

The “Belarus factor”

From balancing to bridging
geopolitical dividing lines
in Europe?

Clingendael Report

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Cover photo: The leaders of Belarus, Russia, Germany, France and Ukraine after signing the Minsk II agreement, February 2015. © In Terris Online Newspaper

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Contents

Map of Belarus	1
Introduction	2
Belarus: Russia, the EU and “integration of integrations”	5
Dependence on Russia, pulling Belarus east	5
The EU, pulling Belarus west	7
“Integration of integrations” as an option for Belarus to bridge the divide between EU and EEU?	12
Belarus’ security concerns: prospects for a more neutral course between Russia and the west?	14
Belarus as a “containing ally” in its relations with Russia	14
Opposition to Russian revisionist policies and limited possibilities for co-operation with the west, including NATO	15
Some preliminary conclusions and recommendations	20

Map of Belarus



Source: <http://geology.com/world/belarus-satellite-image.shtml>

Introduction

Belarus has long been neglected in east-west relations. It had limited value to some EU member states as a trading partner and a transit state for energy links with Russia. Its dependence on Russia made it almost look like a part of the Russian Federation, under a president who was called “the last dictator in Europe”. Limited interests enabled the EU and the US to easily adopt sanctions, in order to punish Belarus for human rights violations and for continuing a “Soviet-light” system with authoritarian repression and a mostly unreformed economy. Fundamental reforms were demanded before any more constructive relationship could be considered.

However, the Ukraine crisis has triggered a rethink about relations with Belarus. It may be that Minsk has some (limited) margins for manoeuvring between Russia and the west, as indicated by its attempts to mediate, offering Minsk as a place for negotiations on the Ukraine crisis. In that context, more constructive relations with Minsk might assist in influencing those in Moscow who are interested in decreasing tensions and solving the present geopolitical crisis. Or at least Belarus’ connections with Moscow could give us some indications as to what to expect next from the Russian side. So, the “Belarus factor” suddenly looks interesting again; something to be considered in a wider regional context.

As such, the Ukraine crisis has had major geopolitical, geo-economic and security consequences for the whole of Europe, leading to new dividing lines between two “Competing Unions” (EU and Eurasian Economic Union) and tensions and insecurity between NATO and Russia. Sanctions and countersanctions have seriously affected economic and broader co-operation, and on both sides of the divide a military build-up is leading to an unstable and potentially dangerous situation in central and eastern Europe for the first time since the end of the Cold War. In this context, the EU and NATO are facing difficult choices in their relationships with Russia and other neighbouring states belonging to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and its military equivalent, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

For Belarus, being overly dependent on Russia in a whole range of aspects, the present geopolitical crisis leads to serious concerns about its prospects to continue as an independent state, with full respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity guaranteed. Therefore, as an immediate reaction to the present crisis, Minsk attempted to rework its balancing, multi-vector foreign policy and mend its relations with the west, as it tried to do in the immediate aftermath of the Georgia war in 2008.

Economically, Belarus risks being locked into a more protectionist Eurasian economic integration with negative consequences for its trade and financial relations with the EU and other western partners. Instead of two “Competing Unions”, Belarus prefers to act as a bridge in an “integration of integrations”, bringing the EEU and EU closer together. Therefore, it refused to co-operate with Russia in its counter-sanctions against the EU and CIS partner Ukraine. But does Minsk have the clout to continue this policy and is it willing to choose reforms and modernisation as a path to strengthening its own independence and resilience inside the EEU?

Security-wise, Belarus risks being dragged into a possible, more intensive Russian military operation against Ukraine or experiencing a Russian form of “hybrid warfare” on its own territory if it does not comply with demands from Moscow. Here, as well, Minsk attempted to balance and distance itself from Russian policies, underlining its more neutral position. Therefore, Minsk refused to recognise the annexation of Crimea, retained its good relations with neighbouring Ukraine and offered its good services, inviting the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France to Minsk for negotiations, which led to the two well-known Minsk Agreements in 2014/15. Furthermore, Belarus refused Russian requests for an additional air base on its territory, developed a new version of its military doctrine, enabling it to counter more effectively potential military actions on its territory, and indicated that Belarusian territory could not be used in aggressive actions against neighbouring Ukraine. The big question is how long Belarus can withstand Russian pressure and whether it could use its chairmanship of CSTO to work for more transparency and confidence-building measures between military blocs.

In the following two sections this paper will deal with :

- the possible consequences of these developments for **EU-Belarus relations**, now that most of the sanctions have been lifted and the EU and Belarus are gradually developing more constructive relations, including in the context of the EU’s Eastern Partnership. As the Eastern Partnership aims more at stabilisation and differentiation between partners with different ambitions in its relationship with the EU, this opens up the way for an EU policy of “principled pragmatism”, supporting reforms and resilience in Belarus and promoting a more constructive partner inside the EEU. What are the push and pull factors inducing or hampering Belarus to act as a bridge between the two “Competing Unions”? What margin does it have for manoeuvring between Moscow and Brussels? How are the two “Competing Unions” trying to influence Minsk?
- the consequences of Belarus’ more neutral position for the security situation around the Baltic states and Poland with special relevance for Minsk’s **relationship with NATO**, in the light of NATO’s build-up of a forward presence to reassure its eastern member states and Russia’s reactions to counter such efforts. Which limitations could Russia impose on Belarus, both in the Union State and in the framework of CSTO (of which Belarus has recently taken over the chairmanship)? What are

the push and pull factors here? Could Belarus act as a bridge for dialogue on the security situation in Eastern Europe, including inside the **OSCE**? Could defence co-operation by Belarus with individual NATO member states, Ukraine and China alter the strategic calculus in Moscow or will it, on the contrary, trigger a forceful negative reaction?

Finally, the paper draws some preliminary conclusions with respect to the options Belarus has for the bridging role to which it aspires and how the EU, NATO and individual member states could support such a role.

Belarus: Russia, the EU and “integration of integrations”

Dependence on Russia, pulling Belarus east

When looking at the EU’s Eastern Partnership countries, Belarus is clearly the most integrated with the Russian Federation: politically (including as part of the Union State), economically and socially (weakly developed national Belarusian identity).

President Lukashenka, in the west often framed as the “last dictator in Europe”, in a number of aspects seems to have developed an autocratic system, which has gradually been copied by his Russian counterpart as well.

The reaction in the west to internal repression and human rights violations has mainly relied on sanctions in an attempt to force Minsk to change course and introduce fundamental political reforms. The results have been meagre, as the EU’s leverage in Belarus has always been limited and isolation has made Minsk even more dependent on Moscow than it already was.¹

In spite of this integration with Russia, also in broader frameworks such as CIS and most recently the Eurasian Economic Union, Lukashenka has always been motivated to keep Belarus independent and limit Russian attempts at a gradual takeover, as has been happening particularly in the sphere of economic and energy relations.

Over time the political economy of Belarus has developed in such a way that fundamental market reforms and privatisation have been put off by energy subsidies from Russia, which could always be used by the political elite to subsidise otherwise uncompetitive companies, both in the industrial and in the agricultural sector. Re-export of oil and oil products and using its position as a transit country for Russian gas has fed into a rent-seeking system, used by President Lukashenka to keep both the elite and the broader population satisfied.²

1 Andrew Wilson, *Belarus. The Last European Dictatorship*, Yale University Press (New Haven/London), 2011 and Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2008 and his sequel: *Reassessing Lukashenka. Belarus in Cultural and Geopolitical Context*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014

2 Margarita Balmaceda, *Living the High Life in Minsk. Russian Energy Rents, Domestic Populism and Belarus’ Impending Crisis*. CEU Press, Budapest, 2014

This high dependence on Russian energy subsidies was accompanied by an equally high dependence on Russian markets for export of both agricultural and industrial products and on remittances from Belarusian citizens working in Russia.

In spite of this highly asymmetric relationship, President Lukashenka managed to keep sufficient manoeuvring space for retaining as much political and economic independence as possible by clever manipulation of parts of the Russian political and economic elite, including by playing the political card of historical friendship between Russia and Belarus.

In principle, Russia’s drive for greater integration in the post-Soviet space, most recently embodied in the Eurasian Economic Union, could limit the options for member states to develop closer economic relations with third parties, including the EU.

However, the institutional weaknesses of the EEU (top-down consensus decision-making, weak implementation at national level) leave plenty of loopholes for countries like Belarus. When Russia initiated counter-sanctions against the west (mostly agro-business, including a whole range of foodstuffs) as a reaction to anti-Russian sanctions, related to the annexation of the Crimea and destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine, Belarus resisted and refused to adopt similar (counter-) sanctions against the west.³

As Moscow applied these sanctions on a bilateral basis, in circumvention of its obligations under the EEU Treaty, this even led to a small trade war with Minsk, when Belarus actually started profiting from the re-export of agricultural products from the EU to Russia. Something similar happened in the context of the CIS Free Trade Agreement (FTA), where Russia sanctioned Ukraine on a bilateral basis, because of its Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. Also in this case, Belarus decided to retain its close trading relations with Ukraine, which after Russia has traditionally always been its main trading partner inside the CIS.

Even in this case of highly asymmetric relations, Moscow could still not force Belarus, either by using the EEU or bilaterally, to follow its demands. The ensuing small trade war reminded Minsk of how Moscow had tried to get its way by using Belarus’ dependency in a number of small “gas price wars” in the recent past, but had equally failed to enforce compliance. It is clear that even in such high-profile cases, Moscow’s influence on Minsk has its limits.

3 For an analysis of the Eurasian Economic Union and Belarus see: Tony van der Togt, Francesco Montesano and Iaroslav Kozak, From Competition to Compatibility. Striking a Eurasian balance in EU-Russia relations. Clingendael Report, The Hague, October 2015 : www.clingendael.nl

However, over time Belarus has been facing gradually worsening terms of trade in its economic relations with Russia, not only in energy relations but also in decreasing demand from Russian markets due to the economic crisis. For Belarus the search for external alternatives is becoming ever more urgent. Once again Belarus is at a crossroads, facing the big question as to whether or not it could still evade fundamental reforms.⁴

For Russia, Belarus constitutes an indispensable element in its search for a more integrated post-Soviet space. In this context, there are clear red lines in how far Russia could allow Belarus to integrate with western institutions such as the EU and NATO.⁵ After the Ukraine crisis, the importance of keeping Belarus firmly tied to Russia and organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Union has only increased for Moscow. However, Belarus is itself the best judge on how much manoeuvring space it has in its relationship with an internationally more assertive Russia. Although Russia’s financial means to support Belarus have decreased because of the economic crisis, Moscow still has plenty of leverage to prevent a more fundamental drift of Belarus to the west.

The EU, pulling Belarus west

In principle, the EU could assist in modernising the Belarusian economy, improving energy efficiency (thereby diminishing dependence on Russia) and redirecting a greater part of goods and services to European and global markets, insofar as the EU’s own protectionist policies allow. This could also make modern sectors of the Belarusian economy, such as IT, even more competitive and assist Belarus in diminishing its present overreliance on (re-)export of energy and other primary resources such as potash and fertilisers.

Furthermore, it would enable Belarus to break out from more protectionist structures such as the EEU, where in a more limited market Russian companies have clear advantages, potentially leading to a greater share in (or even another takeover of) Belarusian companies, as has already happened in energy infrastructure (Beltransgaz being taken over by Gazprom).

4 Marek Dabrowski, Belarus at a Crossroads, Bruegel Policy Contribution, Issue 2016/02, January 2016 : www.bruegel.org; Rumen Dobrinsky (ed.) a.o., The Belarus Economy : The Challenges of Stalled Reforms, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Research Report 413, November 2016 : <http://wiiw.ac.at>.

5 The importance of Belarus for Russia is highlighted in the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept, approved by President Putin on 30 November 2016, in which a separate paragraph deals with Belarus: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201612010045?index=1&rangeSize=1>. See also : a comprehensive report by the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies on EU and the post-Soviet space versus Eurasian integration: https://riss.ru/images/pdf/journal/2015/2/04_.pdf.

Additionally, Belarus’ eventual accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the possibility of a further IMF (International Monetary Fund) standby agreement and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), European Investment Bank (EIB) and World Bank loans all depend on goodwill and co-operation with the EU. So the EU has a better chance of developing more leverage in its relationship with Belarus, now that it has lifted most sanctions and has recently started a constructive institutionalised dialogue with Minsk.

The most important lesson of two decades of EU (and western) policies towards Belarus has been that mainly sanctioning Minsk in an attempt to force Belarus to adopt fundamental political and economic changes has had only a very limited effect. The EU’s leverage was highly insufficient, partly due to limited connectivity between the EU and Belarus. For a long time Russia could easily keep a more closed and unreformed system afloat and have the upper hand in any battle for influence with the EU in Minsk.

However, the Ukraine crisis has raised concerns about Belarus’ independence and sovereignty and has forced Belarus once more to look for other partners, mainly the EU and China, in a renewed effort at multi-vector policies.

The EU has recognised the attempt by Minsk to occupy some middle ground between Russia and the west and act as a bridge between “Competing Unions”, resulting in two Minsk Agreements dealing with the Ukraine crisis. Geopolitical reasons have induced a rethink of EU policy towards Belarus, as a result of which most sanctions have been lifted and some positive measures and further engagement have been offered.⁶

The EU should clearly recognise that its room for geostrategic engagement with Belarus is limited:

- the EU is neither able nor willing to replace Russia as the main economic and financial partner, especially as long as there is no real willingness in Minsk to decide on fundamental market economic reforms, including privatisation.
- the legal basis and terms of engagement are underdeveloped, an inheritance of two decades of sanctions policies: the EU has no Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with Belarus (economic relations are still based on an old agreement between the European Communities and the Soviet Union); Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe; and in the context of the EU’s Eastern Partnership, Belarus only participates in a regional format.⁷

6 <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/15-fac-belarus-conclusions/>

7 Andras Racz and Arkady Moshes, Belarus: deepening ‘dependence on Russia leaves little room for the EU’s geostrategic engagement. In : Kristi Raik and Sinikukka Saari (eds), Key Actors in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood. Competing perspectives on geostrategic tensions. Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, 2016

However, some perspectives for limited approximation and Europeanisation of Belarus have opened up, encouraged both by developments inside Belarus itself and by the EU’s changing policy approaches towards the Eastern Partnership.

Apart from using its geographical proximity, Belarus has been trying to push for a greater opening to external trade by adopting some EU standards to expand the export of goods and services to the EU. Furthermore, some indirect harmonisation “through the back door” seems to have taken place. Contrary to expectations, Belarus’ membership of the Eurasian Economic Union has had some positive impact on harmonisation and approximation, as the system of Eurasian integration is to some extent compatible with EU standards.

As the EU and EEU both respect WTO rules and regulations, there is a clear common basis on which economic relations between the EU and Belarus can be built. Finally, in recent years the EU has started a *modernisation dialogue* with Belarus, which is broadening and gradually includes not only civil society and lower ranking officials in regions, but higher officials in Minsk’s central government as well. In a country where power, including economic power, is as centralised as it is in Belarus, this is certainly a more effective approach.⁸

At the same time, as a preliminary outcome of the EU-wide discussion on the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy, including its Eastern Partnership, some new perspectives have been opened up for Belarus, as:

- *stabilisation* is prioritised in the relationship with neighbours, meaning that democratisation is not necessarily an absolute precondition for closer co-operation; EU policies on Belarus could be based on a new form of *principled pragmatism*, aimed at gradual and more indirect modernisation, combined with strengthening the rule of law;
- *differentiation* is established as a new principle, clearly recognising the fact that not every partner country has the same level of ambition in its relationship with the EU. This implies that, apart from the most ambitious countries with an Association Agreement plus DCFTA (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), other partners (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus) have different levels of ambitions, which call for other more “tailor-made” formats for relationships and closer co-operation.⁹

8 Andrei Yeliseyev, Belarus: Europeanisation through the “back-door”? In: Aldis Austers, Ilvija Bruge and Andris Spruds (eds.), Dilemmas of Europeanisation: Political Choices and Economic Transformations in the Eastern Partnership Countries, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga, 2016

9 https://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf

Figure 1 Top 5 import partners Belarus, 2006-2015¹⁰

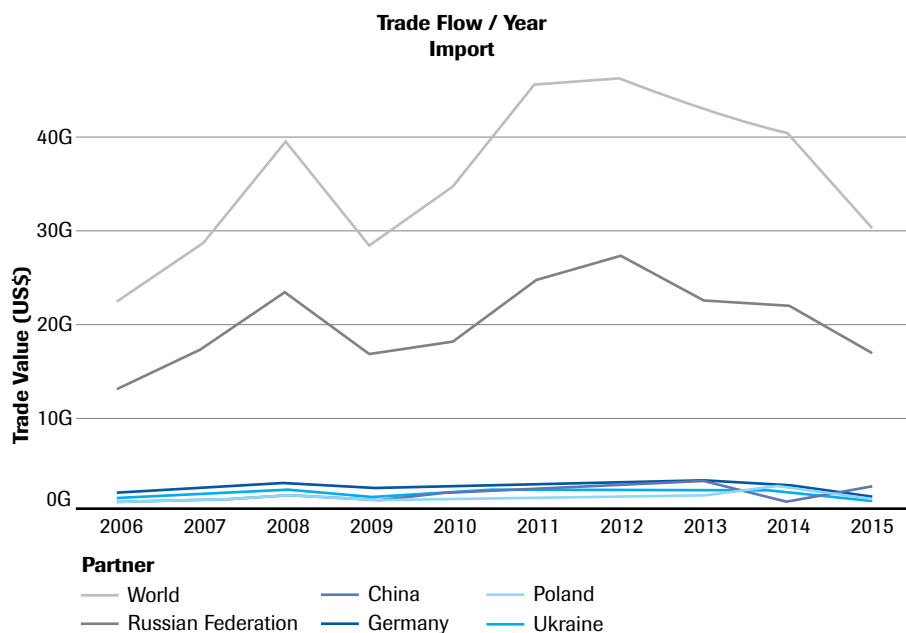


Figure 2 Top 5 import product categories per country, 2014¹¹

Product	World	Russia	China	Germany	Poland	Ukraine
Mineral Products	32,00	57,00				
Machines	17,00	7,20	33,00	39,00	22,00	8,40
Metals	9,50	11,00	11,00	5,60	10,00	18,00
Chemical Products	8,20	4,60	11,00	15,00	12,00	6,60
Plastics and Rubbers	5,90	4,20		9,70		
Animal Products						7,10
Foodstuffs						22,00
Foodwear and Headwear			8,20			
Transportation			10,00	11,00	9,00	
Vegetable Products					14,00	

10 On the basis of UN trade statistics (UN Comtrade Database), Clingendael has carried out a trend analysis of Belarusian trade in the period of 2006-2015

11 Clingendael compiled this figure on the basis of information from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, which uses data provided by UN Comtrade: http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/blr/all/show/2014/

Figure 3 Top 5 export partners Belarus, 2006-2015¹²

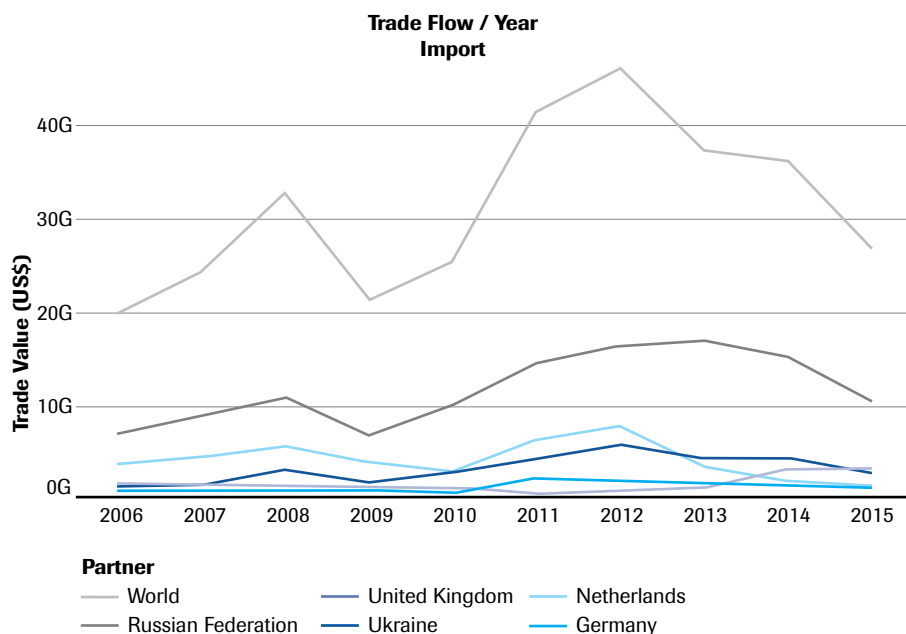


Figure 4 Top 5 export product categories per country, 2014¹³

Product	World	Russia	UK	Ukraine	Netherlands	Germany
Mineral Products	35,00	8,90	96,00	82,00	77,00	67,00
Chemical Products	12,00		2,20	3,00	18,00	3,30
Animal Products	9,40	22,00				
Transportation	7,30	11,00		2,60		
Machines	7,00	13,00	0,18	2,30		
Instruments						2,20
Metals			0,67		1,40	10,00
Plastics and Rubbers		7,60		3,00		
Textiles			0,29		1,10	
Wood Products					0,84	4,90

12 On the basis of UN trade statistics (UN Comtrade Database), Clingendael has carried out a trend analysis of Belarusian trade in the period of 2006-2015

13 Clingendael compiled this figure on the basis of information from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, which uses data provided by UN Comtrade: http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/blr/all/show/2014/

“Integration of integrations” as an option for Belarus to bridge the divide between EU and EEU?

After having identified some of the factors pulling Belarus either east (to Russian-led Eurasian integration) or west (to closer co-operation with the EU), this paper now examines some options for Belarus to combine good relations with both sides.

At about the same time that President Putin launched his plans for Eurasian integration in 2011, President Lukashenka put forward some of his own ideas on what he called an “integration of integrations”.¹⁴

Although President Putin never ruled out a return to the idea of a Free Trade Area “from Lisbon to Vladivostok”, it was clear from the outset that his idea of a Eurasian Union would imply, for the time being, prioritising internal consolidation and integration between EEU member states before opening up to deeper trade relations with their main economic partners, the EU and China.

For Belarus this implied a clear threat to its own attempts at multi-vector policies, balancing between Russia and the west. Therefore, together with Kazakhstan, Belarus successfully managed to limit this most ambitious Russian effort of (re-) integration in the post-Soviet space to economic (and thus not political) integration, and to call the new organisation the Eurasian *Economic* Union. In this context, Belarus clearly acted as a “hesitant partner” in Eurasian integration¹⁵.

Being most integrated with Russia, both politically and economically, Belarus was also interested in bridging the growing divide between two “Competing Unions”, opting for good trade relations with both sides in a policy of “no choosing, no losing”.¹⁶

In this context, the recent Clingendael report on EU-EEU relations¹⁷ has a special relevance for Belarus as well, as it recommends that the EU should:

- strive for *tentative compatibility* between the EU and the EEU and work for closer approximation of norms and standards in trade relations;
- not only start a dialogue with the Eurasian Economic Commission, but also intensify co-operation with individual EEU member states, in order to strengthen their own resilience and position inside the EEU.

14 Nataliya Vasilyeva and Maria Lagutina, *The Russian Project of Eurasian Integration. Geopolitical Prospects*. Lexington Books, New York/London, 2016, providing a clear overview of different intentions of individual partner states in Eurasian integration, including Belarus

15 See Tony van der Togt, Francesco Montesano and Iaroslav Kozak, op.cit. in footnote 3.

16 Pasquale De Micco, *When choosing means losing. The Eastern partners, the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union*. EP Research service, Brussels, March 2015

17 See Tony van der Togt, Francesco Montesano and Iaroslav Kozak, op.cit. in footnote 3..

Such an EU policy could also take into account options for a future EU-EEU “mega deal” on a broader Eurasian Free Trade Area, linked to greater connectivity and mobility across the Eurasian space, as informally discussed by experts from both EU and EEU and recently presented in the IIASA report: “Challenges and Opportunities of Economic Integration within a Wider European and Eurasian Space”¹⁸. Coming from a transit country which has much to win (or to lose) from such efforts at wider integration, it could be very useful for Belarusian experts to actively participate in any follow-up to this dialogue.

In this context, there could be a real opportunity for Belarus to co-operate more closely with the EU and at the same time continue good relations with Russia and other EEU and CIS member states. In principle, a new legal basis for the relationship between the EU and Belarus could be developed, somewhat similar to the agreement presently under negotiation with EEU member Armenia and the Enhanced Partnership and Co-operation Agreement which the EU concluded with another EEU member state, Kazakhstan.

Such an agreement would recognise Belarus’ need for a *balancing strategy* between its two big neighbours, Russia and the EU. The agreement could be constructed as a more “interest-driven deep sectoral co-operation instead of a ubiquitous agreement on EU terms”, as Elena Korosteleva proposed in a recent paper¹⁹, in which she pleaded for a “more tailored and low-key technical engagement ” which could be more effective, also in terms of greater socialisation to international norms and standards, than tough conditionality, demanding fundamental changes in the political regime as a precondition for more constructive relations. A more indirect approach could indeed be more effective in the longer term, recognising geopolitical realities and adopting a policy of “principled pragmatism”.

18 http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/13982/1/28-11-2016%20Final%20Eurasian%20project%20report_FINAL.pdf.

19 Elena Korosteleva, The EU and Belarus: seizing the opportunity? In: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies. European Policy Analysis, Stockholm, November 2016: 13: www.sieps.se

Belarus' security concerns: prospects for a more neutral course between Russia and the west?

Belarus as a “containing ally” in its relations with Russia

In security relations with Russia, the margin for manoeuvre for Belarus is even smaller than in the economic and financial spheres. This is, first of all, because of the strategic value the country has for Moscow and the importance of keeping Belarus integrated as much as possible in Russian-dominated structures such as the Union State and CSTO.

The strategic importance of Belarus for Russia has increased because of its location and military importance in any possible conflict with NATO. In that sense, any overture by Minsk to the west is viewed with concern in Moscow: as James Sherr rightly stated: “Belarus can build bridges to the west, but under the current regime it cannot go there.”²⁰

Therefore, Belarusian attempts at more independent, neutral and mainly defensive policies are not aimed at joining NATO or any alliance which could be seen by Moscow as anti-Russian. Instead, Minsk is interested firstly in keeping as much of its own independence as possible vis-à-vis Russia, and secondly in acting as a “donor of security and stability in the region” and a “containing ally” as far as Russia’s more aggressive and revisionist policies are concerned.²¹

Whereas some studies point to the concept of “neutrality” in Belarusian foreign and security policies²², most experts view this as a perennial effort by President Lukashenka to keep as much manoeuvring space as possible in order to resist Russian pressure for further integration and retain Belarusian independence.

20 James Sherr, *The New East-West Discord. Russian Objectives, Western Interests*. Clingendael Report. December, 2015

21 Yury Tsarik, *A Containing Ally: Belarus' Regional Role in the Context of the New Containment*. KKI Studies, T-2016/7, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Budapest, 2016

22 Siarhei Bohdan and Gumer Isaev, *Elements of Neutrality in Belarusian Foreign Policy and National Security Policy*. Ostrogorski Centre, Analytical Paper 7, Minsk/London, 2016

Against this background :

- only Belarusian air defence is fully integrated with Russia;
- Russia has only limited defence facilities on Belarusian territory;
- Belarusian defence forces are mostly independent from Russia and are primarily aimed at territorial defence and not to be used in conflicts outside Belarusian territory; the only exception could constitute peacekeeping operations under the UN (and not CSTO) flag;
- Belarus has clearly indicated that it does not want to get involved militarily in conflicts in or between other CSTO member states, although it is a hesitant member of CSTO (and at present even chairing the organisation);
- Belarus has increasingly looked for closer defence co-operation with other states, including China.²³

Opposition to Russian revisionist policies and limited possibilities for co-operation with the west, including NATO

The Ukraine crisis and Russia’s aggressive and revisionist policies clearly put more pressure on Belarus to either be incorporated in Russian plans or resist such efforts, in order to retain a more neutral position in the conflict, enabling Minsk to provide active support to Ukraine²⁴.

Russian pressure to open an additional military (air) base on Belarusian territory was first postponed and then rejected, as Belarus did not envisage any need to station extra “foreign forces” on its territory. As President Lukashenka explicitly indicated: “Belarus would never allow other countries to use Belarus’ territory for military intervention in Ukraine”.²⁵

Because of such open resistance to Russian policies, concern in Belarus has been growing that it might run the risk of having to face a hybrid scenario, where Russia would support a takeover of power in Minsk, if possible with some local assistance. Some more nationalist forces in Russia have actually been calling for such a regime change, in case Moscow loses decisive influence over President Lukashenko.²⁶

23 James Sherr, op.cit. footnote 16; Andras Racz and Arkady Moshes, op.cit., footnote 7 ; Siarhei Bohdan, Belarusian Army : Its Capacities and Role in the Region. Ostrogorski Centre, Analytical Paper 4, London, 2014

24 Ryhor Astapenia and Dzmitry Balkunets, Belarus-Russian Relations after the Ukraine Conflict. Ostrogorski Centre, Analytical paper 5, Minsk/London, 2016

25 James Sherr, op.cit. (footnote 16)

26 James Sherr, op.cit., mentions in this context specifically the director of Russian Institute for Strategic Studies Reshetnikov, who has recently even openly questioned Belarusian statehood

The publication of a new Belarusian military doctrine in summer 2016 stimulated a lot of debate over whether some elements of the doctrine were aimed at resisting such a possible Russian-supported takeover. Although formulated in a more neutral way, close reading could lead to the conclusion that the “hybrid threat”, only implicitly mentioned in the doctrine, is seen by Belarusian military as more likely to come from Russia than from NATO under the present circumstances. Military exercises in Belarus later this year also seem to give some indication that Minsk would like to be prepared and to preclude the possibility of being surprised by Moscow in this respect.²⁷

For the moment, Russian pressure on Minsk seems to have decreased and any Russian military build-up, presented by Russia as a reaction to NATO’s rotating battalions to be built up in Poland and the Baltic states, is taking place on Russian territory, including Kaliningrad. But a situation could still arise where Russian military forces are (temporarily) moved to Belarusian territory in the context of a large-scale military exercise. Some Belarusian experts have been discussing such a scenario and may provide some early indications, if and when this becomes a reality.

The new military build-up and tensions in Eastern Europe have in any case led to some estrangement in Belarusian-Russian relations and a strong wish from the Belarusian side to prevent a worsening security situation, in which it could be dragged along against its will.

In this context, Minsk has renewed its efforts to occupy some middle ground, leading to closer defence co-operation with China, Ukraine and some NATO member states on a bilateral basis. Most recently such a defence co-operation agreement has been signed between Belarus and Latvia. Contacts with NATO have also been picked up, in order to identify new opportunities for co-operation under the Partnership for Peace-programme, of which Belarus has been a participant since the mid-nineties.

But for everyone in Minsk, there is a clear understanding that such contacts and co-operation with other parties can only be helpful in their overall relations with Russia if these other powers can prevent any conflict in Europe from further escalation. Understanding the Russian “red lines” and limited possibilities for third parties to

27 Andras Racz, Friends will be friends: the New Military Doctrine of Belarus. In: Coping with Complexity in the Euro-Atlantic Community and Beyond. The Riga Conference 2016 papers, published by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga, 2016 ; Yuri Tsarik and Arseny Sivitsky, Russia’s new geostrategy. Implications and Challenges for Architecture of International Security. Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, Minsk, 2015 ; www.csfps.by; Sivitsky and Tsarik also offered a more extensive analysis of Belarus between Russia and NATO (in Russian), Belarus v kontekste protivostoyaniya Rossiya-NATO, Minsk, 2016 ; www.csfps.by; on the military exercises and his interpretation Arseny Sivitsky wrote in September 2016 in a post for <http://belarusdigest.com> : Belarus is preparing for a Donbass-like hybrid war conflict

engage Belarus in security and defence matters leads to the conclusion that, in a real conflict situation, Belarus will most probably be left to its own devices and that every effort should be focused on preventing such a conflict. At the same time, Belarus may be in a position to give some advance warning, if and when the security situation comes under threat because of Russian military (re-)actions, including on Belarusian territory.

The most important conclusion at the moment is that Russia cannot automatically trust Belarus to act as its ally if a conflict in Eastern Europe threatens to spin out of control. Whether ultimately Russia would attempt to force Belarus to give up its resistance and give more active support to any Russian military plans would depend on :

- the resilience of Minsk and the margin for manoeuvre in other areas, such as economic and energy relationships;
- Russia’s willingness to pay the political costs for instigating another military conflict or broadening the present one in Ukraine, further undermining the European security order.

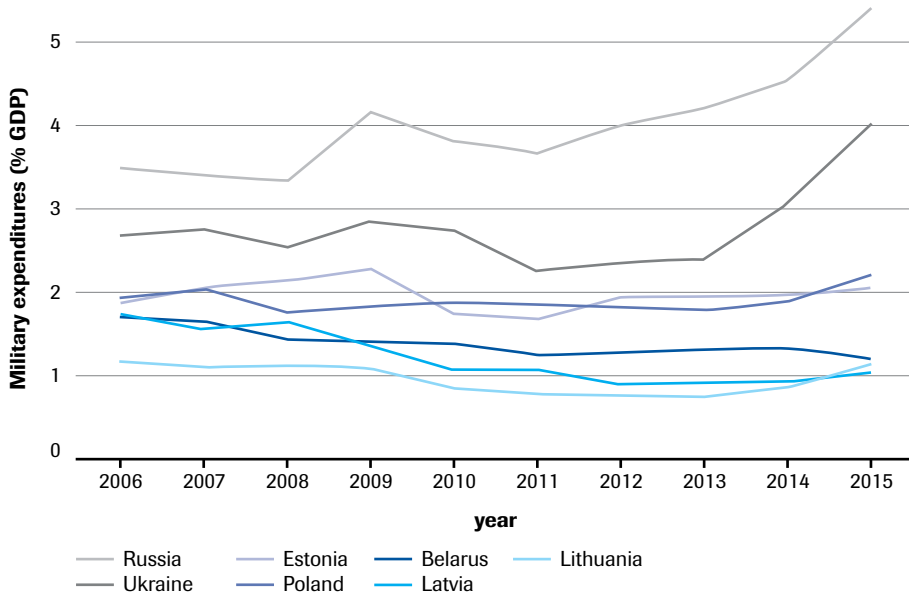
Considering Minsk’s policies so far in limiting its dependence on Russian military forces and on integration in Russian-dominated structures, there could be an extra price to pay for Moscow, if it attempted to force the matter by military means.

Figure 5 Map NATO-members and non-members surrounding Belarus²⁸



28 'Scandinavia and Russia, Just visiting: Russian aggression is pushing Finland and Sweden towards NATO', *The Economist* (9 July 2016), assessed on 23 December 2016 at <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21701803-russian-aggression-pushing-finland-and-sweden-towards-nato-just-visiting>

Figure 6 Military expenditures of countries surrounding Belarus (% GDP)²⁹



29 On the basis of SIPRI data, Clingendael has carried out a trend analysis of military expenditures of countries surrounding Belarus in the period of 2006-2015

Some preliminary conclusions and recommendations

- EU-Belarusian relations could improve gradually on the basis of a new *Co-operation Agreement*, assisting in modernisation of the economy and society, including further development of the rule of law and market economy. Civil society could be closely involved in the modernisation process, and more intensive people-to-people contact could open the way to greater mobility and co-operation in education and science.
- For the EU side, this could constitute a policy of “*principled pragmatism*”; accepting the limits of Belarusian ambitions and the political restrictions in its relations with the EU, but at the same time strengthening its resilience and position, both inside the EEU and in its relations with Russia (including by lessening its dependency).
- For Belarus this could mean introduction of *more fundamental reforms, including privatisation and modernisation of the economy*, opening up to constructive trade and broader economic relations with the EU, in parallel with gradual political reforms. As such, this would enable Belarus to enter WTO and receive much-needed support from IMF, World Bank, EBRD and EIB.
- Due to the limitations Belarus faces in independently developing its external policies because of its economic and financial dependence on Russia, it would be preferable to develop EU-Belarus relations not in competition with Russia, but by supporting Belarus in its efforts to work towards an “*integration of integrations*” between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union.
- In security relationships, the best opportunity for working more closely with Belarus would be to co-operate in conflict prevention, as Minsk desires to be a “*donor of regional security and stability*”. Engaging Belarus in the OSCE as a *potential partner in increasing transparency in military matters and confidence and security building measures* could offer some limited options, insofar as Russia, as the stronger power in this relationship, would allow this to happen. EU/NATO should realise that the margins for co-operating more closely with Minsk are even smaller than in economic and financial relationships.

- Ultimately, the NATO-Russia relationship is a much more decisive factor here, but countries such as Belarus could assist in bringing about an atmosphere of somewhat greater political understanding, based on common security interests. Whether, under the present circumstances, Belarus as current chairman of CSTO could also play a more active mediating role in this domain remains to be seen, given the limited options available to Minsk.
- In this context, the EU could intensify its political dialogue with Minsk on security and defence matters and NATO could consider opening an information office in Minsk. In the security dialogue, civil society from both sides could play an important and constructive role as well.