGF, which is organized and deployed only during a threatened period, the URADS exists and functions on an ongoing basis in peacetime. The position of the URADS commander is rotational but must still be approved by a consensus decision of the presidents of Belarus and Russia. Since the URADS was created back in 2013, only Belarusian representatives had been put in charge of it—Air Forces and Air-Defense Forces Commanders of the Republic of Belarus Oleg Dvigalev (2013–2017) and Igor Golub (since 2018). This

¹³ Arseny Sivitsky, “New Union State Military Doctrine Will Not Change Status Quo in Belarusian-Russian Military Alliance,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, December 11, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/new-union-state-military-doctrine-will-not-change-status-quo-in-belarusian-russian-military-alliance/>

fact is quite remarkable, demonstrating Belarus's strong desire to preserve control over this joint military component.

In peacetime, the ministries of defense of the two countries, together with the URADS commander carry out planning for the use of the unified air-defense system's troops (forces) and capabilities. Additionally, these institutions coordinate their interaction and combat duties on defending their airspace. National air forces and air-defense forces remain subordinated to their national commands, however.

During a period of growing military threat (threatened period) and wartime, the URADS becomes a composite part of the Regional Group of Forces (RGF). From a practical point of view, this means that the URADS commander subordinates to the RGF commander, represented by the chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus.

In December 2013, four Russian Su-27SM combat aircraft landed at the 61st military airbase of the Belarusian Air Forces, in Baranovichi, in order to take part in joint airspace patrolling missions on a rotational basis (two months after two). It was, to some extent, a response to the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission, which protects the airspace of the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. However, already in 2015, the Belarusian leadership abandoned the practice of joint air patrols with Russia in order not to escalate regional tensions, particularly in light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Minsk's decision to suspend joint air patrols was also a rejoinder to the Kremlin's growing pressure on its ally to allow a permanent Russian military base on Belarusian soil.¹⁴

¹⁴ Chris Biggers, "Russia's SU-27 Probably Departed Belarus," Bellingcat, October 1, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/10/01/russias-su-27-probably-departed-belarus/>.

To date, no Russian troops are stationed on the territory of Belarus, either on a permanent or rotational basis; nor is there any pre-deployed Russian military equipment in Belarusian storages. According to the 2017 “Agreement on Joint Technical Support of the Regional Group of Troops (Forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation,” Moscow is legally constrained in when it can deploy military assets across the border to Belarus. Namely, the Russian Ministry of Defense is allowed to transfer and deploy to Belarus all necessary military equipment and weapons for the 1st Guards Tank Army only in the period of growing military threat (threatened period) to the Union State and in wartime. The material and technical base of the Armed Forces of Belarus is used jointly in this case.¹⁵ However, even under those circumstances, the Supreme State Council first needs to activate this decision on the basis of consensus.

Thus, there is no a military “Schengen zone” between Belarus and Russia: Moscow is not legally permitted to use Belarusian territory for military purposes without Minsk’s authorization.

Today, the only form of Russian military presence inside Belarus are two Soviet-era military-technical facilities, owned by the Belarusian government but rented out to Russia—the 43rd Communications Center of the Russian Navy (Vileika), with 350 officers and midshipmen, and the Gantsevichi early-warning radar station of the Volga-type UHF range (Kletsk district), with 600 military personnel. They do not possess combat capabilities and are not considered military bases, according to agreements signed in 1995 (set to expire in 2021). When signing these agreements, the Kremlin agreed to

¹⁵ “Agreement on joint technical support of the Regional Group of Troops (Forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation,” National Center for Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus, January 1, 2017, <http://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=A01600091&p1=1&p5=0>.

partially write off Belarus's debts for energy resources. In addition, Russia was obliged to share with Belarus intelligence data about the regional space and missile operating environment (*informatsiya o kosmicheskoy i raketnoy obstanovke*), as well as training ranges for conducting air-defense combat firing (in particular, at the Ashuluk training ground) due to the absence of such installations in Belarus.

More recently, Russia deployed analogous radar and monitoring facilities on its own territory. To do the same job as the Vileika naval communications station, Russia built a similar complex in Druzhny (Kstovsky district, Nizhny Novgorod region); as for regional radar, the Russian military now has a Voronezh-M radar station in Leningrad region (near the village of Lekhtusi) and a Voronezh-DM radar facility near the town of Pionersky, Kaliningrad region. Therefore, the continued presence of the naval 43rd Communications Center and Gantsevichi radar in Belarus's Vileika and Kletsk district, respectively, are now primarily symbolic from a geopolitical point of view; the two Russian installations on Belarusian soil no longer hold any major military-technical significance in the Baltic region.

Since at least 2015, however, Russia has been demonstrating that it is no longer satisfied with the *status quo* regarding the Union State. Namely, by preserving its considerable veto power within this supranational format, Belarus actually constrains the Kremlin's strategic intentions. The constraints come from not allowing Russian military bases on its soil as well as abstaining from involvement in Russia's conflict with Ukraine and confrontation with the West.

In addition to Russian attempt to push the issue of a military base in Belarus, in September 2015 the commander of the troops of Russia's Western Military District, Anatoly Sidorov, proposed to include the joint Regional Group of Forces within the structure of the group of

forces in the Western strategic direction.¹⁶ In other words, he effectively proposed reassigning the Armed Forces of Belarus, which are part of the RGF, to the command of the Russian Western Military District (Joint Strategic Command “West”). It is worth pointing that that, in 2016, the Kremlin implemented this model in its relations with Armenia. The Russian-Armenian Joint Group of Forces (JGF) is included in and assigned to the Southern Military District (Southern Joint Strategic Command; and the commander of the Southern Military District can exercise command and control over the JGF in a period of growing military threat (threatened period).¹⁷

At the end of 2015, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu proposed to complete the formation of a joint military organization of the Union State by 2018.¹⁸ Specifically, he referred to an in-depth integration of the military and security apparatuses of Belarus and Russia, with a joint decision-making center in the Kremlin. Such a model has already been implemented with regard to Russia's military

¹⁶ “ZVO: the Union Shield exercises showed the need for contacts between Russian Federation and Belarus,” *RIA Novosti*, October 21, 2015, https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20151021/1305697600.html.

¹⁷ “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia on a Joint Group of force (force),” The Russian Government, November 3, 2016, <http://static.government.ru/media/acts/files/0001201611080006.pdf>.

¹⁸ “Moscow is interested in, Minsk is not,” Belarus Security Blog, October 26, 2015, <https://bsblog.info/moskva-zainteresovana-minsk-net/>.

relations with the separatist (and Moscow-backed) Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in 2014¹⁹ and 2015,²⁰ respectively.

Collectively, the above-mentioned Russian proposals to Belarus demonstrate that Moscow no longer considers Minsk an equal partner from a formally institutional point of view and intends to reshape their military-political alliance by undermining Belarus's strategic autonomy. From this perspective, the Kremlin's so-called "integration ultimatum" to Lukashenka's government, explicitly declared at the end of 2018, actually dates back to at least 2015. It clearly shows Russia's geopolitical intentions to subordinate Belarus politically, militarily and economically, within the Union State framework. Integration models already tested by the Kremlin in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and, to some degree Armenia, give some idea of Russia's final goals regarding Belarus.²¹

National Defense: New Strategic Concepts, Modernization and Rearmament

The 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict and resulting Russian-Western standoff led to significant shifts in Belarus's national defense planning and military buildup as well as its threat perceptions. Already, on December 16, 2014, President Lukashenka hosted a session of the Belarusian Security Council to discuss essential changes in the

¹⁹ "Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership," President of Russia, November 24, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4783>.

²⁰ "Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on Alliance and Integration," President of Russia, March 18, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4819>.

²¹ Arseny Sivitsky, "Belarus-Russia: From a Strategic Deal to an Integration Ultimatum," Foreign Policy Research Institute, December, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp3-sivitsky.pdf>.

regional political-military situation, new forms and methods of confrontation and warfare, and how such external threats could influence the country. Although the president remarked that the increase of NATO's military potential on Belarus's western borders was alarming, he, nevertheless, added that "the recent actions of our eastern brother cannot but raise concern." As a result of this session, the government adopted a new five-year Defense Plan and a directive on state defense.²² Although these documents are top secret, public statements from the Belarusian political and military leadership leave no doubts that they are aimed at implementing the so-called "360 degrees" defense concept. The 360 degrees concept obliges the military to pay equal attention to security threats from the western and eastern directions as well as to incorporate the lessons learned from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Some elements of these documents have already been tested during national military exercises and combat readiness checks of the Belarusian Armed Forces.

In February 2015, President Lukashenka ordered the Ministry of Defense to prepare a vision for creating highly mobile Armed Forces capable of fighting multiple, dispersed armed formations while taking into consideration the changing nature of modern warfare—especially "hybrid"-style threats. The Belarusian head of state also emphasized the necessity to rely on Belarus's own capabilities, instructing his military to train its troops without looking to the Russian Armed Forces.²³ On October, 30, 2015, during an operational meeting of command staff, he laid out the main priorities for the

²² "Session of Belarus' Security Council," The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, December 16, 2014, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/session-of-belarus-security-council-10448/.

²³ "Visit to the Defense Ministry," The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, accessed November 17, 2019, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/poseschenie-ministerstva-oborony-10867/.

development of the Belarusian Armed Forces over the next five years. First of all, Lukashenka said that the events in Ukraine had demonstrated the importance of developing combat elements capable of carrying out their missions promptly. He thus tasked his subordinates with increasing the number of combat personnel at the expense of all kinds of managerial and support agencies, while preserving the optimal size of the army at 65,000, including both military and civilian personnel (the traditional proportion used to be 45,000 versus 20,000, respectively). Also, he devoted primary attention to enhancing the efficiency of military training by applying modern technical means and technologies, effective human resources management, as well as patriotic education. Finally, he prioritized selective rearmament, with a focus on C2, reconnaissance, information warfare, camouflage, radio-electronic warfare, air-defense systems, artillery and missile forces, and special operations forces.²⁴

In addition, the Belarusian Ministry of Defense was tasked with developing a new military doctrine. On July 20, 2016, President Lukashenka approved its final version. The previous one had been adopted in 2002, and it was obviously obsolete following the dramatic crises that rocked global and regional security architectures in ensuing years. The 2002 document was written to address the NATO intervention in the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001), the Alliance's preparations for eastward enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe, and concerns about a hypothetical Western-backed “color revolution” in Belarus. For this reason, Belarus had prioritized the formation of a common defense space with the Russian Federation at that time.

²⁴ “Operational meeting of command staff of Belarus’ Armed Forces,” The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, February 19, 2015, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/operational-meeting-of-command-staff-of-belarus-armed-forces-12477/.

But the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and political-military confrontation between Russia and the West contributed greatly to the development of a new Military Doctrine in 2016. In contrast to the 2014–2019 Defense Plan and Directive on State Defense, the Military Doctrine is a public document. It takes into account possible challenges and threats coming not only from the West but from Russia as well.

First and foremost, the new Military Doctrine of Belarus remains defensive in nature. According to statements by Belarusian authorities, this means that the Armed Forces of Belarus may be used only on Belarusian territory, in cases of military conflict, for the purpose of protecting the country's independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty and constitutional order (the same is true if any CSTO member is attacked—the Belarusian army will fulfil its alliance obligations and missions only on the territory of Belarus). Second, the 2016 Military Doctrine proclaims and confirms Belarus's fundamental commitments to maintaining international peace and security. Third, Belarus asserts a peaceful foreign and military policy as well as develops a belt of neighborliness in the military and political dimensions along the perimeter of the state border.

The Military Doctrine does not portray any state as an adversary. However, Belarus does consider as an adversary any state or non-state actor (such as terrorist and extremist organizations) whose activity poses a military threat—i.e., interference in internal affairs or encroachments on the independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty and/or constitutional order of Belarus.

For Belarus, the main formal priority for coalition military policy still remains the strengthening of collective security mechanisms (seen as defensive) with Russia and CSTO member states. In addition, it keeps open the option for Belarus to establish new military coalitions or to ask for military assistance from countries other than Russia and CSTO

or CIS member states, including countries that have signed bilateral strategic partnership agreements with Belarus (for instance, China).

According to the document, Minsk is seeking good neighborly and mutually beneficial cooperation with the European Union. Additionally, it is pursuing a partnership with the North Atlantic Alliance based on maintaining open dialogue, increasing transparency and developing a mutual understanding of regional security issues. In contrast, in 2014, Moscow adopted a new military doctrine that antagonistically perceives NATO as one of its main external military threats. The increased military activity of NATO near Belarusian and Russian borders is seen by Minsk as a “certain danger” but, crucially, not a direct military threat.

Moreover, the new Military Doctrine of Belarus indirectly voices concerns about Russia’s aggressive foreign and military behavior on the international stage. It contains, for instance, allusions to hybrid warfare in a section regarding the characteristics of the current military and political landscape in Belarus’s neighborhood (Chapter 3). The Doctrine also mentions certain attempts by state actors to interfere in the internal affairs of individual countries, including European ones, in order to provoke internal armed conflicts through the use of large-scale military—both traditional and guerilla (partisan or terrorist)—force. The employment of information-psychological warfare for aggressive purposes becomes a composite characteristic in such types of conflicts.²⁵ Although the Military Doctrine does not explicitly refer to “hybrid warfare,” this section undoubtedly alludes to the practical application of so-called “hybrid warfare techniques” by the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine. Defense Minister Andrey Ravkov has even claimed that the Belarusian army has been studying

²⁵ “Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus”, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, July 20, 2016, https://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/basic/doktrina/.

the Ukrainian experience in counteracting hybrid warfare in Donbas.²⁶

Since 2015, Belarusian large-scale military exercises and combat-readiness checks have repeatedly focused on possible Donbas-like hybrid conflict scenarios that could escalate into full-scale interstate conflicts. These exercise scenarios usually lay out a confrontation with illegal armed formations and sabotage and reconnaissance groups. Though such formations and groups are referred to as “terrorists” for the purpose of the drills, they are usually equipped with armored vehicles and backed by the armed forces of a hypothetical foreign state. These terrorists also operate under the cover of heavy artillery and air-defense systems and are assisted by air forces. These exercises and rapidness checks tend to span a significant geographical scope of the theater of military operations. Underlying the general framework of these drills are special operations to stabilize the situation in potential crisis areas. A closer look at them reveals the following elements:

- Conducting strategic command-and-staff trainings involving all services and branches of the Armed Forces; deploying some military units to the wartime staff level by calling out reservists as well as forming new units equipped with reserve personnel and weapons from the reserve stocks; practicing elements of a mass snap mobilization and imposing a martial law situation; testing the territorial defense system;
- Organizing command, control and communications (C3) through all security and military apparatuses and coordinating their actions by the General Staff of the Belarusian Armed Forces; testing new encrypted communications systems, including satellite links; acting in

²⁶ “Minister of Defense: We are actively studying the experience of the armed forces of Ukraine”, *TUT*, February 23, 2016, <https://news.tut.by/politics/486010.html>.

conditions of unstable communications with command posts;

- Managing inter-branch combined units (infantry, tank, artillery, air defense), including interaction between mechanized ones and artillery, radio-electronic warfare units, UAVs, and army and assault aviation;
- Establishing an inter-service groups of forces consisting of various security, defense and law enforcement units, including the Armed Forces and Territorial Defense, the State Security Committee (KGB), the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Border Guards Committee and the Ministry of Interior;
- Reinforcing border protection jointly with border guards and Interior Ministry Troops, especially at the unsecured parts of the state border (currently shared with Russia); establishing checkpoints and safeguarding the state border from infiltration by sabotage and reconnaissance teams or by illegal armed groups from a neighboring country, against the background of potential internal destabilization and unrest in Belarus; practicing defensive actions by mechanized units in coordination with border guards along a broad front; suppressing attempts to violate the land and air borders of Belarus;
- Conducting counter-sabotage operations using special operations forces with an aviation component (UAVs and helicopters), reconnaissance and electronic warfare units and search dogs;
- Eliminating enemy airborne assault groups using heavy artillery and air forces strikes; counteracting enemy air reconnaissance and attempts to infiltrate terrorist groups, arms and materiel by air; screening and identifying combatants and collaborators of illegal armed formations in the local population as well as searching and eliminating sabotage and reconnaissance groups;

- Creating a humanitarian corridor for massive relocations of civilians from towns captured by illegal armed groups; conducting joint operations of the Armed Forces and the Interior Ministry Troops aimed at blocking and mopping up illegal armed groups along with liberating captured facilities (towns, oil storages, airfields);
- Protecting critical administrative, logistic, economic and social infrastructure facilities, as well as military C2 centers from subversive attacks and air strikes; implementing special combat tactics in urban areas, including artillery and air force bombardments of populated localities captured by adversaries while minimizing damage to the infrastructure and civilians;
- Testing the integrated support system during military operations; providing logistical and technical support for Armed Forces units in isolation from the points of their permanent station or main forces in conditions of constant attacks on transport routes, including landing of military personnel and heavy equipment and cargos;
- Training the Territorial Defense Troops in the installation of mine-explosive barriers, checkpoint duties, combat operations for holding a strong point, patrolling areas in cities and preventing the penetration of subversive groups; defending settlements by use of artillery and anti-tank units of the Territorial Troops; testing command and control of Territorial Defense forces by using digital communications.²⁷

²⁷ Andrey Porotnikov, "National defense in the context of regional threats," in *The 2016 Belarusian Yearbook* (Vilnius: Lohvinau, 2016), 26–34; "National defense: Self-reliance is the only option," in *The 2017 Belarusian Yearbook* (Vilnius: Lohvinau, 2017), 29–38; "National defense: Technological achievements and political failures," in *The 2018 Belarusian Yearbook* (Vilnius: Lohvinau, 2018), 26–32; "Glass dome of national defense," in *The 2019 Belarusian Yearbook* (Vilnius: Lohvinau, 2019), 25–32.

Already, on February 22, 2018, speaking at the solemn meeting held to mark the 100th anniversary of the Armed Forces of Belarus, President Lukashenka announced that the country managed to create the most advanced mobile units capable of deploying in two to three hours to battlefields. He also revealed that the personnel level in the Armed Forces reached 70,000 people (both military and civilian).²⁸ This means that, compared with the previous year's level of 65,000 (including 46,500 military personnel), staff numbers could increase by 5,000 even as the deficit in officers, warrant officers and contract soldiers could still range from 3,000 to 5,000.²⁹ The Belarusian leader also emphasized that in the event of a military threat, Belarus must be prepared to ensure a mass-mobilized national defense of the state and be capable of putting under arms half a million people, including Armed Forces, territorial defense forces (almost 120,000) and other law enforcement and security agencies.

Defense Minister Ravkov developed short-term (two years) priorities for the Belarusian Armed Forces in February 2018. They include the further development of C2 systems, reconnaissance, information warfare, radio-electronic warfare and air-defense capabilities, special operations forces, and missile forces, as well as capacities to respond to hybrid war threats, and a territorial defense system. The Belarusian military began training in conducting operations by dispersed autonomous mobile groups. The military was also tasked with

²⁸ "Lukashenka spoke about the latest weapons supplied to the army of Belarus," *Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BelTA*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-o-novejshem-vooruzhenii-postavljaemom-v-armiju-belarusi-291139-2018/>.

²⁹ Andrey Porotnikov, "The increase in the size of the Belarusian army – a reaction to the security crisis in the region," *Thinktanks*, March 22, 2018, <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2018/03/22/uvelichenie-chislennosti-belorusskoy-armii-reaktsiya-na-krizis-bezopasnosti-v-regione.html>.

increasing the amount of up-to-date weapons deployed to 50 percent.³⁰

On December 19, 2019, the Security Council approved a new Defense Plan of Belarus for the next five years and the Concept of Buildup and Development of the Armed Forces until 2030. As President Lukashenka emphasized during that day's meeting of the Security Council, Belarus firmly adheres to a peaceful policy and maintains the status of a security donor in the region. At the same time, the head of state listed the main priorities for Belarusian defense, including the development of an independent national security architecture (i.e., strategically autonomous from Russia and any other third country) as well as the continuation of military cooperation with friendly countries. According to him, Belarus's military forces have never threatened, do not threaten and do not intend to threaten anyone. The Belarusian military is solely an instrument to prevent war; and in case of aggression, it should be able to not only repel but also cause unacceptable damage to the enemy. The main purpose of the Armed Forces is to protect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the country, Lukashenka underscored.³¹

The new Defense Plan (2020–2024) first of all stresses preventing potential outside military aggression against Belarus, and it devotes more attention to so-called strategic deterrence than any of the previous iterations of this document. More focus is also paid to scenarios in which the country becomes destabilized. This reflects

³⁰ Andrey Ravkov, "The Armed Forces of Belarus meet modern realities of ensuring the national security," interview by Svetlana Pekar, *Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BelTA*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.belta.by/interview/view/vooruzhennyye-sily-belarusi-otvechajut-sovremennym-realizacijam-obespechenija-natsionalnoj-bezopasnosti-6080/>.

³¹ "Lukashenka Approves New Belarus Defense Plan. What are the main emphases on?" *Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BelTA*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-utverdil-novyj-plan-oborony-belarusi-na-chem-sdelany-aktsenty-373450-2019/>.

present understanding of how modern military conflicts are most likely to unfold: generally beginning with socio-political turmoil that overwhelms the country and eventually provokes an internal armed conflict, according to Stanislav Zas, the state secretary of the Belarusian Security Council.³²

In preparing the above-mentioned package of defense documents approved at the end of 2019, Belarusian military strategists proceeded from a series of hypothetical worst-case scenarios for the country. The experience of conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Bolivia and Venezuela were all closely examined. Based on these case studies, the military experts drew important conclusions regarding the likely stages of a possible escalation of a conflict affecting Belarus. Notably, the Belarusian military does not consider large-scale war as a likely threat facing the country at the moment (although it does not entirely exclude such a possibility). More probable is for a conflict to begin with the situation in the country being shaken up, opening up space for small groups, the opposition, and/or sabotage and intelligence cells to begin operating in this unstable environment. Today, private military companies are widely used by some international actors to try to undermine a target country's stability. The new Defense Plan includes adequate response measures to such threats, according to the chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus, Alexander Volfovich. For example, the Belarusian military includes an immediate reaction force, ready in case of an unforeseen situation to secure sections of the state border, together with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and to protect key facilities inside the country.³³

Another priority area for the development of the Armed Forces is outfitting them with new as well as modernized weapons and

³² "Lukashenka Approves New Belarus Defense Plan," *BelTA*, December 19, 2019.

³³ *Ibid.*

equipment. The Belarusian defense industry is to play a significant role in this process. Although this priority dates back to before 2014, it has received additional impetus by more recent shifts in Russia's strategic attitude toward Belarus. Some evidence suggest that the Kremlin no longer considers Minsk a special partner in ensuring the security of the Union State in the western strategic direction, as was originally envisaged by the architecture of this bilateral supranational institution. In exchange for Belarus helping to secure Russia's western flank, Moscow was obligated to supply Minsk with the latest military equipment and weapons systems, if not free of charge, at least at a steep discount in order to maintain a high level of combat efficiency within the Belarusian Armed Forces.

However, already by 2010, Russia began to reconsider the conditions of its military-technical cooperation with Belarus, suddenly refusing to supply military equipment either for free or on preferential terms. When Minsk asked to acquire the Iskander operational-tactical missile system in 2007 and Sukhoi Su-27 fighter jets in 2013, Moscow, instead, suggested deployment of permanent Russian missile and air bases on Belarusian territory. Today, Russia sells Belarus only export versions of its military equipment—one more indication that Belarus has lost its special status.

The Kremlin's behind-the-scenes strategy is based on two elements. First, to undermine the capabilities of the Belarusian Armed Forces by no longer supplying them with new weapons for free or on preferential terms, thus creating a capability gap. Second, to demand and push for the deployment of Russian permanent military bases on Belarusian territory, under the pretext of closing this capability gap, in order to secure both the western strategic direction of the Union State and to protect Belarus itself. One recent example of this two-pronged strategy involved Minsk's request to purchase Russian Sukhoi Su-30SM fighter jets. According to Belarusian Security Council State Secretary Zas, Moscow made its financial assistance for Minsk's acquisition of the Su-30SMs contingent on the latter's

acquiescence to the creation of a Russian airbase on Belarusian territory.³⁴ These conditions were unacceptable to Minsk and indicated once again that the issue of permanent Russian military presence in Belarus remained high on the Kremlin's agenda. Thus, Belarus has had to rely on its own recourses. A contract for the supply of 12 Su-30SM fighters was concluded between Russia and Belarus on June 20, 2017.³⁵ The total value of the contract is estimated at \$600 million (for comparison, Belarus's entire defense budget for 2019 was \$560 million).³⁶ That is, each aircraft was sold for \$50 million—the standard market price Russia charges third countries. In contrast, Armenia (also a CSTO ally) has been negotiating a deal on purchasing four Su-30SMs under Russia's domestic conditions and terms of financial assistance (a \$100 million loan): i.e., each of these comparable jets will cost Armenia half of what Belarus pays, \$25 million.³⁷

On July 2, 2019, speaking at an official event commemorating Independence Day and the 75th anniversary of Belarus's liberation from Nazi German occupation, President Lukashenka proclaimed that his country is not seeking a security umbrella from either NATO or Russia. And he pointedly added that Belarus does not want to

³⁴ "Zas: Russia linked aid in the acquisition of the Su-30SM with the deployment of its base on our territory," *TUT*, November 14, 2019, <https://news.tut.by/economics/661116.html>.

³⁵ Belarus received the first two of these fighters on November 13, 2019, and two landed a week later, on November 20. See "Vtoraya para boyevykh samoletov Su-30SM pribyla v Belarus' – Minoborony," *Interfax*, November 20, 2019, <https://interfax.by/news/policy/raznoe/1267558/>.

³⁶ The budget of the Republic of Belarus for 2019, Ministry of Finances of Republic of Belarus, <http://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/bp/budjet/budjet2019.pdf>, p. 29.

³⁷ Ivan Safronov, Alexandra Georgievich, "Russia sold fighters to Armenia as to itself," *Kommersant*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3868951>.

“become part of Russia so that it could protect us.” According to Lukashenka, Belarusians are left with a third option: they have to protect themselves on their own.³⁸

In fact, Belarus has always paid close attention to developing the domestic defense industry. But since 2014, focus has intensified on efforts to decrease the level of dependence on Russian weapons. Belarusian manufacturers have been tasked with building precision weapons (missile program), a medium-range air-defense system (SAM project), highly mobile armored vehicles (Volat, Cayman and Asilak projects), development and testing of strike and reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV project), as well as satellite communication stations and mobile telecommunication systems. While Moscow is refusing to transfer critical military technologies to Belarus or produce military equipment together, Minsk is diversifying its military-industrial ties with other partners, most notably China.³⁹

Military-technical cooperation between Belarus and China dates back to the 1990s; but the greatest intensification in these ties took place after 2010. At the same time, there was a change of roles. Since then, China has become a donor of military technology to the Belarusian defense industrial complex, rather than the other way around, as had been the case until that point. Thanks to this new cooperation with China, Belarus was able to develop indigenous satellite and missile programs. These levels of military-technical cooperation received

³⁸ “Official event in anticipation of Belarus’ Independence Day,” The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, July 2, 2019, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/official-event-in-anticipation-of-belarus-independence-day-21499/.

³⁹ Vladimir Makei, “Interview of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus to the Japanese television and radio company,” interview by Japanese television and radio company, *NHK*, December 19, 2018, <http://mfa.gov.by/press/smi/de367645ecb2d418.html>.

even a further jolt after 2014—one more geopolitical implication of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Namely, the war in eastern Donbas forced Beijing to reconsider its initial plans regarding the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe's East, where Ukraine had initially been accorded a leading role. As such, China shifted more of its strategic attention to Belarus; and within only a few years, bilateral ties reached their highest possible level in both the political and military spheres: a trustful comprehensive strategic partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation (2016), and iron brotherhood (2018), respectively. These top levels of strategic partnership with China are extended only also to Pakistan, another important partner in implementing Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (via the so-called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor).⁴⁰

The year 2015 saw the first results Belarus's ambitious home-grown missile program. During the military parade dedicated to 70th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, held on May 9, in Minsk, participating Belarusian forces demonstrated the Polonaise multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS). This project had been initiated a year earlier and developed by the Belarusian Precise Electromechanics Factory, in cooperation with the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology (CALT, also known as the First Academy; part of the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, or CASC). It was this Chinese corporation that provided the technology for the production of A200 missiles (range up to 200 kilometers), which are used by the Polonaise MLRS.⁴¹ The Precise

⁴⁰ Arseny Sivitsky, "Belarus and China: Strategic Partners and Iron Brothers," *Varta Belarus Security Magazine*, no 4 (November 2019): 19–27.

⁴¹ "New Polonez multiple rocket launcher on 8x8 chassis unveiled during military parade in Belarus," *Army Recognition*, May 15, 2015, https://www.armyrecognition.com/may_2015_global_defense_security_news_uk/new_polonez_multiple_rocket_launcher_on_8x8_chassis_unveiled_during_military_parade_in_belarus_15051513.html.

Electromechanics Factory is currently modernizing the V-200 model of the Polonaise to a new generation, the V-300, which will be capable of firing missiles with a range of up to 300 kilometers.⁴² In general, further development of the Polonaise MLRS project may lead to its transformation into the so-called General Army Tactical Strike System (GATTS), actively promoted by CALT, and capable of launching various types of ballistic and cruise missiles (from A100, A200, A300 and M20 up to CX-1 models). However, the next step in development is indigenous production of the M20 operational-tactical missile, with a range of around 300–400 kilometers.

On January 15, 2016, Belarus launched its first telecommunications satellite, the Belintersat-1, from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center, in China. The orbital hardware provides secured communication over a large area of Europe, Asia and Africa, and is an important component of the integrated digital communication system of the country. Plans to launch the next Belintersat satellite were officially announced in December 2016. The development of Belarus's satellite program was initiated in 2012 by the "Great Wall" corporation (part of the CASC) and the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. The program is aimed at creating the National Satellite Communication and Broadcasting System of the Republic of Belarus.⁴³

In addition to the joint development of satellite and missile programs, Belarus and China are discussing cooperation in anti-aircraft missile systems air/missile-defense systems, and the production of heavy combat UAVs.

⁴² Dmitry Fediushko, "Belarus to adopt extended-range missile for V-300 Polonez-M MRL system," *Jane's*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.janes.com/article/87327/belarus-to-adopt-extended-range-missile-for-v-300-polonez-m-mrl-system>.

⁴³ "About project," Belintersat, accessed November 17, 2019, <https://www.belintersat.com/about-belintersat-5>.

In July 2017, a Chinese delegation headed by Xiao Yatsin, the chairperson of the Committee on Control and Management of State Property of the People's Republic of China State Council, visited Belarus and met with President Lukashenka. During the meeting, the Belarusian leader suggested discussing the possibility of creating high-tech defense industry enterprises (both joint and 100 percent Chinese-owned ones) at the "Great Stone" Chinese-Belarusian industrial park. The Chinese delegation was represented by the heads of a number of leading military-industrial corporations (CASIC, NORINCO, ALIT, AVIC, CATIC).⁴⁴

In April 2018, the joint venture Aviation Technologies and Complexes, founded by the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), was established to launch the mass production of various (unspecified) items of domestic and AVIC's design.⁴⁵ AVIC is known for producing the Wing Loong—a multipurpose, reconnaissance-strike, long-range UAV.

In May 2019, at the MILEX-2019 military industry exhibition in Minsk, a new Buk-MB3K medium-range anti-aircraft SAM system was presented, which uses a 9M318 guided anti-aircraft missile manufactured in Belarus. The air-defense system was developed by specialists of the LTD OKB TSP. According to official information,

⁴⁴ "Meeting with Chairman of the State Property Control and Management Committee under the State Council of the People's Republic of China Xiao Yatsin," The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, August 1, 2017, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-predsedatelem-komiteta-po-kontrolju-i-upravleniju-gosudarstvennym-imuschestvom-pri-gossovete-kr-16769/.

⁴⁵ "A new joint venture Aviation Technologies and Complexes was created by the NAS of Belarus and the aviation company AVIC," National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, April 7, 2018, http://nasb.gov.by/rus/news/6636/?sphrase_id=42201.

the Buk-MB3K can hit targets at ranges up to 70 kilometers and altitudes up to 25 kilometers. The SAM system is housed on an 8x8 MZKT-692250 truck chassis.⁴⁶ Reportedly, it is already comparable with the S-300PS (S-300PMU) system Russia supplied Belarus in the 2000s in terms of tactical and technical characteristics.⁴⁷

In fact, the Buk-MB3K air-defense project is also based on intensive cooperation with a Chinese counterpart. Aerospace Long-March International Trade Co Ltd., part of the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), has been supplying missile engines for the modernized Buk and implementing a project to produce solid fuel as well as rocket engines in Belarus since 2018.⁴⁸

During an April 2018 meeting with Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, President Lukashenka said that cooperation with China had played a decisive role in strengthening the national defense capabilities of Belarus.⁴⁹ The development of Belarus's national

⁴⁶ "A new medium-range air defense system Buk-MB3K is a completely Belarusian development," *Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BelTA*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/novyj-zrk-srednej-dalnosti-buk-mb3k-javljaetsja-polnostju-belorusskoj-razrabotkoj-347456-2019/>.

⁴⁷ "S-300 PS SA-10B Grumble B Surface-to-Air missile," *Army Recognition*, March 31, 2018, https://www.armyrecognition.com/s-300ps_sa-10b_grumble_b_systems_vehicles_uk/s-300_ps_s-300ps_sa-10b_grumble_b_long_range_surface-to-air_missile_technical_data_sheet_information.html.

⁴⁸ "Belarus-China defense cooperation will be expanding," Belarus Security Blog, April 10, 2018, <https://bsblog.info/belarusko-kitajskoe-oboronoe-sotrudnichestvo-budet-rasshiryatsya/>.

⁴⁹ "Meeting with Minister of Defense of the People's Republic of China Wei Fenghe," The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, April 6, 2018, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-oborony-kitajskoj-narodnoj-respubliki-veem-fenxe-18498/.

defense industry, in addition to intensive military-technical cooperation with China, helps Minsk to enhance its capabilities, decrease the level of dependence on Russia and undermine the Kremlin's argument for a permanent military presence in Belarus.

In 2018, Belarus finally obtained its own fixed and mobile secured government communications system, based on research and development carried out at the national cryptographic school. The newly adopted system eliminated a critical dependence on external partners (especially Russia) in communications security. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict showed the critical importance of having stable and reliable government communications. President Lukashenka later noted that Belarus managed to develop secure national communications systems, information encryption centers, inaccessible to intelligence agencies of other states.⁵⁰

As for the financing of the Armed Forces in accordance with the package of defense documents adopted in December 2019, the money will, in the medium-term perspective, primarily be allocated for the development of UAVs as well as electronic and radar reconnaissance. The military will also modernize its attack aircraft as well as continue to purchase and modernize missile systems and barrel and rocket artillery. Among the priority measures, government documents envisage the purchase of ammunition, primarily anti-aircraft guided missiles and anti-tank guided missiles, along with other high-precision munitions.⁵¹

⁵⁰ "Lukashenka called a meeting on the development of government communications," *Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BelTA*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-sobral-soveschaniye-po-razvitiyu-pravitelstvennoj-svjazi-370111-2019/>.

⁵¹ Lukashenka Approves New Belarus Defense Plan. What are the main emphases on?" *Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BelTA*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-utverdil-novyj-plan-oborony-belarusi-na-chem-sdelany-aktsenty-373450-2019/>.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Belarus contributes to regional stability and security. However, that *status quo* is under pressure from Moscow's strategic aims to undermine Belarusian sovereignty and independence and Russia's efforts to transform Belarus into a source of security threats and challenges for other countries, in particular for Ukraine, the Baltic States and Poland (i.e., NATO and the EU). This is the final goal of the Kremlin's "integration ultimatum," aimed at economically, politically and militarily subordinating Belarus to Russia within the Union State framework.

Moscow wants to maintain Minsk within its geopolitical sphere of influence and feels threatened by Belarusian efforts to preserve its national independence and strategic autonomy in foreign and security policy, as characterized by the ongoing normalization of the latter's relations with the West and strengthening of its strategic partnership with China.⁵²

For centuries, Belarusian territory served as an east-west invasion corridor in the heart of the European continent. Therefore, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the West, Belarus's positive and constructive contribution to regional security and stability should not be underestimated or undervalued. However, Belarus can only continue serving as a regional security and stability donor if it is able to preserve its state sovereignty and independence. Preserving this *status quo* will require not only a consensus among regional and global players but also strategic and comprehensive assistance to Belarus.

⁵² Glen E. Howard, "The Growing Importance of Belarus on NATO's Baltic Flank," The Jamestown Foundation, September, 2019 <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Howard-Why-Belarus-Matters-web.pdf>.

Belarus and the EU: Where Could Another Rapprochement Lead?

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Executive Summary

For about two decades, Belarus–European Union political relations remained highly conflictual. Communication between Minsk and Brussels stayed at a low level and rarely extended beyond issues of human rights and democracy, even though Belarus’s trade with EU member states had not been disrupted.

Cautious voices in favor of changing the situation periodically emerged on both sides, and they became stronger during periods of geopolitical troubles. First, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war led to the inception of the Eastern Partnership initiative, which became a turning point for the EU’s policy toward its eastern neighborhood, and it had a particular significance for Belarus. Then, the crisis in Ukraine that began in 2014 became a true game-changer, having a strong impact on both the EU and Belarus in terms of creating immediate security implications and also shifting elite perceptions.

Each geopolitical crisis precipitated an effort at rapprochement between Minsk and Brussels. The first attempt, in 2008–2010, proved unsuccessful. Whereas, the post-2014 endeavor looks more serious and has already brought better results, not least because the Belarusian authorities recognize the crucial importance of the EU for their policy of strategic hedging amid growing risks to Belarus’s national security.

Nonetheless, Minsk and Brussels have yet to turn quantitative progress in their relations into qualitative outcomes. They also need to find ways of dealing with key overarching challenges: a lack of mutual trust, strong vested interests against their rapprochement, and rising geopolitical tensions.

Introduction

The significance of the European Union for Belarus's economy, security and foreign policy becomes obvious when one looks at a regional map. Belarus borders three EU member states—Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. The total length of the border between Belarus and the EU amounts to 1,280 kilometers, which is only 3 km shorter than the Belarusian-Russian border (1,283 km) and about 200 km longer than Belarus's border with Ukraine (1,084 km).

This geography predetermines Belarus's basic needs in international affairs, where the EU should have a special place, both politically and economically. However, for about two decades, relations between Minsk and Brussels, as well as Belarus's bilateral relations with individual EU member states, remained poorly developed. Moreover, since 1991, they have experienced several crises resulting from the EU's critical assessments of the situation pertaining to democracy and human rights in Belarus and the latter's harsh reactions to that criticism.

It is telling that to date—28 years since Belarus gained independence—the only framework agreement that technically regulates the country's relations with the EU is the “Agreement Between the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the USSR on Trade and Commercial and Economic Cooperation,”¹ which was signed back in 1989. This

¹ Agreement between the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on trade

makes Belarus unique, as it is the only country in the EU's neighborhood without a proper overarching agreement. That mere fact alone goes a long way toward explaining the two decades of troubled relations. It is also symbolic and deeply ironic that, even as Minsk and Brussels both emphasize the importance of strengthening Belarusian sovereignty, their relations are still regulated by a Soviet-era treaty.

Symbolism aside, geopolitical shifts in Europe's East after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and particularly after the tragic events in Ukraine that erupted in 2014 have posed numerous urgent and non-trivial questions to Minsk and Brussels. Both seem to have realized their mutual interest in normalizing relations, which explains their efforts in breaking the vicious circle of previous decades and developing a new bilateral and multilateral agenda. Yet, the two sides still have a long way to go and must face multiple difficult issues before their relationship can enter a qualitatively new level.

Legacy of the 1990s and Early 2000s

After Belarus proclaimed its independence in 1991, it immediately faced the grand task of setting up the government apparatus and decision-making system of a sovereign state essentially from scratch. Among other things, it had to establish and start developing relations with a large number of countries located to its west, including EU² member states. Minsk also started to pursue cooperation with

and commercial and economic cooperation, 1989,
http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2008/july/tradoc_139580.pdf.

² Formally, the European Union was established by the Maastricht Treaty, which was signed on February 7, 1992, and came into force on November 1, 1993. Before that, the grouping was referred to as the European Communities. Neighbors Poland, Lithuania and Latvia became members of the EU in 2004.

Brussels, the “capital” of united Europe, and established diplomatic relations with it in August 1992.

The EU, for its part, also had to deal with a completely new reality to the east of its borders after the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the emergence of fifteen newly independent states on the territory of the former USSR. Central European states, with which the EU had a direct border, became the bloc’s top priority at that time. But Brussels and other European capitals also had to think about ways of arranging relations with the new countries further east. For that, the EU developed and started negotiating a special type of bilateral document called a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). Its purpose was not to launch any advanced or privileged cooperation but rather to situate relations within some mutually agreed legal framework.

Minsk and Brussels began talks on their bilateral PCA and concluded negotiations successfully on March 6, 1995. After the agreement was signed, it was sent to national parliaments for ratification. The sides also signed a temporary trade deal on March 25, 1996, to have a working mechanism even before the overarching legal agreement entered into force. The Belarusian parliament, which was then called the Supreme Council, ratified the PCA that same year.

However, the document never made it through the ratification procedures on the EU side; only 8 out of then-15 member countries (Austria, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK) gave it the “green light,” while the others refused to approve it on the grounds of violations of human rights and democratic standards in Belarus.³ On October 24, 1996, the European Parliament suspended

³ This criticism was especially acute following Belarus’s 1996 constitutional referendum, which the EU did not recognize as legitimate. A. Tikhomirov, “Vneshnyaya politika Respubliki Belarus (1991–2015),” 2017, p. 130.

the PCA ratification process as well as the implementation of the temporary trade agreement. Ever since, a legal and political void has existed in Belarusian-EU relations. Moreover, in September 1997, in response to more political tensions inside Belarus, which the EU saw as a further deterioration of the democratic and human rights situation, the EU General Affairs Council made several decisions that would serve as a general template of Brussels' policy toward Minsk and have a long-lasting negative impact on bilateral relations. In particular, the Council agreed that:

- “the Member States will not support Belarus’s membership of the Council of Europe”;
- “the European Communities and the Member States will conclude neither the interim agreement nor the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement”;
- “bilateral ministerial contacts between the European Union and Belarus will, in principle, be established solely through the Presidency or the Troika” (which significantly narrowed Minsk’s space for maneuver vis-à-vis the EU);
- the “implementation of Community technical assistance programs will be halted, except in the case of humanitarian or regional projects or those which directly support the democratization process”; and
- “the Member States will look at their technical assistance programs with a view to their cessation, except in the case of humanitarian or regional projects or those which directly support the democratization process.”⁴

⁴ Commission of the European Communities (1997) “Press-Release”, 2027th General Affairs Council Meeting, 10368/97 (Presse 269). Brussels, September 15.

In July 1998, Brussels for the first time introduced targeted sanctions against Belarus, restricting the right of 131 officials to enter the EU. The restrictive measures came in response to a diplomatic scandal that broke out after the Belarusian authorities asked Western ambassadors to move out of their residences located in close proximity to the president's residence.

In 2004, the so-called “big bang enlargement” brought Poland, Lithuania and Latvia inside the EU. Belarus became an immediate neighbor of the Union, leading to substantial changes. Politically, it meant that Brussels turned into an important voice even in Minsk's bilateral cooperation with all new EU member states, including former Soviet republics and former members of the now-defunct Warsaw Treaty Organization.⁵ Economically, it made the countries of Central and Eastern Europe part of the enlarged European market, with all its centralized regulations and decision-making in relation to third countries. Finally, cross-border movement and people-to-people contacts now also became subject to EU policies, even though technically it took Belarus's neighbors several more years to join the Schengen area.

Even before the 2004 enlargement, the EU proclaimed conditionality as the driving principle of its relations with neighbors to the east. The European Commission defined its approach in the following terms:

Engagement should [...] be introduced progressively, and be conditional on meeting agreed targets for reform. New benefits should only be offered to reflect the progress made by the partner

⁵ Foreign and security policy remains an intergovernmental domain in the EU decision-making system—that is, national governments, rather than supranational European institutions, preserve the final say over foreign relations. Nonetheless, even the informal necessity to take other member states' and Brussels' positions into consideration, immediately imposed certain limitations on the new member states in their dealings with Belarus.

countries in political and economic reform. In the absence of progress, partners will not be offered these opportunities.⁶

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which became the framework approach of the EU to relations with its eastern and southern neighbors, was also built on the principle of conditionality. Hence, Belarus could not benefit fully from the ENP as long as the EU did not recognize progress with democracy and human rights in the country, which it did not do. Moreover, the EU and the United States introduced a series of personal and economic sanctions against Belarus, particularly following the 2004 referendum, which excluded the two-term presidential limit from the Belarusian constitution, and the 2006 presidential elections, which the West judged as unfree and unfair.

Thus, developments in Belarusian-EU relations until about the second half of 2008 were generally conflictual in the political realm. Economic cooperation appeared less dramatic, as bilateral trade grew even despite sanctions. In 2000, trade turnover amounted to about \$4 billion; in 2005, it reached \$10.7 billion; and in 2008, it already surpassed \$22.7 billion.⁷ Yet, political disagreements prevented Minsk and European capitals from deepening and diversifying their economic cooperation. One example of the politically motivated losses incurred on Belarus was its exclusion from the EU's Generalized System of Preferences, which had been in effect between 1993 and 2007 and had lowered or even lifted customs duties on some Belarusian goods.⁸

⁶ European Commission (2003), "Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours, Communication," p. 4.

⁷ Belstat (2012), "Belarus i strany Evrosoyuza: statisticheskii sbornik," pp. 125–126.

⁸ Tikhomirov "Vneshnyaya politika Respubliki Belarus (1991–2015)," p. 131.

Thus, nearly two decades after Belarus gained independence, the country's story in Western political circles and media looked quite simple. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once dubbed Belarus the "last dictatorship of Europe," and that nickname was handy enough as an explanation of everything most EU politicians and diplomats wanted to know about the country. As disagreements over democratic and human rights issues between Belarus and EU member states grew, Minsk was increasingly perceived as a European outcast and, thus, quickly fell off the interest radar in the EU. If the country's name popped up in the European halls of power at all, it was normally within the context of human rights and democracy problems.

A lack of serious interest in dealing with Belarus, combined with Minsk's own non-proactive and, at times, eccentric international behavior, also helped to enroot simplistic ideas about its foreign policy. Minsk has been a close Russian ally since the mid-1990s and was, thus, easily dismissed as part of Russia's geopolitical backyard.

A Geopolitical Belarus and Rapprochement 1.0

A turning point in the Belarusian-EU relationship started to emerge in 2007–2008. Minsk expressed political will to launch a dialogue and normalize relations by freeing individuals whom the EU considered political prisoners. But the most noteworthy development happened within the context of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008. Perhaps for the first time in its history, Belarus appeared on the Western geopolitical radar as a sovereign state that acts out of its own interest rather than bandwagons with Russia on matters of international significance. Namely, Minsk opted not to follow Moscow in recognizing the independence of the Georgian breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since many in the EU did not expect such an independent line of behavior from Minsk, they naturally started to take more interest in developing relations with Belarus.

Brussels once again curtailed and froze restrictive measures vis-à-vis Belarus, while high-level EU officials began to travel to Minsk for talks with their Belarusian counterparts. In December 2008, the government of Belarus and the European Commission signed an associated protocol agreement that regulated technical assistance and cooperation. In December 2009, the EU opened a new diplomatic mission, which later became the Delegation of the European Union in Minsk.

Most importantly, Belarus was invited to join the EU's latest regional initiative—the Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched at the Prague Summit in May 2009. Besides Belarus, five other states from the post-Soviet space became part of the partnership: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The Prague Declaration outlined the following objectives and rationale of the EaP:

To create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries. [...] the Eastern Partnership will seek to support political and socio-economic reforms of the partner countries, facilitating approximation towards the European Union. This serves the shared commitment to stability, security and prosperity of the European Union, the partner countries and indeed the entire European continent.⁹

The document also stated that the EaP would work “without prejudice to individual partner countries’ aspirations”

⁹ European Council (2009) “Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit,”

https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf, p. 6.

regarding their relations with the EU and would be “governed by the principles of differentiation and conditionality,” which provided some space for Belarus’s participation, even though Minsk had never entertained EU membership ambitions.¹⁰

The partnership introduced a main operational novelty—the combination of bilateral and multilateral tracks in the EU’s relations with the six eastern neighbors. Yet, the bilateral track remained key, as the EaP instruments of achieving political association and economic integration with the EU—association agreements, deep and comprehensive free trade areas, as well as visa liberalization—were bilateral. But due to the lack of bilateral agreements, Belarus could only participate in the multilateral track. This, as well as Brussels’ stress on a continued policy of conditionality, somewhat limited the expectations in Minsk.

Nonetheless, the EaP presented a unique opportunity for Minsk and Brussels to start normalizing relations and deepening their practical cooperation. Compared to other eastern partner states, the EaP carried particular added value for Belarus, since the latter remained the only country without a framework agreement regulating its bilateral relations with the EU. In other words, the EaP became the first platform in which Belarus could legitimately engage in new cooperation projects with the EU and Belarusian officials could meet their European counterparts on a regular basis.

A New Crisis

The rapprochement lasted until the end of 2010 and coincided with the presidential race in Belarus. During that campaign, nothing seemed to indicate that the whole endeavor by both Minsk and Brussels to normalize relations and take them to a qualitatively new

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5

height would ultimately end in a disaster. On the contrary, the sides exchanged high-level visits and looked poised to step up their cooperation in all areas after the elections. However, to the shock of many, election night, on December 19, 2010, saw a massive government crackdown on a demonstration in downtown Minsk.

What happened on that night remains unclear and invites numerous questions, which are beyond the focus of this paper. To date, the Belarusian authorities and the West, as well as various participants of those events, have continued to stick to their own conflicting narratives about what transpired. But where they all agree is that the drama of December 2010 brought Belarusian-EU relations to their lowest point ever.

The EU lambasted the election irregularities and subsequent police violence and imposed individual sanctions (which foresaw the freeze of assets and travel bans) against 177 Belarusian nationals. The list included not only officials but also rectors of universities and journalists whom the EU named “responsible for the fraudulent Presidential elections of 19 December 2010 and the subsequent violent crackdown on democratic opposition, civil society and representatives of independent mass media.”¹¹ Previously suspended restrictive measures were also reinstated.

Belarus’s participation in the EaP also suffered a relative downgrade when the European Parliament decided to launch the EaP’s parliamentary dimension in February 2011 but did not invite representatives of the Belarusian legislature, claiming the body was illegitimate. That decision further soured attitudes to the EU in Minsk. Nonetheless, it is revealing that Belarus never left the EaP—

¹¹ European Council (2011), “Press Release, 3065th Council meeting,” https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/119045.pdf.

another indication of how important the platform is to Minsk, as no other legitimate basis for regular contacts and cooperation with Europe exists.

Interestingly, even against the backdrop of the 2010 political crisis, trade between Belarus and the EU was not affected. To be more precise, it experienced a reverse dynamic. That year, mutual trade turnover amounted to \$15.2 billion (4.3 percent lower than in 2009); but in 2011, when political tensions reached their peak, it rose to as much as \$24.4 billion.¹² Even more noteworthy is that in 2010, when (for most of the year) relations seemed to be on a highly positive track, Belarus had a deficit (of about \$26.8 million) in trade with the EU, whereas in 2011 its surplus added up to nearly \$7 billion.

Behind these figures one can see two explanations. First, the EU abstained from introducing serious economic sanctions against Belarus and, hence, the political crisis did not have immediate repercussions on trade. Second, and this often becomes lost in analysis about Belarusian-EU relations, the Russian factor played a role. Disputes over the terms and costs of Russian oil deliveries to Belarusian refineries in 2010 accounted for both the overall decrease in the trade turnover between Belarus and the EU as well as the dramatic fall of Belarusian exports to the EU that year. Once Minsk and Moscow reached agreements in the field, the statistics of Belarusian exports to EU member states rebounded. Imports from the EU also grew in 2010–2012, but at a much slower pace.¹³

¹² A. Tikhomirov, (2017), “Vneshnyaya politika Respubliki Belarus (1991–2015),” p.136.

¹³ Embassy of Belarus to the EU, “Torgovo-ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo,” http://belgium.mfa.gov.by/ru/bel_eu/economy/.

Rapprochement 2.0: Post-2014

Already in late 2012 and early 2013, Minsk started to demonstrate conciliatory intentions toward the EU. But the previous chill in relations was so severe that bringing bilateral relations back to the pre-December 2010 state looked like an extraordinary task.

At the November 2013 EaP summit, in Vilnius, Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei made several statements that signaled Minsk's interest in opening a new chapter in the relationship. In particular, he called on Brussels to launch visa facilitation negotiations and confirmed Belarus's commitment to the EaP, provided that the initiative respects the interests of all participants and does not create geopolitical dividing lines.¹⁴ Moreover, Minsk came up with two specific ideas for the EaP—to establish an EaP Business Forum and to create common digital markets.

The Vilnius Summit marked a watershed moment not only for the EaP but for regional and, more broadly, European security. Several months before the summit, the Armenian government decided to drop its ambitions to conclude an Association Agreement with the EU and instead opted for membership in the Customs Union with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which would later become the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). But most dramatically, the Vilnius Summit saw the Ukrainian government's about-turn on its previous commitment to closer relations with the EU, a decision by then-president Viktor Yanukovich that would set in motion events eventually culminating in the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

¹⁴ Belta (2019), "Belarus v tselom podderzhala itogovuyu deklaratsiyu sammita 'Vostochnogo partnerstva' – Makei, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-v-tselom-podderzhala-itogovuju-deklaratsiju-sammita-vostochnogo-partnerstva-makej-31556-2013>.

Thus, geopolitics once again colored Minsk-Brussels relations, this time in a significantly more serious fashion. War broke out literally on Belarus's doorstep, generating multiple unprecedented challenges for Belarusian foreign and security policy. Although Belarus is integrated in economic and defense alliances with Russia, Minsk did not wish to become embroiled in a Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Hence, the Belarusian government started to pursue a policy of situational neutrality regarding both the conflict itself as well as the resulting broader confrontation between Russia and the West. Quite quickly, Belarus offered up its capital city as a neutral venue for peace talks, where the Minsk ceasefire agreements were negotiated and signed by the leaders of the "Normandy" quartet (Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France) in February 2015 and where the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Trilateral Contact Group has been meeting every second week since mid-2014. In addition, Belarus refused to host a Russian military airbase on its territory, arguing that the base would only worsen the situation in the region by further aggravating the regional security dilemma.

The Belarusian position on the conflict in Ukraine was undoubtedly received highly positively in European capitals and, thus, raised the EU's interest in normalizing relations with Minsk. And after the Belarusian authorities freed all incarcerated individuals whom Brussels had considered political prisoners, the EU Council lifted most sanctions against Belarus on February 15, 2016. Thus, a new chapter opened in the relationship.

Besides regional security considerations, this rapprochement came as a result of hard diplomatic work on both sides. The level and intensity of communication between Minsk and EU institutions and member states had been growing steadily since 2012. Several years of mainly low-key contacts helped to prepare the ground for more substantial moves and slightly improved the overall atmosphere. Belarusian and

EU diplomats started to underline that they could already talk openly, though not always publicly, about most contentious issues.

The establishment of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group in 2016 contributed to that end. The group gathers twice a year, in Minsk and Brussels, to hold structured discussions spanning the entire spectrum of topics of mutual interest, with a view to identifying priorities for future cooperation. Representatives of Belarusian non-governmental organizations (NGO) also participate in some portions of the meetings. Issues on the agenda include trade, customs duties, transport, sanitary and phytosanitary standards, agriculture, research, education, environment, social security, people-to-people contacts, human rights, and political freedoms. Additionally, a separate annual format for a human rights dialogue was launched in 2015.

Also noteworthy is the fact that, after several years of intensifying communication between diplomats, a spillover effected started to emerge. An increasing number of meetings now takes place between representatives of various Belarusian ministries and agencies and their counterparts in the EU.

Besides direct work with Brussels, Belarus's increasingly active engagement with regional and sub-regional European organizations has also made a positive contribution to Belarusian-EU relations. For instance, the Belarusian Presidency of the Central European Initiative (CEI) in 2017 marked the first time that Minsk had held the rotating presidency in an international grouping beyond the post-Soviet space; Belarus used this achievement as both a symbolic and a practical tool of diversifying its foreign policy. It also facilitated additional cooperation with a number of EU member states—primarily, Austria and Italy. Also in 2017, Minsk hosted the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. On the event's sidelines, Lukashenka held talks with Sebastian Kurz, then the OSCE's chairperson-in-office and Austrian foreign minister. That meeting turned out to be instrumental for enhancing Belarusian-Austrian dialogue, particularly as Kurz later

assumed the position of his country's chancellor. And in November 2019, Vienna became the first European capital where Alyaksandr Lukashenka paid a full-fledged official visit after a decade of disrupted relations.

The Vienna visit looked even more noteworthy given that the Belarusian president had turned down several previous invitations to travel to the EU. For example, he decided not to go to the EaP's Brussels Summit in November 2017, the World War I anniversary events in Paris in November 2018, the Munich Security Conference in February 2019 and the World War II remembrance ceremony in Warsaw in September 2019. Apparently, Lukashenka wanted his "return to Europe" to be in the form of a bilateral visit rather than attendance at an international event where most meetings with other heads of state/government happen only on the margins.

Overall, Belarusian-EU relations have experienced a clear upward dynamic since 2011, when they fell to their lowest point. **Graph 2** (see p. vi) shows combined data from studies by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations,¹⁵ which rely on event-analysis methodology to register the intensity and nature of bilateral relations (i.e. whether they have a positive or negative character).

According to the data, Belarusian-EU cooperation left the "negative zone" already at the end of 2012, when Minsk started taking diplomatic steps to reset the otherwise conflictual relationship. And

¹⁵ In 2011–2016, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies produced the bimonthly monitoring study *Belarus's Foreign Policy Index*; and since March 2018, the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations has used a similar methodology to produce the *Minsk Barometer*. The latter has a broader focus as it also deals with the state of regional security in Europe's East, but the data on Belarus's foreign affairs from both studies is comparable. Neither study was published between January 2017 and March 2018.

relations have stayed in the “positive zone” ever since, demonstrating gradual growth. Interestingly, while Minsk’s responsible position on regional security has definitely contributed to improving the atmosphere in the dialogue with Brussels, it is not the only factor, as the gradual positive trend had been there before 2014 and did not experience any dramatic spikes later.

Graph 3 (see p. vi) puts the dynamic of Belarusian-EU relations in a comparative perspective with the other key vectors of Belarusian foreign policy—Russia, China, Ukraine and the US (the latter was not covered in the studies prior to January 2018).

The most striking conclusion is that at the start of the observations, in early 2011, relations with the EU were the least intense and the most negative vector of Belarus’s foreign policy; but since the end of 2015, they have become the most intense and positive one, in some periods well above the Russian vector. It should be clarified, however, that the intensity of relations reflects the number and quality of events and contacts during a given monitoring period; it does not equal their overall depth. In other words, the fact that relations with the EU overtook the Russian vector in 2015 should not be misinterpreted as Belarus turning away from Russia and attempting to fully reorient its foreign policy. If anything, the data shows that Minsk is undertaking serious efforts to diversify its foreign policy and expand its space for maneuver in international affairs.

The positive dynamic notwithstanding, Belarusian-EU relations have yet to turn this quantitative progress into qualitative political and economic results. In recent years, Minsk and Brussels have been negotiating two major agreements, which should pave the way for more systemic cooperation and also signal that the rapprochement is yielding practical outcomes. One of them, an agreement on partnership priorities, remains at an impasse; whereas the other one, on visa facilitation, was signed in January 2020, after about six years of difficult negotiations.

The partnership priorities agreement is meant to become an interim document that will give some working structure to the two sides' day-to-day dealings and open up new cooperation opportunities, including increased funding for technical assistance projects, before Minsk and Brussels are able to conclude a full-fledged bilateral agreement—a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) or its more modernized version. In a way, the partnership priorities should temporarily fill the legal void that exists because of the fact that the 1995 PCA was never ratified. It would also be a political step toward a future framework agreement.

Initially, both Belarusian and EU officials expressed confidence that it would not take too long to negotiate the partnership priorities. Indeed, on most clauses, the sides reached an understanding relatively quickly. However, as of January 2020, the negotiation process has been deadlocked because Lithuania is blocking its finalization. In doing so, Vilnius is trying to pressure Minsk into halting the Belarusian nuclear power plant (NPP) under construction in Astravets, about 30 km from the Lithuanian border. The government of Lithuania claims that the NPP is unsafe, even though the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found no serious problems with the station's safety following an inspection in 2016¹⁶ and continues to have constructive cooperation with Belarus.¹⁷ Vilnius refers to the Espoo Convention (which, in fact, covers environmental impact assessments during early-stage planning and various consultation mechanisms rather than nuclear safety issues *per*

¹⁶ IAEA (2016), "IAEA Director General Welcomes Belarus' Use of IAEA Review Services in Preparation for Nuclear Power,"

<https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/iaea-director-general-welcomes-belarus-use-of-iaea-review-services-in-preparation-for-nuclear-power>.

¹⁷ IEAE (2019), "IAEA Mission Sees Safety Commitment at Belarus NPP Ahead of Commercial Operation," <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/iaea-mission-sees-safety-commitment-at-belarus-npp-ahead-of-commercial-operation>.

se) to make its case; and as an EU member state, it uses its leverage over the EU's common foreign and security policy (formulated by consensus) to exert further pressure on Minsk. Other EU member states have expressed growing irritation because of the Lithuanian position and tactics in regard to the NPP, but they have not yet been able to convince Vilnius to change them.

In the beginning, the authorities in Minsk considered steps to alleviate tensions with Lithuania. In particular, in 2017, they voluntarily carried out stress tests at the NPP and submitted the results to the European nuclear energy regulator ENSREG, which only EU member states are obliged to do. ENSREG gave a generally positive assessment of the results,¹⁸ which both the European Commission¹⁹ and the government of Belarus²⁰ welcomed. Yet, Vilnius demanded that Minsk should address all recommendations by ENSREG before Lithuania unblocks the negotiations on the partnership priorities.²¹

At that point, Belarusian officials concluded that the real aim behind Lithuania's position is not just to raise the security standards of the NPP but to close down the project altogether. In fact, the conclusion

¹⁸ ENSREG (2018), "EU Peer review Report of the Belarus Stress Tests," http://www.ensreg.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/hlg_p2018-36_155_belarus_stress_test_peer_review_report_0.pdf.

¹⁹ EU Commission (2018), "Comprehensive risk and safety assessments of the Belarus nuclear power plant completed," https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_4347.

²⁰ Belta (2017), "Belorusskaya AES proshla stress-testy po standartam Evrosiyuza," https://atom.belta.by/ru/belaes_ru/view/belorusskaja-aes-proshla-stress-testy-po-standartam-evrosojuza-9645/.

²¹ MFA of Lithuania (2019), "Lithuania calls on International Atomic Energy Agency to take action to solve safety issues of Ostrovets NPP," <https://www.urm.lt/default/en/news/lithuania-calls-on-international-atomic-energy-agency-to-take-action-to-solve-safety-issues-of-ostrovets-npp>.

was later confirmed by the then-president of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, who stated that her government would not participate in any joint mechanism to monitor and enhance the security of the NPP, as that would amount to legitimizing the project.²² Moreover, Vilnius declined a Finnish offer to create a trilateral mechanism for dealing with any NPP-related issues, which would include representatives of Finland, Lithuania and Belarus.²³ Minsk had previously reached out to Helsinki and asked its help given that the Finnish NPP under construction is of the same type as the one in Astravets and is being built by the same Russian company. Needless to say, such a position of the Lithuanian authorities is irreconcilable with Belarus's interests. Minsk sees the NPP as a way of weakening its energy dependence on Russian natural gas, and there is no way it will agree to close down the project.

Representatives of European Union institutions in Brussels and of several member states express optimism that Lithuania will soon soften its position and stop blocking further progress in Belarusian-EU negotiations on the partnership priorities. Indeed, after the first block of the NPP is up and running (the launch is expected in 2020) it will become even more difficult for Vilnius to continue demanding that Belarus stop the project. And Lithuania's Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius already admitted that sticking to a "too radical position" on the Belarusian NPP would only harm his country's interests.²⁴ Yet,

²² Delfi (2019), "Gribauskaite: Litva ne mozhet sotrudnichat' c Belarus'yu iz-za BelAES," <https://ru.delfi.lt/news/politics/gribauskaite-litva-ne-mozhet-sotrudnichat-s-belarusyu-iz-za-belaes.d?id=81097989>.

²³ Interfax-Zapad (2019), "Litva otklonila priglashenie Finlyandii na tryokhstoronnie peregovory po BelAES," https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya_politika/1267803/.

²⁴ The Baltic Times (2019), "Lithuania's position on Astravets's NPP should not be too radical – formin,"

given how much political capital the Lithuanian government and individual politicians have invested in attempts to undermine the Astravets plant already, it seems unlikely that Vilnius will simply drop the issue. Lithuania's latest negative response to the Finnish offer points to that as well. At the very least, the Lithuanian leadership will persist in seeking additional face-saving measures.

But even if Lithuania stops blocking the conclusion of the partnership priorities between Belarus and the EU and the document is finally signed and ratified, this will not amount to a real breakthrough in relations—especially when it comes to trade. Belarusian exporters will continue to face insurmountable difficulties in accessing EU markets, especially in the agricultural sector, which is highly protected in the European bloc.

The possible conclusion of the partnership priorities will, nonetheless, carry much symbolic weight, as well as have some practical implications. First of all, this will become the most sizeable qualitative advancement resulting from more than five years of quantitative improvements in Belarusian-EU relations. It will serve as evidence that multiple efforts diplomats on both sides have put into the negotiations have not been in vain and that similar progress can be achieved on other difficult matters. Second, it will provide a better structure to the relationship and open up additional funding opportunities. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it will lift a barrier on the way to launching talks on a full-fledged bilateral agreement.²⁵ Minsk has been calling on Brussels to start such talks

https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuania_s_position_on_astavet_s_npp_should_not_be_too_radical_forin/.

²⁵ Given that Belarus does not entertain ambitions to negotiate an association agreement with the EU, the sides will likely aim at a modernized version of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement they signed in the mid-1990s (something similar to the EU's latest agreements with Armenia or Kazakhstan).

since about 2017, but the latter seems to lack sufficient political will at the moment to proceed.

The visa facilitation negotiations also took a long time and plenty of energy and caused a lot of frustration in Minsk. The fact that Belarus made a unilateral decision to introduce a visa-free regime (short stay) for the nationals of EU member states did not speed up the visa facilitation process. Belarus and the EU declared several times their readiness to sign the agreement already in 2018 and 2019 but the talks continued, because the EU ties the visa facilitation agreement to another document—the readmission agreement. The latter turned out to be more complicated due to various concerns on both sides and particularly Belarus’s fears that it might end up hosting large numbers of illegal migrants from Russia (who will be returned from EU territory), since Belarus and Russia do not have a readmission agreement between themselves.

Finally, on January 8, 2020, Minsk and Brussels signed the two agreements, which marked an important political step forward in their relations, even though the documents, as such, will not bring about any fundamental change. Once the agreements pass ratifications (which is expected to happen before June 2020) they will decrease the cost of the Schengen visa and ease visa application procedures for Belarusians. It will still be a much lower level of visa arrangements than the visa-free regimes that Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have with the EU and that Armenia wants to negotiate. But it will offer a crucial political signal that talks between Minsk and Brussels can lead to practical results.

Lack of tangible progress in trade with the EU has been another source of frustration in the Belarusian government and equipped the opponents of Belarusian-EU rapprochement with additional arguments. The problem for Minsk is primarily not about trade or exports statistics (even though that is also crucial) but about the need to diversify the Belarusian economy and foreign trade. Statistically,

Belarus's exports to the EU increased by about 30 percent in 2018 and nearly reached the record-high level registered in 2012.²⁶ But the lion's share of Belarusian exports consists of petrochemicals, which are produced from Russian crude oil. As a result, trade between Belarus and the EU, in fact, remains a function of Belarusian-Russian relations. If the latter deteriorate, especially in the energy realm, this inevitably has an immediate negative impact on the former. Somewhat ironically, in this particular way the currently ongoing talks between Minsk and Moscow about enhanced bilateral integration might visibly impact Belarusian-EU relations. As Minsk does not fully agree on the integration ideas Russia pushes for, Belarusian oil refineries will be the first to suffer because of the growing costs of Russian crude oil.

Hence, in order to lessen its overall dependence on Russia and decrease the significance of the Russian factor in Belarusian-EU trade relations, Minsk aims at opening up EU markets for its other goods, including agricultural products.²⁷ However, the EU presently does not seem willing to even start such negotiations.²⁸

EU institutions and members states, in turn, have their own reasons to feel frustrated about only modest progress in relations with Belarus.

²⁶ Government of Belarus (2019), "Vstrecha s evropeiskim komissarom po byudzhetu i chelovecheskim resursam Gyunterom Ettingerom," <http://www.government.by/ru/content/8617>.

²⁷ President of Belarus (2019), "Soveschanie po voprosam uchastiya v integratsionnykh strukturakh I sotrudnichestva s evropeiskimi organizatsiyami," http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveschanie-po-voprosam-uchastija-v-integratsionnyx-strukturax-i-sotrudnichestva-s-evropejskimi-20640/.

²⁸ Dzianis Melyantsou (2018), "Koordinationnaya gruppa Belarus-ES: na zapadnom fronte bez peremen," <http://minskdialogue.by/research/opinions/koordinatcionnaia-gruppa-belarus-es-na-zapadnom-fronte-bez-peremen>.

In spite of the increased significance of regional security considerations, EU politicians and diplomats continue to pay close attention to human rights and democracy. And certain actions by the Belarusian authorities undermine arguments in favor of the further normalization of relations.

Conclusion: Has the Ice Melted?

After two decades of highly conflictual relations, Belarus and the European Union began looking for ways to normalize their interaction. Since 2011, the relationship has improved considerably, and the EU is now the most dynamic vector of Belarusian foreign policy. To a large degree, the trend reflects the growing importance of the EU for Belarus's strategic thinking.

After the 2014 events in Ukraine and the beginning of the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West, Minsk's international behavior looks increasingly like an example of strategic hedging. This is a typical strategy pursued by small states that find themselves in between geopolitical centers of gravity and their conflicting interests. Strategic hedging²⁹ is about spreading and minimizing foreign policy and security risk and keeping as wide a space for maneuver as possible to multiply one's options in light of inevitable uncertainties.

Throughout history, a great number of small states employed this kind of foreign policy logic when confronted with growing geopolitical ambiguities and risks that they could not control. Some states excelled at hedging, whereas others were less successful. And key to success is a state's ability to diversify its options for economic and political cooperation. In this respect, relations with the EU have

²⁹ Yauheni Preiherman (2019), "Belarus: A Country Stuck In-Between Euro-Atlantic Security." In: Futter, A. (ed). *Threats to Euro-Atlantic Security*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

become crucial for Belarus, and this is widely recognized by the Belarusian authorities.

At a large governmental meeting in early March 2019, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka listed his country's most important achievements along the bilateral and multilateral tracks of cooperation with the EU since the crisis of 2011–2012. In particular, he stressed progress in working with EU-affiliated financial institutions: the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB). The former adopted a new country strategy, which reflects overall improvements in Belarusian-EU relations, and offered Minsk a record amount of investments and credits at beneficial interest rates in 2018. The latter was just beginning its activities in Belarus but had already pledged multi-million investments in upgrading municipal and environmental infrastructure, international transport corridors and climate action projects. On top of that, the EIB committed to co-financing the reconstruction of a highway from Minsk to the Lithuanian border.

Lukashenka also opined that the EaP was becoming increasingly pragmatic and, thus, interesting for Belarus. Minsk is willing and ready to play an active role in project-based cooperation within the EaP.

At the same time, he also stated that “the ice in the relations with the EU has not melted yet.”³⁰ He went through the issues that cause frustration in Belarus, including problems in negotiations on the partnership priorities, as well as remaining sanctions, which are purely symbolic but still unpleasant for Minsk. Only a few individuals remain on the travel-ban and asset freeze list, and certain restrictive measures

³⁰ President of Belarus (2019),

http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveschanie-po-voprosam-uchastija-v-integratsionnyx-strukturax-i-sotrudnichestva-s-evropejskimi-20640/.

are kept in relation to trade in arms and equipment that can be used for repressive purposes.

But how realistic is it that the ice between Belarus and the EU will melt completely in the years to come? Perhaps, the easy response is that it will not. Given the legacy of the two decades of sanctions and isolation, which resulted in almost non-existent channels of communication and contacts between elites in Belarus and in EU institutions and member states, a full and sustainable normalization of relations still requires extraordinary effort on both sides. And too many uncertainties, misunderstandings and sheer disagreements make such a concerted effort barely feasible in the short-term perspective.

But given that political will to continue rapprochement (even if it does not produce quick palpable results) exists on both sides, Belarus and the EU should be ready to address the three most difficult challenges: insufficient mutual trust, vested interests in the *status quo*, and rising geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West.

Mutual Trust

It would have been naïve to expect Minsk and Brussels to quickly restore mutual trust after nearly two decades of disrupted and conflictual relations. Even when fundamental interests coincide and international actors find it possible to cooperate on dealing with specific problems, it can take years to return to a fully trustful relationship, as each side has its own reasons to distrust the other.

The only way to advance in building mutual trust is by engaging each other and expanding cooperation beyond one's own comfort zone. The more direct communication between relevant decision-makers takes place, the less need they will have for interpretations by third parties, who might not be the supporters of further normalization of relations. And the more trusting the relationship between Belarus and

the EU becomes, the easier it will be to work on difficult issues like the problem of capital punishment in Belarus.

Vested Interests

It is also not at all surprising that the two decades of conflictual relations created some strong vested interests to preserve the *status quo*. In other words, small but vocal and influential groups of individual and corporate interests against any progress in Belarusian-EU relations remain deeply rooted even now that the rapprochement has been ongoing for quite some time. Such groups are easily found inside Belarus and some EU member states. They benefited from the previous state of affairs either because their services were in high demand by the Belarusian government or because they had access to EU funding that becomes unavailable as Minsk and Brussels deepen their relationship. Representatives of these groups are naturally incentivized to take steps aimed at complicating or even derailing the rapprochement.

To fight those vested interests, success stories of EU-Belarusian relations are crucial, as this is the only way to override opposition to further rapprochement. This is why progress on the visa facilitation agreement is so important.

Rising Geopolitical Tensions

Rising tensions and geopolitical contradictions between Russia and the West are having a direct impact on the state of security in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. Different states in the region choose (out of their differing thinking and calculations) to pursue conflicting security policies. For example, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and, at least until recently, Ukraine try to ensure increased US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) presence on their territories, including by deploying troops and delivering weapons. From their perspective, this should work as a guarantee against hypothetical Russian military adventures. Given that these Central and Eastern European states are

either members of NATO or aspire to join the alliance in the future, their logic is understandable. But it does put Belarus in an increasingly complicated situation.

Minsk is extremely concerned about the security dilemma that spirals as the stakes in regional security rise. Since 2014, Belarus has done its best to pursue the policy of situational neutrality, which the authorities in Minsk believe helps to prevent the situation from becoming uncontrollable. And it also helps Belarus to avoid being directly involved in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. But if tensions continue to rise, Minsk might find it impossible at some point to adhere to the neutral line, which would have immediate negative implications for Belarus's own security and that of the whole region.

Hence, it is important that Belarusian-EU relations be based on this understanding of the intricate challenges Belarus faces in the security realm. For example, the EaP should further offer a way of enhancing cooperation and strengthening ties between Belarus and the EU without creating new geopolitical dividing lines or enforce existing ones.

Belarus's Relations With the Baltic States: Strategic Economic Links and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Calculations

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Executive Summary

Historically, Belarus has always had close relations with the three Baltic States—Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—and cumulatively spent centuries together with them in several larger shared state entities. The strategic importance of the Baltic States for Belarus stems from their geographic location—for the land-locked country, Baltic seaports are the closest gateways to overseas markets. In the medium term, this transit direction will receive even more attention from the authorities in Minsk as Belarus continues to take steps to emancipate itself from energy and market dependencies on Russia.

Lithuania and Latvia implement sharply divergent policies toward Belarus. While Riga has chosen a pragmatic approach and tends not to focus on issues sensitive for Minsk, Vilnius often prioritizes a contentious political agenda, such as demanding an end to the construction of the Belarussian nuclear power plant at Astravets. The latter has led to serious political frictions between the two countries and created a deadlock in Belarussian negotiations with the European Union regarding partnership priorities as Lithuania blocks further efforts.

Belarus's relations with Estonia, compared to the two other Baltic states, remain far less intensive.

Nevertheless, Minsk's pragmatic foreign policy calculations dictate that it refrain from mixing political arguments with economic cooperation. Thus, despite political tensions with Vilnius, bilateral economic relations have always remained intensive. The new Lithuanian president, Gitanas Nausėda, is seeking to overcome the legacy of the previous period of frozen political contacts, at least at the level of public rhetoric. This may lead to a breakthrough in bilateral ties, especially after the United States made it clear to Vilnius that it would not back Lithuania's fight against the Belarusian nuclear plant. Meanwhile, the deterioration of Belarus's relations with Russia as well as President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's decision to diversify Belarusian oil supplies are creating additional opportunity for rapprochement with Lithuania.

Introduction

The Baltic States are essential to Belarus's foreign policy and trade relations. However, the individual relationships with each of these three countries have evolved differently over the years. While Lithuania is Belarus's most important economic counterpart among the Baltic States, in political terms, it is the most problematic neighbor. Latvia is also a crucial transit country for Belarusian commodities, but it has chosen a constructive and non-politicized strategy for engaging with the government in Minsk. Estonia, a small country without a shared border with Belarus, is relatively more marginal to Minsk's regional interests.

Lithuania

Economic Relations Heretofore Unaffected by Political Disputes

Lithuania is one of Belarus's main economic partners. It ranks eighth in terms of two-way trade turnover and seventh in terms of destinations for Belarus's exports.

Table 1: Belarusian-Lithuanian Trade in 2014–2019 (USD mln)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Trade	1,407.2	1,241.8	1,032.5	1,166.8	1,512.9	1,444.6
Export	1,042.0	964.0	767.0	848.3	1,156.2	1,060.5
Import	365.2	277.8	265.5	318.4	356.7	384.1
Surplus	676.8	687.2	502.5	529.9	799.5	676.4

Source: Belstat¹

In 2019, two-way commodity trade amounted to \$1.45 billion. Exports reached \$1.1 billion and imports hit \$384.1 million. Belarus's foreign trade surplus with Lithuania during 2019 was \$676.4 million.

At the same time, Belarus has managed to diversify its export deliveries to Lithuania. In 2019, 658 different types of products were supplied. Core export products include petrochemical goods (oil products, ethylene polymers); fertilizers; electricity; ferrous metals (unalloyed steel bars, wire); timber and timber products; animal and vegetable fats and oils; machines and mechanical equipment Belarus mainly imports from Lithuania boilers, mechanical equipment and mechanical devices; plastics and plastic products; electrical machinery and equipment; as well as paper and cardboard.

¹ "Foreign Trade," *National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed May 10, 2020, <http://www.belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/real-sector-of-the-economy/foreign-trade/>.

Service-sector trade between Belarus and Lithuania in 2018 reached \$811.9 million (up by 16.5 percent in 2017), and it accounted for 6.7 percent of Belarus's combined trade in services. The export of Belarusian services to Lithuania went up by 21.9 percent to \$329.9 million compared to 2017. Traditionally transport services have been the most important category, totaling \$246.5 million in 2018, having increased by 17.6 percent from 2017.

In addition, Lithuania is among the top-ten international investors in Belarus's economy—at the end of 2018, this southernmost Baltic State ranked seventh among global and fourth among European investors, respectively.

Table 2: Lithuanian Investments in Belarus in 2014–2018

(USD mln)

Period	Gross investments	FDI
2014	233.5	190.1
2015	168.9	139.6
2016	253.4	185.8
2017	198.2	180.6
2018	196.6	166.3
2019	207.6	185.1

Source: Belstat

Lithuania has consistently invested over \$150 million in Belarus's economy on an annual basis. In 2019, Belarus received \$207.6 million in Lithuanian investments, including \$185.1 million worth of foreign direct investment (FDI).

Belarus is implementing a number of major investment projects domestically with Lithuanian capital in construction, retail, woodworking, agriculture, and the promotion of its transport and logistics networks. More than 600 companies operate with the

participation of Lithuanian capital in Belarus; whereas in Lithuania, there are about 250 companies with Belarusian investments.

Lithuania is also an important transit country for Belarusian commodities bound for third countries. Belarusian cargoes have accounted for more than 30 percent of cargoes transshipped at the Klaipeda seaport since 2014. The port itself generates about 7 percent of Lithuania's GDP, whereas all of the seaport-related enterprises account for up to 18 percent of the country's GDP.

Between 2014 and 2018, the overall cargo turnover of the Klaipeda State Seaport demonstrated sustainable growth, and the same trend remains with respect to Belarusian commodities. In 2014, 12.8 million tons of cargo from Belarus was transshipped (35.1 percent of the port's total cargo turnover); in 2015, 13.2 million tons of Belarusian goods were transshipped (34.2 percent); in 2016, 13.9 million tons (34.6 percent); in 2017, 14.2 million tons (32.9 percent); and in 2018, 14.8 million tons (31.7 percent). Traditionally, mineral fertilizers, oil and petroleum products, and ferrous metals have accounted for the bulk of such transit. Potash (potassium-based) fertilizers account for more than 70 percent of cargo flows from Belarus to Klaipeda. So far, despite the political tensions between Minsk and Vilnius, the flow of potash fertilizers has remained stable because Lithuanian stevedoring and railway companies, as well as bulk cargo terminal operators, work under long-term agreements with Belarusian state companies Belaruskali, Belarusian Potash Company (BPC) and Grodno-Azot.

In 2013, during the visit of then-prime minister Michail Miasnikovič to Lithuania, a deal was closed for Belarus to buy a 30 percent share in the bulk cargo terminal at the seaport of Klaipeda, thus more tightly tying Belarus to Lithuania's transit services. The importance of the Lithuanian direction as a main transit route for Belarus was highlighted once again in January 2020, when Minsk purchased 80,000 tons of Norwegian oil after having failed to negotiate a new oil contract with Moscow. Belarus chose the Klaipeda port as the nearest

entry point to deliver the crude oil to its Navapolatsk oil refinery (Vitebsk Oblast). The Belarusian authorities are also trying to acquire additional facilities (or logistic businesses) at the Klaipeda seaport; but since former Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė labeled Belarus a “security threat” to her country, the perspective for such a deal became less realistic.

Nevertheless, neighboring Latvia has quite successfully competed with Lithuania for Belarusian transit and will be able to take over some of this freight traffic in the future.

Political Relations in the Shadow of Astravets

Belarus's political relationship with Lithuania is starkly opposed to their economic engagement. Of all its neighbors, Belarus has the most toxic relations with Lithuania. But paradoxically, those acute bilateral political differences have had virtually no impact on the trade and economic framework.

The formal reason for the Lithuanian authorities' continual harsh criticism of Belarus is the latter's construction of a nuclear power plant (NPP) just outside Astravets, near the Lithuanian border (and only 45 kilometers from Lithuania's capital city of Vilnius). However, it seems that the real driver behind the deterioration of the relationship was the personal attitude of the former president of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, and the influence of part of the conservative elite around the Belarusian president.

Initially, it was Grybauskaitė who became the main advocate of the normalization between the European Union and Belarus, in 2009–2010. She invested much of her political capital into this initiative, having invited Lukashenka, who had been denied entry into the EU, to visit Vilnius in 2009. However, the authorities' violent dispersal of an opposition rally in Minsk on election day, December 19, 2010, halted the normalization process with the West and undermined all

of Grybauskaitė's efforts to stand up for Belarus in Brussels. After that, Belarus's political relations with Lithuania changed dramatically for the worse. In an interview with *LRT*, Grybauskaitė even claimed that Belarus posed a threat to neighboring member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).²

By the time the former Lithuanian president had begun her rapprochement with Lukashenka, the decision to build a Belarusian nuclear plant had already been made and the Astravets site had been officially chosen. Nevertheless, at that time, Vilnius expressed no qualms either with the site or regarding Russia's participation in the project. Thus, the Astravets NPP is arguably not the main root of the present political conflict between Minsk and Vilnius.

At the level of political elites, bilateral relations were never particularly warm. Lithuanian conservatives, who dominate in Lithuania both ideologically and politically, have always been suspicious of neighboring Belarus, firstly, because the latter is an ally of Russia, and secondly, because the country claims, albeit not particularly openly, to carry on the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—the foundational cornerstone of the history and statehood myth of the contemporary Lithuanian Republic.

The Belarusian leadership, for its part, has long been irritated by Vilnius's moralizing democratization rhetoric. And Belarus resents the fact that the capital of neighboring Lithuania became a place of residence for numerous Western political foundations working with the Belarusian opposition and a permanent meeting and training place for opponents of the Belarusian authorities. More recently, the deployment of NATO contingents in the Baltic States and Poland after

² "D. Grybauskaite: padėsime Estijai" (D. Grybauskaite: we will help Estonia), *Lietuvos nacionalinis radijas ir televizija*, June 5, 2017, <http://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/kalba-vilnius/32/175229/d-grybauskaite-padesime-estijai>.

2014, amid the smoldering confrontation between Russia and the West, has caused additional tensions.

Eventually, the construction of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant began to further aggravate the situation. Despite the absence of complaints from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)³ and the fact that similar nuclear plant models are being built in the European Union (Finland and Hungary), Lithuania set for itself the goal to prevent the construction of the Belarusian NPP in Astravets. To this end, the Lithuanian parliament passed a law calling the Belarusian nuclear project unsafe and a threat to the national security of Lithuania. Vilnius also imposed a ban on the purchase of electricity from the Belarusian NPP and urged Latvia and Estonia to follow suit.

Moreover, Lithuania has unilaterally blocked the negotiations of the European Union with Belarus concerning partnership priorities for several years now, using this as political leverage against Minsk. This complicates the normalization process between Minsk and Brussels and creates additional tensions between Lithuania and Belarus.

After Gitanas Nausėda came to power in Lithuania as the new president, a new trend emerged, albeit a rather weak one for now, toward softening Lithuania's stance on Belarus. Previously, Grybauskaitė and the right-wing conservatives supporting her (the Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats; HU-LCD) argued, in principle, against even the possibility of a dialogue with the Belarusian authorities and advocated for stopping the construction of

³ On June 7, 2017, an IAEA inspection team concluded a SEED mission (Site and External Events Design Review Service) and published a report on the Belarusian NPP, saying that “appropriate steps were followed to adequately address all necessary aspects of site safety and site specific design parameters for the Belarusian NPP for relevant external hazards,”

https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/review-missions/seed_mission_report_belarus_2017.pdf.

the Belarusian NPP. In contrast, the newly elected president has suggests resuming communication with the Belarusian authorities. The monolithic position of the Lithuanian elites concerning the country's engagement with Belarus is beginning to crack.

On August 27, 2019, Nausėda held a closed meeting with Lithuanian experts to discuss the possibility of changing the pattern of his country's relationship with Belarus. The following September, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius met with his Belarusian counterpart, Uladzimir Makei (Makiej), on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. And at the beginning of October 2019, Jaroslav Narkevič, the newly appointed minister of transport and communications of Lithuania, visited Minsk to explore the potential of transport corridors and flows. The visit took place immediately after Narkevič visited the Klaipėda seaport, which suggests that the meeting also addressed options to improve the conditions for Belarusian transit through Lithuania against the backdrop of Lukashenka's statements about the possibility of redirecting flows to Latvia due to the strained political relationship with Vilnius.

In December 2019, at the annual conference of the Eastern Europe Studies Center, the Lithuanian president admitted that isolating Belarus had not succeed and posited that Lithuania should build new ties with this country.⁴ He also stated that Vilnius was ready to help Minsk with alternative routes for oil supplies in order to preserve Belarus's independence—a reference to the latter's heavy reliance on

⁴ Isolation of Belarus did not succeed – Nausėda, <https://reform.by/izoljacija-belarusi-ne-opravdala-sebja-nauseda/>.

Russian supplies amid the serious 2019–2020 oil pricing spat with Moscow.⁵

Overall, there has been a noticeable change in Vilnius's rhetoric. In recent months, demands that Belarus outright scrap its nuclear plant project have been withdrawn from statements by Lithuanian officials and replaced by softened appeals: to ensure construction continues in compliance with the highest safety standards and a call to ban imports of electricity from Belarus across the entire EU common market. It has now become obvious that the Astravets power plant is an undeniable reality and will be operational in 2020. Continuous political claims in Vilnius to stop the NPP have put Lithuanian officials in an awkward position, and they are now adapting their position to this newly accepted reality.

At the same time, conservative political forces inside Lithuania (foremost, the HU-LCD party) are still actively demonstrating that they intend to thwart any normalization attempts. For example, on April 27, 2020, after a telephone conversation between Presidents Nausėda and Lukashenka, the Homeland Union convened a session of the Seimas (parliament) Committee on Foreign Affairs with the participation of Foreign Minister Linkevičius, demanding a tougher policy toward Belarus over its NPP.⁶ In response, Linkevičius penned an article for *Delfi*, in which he criticized the position of the conservatives, saying that they should have protested against the Belarusian NPP back in 2008, when the site was actually chosen.

⁵ "Nausėda: Lithuania is ready to help Belarus with an alternative to Russian oil," *Reform.by*, <https://reform.by/nauseda-litva-gotova-pomoch-belarusi-s-alternativoj-rossijskoj-nefti>.

⁶ "Šaukiamas URK posėdis su klausimais ministrui L. Linkevičiui dėl galimai apleistos Lietuvos pozicijos atstovavimo Europoje ir JAV," TS-LKD, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://tsajunga.lt/aktualijos/saukiamas-urk-posedis-su-klausimais-ministrui-l-linkeviciui-del-galimai-apleistos-lietuvos-pozicijos-atstovavimo-europoje-ir-jav/>.

According to him, the conservatives want to block all links and areas of cooperation between the EU and Belarus by putting forward unimplementable conditions that Lithuania's allies cannot understand. Moreover, he noted that, for Lithuania, Belarus is an important neighbor in all dimensions.⁷

For the most part, the “securitization” of Vilnius's relations with Belarus has not impacted bilateral the economic relations, though there have been a few important exceptions. For example, the Belarusian company Beltrouboprovodstroy was excluded from competitive bidding for a contract to build a natural gas pipeline between Lithuania and Poland in the summer of 2019. The consortium involving the Belarusian company extended the best proposal, but the government of Lithuania declared that the potential deal failed to comply with the country's national security priorities. In July, the Belarusian foreign ministry voiced its protest against this interference of the Lithuanian government in a commercial transaction.⁸ Whereas, in 2018, President Lukashenka warned of the possibility of redirecting Belarusian transit to Latvia: “You understand that we have no access to the sea; and if Lithuania is unwilling to cooperate, we should focus on Latvia.”⁹

To date, Lithuania's diplomatic efforts aimed at blocking the Belarusian NPP have been wholly unsuccessful. Vilnius has failed to coalesce EU-wide solidarity with respect to a possible boycott of

⁷ Linas Linkevičius, “Užimtumas mažina nusikalstamumą,” *Delfi*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/politics/linas-linkevicius-uzimtumas-mazina-nusikalstamuma.d?id=84200367>.

⁸ Communication of the Belarus's MFA, July 26, 2019, http://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/f811fa3d4dbb3069.html.

⁹ “Lukashenko: ‘Yesli Litva ne ochen' khochet s nami sotrudnichat', nado delat' upor na Latviyu,” *TUT.by*, September 18, 2018, <https://news.tut.by/economics/608402.html>.

electricity eventually produced by the Belarusian nuclear power project. Lithuania was even unable to win over its closest neighbor, Latvia. During his visit to Lithuania in October 2019, Latvian President Egils Levits said that Latvia was calling for ensuring the safety of the nuclear plant in Astravets (rather than for stopping its construction altogether). Moreover, he openly acknowledged that there were differences in Latvian and Lithuanian positions on the import of electricity from Belarus.¹⁰ Indeed, earlier, in August 2019, the Latvian government had *de facto* decided to buy electricity from the Belarusian NPP.¹¹ Further complicating Vilnius's maximalist position, in early October, United States Secretary of Energy Rick Perry visited Lithuania and said that the US would not interfere in the debate about the safety of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant and advised the Lithuanian government to rely on the opinion of the IAEA as a specialized international organization. A little later, US Assistant Secretary of Energy for Nuclear Energy Rita Baranwal said the US might supply nuclear fuel to the Belarusian NPP.¹²

Assuming the global COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic does not entirely derail construction this year, the Belarusian NPP will almost certainly be completed, commissioned and launched in 2020, despite

¹⁰ "Lithuanian, Latvian presidents admit differences on Belarusian nuclear power imports," *Energy Central News*, October 3, 2019, <https://energycentral.com/news/lithuanian-latvian-presidents-admit-differences-belarusian-nuclear-power-imports>.

¹¹ MK lemj par turpmāko rīcību elektroenerģijas tirdzniecības organizēšanai ar trešajām valstīm, Ministry of Economy of Latvia, August 13, 2019, <https://www.em.gov.lv/lv/jaunumi/25474-mk-lemj-par-turpmako-ricibu-elektroenerģijas-tirdzniecības-organizēšanai-ar-tresajam-valstim?fbclid=IwAR0LGLGSE6Nh7ZMaBuFrMZR7ETxIDSE0aGuRuHhILZfCKn63YpJuK9RYFE4>.

¹² "SSHA mogli by postavlyat' toplivo dlya BelaES - zamministra energetik," *Interfax.by*, October 7, 2019, https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya_politika/1265516/.

Lithuania's opposition. Vilnius's demands to shut down the plant will look increasingly less realistic. Following this *fait accompli*, the Lithuanian government will have to seek more constructive relations with Minsk. That said, any possibilities for a normalization of the political relationship with Belarus remain constrained by the Lithuanian legislation against the nuclear power plant, which will be difficult to repeal without Vilnius losing face and effectively admitting that the country's previous policy was a mistake.

Latvia

Economic Relations

Latvia is also an important trade partner for Belarus and a major transit corridor for Belarusian export supplies to third countries. However, it is not as crucial as Lithuania for Belarusian trade.

At the end of 2018, Latvia was Belarus's 14th-largest partner by trade turnover and 10th-largest buyer of Belarusian-made products (1.4 percent share of Belarus's exports).

Table 3: Belarusian-Latvian Trade in 2014–2018 (USD mln)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Trade	651.8	675.2	340.0	439.7	582.7
Export	501.5	598.1	269.9	350.9	485.6
Import	150.3	77.1	70.1	88.8	97.1
Surplus	351.2	521.0	199.8	262.1	388.5

Source: Belstat¹³

¹³ "Foreign Trade," *National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed May 10, 2020, <http://www.belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/real-sector-of-the-economy/foreign-trade/>.

In 2018, two-way trade amounted to \$582.7 million (up by 32.9 percent from 2017), Belarusian exports to Latvia reached \$485.6 million (an increase of 38.8 percent), and imports came to \$97.1 million (up by 9.7%). Belarus's trade surplus therefore amounted to \$388.5 million.

Belarus mostly exports to Latvia timber and timber products, oil products, petrochemicals, metal products, fertilizers, insulated wires and cables, construction materials, and strong alcoholic beverages.

The core imports from Latvia are medications, equipment, food products, textiles and plastic products.

In 2018, Belarus exported \$188.2 million worth of services (mainly transport, business, computer, telecommunications and tourist services) to Latvia (up by 29.6 percent from 2017), whereas imports of services amounted to \$64.5 million (up 14.1 percent). As such, Belarus enjoyed a surplus of \$123.7 million in services in 2018.

In 2018, Latvian investments in the Belarusian economy amounted to \$107.5 million (down by 14.3 percent from 2017), including \$82.1 million in FDI (down by 29.2 percent).

Table 4: Latvian Investments in Belarus in 2014-2018, (USD mln)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Direct Investment	85.1	56.8	58.7	116.0	82.1
Net Investment	20.9	4.6	20.6	61.1	29.7
Other	107.9	44.3	40.0	9.5	25.4
Total	193.0	101.1	98.7	125.5	107.5

In Belarus, there are 585 companies financed by Latvian capital. Latvian investors are mostly interested in commerce, services (e.g.

restaurants, movie theatres, cable television and internet), woodworking, pharmaceuticals, food and manufacturing projects.

On February 7, 2018, the two countries' prime ministers met in Minsk to sign an inter-governmental Memorandum of Understanding on the main areas of economic collaboration for the medium term.¹⁴ The transport sector remains the primary strategic focus of cooperation between Belarus and Latvia. And the importance of this dimension has further increased in the wake of the deterioration of Belarusian-Lithuanian relations and the subsequent enhanced competition for Belarusian transit between Lithuania and Latvia.

The volume of cargo transit from Belarus through Latvian seaports increased by 10 percent year-on-year in 2018. Belarusian products already account for up to 30 percent of cargo transit through Latvia.¹⁵ Riga has offered Minsk a single tariff for the entire supply corridor: the price includes transportation by rail and transshipment services via the seaports of Riga or Liepaja. As a result, the seaport of Klaipeda in Lithuania started to lose some of the traditional volumes of Belarusian transit freights.

However, one should not expect a complete redirection of Belarusian cargos from Lithuania to Latvia. Minsk is consciously choosing between competitive and commercially viable offers, which currently exist in both countries, rather than allowing exclusively political motivations to guide its decisions. Furthermore, a deliberate turn

¹⁴ Prime Ministers of Latvia and Belarus sign a number of cooperation agreements, Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia, February 8, 2018, <https://www.mk.gov.lv/en/aktualitates/prime-ministers-latvia-and-belarus-sign-number-cooperation-agreements>.

¹⁵ Denis Paraskevich-Kishinevskiy, "Morskaya konkurenciya Litvy i Latvii vyshla na novyy uroven'," *Novaya Gazeta Baltiya*, April 12, 2019, <http://novayagazeta.ee/articles/25241/>.

toward a single Baltic State would undermine the critical foundation of Minsk's foreign trade policy—the diversification of marketing channels and the promotion of its transit role between the European Union and the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union.

When it comes to the geopolitics of transit, Belarus has demonstrated pragmatism, carefully calculating the costs and benefits before taking any serious decisions in this sphere—even under serious pressure from its powerful partner Russia. Since the Russian Federation launched the Ust-Luga seaport¹⁶ in 2012, and especially after the crisis in Ukraine and the West's resulting anti-Russian sanctions, the Kremlin has repeatedly attempted to cajole Belarus into reorienting its oil-product transit from the Baltic States' ports to Russian ones. As Moscow argued, since Belarusian oil products are made from Russian crude oil, Minsk should use Russian transport companies and ports to sell these refined products abroad. Belarus, however, has consistently refused this option, as Ust-Luga is not only twice as distant as Klaipeda, but the transit costs via Russian territory were more expensive, even with the 50 percent discount offered by the Russian Railways company.

Politics: Cooperation Without Preconditions

Unlike neighboring Lithuania, Latvia has chosen not to focus on sensitive (for Minsk) questions in bilateral political relations with Belarus; Riga purposefully adheres to a constructive approach in developing cooperation with Minsk. Latvia also was and remains a consistent supporter of the Belarusian-EU rapprochement. This stance has resulted in much “smoother” relations compared with any of Belarus's other EU neighbors.

¹⁶ This port on the Gulf of Finland, at the mouth of the Luga River, is located about 30 kilometers north of Narva, Estonia.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, relations were marked by continuous high-level meetings. The prime ministers of Belarus visited Latvia in 1998, 2001, 2008 and 2010. And in 1994, 1995 and 2009, successive heads of the Latvian government traveled to Belarus. After a pause in high-level contacts due to EU sanctions (2011–2015), then–Belarusian prime minister Andrej Kabiakoŭ (Andrei Kobyakov) arrived in Latvia in November 2016 and took part in the 16+1 Summit of Heads of Government (Central and Eastern Europe plus China).¹⁷ Then, on February 7–8, 2018, Latvia's prime minister at the time, Māris Kučinskis, paid a working visit to Belarus.

The foreign ministries of Belarus and Latvia are engaged at a systemic level—the foreign minister of Belarus visited Latvia in February 2014, July 2016 and July 2018. In 2015, the two countries' top diplomats consecutively met in Minsk and Riga. In April 2013, July 2017 and July 2019, the Latvian foreign minister visited Belarus.

On July 26, 2019, President Lukashenka met in Minsk with the foreign minister of Latvia, Edgars Rinkēvičs. The focus of the meeting was on the bilateral agenda as well as the development of Belarus's relationship with the European Union.¹⁸ In addition, the meeting *de facto* marked the first day of preparations for the official visit of the Belarusian president to Latvia, which was initially planned for April 2020 but then postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consultations at the level of deputy ministers and heads of ministry departments and units are held between the foreign ministries on a regular basis. In 2014–2019, consultations centered on political,

¹⁷ Since 2019, the framework is 17+1, with the addition of Greece.

¹⁸ “Meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia Edgars Rinkevics,” Press-service of the Presidential Administration of Belarus, July 26, 2019, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/meeting-with-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-latvia-edgars-rinkevics-21637/.

consular and legal issues, pan-European cooperation and the Eastern Partnership, security cooperation within the framework of international organizations, Eurasian integration issues, engagement with Asian countries, participation in the “17+1” cooperation format, and the North-South transport corridor.¹⁹

The recent (since roughly summer of 2019) conflict between Belarus and Russia over energy supplies provided a new impetus to Riga, in its communication with Minsk, to try to secure the Latvian route for Belarus's non-Russian oil imports. In January 2020, Latvian Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš visited Belarus and held negotiations with President Lukashenka and Prime Minister Syarhey Rumas. Besides oil transit, they discussed direct supplies of electricity to Latvia from Belarus.²⁰ At present, the only route for electricity to arrive in Latvia is through Lithuania, which plans to stop buying Belarusian electric power after the Astravets plant becomes operational; if Vilnius goes through with this pledge, it will cause problems for Riga as it wants to secure balanced electricity imports. Latvia currently imports a small amount of electricity from Belarus—8.6 million kW/h in 2019. But preserving this transit route is a matter of principle for Riga. In light of these incentives, economic cooperation between the two countries is likely to intensify in the nearest future.

Meanwhile, military cooperation is actively developing as well. December 2016 saw the first official visit of the Belarusian minister of defense to Latvia. In December 2017, the Latvian defense ministry

¹⁹ “Belarusian-Latvian Relations,” Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Latvia, accessed May 27, 2020, http://latvia.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/.

²⁰ “Belarus' prarabotayet s Latviyey vozmozhnost' pryamoy postavki elektroenergii—Rumas,” *Belta*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/belarus-prarabotaet-s-latviyey-vozmozhnost-prjamoy-postavki-elektroenergii-rumas-376122-2020>.

head paid a return visit to Belarus. The two countries' ministries of defense signed multiple agreements focusing on cooperation and exchange of air traffic information. Annual action plans have been implemented to further bilateral cooperation. The chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus paid his first ever official visit to Latvia in September 2018. And in August 2019, the commander of the Latvian National Armed Forces made an official visit to Belarus.

Belarusian-Latvian military cooperation is part of a Minsk's broader strategy aimed at building a regional system of confidence and security measures. Belarus consciously seeks to develop such ties with all neighboring states, including NATO members.

Finally, Belarus and Latvia collaborate within the framework of several programs and initiatives of the European Union—including the Eastern Partnership; the Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus Cross-Border Cooperation Program; and the “Country of Lakes” Euroregion. Special attention is paid to the joint implementation of projects to improve border and customs infrastructure as well as ensure the harmonization of digital markets, environmental efforts, energy efficiency and regional development.

Estonia

Since Estonia does not border Belarus and is the smallest of the Baltic States,²¹ its weight in Belarus's foreign trade and politics is far less significant compared to Lithuania and Latvia. Nevertheless, positive trends have also been observed in bilateral Belarusian-Estonian relations over the past several years.

²¹ By area, Belarus is more than four times bigger than Estonia and has more than seven times the population.

*Economic Cooperation***Table 5: Belarusian-Estonian Trade in 2014–2019 (USD mln)**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Trade	154.2	101.2	105.7	112.8	180	139.8
Export	97.4	76.1	64.4	84.6	144.3	107.6
Import	56.8	25.1	41.3	28,2	35.7	32.2
Surplus	40.6	51	23.1	56.4	108.6	75.4

Source: Belstat²²

Belarus's principal exports to Estonia include strong alcoholic beverages, salt, oil products, coke and oil bitumen, as well as potash fertilizers. From Estonia, it imports cattle, frozen fish, cocoa paste, special-purpose machines and mechanical devices, communication equipment. In 2019, Estonian investments in the Belarusian economy amounted to \$45.6 million, including \$42.3 million in FDI.²³

When it comes to Lithuania and Latvia, the proximity of these countries' Baltic seaports enable Belarus to use them to deliver its exports around the world; as a result, Belarus's two-way trade frequently exceeds \$1 billion per annum. In contrast, Estonian seaports are farther away and are mostly used to engage Scandinavian countries, which are not Belarus's foreign trade priorities.

²² "Foreign Trade," *National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed May 10, 2020, <http://www.belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/real-sector-of-the-economy/foreign-trade/>.

²³ "Trade and economic cooperation," Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Estonia, accessed May 27, 2020, http://estonia.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/trade_economic/.

Nonetheless, as it builds on its export and transit diversification policies, Minsk has become increasingly interested in expanding the transshipment of Belarusian commodities through Estonian seaports as well. In May 2019, the Belarusian ambassador to Estonia, Viačaslau Kačanaŭ, met with Port of Sillamäe supervisory board chairperson Tiit Vähi and port administration representatives. The meeting explored possibilities for increasing Belarusian export supplies through Sillamäe as well as the inclusion of Estonian business in the implementation of various Belarusian-Chinese projects, including those based at the Great Stone Industrial Park, just outside Minsk.²⁴ The Port of Sillamäe is the EU's closest major seaport to Russia. It is the European bloc's easternmost deep-water port, capable of working with any major ships entering the Baltic Sea through the Danish Straits.

Political Relations

Since 2014, Belarusian-Estonian dialogue has consistently intensified. In the course of the 22nd Ministerial Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), held in Belgrade on December 3, 2015, the foreign ministers of Belarus and Estonia held a bilateral working meeting. Inter-ministerial consultations are now regularly held to address political, trade, economic and consular issues, as well as to discuss foreign policy analysis and planning.

In April 2015, a group for cooperation with the parliament of Belarus was officially registered in the Estonian national legislature; subsequently, Estonian members of parliament visited Minsk on three occasions. Deputies of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus, in turn, paid a return visit to Estonia on October

²⁴ More Belarusian export via Estonian port Sillamae possible. Accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.belarus.by/en/business/business-news/more-belarusian-export-via-estonian-port-sillamae-possible_i_0000098599.html.

29–November 1, 2017. Moreover, on October 5–6, 2017, a Belarusian delegation led by then–First Deputy Prime Minister Vasil Maciušeŭski visited Estonia. During the trip, Maciušeŭski met with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas.

During the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU (second half of 2017), representatives of Belarus took part in Eastern Partnership–related events organized by Estonia. Specifically, they included the meeting of the justice ministers of the EU and the Eastern Partnership (July 2017), the EU and Eastern Partnership foreign ministers' summit meeting (September 2017), the EU and Eastern Partnership transport ministers' meeting, the e-Partnership Conference, the second Eastern Partnership Ministerial Meeting on Digital Economy (October 2017), the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Conference, the 9th Annual Assembly of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (October 2017), and the Fourth Eastern Partnership Business Forum.

An important area for Belarusian–Estonian engagement is to ensure constructive dialogue with Tallinn in order to promote Minsk's interests in the EU and implement projects within the Eastern Partnership initiative.²⁵ Work is underway on a continuous basis by concerned ministries and agencies of Belarus to implement international projects within the scope of the Eastern Partnership with the participation of the Estonian Center for Eastern Partnership.

Finally, as Belarus seeks to develop its image as an IT-state, Estonia could be interesting for Belarusian officials as an exemplary post-Soviet success story in the sphere e-commerce and e-governance.

²⁵ "Political relations," Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Estonia, accessed May 27, 2020, http://estonia.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/political/.

Conclusions

For Belarus, the Baltic region has strategic importance. Due to the proximity of Baltic ports, the three Baltic States (in particular Latvia and Lithuania) serve as a transit channel for Belarusian goods—mainly fertilizers and oil products—to third countries as well as a possible route for alternative (non-Russian) oil imports. The significance of this direction for Belarus will be ever greater as Minsk proceeds with diversifying its exports and foreign policy in general following the series of its repetitive trade disputes with Russia.

That said, the importance of each individual Baltic State to Belarus differs sharply. While political relations with Lithuania remain the most problematic among all of Belarus's neighboring states—mostly due to the dispute over the construction of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant—bilateral economic and trade cooperation have, for the most part, continued to develop smoothly. The Port of Klaipeda is the main sea gateway for Belarusian exports; although more recently, the situation has started to shift somewhat in favor of Latvian transit routes. Unlike Lithuania, Latvia had always refrained from putting sensitive political issues at the top of the bilateral agenda with Belarus. And this has resulted in more stable and constructive relations compared to those between Minsk and Vilnius.

Estonia stands outside of the main focus of Belarus's regional policy, as the countries do not share a common border and their mutual trade is significantly less intensive than Belarus has with the other two Baltic States. However, Minsk recently started to consider Estonian ports as an additional perspective transit route within its broader trade diversification plans.

The case of the relationship with Lithuania proves that Minsk carefully calculates the economic costs and benefits of its international partnerships as it formulates its policy toward foreign states. When it comes to Lithuania (though other examples also exist), Belarus tends

not to mix political relations and trade. This suggests that it is unlikely Minsk will switch its import-export transit routes from the Baltics to Russian ports out of political considerations or because of pressure from the Kremlin. Either way, Belarusian authorities can be expected to continue to seek additional alternative possibilities to ensure that Belarus avoids becoming dependent on a small handful of states—no matter which ones they are.

The Geopolitical Link Between the Baltic and Black Seas: Belarus and the Strategic E40 Waterway

Alexandra St John Murphy

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Executive Summary

The proposed E40 Waterway would connect the Baltic and Black seas, from the Port of Gdańsk, in Poland, to the Port of Kherson, in Ukraine, running through Belarus. This riverine route offers numerous potential benefits to its participating countries, such as providing greater integration, diversifying trade routes, and developing local regions. For Belarus, the completion of the waterway means closer integration with EU-NATO member Poland and Western-leaning Ukraine, and economic benefits such as access to transport corridors leading to increased trade with Turkey, Central Asia, the South Caucasus and further afield, alongside the strategic benefit of direct access to the Baltic and Black seas.

At the same time, however, the development of the E40 presents a number of drawbacks, including fierce environmental opposition, questions of economic viability, expensive bottlenecks and funding concerns. The options for financing the more than \$14.5 billion project are varied, with potential investors including the European Union, the Three Seas Initiative and states such as China. Yet funding looks to be dependent on the E40's economic benefits offsetting the potential environmental damage. This waterway has so far attracted varying

degrees of support from the governments of Ukraine, Poland and Belarus.

Until recently, the E40 Waterway proposal highlighted Minsk's evolving geopolitical outlook, underscoring the Belarusian state's willingness to deepen cooperation with Ukraine and Poland. The current political crisis and social unrest in Belarus following the August presidential election, however, has seen relations between the partners cool considerably. That said, Belarus's long-term outlook may still see the country seeking closer integration with both Poland and Ukraine eventually. To date, construction of the E40 Waterway has faced significant setbacks. Nonetheless, Ukraine has already begun dredging part of the route, Belarus had approached investors for the construction of a deep-water port, and Poland is investing heavily to enhance its position as a key transit hub, demonstrating that the project is by no means dead in the water.

Introduction

The E40 Waterway (see **Map 4**, p. vii) is a proposed 2,000-kilometer inland shipping route linking the Black Sea with the Baltic. The waterway would flow from Gdańsk, Poland, to Kherson, Ukraine, running through Belarus and along five rivers: the Vistula, the Bug, the Pina, the Pripyat and the Dnieper. The proposed route would also pass alongside major cities in the region, including Brest (Belarus), Warsaw (Poland), and Kyiv (Ukraine). To an extent, the course is already navigable, but use of the route as a complete waterway is hindered by the section between Warsaw and Brest, along the Bug, that requires the construction of a new canal. Development of the E40 also involves deepening existing waterways and building locks, dams and weirs to ensure consistent water levels.

The route is of particular significance to landlocked Belarus, giving the country more direct access to both the Baltic and Black seas, along

with potential links to other Western inland waterways via Poland such as the E70, which, when completed, will allow for passage all the way to Berlin and Rotterdam. The E40 could also result in numerous geopolitical transformations and benefits for Central and Eastern Europe, further raising Poland's role as a regional leader, reducing Belarus's economic dependencies on Russia, and offering Belarus and Ukraine closer ties to the European Union through trade and infrastructure. The localized benefits could be numerous as well, with large investment in the communities through which the waterway would pass.

One of the EU's current priorities is the restoration and development of sustainable transport, including inland waterways. The European Commission's 2018 white paper, "Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area—Towards a Competitive and Resource Efficient Transport System," considered transport by inland waterways as key to the sustainability of the European transport system. The EU aims to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 60 percent by 2050; moreover, it wants to shift at least 30 percent of all roadway transit over 300 km to rail and water by 2030, and to raise this proportion to 50 percent by 2050.¹ Other ongoing development plans in the region, such as the Three Seas Initiative and Chinese infrastructure investment through the Belt and Road Initiative, could feasibly help realize the project.

A number of serious concerns persist, however, including the environmental cost of the project as well as questions of funding, economic viability and the waterway's advantages over railroad investment. The funding options available, such as through the EU, largely depend on the proposed waterway's ability to offset the

¹ Guidance document on inland waterway transport and Natura 2000, *European Commission*, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/iwt_en.pdf.

environmental concerns. Meanwhile, the contentious August presidential election in Belarus, followed by heavy-handed government repressions, Minsk's restored reliance on Moscow, a possible economic downturn and forthcoming EU sanctions, have raised additional considerable challenges to the construction of the waterway, at least in the short term.

Despite those apprehensions, Belarus and Ukraine are at the early stages of implementing the E40 Waterway. Belarus intends to build a new deep-water port in the Nizhniye Zhary village to handle extra cargo and has been in talks with Turkish private investors.² Ukraine also announced an investment of 80 million hryvnia (\$3.15 million) to begin dredging the Dnieper River.³ In October 2019, during a visit to Ukraine, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka stressed the benefits of the waterway, saying "Ukraine's and Belarus's transit appeal can be enhanced by navigation along the Dnieper River, along the Pripyat River, and its integration into the international [waterway] E40."⁴ In April 2020, Ukraine reported that during the first three months of 2020, the volume of dredging works carried out was more

² "Ukraine and Belarus agree on dredging internal waterways," *Dredging and Port Construction*, November 4, 2019,

<https://dredgingandports.com/news/2019/ukraine-and-belarus-agree-on-dredging-internal-waterways/>; "Belarus and Turkish investor plan to build river port on border with Ukraine for access to Black Sea," UkrAgroConsult, November 2018, <http://www.blackseagrains.net/novosti/belarus-and-turkish-investor-plan-to-build-river-port-on-border-with-ukraine-for-access-to-black-sea>.

³ "Belarus, Turkey discussing freight transportation along Dnieper River," *Export.by*, August 9, 2018, <https://export.by/en/news/belarus-turkey-discussing-freight-transportation-along-dnieper-river>.

⁴ "Lukashenka Unveils Belarus-Ukraine Cooperation Priorities," *Belta*, October 4, 2019, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-unveils-belarus-ukraine-cooperation-priorities-124746-2019/>.

than four times that for the same period in 2019,⁵ including dredging on the Kherson sea channels, a key part of the E40 route that feeds into the Black Sea. Poland is currently conducting a second feasibility study on the E40, due for release in late 2020.⁶

History of Waterways in the E40 Region

Goods and people have traveled along inland waterways since time immemorial, and most of the world's major cities are still in proximity to rivers and coastal areas. The designers of the E40 have emphasized their intention to restore a previously existing waterway and reinstate this pathway for modern usage, drawing on its historic legacy. Notably, the famous medieval trade path “from the Varangians to the Greeks” ran through the same region, from the markets of Scandinavia and the southern Baltic shores all the way to the Dnieper. The proposed E40 waterway would resurrect a part of this passage that the Viking longships navigated on their way to Constantinople to connect with the trans-Eurasian Silk Road.

The different segments of the E40 Waterway each have their own long history of trade. During the Early Middle Ages, the Vistula River in Poland was used to transport mainly salt upstream from Gdańsk and downstream from mines in Bochnia and Wieliczka. Copper was also

⁵ “In the first quarter of 2020, the dredging volume by own fleet of USPA reached 7000 thousand cubic meters,” *USPA*, April 10, 2020, <http://www.uspa.gov.ua/en/press-center/news/uspa-news/17544-in-the-first-quarter-of-2020-the-dredging-volume-by-own-fleet-of-uspa-reached-700-thousand-cubic-meters>.

⁶ “Agreement for the preparation of a feasibility study for the development of the Wisla River Waterway signed,” *Port Gdańsk*, July 3, 2018, <http://www.portgdansk.pl/events/feasibility-study-for-the-development-of-the-wisla-river-waterway>.

carried down the Vistula from mines in present-day Slovakia.⁷ Salt and amber were some of Poland's main natural resources, and the Gdańsk Bay area was considered the center of the European amber trade and craft industry.

The canals along the route also have a long history, such as the Dnieper-Bug Canal, which was first constructed in 1775 to grant access to Baltic ports. Originally named the Royal Canal, it was built by the last king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Stanisław August Poniatowski. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Royal Canal was of strategic importance for the Russian Empire, as it was the only navigable water route connecting the Black and Baltic seas. Following Russia's repudiation of the Treaty of Paris in 1870, which had called for the demilitarization of the Black Sea following the Crimean War, five destroyers that were part of the Black Sea Fleet were transferred from the Baltic Sea to Sevastopol via the canal in 1886 and 1890.⁸

The Dnieper River connected with the Baltic Sea by the old Royal, Berezina and Oginsky canals, through part of the E40 route, but they were almost completely destroyed during the Second World War. The Soviets had plans to build an integrated, deep-water, inland navigation system, similar to the E40 proposals, by connecting the Western Dvina, Dnieper, Don, Volga and Kama, en route to the Black and Caspian Seas. The Pripyat and Niemen would also then have allowed for a connection to the Baltic Sea, and the Dnieper, with the Niemen and Pripyat, would serve as a route down to the Black Sea.

⁷ Cezary Gołębiowski, *Inland Water Transport in Poland*, Transportation Research Procedia, Vol. 14, 2016, pp. 223–232, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352146516300588>.

⁸ “Novi Pyut iz varyiag v greki: Yukraina ydarit po Rossie, soediniv Baltickoe i Chernoe moria,” *Svobodnaya Pressa*, September 15, 2019, <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/243718/>.

However, the Soviets never fully integrated the water system as they became more interested in connecting the Baltic with the White Sea, the Volga with the Baltic Sea, and the Volga with the Don as strategic linchpins for defense.⁹

At the end of the 20th century, the European Agreement on the Main Inland Waterways of International Importance (AGN) was accepted by the United Nations Economic Commission, in Geneva. It established a network of European waterways within the framework of the broader European transport network (TNT-T). This led to the selection of waterways of European importance, one of which was the E40 (Gdańsk–Warsaw–Brest–Pinsk–Kyiv–Kherson) route.¹⁰

Current Waterway Use in Europe

The share of inland waterway shipping in cargo carriages in Poland, Belarus and Ukraine is significantly lower than the EU average. The mean EU-wide use of such inland navigation makes up 6.7 percent of freight transport, compared with 75 percent road and 17 percent rail.¹¹ In Belarus inland water navigation makes up 0.96 percent of cargo transported, at four million tons of freight, compared with 40.85 percent road and 29.71 percent rail. In Ukraine the amount of cargo

⁹ Lawrence C. Allin, *The Integrated Inland Waterways of the U.S.S.R.*, Naval War College Review, Vol. 34, No. 3, May–June 1981, pp. 88–96, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44642160?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹⁰ European Agreement on Main Inland Waterways of International Importance, Geneva, January 1996, https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XI-D-5&chapter=11&clang=_en.

¹¹ “Restoration of Inland Waterway E40 Dnieper-Vistula: from Strategy to Planning,” Final Feasibility Study Report, December 2015, http://czech.mfa.gov.by/docs/e40restoration_feasibility_study_en.pdf.

transported by inland waterways is 0.23 percent (68 percent road, 24 percent rail), and in Poland 0.38 percent (75 percent road, 12 percent rail).

In the EU, the share of containers transported on inland waterways increased every year from 2009 to 2017, with more than 10 percent growth in 2014 and reaching 11.3 percent growth in 2017.¹² However, when analyzing freight transport, the 2018 figures reveal a decrease of -8.3 percent from 2017.¹³ This was predominantly due to low water levels on the Rhine, one of Europe's core shipping routes, which made parts of the Rhine-Danube corridor unnavigable. In 2019, Europe saw a sharp contraction in the manufacturing sector due to trade tensions and this led to a further decline in transportation of goods on inland waterways. Container transport on the Rhine fell 4.0 percent in 2019 compared with 2018.¹⁴ In Europe, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium are by far the main contributors to inland waterway transport. These countries are hosts for large transit ports (Rotterdam and Antwerp) or a major source or destination for container movements (Germany).

¹² "Inland waterways – statistics on container transport," Eurostat, December 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Inland_waterways_-_statistics_on_container_transport.

¹³ "Inland waterways freight transport – quarterly and annual data," Eurostat, November 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Inland_waterways_freight_transport_-_quarterly_and_annual_data#Inland_waterways_freight_transport_performance_dropped_by_8.3_.25_in_2018_compared_with_2017.

¹⁴ "2020 Annual Report: Inland navigation in Europe," September 2020, https://inland-navigation-market.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CCNR_annual_report_EN_2020_BD.pdf.

The main types of goods transported on waterways in the EU in 2018 included metal ores, coke and refined petroleum products, chemicals, nuclear and agricultural products. The main cargo currently transported by ships on rivers in Belarus are sand, gravel, building stone, wood, potash, granulated slag, and heavy and oversized cargo. Freight on inland waterways in Ukraine includes construction materials, iron ore, grain, coal, coke and fertilizers. In Poland, the majority of goods transported by inland waterways are metal ores and other mining and quarrying products, as well as coal. The E40 is predicted to transport primarily coal, ore minerals, construction materials, chemicals, and fertilizers and agricultural goods.¹⁵

Goods transported by inland waterways are closely connected with the transshipment (the movement of cargo from one vessel to another) of goods at seaports, as rivers and canals can act as a continuation of sea routes. Currently, the transshipment of goods at Western European ports occurs at a much larger volume than at the seaports linked to the E40 in Poland and Ukraine. In 2017, the largest port in Europe, Rotterdam, handled 467 million tons of cargo—11.5 times higher than the Port of Gdańsk, in Poland (40.6 million tons). The Ukrainian Kherson Sea Port handled only 3.3 million tons in 2017. However, a total of 133 million tons of cargo were transshipped through the seaports of Ukraine combined, which is comparable to the performance of individual Western European ports.¹⁶

Poland and Ukraine are seeing considerable port growth and development. In October 2019, the Port of Gdańsk outlined huge expansion plans designed to double its cargo volumes to 100 million tons a year. This included investment opportunities in a new €2.8

¹⁵ “Restoration of Inland Waterway E40,” Final Feasibility Study Report.

¹⁶ “Economic Assessment of Reconstruction Plans for the Inland Waterway E40,” February 2019, <https://bahna.land/files/5d281e5a2a5d42397bc41dc8.pdf>.

billion (\$3.2 billion) Central Port, cited as “the biggest maritime investment project in Europe.” The Port of Gdańsk grew by 20 percent in 2018 and 9 percent in 2019.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 2019, the Kherson Port in Ukraine handled 18 percent more cargo than in 2018, and there is good reason to expect further growth due to the inclusion of Ukraine in the routes of the Chinese Silk Road and the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA). The first cargo utilizing this route was delivered in 2019.¹⁸

Overview of Work and Costs of the E40 Waterway

The overall cost of the waterway is estimated at €12,720 billion (\$14.5 billion) in the initial feasibility study. This includes the cost of environmental compensatory measures, estimated at between €420 million and €600 million (\$480 million–\$680 million). The Belarusian total is predicted to cost between €96 million and €171 million (\$110 million–\$195 million), and this includes work such as the reconstruction of existing hydrotechnical structures on the Dnieper-Bug Canal, engineering work to increase the dimensions of the navigation channel, the creation of a navigable section of the waterway on the Polish-Belarusian border, and construction of the Zhirovscoe reservoir.

Polish costs are estimated at €11,915.19 million (\$13.5 billion), the bulk of the overall estimate. The price tag of the Polish section is so

¹⁷ “First Baltic Direct Belt & Road Train Reaches Poland’s Gdansk Port,” *Silk Road Briefing*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2019/11/26/first-baltic-direct-belt-road-train-reaches-polands-gdansk-port/>.

¹⁸ “In 2019 Ukraine sea ports handled more than 1 million TEU containers,” *USPA*, January 3, 2020, <http://www.uspa.gov.ua/en/press-center/news/uspa-news/17403-in-2019-ukrainian-sea-ports-handled-more-than-1-million-teu-containers>.

high due to an unnavigable section along the Bug Canal, which requires the construction of a second canal alongside the Bug to connect the Vistula and Mukhavets rivers. The costs also include the restoration of the Vistula waterway and resuming the navigability of the Lower and Middle Vistula.

Estimated Ukrainian costs are the lowest out of the three countries, at €31 million (\$35 million), and involve capital investment for the reconstruction of the Dnieper navigation locks along with further maintenance costs. These expenditures are by no means inclusive of all aspects of the waterway and are based on initial estimates.

Impact of the Waterway on Belarus

Benefits

Benefits of the E40 Waterway include the possibility of transporting six million tons of cargo per year along the route, ensuring significant trade flows among Belarus, Poland and Ukraine as well as between the EU, Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and further afield. The E40 would boost regional trade through the Black Sea with Turkey, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, enhancing the region's position as the "trade gates" to Europe. In Ukraine, the multi-modal TRACECA route links Europe through the Caucasus and the Black Sea with Central Asian countries. With the exception of Russia, some of the biggest importers of Belarusian goods are the Netherlands, Ukraine, Poland, and Germany.¹⁹ The additional construction of the E70 Waterway in Poland, which would connect riverine routes from Rotterdam with Kaliningrad, would create further benefits for the E40 as it would become a substantial artery connecting the Black Sea to Western Europe. Belarus's trade relations with the Netherlands and Germany would also benefit from having this connected inland

¹⁹ "Restoration of Inland Waterway E40," Final Feasibility Study Report.

waterway system in place. Neighboring Russia is unlikely to see the construction of the E40 as a genuine threat to trade relations as the initial economic benefits for Belarus will be small in comparison with Russian trade.

Waterways are one of the most environmentally friendly forms of transport, with associated CO₂ emissions five times lower than from road freight transport. One barge can replace up to 40 trucks carrying containers, dramatically relieving road congestion. Inland shipping may be a slower form of transport, at 230 hours from Gdańsk to Kherson as opposed to 66 hours by rail and 31 hours by road, but it is significantly cheaper. A proposed rate for the transportation of forty 40-foot containers by water from Gdańsk to Kherson would amount to €56,000 (\$63,000), while transport by rail along the same distance would cost more than €82,000 (\$93,000), and €78,000 (\$89,000) by road.²⁰

Forecast studies conducted by the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk indicate that the cargo types with the greatest growth potential for shifting to inland waterways are bulk cargo, namely coal, sand and gravel, but also building materials, energy resources, municipal waste, and heavy and oversized cargo. The majority of these materials are already transported in small amounts on waterways in Belarus.

The E40 Waterway could lead to investment in the regions through which it flows, potentially leading to rising living standards and the creation of new jobs, particularly at the construction stage. New jobs would also be created on the water border crossings in administration and customs. *Belarus Digest* reported that several major firms in southern Belarus could take advantage of the waterway to transport large volumes of cargo, such as the Mikashevichy-based firm Hranit, which has been using the Pripyat to transport its granite for many

²⁰ Ibid.

years. The Mazyr oil refinery or the Salihorsk-based potash company Belaruskali could also transport their products using river routes.²¹ Brest, in southwestern Belarus, is an example of one of the primary regions that could benefit from the E40. Companies of the Brest region maintain trade and economic cooperation with more than 100 countries worldwide: trade partners include Russia, Poland, Germany, China, Ukraine, Norway, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Italy and Lithuania. Businesses in the Brest region currently account for around 5 percent of foreign trade turnover with Poland. The Brest Free Economic Zone (FEZ Brest), which borders Poland along 10 km of the Bug River, was founded in 1996. FEZ Brest is currently home to 71 resident companies from about 20 countries. Since the establishment of the zone, the total volume of investment has exceeded \$1.6 billion, with \$107 million invested in 2019.²² Brest is also located on the E30 Berlin–Warsaw–Brest–Minsk–Moscow highway route, a key transit corridor. The railway junction in Brest is one of the largest in Central and Eastern Europe, handling cargo in transit between the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries and the countries of Western Europe. The E40 could further enhance Brest's regional role in trade.

Drawbacks

One of the biggest drawbacks to this waterway's realization is the environmental impact from its construction. Despite waterways being

²¹ "Redrawing the geopolitical map: Belarus and its neighbours connect the Black and Baltic seas," *Belarus Digest*, August 7, 2017, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/redrawing-the-geopolitical-map-belarus-and-its-neighbours-connect-the-black-and-baltic-seas/>.

²² "Plans to create 1,000 jobs in free economic zone Brest in 2020," *BELTA*, February 18, 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/plans-to-create-1000-jobs-in-free-economic-zone-brest-in-2020-128273-2020/>.

one of the more environmentally friendly modes of transport, the actual construction of the waterway could have a serious impact on the surrounding environment, and environmental opposition has been some of the most vocal. Several civic associations have already been established to protest against the E40 for environmental reasons, such as BirdLife, BUEE and Bahna in Belarus, NECU and USPB in Ukraine, and OTOP in Poland. The repercussions of a waterway's artificial alteration are only partly predictable, and in all three partner countries this is causing serious concern.

In Belarus, the E40 would run through the Western Polesie and Polesie Prypeckie, also known as "Europe's Amazon." About 70 species living in Polesie Prypeckie are listed in the Red Book of the Republic of Belarus, a list of plant and animal species threatened with extinction, or are protected in accordance with international obligations. The system of protected areas in Polesie Prypeckie includes Pripjat National Park, 10 national nature reserves and 13 nature reserves of local importance, as well as 30 natural monuments. Another issue for Belarus is the fortress of Brest, with high historic and cultural value, which is on the Polish-Belarusian border between the Mukhavets and the Bug. The section of the route connecting the Polish part of the waterway with the Mukhavets River must be completed without violating the historical fortifications.

For Poland, the new canal along the Bug River could be in conflict with the protection of areas such as the Bug Landscape Park and five Natura 2000 protected areas situated in the planned construction zones. However, according to EU guidance on inland water transport and Natura 2000, it is noted that Natura 2000 sites are not designed to be "no development zones" and new developments are not excluded.

Instead, their designation requires that any new developments be undertaken in a way that safeguards the local species and habitat.²³

The Ukrainian part of the E40 would pass only 2.5 kilometers from the nuclear reactor in the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Matti Maasikas, the head of the EU delegation to Ukraine, warned that during construction, dredging works in the Kyiv reservoir could disturb sludge contaminated with the radioactive isotope cesium-137 and others, which would lead to the pollution of the drinking water supply system for Kyiv and others cities downstream.²⁴ In Ukraine, the Dnieper estuary and the surrounding land are also included in the Emerald network, an area of special conservation interest.

Environmental issues plagued waterways across Europe throughout 2019. The extremely low water levels on the continent's major rivers led to a substantial decrease in volumes of goods transported along European waterways. In the E40 region, the trend of low river levels was also seen in Poland. A graph released by the Institute of Meteorology and Water Management, National Research Institute (IMGW) showed a dramatic drop in water levels recorded on the Vistula River around Warsaw. In May 2019, the river was 579 centimeters deep; but by the end of July, the water level had sunk to

²³ "Guidance document on Inland waterway transport and Natura 2000," *European Commission*, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/iwt_en.pdf.

²⁴ Statement "To stop the ecologically and economically inexpedient project of the continental waterway E-40 Gdańsk – Kherson," Matti Maaskias, Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine," September 2019, https://necu.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/%D0%94%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BB_%D0%9540_%D0%94%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%86%D1%96%D1%8F_%D0%84%D0%A1_Eng.pdf.

just 40 cm.²⁵ By April 2020, the level at one spot in the capital was already 26 cm lower than on the same day in 2019.²⁶ Among various measures to be taken by the government in response to the crisis, Polish President Andrzej Duda announced that nine large storage reservoirs will be built. This year has also seen massive flooding in western Ukraine, the biggest since the 1970s. It is yet to be seen whether the evolving impact of global climate change will make this extraordinary event a regular local occurrence.

Though locally significant, the transit potential of Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian inland waterways looks low when compared with other European waterways. The E40 route passes through the territory of only three countries, whereas, in comparison, the Danube flows through the territory of or is the border of ten states: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Moldova. Furthermore, as the E40 Waterway is not planned to be wide or deep enough for ocean-going container ships, the need for costly unloading and reloading onto river vessels could limit the route's appeal to international shipping companies.

Critics have also targeted the initial feasibility study conducted on the E40. The EU's Matti Maaskias labeled it "incomplete"²⁷ and argued that it does not take into account that the waterway will largely benefit

²⁵ "Minister comes up with plan to save water as river levels drop," *The First News*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/minister-comes-up-with-plan-to-save-water-as-river-levels-drop-7016>.

²⁶ "Polish cities pumping water from swimming pools to fight shortages amid record drought," *Notes from Poland*, May 8, 2020, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/05/08/polish-cities-pumping-water-from-swimming-pools-to-fight-shortages-amid-record-drought/>.

²⁷ Statement "To stop the ecologically and economically inexpedient," Matti Maaskias.

carriers, which are private companies, leaving taxpayers with the burdens of financing the project and the cost of countering the environmental damage. A 2019 paper titled “Economic Assessment of Reconstruction Plans for the Inland Waterway E40” posits that investment costs for the Ukrainian part of the Dnieper River, excluding the reconstruction of bridges, are understated by almost €100 million (\$114 million), and the cost of the reconstruction of the Belarusian section is underestimated by at least €0.9 billion (\$1.02 billion).²⁸ Even with the total feasibility study estimate of €12,720 billion (\$14.5 billion), the reconstruction and maintenance of inland waterways is costly, and investment in road and rail infrastructure is more popular and cost-effective.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused a global recession. According to the International Monetary Fund’s April 2020 World Economic Outlook, the projection for GDP growth in Belarus for the year is –6 percent, with a partial recovery in 2021 of 3.5 percent.²⁹ The global economy is projected to contract by 3 percent in 2020, far worse than during the 2008 financial crisis, likely hampering foreign investment in the E40 Waterway. For Belarus itself, the situation is made worse by the current debt burden on the Belarusian economy, and the economic crisis brought on by the aftermath of the August election. The Belarusian ruble rate has lost around 11 percent since mid-June 2020, when signs appeared that the presidential election could result in protests.³⁰ Russia’s decision to suspend its multi-billion-dollar

²⁸ “Economic Assessment of Reconstruction Plans for the Inland Waterway E40,” February 2019, <https://bahna.land/files/5d281e5a2a5d42397bc41dc8.pdf>.

²⁹ “World Economic Outlook: The Great Lockdown,” International Monetary Fund, April 14, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>.

³⁰ Todd Prince, “A Political Crisis Has Gripped Belarus. Is An Economic Crisis Next?” *RFE/RL*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/30810092.html>.

credit support program to Belarus at the beginning of 2020 created an even larger challenge for Minsk, as it enters a peak of its public debt repayments. According to Belarus's finance ministry, the country is due to repay around \$3.4 billion of public debt, including interest, in 2020, and \$3.2 billion in 2021.³¹ In September 2020, Russia offered Belarus a \$1.5 billion loan that Minsk will use, at least mostly if not entirely, to pay off its previous debt to Moscow. And even though Belarus raised \$1.25 billion via a new Eurobond placement on the London Stock Exchange in June 2020, it is unlikely the government will have the funds to invest in infrastructure projects such as the E40 in the near future.

The political crisis leading up to and following the August 9, 2020, presidential election in Belarus could also make sourcing funds for the E40 more difficult. The aggressive crackdown on peaceful protesters, accusations of police torture, arrests of civil society figures, expulsions of opposition members, alongside the rising number of political prisoners, has led to calls for the EU to implement sanctions. This crackdown on post-election protests has left President Lukashenka in a much more precarious position both domestically and internationally and, therefore, more susceptible to Russian pressure to withdraw from the E40 if Russia senses the planned waterway to be against its interests.

Impact on Regional Cooperation: The Waterway as a Builder of Resilience and Trade

The promotion of regional cooperation between Poland, Belarus and Ukraine is nothing new. After the fall of the Russian Empire following the First World War, Poland, Ukraine and Belarus rushed to form

³¹ "Belarus faces limits in its hunt for EU and IMF money," *Obserwator Finansowy*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.obserwatorfinansowy.pl/in-english/belarus-faces-limits-in-its-hunt-for-eu-and-imf-money/>.

independent states. The interwar Polish leader Józef Piłsudski believed that an alliance of those states in a federal body could safeguard their respective sovereignties. The term *Intermarium* (from the Latin for “between the seas”) refers to this geopolitical concept of regional integration. The E40 would be based on cooperation rather than integration, but as a concept that encompasses a partnership of countries reaching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, the concepts share some likeness. Both sought/seek to weaken Russia’s regional influence and provide an alternative to the perceived centralized power of Western Europe. In order to assess the likelihood of constructive regional cooperation, a fundamental understanding of the current levels of cooperation is necessary.

Belarus and Poland

Prior to the political unrest in Belarus in the summer of 2020, Belarus and Poland experienced five years of gradually warming relations, and Warsaw had been playing an intermediary role between Minsk and the European Union. Belarus shares extensive historical and cultural heritage with Poland, and Russia’s frosty approach toward Belarus during this time had pushed the country closer to the EU and the West. One of Warsaw’s objectives in these relations was to prevent Belarus from finding itself in complete political and economic dependence on Russia, while Minsk was hoping to convert improved political relations with the West into financial support and increased trade.

The strengthening of Polish and Belarusian ties was seen most outright in the burgeoning trade relationship. In May 2020, the Polish ambassador to Belarus, Artur Michalski, stated that bilateral trade was now at more than \$3 billion a year, up from \$2.5 billion in 2018.³²

³² “Ambassador: Belarus-Poland annual trade exceeds \$3bn,” *BelTA*, May 4, 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/ambassador-belarus-poland-annual-trade-exceeds-3bn-130148-2020/>; “Belarus-Poland trade hits 8-year high in 2018,”

Poland is among the leading investors in the Belarusian economy, ranking fourth behind Russia, the United Kingdom and Cyprus.³³ Warsaw's willingness to engage with Belarus was also based on geopolitical reasoning. The Belarusian defense ministry declared in late August 2019 that it was holding consultations on regional and international military cooperation with Poland.³⁴ This is particularly notable as Poland is NATO's vanguard state in Central and Eastern Europe and the site of a new future US military base.

The disputed presidential election in August 2020 and the violent aftermath has undermined relations between Belarus and Poland, and dialogue between Belarus and the EU has collapsed. Indeed, Belarus's relations with Poland are likely to be extremely strained for the foreseeable future. Poland remains the host of significant numbers of exiled members of the Belarusian opposition and funds opposition leaning media in Belarus. In June 2020 President Lukashenka accused Poland of being the "wire-pullers", manipulating the current election campaign, adding that Belarus is "witnessing foreign interference in our election and domestic affairs."³⁵ This rhetoric escalated following

Belarus.by, March 26, 2019, https://www.belarus.by/en/business/business-news/belarus-poland-trade-hits-8-year-high-in-2018_i_0000095126.html.

³³ "Belarus, Poland can gain more benefits from neighbourhood," *BelTA*, December 11, 2019, <https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/belarus-poland-can-gain-more-benefits-from-neighborhood-126602-2019/>.

³⁴ Andrew Korybko, "The New Viking Silk Road: The E-40 Waterway Project Linking the Baltic to the Black Sea," *Global Research*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-new-viking-silk-road-the-e-40-waterway-project-linking-the-baltic-to-the-black-sea/5653944>.

³⁵ "Lukashenka slams foreign interference in Belarus election, domestic affairs," *BelTA*, June 25, 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-slams-foreign-interference-in-belarus-election-domestic-affairs-131286-2020/>.

the election, with Lukashenka accusing NATO of hostile activity in Poland and subsequently moving Belarusian forces to its western border. Lukashenka also accused Poland of seeking to reclaim former Polish territory from western Belarus and asserted that Polish flags were being hung in Grodno, a Belarusian city on the western border.³⁶

Belarus and Ukraine

For several years, Ukraine was the second-largest trading partner of Belarus. In 2012, trade achieved the highest level of \$7.9 billion; but by 2015, economic exchange had declined to merely \$3.5 billion due to a dispute involving mutual threats to introduce extra duties on each other's goods. Eventually, both sides announced that they would abstain from any counter-sanctions. The situation is now improving and, in May 2020, the president of the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Gennadiy Chyzhykov, said that Belarus is again one of Ukraine's top five trading partners and is Ukraine's second biggest in the CIS. According to Ukrainian statistics, bilateral trade in 2019 totaled \$5.5 billion, with Ukrainian exports to Belarus increasing by around 19 percent and reaching \$1.7 billion. Supplies of Belarusian goods to the Ukrainian market also went up and came to almost \$3.7 billion.³⁷

In October 2019, the Second Forum of the Regions of Ukraine and Belarus was held in Zhytomyr with Ukrainian President Volodymyr

36 Ivan Nechepurenko and Anton Troianovski, "In Belarus Town, People Tasted a Bite of Freedom. It Lasted 2 Days," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/world/europe/grodno-belarus-protests.html>.

37 "Belarus among Ukraine top five trading partners," *BelTA*, May 27, 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/belarus-among-ukraines-top-five-trading-partners-130679-2020/#:~:text=According%20to%20Ukrainian%20statistics%2C%20Belarus,billion%2C%E2%80%9D%20Gennadiy%20Chyzhykov%20noted.>

Zelenskyy and President Lukashenka. Zelenskyy stressed the importance of deep cooperation in relations, and the leaders signed commercial contracts worth around \$500 million.³⁸ Lukashenka named cooperation in infrastructure as a priority in bilateral trade and economic relations. He specifically noted that transport arteries are important in the development of economic ties between the two countries. Minsk also presented itself as neutral ground for a negotiated solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine and has resisted Russian attempts to enlist its support in the conflict. Belarus's role as the broker of peace had boosted its international reputation.³⁹

Overall relations between Ukraine and Belarus had been improving; however, as with Poland, the recent events in Belarus have damaged mutual ties. Before the election, Belarus arrested 32 Russian mercenaries, and Ukrainian authorities were infuriated when Lukashenka released them to Russia despite Kyiv's request that they be extradited to Ukraine to be prosecuted for aiding Russia's proxy rebel forces in Donbas. Relations deteriorated further when Ukraine recalled its ambassador, Ihor Kyzym, from Minsk following the election; upon Kyzym's return to Belarus, the Ukrainian diplomat had his car searched at the Belarusian border, in violation of the Vienna Convention. Relations could potentially worsen going forward: Minsk's current neutral position on the Ukrainian-Russian conflict might become untenable if Moscow is able to exert greater pressure on an internally weakened Lukashenka following his mismanaged presidential election.

³⁸ "Trade turnover between Ukraine and Belarus to exceed \$6 billion," President of Ukraine Official Website, October 4, 2019,

<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/tovaroobig-mizh-ukrayinoyu-ta-bilorussyu-maye-perevishiti-6-57617>.

³⁹ Grigory Ioffe, "Belarus and Ukraine Face Strained Relations," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, November 30, 2016,

<https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-ukraine-face-strained-relations/>.

Poland and Ukraine

Poland and Ukraine's current relations stem from a mutual understanding of the security challenges in Europe's East. While the two countries enjoy different strategic situations—Poland is a member of the EU and NATO and Ukraine is not—they both understand Russian revisionism as a considerable threat.

Trade between Poland and Ukraine is developing rapidly. In February 2019, Poland displaced Russia as the top buyer of Ukrainian goods, according to the latest data available from Ukrstat.⁴⁰ After Ukraine signed the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with the European Union, Ukrainian trade with the bloc expanded to \$9.5 billion, an increase of 10 percent. The EU now accounts for 38 percent of Ukraine's foreign trade. Polish investments in the country are also gradually expanding, now close to \$800 million. A large number of Ukrainians—an estimated two million—have found employment in Poland.⁴¹

A key issue in Polish-Ukrainian relations recently has been a historical dispute. It is centered around conflicting stances on the memorialization of the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, carried out in 1943–1944 by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which resulted in up to 100,000 Polish civilian casualties. Ukraine adopted laws in April 2015 that introduced the possibility of punishing those who denied the heroic nature of the Ukrainian

⁴⁰ "Poland overtakes Russia to become Ukraine's biggest trade partner in February," *bne IntelliNews*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.intellinews.com/poland-overtakes-russia-to-become-ukraine-s-biggest-trade-partner-in-february-161024/>.

⁴¹ Piotr Kościński, "Poland and Ukraine: History Divides," *The Warsaw Institute Review*, March 1, 2018, <https://warsawinstitute.org/poland-ukraine-history-divides/>.

fighters.⁴² An amendment to a bill adopted by the Polish parliament in January 2018 introduced criminal responsibility for the denial of the crimes of Ukrainian nationalists in the years 1925–1950. These events cooled Polish-Ukrainian ties; however, in August 2019, President Zelenskyy and his Polish counterpart, President Duda, agreed to reopen a dialogue to resolve the issues.⁴³

Funding the E40

The construction of the E40 will not come cheap, at \$14.5 billion or more; yet there are several funding options potentially available. In Ukraine, the government is prepared to allocate 500 million hryvnia (\$18.4 million) per year to construction along the route. This should be enough to complete the upgrades to the waterway within Ukraine.⁴⁴ Potential also exists for private investment, with companies from Turkey and the Netherlands expressing interest. The Polish segment of the E40, however, will require a much larger influx of funds, including from other forms of external financing.

⁴² Wojciech Kononczuk, “The Paradoxes of Polish-Ukrainian Relations,” *Focus Ukraine*, *The Kennan Institute*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-paradoxes-polish-ukrainian-relations>.

⁴³ “Ukraine and Poland agreed to update and restart the bilateral working group on historical issues – Volodymyr Zelenskyy,” President of Ukraine Official Website, August 31, 2019, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-ta-polsha-domovilis-onoviti-j-perezavantazhiti-dvos-57029>.

⁴⁴ Alla Hurska, “The E40 Waterway: Economic and Geopolitical Implications for Ukraine and the Wider Region,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, May 13, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-e40-waterway-economic-and-geopolitical-implications-for-ukraine-and-the-wider-region/>.

The EU's Role in European Connectivity Projects

The EU has made interconnectivity and the reduction of carbon emissions two core goals, and it plans to achieve these by prioritizing environmentally friendly transport modes and filling in the missing links in Europe's transport infrastructure. In 2013, the EU embarked on a new era in transport policy and, in accordance with the TEN-T Regulation, aims to build a high-performance EU-wide transport infrastructure network, using the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and other EU funding programs and initiatives.

The CEF is a key EU funding instrument for supporting the development of sustainable and efficiently interconnected trans-European networks in transport, energy and digital services. The level of CEF funding has been unprecedented, with a total financial envelope of more than €30 billion (\$34 billion). Since the initiative began in 2014, Poland, one of the E40 partners, has been the highest recipient of funds with €4.7 billion (\$5.36 billion), far higher than the next highest countries Denmark with €2.4 billion (\$2.7 billion) and France with €2.3 billion (\$2.6 billion).⁴⁵ Transport has received the greatest allocation of CEF funds—€22.8 billion (\$26 billion) for 756 projects since 2014, compared with CEF Energy at €3.2 billion (\$3.6 billion) and CEF Telecom at €0.3 billion (\$342 million). CEF supports further project investment with European structural and investment funds, such as the Cohesion Fund as well as the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI), and loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB).

⁴⁵ "The Connecting Europe Facility, Five Years supporting European infrastructure," *European Commission*, July 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/inea/sites/inea/files/cefpub/cef_implementation_brochure_web_final.pdf.

CEF funding is largely allocated to sectors with environmentally friendly transport: more than 80 percent of the foreseen investments go to non-road transport modes. However, the predominant part of the CEF grants (72 percent) has been allocated to railway actions. The EU's 2014–2019 CEF grants for Poland notably designated €3.5 billion (\$3.8 billion) for railway projects and only €147.8 million (\$161.2 million) for maritime infrastructure, demonstrating an overwhelming preference for rail investment.⁴⁶ In February 2020, when European Commissioner for Transport Adina-Ioana Vălean spoke of the upcoming transport strategy, she stressed that she was planning to put forward measures to increase the share of more sustainable transport modes of both rail and inland waterways.⁴⁷

The E40 is not yet included in TEN-T, which limits the project's ability to access EU funding. But before the waterway can be included, it must plan to comply with Class IV shipping along the entire route—that is, allowing vessels with minimum dimensions of 80 meters by 9.5 meters. The Polish section would require a new canal in order to meet this requirement, thus putting the E40 at odds with the EU's environmental concerns. While the E40 corresponds to the strategic objectives of the EU, such as lower carbon emissions and the development of environmentally friendly transport, the E40 is not yet an investment priority. It should be noted however, that the EU's Cohesion Fund is contributing to construction work to increase

⁴⁶ “Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) – Transport grants 2014 – 2020, Poland,”

European Commission,

https://ec.europa.eu/inea/sites/inea/files/cefpub/eu_investment_in_transport_in_poland.pdf.

⁴⁷ “Commissioner Vălean’s Speech: EU strategy for mobility and transport:

measures needed by 2030 and beyond,” *European Commission*, February 3, 2020,

https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/strategies/news/2020-02-03-commissioner-valeans-speech-eu-strategy-mobility-and-transport_en.

capacity at the Port of Gdańsk in Poland, thus demonstrating that some segments of the waterway can receive EU funding.

The Eastern Partnership

In January 2019, Johannes Hahn, then-Commissioner responsible for the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Enlargement Negotiations, wrote that in a bid to boost connectivity and economic growth in the Eastern Partnership countries, the European Commission and the World Bank co-authored an “Indicative trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) Investment Action Plan” and identified priority projects in the partner countries with an estimated investment of almost €13 billion (\$14.8 billion).⁴⁸

Belarus has so far received €1.2 billion (\$1.4 billion) in investment for transport projects, including a Lithuania-Belarus road border crossing point costing €25 million (\$28.5 million), and a road at the Polatsk border with Latvia costing €146 million (\$166 million). The investment has been predominantly road based (€1,090 million, or \$1.2 billion), followed by rail (€112 million, or \$127.7 million), with no inland waterway investment so far. In Ukraine however, the level of funding has been much higher, reaching €4.4 billion (\$5 billion), and this has included funding for inland waterway infrastructure development, such as locks on the Upper Dnieper costing €63 million (\$72 million), investment of €35 million (\$39 million) into Kherson

⁴⁸ “Eastern Partnership: new Indicative TEN-T Investment Action Plan for stronger connectivity,” *European Commission*, January 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news_corner/news/eastern-partnership-new-indicative-ten-t-investment-action-plan-stronger_en.

Port, and €220 million (\$251 million) for the implementation of dredging works at the Yuzhny seaport.⁴⁹

In February 2018, Karmenu Vella, the former EU Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, said that the recent TEN-T Investment Action Plan for the EaP did not include the sections of the E40 Inland Waterway due to environmental and economic considerations. Vella added that the Polish component of the project, due to its character and scale, would have to be subject to an appropriate impact assessment on Natura 2000 and in conformity with the Water Framework Directive.⁵⁰ The EU's Water Framework Directive was adopted in 2000 to protect and improve the quality of water environments, including waterways. The project could feasibly come under this funding, both in EU member state Poland, and EaP members Belarus and Ukraine. However, EU funding appears to be largely dependent on solving the environmental questions.

The Three Seas Initiative

An alternative source of funding could be the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). The Initiative is made up of 12 EU Member States located between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia (the Czech Republic), Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The core goal is to develop infrastructure for energy, transport and cyber connectivity along the

⁴⁹ "Indicative TEN-T Investment Action Plan," *European Commission*, December 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/ten-t_iap_web-dec13.pdf.

⁵⁰ "Answer by Mr Vella on behalf of the European Commission, Parliamentary Question," *European Parliament*, February 18, 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2018-006186-ASW_EN.html.

north-south axis, as opposed to the predominant east-west direction of current infrastructure. The inherited infrastructure, largely built during the Cold War era, is perceived as a factor of the region's geopolitical dependence on Russia, the main energy provider in the area, and a reinforcement of Germany's economic dominance.⁵¹ Whereas the countries of Western Europe are well linked by roads and railways, the states of Central and Eastern Europe remain comparatively disconnected from one another in terms of modern infrastructure. According to EU data, road and rail travel in the region takes, on average, roughly two to four times longer than comparable travel in the rest of the bloc.

At the 2018 summit, 3SI member countries developed a list of 48 priority interconnection projects and the transport projects included the completion of north-south road and railway corridors that would connect the Baltic with the Adriatic; a railway to connect the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, via Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine; and the FAIRway Danube, a project to improve the infrastructure and navigability of the Danube River in Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Slovakia.⁵² It is clear that the E40 could fit within the priorities of the Three Seas Initiative. Ukraine is not a member, but President Zelenskyy showed interest in joining the 3SI during a meeting with Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid.⁵³ Ukrainian

⁵¹ Thomann, Pierre-Emmanuel, "The Three Seas Initiative, a New Project at the Heart of European and Global Geopolitical Rivalries," *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2019, pp. 31–63, https://ies.lublin.pl/pub/2020-01/RIESW_2019-3-03.pdf.

⁵² "The Three Seas Initiative," *Congressional Research Service*, May 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11547.pdf>.

⁵³ "President: Ukraine is interested in joining the Three Seas Initiative," President of Ukraine Official Website, November 26, 2019,

cooperation is also already taking place with regard to road infrastructure development: specifically, Ukraine is a full member of the Via Carpatia, a planned transnational highway network and one of the flagship projects of the Initiative. It is even more unlikely that Belarus will ever become a 3SI member; but if Ukraine and Poland can use Three Seas investment for their respective sections of the E40, it could increase the likelihood of investment in the Belarusian segment as well.

After United States President Donald Trump attended the 3SI Summit in Warsaw in July 2017, the project gained more attention. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's announcement of a US contribution of \$1 billion dollars in February 2020 sent a message that this region has Washington's support and that it is worth investing here. This could become a driving force for more investments by private US firms. The European Commission (EC) has been officially supporting the project since the Bucharest Summit in 2018, which both the then-European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas attended.⁵⁴ Tension persists between Germany and many of the 3SI states predominantly over the Nord Stream Two natural gas pipeline project. Nord Stream Two is designed to deliver an additional 55 billion cubic meters of Russian gas per year directly to Germany via a Baltic Sea pipeline, which is largely opposed by the 3SI states. Yet German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier attended the June 2019 3SI summit, highlighting Berlin's commitment to the initiative.⁵⁵ With US and EU

<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-zacikavlena-v-tomu-shob-doluchitisya-do-iniciativi-58561>.

⁵⁴ David A. Wemer, "The Three Seas Initiative explained," *Atlantic Council*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-three-seas-initiative-explained-2/>.

⁵⁵ "Speech by State Secretary Andreas Michaelis at the Summit of the Three Seas Initiative," German Federal Foreign Office website, June 6, 2019,

backing, the 3SI has high potential to succeed. The grouping's next summit is scheduled take place in October 2020, in Tallinn.

Members of the Three Seas Initiative, with the exception of Austria, are also members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and there is the possibility that NATO could one day take advantage of the E40. The waterway would not be wide or deep enough for warships, aircraft carriers or cruisers, but small-class NATO ships could potentially use the E40 to circumvent the limitations imposed by the 1936 Montreux Convention. The nearly century-old treaty governs maritime and naval passage through the Turkish Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) to the Black Sea. Poland, as a NATO member, and Ukraine, as one of the “Enhanced Opportunity Partners” under the Partnership Interoperability Initiative, could see this as an extra benefit to the construction of the waterway. In 2019, Belarus even flirted with the idea of joint military exercises with NATO, with Belarusian Defense Minister Oleg Belokonev saying that his country could resemble Serbia in NATO relations—having both close Russia ties and a military training connection to the North Atlantic Alliance.⁵⁶ However, for Belarus, this type of scenario would likely garner strong opposition from Russia, particularly regarding the movement of NATO ships across Belarusian territory. While at the moment this idea is purely theoretical, it is a notion worth keeping in mind and could potentially increase the likelihood of US investment.⁵⁷

<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/michaelis-3-seas-initiative/2227006>.

56 “Belarus and NATO in talks on joint military drills,” *LRT*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1130759/belarus-and-nato-in-talks-on-joint-military-drills>.

57 “Novi Pyut iz varyiag v greki: Yukraina ydarit po Rossie, soediniv Baltickoe i Chernoe moria” [“A New Way from the Varangians to the Greeks: Ukraine will hit

Chinese Investment

China is a player in the economic development of the E40 region, with investments in Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. The region is important to China as it constitutes a gateway to Europe for the overland Belt and Road corridors, and the E40 waterway would logically fall into China's overall infrastructure development strategy. It is possible to find similarities with China's region-specific 17+1 initiative and the 3SI, with many of the same local members and broadly overlapping development aims.

Despite Central and Eastern Europe fitting China's main objectives of transportation networks for the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investments in the region represents a small percentage compared with the other EU countries. In 2017, 71 percent of Chinese investment in Europe went to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. And even though that number dropped to 34 percent in 2019, only 3 percent that year went to Europe's East.⁵⁸ China also decided not to officially include any of the EaP countries into the 17+1 format. Belarus did, however, receive observer status during the 2016 Riga summit, where Belarus's prime minister joined the annual leaders' conference and conducted a bilateral meeting with Chinese premier Li Keqiang.⁵⁹

Russia with the connection of the Baltic and Black Seas"], *Svobodniya Pressa*, September 15, 2019, <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/243718/>.

⁵⁸ David Hutt and Richard Q. Turcsányi, "No, China Has Not Bought Central and Eastern Europe," *Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/27/china-has-not-bought-central-eastern-europe/>.

⁵⁹ Marcin Kaczmarek, Jakub Jakbórowski and Szymon Kardaś, "The effects of China's economic expansion on Eastern Partnership countries," *EU-STRAT*, No. 17,

China appears to view Poland as a key partner in Europe when it comes to expanding freight trade through railway connections and logistical hubs. For example, a rail link between Łódź, in central Poland, and the Chinese city of Chengdu was initiated in 2013. In November 2019, Poland's Port of Gdańsk received the inaugural Euro-China Train (ECT), connecting China directly with the Baltic Sea.

Ukraine has received less Chinese investment. But in 2018, a list of joint projects included investing \$2 billion in a new metro line in Kyiv and \$400 million in a passenger railway connecting Kyiv with Boryspil International Airport.⁶⁰

For Belarus, the China Development Bank and the China ExIm Bank provided \$3 billion in loans to develop the China-Belarus industrial park Great Stone.⁶¹ And in December 2019, the Belarusian Ministry of Finance and the executive of the Shanghai branch of the China Development Bank signed an agreement that granted Belarus a loan of \$500 million.⁶² Between 2000 and 2014, Minsk received more than \$7.6 billion in Chinese financial support in the form of aid and loans,

March 2019, <http://eu-strat.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EU-STRAT-Working-Paper-No.-17.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Andrey Buzarov, "Ukraine and China: Seeking Economic Opportunity within a Framework of Risk," *Focus Ukraine, Kennan Institute*, February 21, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraine-and-china-seeking-economic-opportunity-within-framework-risk>.

⁶¹ Andrei Yeliseyev, "China Fails to Deliver on its Promises in Belarus," *China Observers*, July 31, 2020, <https://chinaobservers.eu/china-fails-to-deliver-on-its-promises-in-belarus/>.

⁶² Adrian Brona, "The Curious Timing of the Chinese Loan to Belarus," *China Observers*, January 17, 2020, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-curious-timing-of-chinese-loan-to-belarus/>.

but it is important to note that only \$368 million of this was direct investment.

Beijing could potentially be a source of funding for the E40 Waterway as it would fit the general investment model of transport connectivity and infrastructure. Poland, under the EU-China Connectivity Platform, proposed the E40 for Chinese investment to develop the Middle and Lower Vistula.⁶³ However the amount of funding in the E40 region demonstrates it may not be a high priority for Chinese investment.

Conclusions

The E40 waterway still has many hurdles to overcome before it can become a reality. The key issues, before the recent political crisis in Belarus, were environmental concerns and questions about funding. The financing question could become less problematic if the environmental concerns are offset, but another obstacle is the economic viability of waterways in general. The Polish segment comes with large costs, and developers will need to provide sufficient incentives to shift investment from rail to inland waterways for the project to have any success. If the next feasibility study, due in late 2020, addresses the key environmental issues within the Polish segment of the E40, that could allow the potential for EU funding for the costliest portion of the waterway.

The many different players in the region have overlapping incentives for funding and constructing the waterway. For Belarus, it would allow access to the Black and Baltic seas, reduce economic dependency on Russia through trade ties with the EU and further afield, and likely

⁶³ “Research for TRAN Committee: The new Silk Route – opportunities and challenges for EU transport,” *European Parliament*, 2018, https://globalshippersalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Study_EP_IPOL_STU2018585907_EN.pdf.

give Minsk a stronger hand in negotiations with Moscow. For Poland, it would provide access to the Black Sea and encourage further development of its regions and the Port of Gdańsk. For Ukraine, the E40 would reinforce economic resilience, develop infrastructure and further cement the country's Western lean. For the EU, the project could help secure its eastern border and lead to greater regional cooperation with and within the EaP. The Three Seas Initiative, with the US as a partner, is seeking regional development and security, particularly on the EU-NATO's eastern border. Chinese investment could come in the form of Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure development, adding an extra trade corridor to the region. In June 2019, Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei stressed the prospect for implementing tripartite projects in the format of "China-EaP-EU countries" for the efficient interconnection of the "Great Silk Road and the EU-TEN-T transport network,"⁶⁴ further demonstrating the potential for the E40 to find funding partners across different initiatives.

Cooperation between Belarus, Ukraine and Poland was burgeoning until very recently, and the partners could retain that solid foundation in regional relations once the political crisis in Belarus is settled. Particularly now, as the wider region seeks to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, an initiative that develops infrastructure and generates growth and jobs could be urgently needed. With these overlapping incentives, it should be possible to attract different branches of funding and support. The recent unrest in Belarus, however, has resulted in the country, at least momentarily, turning sharply eastward toward Russia, likely reducing the incentive and ability to invest in Western regional projects in the short-term; and

⁶⁴ "Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei participates in an expert seminar 'Eastern Partnership at 10: Results and ways forward,'" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus*, June 4, 2019,

http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/b51421e95a1d030e.html.

any forthcoming EU/US sanctions will make funding the waterway more difficult. Nevertheless, the situation in Belarus is changing rapidly, and the future foreign policy outlook of the country, be that facing eastward, westward or something more neutral, has yet to be decided. The second feasibility study on the E40, expected later this year, should provide answers to some of the most crucial outstanding issues and possibly open the door to the project's final implementation.

Belarus as a Pivot of Poland's Grand Strategy

Jacek Bartosiak

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Executive Summary

For 500 years, Poland's grand strategy successfully rested on building various points of leverage with the leaderships and societies in the East—in the so-called Intermarium, between the Baltic and Black seas—in order to prevent these areas from falling under Russian imperial domination and, thus, keep Russia out of Europe's balance of power system. But this approach was interrupted by 45 years of "Atrophy" as a Communist puppet state of the Soviet Union and 30 years of post-Cold War "Geopolitical Pause" that was characterized by Poland's "Strategic Restraint" in its foreign policy toward the East, including importantly toward Belarus. The geopolitical "sunny weather" is now over, however. And Poland is compelled to resurrect its older strategy toward Russia and Europe's East. This situation also calls for critical adjustments (e.g., in military planning and force posture, active defense, stretching the enemy posture, adopting a proactive stance, more strategic signaling) in order to counter Russian New Generation Warfare toolbox with its versatile instruments of coercion in Russia's western limitrophes.

Belarus is literally a pivot of the entire European Intermarium region because of the country's geographic position astride the main east-west invasion corridors between Warsaw and Moscow. As such, Belarus's status—either fully under Russian control or able to prevent the local

stationing of Russian forces—has an outsized effect on the security of all nations and powers in the region. A change in Belarus's status to an outpost for the Russian Armed Forces would trigger a cascading security dilemma for Poland and the entire Intermarium. This realization is already pushing Warsaw to abandon its heretofore Strategic Restraint in favor of a regional approach more aligned with Poland's grand strategy of the last 500 years: an active policy posture toward Belarus coupled with militarily active forward defense capabilities.

Introduction

During the summer and autumn of 2020, Polish media was awash in reports coming out of neighboring Belarus, where not only is the fate of that country currently being decided but also the fate of the security status of the entire Intermarium region, including Poland. Amidst the turmoil that has engulfed Belarus for weeks since its falsified presidential elections, Russian activities in and long-term goals for that country may have serious implications for a territory of immediate security concern for Poland—the lands between Brest and the Smolensk Gate.

In September 2020, I took a car trip (as a passenger) from the Belarusian border on the Bug River to Warsaw. The journey lasted only the time it took me to complete two phone calls, browse Facebook, make one post on Twitter, and hold an hour-long discussion with subscribers to Strategy and Future on our Facebook group. And to my surprise, I was already on the bridge over the Vistula River in Warsaw even though my colleague and driver had not been speeding particularly fast. The 200-kilometer east–west voyage across flat and rather well-connected terrain felt shockingly quick compared to traveling by car from the Polish capital to Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk or the Mazurian lakes.

To put it bluntly: if Russian combat units, including in particular the 1st Guards Tank Army, were to be stationed in Belarus with all the necessary heavy logistics, this would drastically upend Poland's current security *status quo*. Belarus transforms into a deadly threat to Poland if it comes under Russian military control and becomes a base of power projection for Moscow. Such a transformation would compel Poland to change its own force posture and contingency plans, while at the same time forcing the government to heavily recalibrate its military modernization plans.

This, for now, hypothetical scenario is somewhat reminiscent of the case of the partition of Czechoslovakia just before World War II. In the interwar period, until the fall of Czechoslovakia, the Germans could seriously attack Poland solely from West Pomerania. Only this area offered strategic depth and a sufficient operational basis that could support large German units and logistics lines to launch an invasion. East Prussia lacked all such necessary attributes, allowing for only an auxiliary strike. German Silesia, on the other hand, was flanked by Greater Poland (Wielkopolska region) and, above all, by Czechoslovakia, allied with France at the time. Thus, Germany could not plan to launch a strike on Poland from there, fearing a Czechoslovak intervention or the preventive action of the Polish Army on its rear or wing that could cut off its forces from the German core.

The collapse of Czechoslovakia dramatically changed this state of affairs, suddenly permitting the Germans to launch the main attack from Western Pomerania and Silesia simultaneously (see **Map 5**, p. viii). And they did it, invading from Silesia to engage Poland's Łódź Army and then the Modlin Reserve Army, which opened the way to Warsaw. In addition, the German military launched an auxiliary strike from East Prussia (from where it was the closest to Warsaw), crossing Polish defense lines near Mława.

Thanks to the partition of Poland's southern neighbor, Germany also carried out an auxiliary but fateful strike from Slovakia, outflanking the pivotal Kraków Army, which was exceptionally crucial to the Polish war plan. Already on the second day of the war, the Kraków Army was in retreat, resulting in a cascading effect that broke the Polish armies' ability to protect each other's flanks and triggered defeats along the entire long front, thus compelling the commander-in-chief to order a pullback of all the Polish army formations behind the Vistula and San rivers.

As of summer of 2020, Russia was not able to launch an attack on Poland from Kaliningrad Oblast without a prior long-term build-up of forces and logistics in Belarus. True, it could attack the Baltic States from the vicinity of Pskov and St. Petersburg, but not Poland. It could also have threatened to cut Polish communication lines to the Baltic States if Poland decided to help the Balts, but not mount a full and serious attack against Polish territory—unless, of course, Warsaw had sent most of its forces north across the Nemunas and Daugava rivers. The Kaliningrad exclave today is even less convenient as an operational base than East Prussia was for Germany; and at the same time, the Russians are quite concerned that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Poland could seek to occupy the oblast itself. Hence, and contrary to popular belief, Russia does not actually base any important forces in Kaliningrad, which it considers “besieged.”

On the other hand, the presence of a full army-level Russian force in Belarus would mean that, similarly to Nazi Germany's use of Silesia in 1939, the Russians could, from this convenient operational position, launch a major attack on Warsaw. This strike out of Belarus could come from at least two directions (see **Map 6**, p. ix). The first might emerge via Grodno and Wołkowysk, north of the Narew River and in between the Narew and Bug river systems. And the second could originate from Brest and Damachava/Sławatycze, following several possible roads westward through Biała Podlaska, Radzyń, Siedlce,

Międzyrzec, Mińsk Mazowiecki and then toward the Warsaw suburbs on the Praga (eastern) side of the Vistula River.

In addition, such forward-positioned Russian forces would be able to (as they have already done several times in history) move between Włodawa and Chełm in the direction of Lublin to Dęblin, toward the crossings on the Vistula River between Radomka and Pilica. This would allow Russia to circumvent Warsaw from the south, as the Red Army accomplished in 1944 and 1945. On top of that, if it were to launch an attack from Belarus via Ukraine—violating the latter's sovereignty—Russia could create another operational line through Chełm, Lublin and Puławy, dispersing Polish defense efforts of Warsaw.

An auxiliary Russian strike could then emerge from Kaliningrad Oblast and proceed along the Vistula valley, further dispersing Poland's defensive operations in the vast eastern part of the country, which is cut by the Vistula, Bug and Narew rivers. Such a successful maneuver by Russia would additionally eliminate any possibility of the North Atlantic Alliance to help the Baltics or Poland east of the Vistula. That would mean an end to NATO's credibility and the United States' security guarantees.

Belarus in Russian hands obviously eliminates the possibility of helping the Baltic States via the Suwałki Corridor (see **Map 7**, p. x) in the event of a war with Russia, directly making the security status of these countries dependent on Moscow's will. NATO planning will be affected heavily, while Alliance cohesion may be critically eroded given the increased risk of confrontation with Russia on unfavorable terms. The situation would be equally dangerous for Ukraine, for which the threat will appear from the northern border, close to Kyiv and within striking distance of the country's main roads to the west, threatening communication with Poland and the West. Poland's defense plans will have to be revisited. It is too early to say whether a real line of defense could be based only on the Vistula and the suburbs

of Warsaw, but historical evidence would suggest that it might be possible. Regardless, the modernization of the Polish Armed Forces and war plans would all need to change. And in any case, the security of eastern Poland would come under doubt.

Moreover, the evident lack of capability of Western European states to project power in this part of the world, in particular in the event of the United States pivoting to the Pacific or retreating behind the Atlantic, could lead to a much sharper security dichotomy on the continent were Belarus to be absorbed by Russia. In that event, the security status of European countries within the Russian power projection umbrella would be dramatically different from that of the western continental powers of France, Germany or Spain. At the end of the day, everything boils down to the balance of power as well as each side's willingness to use that power to enforce its political will and impose decisions that favor its own interests.

Background

The Baltic Sea “turns” near the mouths of the Vistula and the Nemunas rivers to the north, a spot that forms the northern edge of the isthmus that pinches the European landmass between the Baltic and Black seas—the so-called Baltic–Black Sea Bridge (a.k.a. the European Intermarium).¹ Considered by strategists of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as the most important of the geopolitical zones in Europe when it comes to shaping the balance of power, the Intermarium (see **Map 8**, p. xi) resembles a wide “transition strip” between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, connecting the continental masses of Eurasia with the western European peninsula, which is open to the World Ocean and has for centuries been under the influence of the sea. Thanks to this great maritime connectivity

¹ Eugeniusz Romer, *Polska. Ziemia i Państwo* [*Poland: Land and the State*], Kraków 1917.

highway, Western Europe hugely benefited from the Great Oceanic Revolution starting at the turn of the 16th century, with the geopolitical consequences resonant to this day.²

In contrast, the portion of Europe located closer toward Asia, starting from the eastern part of the Baltic–Black Sea Intermarium region, has a distinctly more continental character. The vast continental spaces have determined the directions of political and economic development of the region and, to a large extent, its status and political anchoring. The Black Sea divides this huge block of land hanging from the east, effectively separating it into two segments. And through there, relentless and incessant invasions from inner Eurasia repeatedly swept into Europe. The region's dual nature—continental yet still “between the seas”—creates a peculiar spatial bloc, with three frontiers opening to Asia, though some require crossing the marginal seas around Europe.³

The transitional location of this place, between Europe proper and the vast stretches of Eurasia, has meant that both Western European political forces expanding east, as well as the political forces of imperial Russia spreading west have, unflinching, for several centuries, sought to subordinate or destroy all political organisms that sprang up in the Intermarium. Above all, they tried to prevent the creation of a unified political-state entity covering the region's geographical whole. The Intermarium is a vast area, covering some one million square kilometers, and sovereignty over the entire territory would mean control over key strategic flows in Europe (that is, the movement of goods, people, troops, technology, capital,

² Ryszard Wraga., *Geopolityka, strategia i granice* [*Geopolitics, Strategy and Borders*], Rome 1945.

³ Andrzej Piskozub, *Dziedzictwo polskiej przestrzeni* [*The Inheritance of the Polish Space*], Ossolineum 1987; Ryszard Wraga, *Sowiety grożą Europie* [*The Soviets Threaten Europe*], Warsaw, 1935.

knowledge and data) across the main east-west axis of communication of the Northern European Plain and north-south between the two maritime zones of the Northern Atlantic and Black Sea, the latter of which naturally connects with the Greater Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus. Every single modern-era war for domination over the European continent included a struggle for control of the Intermarium.⁴

Poland's grand strategy for centuries viewed Russia as a landlocked continental power, whose core area was surrounded by five external powers: Sweden, Poland, Turkey, Persia and China—all located in the intermediate zone between the Eurasian Heartland and the Rimland.⁵ Russia proper was separated from them by a buffer zone—the so-called “borderlands.” In Polish history these eastern approaches came to be known as the “Eastern Frontier.”⁶ From this perspective, Russian history becomes a battle against these regional competitors for control over the borderlands. Occasionally, Russia (or the Soviet Union) became powerful enough to dominate the European continent. But when it sought to counter the consolidation of continental dominance

⁴ Jacek Bartosiak, *Rzeczpospolita między Lądem a Morzem. O wojnie i pokoju*, Warszawa 2018; Feliks Koneczny, *Dzieje Rosji*, Warszawa 1921.

⁵ The concepts of the Heartland and Rimland were, generally speaking, proposed by Halford Mackinder and Nickolas Spykman, who divided Eurasia into the landlocked Heartland and a coastal Rimland. The Heartland did not profit from ocean-faring, trade and connectivity and, as a result, was not prone to control by sea powers. While weaker economically, it nonetheless mastered great armies capable of controlling and operating in the vast continental steppes. In turn, the Rimland was the vast and rich coastal area of the Eurasia, affluent and vibrant and interconnected via sea but prone to domination by sea powers. The Rimland is where, since 1945, the United States has established a network of offshore military bases and system of alliances—arguably conforming in practice the above theory. Russia and China, meanwhile, have no doubt they accurately embody the Heartland.

⁶ Jacek Bartosiak, *Rzeczpospolita między Lądem i Morze. O wojnie i pokoju* [*The Republic Between Land and Sea: On War and Peace*], Warsaw, 2018.

by France or Germany, it repeatedly ended up allying itself in large-scale European or world wars with the world's leading naval power at the time—the United Kingdom and/or the United States.

In that vein, the ultimate goal of Poland's grand strategy has therefore always been (and is almost certain to remain) to keep Russia out of the European system of balance of power. And for the better part of the last 500 years, it largely succeeded, however that sounds to Westerners accustomed to inviting Russia to help balance the system for their own interests: be it to balance against Adolf Hitler, Kaiser Wilhelm or Napoleon or, currently, the French using Russia to balance against Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Today, Russia's value to other powers pursuing balancing behavior (such as Germany, France or Turkey) is largely limited to its energy resources and military power projection capabilities. As such, neutralizing Moscow's New Generation Warfare strategy, which involves combining military and non-military methods (including using energy domination as a political weapon), will nullify Russian ambitions to act as a balancer in the new game between Europe and China.

Even when Russia managed to achieve a forward position on the Central European Plain at various points in the past, this did not translate into a sense of security for the Russian government. East of the Elbląg–Kraków line, the physical space of the region forms a triangle, the base of which expands as one moves deeper into the Russian empire, thus inevitably forcing the Russian forces in this area to form thinner defensive lines. This allows a potential opponent of Russia the opportunity to choose the direction of a strike and to take advantage of its chosen directions. Polish forces have historically used

this opportunity many times, and Russian strategic culture remains fueled by this fear.⁷

This great space from the Elbląg-Kraków line, before it reaches the current borders of Russia, is already thousands of kilometers wide, the terrain flat as a table; and once behind the so-called Smolensk Gate (a physical, 80-km-wide gap between the Daugava and upper Dnieper rivers, near the city of Smolensk, in present-day Russia), the layout of the area practically “invites” a further march eastward to seize Moscow. At the same time, however, for the offensive from the west, there is the issue of ever-longer communication lines throughout the entire area, from the Vistula valley to the foreground of Smolensk and beyond, to Moscow (see **Map 2**, p. ii). The armies of Napoleon and Hitler collapsed in this area. The Poles assaulted Moscow along that route in 1605 and 1610, the Swedes after 1708. The French invaded this way in 1812. The Germans pushed into this area in 1914–1917, the Poles in 1919–1920 and Germans again in 1941–1942.⁸

Since the beginning of the Romanov dynasty in the 17th century, the Russians have repeatedly fought on the Northern European Plain and crossed the Smolensk Gate every 33 years, on average. Russian strategists and military planners presumably have a well-mastered sense of the military geography and patterns of movement and maneuver in this war theatre. In contrast, the United States has never operated east of the Oder River; nor has it ever been engaged in Europe in non-linear, limited warfare (often under the threshold of kinetic war) against a major power that thrives off this type of conflict.

⁷ Władysław Sikorski, *Nad Wisłą i Wkrą, Studium z wojny polsko-rosyjskiej 1920 roku* [On the Vistula and Wkra: Studies of the 1920 Polish-Russian War], Warsaw, 2015.

⁸ Józef Piłsudski, *Rok 1920* [Year 1920], Warsaw, 2014; Józef Piłsudski, *Pisma zbiorowe* [Collective Written Works], Warsaw, 1937.

In the Northern European Plain, Russia has three options. The first is to use strategic depth, resulting from space and climate, to pull enemy forces in and, by exploiting the vastness of the western buffer zone of the Russian empire, destroy the fatigued and overstretched foe (Napoleon, Hitler and the Swedes all suffered such a defeat). But this strategy runs the risk that once on Russian soil, the enemy might still be able to defeat Russian forces. And a further downside is the expected total destruction of the western provinces of the empire in war—as most recently occurred during World War II (with evidence of that conflict still visible to this day).

The second option for Russia is to face the enemy with large forces on the border and carry on a war of attrition. Tsarist Russia famously attempted this approach in 1914–1917, and it seemed like a sound strategy at the time given its more favorable demographics compared to Germany and Austria-Hungary. But it ultimately turned out to be a trap due primarily to the shaky social conditions within the Russian empire, where the weakening of the apparatus of coercion and control allowed the regime to fatally collapse in 1917.

The third option is to push Russian borders as far west as possible, thus creating more buffer areas—as Moscow did during the Cold War. This strategy seemed attractive to the Soviets for a long time because of the great strategic depth it provided along with the opportunity to increase the economic resources of the empire by exploiting the conquered buffer areas. But at the same time, it scattered imperial resources over the entire Baltic–Black Sea Intermarium and further up to the Elbe and the Danube, increasing the cost of military presence far from the core area of the center. This ultimately broke the Soviet Union and ended in the agreement in Belovezha (Białowieża) Forest, in western Belarus, decreeing the collapse of the empire in 1991.

Following Russia's brief period of utter decline after 1991, the tumultuous Boris Yeltsin era gave way to the Vladimir Putin regime, which has sought, over the last two decades, to regain the country's

imperial posture and imperial footprint. Putin's Russia embarked on New Generation Warfare to seize control of key locations in the western buffer zone that Russians call the limitrophes. Moscow employed the full toolbox of limited and non-linear warfare tactics so well known in Europe since the Middle Ages, effectively capturing (in one form or another) Crimea, Donbas, Belarus, the Caucasus and Transnistria.⁹ Belarus is a key pivot in this game.¹⁰

From Poland's perspective, Belarus is potentially the most dangerous piece of real estate in its immediate neighborhood. Belarusian lands accommodate the northern direction of a Russian advance against Poland, stretching from Polesie¹¹ to the Daugava River, and bounded by the Nemunas in the west. It is an open, gently rolling terrain that provides relatively good observation conditions for military operations and is a perfect setting for tank warfare (see **Map 9**, p. xii). Apart from the upper Nemunas and Szczara as well as the swampy valleys of these rivers, this region does not contain any major terrain obstacles. Herein lies the shortest and most convenient route for a Russian invasion of Poland, originating in Smolensk, Orsha and Vitebsk. An incursion by Russian forces in this area, following the relatively numerous and good-quality roads in the region, would separate Poland from the Baltic States and their seaports as well as restore Russia's land connection with Kaliningrad, facilitating the supply of the Russian military in the westernmost oblast.

⁹ Vadim Cymbursky, *Ostrov Rossiya [Island Russia]*, Polis, issue 5, 1993.

¹⁰ Marek Budzisz, *The Unknown Father of Russian Contemporary Grand Strategy*, Strategy&Future, Warsaw, 2020 <https://strategyandfuture.org/en/the-unknown-father-of-russian-contemporary-grand-strategy-part-1/> ; <https://strategyandfuture.org/en/the-unknown-father-of-russian-contemporary-grand-strategy-part-2/>.

¹¹ A forested area that sits astride the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.

By projecting power across the Belarusian front from the Smolensk Gate, Russia can force the entire Polish front into retreat and shift the war—as has happened many times in history—to the central Vistula valley, and therefore to the heart of the Poland, thus paralyzing the main organs of its political will and compromising Poland's defensive posture.

The corridor from the Polish core area toward the Smolensk Gate weaves through a tight arrangement of lakes, rivers, forests and lowland areas in northeastern Poland. Throughout its military history, Polish forces moving eastward would enter the Belarusian theatre of war via lands between Białystok and Wołkowysk (today, Vawkavysk in Belarus) and then proceed toward the Smolensk Gate. The old Polish warfare trail would cross the Nemunas River, in the narrowest passage between the riparian wetlands of the Biebrza and the Narew and the Białowieża (Belovezha) Forest. The trail then continues from Baranowicze (Baranavichy) to Minsk (with the northern passage from Lida) through Wilejka (Vileyka) to Połock (Polotsk); or it can cut straight from Vilnius to Polotsk, along the upper hinge of the Smolensk Gate.¹²

The gap between the upper Dnieper and the Daugava, which form the Smolensk Gate, is about 80 km wide and is predominantly a lowland plain covered with only scarce forests and cut through by two minor rivers. One third of its width is partitioned by mudflats (known in Polish as the *Błota Weretejskie*), 25 km long and 15 km wide.

The military significance of this corridor leading to Moscow is magnified by the fact that three major cities lie along the route: Minsk, Vitebsk and Smolensk. Additionally, Gomel lies slightly off this route. The Smolensk Gate traditionally shielded the heartland of Russia from

¹² Roman Umiastowski, *Geografia wojenna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i ziem ościennych* [*War-Time Geography of the Republic of Poland and Neighboring Territories*], Warsaw, 1924.

the western powers and protected the capital of the tsars, Moscow, which lies only 480 km away.

One can compare the significance of the Smolensk Gate for Poland and Russia to the importance of the Golan Heights for Israel and Syria. The Golan is characteristically raised above the neighboring areas of Israel—Lake Galilee, Tiberias, the Jordan Valley and even the Valley of Gilboa—which make up the core of the country's Galilee region. Israeli control of the Golan Heights, therefore, ensures that those low-lying areas remain relatively safe from threats emanating from Syria. At the same time, with the Golan Heights in the hands of the Israeli Armed Forces, the Syrian capital of Damascus (located less than 50 km from the eastern edge of these highlands) falls within reach of Israeli military units operating from high ground. The Golan forms a convenient operational base from which Israeli forces could potentially launch a rapid land offensive against Damascus, via the Quneitra Governorate—a strategic nightmare for Syria.

In turn, Syria's possession of the Golan Heights—as was the case prior to the 1967 Six-Day War—prevented the Israeli core areas from being able to develop properly. Until Israel seized the Golan, settlements and *kibbutzim* in adjacent Galilee were continually disturbed by Syrian military activities. Moreover, in the event of a war and land invasion, the immediate danger of seizure threatened the entire Israeli area from the border with Lebanon, through Galilee, to the border with Jordan and the Gilboa valley, from where it is not so far to Tel Aviv or the Mediterranean coast.¹³ This, in fact, occurred temporarily in the opening of the 1973 Yom Kippur War (which the Arabs call the Ramadan War), when superior numbers of Syrian armored forces

¹³ Jacek Bartosiak, *Smoleńsk Gate and the Golan Heights*, Strategy&Future, Warszawa 2019; <https://strategyandfuture.org/en/smolensk-gate-and-the-golan-heights/>.

flowed through southern Golan, threatening the brisk seizure of the Degania and Tiberias areas, on the shores of Lake Galilee.

When it comes to the Smolensk Gate, the areas proximate to the Daugava and Dnieper rivers are convenient for large force maneuvering. Of the small rivers and streams crossing the Gate, the only significant ones (each of them is about 20 meters wide) are the Luchosa and the Kaspla. The western end of the Smolensk Gate, extending out around 90–120 km, is covered by a group of Lepiel Lakes, channeling traffic toward the Berezyna River, near Borisov. The muddy Berezyna valley in wet seasons “closes” access to the Gate. The area around Lepiel is an important crossroads from which two natural routes lead to Moscow: one south, passing the Dnieper on the right, to Vyazma, through the Smolensk Gate; and the other north, through Vitebsk and along the banks of the Daugava to Rzhev.

From the Belarusian city of Orsha, the Dnieper River flows through a wide valley that features abundant spring floods and numerous lakes and oxbow lakes; the roads through this area traditionally encouraged the building of dikes. In contrast to the Vistula, which is not always suitable for fording, it was possible to ford the Dnieper across the dry run up to the mouth of Berezyna. The Berezyna, all the way to the mouth of Hayna River, flows within muddy banks overgrown with bushes, making it difficult to cross; only a small number of places permit forces to descend and ford. One convenient crossing point is located near the city of Borisov—known thanks to the legendary retreat of Napoleon’s *Grand Armée* in the autumn and winter of 1812. Forests stretching along the river, becoming wider to the south, add to the difficulty of passage across the Berezina, thus increasing its importance as a natural defensive line. The Lower Pripyat, meanwhile, has no useful areas for fording at all. By contrast, the Daugava River has quite a lot.

In his memoirs of the 1920 Polish-Soviet War, General Władysław Sikorski interestingly recounts that, as a result of the success in the

war of 1919–1921, some Poles “dreamed” of reconstituting Poland’s eastern borders from before the Andruszów Truce of the 17th century. This would have extended interwar Poland’s eastern territory beyond the strategic defensive line of the Daugava and Dnieper rivers, reaching as far as Velikiye Luki, Vyazma, Bryansk or Poltava (all inside modern-day Russia). Such a deep extension into Russia proper would have geo-strategically consolidated Poland’s forward defensive areas, while additionally screening the great rivers’ line that had historically served as a traditional boundary between the Polish and Russian worlds and former empires. For other strategists at that time, however, the minimum plan should be to secure the old borders of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from before the First Partition,¹⁴ to be more or less based on the strategic line of the Dnieper and Daguvas rivers. In the end, however, less was achieved in the Riga Peace Treaty. The Polish military won the war that decided the fate of all Intermarium nations; but Poland failed to secure a lasting peace anchored on effective defensive lines. It took only 20 years for regional great powers to unwind Poland’s precarious security architecture and, ultimately, to destroy its independence in September 1939.

Even a century later, the above discussions are not trivial descriptions of some irrelevant geographic outcomes of past wars. Indeed, current developments roiling Belarus are pushing Poland to think hard about its active defense measures and to consider how to deal with novel concepts related to the ongoing Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)—i.e., long-range fires, fire maneuver, or force multipliers rooted in long-range and advanced sensor technology. All these issues force a rethink of the competition for advantage in situational awareness that characterizes modern warfare. And if such a modern war involve Russia, it would primarily be waged throughout the

¹⁴ Sikorski, *Nad Wisłą i Wkrą*, 2015.

Intermarium, across a key axis of advance from the Smolensk Gate, toward Poland (see **Map 10**, p. xiii).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the strategic goal of post-Communist Poland became to support the emergence of independent countries between itself and the Russian Federation as well as to cultivate positive neighborly relations to prevent these newly sovereign states from falling back into Moscow's orbit. At the same time, after 1991, the western portion of the Intermarium undertook ever-tighter geopolitical integration with the Atlantic, characterized by deepening cooperation with Western European countries and joining the two key Euro-Atlantic structures, NATO and the EU. In recent years, this trend has been conspicuously represented by the United States' growing forward military presence in Central and Eastern Europe.

Juliusz Mieroszewski and Jerzy Giedroyc, reputed Polish émigrés who lived in exile in the West following the end of the Second World War, formulated a geopolitical doctrine for Poland that contained a simple maxim: "There can be no free Poland without a free Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine."¹⁵ According to the two émigré activists, the very fact of the existence of these independent eastern neighbors would remove the danger of another Polish clash with imperial Russia because the two countries would be physically divided by a belt of independent countries formed from former Soviet republics. Indeed, Poland's grand strategy in the East pursued by the governments in Warsaw after 1989 followed this "Mieroszewski-Giedroyc doctrine" fairly closely—underpinned as it was by the understanding that the eastern buffer areas determine the history of Poland, condemning it either to

¹⁵ Juliusz Mieroszewski, "Rosyjski kompleks Polski i obszar ULB" ["Poland's Russia Complex and the Area of the ULB"], *Kultura*, 1974, no. 9 (324).

the position of a satellite or to independence. As Mieroszewski pointedly wrote in the political-cultural monthly *Kultura*, in 1974,

A precondition for Poland's satellite status is the incorporation of the ULB [Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus] to Russia. It would be crazy to regard the problems of Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus as an internal Russian matter, in order for Poland to ameliorate its relations with Russia. Competition in these areas between Poland and Russia has always been aimed at establishing an advantage, not at good neighborly relations. For Russia, the incorporation of the ULB countries is a necessary precondition to reduce Poland to satellite status. From Moscow's perspective, Poland must be a satellite in one form or another. History teaches the Russians that an independent Poland has always [...] tried to establish its advantage in the ULB area. This equates to the liquidation of imperialist Russia's position in Europe. This equates to the fact that Poland cannot be independent if Russia is to maintain its imperial status in Europe. From Warsaw's perspective it is the same—only the other way around. We were looking for an advantage in ULB, whether military or federal, because history teaches that Russia in these areas is an insurmountable opponent. And you can only expect captivity. Even without World War II, Poland's independence would be threatened because we won in 1920 near Warsaw, not Kyiv. Even without [Joseph] Stalin, there would be an arms race and the reduction of Poland to the role of a protectorate by Russia alone or together with Germany.¹⁶

It is worth coming back to the 1990s for a moment. At the peak of the possibility of fulfilling Poland's aspirations to join the West along with the rest of the Baltic–Black Sea Intermarium countries—i.e., just 25

¹⁶ Mieroszewski, "Rosyjski kompleks," 1974.

years ago, at the moment of Russia's deepest collapse and amidst the most profound sense of *Smuta* (depression) under the rule of Boris Yeltsin—the population of this part of Europe was, in fact, greater than the population of the Russian Federation. Moreover, the combined GDP of the Intermarium countries was 16.5 percent higher than Russia's GDP when the latter hit rock bottom, right before the bounce back that began under Putin's rule.

Later on, once Poland became anchored inside NATO and the EU, Polish foreign policy came to embody what could be termed “strategic restraint”—a deviation from the previous 500 years of Polish grand strategy. Specifically, the overarching goal of joining the world of free strategic flows, which would underpin economic growth and democratization, encouraged Poland to adopt Western solutions wholesale; but this began to restrain the country's attained leverage in the East for the sake of cohesion within the collective West. In seeking to square this circle, Warsaw attempted to “use” the material and institutional power of the West to promote the expansion of Western influence in countries east of Poland. Unlike in the previous 500 years, the Third Polish Republic did not rely on its own strength to build up “assets” and sources of “leverage” east of the Bug river; rather it sought to harness the strength of Western organizations and institutions. This strategy had mixed and sometimes disappointing results: Poland and the Baltic States joined NATO and the EU on the one hand, but Georgia, Ukraine and Belarus achieved limited to no European integration on the other hand.

This belief in the unshakeable preponderance of the West in the international system after 1991, combined with the dedication to preserve the cohesion of the collective West, ultimately somewhat undermined Warsaw's historical efforts to establish Belarus as a buffer crucial to the existence and proper functioning of an independent Poland. And current developments in Belarus acutely illustrate that the last 30 years of sunny weather are over and the principles of *realpolitik* in international relations have returned to the fore. Unless

the small (or middle) powers in the region react collectively, the balance of power will change, too. Yet while the countries of the Baltic–Black Sea Intermarium have reacted differently than France and Germany to the crisis in Belarus, they do not wield sufficient leverage to enforce their own policies. The only leverage is the impulse of the rebellious Belarusian society, which is not enough since street demonstrations, even if they were overtly pro-Western, cannot single-handedly change Belarus's orientation vis-à-vis Russia. By failing to build interdependence with Belarus over the last 30 years, Poland today lacks any meaningful points of leverage that might helping both the Belarusian regime and society develop more practical, economic and pecuniary bonds with it and the wider West.

In such matters, the balance of power is decisive and would have to change for the status of Belarus to change. For Russia, the status of Belarus is critical. In the West, it is believed that Moscow is ready to engage in open war to maintain Belarus's status as a Russian ally, while the West itself is by and large not; moreover, Europe lacks the capabilities for such an operation. Finally, Western Europeans generally consider the countries in Poland's region too weak to constitute the object of international politics as they are not net exporters of security and thus cannot influence the status of Belarus—particularly, if that change in status contradicts the national interests of a great power ready to go to war over this issue.

These observations presumably should affect Polish thinking about:

- Poland's security in Europe, including within the context of the consolidation of the European project;
- Poland's policy toward the East; and
- Poland's position and perceptions of Poland elsewhere (including Western Europe) as well as the strength and status of the entire region.

Over the last 30 years, the region has suffered from a progressing breakdown of the post-Cold War consensus as Germany and France have sought to revert to “concert of powers”-style relations with Russia vis-à-vis affairs in the Baltic-Black Sea Intermarium. Those arrangements have routinely undermined intraregional aspirations toward greater unity as well as a consolidation of the Intermarium and its separation from Russian domination. Those policies threaten to split Europe—an issue of vital concern for Poland.

And Belarus is not the only casualty of such policies by the main Western European powers. Indeed, Poland’s own relative security is perceived rather differently from Warsaw compared to from Paris. France, largely toothless as it is in the Intermarium, wants to avoid any confrontation over Belarus with Russia, military or otherwise. This raises serious doubts as to Western Europe’s security guarantees to the Intermarium region as well as its dedication to consolidating the European project if the US were to eventually withdraw from the Old Continent.

And that perceived reality serves as a serious wake-up call for Warsaw, encouraging it to learn to rely primarily on its own Armed Forces. All these reservations and doubts notwithstanding, from a hard security standpoint, the alliance with the United States is more meaningful for Poland than its military links with Western Europe. The US Armed Forces are significantly larger and generally much more capable, despite the fact that they are mostly based far from Poland and do not have their center of gravity in the region. Crucially, so long as the US commitment to its Intermarium allies remains steadfast and tangible, the Russian side cannot be confident of its ability to control the escalation ladder in the event of a crisis—a stark contrast to Moscow’s more dismissive views of the militaries of continental Europe.

In this situation, and to rationally hedge against a hypothetical future refocus of US priorities away from the region, Poland has no choice but to try to find other ways it can shake Russian certainty as to the

latter's control of the escalation ladder in the Intermarium. After Poland regained its independence following the end of World War I, the country's leader, Marshall Józef Piłsudski, argued that there is room for maneuver for Polish politics in the East, for example in the implementation of the *Międzymorze* (Intermarium) concept,¹⁷ and in other activities aimed at building instruments of regional pressure and political influence. Indeed, the instruments of Western policy do not reach the eastern buffer zone or are ineffective there; therefore, Western powers must take Poland into account when it comes to the balance of power in this region. When it came to Polish policy toward the West, Piłsudski assessed that without its own agenda, Poland would have to be obedient in all directions and secondary to the will of the then-Western powers. Deprived of agency in this way, Poland would be forced to accept the will of powers from outside the region, thus limiting Polish maneuvering in the fields of security as well as development, business and capital penetration.¹⁸ Piłsudski's recommendations, in short: in the west of the continent, Poland was nothing, while in the east, Poland was a key player, and this role should be protected and cared for.

In that vein, French President Emanuele Macron's efforts to discuss the region with Russia, without France having any significant instruments of leverage there, were met with deep skepticism in Warsaw. Paris (as other Western European capitals) has become accustomed to Poland adhering to its "strategic restraint" posture of the last 30 years. But that era is coming to an end. The result of this

¹⁷ *Międzymorze* (Intermarium) was an idea in the early 20th century to create a federation of the nations in Central and Eastern Europe that could jointly counter Russian (and German) imperial designs on the region. By its design, Poland would serve as an anchor of this project. Poland under Józef Piłsudski went to war in the spring of 1920 and seized Kyiv in order to consolidate a Ukrainian state that would form a key element of the Intermarium federal concept.

¹⁸ Bogdan Urbankowski, *Józef Piłsudski do Polaków. Myśli, mowy i rozkazy* [*Józef Piłsudski to Poles: Thoughts, Speeches and Orders*], Warsaw 2017.

“strategic restraint” was a Polish reluctance to take any actions in the East that could have developed historically familiar instruments of political leverage over the elites of the new (former Soviet) buffer states.

In absence of credible assurances that the regional balance of power will inevitably remain in the West’s favor, the political-security situation in Central and Eastern Europe grows more complex—as illustrated by the following example:

The Belarusian city of Grodno, located just on the other side of the Polish border, is a major transportation hub on the Neman (Nemunas in Lithuania) River. This is the place where Lukashenka deployed paratroopers following the disputed August 9, 2020, elections in order to signal that he is still in control. And it is where he invited Russian troops to exercise that September, amid tensions on the Belarusian streets following the rigged vote. If Poland and NATO were needed to help consolidate Baltic defenses, Grodno would hang over the Polish right flank’s movement to Vilnius and Kaunas: along Road No. 16 as well as along highway S8, between Suwałki and Marijampolė (Lithuania). It is “felt” all the way from Białystok to Augustów and in Augustów itself and its bypass. Due to the convenient area for attack through Sokółka and Kuźnica, which would be open to Russian forces coming out of Grodno, Białystok could be cut off from both the south and the east, blocking Polish movements from the right flank and threatening them non-stop. Moreover, the right flank of Polish movement cannot be leaned against the Neman, which should be a natural decision given the terrain and the logic of the battlefield. The area itself, along with the need to perform the task of coming to the aid of the Balts through the Suwałki Corridor, effectively “invites” a preemptive neutralization of Grodno by Western forces capturing the bridges on the Neman in order to eliminate the Grodno communication junction, which threatens the Polish projection of force to Vilnius and Kaunas. This operation, of course, would entail a political and military escalation with Belarus and Russia, which stands

behind Minsk. It is not coincidental that Grodno used to lie along the Warsaw–Vilnius communication line and, to this day, forms a key node of a critical Intermarium transportation corridor (see **Map 1**, p. i).

That said, taking Grodno will require reaching further inside Belarus to seize the junction in Volkovysk and in the town of Mosty, on the Neman. Such an operation would, in turn, create the temptation to secure the entire line of the Neman River, cutting Belarus in half in order to lean on this river and the bridges on it. This, of course, would surely draw Belarus fully into the war with all escalatory consequences including Russia.

Therefore, it is worth closely studying the 1920 Battle of the Neman River, which followed the Battle of Warsaw and sealed Poland's military victory in the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–1921. The main targets of the Polish operation at that time were Grodno, then Lida, in a deep left flanking movement, and finally the entire line of the Neman River, utilizing an encircling movement through Druskininkai, north of Grodno.¹⁹ One can assess the key ways in which this area does not align with the political boundaries left by Stalin and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This reality of difficult-to-defend present-day political boundaries translates into a substantially more difficult task for Polish armed forces on NATO's eastern flank. And this becomes a strategic challenge for Poland should Alliance security guarantees prove shaky or if a power vacuum develops and creates a lethal security dilemma in the region.

Even without land incursions of western Belarus, Grodno would have to be reconnoitred by drones, special forces and surveillance monitoring (the Polish situational awareness system); and Polish

¹⁹ Tadeusz Kutrzeba, *Bitwa nad Niemnem, wrzesień–październik 1920* [*Battle of the Neman River: September–October 1920*], Warsaw 1926.

forces would have to ensure airspace dominance (including regarding enemy helicopters) as well as the ability to react to the enemy's fire maneuvers. Nevertheless, Grodno would ideally have to be eliminated as a threat to ensure proper Allied movement through the Suwałki Corridor and deep into Lithuania. This in itself would engage considerable Polish forces. Before any forces could depend on the Suwałki Corridor, much work would need to be expended to secure these maneuvers, including ensuring a firing advantage (under the effective situational awareness system) on at least the flanks to protect against flanking or breaking the flank in conditions of low military saturation and war maneuvering.

In modern conditions, combat on the battlefield is dominated by the maneuverable, mobile actions of troops in an extended field of interaction with poorly shielded areas or completely uncovered flanks. Flank control is achieved through situational awareness control, maneuver flexibility and fire maneuver. This is the situation to expect for Polish and allied NATO forces' movement around the Suwałki Corridor facing Grodno. And the exact same issue would affect units facing Russian forces moving against Poland through Belarus. The main methods for defeating Russian troops would involve preemptive fire and situational awareness control during the various phases of a pre-kinetic and kinetic confrontation as well as in a reconnaissance battle for situational awareness superiority. All this makes the case for active defense that reaches far into Belarus, toward the Smolensk Gate.

On the opponent's side, one has to reckon with deep forays behind Poland's front lines, bypassing Polish/Allied force groups, cutting Poland's and NATO's stretched communication lines, causing logistical chaos, as well as creating an active combat front in the Polish rear with subsequent coordinated strikes from all directions. Increasingly, the center of gravity of war is shifting away from the mass of the enemy and its combat systems and toward command and communications. Deprived of communications and command, for example deep inside Belarus, Russian troops would have no real

combat value in a scattered battlefield. In fact, such “blind and deaf” units could now be effectively “encircled,” depriving them of combat strength with a fire maneuver and disabling their situational awareness system. Such an approach represents a whole new way of fighting, in which technology and multipliers replace mass and numbers. Poland does not face a giant anymore, and understanding this must help guide a restoration of its historical grand strategy.

Conclusions

After 45 years of existing as a Communist puppet state, followed by 30 years of geopolitically sunny weather, Poland is now waking up to the need to devise a new grand strategy rooted in 500 years of history of combating Russia. This redevise grand strategy is built on an understanding of the continuing importance of the strategic borders of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, stemming from the ruthless logic of the Smolensk Gate. Undeniably, a rapid incursion of enemy forces via the Smolensk Gate toward the Vistula valley would threaten Poland's very existence, while undermining NATO cohesion and setting off a cascade of effects that test the Alliance unlike any event in its history.

Poland must additionally bolster its toolkit to counter Russia's New Generation Warfare instruments. Deprived of them, Russia will no longer be in a position to so strongly or destructively influence events in Europe. In contrast, efforts by some Western European capitals, notably Paris, to invite Moscow into various balance-of-power schemes at the expense of the Intermarium region will stress Polish relations with those European powers. France's attempts to bring Russia to its side in the Eastern Mediterranean is already a harbinger of such dangerous realignments.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty will itself affect Polish military planning, particularly when it comes to active defense concepts such as

developing long-range fire and missiles. Acquiring long-range strike capabilities creates considerable opportunities to influence the opponent in the entire rear area and throughout the operational theater, including the combat impact on second and third echelon units, logistics bases, airports, equipment warehouses, electronic warfare systems, installations supporting operational activities, river crossings, logistics centers and the supply system, etc. Belarus is the place from which Russians would threaten Poland. Therefore, this makes Belarus a pivot of Poland's grand strategy.

With an adequate saturation of firepower and the efficient and uninterrupted operation of tracking and guidance systems, it is possible to extend the battlefield deep into the enemy's territory and, thus, significantly complicate the rival's planning and combat operations as well as potentially deprive the opponent of the operational initiative in aviation—assuming the enemy's air bases are within range. The acquisition of such capabilities as part of Poland's own active anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) defense would need to plug into a modern and (this is worth emphasizing) *proprietary* situational awareness system in the Belarusian operational direction, as far as the Dnieper and Daugava lines encompassing the Smolensk Gate. That, combined with the impact on all communication nodes, bridges, bases and enemy concentrations, will be the foundation of a novel active defense concept for Poland.

Obtaining such abilities would significantly improve Poland's chances of preventing a Russian strike by hitting the depths of the theater of operations, where a quick maneuver by enemy forces would threaten the capital city of Warsaw itself. This would also complicate the Russians' planning of quick deployment and marching operations through Belarus. In cooperation with Ukraine, it is possible for Poland, through active defense in the foreground, to strengthen the chance of success in a war with Russia in the event of a blockade of bypass crossings through the Pripjat, which would change the geometry of the front. While this would require a firmer Polish-

Ukrainian alliance, the benefit of making it happen could change the Russian strategic situation: Russia would now find itself flanked from broad southern and southeastern directions. If the security architecture in Europe crumbles, such a Polish-Ukrainian alliance might be the only other viable option for Warsaw.

Demonstrated measures of active defense will need to be robust and credible enough to create a security umbrella in the Intermarium capable of protecting at least against Russia's low-intensity coercion methods. In that case, Russia may find itself also unable to start major offensive land operations without first having to neutralize the North Atlantic Alliance's regional surface-to-surface strike systems and observation systems that deliver force multipliers. This would undermine the Russian dominance of the escalation ladder and could give Poland time for additional preparation, allied assistance and diplomatic maneuver in the event of a brewing conflict. Moreover, other domains of New Generation Warfare designed to give the Russian military the upper hand in a conflict may themselves be at risk: energy blackmail, market access, strategic flows control, disinformation, propaganda, cyber operations, sanctions, etc.

Accordingly, Poland and its regional allies' resilience against Russian New Generation Warfare will grow if augmented by the hard-power measures of a credible active defense. The Intermarium can be protected, at least by denial, through indigenous deterrence by punishment; but this also requires thinking about how to address the entirely different challenge posed by Russia's nuclear capabilities. Protection by denial should suffice because the Russian civilizational project is not attractive to its western neighbors. It is enough for Poland and its Allies to demonstrate their ability to eliminate Russia's perceived military advantage in the Intermarium for the whole edifice of Russian regional dominance to collapse.

Russia's Western High Command and the Role of Belarus in Russian Strategic Planning

Nicholas J. Myers

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Executive Summary

Russia's last friend on its border with Europe, Belarus acquired new significance for Russian strategy after the emergence of an anti-Russian regime in Kyiv in 2014. However, Moscow takes little interest in Minsk's policies even as Russia's Western High Command relies upon Belarusian cooperation in its contingency planning for conflict in continental Europe. Analysis of Russian military exercises and diplomatic patterns since 2017 shows how the Western High Command is thinking about future war with NATO in each of its three strategic directions.

In the northwestern direction—encompassing the Baltic States and coastal Poland—a compliant Belarus plays into the Russian high command's planning as a staging area from which to take control of east-west rail links to isolated Kaliningrad Oblast. In the western strategic direction, mainly targeting Poland, Russian radars on Belarusian soil and Belarusian air-defense assets as well as Belarusian forces may be expected to defend supply lines through Belarus during a broader Russia-NATO confrontation. Losing Belarus would significantly impact Russian power projection, removing Warsaw from the reach of Russian ground forces without committing virtually its entire armed forces to the task. Belarus appears to play the most

indirect role in the southwestern direction, covering Ukraine: mainly serving for Moscow's war planners as a Russian salient, complicating European military support for Ukraine in wartime conditions given the presence of CSTO air-defense assets in Belarus. At the same time, if Russian land forces are able to use Belarus as a staging ground for escalated conflict with Ukraine or simply threaten to do so, this would force Kyiv to withdraw its military front line significantly further westward, leaving the capital region significantly more vulnerable.

A Belarusian exit from Moscow's security planning—whether through neutrality or a changed geopolitical orientation—would seriously complicate Russian military thinking in Europe, significantly elevate Poland's security and strategic influence, and potentially banish Moscow's military threat from the North European plain for the first time in 500 years. However, such a transformation would put Belarus in an extremely precarious political situation that would be difficult to sustain. These considerations underline the significance of the current instability in Belarus following President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's contested reelection on August 9, 2020. For as long as the current present Belarusian government remains politically vulnerable, it raises the risks of Minsk losing its sovereign freedom of maneuver and adherence to de facto neutrality in the face of Russian pressure to join Moscow in the latter's strategic standoff with the West.

Introduction

Tasked with defending Russia from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Western High Command of the Russian Federation holds a prominent place in the country's security architecture. The command was created as part of former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov's broader reform of the Russian Armed Forces' command-and-control structure. Most of its forces are supplied by the Western Military District, which was created at the

same time by combining the preceding Moscow and Leningrad military districts.

Since 2014, ongoing overt strategic rivalry between Russia and the West has increased visibility for this command. Until that time, the Western High Command had focused on using next-generation technologies to reduce demand for massing force. Since the outbreak of war in Donbas, however, Russia has greatly increased its force in the West, standing up a tank army around Moscow and two divisions on the Ukrainian border. Though technological modernization remained a priority, it no longer offset an absence of force but complemented it.

This paper assesses how Russian diplomatic and military bureaucratic behavior reflects the Western High Command's current contingency planning for war in Europe. And in assessing the state of Russian military modernization on its European border, the following study will specifically evaluate the importance of Belarus to current Russian strategic thinking.

How Russia Perceives Its Western Neighbors

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has had a fraught relationship with Europe. Western investment entered the undercapitalized Russian economy in the early years of President Vladimir Putin's regime. In return, Russian natural gas not only heated Europe but also repaid the Soviet Union's legacy debt.¹ However, the enlargement of the NATO strategic alliance into former Warsaw Pact territory and the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania helped sustain a residual Russian security skepticism of the West. In 2019, the

¹ "Russia Pays Off Last Soviet Debt," *The Moscow Times*, August, 22, 2017, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/08/22/russia-pays-off-last-soviet-debt-a58718>.

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall claimed that the hope for a "peaceful, prosperous Europe without dividing lines" was "not realized."²

When these tensions exploded into military conflict in the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Europe established a serious sanctions regime targeting Russia³ and revitalized NATO's historic mission of defending Europe.⁴ But at the same time, long-observed fault lines in Europe crystallized in Russian government messaging: Moscow demonized any European NATO member state supporting the initiatives of collective defense and deterrence, calling them "Russophobic" policies that prioritized war over their citizens' prosperity while justifying raised defense spending to appease the United States.⁵ Anti-Western political figures, already in vogue after the 2011–2012 anti-Putin demonstrations in Russia, became the exclusive voice of Russian opinion in the state-controlled media.⁶

² Maria Zakharova, "O 30-letii padeniya Berlinskoy steny," Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), November 8, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3891813#9.

³ "EU restrictive measures in response to the crisis in Ukraine," European Council, Accessed August 23, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/ukraine-crisis/>.

⁴ "Our 5 priorities for the NATO Summit Wales 2014," Government of the United Kingdom, September 1, 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-5-priorities-for-the-nato-summit-wales-2014/our-5-priorities-for-the-nato-summit-wales-2014>.

⁵ A typical example is this for the United Kingdom: "Diplomaty otvetili na slova britanskogo generala o kibervoyne c Rossiey," RIA Novosti, September 30, 2019, modified March 3, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20190930/1559297334.html>.

⁶ War Vs Peace has created a system for compiling all Russian statements for and against government policies, assigning a positive score of +1 to +3 for all statements of favor and -1 to -3 for all condemnations, oppositions, and threats. Methodology

Russian diplomatic officials had hoped that the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States would reduce Washington's interest in backing a pro-Western regime in Ukraine.⁷ However, bipartisan support for assisting Ukraine continued. Meanwhile, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania successfully lobbied for a ramped-up and enduring NATO conventional force presence in their region to deter potential Russian aggression.⁸

This divide has created a stark fissure in Europe. **Map 11** (see p. xiv) depicts Russian perceptions of Europe by the frequency of diplomatic statements in favor of or against individual European states' policies since the start of the Trump administration, with higher numbers/more red color denoting what Moscow perceives as friendlier states. As the conflict in Ukraine is already militarized, Russia has been forced to keep its military contingency plans for Europe updated to answer recent developments in NATO, even if the probability of a conventional war between Russia and the West remains quite low.

Before assuming that **Map 11** represents the future battle lines of Europe, however, it must be noted that, despite the vitriolic rhetoric emanating from Moscow, Russian diplomatic engagement with Europe goes on. Much of this pertains to Russian actions in the

can be explored in further detail at <https://www.warvspeace.org/official-russian-supportcondemnation>. Since the start of the Donald Trump administration, this system has found a net balance of Russian opinion of European state behavior of -1,369. This compares, for example, to a net score of +207 in Asia.

⁷ "Intervyu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova zhurnal' 'Natsionalnyi interes' publikovannoe 29 marta 2017 goda," MID, March 29, 2017, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2710445.

⁸ "Multinational Corps Northeast," NATO, Accessed August 23, 2020, <https://jfcbs.nato.int/operations/multinational-corps-northeast>.

Middle East, especially in Syria, but it also reflects the enduring bilateral relationships of much of Europe with Russia, regardless of the ongoing disputes over Ukraine. If one combines the frequency of these meetings, the rhetoric of Moscow, and the frequency of signing bilateral agreements (e.g. protocols for state meetings, visa-free travel, etc.) and exacting punishments (e.g. new sanctions, summoning the ambassador, etc.), Europe appears more as **Map 12** (see p. xv).

The latter map suggests that, in the event of a military confrontation with the West, Russia may yet be able to divide and conquer the NATO alliance, especially if the US remains lukewarm toward maintaining Transatlantic solidarity and cohesion. The map also clearly indicates that potential conflict is most highly anticipated in the Intermarium countries directly on Russia's borders. Perhaps ironically, this divide follows roughly the *cordon sanitaire* of the interwar (1918–1939) years. Both maps indicate Poland and Ukraine as the center of Russia's ire in the West, complemented by the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia and Kosovo. Less problematic states include Albania, Czechia (the Czech Republic), Denmark, North Macedonia and Romania. This suggests that Russian defensive and counteroffensive planning for the Europe-facing strategic direction revolves around defeating the militaries of Ukraine and the countries on NATO's northeastern (Baltic) flank.

Another indication of Moscow's strategic focus on these countries is the frequency of articles written on their present-day military-political situations in the Russian press. Out of just under 500 articles surveyed in 2019,⁹ 141 examined the changing dynamic in Europe. Of those

⁹ Sources consulted to compile this database include official Russian defense ministry press releases and official journals such as *Krasnaya Zvezda* as well as excerpts from speeches by Russian government officials, but also unofficial Russian defense-focused newspapers and blogs such as *Voенно-Промышленный Курьер* and *BMPD Blog*.

141, 94 (two-thirds) considered Poland, Ukraine, Belarus or the Baltic States specifically.

Russian military planning in Europe therefore appears to concern itself primarily with these six countries in addition to NATO allies most likely to intervene on their behalf, especially the United States, United Kingdom and Canada.¹⁰ Georgia boasts increased cooperation with NATO but lies outside the European strategic direction, while Kosovo represents a different potential challenge than those countries on Russia's doorstep.

Notable from both above-presented maps is the unique role in Europe played by Belarus. Each one indicates that Moscow regards Belarus as a critical continental partner. However, unlike other major perceived partners France and Germany, Belarus is not considered an "important country" in Moscow. This is quantitatively demonstrated in **Map 13** (see p. xvi), which tallies the number of separate deputy foreign ministerial interactions Moscow has conducted with each European capital throughout 2019. This metric is inherently illustrative because Moscow generally assigns only one deputy foreign minister to each region in addition to several responsible for specific diplomatic projects such as arms control. Thus, Moscow indirectly demonstrates the importance it attributes to foreign governments by whether it is worth dispatching deputy foreign ministers irrelevant to bilateral relations to better understand that government's broader foreign policy.¹¹ **Map 13** indicates that whereas Russian partnerships

¹⁰ The Netherlands registers a negative relationship primarily due to the MH-17 disaster, which originated from Amsterdam, was carrying many Dutch citizens onboard, and has been subjected to a vigorous legal campaign from the Netherlands. Its military contribution to a potential military conflict with Russia will, therefore, not be examined as closely as the others.

¹¹ For example, Russia's deputy foreign minister responsible for Middle Eastern and African affairs occasionally consults with Berlin's ambassador in Moscow to understand and potentially coordinate with Germany's Middle East policy, whereas he does not do so with perceived friendly but "unimportant" governments such as

with France, Germany and Turkey are based at least in part on Paris', Berlin's and Ankara's perceived importance, neither Minsk nor Belgrade receive this respect despite the sentiments displayed in **Map 12**.

Belarus's geographic position between Russia and its perceived opponents in Central and Eastern Europe makes it a critical component of regional Russian military contingency planning, as will be shown below. However, **Map 13** suggests that Minsk's own policies are frequently ignored in Moscow and have little bearing on Russia's foreign or defense policy calculations. This reveals a potential weakness in Russian military and strategic planning if Minsk objects to Russian use of force against Europe from Belarusian territory.¹²

Western High Command Training Patterns

The author does not consider overt Russian aggression against NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe probable. Indeed, such a scenario seems almost implausible given the North Atlantic Alliance's vastly superior overall military capabilities, despite the demographic-driven weakness of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and an unfavorable (toward NATO) balance of forces within the Baltic region itself. This paper, therefore, assumes that Russian military contingencies in Europe involve Moscow perceiving its neighbors to be actively

Budapest. "O vstreche spetspredstavatelya Prezidenta ROssiyskoy Federatsii po Blizhnemu Vostoku i stranam Afriki, zamestitelya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii M.L. Bogdanova s Poslom FRG v Moskve Ryudigerom fon Frichem," *MID*, May 8, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3638961.

¹² Key members of the Belarusian government have recently reiterated their objection to being the battlefield between Russia and NATO, signaling daylight between Minsk and Moscow. "Makey: Belorussiya ne khochet okazat'sya na ostrie protivostoyaniya Rossii i NATO," *RIA Novosti*, October 7, 2019, last revised March 3, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20191007/1559512730.html>.

destabilizing either the Kaliningrad Oblast exclave, other Russian territories or Russian political society at large. A hypothetical example may be Poland, Lithuania and Latvia blocking the resupply of materials to Kaliningrad Oblast during anti-Kremlin civic disorder in the region. Yet, even in that circumstance, Russia would probably attempt to resolve the crisis by maritime and air lines of communication before resorting to armed force; the most likely instigation for war would be a NATO member's use of force to support anti-Kremlin protesters, another improbable prospect, albeit one feared in Moscow and Minsk. The Zapad 2017 strategic-operational exercise scenario involved expunging Western special forces support for anti-government forces.¹³ Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's military response to protesters after the disputed 2020 presidential election seems to follow this pattern,¹⁴ suggesting the president's suspicion of the West's presence among his opponents.

It is also important to note that the Russian Western High Command (ZGK) does not consider the five aforementioned "problematic" border states—Ukraine, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—to form part of a single strategic direction. Rather, the ZGK plans along three strategic directions roughly analogous to the late Soviet *teatr voennykh destvii* (TVD) borders: northwestern, western and southwestern. The northwestern strategic direction encompasses the Baltic region, including Polish coastal areas. The western strategic direction primarily pertains to Poland and Belarus. The southwestern strategic direction includes Ukraine and the Balkans. As in the Soviet era, these regions include some territorial overlap. Belarus, Russia's

¹³ Nicholas J. Myers, "Russia's Union Shield Exercises – in Transition?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 24, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-union-shield-exercises-in-transition/>.

¹⁴ "Zamok na zapade. Belorussiya usilivaet granitsu s Pol'shey i Litvoy," *Radio Sputnik*, August 20, 2020, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20200820/1576054883.html>.

only ally in the region, also divides its forces between two strategic directions—northwest and west—seemingly contiguous with Russia’s definitions.

Though Russia could attempt operations along multiple of these strategic directions simultaneously, this would be a risky gamble. The ZGK’s strategic and strategic-operational exercises of recent years have each focused on an individual strategic direction at a time, as listed in **Table 6**.

Table 6: Russian Strategic and Strategic-Operational Exercises in the West

<i>Exercise</i>	<i>Strategic Direction</i>
Zapad 2009 (West 2009)	Western
Zapad 2013 (West 2013)	Western
Shchit Soyuza 2015 (Union Shield 2015)	Northwestern
Zapad 2017 (West 2017)	Northwestern
Shchit Soyuza 2019 (Union Shield 2019)	Northwestern

Belarus participated in each of those exercises, perhaps explaining why there has not yet been any focus on the southwestern strategic direction. At the very least, it suggests Belarus has made no overt contingency plans for attacking Ukraine with its own forces. To date, the war in eastern Ukraine’s Donbas appears to be managed from Rostov Oblast, under the auspices of Russia’s Southern High Command.

Understanding Russian military planning in Europe requires a greater depth of examination of the units available to the ZGK as well as how they train. The strategic and strategic-operational exercises listed above are merely capstone events of training cycles rather than displays of all capabilities.

The Western High Command's Evolving Order of Battle

In Russian military parlance, a high command (*glavnoe kommandovanie*) is the staff commanding forces within a TVD or strategic direction.¹⁵ A military district (*voennyi okrug*) is responsible for training and arming units in peacetime so that they are at maximum readiness for the demands of the high command in the event of war.¹⁶ The ZGK is responsible for potential warfighting, but the Western Military District (ZVO) supplies only the core of the force that the ZGK would command.

The Western Military District

The ZVO is comprised of three armies, one air force and air-defense army, three airborne divisions, one airborne brigade, the Baltic Fleet, and an army corps attached to the Baltic Fleet.

– *Ground Forces.* The ZVO's three armies fall neatly into the three strategic directions on a map, if less so in practice. The 6th Combined Arms Army is based around St. Petersburg, in the northwestern strategic direction; the 1st Guards Tank Army is around Moscow, in the western strategic direction; and the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army is based between Smolensk and Voronezh, in the southwestern strategic direction. The 11th Army Corps, formally attached to the Baltic Fleet, is based in the Kaliningrad Oblast exclave. These units' paper-strength capabilities are not comparable, as shown in **Table 7**.

¹⁵ "GLAVNOE KOMANDOVANIE," Russian Ministry of Defense, Accessed August 23, 2020, <http://энциклопедия.минобороны.рф/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=5366@morfDictionary>.

¹⁶ "VOENNYI OKRUG," Russian Ministry of Defense, Accessed August 23, 2020, <http://энциклопедия.минобороны.рф/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=4458@morfDictionary>

Table 7: ZVO Ground Forces Unit Breakdown

<i>Army (Corps)</i>	1st Guards Tank Army	6th Army	20th Guards Army	11th Army Corps
<i>Tank Units</i>	1 Division, 1 Brigade	N/A	1 Brigade	1 REG
<i>Motor Rifle Units</i>	1 Division, 1 Brigade	2 Brigades	2 Divisions	1 Brigade, 1 Regiment, 1 Marine BGE
<i>Artillery Units</i>	2 ARTY Brigades, 1 Missile Brigade, 1 Thermobaric BAT	2 ARTY Brigades, 1 Missile Brigade, 1 Thermobaric BAT	1 ARTY Brigade, 1 Missile Brigade	1 ARTY Brigade, 1 Missile Brigade
<i>Engineer Units</i>	3 Brigades, 1 Regiment, 1 LOG BGE, 1 Rail BGE	1 Regiment, 1 LOG BGE, 1 Rail BGE	1 Regiment, 1 LOG BGE, 1 Rail BGE	1 Regiment, 2 Battalions
<i>Attack Helo Units*</i>	1 Brigade	2 Brigades	N/A	1 Squadron

*Attack helicopter units are technically part of the Air Force and Air Defense Army

Immediately notable is the far greater strength of the 1st Guards Tank Army compared to the others, though the 20th Guards Army is still not fully organized and may yet acquire additional forces. Another key specialization visible is that whereas the 1st Guards Tank Army possesses by far the most tanks, the 6th Army has the most attack

helicopters. This suggests that the different units are expected to fight in different regions.

– *Airborne Troops.* The Airborne Troops (VDV) form a separate branch of the Russian Armed Forces. Though they follow their own training regimen and frequently exercise separately from the other services in the strategic exercises, they appear also to conform to the strategic directions based on their peacetime garrisons.

Table 8: Distribution of ZVO VDV Units by Strategic Direction

Northwestern	1 Division
Western	2 Divisions
Southwestern	1 Brigade

– *Aerospace Forces.* The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) combine combat aviation, air defense, and space-based capabilities. In the ZVO, this is organized into the 6th Air Force and Air Defense Army. This is augmented by a separate 15th Army responsible specifically for the air and missile defense of Moscow, but this unit is extremely unlikely to deploy away from the capital under any circumstances. The 6th Air Force and Air Defense Army frequently exercises moving its assets across ZVO territory but garrisons those assets in several bases analogous to the strategic directions. However, it should be assumed that in wartime, all these assets would be redirected as necessary to any of the three strategic directions.

Table 9: Distribution of ZVO VKS Units by Strategic Direction in Peacetime

<i>Strategic Direction</i>	<i>Fighter Units</i>	<i>Strike Units</i>	<i>Reconnaissance Units</i>	<i>Air-Defense Units</i>
Northwestern	2 Regiments	N/A	N/A	1 Division
Western	N/A	N/A	1 Regiment	1 Division
Southwestern	1 Regiment	1 Regiment	N/A	N/A
Kaliningrad*	1 Regiment	1 Regiment	N/A	1 Division

*Kaliningrad’s aviation assets are technically naval aviation but infrequently exercise as such.

– *Navy*. The ZVO possesses the Baltic Fleet, based out of Baltiysk, Kaliningrad Oblast, and Kronshtadt, St. Petersburg, though most assets are garrisoned in the former. While it possesses a decent number of ships, the Baltic Fleet generally keeps most of them at port. To illustrate this, **Table 10** displays how many ships the Baltic Fleet possesses that have conducted an exercise at least once over the past three years arranged into how many training activities they have publicly reported in 2019.

Table 10: Baltic Fleet Assets by Number of Reported Exercises in 2019

<i>Exercise Count</i>	<i>Destroyers</i>	<i>Frigates</i>	<i>Corvettes</i>	<i>Amphibious Ships</i>
10+		1	5	
5–9			7	3
1–4	1		8	8
0		1	1	3
Total	1	2	21	14

<i>Exercise Count</i>	<i>Minesweepers</i>	<i>Other Support Vessels</i>	<i>Submarines</i>
10+			
5–9			
1–4	5	4	1
0	2	4	
Total	7	8	1

As can be observed, the emphasized capability in the Baltic Fleet are the corvettes or small missile ships. These ships are specially equipped to offer distributed lethality against all targets—including shore and missiles.

Neighboring Military Districts

The ZGK can be augmented by assets outside the ZVO in wartime. Although most units could conceivably be redeployed in that manner, this paper will only list the most likely sources of reinforcement and their potential roles in the European strategic directions.

– *Joint Strategic Command “North.”* The Arctic-focused Northern strategic command was detached from the ZGK and ZVO only in 2014 and features Russia’s most powerful, if aging, Northern Fleet with considerable subsurface assets. This force would almost certainly augment operations in the northwestern strategic direction as well as provide medium- to long-range sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) support from the Arctic. The Northern Fleet could also attempt to penetrate the so-called Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap to provide a wider range of missile targets, though such an operation would imperil the fleet’s survival given the large number of NATO naval aviation assets around the North Sea. The ground and air assets in the North would likely engage Norway in wartime if the latter joined NATO’s defense, but these assets would be extremely unlikely to deploy to another strategic direction given Russia’s self-perceived vulnerabilities in the Arctic.¹⁷

– *Central Military District.* The Central Military District (TsVO) encompasses a vast swathe of Russian territory, from the Volga region to eastern Siberia, with only two armies. Its air assets have recently

¹⁷ For example, “Problema Kraynego Severa,” *Viniti Ran*, Issue 4, 2011, <http://militaryarticle.ru/viniti-ran/2011-viniti/11560-problema-krajnego-severa>.

been modernized (see below) and its ground forces are specialized for deployment, so it could augment the ZGK, though this would leave central Russia virtually undefended. TsVO air assets and its 2nd Guards Army would likely move forward to augment Russian defenses wherever the ZVO's deployed forces departed. For example, during the northwestern-focused Zapad 2017, the 2nd Guards Army deployed some forces to Karelia and Murmansk Oblasts opposite the Finnish border.¹⁸ This probably was intended to absorb a hypothetical NATO attack on St. Petersburg or a Finnish counteroffensive honoring bilateral ties with Estonia.¹⁹ In an extended conflict, these assets could also form a subsequent echelon of a Russian offensive.

– *Southern Military District.* The Southern Military District (YuVO) faces the Caucasus, Black Sea and Caspian Sea, and it has coordinated the military activities in Crimea and Donbas against Ukraine since 2014. However, whereas its assets would play a critical role in a southwestern strategic direction campaign, it appears that the impetus for creating the current 20th Guards Army since 2015 has been to reduce the demands of Ukraine on YuVO assets. As in the Second World War, the YuVO's 8th Guards Army might deliberately fix Ukrainian assets in Donbas while the ZVO's 20th Guards Army assaulted Kyiv directly. However, this would likely be the only scenario employing YuVO assets in Europe. Though the Baltic Fleet regularly exercises sending assets to the Mediterranean Sea and sometimes the Black Sea, the Black Sea Fleet has made no similar effort to the Baltic Sea in recent years, though this may simply be a product of the current military-political situation.

¹⁸ "Oni srazhalis' za Siryu," *Kommersant*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3486877?id=5>.

¹⁹ "Estonian and Finnish ministers of defence concluded a bilateral defence cooperation framework agreement," Estonian Ministry of Defense, January 19, 2017, <http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/en/news/estonian-and-finnish-ministers-defence-concluded-bilateral-defence-cooperation-framework>.

– *Non-District Forces*. Russia also possesses several assets unattached to a particular military district, including Long-Range Aviation, Strategic Rocket Forces, and some special airborne troops. During wartime, the Strategic Rocket Forces would prepare for strategic nuclear exchange if the war escalated out of control. However, Long-Range Aviation and the other special airborne troops would provide additional strike and disruption capabilities wherever the ZGK required them, as was, indeed, exercised in Zapad 2017.²⁰

Recent Military Modernization

Since Zapad 2017, of 1,589 incidents reported by the Russian Ministry of Defense of new capabilities delivered to the Armed Forces or unit restructurings or standups, 222 (14 percent) have been reported in the ZVO. **Table 11** indicates that, after a surge at the end of 2017, the recent focus of Russian military modernization has been in the TsVO. **Table 12** breaks down deliveries of new equipment within the ZVO, showing that the 6th and 20th guards armies have received the most attention. However, the absence of any disproportionate spike suggests that these trends show no significant realignment of priorities within the Russian General Staff or Ministry of Defense leadership on priorities among the three European strategic directions.

²⁰ “Ekipazhi VKS otrabotali soprovozhdenie samoletov Dalney aviatsii,” Russian Ministry of Defense, September 15, 2017, http://деятельность.минобороны.рф/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12142409@egNews.

Table 11: Reported Deliveries of New Equipment to Each Military District Since Zapad 2017

<i>Military District</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>Total</i>
West (ZVO)	17.8%	14.4%	10.3%	14.0%
South (YuVO)	9.8%	12.3%	10.3%	11.0%
Central (TsVO)	9.5%	16.1%	17.2%	14.8%
East (VVO)	12.0%	5.4%	9.9%	8.5%
North	1.0%	2.0%	2.8%	2.0%

Percentages do not add up to 100% because of excluded non-district-based assets.

Table 12: Reported Deliveries of New Equipment Within the ZVO Since Zapad 2017

<i>Strategic Direction</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>Total</i>
Northwestern	31.5%	18.8%	36.5%	27.0%
Western	28.8%	26.0%	13.5%	23.9%
Southwestern	26.0%	33.3%	30.8%	30.6%
Kaliningrad	12.3%	17.7%	17.3%	15.8%

Exercise Trends in the Western Military District

This paper considers the data from 1,945 reported Russian military exercises and training activities conducted in the ZVO's territory since the summer 2017 training season. This data set was compiled by the author for War Vs Peace.²¹ For comparing the figures below, the total number of exercises for each strategic direction is 506 in the

²¹ "War Vs Peace," accessed August 23, 2020, <https://www.warvspeace.org/>.

northwestern strategic direction, 417 in the western, 345 in the southwestern direction, and 641 in Kaliningrad Oblast.

Tactical Group Exercises

Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of these exercises and training activities are tactical in scale, a subsection of them specifically exercises standing up tactical maneuver groups or specific tactical capabilities. **Table 13** shows how these exercises were distributed among the different strategic directions (northwestern, western, southwestern) and Kaliningrad Oblast. These exercises were conducted by the Ground Forces and VDV, occasionally augmented by the VKS.

**Table 13: Tactical Group Exercises in the ZVO, Summer 2017–
Summer 2019**

<i>Strategic Direction/Location</i>	<i>NW</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>KO</i>	<i>Total</i>
Company Tactical Group	6	3	4	1	14
Battalion Tactical Group	8	14	8	10	40
Regiment Tactical Group	4	11	1	0	16
Brigade Tactical Group	1	2	1	0	4
Undefined-Scale Tactical Group	1	2	2	7	12
Command-Staff	6	11	7	5	29
Defense & Counter-offensive Against Superior Enemy	6	5	2	3	16
Offensive	1	0	0	0	1
<i>Total</i>	33	48	25	26	132

This table indicates that these tactical maneuver groups are exercised more frequently in the 1st Guards Tank Army than in the other major units within the ZVO. It also exercises these capabilities at a larger scale than the units based in the other strategic directions. Over this time period, the 20th Guards Army had not yet been fully established, and so the southwestern direction's numbers may catch up in future training seasons.

Terrain Indicative Exercises

Certain exercise types indicate the type of terrain for which a unit is specialized. For the Russian Armed Forces, these exercises are special urban warfare, mountain warfare and river crossing exercises. **Table 14** breaks down the frequency of each of these exercises in the different strategic directions (northwestern, western, southwestern, and Kaliningrad Oblast).

Table 14: Terrain Indicative Exercises in the ZVO, Summer 2017–Summer 2019

<i>Strategic Direction/Location</i>	<i>NW</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>KO</i>	<i>Total</i>
Urban Warfare	4	7	4	0	15
River Crossing	11	17	10	8	46
Mountain Warfare	4	0	2	0	6

That river crossings should be so much more common than the other two exercise types is hardly surprising: European Russia as well as Europe's East feature many large rivers and few mountains. It nevertheless is interesting that it is exercised more frequently for the western strategic direction than in the more water-logged northwestern strategic direction. It is also worth noting the paucity of urban warfare exercises, indicating the Russian Armed Forces' preference to conduct its combat operations outside urban areas. Finally, any training for mountain warfare is notable given how rare

they are in eastern Europe. That they were conducted at all suggests a residual interest in combat capabilities in the Scandinavian (Scandes) and Carpathian mountain ranges.

Sustainment Exercises

Equally important in considering Russia's ability to fight across its borders is the frequency of logistical exercises in each strategic direction, especially as most of the country's post-Soviet combat operations have involved relatively short distances beyond its frontiers. **Table 15** breaks down these exercises.

**Table 15: Sustainment Exercises in the ZVO, Summer 2017–
Summer 2019**

<i>Strategic Direction/Location</i>	<i>NW</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>KO</i>	<i>Total</i>
Engineer	17	22	8	15	62
Repair & Logistics	8	15	0	7	30
Railway Sustainment	0	8	0	0	8
Refueling (AAR, Maritime, etc.)	3	9	12	11	35

This breakdown shows a notable preponderance of these sustainment capabilities in the western strategic direction and general unreadiness in the southwestern. This suggests that the primarily Poland- and Belarus-oriented 1st Guards Tank Army is the most capable unit for conducting and sustaining an offensive beyond Russia. This may explain why during the northwestern strategic direction scenario of Zapad 2017, considerable elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army were deployed into the 6th Army area of responsibility.

Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) Exercises

Though Russia does not have an A2/AD operational concept, it has invested considerable resources into modernized air-defense and missile technologies to protect itself from Western standoff tactics demonstrated in Yugoslavia and Iraq. Unsurprisingly, these capabilities have a prominent place in Russian military exercises, as shown in **Table 16**.

Table 16: A2/AD Exercises in the ZVO, Summer 2017–Summer 2019

<i>Strategic Direction/Location</i>	<i>NW</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>KO</i>	<i>Total</i>
Air defense	16	14	7	52	89
Tactical surface missile	14	9	1	16	40
Ship-based missile	0	0	0	25	25
Coastal missile	0	0	0	25	25
Airbase suppression	2	0	2	1	5
Missile defense	3	6	0	11	20
Air strike	17	5	14	36	72
Close air support (CAS)	1	1	2	3	6
Suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD)	2	0	4	0	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>169</i>	<i>289</i>

This again presents a curious dynamic: A2/AD capabilities are overwhelmingly concentrated in the Kaliningrad Oblast exclave. Whereas the western strategic direction has the most capabilities in the previous charts, here it ranks at the bottom with the still-forming southwestern strategic direction units. Kaliningrad's numbers in **Table 16** are, of course, boosted by the basing of most Baltic Fleet assets there, gaining all the maritime exercise numbers for itself. And yet, even without the naval exercises, Kaliningrad would still have almost as many A2/AD exercises as the three other regions combined.

This illustrates three factors in Russian strategic planning. First, the Belarusian alliance and erstwhile (pre-2014) Ukrainian neutrality led Moscow to reduce priority for A2/AD capabilities to the western and southwestern strategic directions, presumably under the assumption that there was no immediate threat to these regions. In other words, the Russian military leadership does not appear to consider the Ukrainian Air Force and missile capabilities as serious threats to Russia. Second, Kaliningrad Oblast is mostly regarded not as a launch pad for an offensive into Poland and Lithuania but rather as a vulnerability requiring considerable means to defend itself from a potential NATO attack. Third, the Baltic Fleet exercises less as a strike force than as an extended air- and missile-defense shield beyond Russia's borders, providing an additional layer of shielding for Russian territory.

Combat Environment Exercises

Another aspect of Russian military planning discernible from the exercise patterns is the combat environment its expects its forces to encounter in the various strategic directions. In particular, Russia exercises cleanup from chemical, radiation, biological and nuclear (CBRN) attacks; recovering aircraft from "operational" airfields after their garrisons were suppressed (sometimes with CBRN weapons), and occasionally combat operations under conditions of enemy use of weapons of mass destruction. Over the past three years, outside of dedicated strategic nuclear exercises, Russia has never overtly practiced employing its own weapons of mass destruction in tactical exercises but also has not ruled out using them if the enemy launches them first. This is broken down in **Table 17**.

Table 17: Combat Environment Exercises in the ZVO, Summer 2017–Summer 2019

<i>Strategic Direction/Location</i>	<i>NW</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>KO</i>	<i>Total</i>
CBRN Defense	11	8	20	15	54
Airfield Recovery	13	0	8	0	21
Operations during Nuclear or Chemical Warfare	1	1	2	0	4
<i>Total</i>	25	9	30	15	79

As with A2/AD exercises, the western strategic direction exercises these capabilities less frequently, likely because of the relative protection offered by Belarus. The more-exposed northwestern and southwestern strategic directions, therefore, exercise these capabilities more vigorously. Kaliningrad Oblast's forces do not exercise airfield recovery, presumably because of a lack of available runways.

Belarus in Russian Strategic Calculations

Unavoidable in this appraisal is the centrality of Belarus to Russian strategic planning for war in Europe. Though the southwestern strategic direction appears to avoid using Belarusian territory, the 1st Guards Tank Army may still seek to utilize a forward deployment in Belarus during a crisis either to strike the western Ukrainian rear or simply fix Ukrainian forces behind the decisive front.

President Lukashenka of Belarus occasionally denounces the escalated tensions between Russia and the West, proclaiming that he does not

want his country to become a battleground for their competition.²² However, as indicated above, Minsk's political position is not regarded as important in Moscow. Lukashenka's ideal solution (and, indeed, the Putin regime's²³) arguably involves not leaving the Russian security orbit but rather finding a way for the Eurasian bloc to reconcile its differences and better integrate with Europe in an economic and security if not political framework. Considering the ongoing security friction between Russia and Europe—especially given the positions of the Moscow-skeptic countries Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland—this peaceful solution appears remote at the time of writing. Nevertheless, thinking through the potential impact that a Belarusian withdrawal from Russian planning would have on the ZGK yields important insights about Russian military strategy along NATO's northeastern flank. In light of the Lukashenka regime's instability following the Belarusian 2020 presidential election, Moscow is likely considering the potential implications of this possibility now.

Southwestern Strategic Direction

The southwestern strategic direction would be impacted least by Belarus's hypothetical withdrawal from the Russian security sphere but would undergo some important changes. In the prevailing military-political situation since 2014, Belarus acts as a Russian salient, complicating European military support for Ukraine in

²² "Gradus nedoderiya mezhdu Rossey i Zapadnom dostig predela, zayavil Lukashenko," *RIA Novosti*, October 8, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191008/1559535129.html>.

²³ As illustrated by Russia's occasional anti-"false choice" of Europe versus Russia narrative on the EU and EEU, "Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode lektsii dlya vysshego ofiterskogo sostava Akademii Genshtaba, Moskva, 23 marta 2017 goda," MID, March 23, 2017, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2702537.

wartime conditions given the presence of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) air-defense assets in Belarus.²⁴ Without this complication, European resupply to Ukraine would become considerably simpler. Nevertheless, this consideration is hardly the most important inhibitor to Ukrainian association with the NATO alliance.

Presuming that the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army cannot use Belarus as a concentration point ahead of a broader attack on Ukraine, the territory west of Kyiv becomes a far more secure rear area. Ukraine still has a border with the Moscow-supported “frozen” conflict zone of Transnistria (eastern Moldova), but Russian assets there amount to one battalion’s strength and could easily be shielded on either the northern or eastern frontiers. That said, the Russian Operational Group of Forces in Transnistria could still be used as a rear attack unit against Odesa, presuming a complementary Russian conventional strike toward the city from either the sea or overland from the east. Additionally, Transnistria has roughly 10,000–15,000 local though *de facto* Russian-commanded forces that, at the very least, could defend this small territory while the Russian battalion conducted an offensive.²⁵

Ukraine’s immediate challenges would be unchanged: a war in Donbas, a long open border with Russia in the 20th Guards Army’s area of responsibility, and the Black Sea coast open to naval attack

²⁴ “Rossiya i Belorussiya nachali nesti sovместnoe boevoe dezhurstvo po protivovozdushnoy oborone granits Soyuznogo gosudarstva,” Russian Ministry of Defense, September 6, 2017, http://деятельность.минобороны.рф/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12141197@egNews.

²⁵ Dumitru Minzarari, “Crimea Crisis Exposes Severe Deficiencies in Transnistria Negotiations Format,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 9, 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/crimea-crisis-exposes-severe-deficiencies-in-transnistria-negotiations-format/>.

from forces in Crimea and Krasnodar Krai. However, a Belarus closed to Russia would broadly secure its rear area bordering NATO and facilitate potential reinforcement from the West in the event of war.

Russia's power projection capabilities in the southwestern strategic direction beyond Ukraine would not be more seriously hampered than they already are by the departure of Belarus. Short of acquiring a willing partner with an accessible coastline, such as Bulgaria or Greece, Russia has no means of accessing the Balkans besides by air or negotiation for passage with NATO member states.

Western Strategic Direction

Sitting astride the western strategic direction, Belarus could profoundly impact this military option if it hypothetically were to withdraw from Moscow's orbit. The western strategic direction primarily addresses Poland at present; without Belarus, Russia's only direct access to Poland would be via already-disconnected Kaliningrad. If Russia were to seriously attempt an attack on Poland from Kaliningrad Oblast, the reinforcement of the exclave would represent such an obvious vulnerability as to invite possible preemptive strikes and sea interdiction from the West.

The withdrawal of Russian radars from Belarus and loss of Belarusian air-defense cover would almost certainly prompt a buildup of further air-defense assets around Smolensk. It could also encourage the buildup of additional ground and air forces to offset the loss of Belarusian forces that might otherwise have been called upon to defend supply lines through Belarus during a broader Russia-NATO confrontation.

However, the most profound shift could come less from the change to the order of battle itself than to Moscow's disposition toward Minsk. Considering Minsk a traitor to the Eurasian order, Moscow would likely direct an avalanche of destabilizing propaganda at Belarus while

supporting anti-government insurrectionists—as it did in Donbas in 2014. The 1st Guards Tank Army may simply adjust its planning away from fighting Poland to fighting Belarus given the general similarity in terrain.

During the ongoing crisis in Belarus in August 2020, Russian messaging on the situation in Belarus has been decidedly mixed. Immediately prior to the election, Belarus arrested 33 Russians in the country on suspicion of their being part of the Wagner Group private military company.²⁶ Russian officials denounced the move before the election but opinion²⁷ shifted dramatically to one of support for Lukashenka's legitimacy afterward.²⁸ As the crisis has dragged on, Russian confidence in Lukashenka's regime appears to have become shaken, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov admitting the elections were not "perfect."²⁹

Losing Belarus would significantly impact Russian power projection, removing Warsaw from the reach of Russian ground forces without

²⁶ "V MID Belorussii sostoitsya vstrecha po delu o zaderzhannykh rossiyanakh," *RIA Novosti*, July 30, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200730/1575144642.html>.

²⁷ "O zaderzhanii belorusskoy storonoy grazhdan Rossii," *MID*, July 30, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4276463.

²⁸ "Kommentariy Departmenta informatsii i pechati MID Rossii po itogam prezidentskikh syborov v Belorussii," *MID*, August 10, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4281983. "Telefonniy razgovor s Prezidentom Belorussii Aleksandrom Lukashenko," Kremlin, August 15, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63893>.

²⁹ "Fragment interv'yū Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu 'Rossiya', Moskva, 19 avgusta 2020 goda," *MID*, August 19, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4290963.

committing virtually its entire armed forces to the task. Though Kaliningrad would likely remain under Russian control absent larger civic unrest within Russia itself, the removal of a serious risk to NATO's section of the North European Plain beyond medium- to long-range missile strikes would offer significant insulation to European security. The effect would be to restore the political balance to something akin to that between Muscovy and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth four centuries ago, albeit with a Russian rather than German enclave in East Prussia (today's Kaliningrad).

Even before the 2020 election, Lukashenka was unlikely to voluntarily enact such a geopolitical transition as it would transform his country into a battlefield between West and East, making his political survival contingent upon Warsaw's (and Brussels') good graces rather than Moscow's.³⁰

Northwestern Strategic Direction

Belarus's impact on the northwestern strategic direction is the most debatable of the three. A glance at the map suggests that it could be as significant as Belarus's disappearance from the western strategic direction, given that it would deprive the Russian Armed Forces of easy access to the potential Suwałki Corridor chokehold on NATO resupply to the Baltic States. However, Belarus's significance on this front may be less definitive than first meets the eye.

A hypothetical Russian attack against Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is still assumed to be contingent on the unlikely scenario of necessary Russian ground reinforcement to Kaliningrad Oblast being denied by

³⁰ A consideration Moscow frequently reminds its Belarusian partners of. "Kommentariy DIP MID Rossii ob otsenkakh nablyudeniya za parameentskimi vyborami v Respublike Belarus'," *MID*, November 21, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3908552.

the region's governments. Though Russia's objectives may experience subsequent mission creep, the initial military objective would be achieving a land bridge with Kaliningrad, presumably including a rail link. The Suwałki Corridor features no east-west rail corridor along the geographically short gap between Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus.³¹ Instead, the shortest rail link from Belarus to Kaliningrad passes through Vilnius and Kaunas in Lithuania. However, assuming that Belarus is no longer friendly territory for Russia, the shortest rail link would be that from Pskov via Daugavpils in Latvia and subsequently via either Panevezys or Vilnius and Kaunas in Lithuania. Fighting to gain control of this entire stretch of railway appears infinitely more complicated on a map but affords the possibility of avoiding the two largest cities of Lithuania, a welcome consideration for the Russian Ground Forces.

Furthermore, as **Map 14** (see p. xvii) suggests, this thinking is already prominent for the northwestern strategic direction in Russia today, contingent on the continuation of the alliance with Belarus. During Zapad 2017, the main groupings of Russian forces were localized near the start of the Pskov railway running south toward Daugavpils and along the Belarusian railway running northwest toward Vilnius, with only attack helicopters exercising anywhere near the Suwałki Corridor to potentially provide supply harassment.³² Without Belarusian support, Moscow would likely first secure Minsk's neutrality in this conflict before committing to the operation; fighting both Belarus and NATO simultaneously would be an exceptionally tall order for the Russian Armed Forces. This would also mean that the Pskov rail line

³¹ Open Railway Map, <https://www.openrailwaymap.org/>

³² It should be noted that the Belarusian polygon where the attack helicopters exercised in Zapad 2017 is, indeed, a specialized helicopter training ground and may have been selected purely for pragmatic considerations. However, it is not the only such training ground in Belarus and so can plausibly be considered indicative evidence.

would be the only potential path to victory. Without the option to fix enemy forces in place with threats from Belarusian territory, it becomes significantly simpler for Latvia, Lithuania, and any NATO forces assisting them to identify and plug the main axes of a Russian advance.

The possibility of an attack out of Kaliningrad Oblast should be considered at least briefly. Baltic Fleet amphibious forces do exercise marine offensive capabilities. However, this is likely intended to attack the rear areas of Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania to pull their meager forces away from the main axis of the Russian advance. Using Russian naval infantry to attack elsewhere may produce a tactical victory but it would be unexploitable and would likely only serve to convince NATO member states beyond Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that Russia is a threat worth fighting. The other Russian units in Kaliningrad Oblast occasionally exercise offensive tactics, but, as **Table 13** showed, almost always do so in the context of deflecting an enemy attack into the exclave. Considering the size of the Polish Armed Forces relative to the Russian 11th Army Corps and the difficulty of resupplying the exclave during wartime (i.e., the presumed reason why a war would start), it seems extremely unlikely that Russia would launch any offensive out of Kaliningrad before Russian reinforcements could arrive.

Without Belarus, this plan for relieving Kaliningrad becomes far riskier and more singularly minded. However, Belarus's absence does not doom such an operation to failure, especially if Russia can convince NATO member state governments that its opponents are destabilizing Kaliningrad Oblast and that it, therefore, is the victim, as Moscow surely would attempt in this scenario.

Russian power projection in the Baltic Sea and into Scandinavia further in the northwestern strategic direction is not seriously impacted by Belarusian neutrality. However, the likelihood of such an attack is considered extremely low given the relatively functional state

of diplomacy between Russia and the Nordic countries as illustrated above. Attempting to conventionally attack Sweden or Norway would be complicated and result in little reward; attacking Finland would, at best, result in a massive war of attrition.

Conclusion

In the time of Russian-Ukrainian antipathy since 2014, Russia has retooled its forces facing Europe to prepare for conflict against its immediate border states, largely disregarding the probability of conflict with European states further away. Russia's diplomats have worked to maintain functional relationships with key NATO member states, such as France, Germany, Italy and Turkey, to keep them aloof from potential problems in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and (non-member) Ukraine. This strategy may be borne from Russian military weakness, namely an inability to carry on a protracted long-distance war; but it nevertheless appears at least partially successful.

Moscow perceives rising risk of conflict on its western borders with Europe according to the following basic scenarios:

- Northwestern strategic direction: Latvia, Lithuania and Poland may attempt to seal Kaliningrad Oblast from external reinforcement during an internal governance crisis.
- Western strategic direction: Poland seems willing to use force to stop Russia from defending, maintaining, or expanding its sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union.
- Southwestern strategic direction: Ukraine may try to retake Crimea or even attempt an offensive against Russia proper if hardliners in Kyiv choose to riposte losing the peninsula and control over Donbas with an anti-Russia crusade.

Russia has configured training in the three strategic directions under the Western High Command toward three basic objectives:

- Northwestern strategic direction: Opening a land bridge to Kaliningrad Oblast via Latvia and Lithuania using assets designed for fighting in canalized swampy terrain as well as rapid-reaction capabilities to defend targeted points of infrastructure and fix enemy forces away from the decisive battlefield.
- Western strategic direction: Fixing the Polish Armed Forces with a defense of Warsaw and potentially cut off NATO access to the front with heavy or long-range weapons.
- Southwestern strategic direction: Restoring capabilities on previously demilitarized territory, ready to seize the initiative and take Kyiv if the conflict escalates in Donbas or if Ukraine attempts to retake Crimea.

These capabilities reflect Russia's perceived risks in light of a growing NATO military presence on its western frontiers. Ironically, this response in turn justifies a further NATO buildup, which then marginally raises the threat of war, even one unwanted by both sides, despite actions intended to obviate such a possibility.

Though none of the above-described risk scenarios directly involve Belarus, Russia's only treaty ally in Europe, they all require—to a greater or lesser extent—Belarusian cooperation to achieve planned military objectives. This puts Belarus in the awkward position of potentially being a major battleground between Russia and NATO, all while its government remains isolated from the West and with little influence over Moscow. A Belarusian withdrawal from Moscow's security planning would seriously complicate Russian military thinking in Europe, significantly elevate Poland's security and strategic influence, and potentially banish Moscow's military threat

from the North European plain for the first time in 500 years. However, such a transformation would put Belarus in an extremely precarious political situation that would be difficult to sustain.

These considerations underline the significance of the current instability in Belarus following Lukashenka's apparently fraudulent reelection on August 9, 2020. Whereas Moscow fervently adheres to a script of denying any legitimate course for Europe to intervene in its ally,³³ it keeps the option of its own military support open through either the Union State or CSTO alliance.³⁴ In 2019, the Russian government made a total of 214 statements about Belarus, a number only topped by the United States (444) and the People's Republic of China (244).³⁵ If Lukashenka's regime remains unstable, a Russian intervention may become progressively more likely, regardless of current Russian statements.

³³ "O telefonnom razgove Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova s Prem'er-ministrom, Ministrom evropeyskikh I inostrannykh del Albanii, Deystveyushchim predsedatelem OBSE E. Ramoy," *MID*, August 20, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4293674.

³⁴ "B Kreml'e otritsayut voennoe pristustvie Rossii v Belorussii," *RIA Novosti*, August 19, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200819/1575981775.html>.

³⁵ This compares to 8 mentions of Belarus by the United States and 17 by the People's Republic of China in the same year.

The Belarus Factor in Kaliningrad's Security Lifeline to Russia

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Executive Summary

Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, security ties between the Republic of Belarus and Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast exclave remain linked in important ways, even as economic, transit and energy infrastructure connections have withered away over time. But since the disputed August 9, 2020, Belarusian presidential elections, demonstrations and instability inside Belarus have sparked anxiety and concern in both Moscow and Western capitals over the future geopolitical orientation of this East European country wedged between Russia and NATO's Baltic flank. Hypothetical dramatic political changes inside Belarus that deeply and profoundly alter Minsk's foreign policy and geopolitical alignment would force Russia to introduce major revisions to military-strategic planning on its western flank. Undoubtedly, under such a scenario, Kaliningrad, the Russian Federation's westernmost province, would be adversely affected. And though some implications—especially in the realms of bilateral trade, food and energy security—would have only marginal bearing on the oblast, at least at first, the military-political ramifications would bring profound medium- to long-term changes to Russia's position in Kaliningrad. Indeed, the impact of Belarus on the Russian strategic situation in Kaliningrad has often been neglected, if not completely ignored, by Western experts.

Any sudden reorientation of Belarus away from Russia would drastically transform Kaliningrad's military capabilities and marginalize many of the efforts undertaken by Moscow (especially since 2014) to restore the oblast's military potential. In terms of the transportation sector, the impact could derail Kaliningrad's economic model, which is heavily reliant on exports of manufactured goods to Russia that primarily ship via overland routes across Belarus, rather than by sea. And in the scope of information-ideology, one likely consequence could be the emergence and growth of separatist trends in Kaliningrad that could uproot its Russia-tied mooring—arguably Moscow's main fear regarding its Baltic exclave.

Following the 2004 Belarus-Russia natural gas dispute, Kaliningrad-bound supplies of gas through Belarus were suspended, creating a panic in Moscow over the energy vulnerability of its Baltic exclave and setting in motion a series of long-term plans to insulate the oblast from any future supply disruptions via Belarusian territory. Over the next decade, Moscow began the delicate task of trying to bolster Kaliningrad's economic and transportation security in order to offset these perceived vulnerabilities. While Russia has managed to work out some solutions to mitigate the consequences of possible negative scenarios (such as, for example, a potential energy blockade of the oblast by its European neighbors), other strategic liabilities, including second- or third-order effects on Kaliningrad Oblast's local economy, remain unaddressed.

A potential break or revision of existing ties between Belarus and Kaliningrad could also bring about important external changes. Namely, for Western actors (NATO members), Kaliningrad's offensive potential—profoundly damaged after 1991, but partially restored after 2014—would be greatly diminished. Kaliningrad would effectively transform from a forward Russian outpost in the Baltic to an isolated enclave devoid of any overland ties to Russia. At the same time, however, the prospect of worsening economic conditions in the oblast could result in growing anti-Moscow moods akin to the developments

that occurred in Kaliningrad years earlier and resembling ongoing regionalist-minded protests in the Russian Far East. Arguably, this possibility constitutes a much greater and more likely challenge to the Kremlin than the threat of direct military engagement with NATO in the Baltic theater and/or the weakening military capabilities of Kaliningrad.

Introduction

Few experts in the West recognize the impact that Belarus has on the Baltic-littoral Russian exclave of Kaliningrad—an entity separated from Russia proper by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union members Lithuania and Poland. Yet Russia-leaning Belarus is the nearest regional ally that Kaliningrad Oblast (KO) could look to for reprieve in the event of a conflict with any of its NATO neighbors. Moreover, in the event of such a conflict, Russian access to Belarus would be important beyond as a critical relief point for Kaliningrad: the country could additionally serve as a launching pad for a Russian invasion of neighboring Baltic adversaries such as Poland or Lithuania.

Given the ongoing turmoil in Belarus since the disputed presidential elections of August 9, 2020, Moscow can no longer be assured of a stable (and predictable) Minsk despite their current close bilateral ties. Specifically, in the military political domain, any changes to Belarus's foreign policy or geopolitical orientation would downgrade Kaliningrad's military capabilities and marginalize many of the efforts taken by Russian since 2009, aimed at restoring some of the oblast's military potential. The preservation of stable transportation, food security and energy ties to Belarus are important but not critical to Kaliningrad's security under peaceful conditions. However, in the event of a conflict with the North Atlantic Alliance and a naval embargo of KO, Belarus would become a highly important—if not crucial—lifeline. The loss of Belarus as an overland link, whether

because of Minsk's reorientation away from Moscow or due to sudden and prolonged upheaval in that country, would put Russia's hold on KO in long-term jeopardy.

Kaliningrad and Belarus: A Controversial Partnership

By virtue of history, since 1945, Kaliningrad and Belarus have been connected by a myriad of ties. One of the most direct was the massive flow of ethnic Belarusians pouring into the captured Baltic-littoral territory from the most war-destroyed areas of Belarus.¹ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, links between Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast—still populated by a robust Belarusian diaspora that currently stands at 3.8 percent of the total population²—have remained strong. In his speeches, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has repeatedly pointed out that during the Soviet era, discussions and plans for various forms of incorporation or integration of Kaliningrad into the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) were quite common.³ Moreover, in 2014 and again in 2019, Lukashenka, to the great surprise and irritation of conservative Russian politicians, promised to turn Kaliningrad into a “thriving land” (*tsvetushii krai*) were the territory to be ceded to Belarus.⁴ With those aspects in mind,

¹ Yuri Kostyashov, *Izgnaniye prusskogo dukkha: kak formirovalos istoricheskoye soznaniya naseleniya Kaliningradskoy oblasti v poslevoyennye gody*, Kaliningrad: Kaliningrad State University, 2003. In 1988, the share of ethnic Belarusians in KO reached almost 9 percent. For more information see: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_89.php?reg=7.

² “Kaliningradskaya oblast,” *Export.by*, accessed October 10, 2020, <https://export.by/kaliningrad>.

³ “Lukashenko nazval Kaliningrad ‘svoyey oblasti,’ ” *RIA Novosti*, November 25, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191125/1561564114.html>.

⁴ “Lukashenko gotov sdelat iz Kaliningradskoy oblasti ‘tsvetushchiy sad,’ ” *Novyy Kaliningrad*, October 11, 2013,

it is important to chart the actual state of relations between Kaliningrad and Belarus today as well as to analyze the main strengths and weakness of this partnership.

Economic and Business Ties: Cooperation and Disagreements

The economic relationship between KO and Belarus is premised on two central pillars: an inter-governmental agreement (1999) that specifically addresses the issue of Kaliningrad⁵; and inter-regional agreements signed between KO and Belarus's Grodno and Minsk (1996), Brest (2004) and Gomel (2009) oblasts.⁶ On the surface, official contacts (economic and political) between KO and Belarus are thriving; in reality, however, this image may be misleading.

First, bilateral economic ties are actually quite feeble compared to official rhetoric on the matter. In 2018, Belarus occupied merely 1 percent of Kaliningrad's foreign trade.⁷ The bilateral trade balance has

<https://www.newkaliningrad.ru/news/politics/2599866-lukashenko-gotov-sdelat-iz-kaliningradskoy-oblasti-tsvetushchiy-ray.html>.

⁵ "O sotrudnichestva Kaliningradskoy oblasti s Respublikoy Belarus," *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, April 3, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/ru/vnesneekonomiceskie-svazi-sub-ektov-rossijskoj-federacii/-/asset_publisher/ykggrK2nCl8c/content/id/3152683.

⁶ "Slova Lukashenko o 'nashem' Kaliningrade poschitali signalom NATO," *Kgd.ru*, November 26, 2019, <https://kgd.ru/news/policy/item/86087-slova-lukashenko-o-nashem-kaliningrade-poschitali-signalom-nato>.

⁷ Darya Khaspekova, "Prirastat regionami. Kak ukreplit predprinimatelskie svyazi mezhdru Rossiyey i Belarusyu," *Eurasia Expert*, May 31, 2018, https://eurasia.expert/regionami-ukreplit-predprinimatelskie-svyazi-rossiy-belarusyu/?sphrase_id=21367.

also been decreasing since 2014 (in 2015, it collapsed by 40 percent).⁸ On top of that, Kaliningrad has a disproportionately large (and growing) trade deficit with Belarus—in 2019, the latter's exports to the oblast stood at \$210 million, whereas KO's exports to Belarus were worth only \$150 million.⁹

Second, long-running discord stems from Belarus's refusal to utilize KO-based transportation and logistics infrastructure (ports and railway) for Belarusian international trade. The issue of switching from Klaipeda (Lithuania) and Ventspils (Latvia) to KO-based seaports was first proposed (at a serious level) by the Russian side in 2004¹⁰; yet despite repeated promises, Minsk never took any concrete steps in this direction. Local Governor Anton Alikhanov recently admitted the near-complete lack of reciprocity in transportation ties between Kaliningrad and Belarus: while “nearly all goods from Russia [to KO] are transported through Belarus [and subsequently Lithuania] by rail, Minsk does not use any of the KO-based infrastructure, causing serious economic losses for the oblast.”¹¹ Incidentally, in his recent public statements, Alikhanov has been increasingly critical of Belarus's “discriminatory policies,” which he

⁸ “Tovarooborot Belorussii i Kaliningradskoy oblasti sokratilsya na tret,” *Kgd.ru*, May 31, 2016, <https://kgd.ru/news/economy/item/54285-tovarooborot-belorussii-i-kaliningradskoj-oblasti-sokratilsya-na-tret>.

⁹ “Tovarooborot Belarusi s Kaliningradskoy oblastyu byet recordy,” *Voyenno-Politicheskoye Obozreniye*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.belvpo.com/105688.html/>.

¹⁰ “Kaliningrad i Belorussiyay menyayut principy sotrudnichestva,” *Novyy Kaliningrad*, August 27, 2004, <https://www.newkaliningrad.ru/news/economy/10243-.html>.

¹¹ Aleksandr Gamov, Aleksey Denisenkov, “Glava Kaliningradskoy oblasti Anton Alikhanov – o sotrudnichestve s Belarusyu: Minskie ‘kuznechiki’ preobrazili gorod,” *Soyuznoye Veche*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.souzveche.ru/articles/economy/35634/>.

implicitly likened to Lithuania's¹²—viewed in Kaliningrad as an overtly anti-Russian player. Despite vigorous attempts to boost cargo flows along the Ust-Luga–Baltiysk sea-based transportation corridor (these attempts were first articulated in 2017),¹³ Russian sources confirm that, in 2020, “practically all Russian transit to Kaliningrad goes [overland] via Lithuania [mainly through Belarus or, to a much more limited extent, Latvia], which approximates to almost 6 million tons per annum.”¹⁴ However, given mounting pressure applied by EU member states on Belarus's political leadership, cargo flows to Kaliningrad via Belarus–Lithuania could end up being drastically reduced.

The third problematic area comes in the form of mutual competition. In 2014, Belarusian customs authorities confiscated a large quantity of KO-assembled electronics classified as “counterfeit products.” But allegedly, these products later ended up being sold in Belarusian stores anyway.¹⁵ The incident resulted in a surge of discontent in both

¹² Konstantin Amozov, “Alikhanov: Kaliningradskiy biznes zavisit ot prikhoti zheleznodorozhnykh vlastey Litvy i Belorussii,” *Kgd.ru*, September 1, 2019, [https://kgd.ru/news/economy/item/84342-alihanov-kaliningradskij-biznes-zavisit-ot-prihotti-zheleznodorozhnyh-vlastej-litvy-i-belorussii](https://kgd.ru/news/economy/item/84342-alihanov-kaliningradskij-biznes-zavisit-ot-prihоти-zheleznodorozhnyh-vlastej-litvy-i-belorussii).

¹³ “RF do 2020 goda otkazhetsia ot z/d transita mnogikh gruzov cherez Belarus,” Sputnik, June 17, 2017, <https://sputnik.by/economy/20170617/1029350369/RFdo2020godaotkazhetsyaotzh-dtranzitamnogihgruzovcherezBelarus.html>.

¹⁴ “Na tranzitnyje gruzi v region predlagajut stavit elektronnije plombi,” RBK, November 23, 2020, <https://kaliningrad.rbc.ru/kaliningrad/23/11/2020/5fbb9f559a79478587acebb3>.

¹⁵ Yelena Kalugina, “‘Telebalt’: Belorusy konfiskovali nashu tekhniku i prodavut ee v magazinakh Minska,” *Kgd.ru*, January 19, 2015, <https://kgd.ru/news/economy/item/40956-telebalt-belorusy-konfiskovali-nashu-tehniku-i-prodayut-ejo-v-magazinah-minska>.

Moscow and Kaliningrad¹⁶ but went well beyond KO-Belarusian relations, ultimately ending up before the Court of the Eurasian Economic Union, which ruled in Russia's favor (although the court order was never satisfied).¹⁷ This scandal vividly demonstrated that Belarusian-based producers—the issue, in fact, goes well beyond electronics, covering such industries as construction and agriculture—view KO not as an economic partner but as an unwelcome competitor.

Indeed, Kaliningrad-based experts admit that, when it comes to economic/business ties, KO and Belarus have yet to expand the currently meager relationship into a genuine, sustainable one.¹⁸

Energy-Related Ties

Throughout the 1990s–mid 2000s, energy security was one of the most acute issues faced by KO, which at that point completely depended on the uninterrupted import of natural gas via the Minsk–Vilnius–Kaunas–Kaliningrad pipeline traversing Belarus and Lithuania. Local power plants, meanwhile, remained underdeveloped (the need to build a modern power-generating facility was voiced as early as 1990) and could not satisfy local electricity needs. This left the

¹⁶ Yelena Kalugina, “Tsukanov o deystviyakh belorusskoy tamozhni: Eto pokhozhe na devyanostye,” *Kgd.ru*, February 5, 2015, <https://kgd.ru/news/economy/item/41352-cukanov-o-dejstviyah-belorusskoj-tamozhni-jeto-pohozhe-na-devyanostye-gody>.

¹⁷ “V Belorussii ne soglasny s resheniyem EAEC po delu o kaliningradskom tranzite,” *RIA Novosti*, March 3, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20170301/1489012406.html>.

¹⁸ “O sotrudnichestve Kaliningradskoy oblasti s Respublikoy Belarus,” *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, April 3, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/ru/vnesneekonomiceskie-svazi-sub-ektov-rossijskoj-federacii/-/asset_publisher/ykggrK2nCl8c/content/id/3152683.

oblast extremely vulnerable to external fluctuations and the will of neighboring transit states.

A broadly repeated view among Russian analysts suggests that local energy security was under jeopardy because of Lithuania's assertive actions, which ultimately spurred Russia into taking decisive steps. In fact, however, Moscow's sudden focus on improving Kaliningrad's energy security was related to a "gas dispute" between Moscow and Minsk in February 2004, when Russia temporarily halted supplies of this resource to Belarus. As a result, KO was cut off from gas supplies for 19 hours, which "put the entire local energy sector on the brink of collapse."¹⁹ To remedy this systemic vulnerability, between 2005 and 2019, Russia launched an ambitious (and quite costly) program specifically designed for Kaliningrad to be able to achieve energy autarky, minimizing dependence on third parties. Incidentally, this strategic priority became one of the key objectives spelled out in the Russian Doctrine of Energy Security, adopted in 2019. Specifically, Article 27 (point A) states that the "development of energy infrastructure in Eastern Siberia, the Arctic region, the Far East, the North Caucasus, Crimea and Kaliningrad Oblast" was to become a central priority for Russia's energy policy.²⁰ During the same period (2005–2019), Moscow pursued and successfully implemented (based on information acquired from open sources) three strategic policies:²¹

¹⁹ Artur Usanov, Alexander Kharin, "Energeticheskaya bezopasnost Kaliningradskoy oblasti: kluchevyye problem i puti ih resheniya," *Regionalnaya Ekonomika*, 2015, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/energeticheskaya-bezopasnost-kaliningradskoy-oblasti-klyuchevye-problemy-i-puti-ih-resheniya>.

²⁰ "Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 13 maya 2019 № 216 'Ob utverzhdenii Doktriny energeticheskoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii,'" *Garant.ru*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/72140884/>.

²¹ Sergey Sukhankin, "Kaliningrad Oblast and the 'Sanctions War': Genuine Progress or Avoidable Stagnation?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 17, Issue 140, The Jamestown Foundation, October 7, 2020,

1. Electrification, which included launching the 900-megawatt (MW) Kaliningradskaya Thermal Power Plant 2 (TPP-2), Talakhovskaya TPP (159 MW), Mayakovskaya TPP (157.3 MW) and Pregolskaya TPP (455.2 MW). These four plants' combined generating capacity enables KO to fully satisfy its annual electricity consumption.
2. Gasification that includes launching the Floating Storage Regasification Unit (FSRU) *Marshal Vasilevskiy*, procured in South Korea at Hyundai Heavy Industries (\$295 million), as well as the construction of an underground gas storage facility. Thanks to these investments, Russia is now able to transport liquefied natural gas (LNG) from its territory via the Baltic Sea and re-gasify it in KO as an alternative to shipping dry gas volumes overland via the above-mentioned Minsk–Vilnius–Kaunas–Kaliningrad pipeline.
3. Digitalization, which is to modernize the local power grid into the most up-to-date system in Russia. For this purpose, the Public Joint Stock Company (PJSC) ROSSETI—fully in charge of this strategic initiative—has diverted approximately \$285 million (between 2015 and 2020) from a number of separate regional projects.

It would be fair to say that in the domain of energy, KO-Belarus contacts could be minimized (or discontinued completely) in case of emergency without significant negative fallout for Kaliningrad. For now, Russia continues using the Minsk–Vilnius–Kaunas–Kaliningrad pipeline to supply the oblast with natural gas, since completely switching to the alternative mode of supply—LNG shipments by sea—

<https://jamestown.org/program/kaliningrad-oblast-and-the-sanctions-war-genuine-progress-or-avoidable-stagnation-part-one/>.

would be extremely costly. Nevertheless, if circumstances required it, such a transition could be accomplished almost instantly.

Military-Political Cooperation

Arguably, the strongest area of partnership between KO and Belarus is in the realm of military cooperation. The importance of Belarus—the strongest Russian military-political treaty ally in the region and more generally—for Russia's national security²² cannot be overestimated: in addition to other elements, it is located on the Great European Plain, which has served as a key invasion route from the West for centuries. Moreover, Russia and Belarus are connected by strong ties in the realm of technical-military cooperation, with the Belarusian defense-industrial complex producing indispensable parts/components for many types of weaponry and military equipment²³ vital to Russia's national security.

Referring specifically to KO-Belarus military ties, two essential aspects need to be highlighted. First, Belarus has a key meaning for Kaliningrad's aerospace security. Concluded on February 3, 2009, the Agreement Between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on Joint Efforts in Protection of the External Border of the Union State²⁴ became a stepping stone toward the creation of the

²² Glen E. Howard, "The Growing Importance of Belarus on NATO's Baltic Flank," September, 2019 <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Howard-Why-Belarus-Matters-web.pdf>.

²³ Yuriy Zverev, " 'Strategicheskoye podpolye': Kak Belarus pomogayet obespechivat voyennuyu bezopasnost Rossii," *Eurasia Expert*, November 11, 2018, [https://eurasia.expert/strategicheskoe-predpole-kak-belarus-pomogaet-obespechivat-voennuyu-bezopasnost-rossii/-](https://eurasia.expert/strategicheskoe-predpole-kak-belarus-pomogaet-obespechivat-voennuyu-bezopasnost-rossii-/).

²⁴ "Soglasheniye mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Respublikoy Belarus o sovместnoy okhrane vneshney granitsy Soyuznogo gosudarstva v vozdušnom prostranstve i sozdaniy Yediniy regionalnoy sistemy protivovozdušnoy oborony

Unified Regional System (EPS) of anti-aircraft/missile defense, *de facto* finalized in 2016. This system—consisting, among other elements, of S-400 (located in Kaliningrad) and S-300 (Belarus) divisions—ensures aerial security of the area between Kaliningrad and Belarus and, at the same time, is capable of denying entry to NATO aviation seeking to access the three Baltic States.²⁵ According to Russian sources, the creation of the EPS increased the “general effectiveness of anti-missile/aircraft defense for Belarus by 1.4–1.6 times and for Russia [in this region] by 1.7 times.”²⁶

Second, Belarus is a potential game-changer in NATO's “Suwałki Corridor dilemma.” The Suwałki Corridor, the short stretch of Polish-Lithuanian border (65–104 kilometers across, depending on the method of measurement) between Kaliningrad and Belarus—is viewed in the West as potentially one of the most vulnerable areas on NATO's eastern flank.²⁷ Russia sees it from a diametrically opposite perspective: in case of hostilities, Russian forces could rapidly cut off the Baltic States and block Poland's eastern border, at the same time establishing naval superiority in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea (secured by naval forces located in Kronstadt and Baltiysk) with a prospect of further gains. Yet this scenario would be feasible only if

Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Respubliki Belarus,” *Conventions.ru*, February 3, 2009, http://www.conventions.ru/view_base.php?id=1426.

²⁵ Yuriy Zverev, “‘Strategicheskoye podpolye’: Kak Belarus pomogayet obespechivat voyennuyu bezopasnost Rossii,” *Eurasia Expert*, November 11, 2018, <https://eurasia.expert/strategicheskoe-predpole-kak-belarus-pomogayet-obespechivat-voennuyu-bezopasnost-rossii/>.

²⁶ Yuriy Zverev, “Zachem Belarusi i Rossii yedinaya Sistema PVO,” *Eurasia Expert*, September 20, 2016, https://eurasia.expert/zachem-belarusi-i-rossii-edinaya-sistema-pvo/?sphrase_id=21367.

²⁷ “NATO repetiruyet blokadu Kaliningradskoy oblasti,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda Kaliningrad*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.kaliningrad.kp.ru/daily/26698.4/3722201/>.

Belarus allows Russian forces to traverse its territory from east to west.²⁸ Speaking on this subject, however, Lukashenka has repeatedly made clear that Belarus would only allow Russian forces to move through its territory if NATO commits aggression against Russia.²⁹ The bottom line is that in the event of a conflict with the North Atlantic Alliance but absent Belarus's assistance, KO would not only be incapable of (counter)offensive operations, it would also be difficult for the oblast (which would be *de facto* isolated) to defend itself against much stronger (in conventional terms) NATO forces without Russian use of nuclear weapons.

Kaliningrad in Transition (1991–2020): Social, Economic, Military Pillars

From Oblivion to 'Vanguard' of Russian World

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), Kaliningrad Oblast—wedged between independent Poland and Lithuania—found itself completely cut off from the Russian mainland. For KO, the first post-Soviet decade was dominated by socio-economic and political disturbances, including a dramatic plummeting of living standards and flourishing of various social malaises such as smuggling, criminality, prostitution and drug dealing/abuse (two main causes of surging HIV/AIDS cases in the oblast). Consequently, KO was dubbed the “black hole of Europe” and a “double periphery”—an entity feared in the European Union and ignored by Russia.³⁰

²⁸ Ivan Gog, “Chto takoye ‘Suvalskiy koridor?’” *Klaipedszkaya assotsiatsiya rossiyskikh grazhdan*, July 7, 2016, <http://www.klaipeda1945.org/konsuljtatsii/chto-takoe-suvalskij-koridor/>.

²⁹ “Lukashenko rasschityvayet na rossiyskuyu armiyu v sluchaye napadeniya NATO,” *NTV*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1243698/>.

³⁰ Sergey Sukhankin, “Kaliningrad in the “Mirror World”: From Soviet ‘Bastion’ to Russian ‘Fortress,’” *Notes Internacionals* 151, CIDOB, Barcelona, June 2016,

Surprisingly, however, during these tumultuous times, the oblast's population maintained a steadfast loyalty to Moscow, never demonstrating any serious secessionist sentiments³¹—a reality that remains equally true today. Sociological research conducted in Russia in 2018 clearly demonstrated that in comparison with the residents of other surveyed federal entities (occupied Crimea, Murmansk, Kostroma Oblast, Chuvashia and Primorski Krai), Kaliningraders are more likely to identify themselves with Russia.³²

Beginning with the turn of the 21st century, the Kremlin's heretofore standoffish attitude toward KO began to rapidly evolve, fueled by the Russian leadership's concerns over the ongoing integration of Poland and Lithuania into Euro-Atlantic structures. During the early 2000s, Moscow managed to minimize the nascent links between KO and its two European neighbors by actively relying on three main tools: economic subsidies (to destroy the local entrepreneurial spirit and minimize business contacts with Poland and Lithuania), information operations/propaganda (promoted by civilian authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church),³³ and the re-militarization of the exclave. Thus, hopes shared by many Western experts regarding the prospect of a full demilitarization and subsequent transformation of

https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_151/kaliningrad_in_the_mirror_world_from_soviet_bastion_to_russian_fortress.

³¹ Sergey Sukhankin, "Bridge to Nowhere: Kaliningrad on Geopolitical Map between Russia and Europe," PhD thesis, Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Barcelona, 2018, https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/tesis/2018/hdl_10803_663980/sesu1de1.pdf.

³² Igor Zadorin, Regiony " 'Rubezha': Territorialnaya Identichnost i Vospriyatiye 'Osobennosti,'" *Politiya*, № 2 (89), 2018.

³³ Sergey Sukhankin, "The "Russkiy Mir" as Mission: Kaliningrad between the 'Altar' and the 'Throne' 2009–2015," *Ortodoxia* (56), University of Eastern Finland, 2016.

Kaliningrad into a “Baltic Hong Kong”³⁴ never materialized. Instead, Kaliningrad effectively became the “vanguard of the Russian World” and “Russia’s outpost in the West.”³⁵ In the context of this time period, it is important to note that, from a socio-economic point of view, Kaliningrad successfully managed to overcome the hardships of the 1990s–early 2000s and stabilize its macro-economic situation. This progress, however, was not premised on principles of economic sustainability and free trade; instead, it relied entirely on massive federal subsidies and preferential access to the mainland Russian market.

A ‘Military Bastion 2.0’?

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin clearly articulated his strategic interest in acquiring Königsberg (and other portions of East Prussia) from Nazi Germany in 1941 (Moscow summit)³⁶ and 1943 (Tehran Conference).³⁷ Once captured by the Red Army as a result of the East Prussian Offensive (January 13–April 25, 1945), Moscow split up the German exclave between the Soviet Union and Poland. The majority of the Soviet-annexed lands became re-designated Kaliningrad Oblast and quickly transformed into one of the most militarized places in the world. Moscow’s military planners saw the oblast in offensive terms—

³⁴ Christian Wellmann, “The problem with Kaliningrad,” *The Baltic Review* (1994): 34.

³⁵ “Vystupleniye Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirill ana I Kaliningradskom forume Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora,” *Patriarchia.ru*, March 14, 2015, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4013160.html>.

³⁶ Oleg Rzhesheshevsky, “Vizit A. Idena v Moskvu v dekabre 1941. Peregovory s I.V. Stalinym I V.M. Molotovym,” *Novaya I novejschaya istoriya*, No.2, (1994): 91–95.

³⁷ *Sovetskii Soyuz na mezhdunarodnykh konferentsiyakh perioda Velikoi Otechestvennoy voyni, 1941–1945*, Moscow: Politizdat, 1984, 150.

as a potential base from which to attack NATO forces in the Baltic theater as well as, specifically, to capture the Danish Straits.³⁸

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, KO underwent drastic de-militarization in virtually all strategic areas.³⁹ Nevertheless, the newly exposed oblast's military potential was never entirely nullified. Notably, military (including retired) personnel inhabiting the region continued playing an important role in virtually all spheres of public life. Moreover, the Zapad-99 strategic military exercises—meant to check the combat readiness of the recently founded Union State with Belarus⁴⁰—pointedly re-articulated the military-political importance of Russia's Baltic exclave. Incidentally, the exercises became the first post-Soviet rehearsal for joint forces of Belarus and Russia to practice warding off a mock aggressive enemy action against Kaliningrad.⁴¹

³⁸ “‘Zapad-81’: kakimi byli samiye mashtabnuye ucheniya Sovietskogo Soyuza” [“‘West-81’: what were the most large-scale exercises of the Soviet Union”], *TV Zvezda*, September 19, 2017, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201709192226-zlk6.htm>.

³⁹ Andrey Rezchikov, “Vosstanovit voyenny potencial Kaliningrada budet krayne slozhno,” *Vzglyad*, October 19, 2017, <https://vz.ru/politics/2017/10/19/139608.html>.

⁴⁰ Vasilii Izgarshev, “ZAPAD-99,” *Pravda.ru*, June 24, 1999, <https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/903671-zapad99/>.

⁴¹ Konstantin George, “Russia resumes big military exercises,” *Executive Intelligence Review*, Volume 26, Number 27, (July 2, 1999), https://larouchepub.com/eiw/public/1999/eirv26n27-19990702/eirv26n27-19990702_070-russia_resumes_big_military_exer.pdf.

Starting from 2014 onward, Russia increased its efforts to partially remilitarize KO.⁴² Aside from increasing the number of small-scale drills and snap exercises, the oblast became an integral part (together with Belarus) of the Zapad strategic-operational exercises in 2013 and 2017. An intermediary zenith of this policy was reached in 2018, when nuclear-capable Iskander-M mobile ballistic missile systems were deployed to KO on a permanent basis.⁴³ Although Russia has vigorously sought to restore Kaliningrad's military capabilities⁴⁴ in order to respond to current geopolitical and military-strategic realities, Russian strategists admit the oblast continues to suffer from inherent weaknesses and vulnerabilities that would become obvious in a potential military confrontation in the Baltic Sea region. For instance, a report by Jamestown Foundation Senior Fellow Richard Hooker⁴⁵ on a hypothetical regional military clash triggered a wave of alarmism among Russian military experts, many of whom (tacitly) noted the serious difficulties Moscow would have defending the exclave by

⁴² Given Russia's significantly lower economic potential compared to the Soviet Union, Moscow is not planning (and is incapable) to re-establish the extreme level of militarization that had existed in Kaliningrad before 1991.

⁴³ Sergey Sukhankin, "The End of 'Hide and Seek': Russian Iskanders Permanently in Kaliningrad," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 15, Issue 28, The Jamestown Foundation, February 23, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/end-hide-seek-russian-iskanders-permanently-kaliningrad/>.

⁴⁴ For more detailed analysis related to the remilitarization of KO, see: Nicholas J. Myers, "Russia's Western High Command and the Role of Belarus in Russian Strategic Planning," *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 31, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-western-high-command-and-the-role-of-belarus-in-russian-strategic-planning/>.

⁴⁵ Richard D. Hooker, "How to Defend the Baltic States," *The Jamestown Foundation*, October 2019, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/How-to-Defend-the-Baltic-States-full-web4.pdf?x52810>.

conventional means.⁴⁶ And upbeat rhetoric coming out of the Russian Ministry of Defense⁴⁷ notwithstanding, the country's military strategists have serious concerns about the ability of locally stationed air-defense and anti-aircraft systems—S-300/400s, modified Pantsirs, and Ball and Bastion complexes—to effectively withstand a massive attack by NATO forces utilizing the whole spectrum of the latest means of warfare, including unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV).⁴⁸

With all the above in mind, it must be underlined that, unlike in Soviet times, KO is today primarily viewed by Moscow's military-political leadership in defensive (rather than offensive) terms—as a force tasked with withstanding an initial enemy attack. This is corroborated by the nature of contemporary exercises conducted on the oblast's territory that, among other elements, strongly prioritize A2/AD-related capabilities.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “Opublikovan plan zakhvata Kaliningradskoy oblasti Polshey i SShA,” *Lenta.ru*, October 27, 2019, <https://lenta.ru/news/2019/10/27/force/>.

⁴⁷ Ivan Abakumov, Nikita Golobkov, “Pochemu NATO ugrozhayet napast na Kaliningrad,” *Vzglyad*, September 20, 2019, <https://vz.ru/world/2019/9/20/998833.html>.

⁴⁸ Despite rhetorical bravado coming from some (ultra)conservative Russian military experts and analysts, a general sense of uneasiness can be perceived when it comes to the actual level of Russian capabilities to defend against the most modern weapons systems. These doubts have particularly crept in following evidence of the mixed record of Russian private military contractors engaged in Syria and especially Libya against opponents armed with newly developed “killer drones” supplied by Turkey.

⁴⁹ Sergey Sukhankin, “From ‘Bridge of Cooperation’ to A2/AD ‘Bubble’: The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 31 (2018): 15–36.

A Belarusian Reorientation Away From Russia and the Implications for Kaliningrad

Considering the crucial security links between Kaliningrad and Belarus, the hypothetical prospect of Minsk geopolitically reorienting away from Russia would represent a nightmare scenario for the Kremlin. Such an outcome would have negative implications for KO in multiple areas.

Ramifications for the Civilian Realm

In terms of energy security, the hypothetical loss of Belarus as a military-political ally and overland transit corridor would be unlikely to result in major new challenges for Kaliningrad in the short term. During the 1990s–2000s, the oblast's dependency on neighboring states (in terms of transportation) was, in fact, overwhelming. But since then, Russia has managed to achieve essentially complete energy autarky for the isolated oblast, at the cost of over \$1 billion in direct investments during the past decade.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, this energy independence suffers from a significant liability: In the event that traditional, overland pipeline gas delivery methods from Russia proper to Kaliningrad across Belarus (and Lithuania) were to suddenly become unavailable, Moscow's contingency plan would be to ship in LNG volumes across the Baltic Sea. This would be a truly costly operation. But even more importantly, the maritime route is itself highly vulnerable to being obstructed (particularly by Finland and Estonia), leaving the oblast entirely cut off from its most important energy source. That said, the declared capacity of the recently constructed Kaliningrad gas storage facility equals 2.7 billion cubic meters, which is more than the oblast consumes per annum (2.5

⁵⁰ Prospectively, costs are likely to increase dramatically.

billion).⁵¹ So while KO seems well prepared for a negative scenario in which it is cut off for up to a year, that is also presumably long enough for Russia to try to resolve such a blockade using a variety of “hybrid” and/or hard military methods.

Second, in the domain of food security—one of the main inherent weaknesses of the oblast in the pre-sanctions period (1991–2014)—KO is today capable of covering all its basic needs in strategic commodities. However, the oblast still has relatively underdeveloped storage capacities (granaries and elevators), and it continues to be heavily dependent on food imports from Belarus and other foreign countries that did not introduce anti-Russian economic sanctions. As a result, some problems in this area might be expected if Belarus were to suddenly turn sharply against Russia.

Third, when it comes to transportation and regional trade, noted Eurasia expert Paul Goble expects that “Minsk’s reorientation away from Moscow would make it much more difficult (if not impossible) for Russia to block the construction of the [Poland–Belarus–Ukraine] E40 north-south waterway between the Black Sea and the Baltic.”⁵² This prospect, although undoubtedly highly undesirable for Russia politically and economically,⁵³ would have limited direct impact on

⁵¹ “V Kaliningradskoy oblasti rasskazali, chto zhdet transit gaza cherez Litvu,” *Sputniknews.ru*, January 10, 2019, <https://lt.sputniknews.ru/economy/20190110/8028258/V--Kaliningradskoy-oblasti-rasskazali-chto-zhdet-tranzit-gaza-cherez-Lithuania.html>.

⁵² Paul Goble, “Kaliningrad—A Key Factor in the Kremlin’s Calculations on Belarus,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 17, Issue 122, The Jamestown Foundation September 8, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/kaliningrad-a-key-factor-in-the-kremlins-calculations-on-belarus/>.

⁵³ Alla Hurska, “E40 Waterway: Economic and Geopolitical Implications for Ukraine and the Wider Region,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 17, Issue 67, The Jamestown Foundation May 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-e40->

Kaliningrad itself. What presents a much greater challenge for the exclave would be the sudden hardships associated with transporting locally assembled/produced goods (ranging from electronics and appliances to automobiles) to Russia without free access to Belarusian overland transit networks. Similarly, the oblast would not be able to receive strategic raw materials/components from Russia to maintain its industrial output. Taken together, this would have devastating consequences for the local economy and key branches of KO industry.

Implications in the Military-Political Domain

Aside from the already-discussed “Suwałki dilemma” to Kaliningrad/Russia that would arise if Belarus were to deny entry to Russian troops in the event of a conflict with NATO, there is yet another important aspect worth considering. Namely, Russia’s capabilities in the realm of radio-electronic warfare in the Western strategic direction could also be seriously undermined if Belarus suddenly turned away from Moscow. Specifically, on June 6, 2021, the bilateral agreement (established in 1995)⁵⁴ that allows the Russian side to lease immovable property and land in Belarus expires. Unless the issue is settled on terms favorable to Russia soon, the status of two important military facilities could be jeopardized:

- The 43rd Communications Center of the Russian Navy (Minsk oblast) with the Vileyka VLF transmitter (10,000-kilometer range), which, in fact, is useful to various branches of the

waterway-economic-and-geopolitical-implications-for-ukraine-and-the-wider-region/.

⁵⁴ “Soglasheniye mezhdru pravitelstvom RF i pravitelstvom Respubliki Belarus o poryadke ispolzovaniya i sodержaniya radiostantsii Vileyka, raspolozhennoy na territorii Respubliki Belarus (zaklyucheno v Minske),” *Pravovaya Rossiya*, January 6, 1995, <http://laws-russia.narod.ru/fed1995/data04/tex17172.htm>.

Russian Armed Forces, including the Strategic Missile Forces (RVSN) and Aerospace Forces (VKS).⁵⁵

- The 474th Communication Center Baranavichy (Brest oblast) with a locally stationed Volga early-warning radar station (RLS). Thanks to its maximum detection range of 4,800 kilometers, the Volga is considered to be crucial for defending central Russia and portions of its northwestern regions.⁵⁶

It appears Moscow has, indeed, been considering the implications of a failure to extend the 1995 treaty (or other circumstances that might affect the status of the Russian communication centers in Belarus). The media has increasingly carried commentary calling for the deployment of the Konteiner-type over-the-horizon radar (which underwent combat duty for the first time in Mordovia on December 1, 2019) in Kaliningrad⁵⁷ as a substitute to the facilities located in Belarus. According to Russian sources, the Konteiner radar is capable of tracking mass takeoffs of aircraft (including jets, helicopters, UAVs) and cruise missile/hypersonic weapon launches at a distance of up to 3,000 kilometers. Some experts have suggested that simply voicing these plans sends an unequivocal message to Minsk that the

⁵⁵ Vadim Udmantsev, "Flotskiye pozyvnyye iz partizanskogo lesa," *Voyenno-Promeshlennyy Kuryer*, July 26, 2006, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/4597>.

⁵⁶ Sergey Ostryna, "Yeshche raz o sudbe rossiyskikh voyennykh obyektov v Belarusi," *Novosti VPK*, December 24, 2019, https://vpk.name/news/359262_eshe_raz_o_sudbe_rossiiskih_voennyh_obektov_v_belarusi.html.

⁵⁷ "Russia's advanced radar in Kaliningrad to monitor entire territory of Europe — source," *TASS*, March 18, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1132191>.

Russian facilities on Belarusian territory can be easily replaced.⁵⁸ But that point of view is not shared by all military analysts: in effect, the contrarian argument points out that due to the technical differences between the Volga and Kontejner radar systems, the latter should not be seen as an identical substitute to the former.⁵⁹ Moreover, beyond the military-related aspects, Russian sources assert that a potential withdrawal of communications facilities from Belarus—as a “result of a hypothetical advent of anti-Russian forces” there—would severely undermine the alliance between the two countries, resulting in an explicit victory of NATO and the US in the post-Soviet space.⁶⁰ As noted by conservative military expert and member of the Presidium of Russian Officers Andrey Golovatiuk, “Belarus is Russia’s strategic partner in the scope of the Union State. We [Russia] would not want it to drastically step sideways from our common political course, as happened with Ukraine. This would compel us to change our whole national defense strategy, including not only the anti-missile/aircraft defense strategy but other directions as well.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Kirill Ryabov, “RLS ‘Kontejner’: polgoda do boevogo dezhurstva,” *Armejskiy Vestnik*, December 5, 2018, <https://army-news.org/2018/12/rls-kontejner-polgoda-do-boevogo-dezhurstva/>.

⁵⁹ Aleksandr Alesin, “Risknet li Minsk potrepat nervy Moskvyy za ‘eti dve bazy’ v Belarusi?” *Naviny*, April 28, 2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20200428/1588059825-risknet-li-minsk-potrepat-nervy-moskve-za-eti-dve-bazy-v-belarusi>.

⁶⁰ Aleksandr Elesin, “Sistema preduprezhdeniya o raketnom napadenii: ‘Volga’ okazalas vazhneye ‘Dnepra’ i ‘Daryala,’” *Belrynok*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.belrynok.by/2020/08/06/sistema-preduprezhdeniya-o-raketnom-napadenii-volga-okazalas-vazhnee-dnepra-i-daryala/>.

⁶¹ Lyubov Stepushkova, “Belorussiya ukhodit na Zapad. Chto budet s oboronosposobnostyu Rossii?” *Pravda.ru*, August 17, 2020, https://military.pravda.ru/1521607-russia_belarus/.

Implications in the Information-Ideological Domain

Unlike some other Russian regions, KO has never experienced strong separatist trends. Even the often mentioned regionalist Baltic Republican Party (active between 1993 and 2003) saw Kaliningrad as Russia's "bridge" to the EU, but remaining squarely under Moscow's sovereignty; and, in fact, its total number of active members never exceeded fifty.⁶² Subsequently, the "Tangerine Spring" (2009–2010)—a series of public protests that broke out in Kaliningrad over subsiding living standards and some unpopular reforms, resulting in the eviction of Vladimir Putin's handpicked local governor, Georgy Boos—was also bereft of separatist under/overtones, although anti-governmental (anti-Putin) sentiments were widespread within the movement.⁶³

Several years later, developments in Ukraine translated into an unprecedented consolidation of Russia's domestic audience around an anti-Western ideological narrative. In this regard, KO experienced a massive information-propagandist campaign carried out by federal and local media as well as public figures (including the then-governor Nikolay Tsukanov and his team). The thrust of the message—explicitly anti-Western in general and anti-Ukrainian, -Polish and -Lithuanian in particular—aimed to form/boost the image of Kaliningrad as increasingly surrounded by adverse powers. The policy has, indeed, yielded the desired effect. However, in case of potential

⁶² "Politicheskiye partii," *Obshchestvo.ru*, accessed October 17, 2020, <http://socarchive.narod.ru/bibl/polros/Kaliningr/partii-kalin.htm>; "Predsedatelyu obshchestvenno-politicheskoy organizatsii Kalinigradskoy oblasti' Baltiyskaya respublikanskaya partiya,'" *Delovaya Zhyzn*, August 23, 2002, <http://enet.ru/~baltia/bl020829.html>.

⁶³ Sergey Sukhankin, "Special no more: Kaliningrad on life support," *European Council on Foreign Relations* (London), November 7, 2016, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_special_no_more_kaliningrad_on_life_support_7169.

drastic transformations in Belarus, two serious repercussions might ensue.

First, it will be significantly more difficult for local and federal propagandists to convince the oblast's audience that Belarus—traditionally viewed in much more amicable terms than Ukraine—is an adverse power. That is not to say, of course, that such a task would be impossible: in fact, some Kaliningrad-based policymakers are already reviving themes of “Belarusian nationalism” and “neo-Nazism” that were “strangled by Lukashenka”⁶⁴ in the 1990s, thus implying their imminent return. Second, developments in Belarus, primarily stemming from public discontent with an aging autocrat, could potentially become a serious challenge to the Russian system. Leading Russian conservative intellectuals, such as Sergey Karaganov, have already admitted as much.⁶⁵ In effect, developments in Belarus could feasibly trigger the revival of anti-Putin and anti-system sentiments in Russia's westernmost region reminiscent of the Tangerine Spring protests of the 2009–2010 period or the regionalist rallies that broke out in the Russian Far East in mid-2020.

Conclusion

When considering any potential future dramatic changes in Belarus and their likely impact on Kaliningrad, two major aspects should be underscored.

On the one hand, the “loss” of Belarus would have relatively little negative effect on the socio-economic conditions in Kaliningrad

⁶⁴ Aleksandr Katerusha, Viktor Sergeev, “Chem grozyat Kaliningradu protest v Belorussii,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda Kaliningrad*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.kaliningrad.kp.ru/daily/217170/4272813/>.

⁶⁵ Sergey Karaganov, “Pravo znat!” *YouTube*, October 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmzebWwi3Gk>.

Oblast itself in the short term. At first, the most harmful ramifications would primarily be associated with heavier federal outlays to KO to compensate for the latter's increased energy costs, deficits in some categories of foodstuff, as well as likely problems in industrial production due to shortages of strategic resources/raw materials in the oblast and a (temporary) inability to export finished goods to end users in Russia. Such vital domains as energy security (the complete re-orientation from gas supplies via Belarus is now possible) and local defense capabilities (Belarus does not share actual borders with KO) would also not be overly affected at first; but they could be more vulnerable to disruption over time, especially in the event of a NATO naval blockade of Kaliningrad. That situation could begin to grow more dire if Russia is unable to break KO's isolation after about a year or so.

Yet on the other hand, a reorientation of Belarus away from Russia might yield far more visible and far-reaching consequences at the strategic level. These would include the military-strategic impact of transforming Kaliningrad from an "amber pistol"⁶⁶ at the temple of the EU/NATO into an isolated target for the transatlantic alliance—one that Moscow would have a significantly harder time relieving and supplying without a forward position in Belarus. But perhaps even more importantly, plummeting living standards in a more cut-off KO (held on life support by a cash-strapped Moscow) would, over time, likely trigger growing discontent among the local population. In contrast to the 1990s—when information could be not transmitted as immediately or easily as today, the popular mobilization potential was incomparably lower due to the absence of social media—the next socio-economic crisis could far outstrip the "Tangerine Spring" in terms of its magnitude. Under such a scenario, secessionist voices could also grow more audible inside Kaliningrad. And the problem of

⁶⁶ Vladimir Abramov, "Yantarnyy pistolet, on zhe mishen," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 14, 2011, https://www.ng.ru/regions/2011-11-14/100_oborona.html.

a separatist-minded KO would be by a far more dangerous (not to mention more realistic) challenge for Moscow than any potential threat of a regional military encounter with NATO.

The Changing Religious Landscape of Belarus and Its Impact on Belarusian Nationalism

Grigory Ioffe

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Executive Summary

Historically, no religious denomination has categorically or systematically promoted Belarusian nationalism. Rather, for centuries, an Orthodox-Catholic contest over which faith would play a dominant role in Belarusian lands ended up promoting the national causes of Russia and Poland, respectively, and not offering a niche for Belarus as such. Consequently, Belarus has long been effectively a cultural borderland. And the existence of a fuzzy and unstable border between two Christian denominations on this territory resulted in frequent, geopolitically triggered changes in religious allegiance on the part of the ancestors of today's Belarusians.

By the early 20th century, the Catholic minority began to play a more active role in the Belarusian national movement, whereas the Orthodox Church remained the major symbol of cultural proximity to Russia. However, the current protest movement, triggered by the disputed August 9, 2020, presidential election, may have shattered this symbolic divergence, as some Orthodox priests and even the head of the Belarusian Christian Orthodox Church could not stay away from castigating the government's harsh response to the street demonstrations. The initially loose relationship between religion and

Belarus's national cause, including the country's sovereignty, now appears to be tightening across the board.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of Europe's relative secularism, Belarus looks quite religious.¹ According to the 2018 national survey by the Information Center of the Presidential Administration, 62 percent of Belarusians acknowledged belief in God.² The 2017 estimate of the Pew Research Center was even higher, at 84 percent.³

More demonstrable, quantifiable and credible is Pew's 2018 data about the proportion of highly religious adults, based on combining four individual measures of religious observance—a self-assessment of religion's importance in one's life, attendance of religious services, frequency of prayer, and belief in God. The composite index thus derived adds an extra layer of certainty: spatial continuity. Specifically,

¹ Sergei Poltarzhitsky, "Skolko belorusov veryat v Boga?" *Zautra Mayei Krainy*, October 24, 2018, <https://zautra.by/news/news-29385#:~:text=%D0%A2%D0%B0%D0%BA%2C%20%D0%BF%D0%BE%20%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8%20Pew%20Research,12%25%20%D1%81%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%8B%20%D1%81%20%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B8%20%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F%D0%BC%D0%B8>.

² "Belorusy otmechayut spokoinuyu i bezkonfliktnyuyu situatsiyu v sfere mezhkonnatsionalnykh otnoshenii," *Belta*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/belorusy-otmechajut-spokojnuju-i-beskonfliktnuju-situatsiju-v-sfere-mezhkonnatsionalnykh-otnoshenij-iats-335726-2019/>.

³ How religious is your country? *Pew Research Center*, December 5, 2018; <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/how-religious-is-your-country/>.

as mapped out by Pew,⁴ Belarus is midway between Russia and Poland not only physically but in terms of dedication to religion as well: 27 percent of Belarusians are highly religious versus 17 percent of Russians and 40 percent of Poles.

The data on Belarus's other neighbors does not undermine this continuity and is in line with well-established facts, like for example, lower levels of religiosity in largely Protestant countries. Thus, of all nations bordering on Belarus, the least religious is, predictably, largely Lutheran Latvia (15 percent); predominantly Catholic Lithuania is more religious (21 percent); and predominantly Orthodox Ukraine is not far apart from Belarus, at 31 percent.

Being in between Russia and Poland on dedication to religion makes sense also because Orthodoxy and Catholicism are the two leading religious denominations of Belarus. According to various surveys, Catholics account for 9–14.5 percent of Belarusians, whereas Orthodox Christians make up 72–83 percent. A typical Belarusian believer does not show up regularly for services on Sundays; only 12 percent do, which, however, is twice the frequency of Russians (6 percent). Catholics are more active than the Orthodox: 25 percent of them attend church once a week, and they also more frequently attend religious events outside their regular places of worship.

Altogether, 25 religious denominations are registered in Belarus. The third-most numerous is the Protestant community. It accounts for up to 4 percent of Belarusians, and the dominant varieties of Protestantism in Belarus are Baptist and Pentecostal.

Located in the center of the former Jewish Pale of Settlement, Belarus was at one point distinguished for being home to the highest percentage of Jews anywhere in Europe—14.2 percent of the entire

⁴ Ibid.

population back in 1897, or more than 900,000 people.⁵ At that time, in Minsk alone, Jews accounted for 57 percent of the population. Currently (2019), merely 13,705 Jews remain in Belarus.⁶

The Orthodox lead not only in terms of the overall number of believers but also the number of parishes (1,709).⁷ Curiously, they are followed by Baptists (524) and only then Catholics (498). The fact that Evangelical Christian parishes outnumber Catholic churches reflects the smaller average size of the former's parishes but also the aftermath of a Protestant boom of the 1990s.

Soviet Crackdown on Religion and the Geography of Religious Communities

All of the major religious denominations are represented in Minsk and the country's other five regional centers. But geographically, the center of gravity of religious life, including the sheer number of parishes, is definitively found in western Belarus, which, from 1921 to 1939, lay within the borders of interwar Poland. In this regard, maps of the religious landscape in Belarus from 2006 (**Maps 15–17**, see pp. xviii–xx) are not outdated: the situation had largely taken shape by

⁵ Yevgenii Rosenblat and Irina Yelenskaya, "Linamika chislennosti i rasseleniya belorusskikh yevreyev," *Demoscope*, № 105–106, March 17–30, 2003; <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2003/0105/analit03.php>.

⁶ Itogi Perepisi 2019: Kakiye Natsionalnosti Zhuvut v Belarusi, *Belmir*, September 11, 2020, <http://www.belmir.by/2020/09/11/%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B8-2019-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82/>.

⁷ Informatsiya o konfessionalnoi situatsii v Respublike Belarus, *Upolnomochennyi po Delam Religii i Natsionalnostei*, 2020; <https://belarus21.by/Articles/1439296790>.

that time and did not change much thereafter. Such an uneven geography is a lasting legacy of the Soviet crackdown on religion in the 1930s in the eastern part of the republic. For example, by 1939, not a single acting Orthodox church remained in Minsk; and 20 Catholic churches of eastern Belarus still functioning in 1936 had all been closed by 1939.⁸ It is then little wonder that on maps implicitly reflecting the number of parishes per unit of land (**Maps 15–17**, pp. xviii–xx), even Orthodox Christianity, which invokes and reflects spiritual closeness to Belarus's *eastern* neighbor, is centered in *western* Belarus. Catholics are most numerous in the northwest, especially in Grodno Oblast; but even there, the number of Catholic parishes yields to the Orthodox (176 and 210, respectively). Only the area integral to the former Wileński Kraj (environs of Vilnius) and stretching along the Lithuanian border, at the crossroads of Minsk, Grodno and Vitebsk oblasts, stands out for hosting few Orthodox parishes and featuring an absolute dominance of Catholicism. Protestant parishes are particularly numerous in the southeast of Brest Oblast and in the adjacent corner of Minsk Oblast.

Following the Soviet crackdown on religion in the 1930s, church buildings tended to be repurposed as warehouses. The Council for Religious Affairs actually proposed converting closed churches into schools, museums, libraries, archives and book depositories. However, this could only be relevant for cities. In the villages, where most of the closed churches were located, such institutions were not in demand. Wooden temples could still be converted into a club or a school, but the stone-and-brick religious buildings were only suitable for various warehouses and “utility rooms.” Anything could be stored in churches: grain, sauerkraut, fuel, fertilizers, pesticides, manure, etc. Before the war, barrels of herring stood in the ancient Peter and Paul

⁸ Józef Dębiński, “Kościół katolicki na Białorusi na przełomie XX i XXI wieku,” *Folia Historica Cracoviensia*, Vol 14, 2008: 23–48.

Church in Minsk. Already after the war, the unique fortress church in Synkovichi, Grodno Oblast, was used for vegetable storage.

In larger cities (Polotsk, Mogilev and Bobruisk), closed churches were often assigned the role of archives and book depositories. In Minsk, four religious buildings were used this way simultaneously. Temples often served as garages: notably, larger churches in Vidzy, Lepel and Melyuntsy (Vitebsk Oblast), Grinevichi (Minsk Oblast), Mezhirechi and Shilovichi (Grodno Oblast), as well as synagogues in Borisov and Uzda (Minsk Oblast). For several years, the garage of a sports motorcycle club was located inside the Bobruisk synagogue at 29 Chongarskaya Street. In Antopol (Brest Oblast), local authorities located a fire station in the church. They did the same with the synagogues in Dyatlovo (Grodno Oblast) and Orsha (Vitebsk Oblast). Amazingly, fire services are located in these temples to this day.⁹

In contrast to eastern (Soviet) Belarus, in the western part of the republic, in 1939, there were hundreds of functioning places of worship. The Soviet authorities did not close most of them right away; so, by the end of February 1941, there were still 446 Catholic and 540 Orthodox churches, 387 synagogues and 14 monasteries. They collectively employed 617 Catholic and 606 Orthodox priest and 293 rabbis.¹⁰ Four months later, the Soviet Union was attacked by Nazi Germany. After the war, the closure of places of worship in the western part of Belarus became pervasive, but still not to the same degree as in the east, prior to the German invasion. All synagogues, however, were shut down as they were now devoid of their respective communities.

⁹ Pivnoi bar, tyurma i spirtzavod: vo chto kommunisty prevratili belorusskie khramy, *Tut.by*, December 13, 2019, https://news.tut.by/culture/664647_print.html.

¹⁰ *Ty z Zakhodniai, ya z Uskhodnei Belarusi. Verasen 1939–1956*. Minsk: Belaruskaya Navuka 2009: Volume 1: 5,228–5,235.

Religion and Nationalism

Perhaps the most crucial fact about Belarus's religious landscape is that historically and largely to this day no religious denomination has had strong, if any, connection to the Belarusian national idea (i.e., the idea that Belarusians are a nation separate from Russians and Poles). That is to say, no particular creed is associated with the emergence of the Belarusian nation in the late 1800s or to its subsequent evolution. The sociolinguist Nina Mechkovskaya writes that in Belarus, in the late 1800s to early 1900s, "anything that was elevated above the illiterate peasant's existence, be that church, school, or officialdom, automatically became either 'Russian' (and Orthodox) or 'Polish' (and Catholic)."¹¹ The emergence of a Belarusian national idea was a step forward compared with the awareness of ethnic distinction that, early on, resulted from West-Rusist (see below) folklore expeditions of the 1860s.

More than 40 years later, at the beginning of the 20th century, the role of Belarusian nationalism's cradle was played by the *Nasha Niva* literary circle, which, from 1909 to 1915, published the eponymous newspaper in Wilno (Vilnius). This circle consisted mostly of Catholics, a minority among Belarusian speakers. The preponderance of Catholics among the Belarusians, who became conscious of their belonging to a distinct ethnicity, is underscored by many authors, notably by Alexander Tsvikevich.¹² From 1909 to 1912, the *Nasha Niva* paper was published in two parallel versions: *Lacinka* (i.e., using the Latin alphabet) and *Grazhdanka* (using the Cyrillic alphabet). Among Belarusian speakers, the Roman Catholics who preferred *Lacinka* were five times less numerous than the Orthodox. The latter

¹¹ Nina B. Mečkovskaya, *Belorusskii yazyk: Sotsiolingvističeskie Očerki*, München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2003, 28.

¹² Alexander Tsvikevich, *Belarus: Politicheskii ocherk*, Berlin: Izdaniye Diplomaticheskoi Missii BNR, 1919: 24–25.

did not just prefer Graždanka but were for the most part ignorant of the Latin script. Yet at the same time, the percentage of *Nasha Niva*'s readers among the Catholics was 2.5 times higher than among the Orthodox. This parallel publishing in two scripts was an early indication of a cultural divide that would complicate the national consolidation of Belarusians for decades to come. It is also important to keep in mind that although Lacinka was popularly perceived as a symbol of high culture and of belonging to Europe, the Russian government was hostile to the idea of introducing the “Polish alphabet” to the peasant masses. In 1912, faced with this controversial situation and also strapped for cash, the editors of *Nasha Niva* switched to publishing entirely in Cyrillic.¹³

The aforementioned divide opened up a gap between how two groups of Belarusian intellectuals understood what it means to be a Belarusian. The ideological blueprint for those leaning toward the East was so-called West-Rusism, a theory that emphasized Belarusian peculiarity only within the confines of the Russian cultural universe (Russian World), which implied a devotion to Orthodoxy. The most prominent author and promoter of this theory was Mikhail Koyalovich (1828–1891). Born into the family of an Orthodox priest in Kuznica Bialystocka, now in Poland, in the Belarusian-speaking area's extreme west, wherein the Orthodox were a minority, Koyalovich was imbued with the idea of the high mission of Russian Orthodoxy.

Born ten years later in Mostovliany, Konstanty (Kastus) Kalinowski (1838–1864) was imbued with the idea of the high mission of Polish Catholicism for the enlightenment and liberation of the local, and mostly Orthodox, peasantry. In a primordialist sense, that is, assuming that nation comes first (as a kind of biological organism) and nationalism later, both Koyalovich and Kalinowski were

¹³ Nina Mečkovskaya, op. cit.: 58.

Belarusians. But they were committed to dragging the heart and soul of the Belarusian national cause in opposite directions: for Koyalovich, the Belarusians' natural home was Orthodox Russia; for Kalinoswki, it was Catholic Poland. Similar alter egos can be found in the next generation of Belarusians. Thus, Bronislaw Taraškewicz (Taraškevič or Tarashkevich), the author of the first Belarusian grammar manual (1918), was apparently raised in Polish culture. In the Vitebsk Drama Theater's production of Sakrat Yanovich's play "Arrest," Tarashkevich talks about himself as a man of Polish culture and clarifies that this is different from actually being a Pole. Tarashkevich's contemporary, Yevfimii Karski, the premier Belarusian linguist of all time, was Orthodox, an offspring of a converted Jew¹⁴ and decidedly a man of Russian culture. As the rector of Warsaw University from 1905 to 1915, he was one of the most ardent Russifiers of Poland, not just Belarus.

The denominational pattern of ethnic mobilization inherent in Polish and Russian nationalisms did a disservice to the Belarusian national cause, as noted by multiple scholars. "Denominational problems are extremely painful for the Belarusian national movement," wrote Pavel Tereshkovich. "In Belarus, Catholicism bears a distinctly colonial imprint, whereas the attitude of the Orthodoxy to the national movement is chilly, although the Orthodoxy has absorbed some regional features... The overwhelming majority of Catholic priests are ethnic Poles who consider all Belarusian Catholics to be Poles. The Polonization conducted by the priests is also reinforced by widespread Polonophile views among youths."¹⁵

¹⁴ Victor Korbut, "Raskrylas taina proiskhozhdeniya osnovatelya belorusovedeniya Yevfimiya Karskogo," *Belarus Segodnya*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.sb.by/articles/taynoe-stalo-yavnym-11062015.html>.

¹⁵ Pavel Tereshkovich, "Obshchestvennye dvizheniya v sovremennoi Belorussii: kratkii kommentarii k dokumentam," in *Grazhdanskie dvizheniya v Belorussii: dokumenty i materialy, 1989–1991*, Moscow: TSIMO 1991: 28, 31.

Interdenominational problems have lingered in independent Belarus, perhaps initially in a more latent way, under the cloak of the peaceful coexistence of religious communities; but subsequently, they have acquired greater visibility. For example, Roman Catholics played an inordinate role in the Belarusian Popular Front, whose founder, Zianon Pazniak, is an ardent member of that faith. Also, of the two largest denominations in the country, only Catholics have attempted to Belarusify their church services: in the major Catholic cathedral in Minsk, masses are now conducted intermittently in Polish and in Belarusian. In contrast, the country's Orthodox clerics have firmly clung to Russian. Responding to questions of why Belarusian is almost absent in their houses of worship, Orthodox hierarchs suggest that they will switch to Belarusian as soon as there is popular demand for it, which, so far, has been missing or inadequate.¹⁶

The primary factor behind Catholics' stronger proclivity to embrace the Belarusian national cause is not difficult to ascertain. In today's environment, propagating and strengthening Belarusian identity can only be achieved through distancing from Russia and Russians. Being a Catholic is an overtly non-Russian trait, so it naturally facilitates the aforementioned detachment. The same logic has been valid for Belarusians in eastern Poland, where each subsequent post-war census recorded a smaller number of self-identified Belarusians. Being Orthodox in Poland is much like being a Catholic in Russia. Apparently, there is also a strong homogenizing pressure within Poland, one of the world's most ethnically homogenous countries. As a result, Belarusian identity has almost entirely vanished among Catholics of northeastern Poland and has only been retained among a part of the Orthodox: in 2011, almost 84 percent of the Belarusian

¹⁶ Interview by Veniamin, Exarch of Belarusian Orthodox Church, September 14, 2020; <http://borisoveparhia.by/intervyu/mitropolit-minskiy-i-zaslavskiy-patr.html>.

minority (a community numbering around 40,000 people in total) identified as Christian Orthodox.¹⁷

Across the border, in Belarus, the situation is entirely different. Here, Catholic Belarusians are usually strongly dedicated to their Belarusianness. Prior to 1990, there was no Catholic seminary in Belarus. Therefore, in the religious upsurge that began during the years of *perestroika*, most priests in Belarus were “imported” from the neighboring country to the west. Over time, however, Polish citizens began to be ousted from the ranks of the local clergy—the authorities simply did not extend their visas. As a result, by 2007, out of 470 Catholic priests, only 181 were Polish citizens; by 2009 there were 161 of them in the country, by 2015 only 113, and in 2019, only 87.¹⁸ While expelling Polish priests pursues the authorities’ goal of detachment from Poland as an unfriendly entity, indirectly this practice boosts the Belarusian identity of the local Catholic Church.

The Polish language has consequently also been in gradual retreat from Catholic masses, especially outside Grodno Oblast. In November 2016, in Minsk, this author interviewed Father Stanisław Waszkiewicz, whose parish is in the northern part of the city. Born in Voronovo (Werenow), the most Polish district of Belarus, Waszkiewicz considers Polish to be his native language. “In my youth, after several years of studying in Poland, my spiritual ties with the language grew even stronger,” said Waszkiewicz. However, in his everyday interactions with parishioners in the Minsk district of

¹⁷ Grzegorz Gudaszewski, *Struktura narodowo-etniczna, językowa i wyznaniowa ludności Polski*. Warszawa: 2015: 109.

¹⁸ Grigory Ioffe, Jurij Drakochrust, “Życie na pograniczu: Polska mniejszość narodowa na Białorusi,” *Polacy na Białorusi od Powstania Styczniowego do XXI wieku, Tom IV*, Warsaw: Studium Europy Wschodniej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2020: 641–664; “Białoruś: kościoły bez polskich księży,” *Onet*, February 4, 2019, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/bialorus-koscioly-bez-polskich-ksiezy/xq9y3je>.

Uruczcze, he had to address the question: who am I in the first place, the purveyor of the Polish national spirit, or a Catholic priest? For Father Waszkiewicz, the answer was clear: I am a priest. As such, he feels obliged to speak in the languages of his parishioners. In dealing with people and when hearing confessions, he speaks Russian. At mass, he uses Russian and Belarusian. Of course, not every priest—especially in areas with compact communities of ethnic Poles—takes this same approach to language. However, the Voronovo-born priest's words point to a general tendency that even the remaining Belarusian clergy who are Polish citizens would not challenge.

Occasionally, inter-denominational issues give rise to clichés. For example, the Belarusian historian from Białystok, Poland, Oleg Latyszonak, sees profound symbolism in his observation that the four most important personalities who led independent Belarus back in 1992 had a Catholic background: Zianon Pazniak, the head of the Belarusian Popular Front; Stanislaw Shushkevich, the speaker of the parliament; Viacheslav Kebich, the prime Minister; and Stanislaw Bogdankevich, the chair of the National Bank. The fact that at least one of them, Kebich, and, possibly, Bogdankevich, too, used to be Soviet bureaucrats rather than devout Catholics, did not dissuade Latyszonak. Likewise, in his opinion, the Belarusian Orthodox majority “took revenge”¹⁹ in 1994, the year Lukashenka came to power. In Latyszonak's view, Catholics represent a morally positive force; but in the opinion of his *de facto* opponent, Vladislav Makarov, who thinks otherwise, “all Belarusian opposition effectively consists of Belarusian Poles and Belarusian-Catholics for whom Polish culture and language are closer than the culture of Orthodoxy.”²⁰

¹⁹ Aleg Latyshonak, “Belaruski natsionalizm i sutyknenie tsivilizatsii,” *Arche*, 7–8, 2007; <https://xn--d1ag.xn--e1a4c/pub/arche/html/2007-07/latysonak707.htm>.

²⁰ Vladislav Makarov, “Kult proklyatykh soldat ili kak Polsha udobryayet semena neonatsizma v Belorussii,” *Ritm Yevrazii*, October 29, 2015,

But even such analytically shallow contentions contain some meaningful information since they reflect attempts to use religion to attach moral or ethical labels to geopolitical leanings. As a case in point, the reason that the prominent Catholic Konstanty Kalinowski is today proclaimed an utmost Belarusian hero (at least among the opposition-minded public) whereas Koyalovich, his Orthodox alter ego, is only known to historians, is entirely because the present-day Belarusian national idea requires separateness from Russia. Kalinowski matches this task perfectly considering that he called upon Belarusian peasants to distance themselves from Russia and embrace the spiritual patronage of Polish culture. In contrast, Koyalovich does not appear to be a “good guy” and is worthy of oblivion (for the Westernizing opposition at least) because he recognized Belarusian specificity only as an inalienable part of the Russian World.

Also, the way Belarus’s two biggest Christian Churches are organized makes Catholics more prone to embrace Belarusian nationalism. Whereas the Orthodox Church in Belarus is just an arm of the Russian Orthodox Church (the so-called exarchate), the Roman Catholic Church is independent, in the sense that it is institutionally separate from the Polish Catholic Church. And whereas the Belarusian exarchate was, until recently, headed by ethnic Russians, born and raised in Russia, first by Filaret and then Pavel, the leaders of Belarusian Catholics, Cardinal Kazimir Sviontek (Kazimierz Świątek, who served in that capacity during 1991–2006) and Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusevich are not from Poland. Sviontek was born in Estonia, and Kondrusevich is a native Belarusian. Only in 2020, did the leader of the Belarusian Orthodox Church become a Belarus-born cleric.

<https://www.ritmearasia.org/news--2015-09-07--kult-prokljatyh-soldat-ili-kak-polsha-udobraet-semena-neonacizma-v-belorussii-19478>.

Belarus as a Historical Borderland

One peculiar historical feature of Belarus's religious landscape is a frequent change in the local population's dominant religious affiliation. The historian and political commentator Yury Shevtsov observed that in Belarus such changes occurred on average once every 150 years.²¹

Christianity first came to Belarusian lands in the tenth century. In 986, the first church was built in Polotsk. However, mass conversion from paganism to Christianity was a centuries-long process, lasting until 1387 in the northwestern corner of Belarus. The first episcopates with centers in Polotsk and Turov belonged to the Russian metropolis of the Constantinople Patriarchate; so after the Great Schism of 1054,²² it became an Eastern (or Greek) Orthodox Church. Roman Catholicism came to Belarusian lands later, with the 1387 baptism of Lithuanians, including quite a few Slavic-speakers and Slavicized Balts in the northwestern part of modern Belarus. The initial divide between the Orthodox and Catholic ecumenical territories lay along the Polotsk-Borisov-Mozyr line, well to the east of where a fuzzy (indistinctive) divide runs these days. Reallocations of this divide during the decades and centuries to come were chiefly a function of a tug-of-war between historical cores of Russia and Poland for domination over Belarusian lands.

During the Reformation, a notable infusion of Protestantism into Belarusian lands occurred. Thus, at the end of the 16th century, only

²¹ Yury Shevtsov, *Obyedinionnaya Natsiya: Fenomen Belarusi*, Moscow: Europa 2006: 44.

²² On July 16, 1054, Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerularius was excommunicated from the Christian church based in Rome, Italy. Thus, the main faction of Christianity became split into two divisions, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

two senators of the Great Duchy of Lithuania out of twenty-five were Catholics, the rest were largely Protestants. The earliest Protestant communities appeared in 1535, in Slutsk, and in 1553, in Brest, laying the foundation for the Reformation movement, initially Lutheran in nature. In the second half of the 16th century, many magnates, including such families as the Radzivils, Sapehas and Tyshkeviches, embraced Calvinism, while many of the gentry also adopted Nontrinitarianism.²³ In 1563, the charter of the grand duke of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania gave Protestants equal rights with Catholic and Orthodox believers. Though not numerous, Protestants made a substantial contribution to book printing in Belarus; the first book printed within the contemporary borders of Belarus and the first book printed in Belarusian within those borders were both by Protestants.²⁴

While dominance of the Orthodox religious dogmas and rites on Belarusian lands lingered, the subordination of local churches to the Moscow Patriarchate was terminated in 1595–1596. That change stemmed from the decision of the Ruthenian (Proto-Belarusian) Orthodox Church eparchies (dioceses) in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth to break relations with Moscow and to enter into communion with and place themselves under the authority of the Pope of Rome. In such a way, the Uniate or Greek Catholic Church was born. Between 1569 to 1839, most residents of Belarus, by some accounts about 70 percent, belonged to the Uniate Church, whereas Roman Catholics were still quite numerous in the western part of the Belarusian lands. Some scholars believe the subsequent collapse of the Uniate Church, in 1839, when it returned to the institutional realm of the Russian Orthodox Church, more than any other development

²³ Nontrinitarianism, historically also referred to as Antitrinitarianism, is a form of Christianity that rejects the doctrine that God subsists as three distinct but coequal persons indivisibly united in single substance of the Holy Trinity.

²⁴ Grigory Ioffe and Vitali Silitsky, *Belarus Historical Dictionary*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2018: 100.

undermined Belarusians' sense of being different from neighboring ethnic groups.²⁵ Indeed, the Uniates (who abided by Orthodox rites but recognized the supremacy of the Pope) essentially represented a transitional, halfway creed between Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy. One may say that it was just as transitional as local vernaculars were between Polish and Russian. Two transitional features (language and creed) superimposed might have led to something qualitatively new, as occurred in western Ukraine, where the Uniate Church survived and the region ultimately became a hotbed of Ukrainian nationalism. However, even at the time when most ancestors of today's Belarusians were Uniates, many in the upper classes were Roman Catholics.²⁶ It is, therefore, not a foregone conclusion that the retention of the Uniate Church would have helped to consolidate a sense of Belarusian nationhood. In the annals of Russian history, 1839 is referred to as voluntary reunion, a return of the prodigal child to the parental church; but in the Polish telling as well as in the perception of Belarusian Westernizers, the return of Moscow's authority over the local Uniate parishes is treated as compulsory. The truth is most probably in the middle. On the one hand, the "reunion" was a direct result of the two Polish uprisings (1794 and 1830) and the ensuing desire of Moscow to retrieve and entrench its influence over Belarusian lands. On the other hand, since the liturgical rites were not altered, the shift in church subordination *per se* could hardly become a disruptive event for the general public. In the early 1990s, an attempt was made to recreate a Uniate or Greek Catholic Church in Belarus. Currently, 16 Uniate parishes exist in the

²⁵ Zakhar Shybeko, "Novaya i noveishaya istoriya Belarusi: Vazhneishiye sobytiya i osnovnye tendentsii," *Russkii Vopros* 2, 2004, at <http://russkiivopros.com>.

²⁶ Viacheslav Nosevich, "Belorusy: Stanovleniye etnosa is 'natsionalnaya ideya,'" in *Belorussiya i Rossiya: Obshchestva i gosudarstva* Moscow: Prava Cheloveka, 1998: 11-30.

country, including 4 in Minsk and 4 in Vitebsk, with the total number of parishioners reaching about 10,000.²⁷

During subsequent decades, shifts in the fuzzy border between Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy were entirely a function of Russian-Polish relations, especially in the aftermath of the third Polish uprising of 1863–1864 and of relative liberalization following the 1905–1907 revolution in Russia. A seminal article by Pavel Tereshkovich about Belarus as a borderland contains a wealth of relevant information on that trend.²⁸ Thus, in the wake of the uprising of 1863, as a result of a purposeful conversion to Orthodoxy, the Catholic population of Belarusian lands was significantly reduced.²⁹ For example, in Minsk from 1858 to 1897, the proportion of Catholics decreased from 33 percent to 15.1 percent. In total, the Catholic community of Belarus lost up to 280,000 adherents.³⁰ Along with this,

²⁷ “Uniatstvo mozhet vnov obyedinit belorusov,” *Belorusskii Partizan*, January 10, 2014, https://belaruspartisan.by/life/253656/?__cf_chl_captcha_tk__=d8bd66ec5163270fba15b468dc09dd1706eee5e8-1604066916-0-AbXix9nXQdrXl593pVBpILmJOk3NYGbhH4GP--F6gjrRUVUFMeF69SilhNPgp4xqCBqoM8gUNxNQnGWleThUMsaJddkjXLvfXSdUgIkH8fMyMxItvIycRmUyu2Igr2A7_G1uAM3mTobEy0HuwLEG946KY6bzWoRfGRjVE16BMvV2_9hIgzucWaerX8IJAgkKgfPb4zkP88hyCxkiUpCAK3IcBRL6V-yYKlmT7FvVE21ADSVI9UexhNp2xuqXbCCGg1EW_5cmOrM48PpjvsCWvf_Rm5EWEj1EvHcdXG1fgEbqfztrxwSOVioGmAi_zbGNBCL-U7y0pFOzR8OwGs-dJXzDwkc9VDNNjqVDiQOe8k5obx0kGJpXuBvVa1Nkj--EJxS0H8jNaOChcq-_8gIo41raB5njWCUCIAMmHfVKMA_a2rHQQxmVHuGnY_B3JpLRL0T1r-n0zp919gofew4Mlml7nrL-Wt93IOcRiHg1eRSlmmLG8LVaz4z33F-78WCZR_XrjqXc9gUh4p9vdZBLd4QzGM1ATrzSgREuhJm2aNa4g0N6eomnf1aS1UZdsW9TwQ.

²⁸ Pavel Tereshkovich, “Pogranichye kak soudba: Metamofozy identichnosti v vjstochnoyevropeiskom pogranichye,” *Ab Imperio*. 2009. №1: 191–226.

²⁹ *Ibid*: 214–215.

³⁰ *Ibid*: 215.

the government called for “snatching Russian Catholics from the hands of the Poles,” that is, to wean the people who remained in the bosom of Catholicism off their Polish identity. “To this must be added,” writes Tereshkovich, “that the policy in the area of education pursued by the Russian administration in the second half of the 19th century in order to combat Polonism led to the construction of an ‘imaginary Belarus’”—a historical, folkloric and ethnographic entity that had never existed before.³¹ Indeed, inspired or sanctioned by the authorities, West-Rusist publications, devoted to inculcating the locals with the notion of Belarus, were impressive in volume and content. Among other things, they strived to perpetuate the name “Belarus” (Belorussia) for the territory inhabited by people whose speech was now called Belarusian. The identical opinion about the foundational role of West-Rusism in “discovering” Belarusians as a self-styled ethnic group is expressed by Valer Bulgakov in his *History of Belarusian Nationalism* (2006).³²

To be sure, Belarusianness was viewed by West-Rusism exclusively as a manifestation of the “primordially Russian” character of the region, juxtaposed against Polonization. Paradoxically, however, “the majority of the activists of the Belarusian national movement at the beginning of the 20th century were Catholics” who would rather facilitate Polonization, not move away from it.³³ In such a way, on the territory of modern Belarus, Belarusianness clashed with Polishness in the most sensitive area of religion, with which national feelings were inextricably linked at that time. It is not surprising that the 1897 census found Catholics made up only 2.4 percent of in Belarus. A significant decline in the prestige of the Polish language also

³¹ Ibid: 217.

³² Valer Bulgakov, *Istoriya Belorusskogo Natsionalizma*, Vilius: Institut Belarusicistiki 2006: 154.

³³ Pavel Tereshkovich, op. cit: 218–219.

followed.³⁴ Thus, at least on paper, the Polish population decreased so much, writes Tereshkovich, that “Polish scientists over the past hundred years have invariably considered statistics reflecting these dynamics to be falsifications.”³⁵ It is all the more significant that as a result of subsequent liberalization, after the 1905 adoption of the law “On Religious Tolerance,”³⁶ many thousands of Orthodox believers converted back to Catholicism, construction of Catholic churches began on a grand scale throughout Belarus, and the number of Poles from 1897 to 1910 increased by 70 percent, including in Minsk from 1897 to 1917 by as much as 2.5 times, while the number of Belarusians decreased by 4 times.³⁷ In this, Tereshkovich discerned what he called “the usual social practice of the borderland, the practice of adaptability and flexibility.”³⁸ Borderland is the key word in this context. The very phenomenon of a frontier, coupled with a tug-of-war for expansion and influence, can explain denominational fluctuations within Belarusian lands, whereby ordinary people were at times implicitly and at times outright asked to adjust their religious preferences to those of the upper strata. Hence the ever-shifting and indistinctive border between Western and Eastern Christianity that, nevertheless, has been regarded as “the most fundamental religious border in

³⁴ Ibid: 219.

³⁵ Ibid: 220.

³⁶ On April 30, 1905, Tsar Nicholas II signed a decree for religious tolerance. In this decree, the rights that were once exclusively reserved for Orthodox citizens were now extended to other religions.

³⁷ Pavel Tereshkovich, *op. cit.*: 223–224.

³⁸ Ibid: 224.

Europe today.”³⁹ It is this religious border that Samuel Huntington used as his eastern border of Western civilization.⁴⁰

Piotr Eberhardt attempted to mark out this cultural divide more accurately than Huntington did in the latter’s seminal book about the clash of civilizations. According to Eberhardt’s version (see **Map 18**, p. xxi), the divide leaves a strip along the northwestern border of Belarus (at the crossroads between the Grodno, Minsk and Vitebsk regions) on the side of “Western civilization,” while the rest of Belarus is assigned to the Byzantine Orthodox.⁴¹ Although it has become at least controversial to try to apply a master key of cultural determinism to current events, many observers have paid attention to the overwhelmingly peaceful and violence-free nature of the Belarusian protest movement as a reflection of its Europeanness. As the Russian liberal economist Yevgeny Gontmacher put it, “even during the protest rallies, not a single car was burned, not a single glass window was broken. This [...] speaks to the quality of social capital of Belarus.” In that sense at least, the Belarusian protest movement has been far apart from both recent instances of social unrest in the West and from what Alexander Pushkin famously called a “Russian rebellion—senseless and merciless.”⁴²

³⁹ Terry Jordan, *The European Culture Area*, New York: HarperCollins 1996: 88.

⁴⁰ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer, 1993): 9.

⁴¹ Piotr Eberhardt, “The Concept of Boundary between Latin and Byzantine Civilization, in Europe,” *Przegląd Geograficzny* 76, no. 2 (2004): 169–88.

⁴² Ne privedi Bog videt russkiy bunt, bessmyslenny i besposhchadnyy! Iz povesti (gl. 13) “Kapitanskaya dochka” (1836) A. S. Pushkina (1799–1837). Though this phrase, from his novella “Kapitanskaya Dochka,” specifically refers to Pugachev’s Rebellion—a peasant Cossack uprising, between 1773 and 1774, headed by Yemelyan Pugachev—in fact, Pushkin’s words are meant to symbolically allude to how Russians rebel in general.

Recent Developments

The unique religious landscape of Belarus has continued to subtly influence developments in the country in recent years—culminating in the ongoing anti-Lukashenka protest movement. On April 4, 2019, associates of the local forestry administration demolished 70 massive (five-meter-tall) wooden crosses that Zmitser Dashkevich, one of the most defiant opposition activists of Belarus, and a dedicated Baptist, installed back in July 2018, along the perimeter of the Kuropaty forest. Situated in the northernmost part of Minsk, Kuropaty is the site of late-1930s mass executions by Stalinist secret police.⁴³ Only Dashkevich’s crosses were removed; multiple other crosses standing within the forest patch itself were not touched. Tadeusz Kondrusewicz, the head of Belarusian Catholics, spoke against the removal of the crosses.⁴⁴ Less stringent criticism emanated from the Orthodox Church. “I support the president [Lukashenka] by all means: Kuropaty should be put in order,” wrote Sergei Lepin, the head of the Synod Information Department of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, “but the method used by the local bullies I cannot support.”⁴⁵ Feodor Povny, the rector of the Minsk Cathedral of All Saints, called Kuropaty a “metaphorical human Golgotha,” but added, “whereas a cross is holy in and of itself, the whole alleys of crosses are more like overindulgences than signs of reverent veneration... There is a fine line between protecting a cross and condemning the authorities that everybody strives to label inhuman... As for Kuropaty, they began from a standoff and [...] from exaggerating the number of victims and

⁴³ Grigory Ioffe, “Showdown in Belarus’s Kuropaty Forest,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 15, Issue 95, The Jamestown Foundation, June 20, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/showdown-in-belaruss-kuropaty-forest/>.

⁴⁴ “Tadeusz Kondrusevich prizval srochno prekratit snos krestov v Kuropatakakh,” *Tut.by*, April 4, 2019, <https://news.tut.by/economics/632586.html>.

⁴⁵ “Viadomyya liudzi pra znosy krastou u Kurapatakakh,” *Svaboda*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29868643.html>.

distortions of facts that later were disguised by those crosses. Let us confess to ourselves that each time this place of mourning is recalled in public, it is either because of a scandal or of a provocation.”⁴⁶

In October 2018, the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople decided to grant the Ukrainian clerics independence (“autocephaly”) from Moscow. On the same day, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka met, in Minsk, with the members of the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod.⁴⁷ In principle, the Belarusian Orthodox Church could seek to claim independence, too—with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church serving as a clear precedent. But although some supporters of Belarusian autocephaly managed to conduct a conference in Chernihiv, Ukraine, a claim for the Belarusian Church’s separation from the Moscow Patriarchate is far-fetched at least for the time being. First, there does not appear to be any significant grassroots preference for that kind of development in Belarus. And second, until recently the leading Orthodox clerics in Belarus, including former Metropolitan Paul, the Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus, were all ethnic Russians.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the reputable Russian cleric and religious philosopher Andrei Kuraev, known for his criticism of Church authorities, opined, in an interview for the Belarusian Service of *Radio Liberty* that autocephaly for Belarus is only a matter of time and will probably take

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Vstrecha s chlenami Sviashchennogo sinoda Russkoi Pravoslavnoi tserkvi i sinoda Belorusskopi Pravoslavnoi tserkvi, October 15, 2018, http://www.president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-chlenami-svjaschennogo-sinoda-russkoj-pravoslavnoj-tserkvi-i-sinoda-belorusskoj-pravoslavnoj-19696/.

⁴⁸ Grigory Ioffe, “Autocephaly of Ukrainian Orthodox Church Spotlights Belarus’s Growing Geopolitical Importance,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 15 Issue: 151, October 24, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/autocephaly-of-ukrainian-orthodox-church-spotlights-belaruss-growing-geopolitical-importance/>

place following a “change in the political climate.”⁴⁹ Piotr Rudkovsky, a Catholic theologian who is now leading the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, shares this opinion. Rudkovsky sees the seed of a further future schism within the Russian Orthodox Church in the fact that not a single ethnic Belarusian participated in the above-mentioned Synod meeting in Minsk, in October 2018—specifically because the members of the Synod were not locals and mostly ethnic Russians. Rudkovsky interprets this as abuse of Belarusians’ loyalty to Moscow that will not remain unnoticed.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Valer Karbalevich of *Radio Liberty* argued that by hosting the Synod meeting in Minsk, the Belarusian government was taking part in Moscow’s geopolitical games. This overshadows Minsk’s peacekeeping efforts in Ukraine since it is effectively giving up the status of an independent international actor while reinforcing its reputation as an instrument of the Kremlin’s foreign policy, Karbalevich asserted.⁵¹

In November 2019, the major event that reverberated with religious feelings for many Belarusians was the reburial of the remains of Kostanty (Kastus) Kalinowski in Vilnius, Lithuania. Born in 1838 in Mostowliany (in the easternmost part of today’s Poland) and executed in 1863 in Wilno (Vilnius), Kalinowski was one of the local leaders of the uprising against tsarist Russia. Among other achievements, he published the newspaper *Mouzhytskaya Prawda (Peasant Truth)* in

⁴⁹ “Diyakan Kurau: Tsarkouna-praunaya baza dlya Belaruskai autokefalii uzho podrykhtavanaya,” *Svaboda*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29546796.html>.

⁵⁰ Grigory Ioffe, “One More Standoff in Kuropaty: Slow-Motion Social ‘Civil War’ Rages on in Belarus,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 16, Issue 49, The Jamestown Foundation April 8, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/one-more-standoff-in-kuropaty-slow-motion-social-civil-war-rages-on-in-belarus/>.

⁵¹ Valer Karbalevich, “Navoshta Minsku rolya instrument u gulniakh Maskvy?” *Svaboda*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29545040.html>.

Belarusian, which sought to fuel peasant support for the nobility-led rebellion. Much debate exists about the identity of Kalinowski himself and about his significance for Belarus. For the opposition-minded Belarusian Westernizers, Kalinowski has long been seen as a national hero, originally mentioned in that capacity by Vatslav Lastouski, the author of the first Belarusian history text (1910) couched in the Westernizing tradition. However, to those culturally leaning toward Russia, Kalinowski has always been too Catholic and too Polish, although the Soviet historiography attempted to paint Kalinowski in class terms, as a defender of downtrodden Belarusian peasants.

The reburial of Kalinowski in November 2019 was attended by not only many representatives of Belarusian Catholics but also an official delegation from Minsk headed by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Petrishenko. The presence of Belarusian government officials was primarily attributable to tensions at that time between Minsk and Moscow; until recently, only Belarusian Westernizers, particularly Catholics, had recognized the significance of Kalinowski for Belarus. Indeed, in a notable public dispute, Orthodox Archpriest Sergius Lepin expressed the views of the Orthodox Church, characterizing Kalinowski as an outsider, while historian Vasily Gerasimchik expressed the Westernizers' traditional standpoint on the 19th century figure—describing him as a national hero of Belarus.⁵² These discussions reflected the seriousness of the religious and cultural differences within Belarusian society, not just political orientation, since both Lepin and Gerasimchik are firm supporters of Belarusian statehood. Such cleavages become seemingly insurmountable obstacles to some iconic historical figures' ability to play a unifying role for the Belarusian nation.

⁵² Lepin's standpoint is described in: "Ya prestupnik ne po ubezhdeniyu," *Tsarkva*, December 9, 2019, Tsarkva, <https://churchby.info/rus/articles/kalinovskiy-ya-prestupnik-ne-po-ubezhdeniyu>; Gerasimchik's standpoint is described in "Kryvazherny Kalinowski?" *Svaboda*, November 29, 2019, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30297251.html>.

Also, in 2019, two more Catholic priests who are citizens of Poland were not extended their visas: Pavel Knurek, who had served in Vitebsk for 15 years, and Sobieslav Tomala, who had served for 20 years in Soligorsk. Following numerous solicitations by the parishioners, Tomala received a six-month extension, but Knurek did not.⁵³ Several requests to establish new Pentecostal churches were denied as well.

Following the August 9, 2020, presidential election, the more active and consistent stand against the authorities' repressions was taken by Belarusian Catholics. Already one week prior to the election, they announced the action "A Catholic does not falsify." In the context of the campaign, it was clear that this slogan was directed against Lukashenka. After the rigged results of the vote were released and the first protest rallies began, the chair of the episcopal conference of Belarus, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusevicz, addressed the community. In particular, he called for negotiations and said, "May your hands, created for peaceful labor and fraternal greetings, not raise weapons or stones." Vitebsk Bishop Oleg Butkevich put it even more bluntly: "The regular elections caused a crisis in our society, which led to an aggravation of the electoral campaign and yet to not entirely correct counting of votes... Systems based on blood have never been strong in history, and Justice has always been done in regard to those violating all human (not to mention God's) standards." In addition, Catholic priests in the city of Zhodino took to the streets together with the protesters.⁵⁴ On August 21, Archbishop

⁵³ Alexander Shramko, "Religioznaya sfera: Period neopravdavshikhnya nadezhd i ozhidaniy, *Belorusskii Yezhegodnik* 2019, <https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2020/page17.html>.

⁵⁴ "Religioznaya karta Belarusi i tserkovno-konfessionalnaya reaktsiya na protest," *Argument*, August 25, 2020, <http://argumentua.com/stati/religioznaya-karta-belarusi-i-tserkovno-konfessionalnaya-reaktsiya-na-protesty>.

Kondrusevicz met with the then–minister of internal affairs, Yuri Karayev, and expressed his concern about police brutality.⁵⁵

The initial stand of the Orthodox Church could not be more different. On August 10, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Pavel, “whole-heartedly congratulated” Lukashenka on his victory in the August 9 elections. After a wave of indignation from Orthodox parishioners, Metropolitan Pavel called a press conference. However, in his remarks to journalists, he did not say anything of principle that might elucidate his position. In fact, his message could be interpreted as a desire to please the protesters but at the same time not to spoil relations with the authorities. Some of the clergy and believers nonetheless united with Catholics by joining an impromptu group united against falsification. The first multid denominational procession was held on August 13. Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants took part in it. The first two groups carried icons in their hands, and the rest carried the Bible. The Belarusian Orthodox Church publicly denounced the procession. This angered quite a few believers, who wrote an open letter to Metropolitan Pavel. The next day, he joined them and also called on the authorities to do everything possible to end the bloodshed. He added, “At the same time, I urge our citizens not to provoke [law enforcement].” “Our citizens” sounded ironic, as Metropolitan of Minsk Pavel (born Georgy Vasilyevich Ponomarev) is a citizen of the Russian Federation.

Shortly thereafter, Metropolitan Pavel apologized for his premature congratulations of Alyaksandr Lukashenka on the latter’s victory in the presidential election. The press secretary of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Sergei Lepin, said that the hierarch had seen the video recordings of the arrests and they “upset and angered him.” The

⁵⁵ Piotr Rudkowski, “Tsarkva, yakaya vycherpala limit astsiarozhnastsi,” *Nashe Mneniye*, October 28, 2020, <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/7249.html>.

next day, August 25, it was announced that the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Pavel, was appointed to head the Kuban Metropolitanate in Krasnodar, Russia, where he replaced Metropolitan Isidor, who died after being infected with COVID-19. Certainly, such an abrupt transfer must have derived from the displeasure of the Belarusian authorities and Lukashenka personally. The new head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church is Veniamin, who continues to also serve as the top cleric of the Borisov Eparchy. Veniamin's secular name is Vitaly Ivanovich Tupeko. Born in Luninets, Brest Oblast, he is an ethnic Belarusian, unlike his two predecessors. Subsequently, Sergei Lepin, the press secretary, resigned too, after President Lukashenka criticized him for expressing outrage at the government for removing an improvised memorial devoted to a person fatally mistreated by the authorities.⁵⁶

The government's actions against the head of Belarusian Catholics, Tadeusz Kondrusevich, is arguably worse than what befell Pavel, although some may see the outcomes pertaining to both faith leaders as identical. On August 31, 2020, Kondrusevich, a Belarusian citizen, was denied reentry from Poland, where he had spent several days.⁵⁷ Despite the solicitation of the Pope through Cardinal Paul Richard Gallagher, who visited Minsk for four days in mid-September and held talks with Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei,⁵⁸ the issue remained unresolved for months. The official explanation for denying entrance to a citizen of Belarus is bizarre and boils down to a statement that his

⁵⁶ Tut.by, November 20, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/709331.html>.

⁵⁷ Grigory Ioffe, "Belarus at Moscow's Mercy All Over Again," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 17, Issue 122, The Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-at-moscows-mercy-all-over-again/>.

⁵⁸ "Sviatoi prestol nastaiwayet na razreshenii arkhiepiskopu Kondrusevichu vernutsya v Belarus," *Naviny.by*, September 15, 2020, <https://naviny.media/new/20200915/1600176396-svyatoy-prestol-nastaivaet-na-razreshenii-arhiepiskopu-kondrusevichu>.

Belarusian passport is not valid. One possibility is that, when applying for his Belarusian passport, Kondrusevich might have concealed his other citizenship, presumably Polish. Kondrusevich was born near Grodno, Belarus to ethnically Polish parents; he received his secular education in St. Petersburg, Russia, and worked as a priest in that country for an extended period of time. Finally, on December 22, it was announced that Lukashenka would honor the request of Pope Francis and allow Kondrusevich's return to Belarus. This request was probably passed on to Lukashenka by the Apostolic Nuncio in Great Britain, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, who paid a visit to Minsk on December 17 and spoke with the Belarusian president.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Belarus is a moderately religious and predominantly Eastern Orthodox national community with a strong Roman Catholic minority and increasingly notable presence of Protestant groups. Historically, no religious denomination promoted Belarusian nationalism. Rather, the Orthodox-Catholic contest which religion would play a dominant role in Belarusian lands ended up promoting the national causes of Russia and Poland, respectively, and did not offer a niche for Belarus as such. For a long time, Belarus was effectively a cultural borderland. The existence of a fuzzy and unstable border between Catholicism and Orthodoxy across this territory resulted in unusually frequent changes in religious allegiance on the part of the ancestors of today's Belarusians, motivated by shifting geopolitical factors.

⁵⁹ "Lukashenko meets with special envoy from Pope Francis," *Belarus.by*, December 17, 2020, https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/lukashenko-meets-with-special-envoy-from-pope-francis_i_122872.html; "Makey zayavil, chto Lukashenko poshel navstrechu pape rimskomu po povodu vozvrashcheniya v Belarus Kondrusevicha," *Tut.by*, December 22, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/economics/712383.html>.

With the passage of time, however, the Catholic minority began to play an active role in the Belarusian national movement, whereas the Orthodox Church remained the major symbol of cultural proximity to Russia. The protest movement in the wake of the August 9, 2020, presidential elections may have shattered this symbolism as some Orthodox priests and even the head of the Church showed a willingness to castigate the government's response to the street demonstrations. The initially loose relationship between religion and Belarus's national cause, including the country's sovereignty, appears to be tightening across the board. Now, not only Catholics but a growing majority of the Orthodox, as well, are firmly in favor of Belarusian statehood.

Yet ample reason exists to believe that the future of Belarus, including the resolution of its current political crisis, will be largely conditioned by factors external to Belarus's religious landscape and even to its lasting position as a civilizational borderland. In the past, when inhabitants of what is today's Belarus switched from one denomination to another, they were adjusting to the dominant political force in control at that time, not because their spiritual preferences had changed. This time, however, the fate of constitutional reforms, a change at the helm of power, as well as the circumstances of that change are unlikely to result in any major changes in the religious allegiance of the populations. That said, the ever more noticeable support for democratic rule emanating from within various religious communities inside Belarus bears watching closely. Likewise, Belarus's ability to demonstrate increasing cultural dissimilarity from its larger neighbors will be key to maintaining this country's unique and independent place in Europe.

Four Scenarios for Belarus in 2025–2030

Artyom Shraibman

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Executive Summary

At least three trends will define the future of Belarus until 2025. The role of the state in the economy will continue to decrease. Belarusian foreign policy will continue to become more sovereign. And, unless he drops his widely announced plans, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka will amend Belarus's constitutional framework so as to prepare for a smooth transition of power. However, in the long run (2030 onward), a lot may depend on two key factors, the development of which is hard to predict today: Russia's policy toward Belarus, and the Belarusian regime's capability to weather economic woes while avoiding domestic political turbulence and serious repressions. This study considers four possible future scenarios, examining various combinations of these two variables.

Introduction: The Kingdom of Stability?

Starting from the early 21st century, most of the former Soviet republics of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have experienced a series of headwinds—pivots of foreign policy, revolutions and even wars—all of which have changed the face of the region. Seemingly, only Belarus, according to its own strong truism, could boast a level of enduring stability. However, this impression is only partly true.

Indeed, Belarus has kept its borders and political system untouched, largely due to its personality-based authoritarianism, with no ruling party, clans or oligarchy, and buttressed by minimal social inequality and selective repressions against the most unwanted opposition members. Yet, this situation changed by the second half of the 2010s, when the country began to face mounting internal and regional challenges.

A spate of economic crises (in 2009, 2011 and 2015) forced President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, known for his conservative adherence to neo-Soviet-style management, to appoint to government positions a group of younger and pro-market technocrats, all united in their support for structural economic reforms.¹ Throughout these years, the generally ineffective state-run sector of the economy shrank, freeing up significant portions of the labor force that were ultimately absorbed by the growing private sector, including the IT industry.²

Economic friction and a lack of stable support from Russia, combined with the latter's aggressive behavior in the region, have created daylight between the respective foreign policies of Minsk and Moscow. After the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, the Kremlin turned to full-on confrontation with the West. At the same time, Belarus began a gradual, and thus more sustainable, rapprochement with the European Union and the United States. Belarusian foreign policy exhibited more traits of neutrality while still performing many formal duties of Russia's ally. The new policy manifested itself in a distinctive geopolitical position and motivated Minsk's peacekeeping

¹ Artyom Shraibman, *Belarus's Lukashenko Appoints Market Reformer PM in Preparation for Storm* (Carnegie.ru, 2018), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77102>.

² The authorities want more from state-owned companies. Reducing staff favors this and does not put pressure on the budget (TUT.BY, 2019), <https://news.tut.by/economics/642304.html>.

efforts in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Yet, the new Belarusian course did not stop there.

Minsk authorities refused to allow the creation of a Russian airbase on Belarusian territory,³ started to look for new partnerships in the military-industrial sphere (China,⁴ Ukraine⁵), lifted the freeze on Belarus' dialogue with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),⁶ as well as enhanced pro-independence rhetoric and a Belarusian-identity narrative domestically.⁷ Belarus also started to open up to the world with its visa-free travel regime.⁸ So as to not compromise the normalization of relations with the West, Belarusian authorities limited the extent of political repressions⁹ in the country.

³ Lukashenko: No need for a Russian air base in Belarus (BelTA news agency, 2017), <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/lukashenko-no-need-for-a-russian-air-base-in-belarus-98468-2017/>.

⁴ Big eastern brother (Lenta.ru, 2019), https://lenta.ru/articles/2019/02/12/luka_i_krasnyi_dracon/.

⁵ Lukashenko invites Ukraine to collaborate in missile engineering (BelTA news agency, 2019), <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-invites-ukraine-to-collaborate-in-missile-engineering-124738-2019/>.

⁶ Minsk military cooperation: Belarus with both NATO and Russia? (Deutsche Welle, 2016), <https://www.dw.com/ru/военное-сотрудничество-минска-беларусь-и-с-нато-и-с-россией/a-36734565>.

⁷ Artyom Shraibman, *Why Lukashenko fell for the Belarusian language and national identity* (Carnegie.ru, 2016), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/66512>.

⁸ Belarus extends visa-free entry to 30 days (BelTA news agency, 2018), <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/belarus-extends-visa-free-entry-to-30-days-113548-2018/>.

⁹ Belarusian authorities abandon tough confrontation with opposition and soften repressions against opponents (Belarus in Focus, 2016), <https://belarusinfofocus.info/society-and-politics/belarusian-authorities-abandon-tough-confrontation-opposition-and-soften?page=3>.

They eschewed imprisoning more government critics, who could be considered political prisoners by the West, and, with rare exceptions, avoided brutal crackdowns of opposition protests. With the major setback in the protection of human rights in Russia, Belarus has arguably ceased being the *last* dictatorship of Europe, not only rhetorically, but also in the rankings of international human rights watchdogs like Freedom House.¹⁰

All of the above could not help but trigger tensions in relations with Moscow, which was not used to dealing with the smooth departure of an ally from its circle of control. At the end of 2018, after Belarus's query to prolong the preferential terms it enjoyed in its oil trade with Russia, the latter suggested to advance the bilateral integration processes first. Since then, Minsk has indicated that it is not going to sacrifice its sovereignty and is not ready to be governed by any new supranational joint institutions or a single currency. Nevertheless, both sides started negotiations on harmonizing their legislation and creating a single market—a task that has proven elusive over the past decade and one that few believe will be accomplished in the coming years.

The following study does not seek to forecast what Belarus's domestic and regional situation will look like in the short- or medium-term perspectives; rather, it attempts to glimpse over a more distant horizon, toward 2025–2030.

It is important to admit right away that any definitive forecast is bound to be wrong. Almost every significant event that shaped Belarus' political course in the past decade was either a matter of chance or a hardly predictable foreign-driven process: this has included the global economic crisis in 2008 and that August's Russia-

¹⁰ Nations in Transit 2018: Table of Country Scores (Freedom House, 2019), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nit-2018-table-country-scores>.

Georgia war, Vladimir Putin's return to power in Russia in 2012, the revolution in Ukraine in 2014, the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia and its intervention in Donbas, as the choice of Minsk to host negotiations on resolving the conflict. Almost certainly, the same sorts of unpredictable events will influence Belarus's future pathway as well.

Therefore, in an attempt to glimpse where Belarus is headed over the next decade, this paper will utilize scenario-analysis. But before defining the factors for each potential future scenario, it will be helpful to identify the major trends presently shaping Belarus's trajectory.

Trends Until 2025

Leaving aside the fact that the future is fundamentally unpredictable, in the case of Belarus there are a few midterm trends that already appear irreversible.

Growth of the Private Sector

The first relates to the Belarusian economy: the country is definitively attempting to decrease the role of the government sector. In fact, this process has already started, despite the absence of Lukashenka's green light to undertaking the structural reforms proposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. From 2012 to 2019, the number of employees working for Belarusian state-owned enterprises (SOE) has decreased by over a quarter, from 1.71 million to 1.28 million people.¹¹ With the further deterioration of Belarus's economic relationship with Russia and with continued private business development, the state-run sector will continue to shrink.

¹¹ Key performance indicators of public sector organizations for January–June 2019 (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2019),

http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public_bulletin/index_14339/.

The government itself admits that the state sector has for years now been, on average, 1.5 times less productive than privately owned companies, which drive economic growth while SOEs generally drag the country's economic indicators downward.¹² Parallel to this process, support within the Belarusian society for a market economy has grown immensely in the past few years. Independent surveys conducted in 2019 indicate that all demographic groups, from young to the elderly, from rural dwellers to Minsk residents, consider private business more effective than SOEs.¹³ The support is most dramatic among the youngest age cohort (between 18 and 24 years old): 63 percent favor private business, with only 9 percent holding the opposite view. Support for privatization has been growing for years, while support for state paternalism has declined.

President Lukashenka will hardly force this process. On the contrary, he will try as much as possible to preserve the state enterprises that provide jobs in the regions beyond Minsk, which would otherwise have long ago been overwhelmed by mass unemployment. Although, as developments in recent years have shown, the president can slow down the shrinking of the government sector, he can hardly reverse this trend. At its current pace of contraction, based on average rates recorded over the last decade, by 2030 the state-owned sector will likely employ no more than 15–30 percent of Belarusians. While this is not a small number, it only faintly resembles “the Communist reservation” the Belarusian economy was considered to be in the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁴

¹² Roumas: Labor productivity in state-owned companies is one and a half times lower than in private ones (TUT.BY, 2019), <https://news.tut.by/economics/632831.html>.

¹³ A. Chubrik, *Reforms without consequences, or Why should the Leviathan state come to terms with the “invisible hand” of the market* (TUT.BY, 2019), <https://news.tut.by/economics/656659.html>.

¹⁴ David L. Stern, *Can Belarus' communism-lite go on?* (Public Radio International, 2010), <https://www.pri.org/stories/2010-01-07/can-belarus-communism-lite-go>;

Two growing interest groups in the country—the young pro-market government functionaries, whose number and influence keeps increasing, and the emerging large private businesses—will push the Belarusian authorities toward the same direction. In 2017–2019, an informal alliance of representatives of these two groups lobbied for the unprecedented liberalization of the IT sector, thus creating a parallel legal system for this business.¹⁵ Such instances of a sectorial or broader pro-market lobbyism will surely become more widespread.

Sovereignization of Belarusian Foreign Policy

The second major trend over the next five to six years is the sovereignization of Belarusian foreign policy. Russia's wars with its neighbors in 2008 and 2014 not only alarmed Minsk but pushed Belarusian authorities to actively look for alternative partners and a new geopolitical self-identity. All this time, relations between the two countries developed in a wave-like mode: periods of prevailing pragmatism and economic frictions gave way to tradeoffs and new integration institutions.¹⁶

The divergence of Belarusian foreign policy from Russia's has become a sustainable trend in the past five years, and it most certainly will continue. Minsk no longer considers its dialogues with Brussels, Washington, Kyiv or Beijing to be an attempt to bargain concessions from Moscow by scaring it with a potential drift toward a different

Serhei Bohdan, *The European Myth of Belarusian Socialism* (BelarusDigest, 2012), <https://belarusdigest.com/story/the-european-myth-of-belarusian-socialism/>.

¹⁵ A. Mikhalkovich, *The Belarusian hi-tech revolution: the government drafts an ambitious decree* (BelarusDigest, 2017), <https://belarusdigest.com/story/the-belarusian-hi-tech-revolution-the-government-drafts-an-ambitious-decree/>.

¹⁶ B. Zogg, *Belarus between East and West: The Art of the Deal* (CSS Analyses in Security Policy, 2018), <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>.

geopolitical party. Starting from the mid-2010s onward, a multi-vector foreign policy with certain elements of neutrality have become intrinsically valuable for the Belarusian elites. This tendency is also fueled by Belarusian public support for a foreign policy based on non-alignment. When public opinion surveys go beyond the usual binary “union with Russia” versus “entering the EU” choice—for example by including more pro-independence or pro-neutrality options—the decisive majority of Belarusians expresses its support for a middle ground.¹⁷

In 2018/2019, Russia decided to make further economic preferences to Belarus—on oil, natural gas and loans—contingent upon the depth of bilateral integration. Moscow’s main lever of pressure has been Belarus’s aspiration to receive compensation for the so-called “tax maneuver” in the Russia’s oil industry.¹⁸ This Russian taxation reform will gradually implement world market to its oil trade with Belarus by 2024. The consequent economic losses for Belarus are estimated at \$10 billion over six years, a part of which Minsk has already suffered.¹⁹ Some experts believe that the negotiations over closer integration may lead to a takeover by Russia. Though unlikely, it is nonetheless reasonable to always be aware of such a risk, especially bearing in mind Russia’s occasionally impulsive foreign policy.

¹⁷ Data from a representative survey conducted by the Belarusian Analytical in September 2018 and provided to the author. First reference: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78226>; Belarus National Poll 2019: Public Opinion Does Not Change (PACT, 2019), <https://www.pactworld.org/news/belarus-national-poll-2019-public-opinion-does-not-change>.

¹⁸ Moscow claims Minsk violates its right on domestic tax policy (Interfax news agency, 2019), <https://interfax.by/news/policy/raznoe/1266366/>.

¹⁹ “Lukashenko instructed [the government] to compensate for losses due to tax maneuver in cooperation with Russia,” BelTA news agency, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-poruchil-kompensirovat-poteriz-za-nalogovogo-manevra-v-sotrudnichestve-s-rossie-332166-2019/>.

A much more possible scenario sees Belarus further cooling its enthusiasm for integration due to the uncompromising position taken by Russia. Any forms of deep bilateral integration and creation of joint supranational institutions in which Russia would take the lead would be entirely unacceptable for the Belarusian authorities, as this would deprive them of important levers of power domestically. That is why Lukashenka has continued to hold firm on integration; he almost certainly will not change his mind on such an existential issue. On the other hand, giving an equal voice to Belarus in supranational institutions created as a result of deeper integration between the two states is unacceptable for Russia, since this would give Minsk veto power over the economic policies of both countries. Apart from military threats or a total economic embargo, Moscow lacks leverage over Lukashenka to force him to accept a deeper political component of bilateral integration. For now, such scenarios are highly unlikely and seem overly burdensome even for a highly assertive Kremlin.

The less ambitious vision—the harmonization or unification of the two countries' legal codes—looks like a long bureaucratic process doomed to end with numerous national exemptions, such as maintaining their respective free economic zones. Even if both parties agree to undertake such a complex program, it will take many years. It is also rather improbable that such a superficial integration process—even if it moves beyond mere negotiations—will be enough to persuade Moscow to substantially compensate Minsk for the increasingly unfavorable (for Belarus) market terms of their bilateral oil trade by 2024.

More and more, Lukashenka is likely to view the financial losses incurred from the current and (to date) most serious phase of difficult relations between Russia and Belarus as a source of his domestic economic problems. This will, in turn, push Minsk toward further actions on rapprochement with its other next-door neighbors, as well as the US, EU and China, especially regarding alternative financial institutions to provide loans, markets for Belarusian products, and

alternative supplies of oil. In the meantime, Lukashenka will likely accuse Russia of economic hardships and will broadcast this message to the Belarusian public

It is important to understand that Belarus distancing itself from Russia will not be abrupt. The decades of Belarus's complicated friendship with Russia, combined with seeing the latter's reaction toward Georgia's and Ukraine's attempts to turn toward the West, have taught Minsk which red lines are important not to cross. In the foreseeable future, Belarus will not exit its joint unions with Russia and will not take the path of European integration. Most probably, Lukashenka's pro-Russian lip service, necessary for maintaining relatively cordial relations, will continue as well. However, instead of playing a zero-sum game, Minsk will seek to explore other vectors of its foreign policy while trying to maximize the benefits from its continued alliance with Russia.

The problems with the large eastern neighbor will strengthen the lobby within the Belarusian authorities in support for domestic policies that do not hinder the development of ties with the West. To keep in line with its aspirations, Minsk will have to stay below the human rights radar of Brussels and Washington, so as not to provoke a return to sanctioning and isolating Belarus. Thus, domestic persecution of the opposition, barring some particularly pressing need, will remain curtailed enough to prevent protests from the West.

The absence of conflict with the EU and the US is necessary for Belarus to be able to main its beneficial image as a regional peacekeeper and stabilizer. Western leaders and diplomats would find it difficult to attend multilateral negotiations on Ukraine in the Belarusian capital or conferences like the "Minsk Dialogue" were Belarus to regain the status of an international pariah.

Constitutional Reform

Finally, the third major medium-term trend concerns expected modifications to the Belarusian political system and constitutional reforms. This trend is not as certain or seemingly irreversible as the two previous ones, but it still qualifies as a rather likely development. Starting from 2016, President Lukashenka occasionally brought up the idea of revising the constitution. In 2019, he returned to the issue on a regular basis and tasked the Constitutional Court with preparing a new edition of the constitution aimed at strengthening the parliament and the government. Lukashenka himself has set the approximate timeline for change to occur between 2020 and 2024.²⁰

Lukashenka was plain about the purpose of these transformations: he does not want to leave his successor the current constitution, according to which the head of state not only domineers over the other branches of government but also essentially offsets their political capabilities. The goal is clear: if an authoritarian leader wants to step down, he needs to put in place certain guarantees for himself and his family. Entrusting oneself completely to a successor is a dangerous idea, as oftentimes those people grow out of control. Thus, one can balance out the successor's influence with other institutions in which the outgoing leader can maintain the levers of control. Something similar could be observed in Kazakhstan where, apart from the formal guarantees and powers bestowed on Nursultan Nazarbayev, his position is protected by his daughter as the Head of the Senate. Two years prior to the transition of power, authorities in Kazakhstan also broadened the mandate of the Security Council, which the first president now heads.

²⁰ Lukashenka in favor of new Constitution (BelTA News Agency, 2019), [eng.belta.by.https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-in-favor-of-new-constitution-119172-2019/](https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-in-favor-of-new-constitution-119172-2019/).

If Alyaksandr Lukashenka decides to make the government and the parliament the new centers of power in Belarus, he will likely encourage the institutionalization of political parties, including the establishment of a ruling party. Such a party is already much anticipated by many high-level officials in Belarus since it may open new resources and opportunities for them. Until now, Lukashenka opposed it, not wanting to create intermediaries between the people and himself and being all too aware of the disreputable history of the late Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He also does not want the political establishment to have a parallel, party-based hierarchy of loyalty. Yet, it is difficult to envision a different control mechanism over a legislature other than an empowered ruling party. Reluctantly, Lukashenka is starting to admit that he will eventually take this path.²¹

Unless constitutional reforms are blocked from gathering momentum, eventually—certainly before 2030—the institutional layout of the Belarusian regime will transform into something similar to Kazakhstan or Russia: with a domineering ruling party, a couple of satellite parties and a still strong president. Under such a scenario, Lukashenka would likely accept the necessary changes to the constitution by 2024; and then, after winning another term in office in 2025, he would presumably commence a transition of power to a chosen successor.

Transition of Power

The scenario described above is only one possible course, a map that Lukashenka seems to have in mind for now. But a deep economic or political crisis could compel Lukashenka to change tack: in such a

²¹ “Lukashenko: I would not have become president without parliamentary experience,” Official Website of the Republic of Belarus, 2019, https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/parliamentary-elections-in-belarus/lukashenko-i-would-not-have-become-president-without-parliamentary-experience_i_105332.html.

situation, he may not dare to hand over his power or suspend even small-scale experiments with the constitution. Then, just like many other autocrats in similar systems, Lukashenka might choose to stay in power until he can no longer physically retain it. Despite the inability to guess the exact transition scenario, it is possible to identify and probably dismiss the least likely options.

One of them is a revolution scenario similar to those in Ukraine in 2014 or in Armenia in 2018. The Belarusian opposition has neither the will nor the capabilities to proceed in this direction without a drastic weakening of the current regime. Revolutions in post-Soviet countries were successful only if several key factors came together first: 1) the regime was neither unified nor eager to engage in a comprehensive crackdown on dissent, 2) the law enforcement agencies were inconsistent in their actions, and 3) the opposition was integrated in state institutions at least to some extent (for instance, by having factions in the parliament) and had access to effective mass communication channels (e.g. social media or TV).

None of these elements are currently present in Belarus, nor are they likely to be in the foreseeable future. The opposition is weak and disunited and, for the most part, abstains from street protests. The security services continuously prove their capacity to engage in tough crackdowns. Potential leaders would be arrested either preemptively or during the protests. The state has monopolized control over national television and, if necessary, can block localized Internet access or social media services that protesters use.²²

The Belarusian *nomenklatura* is not united in clans or fractions: officials consolidate not around dispersed power groups but rather around the top-down vertical of power headed by the president. This

²² Freedom on the Net 2018 – Belarus (Freedom House, 2018), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/belarus>.

situation inhibits a potential coup. Lukashenka also rotates higher officials quite masterfully²³ so that they do not linger and gain political capital or a clear constituency. The security and law enforcement agencies compete and keep a wary eye on each other. The attempts of potential coup-plotters to open themselves up to foreign (Russian) aid seem so risky for them personally that this scenario is also hard to contemplate.

Regimes like the Belarusian one often see the transition of power going in either of two directions: a controlled transition to a successor or the leader's physical inability to maintain the position. By 2030, Lukashenka will be 76 years old. Theoretically, he might still be capable of ruling the country. This is a possible yet not the most likely course of events since, in this case, Lukashenka will have to be in good health as well as either cancel or significantly delay his current plans for transitioning power.

Therefore, the default future framework for now is a controlled transition of power in the second half of the 2020s, with immunity guarantees for Lukashenka. In such a scenario, he would likely maintain a significant role in the first years after the formal transition of power to his successor. His probable successor would come from the higher political establishment or, to be more precise, from among those people who have gained Lukashenka's full trust after many years of working together. Most probably, this person already works at the highest levels of the state apparatus.

It is impossible to point to concrete names. First, there is no visible power struggle going on in Belarus that would allow for an assessment of the contenders' chances. Second, at this stage, the pool of potential

²³ M. Mironchik, *Clear footage. How Lukashenko shuffles the security forces against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis*, (Belarusian journal, 2016),

<http://journalby.com/news/chetkie-kadry-kak-lukashenko-tasuet-silovikov-na-fone-ukrainskogo-krizisa-710>.

successors after 2025 includes dozens of people, all of whom deliberately avoid seeming too ambitious. For decades, Lukashenka himself has taught his subordinates that the most reliable way to lose one's senior post is to become overly visible or active. Unless the president needs it, no "number two" will be allowed to emerge, because picking a successor prematurely might disorient both—the *nomenklatura* and Kremlin.

Could one of Lukashenka's sons be his successor? It is not unthinkable, though a family handover is not traditional for Belarus, and thus it is unclear if the political class and people alike would welcome such a move. Lukashenka himself has promised dozens of times not to hand over power to his sons. Still, he may change his mind if the situation in the country deteriorates shortly before the handover, or if the handover will have to meet tight deadlines due to the president's health issues.

Whatever the case, any options for the controlled transition of power suggest that Lukashenka himself will choose the candidate for the post, which means this person will hardly deviate much from the president's basic worldview. Most probably, Lukashenka's policies will continue to persist after the official handover. Deviations will come either with time or due to some unpredictable crises facing the new Belarusian authorities.

Uncertainty Factors

Two factors that may somehow shift Belarus's development path include domestic trends and Moscow's policy toward Minsk.

The resources for growth in the public sector of the economy are depleted, and Russian monetary support is decreasing and will continue to do so. According to IMF and World Bank forecasts, Belarus is on the verge of a stagnation period. If relations with Russia develop according to a worst-case scenario, in the medium-term

Belarusian GDP may start to decline. Profound structural reforms may shorten the period of economic turbulence; but in the short term, they will send strong shockwaves across the economy.

Regardless of the future scenarios, the Belarusian state can be expected to continue to curb expenses in the coming years. This process dates back several years already: since 2016, the retirement age has been gradually raised,²⁴ the preferential home loans program is being downsized,²⁵ and fuel prices and utility bills have been growing slowly but steadily.²⁶

Continuous economic stagnation and reductions in the social safety net will trigger increasing social unrest. Two questions are worth asking in this case. Will the unrest lead to protests? And if so, what will be the authorities' reaction? Thus, the first key variable introduced for this scenario-analysis exercise can be defined as follows: will the social discontent in the next 10 years trigger new waves of repression and toughening of the regime in Belarus? In other words: “domestic turbulence” versus “domestic stability.”

Another important factor will be Russia's policy toward Belarus. Minsk's strategic course has not changed in the past 20 years: it is extracting the maximum possible economic benefits from the

²⁴ Belarus raises retirement age (BelTA news agency, 2017), <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-raises-retirement-age-97644-2017/>.

²⁵ Belarusian authorities curtail social policy in housing (Belarus in Focus, 2016), <https://belarusinfofocus.info/by/regiyony/beloruskie-vlasti-svorachivayut-socialnyu-politiku-v-sfere-zhilishchnogo-stroitelstva>.

²⁶ N. T. Acosta, *Rise in oil prices hits hard on Belarus* (Center For Russia and Eastern Europe Research, 2018), <https://creereneva.org/2018/10/28/rise-in-oil-prices-hits-hard-on-belarus/>; The government announced how much it will increase the utility tariffs starting from New Year (TUT.BY, 2018), <https://news.tut.by/society/613850.html>.

relationship with Russia while making minimum political concessions to its partner. However, the cutting of Russian economic support to Belarus now seems irreversible. Once it becomes clear that Lukashenka does not want to integrate his country any further with Russia than he already has, the authorities in Moscow will reach a crossroads: to live with the gradual alienation between the two countries, or to keep insisting on closer integration and pressuring Minsk to fall in line.

Russian approaches toward Belarus differ among various groups of elites and stakeholders. Supporters of Russia's imperial expansion and the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) doctrine—many of whom members of the Russian security services—prefer to follow a more proactive approach in relations with Minsk. That is, they judge any policy as beneficial if it ultimately ensures complete loyalty of and control over Belarus. On the other hand, pragmatic monetarists in the Russian government, including Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and his team, desire greater market transparency in their country's relationship with Belarus over extending the borders of the "Russian World" in the region at whatever cost.

In turn, President Putin appears to fall somewhere in between: his actions show features of both approaches. Currently, it is unclear what approach will become dominant in Russia's approach to Belarus over the following years. It is even less clear how it might change after the probable transition of power in Russia in 2024. Thus, the second variable in our analysis can be framed as: will Russia choose an assertive approach in relations with Belarus in the mid-term perspective? Or in terms of a binary choice: "assertive Russia" versus "non-assertive Russia").

It is important to note that in any probable scenario, Russia would hardly tolerate Belarus drifting toward European or Euro-Atlantic integration, the stoppage of oil and gas transit via Belarusian territory, or any serious discrimination against the Russian language and

residents in Belarus. This being clear to Minsk, it is difficult to imagine that any Belarusian government will dare to cross those red lines in 2020–2030.

The following assessment will combine the two possible answers to the first question with the two possible answers to the second one, and analyze the results for the future of Belarus by 2030 under four potential future scenarios.

Four Future Scenarios

Scenario 1: Domestic Stability + Assertive Russia

According to this scenario, sometime around 2022–2024, Moscow becomes so frustrated with the obstruction or slowdown of integration negotiations that it starts to actively pressure Minsk. At the same time, Belarus enjoys relative political stability, and the authorities manage domestic social protests without exercising tough punitive measures. The brain drain of the most active opposition groups factors into that stability.

Under this course of events, Russia will use a mix of economic and informational pressure methods to force Lukashenka to comply. Yet, the integration tradeoff looks rather improbable: superficial integration will not satisfy Moscow, while a deep one will be flatly rejected by Lukashenka. Under increasing pressure from the Kremlin, the Belarusian authorities will promote national identity and consolidation while referring to the value of independence within the country much more actively than they do today. The claims about independence being under threat may help disarm the opposition and its street activism. If Russian propaganda decides to regularly attack Lukashenka, Minsk will limit Russian TV broadcasts.

The absence of serious repressions in the country and the promotion of the Lukashenka government's image as a defender of Belarusian independence from Russia will allow Minsk to maintain a friendly dialogue with the West. Belarus will actively seek to enter Western capital markets, thereby involuntarily speeding up economic denationalization.

If Russia's hard line toward Belarus prevails, it is doubtful that Minsk will force a political rapprochement with the EU and the US. Provoking further hardening might be dangerous. As a political alliance with the West will not be high on Lukashenka's agenda, he will hardly make concessions in terms of democracy and human rights. The Belarusian authorities will also fear that domestic liberalization could embolden domestic pro-Russian forces that would likely receive support from a now-assertive Kremlin.

With neither serious repressions nor democratization, but with Russian pressure on Belarus growing, it will be up to Western decision-makers whether to lend financial support to Minsk. If the West fails to provide such support, Lukashenka will have to make concessions to Moscow, so as to reign in its antagonism and find sources to pay back the growing bills to Russia. This can take the form of selective privatization of state-owned assets (e.g. Belaruskali, oil refineries, defense industry producers) or a further tightening of expenditures for as long as Belarusians' patience allows.

This scenario would be rather stressful for the Belarusian authorities. That is why any serious experiment with adopting constitutional changes would be unlikely. The transition of power—if it takes place before 2030—will follow a tightly controlled route, delegating significant powers to a handpicked successor to maintain the political *status quo*. The new Belarusian leadership will be selected in a way that allows avoiding a more aggressive reaction from Moscow. Consequently, Minsk's Western drift is unlikely even after the handover. Yet this course of events will allow the Belarusian capital to

remain a non-toxic platform for international negotiations on regional security. If the demand for such negotiations still exists, nothing will stop Belarus from strengthening its image as a promoter of peace and stability.

Formally, Belarus in 2030 will remain Russia's ally, yet their relationships will be beset with more regular and heated conflicts than today. By contrast, the relationships with the EU and the US will become more sustainable due to the absence of mass repressions over the previous 15 years. However, these relationships will not take a quantum leap, so as not to irritate the more assertive Russia. The new Belarusian authorities, should they be in place by 2030, will maintain the previous political model of top-down governance. At the same time, the dominance of state-owned assets in the economy will diminish. This model will somewhat resemble contemporary Kazakhstan but with a lower standard of living.

Scenario 2: Domestic Turbulence + Assertive Russia

This is the most dangerous scenario for Belarus. Facing economic pressure from Russia, Alyaksandr Lukashenka will have to decide whether to give the green light to painful domestic market reforms or leave things unchanged. Should he undertake reforms, the economic decline and austerity measures following his decisions would then lead to growing political unrest and local protests stirred up of the opposition.

In this possible future, the Belarusian regime subsequently retaliates with internal repressions that completely reverse the previous thaw in relations with the West. Whether or not sanctions Europe and the US then reintroduce sanctions against Minsk, Lukashenka's government will cease to be a friendly companion for Western powers. The European banks that opened up local branches in Belarus in 2017–

2018²⁷ will cease any further expansion into the Belarusian financial sector or pull out altogether. After relations with the West cool down, Minsk will be unable to proceed with marketing itself as the “Eastern European Switzerland.” The EU and the US will lose their interest in engaging Belarus, leaving it *de facto* alone to deal with an ever more demanding Kremlin.

The expansionist Kremlin will hardly leave Lukashenka alone with his economic and political challenges. The Russian government would see the collapse of the Belarusian regime and chaos in a neighboring country as a potential threat to Russia’s interests. Thus, out of tactical considerations, the Kremlin may periodically ease the economic pressure on Minsk as part of a carrot-and-stick approach vis-à-vis the Belarusian leadership.

This scenario does not suggest Lukashenka compromises with Russia on losing independence. Delegating a big chunk of authority to Moscow would mean an inevitable loss of power, and the refusal risks remain manageable. Still, less radical concessions in this case are virtually imminent. This entails the entry of Russian capital into strategic Belarusian state-owned assets in return for a weakening of economic pressure. A Russian military buildup in Belarus is another possible option, as Lukashenka will no longer be bound by the idea to improve relations with the West. Belarus’s reputational gains of 2015–2020 will be lost. Attracting non-Russian investments will become close to impossible after the new problems with the country’s image and international businesses’ concerns regarding the prospect of Belarus losing its independence.

²⁷ First ever EIB support for Belarus – development of water infrastructure and private sector, (European External Action Service, 2018), https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/54191/node/54191_en.

The role of the *siloviki* in the Belarsian government will increase, while reformists will be demoted and withdrawn from positions of influence. Moreover, domestic tensions, a toughening of the regime and the growing pressure from Russia would all be incompatible with undertaking constitutional reforms. In this case, Lukashenka stays in power for as long as his health allows for it, after which point he hands power over to either his eldest son or to an influential member of the security services establishment.

Even though, by 2030, Russia may fail to compel Belarus into closer political integration, the economic dependence of Minsk would only increase. Aligning economic legislation in tax, customs and other areas would stop being just a concession to Moscow, with Belarusian businesses necessarily blending with Russian firms. In this situation, a new attempt to create distance from Russia will require much greater effort and stronger political will.

Scenario 3: Domestic Turbulence + Non-Assertive Russia

According to this scenario, in the 2020s Russia withholds economic support to Belarus. Minsk does not want to offer concessions, but this does not result in additional counter-pressure from Moscow. Russia instead accepts a pragmatic approach toward Belarus, perhaps as a result of a transition of power in Russia to a faction of market-oriented technocrats from Medvedev's inner circle.

The relationship between Belarus and Russia is largely confined to the transparent market domain. Pragmatism eliminates some causes of conflicts previously rooted in different understandings of "alliance" and notions of who owes what to whom. Both parties downgrade their expectations about each other and gradually dialogue settles at a lukewarm partnership level. Simultaneously, Minsk understands that Russia's strategic red lines remain relevant and does not attempt to wholly quit bilateral integration and defense deals.

Yet, domestic stability in Belarus does not withstand the test of economic shocks stemming from the cutoff of Russian assistance. The country witnesses protests—and the authorities respond with brutal crackdowns. Thus, similar to Scenario 2, the West diminishes its enthusiasm regarding further rapprochement with Minsk. As Belarus becomes a less interesting destination for foreign investments, it succumbs to a prolonged political and economic depression. Third countries, like China or the Arab monarchies in the Gulf, may be able to benefit from this situation by offering investments that could cushion the crisis. But without having many choices, the Belarusian authorities would be limited in courting such investors on terms beneficial to Minsk.

Tighter control over the country, resulting from the suppression of domestic dissent, would allow the authorities to perform painful economic transformations forced by the decline in the support from Russia. If social tensions calm down, the president may return to his handover agenda by 2030. But Lukashenka's successor would not wholly inherit his negative balance in relations with the West. This would allow the new Belarusian authorities to reset ties with the EU and the US around 2030. Moreover, if this is accompanied by resumed economic growth, the new regime could safely add some limited political liberalization to advance the new period of thaw in relations with the West.

Much would depend on the state of Russia at that point, as well as on the attractiveness of the Russian market for Belarusian manufacturers. If by that time Minsk and Moscow are significantly distant from one another, in the 2030s the new Belarusian authorities may start moving toward full-scale neutrality or even limited integration with the EU.

Scenario 4: Domestic Stability + Non-Assertive Russia

This is arguably the most comfortable scenario for the Belarusian authorities, although it does not imply that the country simply dodges

its upcoming economic problems. Still, even if Russia's reduces its economic preferences toward Belarus, Lukashenka may still manage to prevent social tensions or deal with them without resorting to excessive violence. Just as in Scenario 3, under this future, relations between Russia and Belarus transform and become more pragmatic and market-oriented. By 2025, many conflicts recede into the past due to the adoption of understandable, though less and less profitable, rules of the game.

After a failure or a slowdown of the integration negotiations initiated at the end of 2018, Moscow stops insisting on deep integration. The Kremlin is satisfied with simply keeping Belarus within the Russian orbit, knowing that it will not switch its geopolitical allegiance in the near future. Shifting bilateral relations with Belarus solidly into the market domain is enough of a penalty for Minsk's inadequate ambitions for integration, the Kremlin decides.

Consequently, Russia energy supplies grow more expensive for Belarus, compelling the authorities in Minsk to sell off state-owned assets and cut social expenditures. As a positive side effect, this policy course makes it easier to negotiate a new loan with the IMF. The structure of the Belarusian economy continues to transform as the share of government revenues from SOEs and oil refining decrease.

A diplomatic cooldown with Russia encourages Lukashenka to diversify his foreign policy in a more proactive way. Here, a few possible concessions to the European Union may include the abolition of the death penalty and registering several opposition parties and organizations. Domestic stability (which is presumed under this scenario) allows Lukashenka to amend the constitution and commence his planned transition of power after 2025.

This favorable economic and political outlook is especially conducive to the rise to power of any representative of the Belarusian elite who can strike a delicate balance: avoiding antagonizing Russia,

maintaining domestic political stability, and keeping peace with the West and its financial institutions. Most probably, therefore, in this scenario, Lukashenka's successor would come not from within the *siloviki* but from a circle of moderately pro-reform officials—an effective manager who proved his loyalty after many years of service. Among current senior officials, two names come to mind: Sergei Roumas, the sitting prime minister, and Vladimir Makei, the minister of foreign affairs. In 7–8 years, the candidates may change, but their general background would be more or less similar.

Here it, is also possible to expect a similar course of events as was outlined in Scenario 3, but notably developing a few years earlier in the timeline. By the end of the 2020s, the new Belarusian authorities would already be more independent in their domestic and foreign policy. Belarus would progress in its neutral positioning on the international scene. The level of autonomy of Belarusian foreign policy would be reflective of the decrease in the economic dependency on Russia. A greater representation of Western capital and businesses in Belarus would have a modernizing effect on state institutions. The companies representing this capital would lobby for domestic and foreign policies that would not hinder these ties.

The key questions dictating the actual developments are how the Kremlin would perceive Belarus in the second half of 2020s, and how sustainable would be its original non-assertive approach. Should that non-assertive Russian approach persist, it is entirely plausible that after 2030 Belarus and Russia might more formally drift apart and be willing to undertake a review of some current integration formats that, by then, had become obsolete or wholly incompatible with the state of the relationship.

Conclusion: Resilience as Priority

Needless to say, all of the above scenarios are relative. Not only is it all but certain that *a priori* unpredictable “black swans” may meddle in

the course of events, it is also likely that the variables in the analysis of these scenarios may impact each other in an even more complicated manner. For instance, once the Kremlin notices Belarus actively seeking pragmatic relations with other powers outside the Russian orbit, it could quickly switch from a non-assertive to an assertive mode of conduct. Alternatively, tired of several years of fruitless hard pressure, Moscow could reverse course from an assertive to a non-assertive approach.

The likelihood of domestic protests and the prospective reaction of the authorities are also unclear and may play out differently if Russia is factored in. For example, if the Kremlin tries to trigger or support social protests inside Belarus as a means to frighten and pressure Lukashenka, this may lead to the exact opposite results. Lukashenka may take it as a provocation and himself make quite a few confrontational steps toward Russia. On the other hand, he may sense that he is stepping dangerously close to a red line in his relations with Moscow and become more compliant only to stop the Kremlin's interference in Belarusian domestic matters.

That said, it is worth mentioning that Russia currently does not have political infrastructure in Belarus sufficient for any serious meddling campaign. The popular myth that Belarusian *siloviki* and law enforcement are somehow more pro-Russian than the rest of society simply lacks evidence to support it. When ordered, these people unhesitatingly persecute pro-Russian bloggers²⁸ or prevent pro-

²⁸ V. Smok, *Pro-Russian bloggers sentenced: Belarus draws red lines in propaganda war* (BelarusDigest, 2018), <https://belarusdigest.com/story/pro-russian-bloggers-sentenced-belarus-draws-red-lines-in-propaganda-war/>.

Russian associations²⁹ or parties³⁰ from existing. As of yet, there are no sizable pro-Russian movements in the country, as the Belarusian regime does not tolerate the erosion of its monopoly on being the most pro-Russian political actor available for Moscow to deal with. No Belarusian region (like Crimea or Donbas in Ukraine) gravitates significantly toward Russia.³¹ Within the Belarusian population, no pro-Russian constituency exists that feels discriminated against based on its support for closer ties with Russia, usage of the Russian language or adherence to the Russian Orthodox Church. That is partly why Lukashenka can occasionally resort to harsh verbal criticism of Russia without fear of domestic repercussions. Not every post-Soviet strongman can do this. For instance, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev—despite being less dependent on Russian energy supplies—has never made equally provocative statements toward Moscow precisely due to concern about how such anti-Russian rhetoric might affect domestic politics in Azerbaijan.³² Bearing all these reservations in mind, there are a number of rather predictable and consistent patterns in how the situation in Belarus develops.

Russian pressure and the perceived threat of escalation narrow Belarus's margin for maneuver in its foreign policy. If Lukashenka sees that his flirting with the West provokes Russia's sharp response, he will become more cautious. On the other hand, if Moscow

²⁹ The Supreme Court refused to register the Immortal Regiment in Belarus (TUT.BY, 2019), <https://news.tut.by/economics/638373.html>.

³⁰ Artyom Shraibman, *The authorities will fight the "sixth column" with the same tools as it fights the "fifth" one* (Naviny.by, 2014), https://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/05/25/ic_articles_112_185609.

³¹ Serhei Bohdan, *The United Nation of Belarus?* (BelarusDigest, 2014), <https://belarusdigest.com/story/the-united-nation-of-belarus/>.

³² E-mail from Rauf Mammadov, Resident Scholar on Energy Policy, The Middle East Institute.

distances itself and decreases its support, this will push Minsk toward maximum possible diversification in foreign policy and trade. If political disruption inside Belarus leads to a new round of repressions, this will weaken the reformists in the government and strengthen their opponents in the uniformed agencies. Lukashenka, in turn, will become less willing to proceed with constitutional reform experiments or a transition of power; while Belarus's relations with the EU and the US either lose their current momentum or start to deteriorate.

Presently, Lukashenka has obviously chosen to abstain as much as possible from brutal actions toward the opposition. For him, it is important to maintain momentum—or at least not to spoil the normalization of Belarus's relationship with the West. In recent years, the authorities have continuously chosen carrots over sticks. In regional and social protests, the government has started to make more concessions and take the middle path with demonstrators so as to prevent their politicization. As regards the opposition, arrests in most cases gave way to fines. This tactic proved successful, and the Belarusian authorities will likely continue this practice. Yet, it is also obvious that domestic crisis and the growth of social unrest will seriously test the Lukashenka's administration ability to preserve such a carefully calibrated approach.

Belarus is entering a turbulent period in its political development. President Lukashenka's quiet days of governing are receding into the past. The looming transition of power, Russia's changing ambitions as well as multiple impending, lingering headwinds in the economy are the most serious challenges Minsk has ever had to deal with since independence. The ability to tackle those challenges without losing the country's sovereignty or a feasible pathway to its modernization will define Belarus's future well beyond 2030.

Addendum: Timeline of Key Security Events in Belarus (1990–2020)

27 July 1990: Belarus declares its sovereignty from the Soviet Union.

15 May 1992: Belarus joins the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty.

10 July 1994: Alyaksandr Lukashenka wins his first term as president of Belarus, with 80.1 percent of the vote.

July 1998: Belarus joins the Non-Aligned Movement.

July 2011: Belarus secures a \$300 million loan from Azerbaijan.

Late August 2013: Russia denies Belarus military equipment at favorable rates, and pressure grows on Belarus to host a permanent Russian airbase.

11 January 2014: President Lukashenka appoints Aleh Belakoneu as chief of the General Staff.

12 March 2014: Russia deploys fighter jets on the border of Belarus and Poland in response to NATO exercises in Poland. On the same day, the Security Council of Belarus meets and demands more Russian fighter planes due to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) activity on the border.

20 March 2014: Belarus and Ukraine continue their bilateral military cooperation despite the conflict in Crimea. The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine grants production companies the right to export military goods to Belarus.

23 March 2014: President Lukashenka discusses the delivery of four battalions of Russian S-300 air-defense systems, adding that the Belarusian Air Force will be modernized by the end of the year.

2 April 2014: Lukashenka sets an agenda to organize the manufacturing of helicopters and planes, including those headed for the Russian market.

7 May 2014: Russian MP Frants Klintsevich, referring to nuclear weapons, says that Russia may start “moving our weapons closer to its borders” in response to the permanent deployment of NATO troops in Eastern Europe.

8 May 2014: At the annual Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) conference, Lukashenka offers to help Russia coordinate its policy toward Ukraine.

July 20, 2014: President Lukashenka passes an amendment that would allow the government to lease military facilities to foreigners provided the facilities ensure the country’s military security and defend and pursue the national interest in the economic, scientific, social, information and other spheres deemed important to the state.

July 2014: The Ukrainian National Guard places orders for 44 new trucks and trailers from Minsk Truck Plant (MAZ).

1 August 2014: Viktor Bondarev, the Russian Air Force Commander, says that the Air Force will open a base at Baranavichy, Belarus, after both sides sign an intergovernmental agreement.

18 August 2014: Belarus’s ambassador to Ukraine, Valiantsin Vialichka, assures Ukraine that no third party will be allowed to operate from its territory into Ukraine.

4 September 2014: Belarus decides to guard its border with Russia.

10 September 2014: A US delegation headed by Evelyn Farkas, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, visits Belarus and talks about human rights and other freedoms with Colonel Alieh Voinau, the State Secretary and Assistant to the Minister of Defense of Belarus. Belarusian officials talk about normalization of relations with the United States.

October 2014: The Ukrainian National Guard buys 27 more trucks and trailers from MAZ.

8 November 2014: Belarus and China sign a protocol for bilateral agreement on non-repayable military assistance, mostly in the form of armored vehicles and Chinese small arms.

17 December 2014: Russia's Ambassador to Minsk announces that Belarusian enterprises provide 15 percent of Russia's national defense purchases. Belarus simultaneously reaches out to other countries, such as Ukraine, to export military hardware.

23–24 December 2014: The Russian and Belarusian defense ministers meet. The Belarusian officials refuse to legally formalize the creation of a Russian air base. Russian officials seek to increase their country's military presence by adding more aircraft at a base in Belarus.

23 January 2015: The Belarusian Army holds military exercises in which 15,000 reservists are called up for duty. Officially, these exercises are in response to NATO activity near the border with Poland. However, some experts suggest the war in Ukraine and the need to secure Belarus's porous borders are the actual reason for the exercises.

April 2015: The Belarusian Air Force receives light ground-attack aircraft (Yak-130s) from Russia.

15–27 June 2015: Chinese paratroopers participate in a joint anti-terrorism exercise with a Belarusian Special Forces company.

17 June 2015: In an interview, Belarussian Defense Minister Andrei Roukau announces that the issue of the Russian airbase in Belarus was on hold. He argues that additional NATO troops and heavy weapons close to the border create more risks for Belarus.

31 June 2015: The EU council significantly reduces its sanctions list against Belarus in exchange for talks on human rights with Western countries.

2–4 August 2015: A US delegation headed by Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, Chairman of the Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats subcommittee, visits Belarus.

17 August 2015: Russia and Belarus agree on legal and technical details regarding a proposed Russian base in Belarus. However, the situation regarding the base remains unsettled. Russian media and President Vladimir Putin put pressure on Belarus to agree to the base.

2-5 September 2015: Slavic Brotherhood military exercise with Russian and Serbian special forces occurs near Novorossiysk.

10–16 September 2015: Belarus and Russia conduct Union Shield military exercise on the latter's territory that involves 8,000 personnel from air force, infantry and other service branches.

19 September 2015: Putin orders the Russian Ministry of Defense to hold talks with its Belarusian counterpart about an agreement regarding a military base.

22–24 September 2015: Belarus conducts training exercises involving the landing of aircraft on roadways. Chinese representatives attend the drills.

30 September–4 October 2015: Belarusian special forces train with personnel from the CTSO. The exercise takes place in Armenia and involves the police and army of member states.

4 October 2015: 1,000 protesters march in Minsk against the proposal of a Russian base inside Belarus. Many believe it would violate Belarus's neutrality between Moscow and the West.

6 October 2015: Belarusian and Russian companies conduct a tactical-level exercise, training to respond to an illegal formation from abroad.

10–12 October 2015: A Chinese delegation headed by Admiral Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of the General Staff of the Army, visits Belarus. Minsk does not comment on his visit. Chinese sources quoting Jianguo mention a strategic partnership development between the two countries, which include Chinese assistance in developing and producing the Polonez, a multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) in Belarus.

26 October 2015: A proposed meeting of Putin and Lukashenka does not take place. Belarus continues to delay the establishment of a Russian airbase. Belarusian officials, including the defense and foreign minister, firmly oppose the base. On October 23, 2015, Defense Minister Andrey Raukou says he does not see any use for a Russian base. Instead, he believes Belarus should acquire the means, such as upgraded Russian aircraft and Chinese designed rocket systems, to eliminate any threat from NATO.

30 October 2015: President Lukashenka reports that a new military doctrine will be introduced in 2016.

15 November 2015: Defense Minister Raikou announces a new military doctrine for the coming year on live television. The doctrine emphasizes a form of aggressive defense and preemption. The doctrine includes policies such as the reduction of the army, more emphasis on rocket forces, and the restructuring of administrative and support personnel. The doctrine also announces the goal to create a rapid response force and for Belarus to begin producing its own drones.

31 October 2015: Lukashenka comments that a Russian airbase is something that “neither we nor Russia need,” and that current air defenses are enough.

17 December 2015: The head of the State Border Committee, Leanid Maltsau, announces that in 2015, Belarussian border guards seized 53 weapons and 500 rounds of ammunition on the Belarus-Ukraine border. Only individual weapons were seized on the Belarus-Lithuanian border.

17 December 2015: The military publishes the planning document “Special Role of Air Defense Among the Interests of the Union State of Belarus and Russia,” which mentions the problem of a hole in the defense perimeter of Russia due to the state of Belarusian aircraft. Air Force Major General Siarhei Trus tells the media that 24 planes have guarded Belarusian airspace as part of the Unified Air Defense between the two countries. Belarusian media reports the presence of Russian fighter planes at Baranavichy airfield as part of this system.

18 December 2015: The issue of a prospective airbase is not discussed between Putin and Lukashenka.

22 January 2016: President Lukashenka announces a new Military Doctrine. The new doctrine emphasizes combating “hybrid” warfare and “color revolutions.” The former points to a concern about an aggressive Russian foreign policy (mentioned indirectly in the text of the document), and the latter points to fears that the West is preparing a “color revolution” for Belarus. The Belarusian Armed Forces conduct a Donbas-like hybrid warfare scenario and reportedly study the experience of their Ukrainian counterparts in counteracting “hybrid” scenarios.

January–February 2016: Russia delivers a second-hand S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Belarus. One more S-300 is delivered in March. Special forces, motorized rifle units, mechanized armor, artillery, air-defense, and missile units are mobilized and dispatched to conduct tactical drills.

23 February 2016: Defense Minister Raikou says that the security of Belarus depends on military cooperation with Russia and the CSTO. He also talks about “strategic” military cooperation with China and an aspiration to have a “constructive dialogue with NATO.”

14 March 2016: Defense Minister Raikou meets with Andrea Wiktorin, head of the EU's delegation to Belarus, although no details about the meeting are known.

25–28 March 2016: First Deputy Defense Minister of Kazakhstan Saken Zhasuzakov arrives in Belarus for an official state visit.

28 March 2016: The US Embassy in Belarus announces that, in December 2015, a delegation from the Belarusian Ministry of Defense visited Washington. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Carpenter visits Minsk, where he meets with defense and foreign ministry officials and, later, Lukashenka. The media reports

the visit as “the event of the week” and ends a ten-year gap in bilateral military-military relations.

6 April 2016: The Russian government declares that the Unified Air-Defense System with Belarus had been implemented. The announcement downplays Belarus’s more complicated military relationship with Russia and the former’s international balancing act.

4 April 2016: The Belarusian Parliament, with the influence of the county’s KGB security service, approves amendments to the law “on Counteracting Extremism.” The new laws targets individuals who joined extremist groups. The conflict in Ukraine and the fear of groups carrying out street protests are the driving forces behind the amendments.

8 April 2016: Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei confirms that the issue of a Russian base in the country is “closed.” He also responds to Russian criticism of US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Carpenter’s visit, saying that Minsk wants to have a normal dialogue with the West and to be informed of NATO’s activities near the country’s western borders.

6 April 2016: The deputy commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces, Pavel Kuranchenko, announces that the Unified Air-Defense System of Russia and Belarus has been implemented. Both countries agree that the single system will function under Belarusian command.

18 April 2016: The Belarusian Parliament passes the first reading of the new Military Doctrine. Armenia, which is engaged in a conflict with Azerbaijan, objects to the new doctrine as it prohibits its CSTO treaty ally Belarus’s armed forces from participating overseas.

16 May 2016: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov arrives in Minsk to discuss a response to the construction of a European missile-

defense system. Russia wants to deploy Iskander ballistic missiles to Belarusian territory. Minsk resists Moscow's plans to move military units into Belarus. While Belarus does not see a threat from European missile defense, being more concerned about threats from instability in Ukraine, for Moscow, the missile-defense system disrupts the principle of mutual assured destruction.

2–3 June 2016: Defense Minister Raukou pays a working visit to Kazakhstan, where two major deals, related to military parts and service repairs, are concluded.

3 June 2016: Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Yauhen Shastkou, referring to the proposed Russian military base, criticizes key players on the European continent, saying, “We do not share the approach based on placing additional foreign military facilities and forces on one's own territory.”

7 June 2016: Lukashenka, in responding to a question regarding new NATO forces arriving on the Western border of Belarus, expresses a lack of concern, saying his country, will without “much fuss,” adopt defensive measures.

20 July 2016: The new Military Doctrine comes into effect. It contains a separate section on the domestic arms-production sector, emphasizing the importance of developing the defense industry as “a high-technology sector capable of meeting the needs of the Armed Forces with regards to modern armaments, military and special equipment.”

7 July 2016: Tetrader, a private defense firm based in Minsk, signs a deal with Electronic Corporation of India Limited. Unnamed personnel reveal that the two companies intend to cooperate in the manufacturing and delivery of “high-tech defense equipment.”

16 August 2016: The Belarusian defense ministry announces the deployment of the first Protivnik-GE early warning surveillance radar in response to the US missile-defense system in Europe.

22 August 2016: The Belarusian Army officially deploys the Polonez multiple-launch rocket system, which is given to the 336th Rocket Artillery Brigade. The Polonez is symbolic of Belarus's new Military Doctrine as "an element of strategic deterrence."

22 August 2016: Minsk reportedly intends to purchase four more YAK-130 trainer aircraft for the air force and Mi-8 helicopters for the army. The Belarusian Air Force continues to use Soviet-era Mi-24 and MiG-29 fighter planes but has plans to buy newer Su-30 fighters from Russia.

14–20 September 2016: The Belarusian Armed Forces practice large-scale military drills based on combating hypothetical separatist and illegal armed formations supported by a foreign state. The exercises apparently take into consideration a hybrid attack from Russia; other drills focus on a possible attack from the West.

15 September 2016: Belarus's Parliament discusses plans to purchase four Su-35 fighter jets from Russia. Belarus wants to purchase planes instead of hosting a Russian airbase.

20 September 2016: Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei again meets with US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Carpenter. They discuss the facilitation of "direct dialogue between the military agencies of both countries."

1 October 2016: Russia withdraws all its fighter jets from Belarus.

13 October 2016: Belarus receives €2.5 million in equipment from the European Union for use in patrolling its borders.

14 October 2016: Belarus becomes chair of the CSTO. President Lukashenka criticizes the CSTO for its passiveness, arguing that it needs to become more “serious.” Many Baltic and Ukrainian officials cite Belarus’s membership in CSTO as proof that Belarusian neutrality is an illusion.

22–23 October 2016: Lukashenka pays a working visit to Vladimir Putin to discuss bilateral economic problems.

Early November 2016: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu arrives in Belarus for an unannounced meeting with Lukashenka and a joint board of defense ministries. Shoigu discusses Russian-Belarusian bilateral cooperation. He says that NATO and the US increased their offensive capabilities on the western border of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. He also details NATO’s plan to deploy four multinational battalions on its eastern flank, which he believes would undermine the strategic stability of the region.

29 November 2016: The Russian Ministry of Defense discloses logistical data of railway traffic to other countries, including plans to ship a significant amount of military cargo to Belarus for the next year utilizing 4,162 rail cars. The reported volumes raise alarms in Ukraine, Poland and the Baltics. But the activities are related to the Zapad 2017 exercises planned for the following year, and the logistical data is meant to sow confusion in the West.

23–26 January 2017: A Baltic wargame scenario conducted by the Potomac Foundation, analyzes the Russian military threat to the Baltic States and Poland. It finds Belarus is a key contributor to regional security and stability by containing Russia’s aggressive strategy.

27 January 2017: Serbian Minister of Defense Zoran Djordjevic returns from Belarus. Belarus decides to sell Serbia MiG-29 warplanes and Buk missile-defense systems. The two countries plan to increase

economic expansion to half a billion dollars in two years. The defense ministers also discuss the purchase of S-300 missile systems.

15–26 February 2017: Lukashenka visits Sochi, Russia, without meeting Putin. Relations between the two countries have been deteriorating since Moscow put more and more pressure on Minsk over the airbase issue and broader integration as well as their divergent policies toward the situation in Ukraine. Russia imposes sanctions and deploys mechanized brigades near the Belarusian border. Journalists reporting on Belarus in the Russian media evince parallels with the situation in Ukraine. Also, dozens of anarchists appear unexpectedly at a demonstration in Brest.

23 February 2017: Defense Minister Raukou announces forthcoming purchases of state-of-the-art weaponry from Russia, including Su-30SM aircraft and Nona-M1 heavy mortars. In return for the purchases, Belarus agrees to hold military exercises with Russia in September.

9 May 2017: Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleh Krauchanka gives a presentation at the Atlantic Council conference in Washington, DC, where he emphasizes US-Belarusian security cooperation and notes that Belarus does not consider NATO a direct threat to his country. Defense Minister Raukou, in contrast, lashes out at NATO at a conference in Moscow, particularly at new NATO deployments and stored military hardware.

20–22 May 2017: Belarus features its first ballistic missile at an exhibition of defense equipment. The Belarus State Military Industrial Committee explains that the missile was developed under the framework of “existing cooperation,” presumably with China. In addition, the exhibition features new combat reconnaissance vehicles.

20 June 2017: Belarus signs a contract with the Russian Irkut Corporation to purchase 12 Su-30SM jets. Moreover, it acquires a batch of upgraded T-72 tanks from the Russian plant Uralvagonavod. Lukashenka and other Belarusian officials, however, are frustrated at Russia for refusing to sell Minsk S-300 rocket systems and Iskander missiles.

21 July 2017: Lukashenka visits Ukraine and meets with President Petro Poroshenko. Poroshenko receives guarantees from Lukashenka that Ukraine will never be attacked from Belarusian territory. Many other Ukrainian officials voice concern about the (then-upcoming) Zapad 2017 exercises in the region. Other NATO officials also voice concern.

1 August 2017: Lukashenka praises Belarusian-Chinese cooperation in arms manufacturing in a meeting with Xiao Yaqing, the head of the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission. He goes on to invite Chinese defense firms to the Belarusian-Chinese industrial park Great Stone, where three Chinese companies already have factories.

29 August 2017: Aleh Belakoneu, the head of the Belarusian General Staff, promises neighboring countries that all Russian troops involved in Zapad 2017 would leave the country on September 30, 2017. Lukashenka also invites NATO and other European countries to send observers to the exercises. In a briefing, Belakoneu reveals that the wargame will include two enemy states that have invaded and occupied a part of Belarus, and that Russia and Belarus would practice retaking the territory. The wargame premise rankles neighbors in the region, as the names of the hypothetical countries and the occupied territory, Viejšnoriya, Viesbaryja and Lubienija, sound Baltic. In addition, Belakoneu accuses NATO of preparing an assault across the border.

14 September 2017: Belarus and Russia start Zapad 2017 with the first day of drills. The exercises included 12,700 soldiers, 7,200 from Belarus and 5,500 from Russia. The maneuvers also involve 70 aircraft and helicopters, 250 tanks, 200 artillery pieces, and 10 war ships.

28 September 2017: The last Russian troops that had participated in Zapad 2017 leave Belarus. Whereas, the commander-in-chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces, Viktor Muzhenko, asserts that a few troops return to Russia, but the reminder stay in Belarus.

8 October 2017: Azerbaijan's defense minister, Colonel General Zakir Hasanov, visits Minsk. He meets with President Lukashenka and the senior military leadership. Two days later, he signs a military cooperation plan for 2018 with his counterpart, Andrei Raukou. Details of the plan are not disclosed. However, the two sides reportedly discuss industrial cooperation. Defense Minister Hasanov meets with Belarusian State Military-Industrial Committee Chairperson Alieh Dvihalioiu. He also visits the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant, which is partially involved in production of arms for export. Hasanov surveys the Polonez missile systems, perhaps to counter Armenia's Iskander ballistic missile system. On the same day as the Hasanov visit, Belarusian Special Operations Forces complete their maneuvers as part of the CSTO Search 2017 military exercise, which takes place on Armenian territory.

1 November 2017: Leaders with the Tell the Truth social movement meet with Chief of Staff Aleh Belakoneu and other leading military officials to discuss various issues facing the Belarusian Armed Forces. This is the first meeting between opposition leaders and military officials. The Belarusian military takes steps to show greater transparency, including sharing information about an open investigation into a soldier's suicide. Belarus also demonstrates this transparency in allowing Organization for Security and Cooperation

in Europe (OSCE) observers from Norway and Sweden to watch Zapad 2017, as well as 80 diplomats and 280 foreign journalists.

25 October–6 November 2017: President Lukashenka visits the United Arab Emirates and signs an agreement for a \$25 million loan from the Khalifa Fund for Entrepreneurship Development to the Development Bank of Belarus. The loan creates funds for private initiatives, innovation and regional projects. Lukashenka also meets with Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan and discusses spheres of bilateral cooperation.

2 November 2017: President Lukashenka meets with Ukrainian President Poroshenko in the United Arab Emirates. They discuss security cooperation and highlight urgent issues between the two states.

15 November 2017: Belarusian Foreign Minister Makei offers to send peacekeepers to eastern Ukraine. His Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, voices support for the proposal. *Kommersant*, a Russian newspaper, quotes a source within the Ukrainian administration that Kyiv would prefer Polish or Lithuanian peacekeepers, but Russia would oppose that option. The paper concludes that Belarusian or Kazakhstani peacekeepers would be a good compromise.

21 November 2017: Belarusian Special Forces Commander Vadzim Dzyanisenka presents the military leadership's vision of contemporary armed conflicts. This new vision includes an emphasis on developing special forces. Without the special forces, Dzyanisenka says, "it is not possible to solve the tasks related to ensuring national security." The Special Forces receive more equipment than most branches of the military, including new equipment. Only air defense receives more support. The larger idea in developing special forces is that Minsk wants to build a smaller, yet more efficient fighting force

that can deal with Donbas-like conflicts instead of a major war with NATO.

28 November 2017: Deputy Defense Minister of Armaments Siarhei Simanenka tells reporters that several Soviet-era tanks and trucks were successfully modernized.

1 December 2017: Belarus agrees to supply a joint regional group of Belarusian-Russian troops. In return, Russia agrees to give Belarus the necessary equipment and arms in a time of war.

31 January 2018: Managing officials of the State Industrial Committee announce that Belarusian arms exports in 2017 grew by 15 percent over the previous year and made up \$1 billion in sales. The country retains its position in the top 20 of world arms sellers. The chair of the committee, Aleh Dvihalyou, says that 54 percent of the “international interaction” for Belarusian defense industries involves Russian firms.

31 January 2018: Stanislau Zas, the state secretary of the Security Council, reveals plans to produce new sophisticated arms. Defense industries plan to complete the development of combat drones. Zas says that Belarus will test a new, completely Belarusian-made rocket for the Polonez MLRS. Before this, Belarus depended on Chinese-built parts. Designers, he continues, are also developing a new Belarusian missile for the Buk rocket system.

13 February 2018: Lukashenka criticizes Russia for its reluctance to equip the Belarusian and CSTO army, in an address to his Security Council: “The leadership of Russia today lacks a serious understanding that it is necessary to strengthen the national armed forces of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and other countries.”

14 February 2018: Defense Minister Raikou says that the delivery of Russian Su-30s are delayed and not expected until next year.

18 February 2018: Lukashenka offers to send 10,000 peacekeepers to eastern Ukraine.

22 February 2018: At a ceremony celebrating Armed Forces Day and Defenders of the Fatherland, Lukashenka says, for the first time in his career, that Belarus should defend itself on its own. He does not mention Russia once in his speech: “In the event of a military threat, we must be ready for the nationwide defense of Belarus. 70,000 men of our Army cannot defend our state [...] the land must be protected by the whole people... This is the essence of our defense doctrine.” He also mentions the use of new arms to respond to new challenges. He praises China for its help in this sphere because China had recently given Belarus five armored vehicles.

14–16 May 2018: A NATO delegation visits Minsk. The delegation and the Ministry of Defense finalize a set of objectives that Belarus will pursue as part of its participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace.

1 June 2018: Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei, speaking in Brussels, warns that a proposed US base in Poland would trigger a response in the region, even with Belarus hosting a Russian base.

1 June 2018: President Lukashenka says that he would prefer Ukraine join NATO than to see it taken over by nationalism and be turned into a bandit state.

22 August 2018: Lukashenka meets President Putin in Sochi, Russia. The Belarusian leader acknowledges that there are conflicts with Russia. However, he says that there are no new problems and that they are not piling up. Some problems, he believes, “we happened to deal with are not ours.” He does not elaborate.

22 September 2018: Lukashenka, at a press conference in Minsk, says that the one-on-one talks in Sochi with Putin “were not just difficult but tough. However, they bore fruit.”

11 October 2018: Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Rumas meets with his Tajikistani counterpart, Qohir Rasulzoda, to discuss their countries’ strategic partnership. Over 100 documents and agreements are prepared for advancing the relationship between the two countries.

12 October 2018: Rumas meets with Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah in Afghanistan to discuss cooperation agreements between the two countries.

17 October 2018: Lukashenka signs Decree No. 140 to establish the concept for the country’s border security program for 2018–2022, which will ensure efficient protection of Belarus’s national interests in the border area and strengthen good neighborly relations.

13 February 2019: Putin and Lukashenka meet in Sochi. In addition to skiing and playing hockey, they discuss the question of integration of Belarus and Russia and agree to “synchronize their watches” and work through the problems on that issue.

27 February 2019: Minsk requests a \$600 million loan from Russia to refinance its debt to Russia. When Moscow does not immediately agree, Lukashenka asserts that “we will not crawl on our knees” to ask for the loan.

14 March 2019: The chiefs of the General Staffs of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries meet to discuss the CIS integrated air-defense system. Russia’s Valery Gerasimov says that they discussed upgrades to the air-defense system as well as a plan of cooperation through 2025.

30 April 2019: Vladimir Putin relieves Moscow's ambassador to Belarus, Mikhail Babich, of his duties and, in his place, appoints Dmitry Mezentsev. Mezentsev was previously a Senator from Sakhalin.

15 May 2019: At the Milex-2019 International Arms Show, Russia's Federal Service for Military and Technical Cooperation announces two contracts with Belarus. First, they will be modernizing a batch of Belarusian T-72 tanks. Additionally, they will deliver Sukhoi Su-30SM fighter jets to Belarus.

16 May 2019: Stanislau Zas, the state secretary of the Security Council of Belarus, is nominated to be the secretary general of the CSTO, with a term that starts in January 2020.

14–27 June 2019: The Slavic Brotherhood 2019 military exercises are held in Serbia, with participants from Russia, Belarus and Serbia. Over 600 troops attend the exercises.

18 July 2019: Putin and Lukashenka meet at Lake Ladoga for talks ahead of the 6th Forum of Russian and Belarusian Regions. They discuss the future of the Union State and other issues of integration—economic and political—between the two countries.

29 August 2019: US National Security Advisor John Bolton visits Minsk and meets with Lukashenka, marking the first time a US official at that level or above had visited Belarus in 18 years. The two discuss regional security matters and cooperation between the two countries.

31 August 2019: In Warsaw, Bolton meets with Zas, the secretary of the Belarusian Security Council, along with top officials from Poland and Ukraine.

13 September 2019: Russia and Belarus launch the Union Shield joint military exercises in Nizhny Novgorod. This involves a total of 12,000 troops, including 4,000 from Belarus. The Union Shield drills are carried out every four years.

6 September 2019: The prime ministers of Russia and Belarus, Dmitry Medvedev and Sergey Rumas, respectively, initial an integration development program for the two states. It includes 31 action items, or “roadmaps,” to further the integration of the two countries. Rumas says that by December, there will be a package for the presidents to sign.

1 October 2019: Lukashenka attends the Eurasian Economic Union summit in Yerevan, along with leaders from Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. They discuss economic integration among the member states and the creation of a common energy market.

14–18 October 2019: Belarus hosts the military exercise Poisk 2019 with fellow CSTO allies, including about 2,000 troops from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

21–29 October 2019: The military exercise Enduring Brotherhood 2019 is held in Tajikistan, involving the CSTO states, shortly following another military exercise. About 2,000 troops from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan participate.

17 November 2019: Parliamentary elections are held in Belarus. No opposition members win any seats. International observers criticize the election as unfair and not free, which Lukashenka denies.

28 November 2019: In Bishkek, a CSTO summit is held, attracting the heads of state of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan

and Armenia. The talks involve information security, the Tajikistani-Afghan border, and other issues of collective concern.

7 December 2019: Putin and Lukashenka meet in Sochi to discuss integration between Belarus and Russia, but the talks seem to end in a stalemate. Seemingly, the only matter of agreement is to meet again in two weeks.

7–8 December 2019: Opposition demonstrators in Minsk rally outside the Russian embassy to protest against closer integration with Russia. Several hundred participants gather, calling for the international community to stand with the Belarusian opposition against Russian hegemony.

20 December 2019: Putin and Lukashenka meet in St. Petersburg to continue their conversation about integration and cooperation. After the talks, Russia's economics minister says no agreement was reached over issues of natural gas and oil, a key dispute keeping the two sides apart. Protests in Minsk continue during these talks.

1 January 2020: Russia halts oil supplies to Belarus following months of haggling over prices. According to Russia, the halt was necessary because there were no contracts signed for the new year. A few days later, supplies resume as the two sides move closer to an agreement on a new contract.

1 February 2020: US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo visits Minsk. He sits down with President Lukashenka and with Foreign Minister Makei. Pompeo reportedly offers US energy supplies at competitive prices, but emphasizes that this is a trip about diplomacy, not about forcing Minsk to choose between Moscow and Washington. Pompeo also notes that the US will send an ambassador to Minsk in the near future.

14 February 2020: Gazprom and Belarus sign an agreement on gas prices for 2020. The agreement continues the conditions of the 2019 contract, wherein gas was supplied at \$127 per 1,000 cubic meters.

18–21 February 2020: In Pskov, Belarus and Russia conduct joint military exercises. The drills involve over 350 military personnel from the Russian Airborne Troops and the Special Operations Force of the Republic of Belarus.

27 February 2020: The first case of COVID-19 is confirmed in Belarus.

16 March 2020: Russia closes its border with Belarus due to concerns over COVID-19.

31 March 2020: The first death of a COVID-19 patient is reported in Belarus.

6 May 2020: Serhei Tikhanovski is detained and sentenced to 15 days of arrest for participation in unsanctioned protests. His sentence is later expanded by 30 more days.

15 May 2020: Minsk signs an agreement with Rosneft for oil supplies for 2020. Specifically, Rosneft will supply nine million tons of oil to Belarusian refineries for the period April–December of 2020.

29 May 2020: Serhei Tikhanovski is again arrested, this time in Grodno at a picket to collect signatures for his wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, to run for president in his place. Tikhanovski was banned from running by the Electoral Commission earlier in the month. At least nine others are also detained at the picket.

31 May 2020: Opposition politician Mikalai Statkevich is detained for participating in an unsanctioned protest. His initial jail sentence of

fifteen days is first doubled and then extended further into the summer.

3 June 2020: Lukashenka dismisses his prime minister and government. He links the action to upcoming elections in August 2020, but promises that there will be no “revolution” when the government changed.

4 June 2020: Lukashenka appoints a new prime minister and government. Roman Golovchenko, who was previously the chairperson of the State Authority for Military Industry, is appointed head of government.

14 July 2020: Presidential hopeful Viktor Babariko, the head of Belgazprombank, is denied registration to be a candidate in the election. The authorities assert the denial is due to his involvement in ongoing criminal cases. The Central Election Commission also blocks former diplomat and technology entrepreneur Valery Tsepkalo, citing irregularities in the collected signatures in favor of his candidacy. However, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is registered as a candidate in the election following her husband's detainment and inability to stand in the election.

16 July 2020: The campaign headquarters of Babariko and Tsepkalo unite with Tikhanovskaya's to support her candidacy.

18 June 2020: Viktor Babariko and his son Eduard are arrested. The charges are financial crimes and tax evasion. An official accuses Babariko of being run by Russian “puppeteers.” The European Commission president states that all “arbitrarily detained” prisoners should be freed.

24 July 2020: Tsepkalo flees Belarus for Moscow, fearing prosecution over a criminal case lodged against him by another businessman, which Tsepkalo considers a fabricated provocation.

29 July 2020: Thirty-to Russian citizens and a Belarusian citizen of the Russian private military company (PMC) Wagner Group are arrested in Belarus. The state news agency claims that they were in Belarus to destabilize the country ahead of the election.

4–9 August 2020: Presidential election polls are open, with early voting permitted between August 4 and 8, due to COVID-19 pandemic conditions. The candidates on the ballot are incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka, united opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, social-democrat Siarhei Cherachen, parliamentary deputy Hanna Kanaptskaya, and co-chair of the “Tell the Truth” political movement Andrey Dmitriyev.

9 August 2020: The Central Election Commission announces that Lukashenka is re-elected to his sixth term in office after receiving more than 80 percent of the vote. Opposition candidate Tikhanovskaya claims to have won 60 percent of the vote in the first round. All opposition candidates join her in calling for the election results to be invalidated. The Belarusian authorities detain Tikhanovskaya overnight, and her campaign loses contact with her for many hours.

August 2020–March 2021: Major anti-government street protests begin after election results are announced. Demonstrations against Lukashenka and the legitimacy of the election continue for months, yielding the largest anti-government protest movement in the history of Belarus.

11 August 2020: Tikhanovskaya appears in a video, filmed on August 10, at the offices of the Central Election Commission, in which she

delivers seemingly forced remarks discouraging her supporters from joining street protests. Subsequently on August 11, she makes known she had fled Belarus to Lithuania under duress, out of concern for her children.

14 August 2020: Tikhanovskaya creates the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power to facilitate a democratic transfer of power. The council consists of 64 core members, all of whom are later arrested or chose to leave Belarus fearing repercussions from the police. The same day, in an apparent gesture to Moscow, the government releases the Wagner mercenaries jailed since July.

15–16 August 2020: Lukashenka requests and is granted phone calls with Russian President Putin. The Russian side pledges to dispatch “full assistance” at “first request” to deal with the anti-regime demonstrations in the country, according to Lukashenka. However, the Kremlin initially declines to provide more than token support for the embattled Belarusian leader, preferring to see how the situation develops.

17 August 2020: Lukashenka visits the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Factory to speak at a rally held by industrial workers with the intention of negotiating. The crowd heckles the president, yelling for him to leave. The president responds to the crowd's jeering by saying, “We held elections already. There will be no other elections until you kill me.”

13 September 2020: Police violently crack down and detain over 400 people in Minsk after around 100,000 gather in Minsk to protest.

23 September 2020: Lukashenka is inaugurated in a secret ceremony amid mass demonstrations. The ceremony is not televised, nor are any foreign dignitaries present.

Author Biographies

Jacek Bartosiak

Dr. Jacek Bartosiak is the author of several best-selling books, including *Pacyfik i Eurazja. O Wojnie* (*Pacific and Eurasia. On War*), 2016, which focuses on the ongoing great power competition in Eurasia and a possible war in the Western Pacific, as well as *Rzeczpospolita między Lądem a Morzem. O wojnie i pokoju* (*Poland and Intermarium Between the Land and the Sea Powers*), 2018, which deals with the geostrategic reality Poland and Europe face in the era of great power competition and is an in-depth study of the Central Eastern European theater of war and modern warfare.

He is a Senior Fellow at the Potomac Foundation in Washington, DC, the Director of the Wargaming & Simulations Program at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation, as well as a co-founder of PlayofBattle (a wargaming and simulation games studio). He is additionally a contributor at *Nowa Konfederacja* and at New Generation Warfare Center in Washington DC. Dr. Bartosiak is a former (2018–2019) CEO of Solidarity Transport Hub, the largest infrastructure project in Poland's history; and an advisor to the Government plenipotentiary for the Solidarity Transport Hub (2017–2018). He is a graduate of the Law and Public Administration Faculty of Warsaw University and is an attorney, specializing in corporate, business and financial law, and a Managing Partner at a Warsaw-based law office since 2004.

As a renowned expert on geopolitics, Dr. Bartosiak has been a leading voice in the debate on the strategic reality of Central Eastern Europe, Eurasia and the Western Pacific as well as factors affecting these geopolitical realities. He he has participated in countless conferences and speaking engagements in Poland and worldwide.

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Girard Bucello holds a Master's degree in EU Politics with a specialization in the foreign affairs of the European Union from the London School of Economics and Political Science and, at the time of writing, was a fall 2019 Europe-Eurasia Intern with The Jamestown Foundation. Prior to his internship with Jamestown, the main focus of his academic career centered on the security of the Baltic States. He has also written on the response to pro-Russian disinformation campaigns.

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Matthew Czekaj is the Senior Program Associate for Europe and Eurasia at The Jamestown Foundation and also serves as the Editor-in-Chief of Jamestown's Eurasia Daily Monitor publication, focused on the post-Soviet space. He has edited and prepared for publication numerous books and reports published by Jamestown, including *Russia's Military Strategy and Doctrine* (2019), and his writings have appeared in *EDM*, *Central Europe Digest* as well as the *Atlanticist* blog. Prior to joining Jamestown, Mr. Czekaj was a Research Associate at the Atlantic Council, where he worked on issues of European Enlargement. Before that, he was a Research Assistant at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) Energy Security Program. Mr. Czekaj holds a Master's degree in Russian and East European Studies from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, and a Bachelor's degree in International Relations with a concentration in European Studies from The Johns Hopkins University. His research interests include Polish foreign and defense policy, Baltic Sea regional security, European enlargement, as well as pipeline politics and energy security.

Glen E. Howard

Glen Howard is the President of The Jamestown Foundation, a research and analysis institution based in Washington, DC. He is fluent in Russian and proficient in Azerbaijani and Arabic, and is a regional expert on the Caucasus and Central Asia. He was formerly an Analyst at the Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) Strategic Assessment Center. His articles have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, and *Jane's Defense Weekly*. Mr. Howard has served as a consultant to private sector and governmental agencies, including the US Department of Defense, the National Intelligence Council and major oil companies operating in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Grigory Ioffe

Grigory Ioffe was born and raised in Moscow, Russia, and graduated from Moscow State University where he majored in Human Geography. He emigrated to the United States in 1989. Since 1990, he has been affiliated with Radford University in Radford, Virginia, where he is a professor of geography. Dr. Ioffe has been active in Belarusian studies since 2002. He has authored and co-authored multiple peer-refereed articles on Belarus, including “Geostrategic Interest and Democracy Promotion: Evidence from the Post-Soviet Space” in *Europe-Asia Studies* (2013); “Debating Belarus: An Economy in Comparative Perspective” in *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2011) (co-authored with Viachaslau Yarashevich); as well as “Belarus and the West: From Estrangement to Honeymoon” in the *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* (2011). Ioffe’s book, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark* was published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2008 and again in 2014. Published in 2014 by Palgrave Macmillan, his book *Reassessing Lukashenka: Belarus in Cultural and Geopolitical Context*

is based on extensive interviews with the Belarusian leader. Ioffe also co-authored the third edition of *Historical Dictionary of Belarus*, published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2018. He regularly writes about Belarus for the *Eurasia Daily Monitor*.

Rauf Mammadov

Rauf Mammadov is resident scholar on energy policy at The Middle East Institute. He focuses on issues of energy security, global energy industry trends, as well as energy relations between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Caucasus. He has a particular emphasis on the post-Soviet countries of Eurasia. Prior to joining MEI, Mammadov held top administrative positions for the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) from 2006 and 2016. In 2012, he founded and managed the United States Representative Office of SOCAR in Washington D.C.

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Vladimir Socor is a Senior Fellow of the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation, where he writes analytical articles on a daily basis for Jamestown's flagship publication, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (1995 to date). An internationally recognized expert on the former Soviet-ruled countries in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, he covers Russian and Western policies, focusing on energy, regional security issues, Russian foreign affairs, secessionist conflicts, and NATO policies and programs. Mr. Socor is a frequent

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Andrew Wilson is Professor in Ukrainian Studies at University College London, and a Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. His most recent book *Ukraine Crisis: What the West Needs to Know* was published by Yale University Press in 2014. A fourth, updated, edition of *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* was published in 2015. His other books include *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (2011), *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (2005) and *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (2005).

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF BELARUS ON NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

Over the past several years, the unique and widely misunderstood country of Belarus has risen to the attention of policymakers in Europe and the United States. Though for centuries an important invasion corridor across the plains of North Central Europe, its strategic importance had been overlooked by post–Cold War Western military planners until Russia’s invasion of neighboring Ukraine in 2014. Today, there is increasing awareness that preserving Belarus’s independence and averting a permanent Russian military presence on its territory is critical to the security of allies on NATO’s eastern flank.

It was almost a miracle of history that the modern state of Belarus was created out of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet in the three decades of its existence, it has steadily gained a sense of national identity, despite continuing to live in the shadow of Russia. At the same time, multi-vectorism has been one of the few constants in Belarus’s foreign policy precisely because it has allowed this country to navigate between stormy and calm periods in relations with Russia on the one hand and the West on the other. These dynamics can be expected to endure and outlast the political crisis that gripped Belarus following the falsified presidential election of August 2020.

The collection of essays found in this book captures the various intriguing, but generally under-examined, strategic dimensions and complexities that define Belarus today. Their topics of focus run the gamut, from Belarus’s geo-strategic importance to the North Atlantic Alliance and the nearby region, Minsk’s *de facto* non-alignment strategy, energy security and military considerations, relations with its European neighbors, role within Russia’s defense posture, and split national identity, to political forecasts for the next two decades. Moving beyond the oft-repeated phrase “Last Dictator of Europe,” and peering beneath such dismissive clichés, the included analysts—experts from Belarus, Europe and the United States—aim to explore the strategic undercurrents that deserve closer consideration in formulating an effective Belarus policy.

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