

# An Ever Closer Union?

## Ramifications of further integration between Belarus and Russia

Bob Deen  
Barbara Roggeveen  
Wouter Zweers

Clingendael Report



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



# Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

## An Ever Closer Union?

Ramifications of further integration between Belarus  
and Russia

Bob Deen  
Barbara Roggeveen  
Wouter Zweers

Clingendael Report  
August 2021

**Disclaimer:** The research for and production of this report have been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

**August 2021**

© Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.

Cover photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko in Sochi, Russia May 28, 2021 © Reuters

Unauthorized use of any materials violates copyright, trademark and / or other laws. Should a user download material from the website or any other source related to the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', or the Clingendael Institute, for personal or non-commercial use, the user must retain all copyright, trademark or other similar notices contained in the original material or on any copies of this material.

Material on the website of the Clingendael Institute may be reproduced or publicly displayed, distributed or used for any public and non-commercial purposes, but only by mentioning the Clingendael Institute as its source. Permission is required to use the logo of the Clingendael Institute. This can be obtained by contacting the Communication desk of the Clingendael Institute ([press@clingendael.org](mailto:press@clingendael.org)).

The following web link activities are prohibited by the Clingendael Institute and may present trademark and copyright infringement issues: links that involve unauthorized use of our logo, framing, inline links, or metatags, as well as hyperlinks or a form of link disguising the URL.

### **About the authors**




**Bob Deen** is coordinator of the Clingendael Russia and Eastern Europe Centre (CREEC) and Senior Research Fellow in the Security Unit of the Clingendael Institute. His research centres on international security issues and multilateral cooperation, with a particular focus on Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Prior to joining Clingendael he worked as Head of Section and Senior Adviser to the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

**Barbara Roggeveen** is a Research Associate at the Clingendael Institute. Her research focuses on Russian foreign policy in the Eurasian region, EU-Russia relations, and Euro-Atlantic security. Her doctoral research in Russian and East European Studies at Oxford University explores a prominent yet under-researched attempt by Russian foreign policy actors to redefine the spatial contours of Russia's post-Soviet zone of interest. She has held research positions at the Atlantic Council in Washington DC, the University of Amsterdam, and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

**Wouter Zweers** is a Research Fellow at the EU and Global Affairs unit of the Clingendael Institute. His research revolves around the external dimension of EU policy-making, focusing specifically on the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans regions. He coordinates Clingendael's 'Balkans Hub', a project in which Clingendael engages with local think tanks from the Western Balkans in joint research and events.

The Clingendael Institute  
P.O. Box 93080  
2509 AB The Hague  
The Netherlands

Follow us on social media

 @clingendaelorg  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 clingendael\_institute  
 Clingendael Institute

Email: [info@clingendael.org](mailto:info@clingendael.org)  
Website: [www.clingendael.org](http://www.clingendael.org)

# Contents

Executive summary	1
List of Acronyms	3
1 Introduction	4
2 Historical and legal context of the Union State of Russia and Belarus	6
Road maps to where?	8
Post-Soviet integration projects beyond the Union State	8
3 The geopolitical dimension	11
A pattern of pressure and accommodation by both the EU and Russia	11
Main strategic interests	16
4 The security policy dimension	21
Russia's "West" anxieties	22
The 'NATO spectre'	23
Let's go West	24
5 The economic dimension	26
The Belarusian economy	26
The unmet economic promises of the Union State	27
Wider Eurasian integration: ECU, SES, and EEU	28
Economic sanctions... and incentives?	30
6 Scenarios	33
What influences the future of Belarus in the context of the Union State?	33
Constructing the scenario framework	35
Implications and preferred scenarios for the different actors	39
7 Conclusions and recommendations	42

Annex 1 How to Build a Union: View of Societies and Elites in Russia and Belarus	45
Annex 2 Key economic dependencies of Belarus	50
Energy ties and dependencies	53
Foreign Direct Investment flows	54
Financing of the public debt and infrastructure projects	55
Conclusions on Belarus' key economic dependencies	56
Annex 3 The role of Belarus in Russian military planning and strategy	57
Changes to the state of play	58
Strategy, doctrine, and operations	61

# Executive summary

The Union State of Russia and Belarus was forged in the 1990s through a series of bilateral treaties but has largely remained a paper tiger – at least until now. For well over two decades Belarusian President Lukashenko has had a complicated love-hate relationship with the Kremlin, milking the Russian Federation for energy subsidies and other economic benefits while simultaneously zealously guarding his country's sovereignty and shielding its state-owned enterprises from Russian takeovers. Although co-operation in the military domain has advanced considerably, the more far-reaching provisions of the Union State, such as a joint constitution, monetary union and a single energy market, have never materialized.

While Belarus has generally aligned its foreign policy outlook with the Russian Federation and acceded to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, at various moments Lukashenko tried to keep his geopolitical options open as his relations with the Kremlin deteriorated. Among other things, he sought closer relations with the European Union following the 2008 Georgia conflict and the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The EU, in turn, has alternated between defending its democratic values by imposing sanctions on Lukashenko and his regime for human rights abuses, and then lifting those again a few years later, hoping to lure Belarus away from Russia's sphere of influence.

These hopes proved to be in vain. The Presidential elections of August 2020 and their repressive aftermath have again led to a turning point in Belarus' relations with the West and with the Russian Federation. Relying on Russian support to remain in power and facing a series of European sanctions, Lukashenko is now again under pressure by the Kremlin to make far-reaching concessions and to advance the integration of Belarus and Russia within the Union State framework. As both the stability of the Lukashenko regime and the outcome of the integration process remain uncertain, this report identifies six scenarios for the future of Belarus and further elaborates the consequences of four of them.

In the first scenario, 'Muddle Through', Lukashenko remains in power either upfront or behind the scenes and repeats the pattern of the last 25 years, making just enough concessions to preserve Russian support but avoiding to make integration irreversible. In the second scenario, 'Reluctant Integration', Lukashenko is forced to make far-reaching concessions for further integration within the Union State, including in the economic and military domains. In the third scenario, 'Change of Course', the regime falls and a new moderate government comes to power that aims to restore good relations with both the EU and the Russian Federation and tries to carefully reverse some of the steps taken by Lukashenko, with limited success. In the final scenario, 'Incorporation', Lukashenko

is replaced by a much more pro-Russian leader who cedes sovereignty to the Russian Federation in all but name and turns Belarus into a *de facto* satellite state.

Each of these scenarios has far-reaching geopolitical, security and economic consequences that are elaborated upon in the report and its three external contributions. In its recommendations to the EU and NATO it argues that, as the West presently has limited means to influence Belarus' general course in the near future, it should play the long game and be consistent in promoting its values. Importantly, the West would do well to abandon its geopolitical opportunism of lifting sanctions whenever Lukashenko gets into an argument with Russia and makes token concessions in the field of human rights. Instead, it should offer a long-term alternative perspective to the people of Belarus through direct support to those affected by repression and to the private sector, as well as preparing an economic recovery plan in case the 'change of course' scenario materialises. To increase the currently limited effectiveness of sanctions the West should take the reality of the Union State and the Eurasian Economic Union into account and ensure more congruence of future sanctions on Russia and Belarus. In the field of security policy NATO should proceed from a do-no-harm principle and be cognizant of the fact that in Russian and Belarusian narratives 'the West' and NATO play negative roles vis-à-vis Belarus. Among other things, NATO should call on Russia and Belarus to provide maximum transparency prior to and during the Zapad 2021 military exercises; and it should lead by example by being transparent about its own exercises and military deployments in the region.

# List of Acronyms

<b>A2/AD</b>	Anti-Access/Aerial Denial
<b>CAA</b>	Combined Arms Army
<b>CAP</b>	Comprehensive Assistance Package
<b>CIS</b>	Commonwealth of Independent States
<b>CISFTA</b>	Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area
<b>CSBMs</b>	Confidence and Security Building Measures
<b>CSTO</b>	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
<b>EBRD</b>	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
<b>ECU</b>	Eurasian Customs Union
<b>EEU</b>	Eurasian Economic Union
<b>EFSD</b>	Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development
<b>EIB</b>	European Investment Bank
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EurAsEc</b>	Eurasian Economic Community
<b>FDI</b>	Foreign Direct Investment
<b>FSB</b>	Federal Security Service (Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti)
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communications Technology
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IT</b>	Information Technology
<b>JSC</b>	Joint Strategic Command
<b>MD</b>	Military District
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
<b>NPP</b>	Nuclear Power Plant
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>RF</b>	Russian Federation
<b>RGF</b>	Regional combat grouping of forces
<b>SES</b>	Single Economic Space
<b>SOE</b>	State-Owned Enterprises
<b>Union State</b>	Union State of Russia and Belarus
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollar
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization



# 1 Introduction

The presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020 and their aftermath have been a turning point in relations between Belarus and the West. While the EU had criticized and sanctioned the repressive policies of the Lukashenko regime in the past, this time the situation is markedly different. This is due to the emergence of a determined and largely co-ordinated opposition, the strength of the popular protests and the level of repression and brutality employed by the regime. As a result, relations between Belarus and the West have soured, the EU has imposed a series of sanctions and Belarus has suspended its participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership.

At the same time the crisis has pushed Lukashenko closer towards the Russian Federation, which has helped him stay in power through political, financial and other forms of assistance. However, this support comes at a price. To the outside world Lukashenko and Putin are now stalwart allies, but behind the scenes long-standing differences and tensions remain. Belarus is under pressure to integrate further with the Russian Federation within the context of the Union State of Russia and Belarus (hereinafter: "Union State"), a hitherto largely dormant set of treaties from the 1990s. Although the crisis has been caused by domestic factors, there is nonetheless a strong geopolitical overlay. As such, it poses further complications for the already strained relations between Russia and the EU and NATO.

While Lukashenko is clearly playing for time and has managed to cling on to power, both the fate of his regime and the degree of further integration into the Union State remain uncertain. The different possible outcomes, ranging from a more pro-Western change of course to further incorporation into the Russian Federation, will have far-reaching ramifications for the European Union and NATO. In order to help Western policymakers better prepare for and respond to different outcomes, this report analyses the geopolitical, economic and security dimensions of the crisis in Belarus and will identify a number of scenarios for the country's situation in 2023, in particular vis-à-vis its future relationship with the Russian Federation within the Union State.

In chapter 2 this report will first look into the legal and political background of the Union State and place its development in the context of other Russian-led integration processes in the post-Soviet space. Chapter 3 will then assess the geopolitical dimension of the crisis, including the interests of the Lukashenko regime, the Russian Federation and the West. Chapter 4 will analyse the security dimension of the Union State and the role of both NATO and the Belarusian and Russian militaries. Chapter 5 will look more closely into the Belarusian economy and its dependencies on both Russia and the EU, including the economic impact of Belarus' participation in the Union State

and Eurasian Economic Union and the sanctions imposed by the European Union. For these chapters the researchers have based their research on a mix of literature review and interviews. They have specifically drawn on contributions by three external experts on specific political, economic and security aspects of the crisis, which have been annexed to the present report.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 6 will then bring these political, security and economic factors together by building a scenario framework around a number of key uncertainties, in line with the Clingendael scenario methodology.<sup>2</sup> This chapter builds on an expert workshop held in April 2021, where a number of country experts first constructed six scenarios and then analysed the political, economic and security implications of four of them. While the report does not aim to predict and evaluate the likelihood of these different scenarios, it will compare each of them to the objectives of the key actors and thus give an indication of the potential pathways out of this crisis. The report concludes with a number of policy recommendations for the European Union and NATO.

### Note on transliteration and terminology

Belarusian and Russian are the official languages of Belarus on an equal footing. In this report, Belarusian (personal) names and toponyms are transliterated into English based on their Russian equivalents (“Lukashenko” instead of “Lukashenka”), which are more commonly used in English-language publications and are therefore more accessible to the wider public. This choice does not represent any political or other preference on the part of the researchers.

The ‘Union State of Russia and Belarus’ is the most commonly used English translation of the Russian ‘Союзное государство России и Белоруссии’ (СГРБ); in legal documents it is referred to as the ‘Union State’.

---

1 The authors would like to thank Artyom Shraibman, Kateryna Bornukova and Michael Kofman for both their written contributions and their participation in the scenario workshop, and Hugo Klijn and Niels Drost for their contributions to the research project.

2 For an example of the Clingendael scenario methodology, see Minke Meijnders, Jaïr van der Lijn and Bas van Mierlo, ‘[Syria in 2019: four scenarios – Implications for policy planning](#)’, November 2017.

## 2 Historical and legal context of the Union State of Russia and Belarus

The Union State of Russia and Belarus originates from the immediate post-Soviet period and is the outcome of several years of negotiations and formal agreements between both countries. These were negotiated largely between Russian President Yeltsin and Belarusian President Lukashenko from 1995 to 1999. The legal basis of the Union State lies in a number of treaties that are accompanied by a multitude of more specific bilateral agreements.<sup>3</sup> The first significant step in the integration process was taken in 1995, shortly after Lukashenko rose to power, when Moscow and Minsk signed the *Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation*, which sought 'deeper economic integration' and the 'formation of a single economic space', as well as the coordination of military activities between the two countries.<sup>4</sup> In 1996 both countries signed the *Treaty on the creation of the Community of Russia and Belarus*, which sought further integration in the economic and humanitarian domains, as well as cooperation in the field of foreign policy, security, border protection and crime prevention through the formation of a so-called political and economic 'community' ('сообщество').<sup>5</sup> In 1997 they further increased the level of ambition when they signed the *Treaty on the Union of Belarus and Russia* ('Союз'), which stipulated the implementation of a coordinated foreign and defence policy, joint citizenship, and a common market for goods, services, capital, and labour. The process concluded in the final days of Yeltsin's presidency with the *Treaty on the Creation of the Union State* ('Союзное государство'), signed on 8 December 1999.<sup>6</sup> It was ratified by the Russian State Duma and the Belarusian Parliament on 22 December 1999 and 26 January 2000 respectively.<sup>7</sup>

---

3 For a good overview of the legal aspects of the integration process, see Yauheni Preiherman, "[Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia](#)" Minsk Dialogue, 1 April 2019.

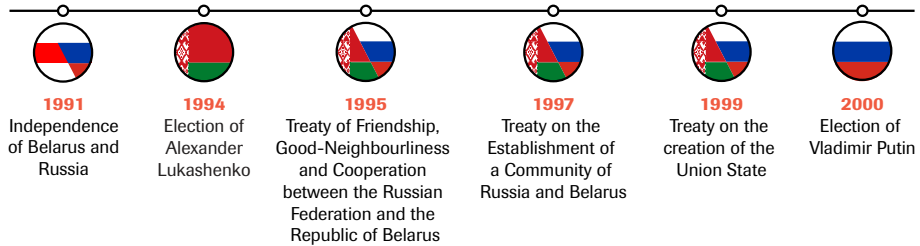
4 "[Dogovor o druzhbe, dobrososedstve i sotrudnichestve mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Respublikoy Belarus](#)", Informacionno-analiticheskij portal Sojuznogo gosudarstvo, 21 February 1995.

5 "[Dogovor ob obrazovanii soobshchestva Rossii i Belarusi](#)," Informacionno-analiticheskij portal Sojuznogo gosudarstvo, 2 April 1996.

6 "[Dogovor o Druzhbe, Dobrososedstve i Sotrudnichestve Mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Respublikoy Belarus](#)," signed on 21 February 1995; "[Dogovor o Sozdanii Soyuznogo Gosudarstva](#)," signed on 8 December 1999.

7 Audrius Žulys, "[Towards a Union State of Russia and Belarus](#)," *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, no. 15-16 (2005): 148-169.

**Figure 1** Timeline of the development of the legal framework of the Union State and preceding Russian-Belarusian integration projects



Although both countries have been eager to present the ratification of these treaties as pushing the integrative processes forward, many of the legal provisions – particularly in the political and economic domains – have been merely declarative and symbolic in nature. A plethora of economic and political plans were either never implemented (e.g., the monetary union, the common energy market, a joint constitution) or were reversed soon after implementation (e.g., the customs union).<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, integration in the *military domain* has proven to be most successful. Within six months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus and Russia signed their first military agreements. These were supplemented by agreements on the stationing of Russian forces in Belarus and the use of communication and radar facilities. In 1997 the signing of the first Union Treaty was accompanied by a bilateral treaty on military cooperation, while the 1999 Union Treaty contains provisions concerning a joint military doctrine and on integrating Belarusian forces and Russian forces from the Western Military District into a combined unit. Although, also in this sphere, the implementation of these arrangements has been incomplete, military cooperation between the two countries has proceeded relatively well, as will be further discussed in chapter 4.<sup>9</sup>

From the perspective of the Belarusian Government, the desire for further integration through the Union State framework was primarily driven by economic interests, as it was seen as an opportunity to extract financial benefits from their resource-rich neighbour. For the Kremlin, the Union State was mostly seen as a political prestige project and a way to retain control over its 'near abroad' in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Diverging expectations of what the Union State was supposed to bring for

<sup>8</sup> The Customs Union was reinstated in 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Deyermund, "The State of the Union: Military Success, Economic and Political Failure in the Russia-Belarus Union", *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 8, (2004): 1203

both member states have caused tensions from the very beginning, as will be further discussed in chapter 3.<sup>10</sup>

## Road maps to where?

In 2019, Belarus and Russia started negotiations on the development of a set of 31 'road maps' for further economic integration within a Union State framework. The exact content of the road maps has not been made public but they are said to contain plans for the further unification of the Belarusian and Russian economies, as well as plans for the creation of a *de facto* confederal state from 2022 onwards.<sup>11</sup> So far, Belarus and Russia have agreed on provisions related to closer cooperation between their countries' customs services, as well as the coordination of industrial policies, which has resulted in a lifting of Russian restrictions on imports of Belarusian dairy products and meat.<sup>12</sup> However, they have been unable to reach a consensus on more contentious road maps concerning oil and gas prices, the coordination of tax policies, and the creation of a single currency.<sup>13</sup> More recently, the 'road maps' have been remodelled into 28 so-called union programmes. The union programme on oil and gas is said to contain plans to offer Belarus a lower gas price of \$100 per 1,000 cubic meters instead of the current \$128.5 per 1,000 cubic meters.<sup>14</sup> There is, however, one catch – the former Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has previously contended that Belarus will only receive this discount once an actual merger of the two states has taken place. This has been referred to as the 'Medvedev Ultimatum', as further discussed by Artyom Shraibman in annex 1.<sup>15</sup>

## Post-Soviet integration projects beyond the Union State

Concurrently with the bilateral integrative processes taking place between Belarus and Russia within the framework of the Union State, several other Russian-led integration

---

10 See also Alena Vieira, "[A Tale of Two Unions: Russia–Belarus Integration Experience and Its Lessons for the Eurasian Economic Union](#)," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 41–53.

11 Igor' Il'jash, "[Chto takoye uglublennaya integratsiya Rossii i Belorussii – i pochemu sami belorusy eye opasayutsya?](#)," Meduza, 10 December 2019; Dmitrij Butrin, "[Druzhba nalogov](#)," *Kommersant*, 16 September 2019.

12 Elena Kuz'mina, "[Rossiya i Belorussiya: novyy format integratsii v ramkakh Soyuznogo gosudarstva](#)," Valdai Discussion Club, 17 December 2019.

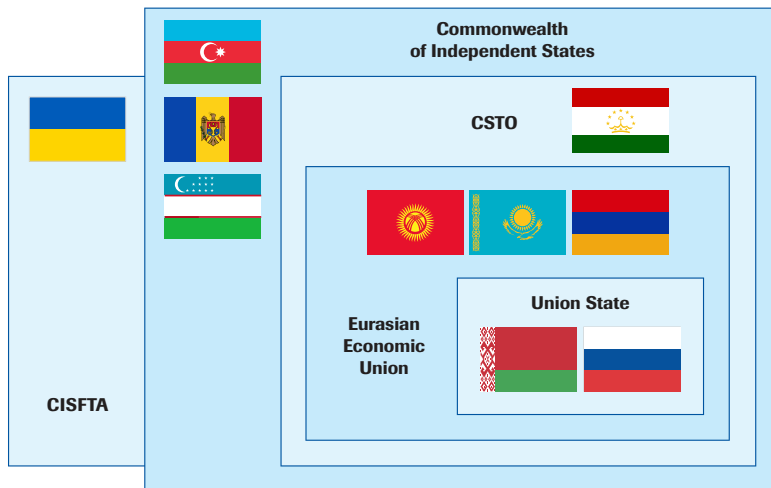
13 Elena Kuz'mina, "[Rossiya i Belorussiya: novyy format integratsii v ramkakh Soyuznogo gosudarstva](#)," Valdai Discussion Club, 17 December 2019; TASS, "[Belarus, Russia have 6-7 integration roadmaps left to fine-tune out of 33, Lukashenko says](#)," 22 February 2021.

14 *Kommersant*, "[Aleksandr Lukashenko ne sedit slozha nogi](#)," 15 May 2021.

15 Valery Karbalevich, "[Ul'timatum Medvedeva tolkayet Belarus' v novuyu real'nost'](#)," UDF.by, 14 December 2018.

projects with partially overlapping memberships have involved Belarus and the post-Soviet region at large [see figure 2]. The first step towards integration in the wider Eurasian sphere was taken with the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) through the signing of the Alma-Ata Protocol on 21 December 1991. Although the CIS provided a framework for continued dialogue and cooperation between the post-Soviet states after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent countries were primarily concerned with the internal processes of state-building. As a result, deeper *economic* integration was low on the agenda.<sup>16</sup> The body's Collective Security Council adopted documents on deepening *military* cooperation between member states and was instrumental in transferring the central command over former Soviet troops and strategic forces to the Russian CIS Commander-in-Chief Yevgeny Shaposhnikov. But from 1992 onwards, defence policy was more specifically dealt with through a parallel Collective Security Treaty, signed in 1992.<sup>17</sup> Cooperation on internal and border security still falls within the CIS remit, however.

**Figure 2** Overlapping membership of Russian-led integration projects in the post-Soviet space



The first real step towards deeper *economic* integration in the post-Soviet region was taken by Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 2000, with the

16 Sean P. Roberts and Arkady Moshes, "[The Eurasian Economic Union: A Case of Reproductive Integration?](#)," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 6 (November 1, 2016): 543.

17 The initial signatories to this treaty were Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; in 1993 Azerbaijan, Georgia and Belarus would follow but later on several countries would withdraw their signatures. The CST/CSTO make-up always differed from the CIS membership.

creation of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). Although the EurAsEC lacked the supranational institutions to truly integrate its member states' economies, it provided an important foundation for further economic integration in the years ahead. The EurAsEC was transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2015, which has so far proven to be the most ambitious attempt at economic cooperation in the post-Soviet space and is perhaps even more significant than the Union State in terms of economic integration (see chapter 5).

Alongside these processes of economic integration, Belarus has been a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). This organisation is based on the abovementioned Collective Security Treaty, which, after alterations to its membership, acquired a charter and legal status in 2002. Apart from Russia and Belarus, the CSTO consists of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The CSTO's original treaty contains a collective defence clause, not unlike NATO's Article 5 provisions. Moreover, the CSTO prohibits its members from joining military alliances that act against the interests of other member states.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike most integration processes in Western Europe, all of the abovementioned Russian-led integration processes have taken place in a highly asymmetrical environment. A politically, militarily and economically dominant Russia has dictated most of the terms to its junior partners which in turn are continuously concerned about their sovereignty. The legal provisions are also often interpreted opportunistically or are suspended as a result of short-term political or economic concerns. They nonetheless offer both Russia and its partner countries a range of options to legalise existing practices, to institutionalise their leverage over one another and to align expectations. As such they also play an important geopolitical role, becoming legal embodiments of Russia's sphere of influence. The specific geopolitical aspects of Russia's relations with Belarus will be further examined in the next chapter.

---

18 ["COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY, dated May 15, 1992,"](#) Collective Security Treaty Organization, 7 October 2002.

### 3 The geopolitical dimension

When the protests in Belarus started in August 2020, both the democratic opposition, the European Union and even the Russian Federation were at pains to stress that this was *not* another geopolitical crisis in Eastern Europe. They frequently and rightfully pointed out that there were no EU flags on the streets in Minsk. The situation is indeed radically different from Ukraine's Euromaidan protests, which were triggered by Yanukovich's refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. The contestation in Belarus is about domestic governance and particularly about the person of Alexander Lukashenko, not about a 'civilizational choice' of relations with Russia or the West. The population is not nearly as divided as the Ukrainians were prior to the 2014 crisis; in fact, opinion polls consistently show that most Belarusians would be content if their country would enjoy good relations with both Russia and the West.<sup>19</sup>

The crisis nonetheless has a strong geopolitical overlay, not least due to Belarus' strategic location and significance to the security of both Russia and NATO – and Lukashenko's own interest in blackmailing the Kremlin into supporting him by raising the spectre of a 'Western takeover'. In turn, the more the Russian Federation manages to politically, militarily and economically integrate Belarus within the framework of the Union State, the more this entangles Belarus in the broader web of geopolitical tensions between the EU and Russia. This chapter therefore explores the different geopolitical aspects of the Belarus crisis by first outlining the pattern of pressure and accommodation in Belarus' relations with both the EU and the Russian Federation over the last 25 years. It will then analyse the main domestic political interests, constraints and geopolitical objectives of the Lukashenko regime, the Russian Federation, the European Union and NATO. These then form the basis for the scenarios that will be further developed in chapter 6.

#### A pattern of pressure and accommodation by both the EU and Russia

As much as Lukashenko currently positions himself as a staunch defender of Russia's interests against encroachment by the West and Belarus as Russia's 'western frontier'<sup>20</sup>, the reality and his own track record are much more complex. Throughout his rule he has consistently tried to leverage his country's strategic position by playing both sides

---

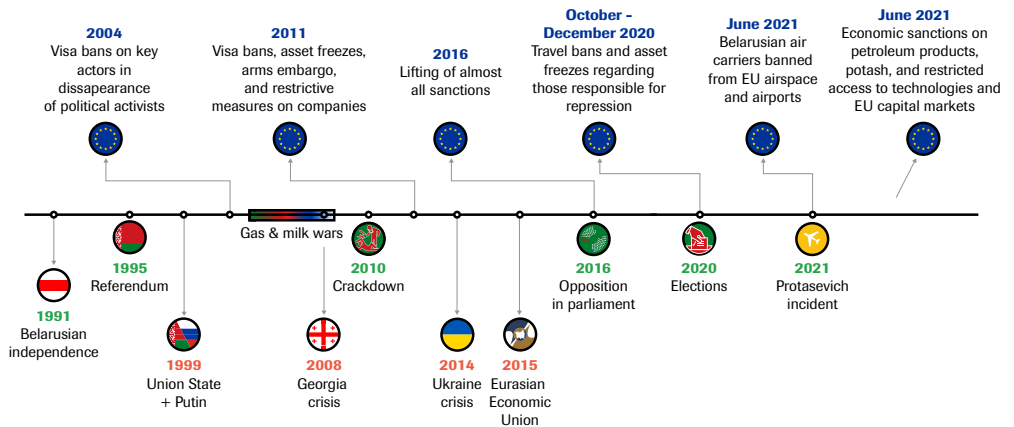
19 Ryhor Astapenia, "[Belarusians' views on the political crisis](#)," *Chatham House*, 11 June 2021.

20 Belta, "[Lukashenko: They are rocking the boat in Belarus first to take on Russia afterwards](#)," 24 August 2020.



against each other and by preserving Belarusian sovereignty, even if the overall drift has been largely ‘eastwards’. The EU and Russia have both accommodated and to some extent rewarded this behaviour by vying for influence and alternating between pressure and engagement [see figure 4].<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 3 Timeline of EU-Belarus and RF-Belarus relations**



When Belarus gained its independence in 1991, its leaders initially flirted with eventual European integration but these overtures were halted when the former communist elite led by Lukashenko consolidated control. In his aim to preserve continuity Lukashenko largely went along with Russia's efforts to salvage the remains of the USSR through its various integration projects as set out in chapter 2. At that point in time Yeltsin's Russia was still largely content with symbolic integration and in turn heavily subsidized Belarus' economy through discounted exports of hydrocarbons. It also thereby partially shielded Belarus from the economic shocks of other countries in the region, allowing Lukashenko to position himself as a force for stability and prosperity. Some analysts argue that Lukashenko's initial enthusiasm for the Union State may also be linked to his aspirations to use it as a vehicle to gain control over Russian politics as well.<sup>22</sup>

The EU paid little attention to Belarus in the early and mid-1990s, being more concerned with integrating Central and Eastern Europe and stabilizing the Western Balkans.

21 For a good overview of EU-Belarus relations, see Giselle Bosse, "EU-Belarus Relations," in [The Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy](#), ed. Tobias Schumacher, Andreas Marchetti, Thomas Demmelhuber (New York: Routledge, 2018), 290-302.

22 Matthew Frear, "Belarus: Player and Pawn in the Integration Game," in [Eurasian Economic Integration: Law, Policy and Politics](#), ed. Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013), 121-22.

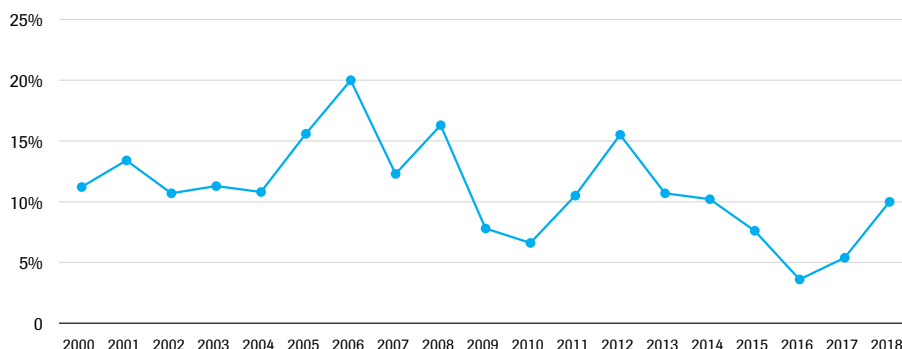
EU-Belarus relations started to deteriorate sharply in the late 1990s and early 2000s when it became increasingly apparent that Lukashenko was determined to consolidate his rule by authoritarian means and that he would resist all forms of 'Western interference'. In this period the EU increasingly opted for a principled approach of 'naming and shaming' and sanctions as a mechanism to pressure Lukashenko into compliance with international human rights norms. A series of different EU sanctions were imposed in the period 1998-2006 as politicians and journalists started to disappear and the elections of both 2004 and 2006 were rigged by the man Europe increasingly – and perhaps overly optimistically – started to call its 'last dictator'.

The EU's approach of isolating and pressuring Lukashenko through sanctions did not make him significantly alter course. Instead, it was the deterioration in relations with Russia, in response to increased pressure to make real headway in the integration process, that made Lukashenko worry about his lack of geopolitical and economic options. After Vladimir Putin took office the Kremlin's impatience with Lukashenko's procrastination and the 'integration deadlock' steadily grew throughout the early 2000s. Russia began leveraging its economic weight and adjusting its energy subsidies to reduce the costs of Belarus to the Russian economy and to extract more concessions. This culminated in the 'milk wars' and 'gas wars' of 2004-2009 and sharply fluctuating levels of energy subsidies (see figure 4). Lukashenko, whose hopes for a prominent role in Russian politics were dashed by Putin's ascent to power, nonetheless resisted Russian pressures to reform Belarus' largely state-led economy and began diversifying oil imports, including from the United States. While he still went along with military integration, he particularly dragged his feet on all political aspects of the Union State, resisting all forms of Russian encroachment on Belarusian sovereignty.<sup>23</sup>

---

23 For a detailed analysis of Belarusian strategic culture and Belarus-Russia relations, see Matthew Frear, "Evolution and Adaptation in Belarusian Strategic Culture," in [Strategic culture in Russia's neighborhood: change and continuity in an in-between space](#), ed. Katalin Miklóssy and Hanna Smith (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 229-257.

**Figure 4 Russian energy subsidies for Belarus (% of Belarus' GDP)**



Source: *Finansowy.pl*<sup>24</sup>

Roughly at the same time the now enlarged EU and NATO started to develop a more geopolitical and active approach towards their new 'eastern neighbourhood', spurred on by the new member states from Eastern Europe. Especially after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 the EU developed its Eastern Partnership and began its 'critical engagement' with Belarus, in order to offer it a geopolitical alternative to dependency on Russia. Lukashenko cleverly made use of the increased tensions between Russia and the West and stopped short of joining Russia in recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He also clearly enjoyed being courted by Western politicians, some of whom even offered him large-scale financial assistance in the run-up to the 2010 elections. It would not last long, however: the brutal crackdown that followed these elections led to a sharp deterioration in Belarus-EU relations, characterized by new EU sanctions and the departure of EU diplomats from Minsk. It would not be the last time that European hopes to woo Lukashenko were dashed as his primary domestic concern, to preserve power at all cost, trumped his geopolitical interest in a multi-vector foreign policy and reduced dependency on Russia.

The pattern would repeat itself a few years later, following the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Lukashenko again stopped short of fully joining Russia in its confrontational approach and began hedging his bets. He did so, among other things, by not recognizing the Russian annexation of Crimea, by positioning himself and Minsk as a neutral venue for negotiations, and by making largely symbolic concessions to the West such as the release of political prisoners. He also managed to preserve good relations with Ukraine, his large southern neighbour and strategic trading partner, despite its bitter confrontation with Russia. For the first time since independence, he actively started to

24 Aleś Alachnovič, "Belarus: economic dependence has its upsides," *Obserwator Finansowy.pl*, 15 April 2019.

play the Belarusian culture card, emphasizing the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of Belarus and positioning himself as the main defender of its sovereignty.

Once again the EU tried to make use of this geopolitical window of opportunity. It lifted most sanctions in 2016, doubled its financial assistance and actively began courting Lukashenko within the context of the Eastern Partnership – although it remained apparent that he was not genuinely interested in making actual concessions in the sphere of the rule of law and democratization. The cancelled visit of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini, in October 2019 was indicative in this regard, even though Belarus finally did sign a visa facilitation and readmission agreement with the EU in January 2020.<sup>25</sup>

An increasingly frustrated Russia, in turn, ramped up the pressure on Lukashenko to fall in line and to stop profiteering from Russian subsidies while not delivering on political, military and economic integration within the Union State. Both the bilateral relations between Belarus and Russia and the personal relations between Lukashenko and Putin sharply deteriorated in 2014-2020; Russia's 'tax manoeuvre' on oil exports to Belarus threatened one of the key pillars of the Belarusian business model, and Russia even briefly halted oil exports altogether in 2019. The lowest point came when Lukashenko accused Russia of trying to incorporate Belarus into the Russian Federation and even of sending mercenaries to meddle in the Presidential elections of August 2020. Days before the election Lukashenko was still openly claiming that the Kremlin was trying to overthrow him and that Russia was working with opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.<sup>26</sup>

The Belarusian pendulum would soon swing back towards the east once more, again driven by Lukashenko's overriding objective to retain power at all costs. Merely a few weeks after he accused the Kremlin of wanting to overthrow him, an embattled Lukashenko flew to Sochi to plead with Putin. He needed Russian political, financial and other support to cope with the unprecedentedly large-scale protests against the equally unprecedented levels of electoral fraud and repression that he had deployed to stay in power. The Kremlin obliged and propped up the troublesome autocrat for the time being, while the EU once again – initially grudgingly, but later more convincingly – imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and his regime and this time refused to recognise his new mandate as President. Tikhanovskaya and other opposition leaders fled to EU countries and Western leaders threw their weight behind them. Lukashenko's most recent and

---

25 Veranika Laputska, "Failed Expectations? Belarus and the Eastern Partnership," *New Eastern Europe* no. 5 (2020), 134-139. The EU assistance to Belarus doubled to € 30 million per year in the period 2016-2020: "Facts and figures about EU-Belarus relations," European Council, n.d.

26 Tatjana Melnichuk, "Lukashenko obvinil Moskvu vo lzhi i poobeshhal ne dopustit' revoliucii," BBC Russian, 4 August 2020.

brazen move to force a Ryanair flight from Greece to Lithuania to land in order to apprehend critical journalist Raman Pratasevich led to further sanctions that isolated him even more from the West.<sup>27</sup> Lukashenko formally suspended Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership on 28 June 2021. This temporarily absolved the EU of the dilemma on whether or not to invite the Belarusian Government to meetings of the Eastern Partnership. At the same time it sparked a debate among EU member states as to whether to invite the Belarusian opposition as representatives of the country instead.<sup>28</sup>

## Main strategic interests

The above pattern of events reflects the main but sometimes contradictory domestic and geopolitical objectives of the four main actors: the Lukashenko regime, the Russian Federation, the European Union and NATO. These clashing objectives are at the root of the geopolitical dimension of the Belarus crisis. Each will be briefly discussed in turn and in the order of priority.

### Lukashenko's strategic interests: retain power, sovereignty and economic stability

Throughout his reign Lukashenko has consistently pursued three main objectives. First and foremost he is intent on **preserving his personal hold on power** by any means necessary, without leaving any opening for the emergence of a real democratic opposition. Even now, with virtually no legitimacy left and a reliance solely on repression to stay in power, Lukashenko insists on a long, vague and pseudo-legal constitutional reform process that allows him to keep exercising control either upfront or behind the scenes. It is this objective that consistently puts him at odds with the European Union and its policy of promoting democracy and human rights. It makes him more dependent on Russia, given that it is primarily the Kremlin's support that keeps him in power. However, it also makes him more of a headache for the Kremlin since he effectively blocks any alternative leadership from emerging, even if Russia would prefer to have someone else to work with. The stubborn refusal of the Ministry of Justice to register the pro-Russian 'Soyuz' party is indicative in this regard.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly and relatedly, despite his initial openness for at least symbolic integration within the Union State, Lukashenko has consistently aimed to **resist relinquishing**

---

27 For a good overview of Russian-Belarusian 'codependence', see Maxim Trudolybov, "[Russian-Belarusian Codependence Highlighted in Wake of Forced Jet Landing](#)," *The Russia File, Kennan Institute*, 2 June 2021.

28 Alexandra Brzozowski, "[EU reproves Belarus' walkout from the Eastern Partnership](#)", *Euractiv*, 29 June 2021

29 Ministerstvo justicii Respubliki Belarus, "[Ministerstvom justicii otkazano v gosudarstvennoj registracii Politicheskoy partii](#)," 4 May 2021.

**Belarusian sovereignty** to the Russian Federation. This does not only concern political matters but also economic matters such as control over state-led enterprises and energy transport infrastructure, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5. This objective became more acute for Lukashenko as it became apparent from the 2008 Georgia conflict and especially the 2014 Ukraine crisis how far Russia was willing to go to consolidate control over its near abroad. It is also this objective that the EU has catered to with its 'critical engagement' approach, offering Lukashenko a geopolitical alternative. However, it is clearly subordinated to objective #1, even though it is still unclear how much de facto sovereignty Lukashenko is willing to relinquish in exchange for continued Russian support.

Finally, Lukashenko's options are constrained by a third objective: **to preserve economic stability**, keeping the largely state-run economy functional. This objective has largely driven his policies since the 1990s but has become more acute in the last decade, especially since he could no longer fully rely on Russian energy subsidies. While Belarus' economic dependence on Russia is one of its main ways to pressure Lukashenko, this objective also gives the EU a certain amount of leverage, given the growing importance of the European Union as a market for Belarusian exports, as further discussed in chapter 5 and in the contribution of Kateryna Bornukova to this report.

### **Russian strategic interests: gain more control over Belarus, avoid nasty surprises and cut costs**

Since the turn of the century, Russia's strategic interests have largely remained consistent. Some are more defensive and reactive in nature, others have more to do with economic and political objectives, and each has its own set of supporters within the Russian Federation.<sup>30</sup>

First and foremost Russia wants to **retain control over Belarus for geopolitical and security reasons**; it will go to great lengths to prevent Belarus from ever making a Ukraine-style 'pivot towards the West' and joining the EU and especially NATO. Ever since Lukashenko came to power this has never been a realistic prospect, given his disregard of the EU's and NATO's political norms and values. While a fully-fledged change of geopolitical course presently remains unlikely, Russia nonetheless wants to have sufficient control over current and future Belarusian governments to prevent this from happening. Lukashenko regularly plays on these Russian fears when he inflates the threat that NATO poses to Belarus and Russia's western frontiers, and the wholehearted support of Western leaders for Tikhonovskaya contributes to these deep-rooted Russian apprehensions of plots to take over Belarus.

---

30 See also the contribution of Artyom Shraibman in Annex 1 to this report.

Secondly and relatedly, a bottom-up revolution in Belarus is itself a threat to the Kremlin's overarching objective of **preserving domestic political stability**. The protests in Belarus coincided with a wave of protests against Putin and his ruling party across Russia; the images from Belarus were widely watched in Russia, and even if the protests were different in nature and scale, a degree of solidarity quickly developed between protesters in Khabarovsk and Minsk.<sup>31</sup> This raised concerns within the Kremlin, which clearly wants to avoid a precedent of a bottom-up change in power in Belarus. In addition, while Russia can clearly work with leaders who emerge from domestic political turmoil, such as in fellow CSTO members Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, it strongly prefers any transition of power to take place according to at least a pseudo-legal, formal and most of all *managed* process. This objective is arguably why Russia agreed to prop up Lukashenko in the first place, but also why it continues to insist on constitutional reform and an eventual political transition. Russia's support for Lukashenko's repressive policies is deeply unpopular among the Belarusian people; the Kremlin knows that the longer it supports his repressive policies, the more Russia's generally positive reputation will suffer.<sup>32</sup>

Thirdly, and as further discussed in chapter 5, Russia is intent on **reducing the costs that Belarus poses to the Russian economy and state budget** by phasing out its economic subsidies and by gaining more control over Belarusian state companies and energy transit infrastructure. The 'tax manoeuvre' in particular is meant to ensure that a larger part of the oil revenue reaches the coffers of the Russian state budget. This objective gained in importance during the costly Covid-19 crisis, but still pales in comparison to the other two more political objectives. It still offers some leverage to the West, by increasing the costs for Russia to prop up Lukashenko.

Finally, and arguably last in the order of priority, Russia is **not keen on another Ukraine-style confrontation** with the West that only leads to further costly isolation. Despite its regular rhetoric of resisting Western interference in domestic affairs, Russia's response to the crisis has been relatively muted. It has not engaged in sabre rattling similar to its snap exercises along the Ukrainian border in April 2021. In fact the unpredictable Lukashenko poses a risk to Putin's recent efforts to make the relationship with Europe and the US more 'stable and predictable'. This last Russian objective is effectively the only one shared with the EU's objectives, which will be further discussed below.

---

31 See for example Andrey Makarychev, "[The Minsk-Khabarovsk nexus: Ethical, performative, corporeal](#)," *New Perspectives* vol. 29 (January 2021): 109-119.

32 Currently a third of Belarusians have very positive attitudes towards Russia, and 79% of the population generally feel positive about Russia. See Ryhor Astapenia, "[Belarusians' views on the political crisis](#)," Chatham House, 11 June 2021.

### **The EU's strategic interests: promote values, offer an alternative, and preserve stability**

Ever since the late 1990s the EU has been confronted with a 'Belarus dilemma' of isolation versus engagement, and different factions within the EU push for different objectives.<sup>33</sup> The first and most visible objective is the EU's insistence on the **promotion of its norms and values** in its immediate neighbourhood. Lukashenko's reliance on repression directly clashes with the EU's emphasis on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. As the brief overview in this chapter shows, every time Lukashenko has cracked down on protesters, opposition politicians or the free press, the EU has responded with concerned statements full of indignation and sometimes new sets of sanctions.

However, it also often lifted those same sanctions a few years later due to its second, competing objective: **offering Belarus a geopolitical alternative to the Russian Federation**. This objective gained in prominence with the development of the Eastern Partnership and the rise in tensions with the Russian Federation over Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The EU has tried to square the circle of this 'Belarus dilemma' through the formula of 'critical engagement' and by making use of the geopolitical window of opportunity of the deteriorating Belarus-Russia relationship post-2014, but with little success.<sup>34</sup>

The third overarching EU objective in this crisis overlaps with Russia's objective to **avoid another major geopolitical crisis in Eastern Europe**. At a time when EU-Russia relations are already strained, several EU member states are wary of a new showdown over a country that is so closely linked to the Russian Federation, where the EU has limited leverage and where the population itself is not asking for a decisive shift towards Europe. European countries have come out strongly in support of the democratic opposition but were relatively muted in their response vis-à-vis Russia's support for Lukashenko. Ultimately, the more Belarus integrates into the political, economic and military space of the Russian Federation and the more EU-Russia relations deteriorate, the more this accommodating stance becomes problematic to maintain.

### **NATO's strategic interests: maintain a credible deterrence while avoiding escalation**

While NATO shares the EU's political objectives of promoting democracy and respect for human rights, it also faces a 'Belarus security dilemma' of its own. Its primary

---

33 See Elizabete Vizgunova, "[The Belarus dilemma](#)," EUISS Alert, October 2015.

34 Tony van der Togt, "[The "Belarus Factor": From balancing to bridging geopolitical dividing lines in Europe](#)," *Clingendael Report*, January 2017, pp. 5-12.



objective is to **reassure its eastern allies** that its deterrence policy remains credible and that the territory of the Alliance remains defensible in case of an increased Russian military presence in Belarus. Especially the Baltic States and Poland are understandably concerned about a potential further westward extension of Russia's military posture and particularly about the vulnerability of the transport corridor through the Suwalki gap, as further argued by Michael Kofman in Annex 3.

At the same time NATO has a second objective of **avoiding escalation** in its relations with the Russian Federation, which harbours its own anxieties about a NATO build-up near its borders. In this way Belarus is becoming another case highlighting one of the core concerns in NATO's deterrence policy: how to simultaneously remain credible *and* ambiguous in its signalling towards different audiences. This dilemma and the role of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

## 4 The security policy dimension

As stated in chapter 2, military cooperation between Minsk and Moscow has been at the forefront of bilateral relations that developed in the 1990s after both republics' declarations of independence from the Soviet Union. Most recently, in 2018 Russia adopted a new version of the joint military doctrine in the framework of the Union State, although this document has not yet been agreed upon by Belarus.<sup>35</sup> In between, and ever since, military cooperation has manifested itself through various additional agreements about the use of military facilities<sup>36</sup>, the stationing of troops and multiple exercises, either in a CSTO framework, under the flag of the Union State (the 'Union Shield' exercises), in an ad hoc 'Slavic Brotherhood' formation (including Serbia) or as part of Russian exercise cycles, such as the quadrennial 'Zapad' ('West') drills.

Military and security cooperation between Belarus and Russia has become a more salient topic since the political crisis that erupted over the Belarusian presidential elections in August 2020. Whereas in the run-up to these elections, President Lukashenko was still playing his 'independence from Russia' hand, immediately after the disputed polls he abruptly changed course and warned that NATO was massing troops on Belarus's western border<sup>37</sup>, backed by Russian assertions about NATO countries meddling in Belarusian affairs.<sup>38</sup> NATO's Secretary General reciprocated, urging Russia to respect Belarus' sovereignty.<sup>39</sup>

It is to be expected that security policy concerns are among all interested parties' most pressing considerations when assessing the various scenarios in the framework of further Union State integration. At the same time, it should be noted that Western leverage in this respect, and its ability to influence developments, is limited. After all, since the early 1990s Belarus and Russia have largely aligned their foreign and security

---

35 Anna Maria Dyner, "[Possible Scenarios of Russian-Belarusian Military Integration](#)," The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 17 December 2020.

36 These concern the 43rd Vileika signal centre used by the Russian Navy and the Baranovichi radar station integrated with Russia's early warning system.

37 Reid Standish, "[As Lukashenko Turns To Geopolitics, The West Faces Learning Curve In Belarus](#)," *Radio Free Europe*, 24 August 2020.

38 Guy Chazan, Henry Foy, and Michael Peel, "[Putin warns western leaders over 'meddling' in Belarus](#)," *Financial Times*, 18 August, 2020.

39 Belsat, "[NATO Secretary General urges Russia to respect sovereignty of Belarus](#)," 13 February 2020.

policy outlooks and morphed their Soviet-era relationship into a sustained security partnership, whose potential has only been mitigated by Minsk's sometimes laboured efforts to demonstrate its geopolitical sovereignty. The current circumstances leave considerably less wiggle room in this respect, and Russia's ability to determine future developments has clearly been enhanced. It is therefore of key importance to dig deeper into the position and role of Belarus within Russian security strategies and its broader concerns about the stability of its western flank. Michael Kofman analyses the role of Belarus in Russia's military planning in more detail in his external contribution in Annex 3.

## Russia's "West" anxieties

Historically, Russian leaders have attached great strategic importance to their western borders for reasons that are not always understood by Western observers. Practically all major invasions of Russia were launched from the West, by Swedish, Polish, Lithuanian, French and German troops, time and again exposing vulnerabilities to military incursions via Europe's northern plains – and often via the territory of contemporary Belarus. Russia, in its various administrative incarnations, has always displayed a tendency to extend its sphere of influence as far west as possible, *inter alia* to gain advantages of 'strategic depth'.

By the time the Soviet Union imploded in 1991 the Russian Federation had been reduced in size to approximately its 17<sup>th</sup> century borders, and policies were aimed at retaining influence in its newly independent western neighbourhood. NATO's subsequent eastward enlargement, including the accession of the three Baltic republics in 2004, gave new impetus to this approach. In the case of Ukraine, Russia's most strategic 'buffer zone' and host to its Black Sea fleet, the policy to maintain friendly relations ran afoul and eventually Russia intervened to establish *faits accomplis* (the annexation of Crimea and destabilization of the eastern Donbas region) to thwart Ukraine's ambition of integrating with the West. After this episode, and with the ensuing stalemate with regard to Ukraine, the importance of Belarus in Moscow's strategic calculations has grown. In May 2016, Russia's Ministry of Defence announced the formation of three new divisions in its Western Military District, two in the Voronezh and Rostov Oblasts close to Ukraine, and one in the Smolensk Oblast close to Belarus; all three permanently based units apparently created with an eye towards Ukrainian and Belarusian contingencies<sup>40</sup>, where Moscow will want to ensure that the latter will not turn into a repeat version of the former.

---

40 Michael Kofman, "[Russia's New Divisions in the West – Russia Military Analysis](#)," *Russia Military Analysis*, 7 May 2016.

## The 'NATO spectre'

In Russia's current Military Doctrine, which dates from 2014 and is expected to be updated shortly, NATO is considered to be a 'military risk' (still one category below a 'military threat')<sup>41</sup>. Since the publication of this document relations have steadily deteriorated, and the National Security Strategy adopted in July 2021 depicts "the build-up of [NATO] military infrastructure near Russian borders" as a threat.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, what NATO says and does in the context of the crisis in Belarus is closely watched by Moscow. NATO's responses to the crisis in and around Ukraine may be interpreted by Russian policymakers as providing clues about possible future positions with regard to developments in Belarus, even though from the 1990s onwards the Alliance's partnership with Ukraine has differed in qualitative terms from NATO-Belarus relations.<sup>43</sup> After the Ukraine crisis erupted in 2014, NATO suspended its cooperation with Russia through the NATO-Russia Council, adopted a Readiness Action Plan and enhanced the NATO Response Force by establishing a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. In 2016, the allies decided to conclude a Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine and deployed four multinational battalion-size battle groups on a rotational basis in Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as part of an 'Enhanced Forward Presence' deterrent posture. Since 2020, Ukraine has enjoyed the status of a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner. Crucially, in 2008 the Alliance decided that Ukraine will become a member of NATO.<sup>44</sup> Some individual allies have stepped up military aid for Ukraine, such as the U.S. under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative.<sup>45</sup>

As stated above, Belarus' relations with NATO merely extend to participation in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (a dialogue forum bringing NATO's 30 members and 20 partner countries together) and a modest individual cooperation programme under the Partnership for Peace. Besides, Belarus is a founding member of the CSTO and has never expressed an unequivocal interest in upgrading its partner status. The scope of the NATO-Belarus relationship is limited, especially now with the Alliance's increasingly critical stance towards the country's leadership<sup>46</sup> (including diplomatic measures such as restricting the access of Belarusian personnel to its headquarters). Therefore, it is rather NATO's overall posture on its eastern 'flank' that will inform Russia's thinking,

---

41 "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation", The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 29 June 2015.

42 "[O Strategii nacional'noj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii](#)," Ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii, Oficialnyj internet-portal pravovoj informacii, 2 July 2021.

43 Belsat, "[NATO Secretary General urges Russia to respect sovereignty of Belarus](#)," 13 February 2020.

44 "[Bucharest Summit Declaration](#)," NATO, 3 April 2008.

45 Aaron Mehta and Howard Altman, "[US announces \\$125 million in military aid for Ukraine](#)," Defense News, 1 March 2021.

46 See paragraph 54, "[Brussels Summit Communiqué](#)," NATO, 14 June 2021.

including on how to further incorporate Belarus into its own military planning. In that sense, the upcoming edition of the joint Zapad exercises, scheduled to start this September, will be indicative of Russia's (and Belarus') ideas in this regard.

## Let's go West

The previous edition of Zapad in 2017 (the first to be held after the Ukraine crisis) caused considerable tensions in Western and neighbouring countries. That was because Russia toyed with troop numbers in order to circumvent notification and monitoring obligations under the so-called Vienna Document<sup>47</sup>, a politically binding set of Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) within the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>48</sup> The exercise also included a "Union State" victory over a fictive 'Veyshnoriya' which had tried to stage border incursions, as further discussed by Michael Kofman in Annex 3.<sup>49</sup>

Zapad 2021 will be scrutinized at least as closely as its predecessor. First, because of the continued 'Ukraine' factor, which has attracted renewed attention with the recent spike in cease-fire violations in the Donbas region and Russian troop concentrations on the Russo-Ukrainian border, according to Moscow in response to NATO activities.<sup>50</sup> Second, because the 'Belarus' factor is now far more topical and Minsk's earlier reluctance to host more Russian military infrastructure may carry less weight. Some experts agree that, as always, Russia will use Zapad (in reality a whole range of various exercises put together) to evaluate combat readiness, test concepts and new technologies, train logistics and sustaining land and air operations and examine force generation and reserve system procedures. Zapad 2021 will probably yield new levels of Russian-Belarusian operational integration or even the incremental subordination of Belarusian armed forces to Russia's Western Military District. It is expected that this year more activities will be rolled out on Belarusian territory and that Minsk, this time to a lesser extent the 'junior partner', will display greater ownership of Zapad than previously in terms of communications to third parties.

As far as the often debated question of 'permanent Russian bases in Belarus' is concerned, the forecasts are rather that Russia may want to 'mirror' NATO's enhanced

---

47 ["Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures,"](#) OSCE, 30 November 2021.

48 RUSI, ["Zapad-2017: Why Do the Numbers Matter?"](#) Wiredgov, 13 September 2017.

49 See also Mathieu Boulègue, ["Five Things to Know About the Zapad-2017 Military Exercise,"](#) Chatham House, 25 September 2017; Keir Giles, ["Russia Hit Multiple Targets with Zapad-2017,"](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 January 2018.

50 Cyrus Newlin, Heather A. Conley, Matthew P. Funaiolo, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, ["Unpacking the Russian Troop Buildup along Ukraine's Border,"](#) Center for Strategic & International Studies, 22 April 2021.

Forward Presence in Poland and the Baltic Republics, which means deploying troops on a 'near permanent' rotational basis to existing joint training facilities. With the current and growing level of operational integration and Belarus already being part of Russia's integrated air defence system, it seems that no spectacular new institutional arrangements are in the offing, essentially because, for the time being, the evolution of the current framework already serves Russia's immediate security purposes.<sup>51</sup>

To conclude, the security policy dimension of the evolving political crisis in Belarus is especially prominent, given the overall dire relations between the Russian Federation and NATO and the fact that Belarus occupies centre stage in Moscow's strategic calculations, certainly after Moscow's fallout with Ukraine. At the same time, military cooperation has been the most steady bilateral platform between Russia and Belarus in their post-Soviet relationship, despite intermittent efforts by Minsk to portray an independent course. In the security realm, the West's (including NATO's) relations with Belarus are least developed, which severely limits leverage to promote its own interests. This chapter is premised on the expectation that the political crisis in Belarus will be drawn out and that Russia will be in a position to carefully orchestrate further moves and navigate between the various integration frameworks (including the Union State) to protect its security interests – also because Lukashenko's 'nuisance' potential has diminished. In more extreme scenarios, like a sudden collapse of the Lukashenko regime and/or a 'hostile takeover' by Russia, the equation will obviously alter dramatically, as further discussed in chapter 6.

---

51 These notions are derived from a CSIS-organized discussion with Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges and the analyst Michael Kofman: "[Zapad 2021 and the Future of Russia's Force Presence in Belarus](#)," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 15 June 2021.

## 5 The economic dimension

This chapter explores Belarus' economic position in two key Russia-led integration projects in the post-Soviet region – the Union State between Russia and Belarus and the Eurasian Economic Union. The sections below provide a brief overview of the characteristics of Belarus' economic system. The chapter then continues with an assessment of Belarus' position in the Union State, as well as its role in wider Eurasian integrative processes. The chapter then explores Minsk's interests beyond Russian-led integration initiatives and concludes with a discussion on the effectiveness of economic sanctions as an instrument to influence the regime's cost-benefit calculations.

### The Belarusian economy

With state-owned enterprises accounting for an estimated 48.8% of GDP in 2019, the Belarusian economic model remains extraordinarily centralized.<sup>52</sup> As a landlocked, resource-poor country, Belarus has relied on energy subsidies from the Russian Federation to maintain its economic system.<sup>53</sup> Approximately 30% of the state budget is acquired through importing subsidized crude oil from Russia and subsequently exporting petroleum to western partners.<sup>54</sup> Although financial cushioning provided by the Kremlin has kept the Belarusian economy afloat, it has also inhibited the implementation of necessary economic reforms for long-term growth.

Lukashenko has managed to maintain an extremely tight grip on the Belarusian economy, dismissing and appointing key economic figures through a patron-client system of punishment and reward. As a result, compared to other post-Soviet economies, Belarus distinguishes itself by an absence of oligarchs. One of the risks that would come with a potential privatization scenario would thus be the rise of a new class of business oligarchs. Matthew Frear demonstrates, however, that Lukashenko has so far managed to preserve a highly personalised economic system, in which 'there is no influential independent business lobby to agitate for or against regional economic integration.'<sup>55</sup> To determine the country's economic course of action, Lukashenko has sought advice from both pro-Russian traditionalists supportive of deeper integration

---

52 "Nacionalnye scheta respublik Belarus," Nacionalnyj statisticheskij komitet Respubliki Belarus, 2021.

53 Rilka Dragneva and Christopher A. Hartwell, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Integration without Liberalisation?" *Post-Communist Economies* 33, no. 2-3 (3 April 2021): 206.

54 Frear, "Belarus: Player and Pawn in the Integration Game," 121-22.

55 Ibid., 121

with the Kremlin and economic nationalists in favour of closer ties with Western partners. Lukashenko has changed the composition of his ruling elites routinely to fit whatever economic agenda he has been pursuing at a given time, in line with the pattern of alternating between deeper integration with the Russian Federation and closer engagement with the West as outlined in chapter 3.<sup>56</sup>

## The unmet economic promises of the Union State

After his initial enthusiasm for closer integration with the Russian Federation waned in the early 2000s, Lukashenko has largely treated the Union State as a framework to extract financial benefits from the Russian leadership in return for concessions in the military and political sphere. Although Lukashenko has had little choice but to engage with this Russia-led integration initiative, Belarus should not be portrayed as a passive victim of Kremlin pressures. Minsk has consistently managed to negotiate preferential terms of engagement with its larger neighbour, not in the least due to its strategic position as an economic transit route to the European Union.<sup>57</sup>

Although originally envisioned as an economic and political union, which would offer a legal roadmap to joint citizenship, a common currency, and a dismantling of state borders, both countries have been selective and strategic in the implementation of the negotiated agreements in those domains. From a Russian perspective, Lukashenko's unwillingness to reform Belarus' economy has made a true unification of the Russian and Belarusian markets undesirable, since Belarus' weak economic performance is likely to have a destabilising effect on the Russian economy.<sup>58</sup> From a Belarusian perspective, Putin's refusal to grant Belarus an equal say in the Union State has curbed Lukashenko's enthusiasm, since further integration within the Union State has become associated with threats to national sovereignty and independence. These hurdles have inhibited deeper economic integration and may well continue to do so should Lukashenko's position vis-à-vis Russia remain the same. For both leaders, the true importance of this project does not lie in economic integration *per se* but in its symbolic value.<sup>59</sup>

---

56 Ibid., 120.

57 Clingendael interview, 2 June 2021.

58 This is visible in Russia's hesitance to take steps towards the implementation of a joint currency within the framework of the Union State, for example (Clingendael interview, 2 June 2021).

59 Generally, the richness of cooperative links has been treasured more than the actual effectiveness of integration projects in the post-Soviet region (Clingendael interview, June 10, 2021). This explains why failed integration projects such as the Union State and CIS continue to exist. The tenacity of Russia's integration efforts is driven by a desire to portray itself as a great power actor capable of integrating the wider Eurasian region (Clingendael interview, 2 June 2021). The *de jure* existence of these integrative links is therefore more important than the *de facto* success of Russia's integrative efforts.



Thus, what in appearance might seem like the single most ambitious integration project in the post-Soviet region has so far failed to yield any effective steps towards true economic unification between the two member states. At best, the Union State has functioned as a political pressure tool employed by both countries' leaderships to extract benefits from one another. At the same time, the significance of the Union State should not be underestimated, as it has provided the Kremlin with a modest testing ground for integration in the wider Eurasian space.

## Wider Eurasian integration: ECU, SES, and EEU

Russia's economic integration initiative in the wider Eurasian region, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), has been developed in three stages. The first step was the creation of a Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) in 2010, establishing a free trade zone and a common customs tariff among the Eurasian 'troika' states: Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The subsequent stage was the establishment of the Single Economic Space (SES) in 2012, which pursued further unification of the troika states' economies through the coordination of a common market for goods, capital, and labour and the stipulation of common tax policies.<sup>60</sup> Finally, in 2015, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan proceeded with the formal establishment of the EEU, rapidly adding Armenia and Kyrgyzstan to their ranks. Notwithstanding Russia's continuous rhetorical efforts to politicise the EEU, its main competencies continue to fall narrowly within the *economic* domain. With sovereignty high on the agenda, EEU institutions have remained weak, however. This has meant that economic issues continue to be resolved on a bilateral level.<sup>61</sup>

The impact of the EEU on the Belarusian economy has been significant. Even though Russia's Eurasian project offered a free trade zone accessible to Belarus, its requirements have limited Belarus in pursuing trade relations beyond the Eurasian region. Additionally, the EEU market has remained small and uncompetitive.<sup>62</sup> Participation in the EEU has moreover increased Minsk's economic reliance on Russia, creating a downward spiral for the Belarusian economy.

Lukashenko has *conditionally* supported Russia's EEU initiative from the outset, using participation in the EEU as a bargaining chip to extract economic benefits from the Kremlin.<sup>63</sup> The Kremlin has met Minsk's demand for economic advantages by offering

---

60 Yevgeny Troitskiy, "[The Eurasian Economic Union at Five: Great Expectations and Hard Times](#)," *Kennan Institute*, 14 January 2020.

61 Clingendael interview, 10 June 2021.

62 Ryhor Astapenia, "[Belarus and the Eurasian Economic Union: The View from Minsk – European Council on Foreign Relations](#)," *ECFR*, 7 January 2015.

63 Clingendael interview, 10 June 2021

discounted oil and gas prices, preferential customs fees, and advantageous loans.<sup>64</sup> Rather than being a 'true' believer in Eurasian integration or a staunchly loyal supporter of Putin, Lukashenko's participation in the EEU has been a pragmatic – albeit short-sighted – calculation. Although Belarus benefited substantially from Russia's energy subsidies in the short term – between 2011 and 2015 alone Belarus profited to the extent of \$7.5 billion from its energy contracts with the Russian Federation<sup>65</sup> – the country's participation in the EEU is likely to inhibit its economic development in the long term.<sup>66</sup>

Lured by subsidised energy prices, Lukashenko has fallen for the short-term benefits of participating in the Russia-led integration project. At the same time, the Belarusian leadership is well aware that this commitment has increased Belarus' economic dependence on the Kremlin. The Lukashenko regime – already extremely wary of reforms – is now experiencing an economic deadlock: maintaining a state-run economy is unviable in the medium to long term, yet privatization and liberalisation are deemed impossible due to a not entirely unreasonable fear of Russian monopolies. Importantly, although Lukashenko wants to maintain a tight grip on the Belarusian economy, his reluctance to reform is not necessarily driven by a dogmatic belief in what he has called 'market socialism' but rather a fear of Russian capital dominating the Belarusian market.<sup>67</sup> The Kremlin may force Lukashenko to liberalise parts of the economy in return for continued regime support, however. Moreover, even in a scenario in which the Lukashenko regime would be replaced by moderate opposition forces, privatisation would still come with a threat of increased Russian ownership.

Overall, the Lukashenko regime has balanced between wanting to extract economic benefits from Russia, while not wanting to cede sovereignty through *political* integration within the EEU framework. Adversely, Russia has expressed interest in more political integration within the EEU (or even incorporation within the Union State), while increasingly wanting to avoid the costs that come with having to provide *economic* support to its smaller neighbour. The Ukraine crisis has exacerbated this push-and-pull dynamic in which Belarus (and Kazakhstan) try to block *political* integration and Russia is increasingly reluctant to continue on a path of *economic* integration, insofar

---

64 Alena Vieira, "A Tale of Two Unions: Russia–Belarus Integration Experience and Its Lessons for the Eurasian Economic Union," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32, no. 1 (2 January 2017): 48.

65 Anna Maria Dyner and Natalia Ryabova, "Belarus in the CES: Advantages and Disadvantages of Economic Integration," *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych*, 2013.

66 For Russia, the economic benefits of the EEU have been limited. At best, the EEU has served Russia's food-security and self-sufficiency objective by offering an economic buffer of friendly states away from the global market, which Russia sees as unfairly dominated by the West (Clingendael interview, 10 June 2021).

67 Frear, "Belarus: Player and Pawn in the Integration Game," 2013; Sean P. Roberts and Arkady Moshes, "The Eurasian Economic Union," 2016.

as this requires the Kremlin to offer ‘integration discounts’ to weaker member states.<sup>68</sup> This impasse is unlikely to be resolved in those scenarios where Lukashenko remains in power or where he is replaced by someone who pursues a similar hedging strategy towards Russia, as further discussed in chapter 6.

Under the current circumstances, however, both Russia and Belarus have shown themselves to be willing to concede if the political or economic realities of their countries so demand. On the Russian side, such a concession was offered in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, when the Kremlin considered it to be critical for the Eurasian project to succeed. It was thus that Lukashenko found himself in a position where he could push the Eurasian project into his desired direction, for example, by blocking the use of the term ‘Eurasian integration’ in favour of ‘Eurasian *economic* integration’ and by obstructing the formation of supranational bodies with strong institutional power.<sup>69</sup> On the Belarusian side, a concession seems to grow more probable, as Lukashenko might be compelled to accept deeper *political* integration in return for continued ‘life support’ offered to his regime by the Kremlin.

Importantly, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both the economic and the political relationship between Russia and Belarus have always followed a cyclical pattern in which one actor manages to profit from the temporarily weakened position of the other. Although the scales may now be tipped in Russia’s favour, there has always been back and forth positioning between the two countries in terms of extracting benefits and pushing the Union State and EEU in their desired (at times opposing) directions. What we are currently observing might therefore be a mere snapshot, since the dynamic has shown itself to change regularly and rapidly. Although supportive of closer economic ties with Russia, insofar as this provides the Lukashenko regime with economic benefits, Minsk has also sought to build relations with partners in the West and China. It is therefore also important to look at the effects of the economic sanctions imposed by the EU and others in response to the crackdown and the diverted Ryanair flight.

## Economic sanctions... and incentives?

The EU is limited in its options in the economic domain and can either choose between a normative or pragmatic strategy. Since the onset of the crisis in August 2020, the EU has opted for a normative approach built around *negative conditionality* and reinforcing its criticism of Lukashenko’s repressive strategies with both individual and sectoral

---

68 Russia’s unwillingness to offer integration discounts has recently culminated in the Kremlin’s so-called ‘tax manoeuvre’, by which Russia has lowered export duties on crude oil, while increasing its mineral extraction tax. This tax manoeuvre has led to a significant increase in crude oil prices paid by Belarusian SOEs.

69 Astapenia, “Belarus and the Eurasian Economic Union,” 2015.

sanctions meant to hurt the regime 'in its wallet'. However, sanctions against individuals within the regime, including Lukashenko himself, have so far demonstrated to be largely ineffective. In the cost-benefit calculation of the regime, the risk of losing power far exceeds the reward of being able to travel or do business in Europe. Rather, the EU sanctions are mostly of a symbolic nature, reinforcing the EU's message both to its own constituencies and to the people of Belarus that autocratic behaviour and human rights violations have no place within the EU's community of values. Adversely, the EU's flight ban imposed after the arrest of Roman Pratasevich could even have adverse effects on the freedom of members of the opposition to leave the country and flee from Lukashenko's repressive regime.<sup>70</sup>

Sectoral sanctions and targeted sanctions against state-owned enterprises, on the other hand, directly target the regime's sources of income. If well designed, these sanctions could exploit its economic weaknesses and significantly influence the cost-benefit analysis of both Belarus and the Russian Federation. In order for this to have a genuine impact, however, the sanctions need to be 'smart' enough to maximize the economic pressure on the regime while minimizing the economic costs to the population - and by limiting the regime's sanction-busting or trade-diversion options. They should therefore take Belarus' economic relationship with the Russian Federation within the Union State and the Eurasian Economic Union into account, as well as Western sanction policies against the Russian Federation itself. The Russian authorities have already hinted that there may be a concerted EEU response to the EU's sanctions against Russia and Belarus, although Kazakhstan has categorically rejected this proposal.<sup>71</sup> Given the interlinked nature of both countries' economies, they are well positioned to engage in 'sanction busting' against sectoral sanctions that target only one of the two countries - even if other EEU members such as Kazakhstan presently appear to be unwilling to be dragged into a 'bloc versus bloc' sanctions showdown.<sup>72</sup>

The sanctions on potash, for example, are touted by the EU as a strong message meant to 'drive the country to its economic knees' by targeting one of its most prominent SOEs, Belaruskali. While potash indeed makes up a significant part of Belarus' exports, only approximately 8-10% of those go to the European Union itself. And because the EU has exempted contracts signed before 24 June from the sanctions in order to protect its own business and farming interests, they are estimated to only affect approximately 15% of the total trade flow of potash to the EU, i.e., not more than a negligible 1.5% of

---

70 Benas Gerdžiūnas, ["Will the flight ban trap Belarusian dissidents in the hands of Lukashenko?"](#), *EurActiv*, 26 May 2021.

71 RIA Novosti, ["V EAES prorabatyvajut konsolidirovannyj otvet na sankcii Zapada,"](#) 3 June 2021.

72 Eurasianet, ["Kazakhstan rejects proposal to join Russian sanctions-busting plans,"](#) 7 June, 2021; Catherine Putz, ["Kazakhstan: Please Don't 'Politicize' the Eurasian Economic Union"](#), *The Diplomat*, 9 June 2021.

total Belarusian potash exports.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the Russian potash producing company Uralkali – which has a long but strained relationship with Belaruskali – can easily take over Belaruskali's market share in Europe while Belarus reorients its exports to third countries such as China and Brazil. Ironically, it may well be the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda with its dedicated potash terminal that suffers most from these sanctions, not the Belarusian regime.<sup>74</sup>

To conclude, the structure of Belarus' largely state-led economy and the preference of the Lukashenko regime to retain control and also uphold its economic sovereignty has curbed its enthusiasm for full economic integration with the Russian Federation through regional projects such as the Union State and the Eurasian Economic Union. Its membership of these bodies nonetheless constrains Minsk's economic options, both in its relations with the EU and with third parties, and also affects the effectiveness of Western economic sanctions. The more Belarus integrates its economy with the Russian Federation, the stronger these effects will be. The effects of different levels of future integration will be further examined in the next chapter.

---

73 The Guardian, "[Belarus opposition calls on EU to close sanctions 'loopholes'](#)", 30 June 2021.

74 Michael Scollon, Maria Kugel and Matthew Luxmoore, "[EU sanctions poised to harm Belarus, help Russia](#)," RFE/RL, 26 June 2021.

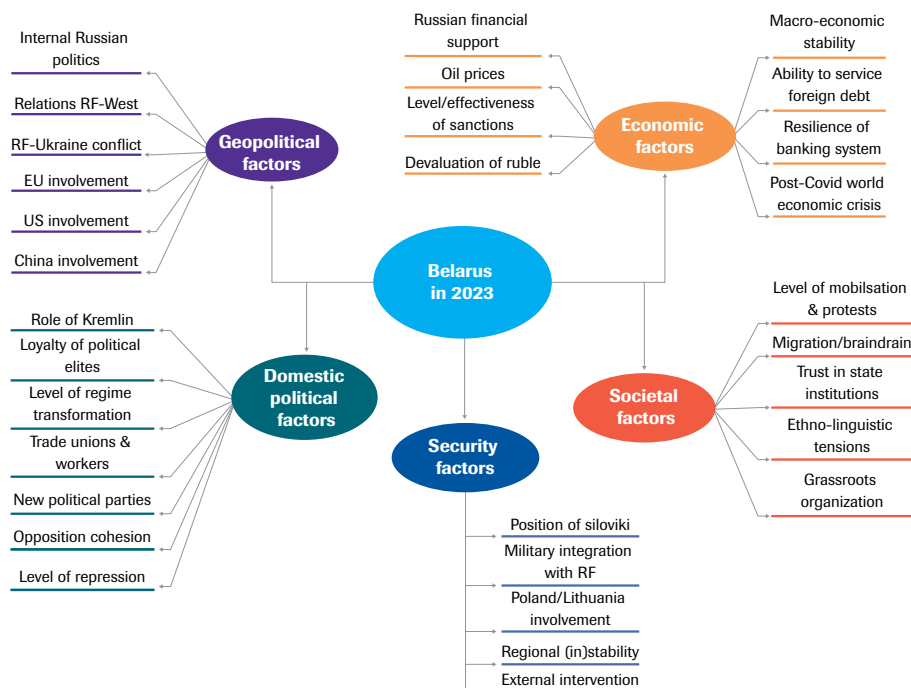
## 6 Scenarios

This chapter aims to combine the analysis of the geopolitical, security and economic dimensions of the previous chapters with the findings of a scenario workshop on the future of Belarus, held on 15 April 2021. It will first focus on the key influencing factors that shape both the domestic political situation in Belarus and the degree of its integration into the Union State. It will then formulate a number of possible scenarios and will conclude by examining their implications for the EU and NATO. It is important to note in this regard that the developed scenarios do not aim to *predict* the future or provide forecasts of future (geo)political developments. Instead, these scenarios are meant to be descriptions of potential future pathways. This allows policymakers to formulate better strategies, both to nudge the outcome towards their preferred scenario and to draw up contingency plans in order to respond to other scenarios.

### **What influences the future of Belarus in the context of the Union State?**

In the context of this exercise, influencing factors constitute relevant factors that may play a role in the overall future of Belarus until the spring of 2023. The participants of the workshop were asked to identify influencing factors in six broad categories. These are Political; Geopolitical; Economic; Societal; Security; and Other. Based on literature research and input by the workshop participants a large number of influencing factors in the aforementioned categories were identified. Figure 5 below shows which driving forces were considered by the participants to be of most relevance for the future of Belarus.

**Figure 5 Factors of influence**



While a full analysis of each factor is beyond the scope of the present report, it is important to note that these factors are strongly interdependent, both within categories and between categories. For example, the level of repression within Belarus has a direct effect on the level of mobilisation of citizens to go out and protest, and vice versa. In turn, international factors such as the role of the EU and the impact of sanctions from the West is linked to actions by the regime. Domestically, the level of regime stability, which in turn is dependent on many other factors, is one of the most important parameters for the country's future in the next two years. The level of Russian support for the Lukashenko regime is a pivotal factor for ensuring its survival, together with the loyalty of political and security elites towards the regime; these two factors counter the pressure on the regime by the growing level of societal discontent and mobilisation, at least in the short term.

Zooming in on societal factors shows that these are also closely related. The level of mobilisation of citizens depends on the level of trust in state institutions, the extent to which grassroots organisations are effective, but also to some extent on the level of emigration and brain drain. In the category of domestic political factors, the level

of cohesion within the opposition and the position of trade unions and workers are significant, also from a societal point of view.

Economic factors are both influenced by and shape the political and societal future of the country. The domestic political situation in Belarus strongly affects the country's macro-economic situation, especially with an eye towards a potential post-covid economic crisis. For Belarus' economy the *political* relations with the Russian Federation are moreover key, as set out in chapter 5. Should those deteriorate once again then the crucial financial support from Russia to Belarus may well dry up, with considerable economy consequences; in turn, Western economic sanctions will also negatively impact the Belarusian economy, even though the current sanctions are still relatively mild.

Finally, a number of security and geopolitical factors are worth highlighting. The (partial) integration in the Union State may lead to the further integration of Belarusian and Russian armed forces. Such military developments may in turn spur Western military responses which will have a combined effect on regional stability perceptions. The positions of Russia and the EU are also influenced by other geopolitical actors, such as the U.S.

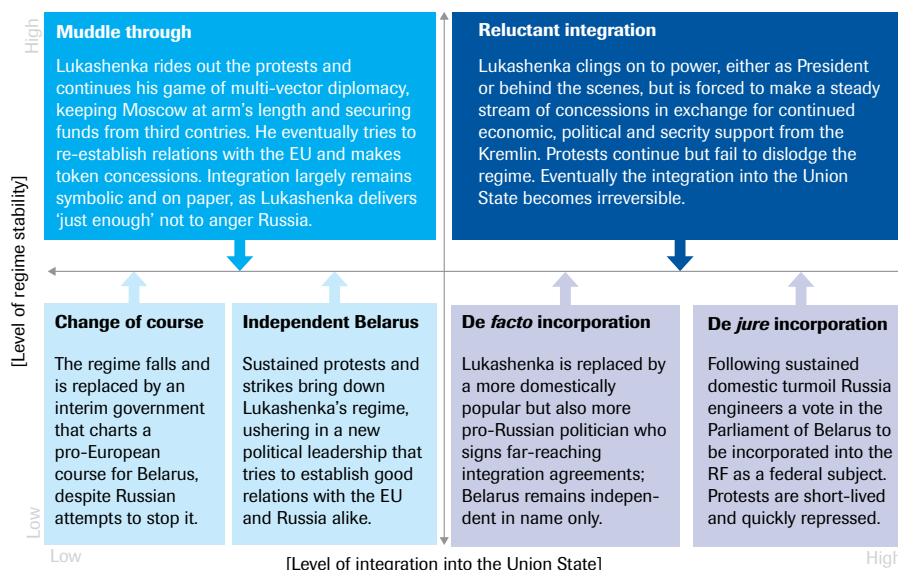
## Constructing the scenario framework

Based on the discussion of influencing factors a scenario framework along two main axes can be constructed. The two main axes constitute two aggregated influencing factors that are both decisive for the future of Belarus, and that are of particular relevance for the research question of this report. The first is the level of regime stability in the country, revolving around the question of whether the current Belarusian leadership will remain in power or not. This does not only exclusively concern Lukashenko, but also his closest allies within the regime. A nominal 'Kazakhstan-style' transition, with Lukashenko formally stepping down but remaining in power behind the scenes would count as continuity for the purposes of this scenario exercise.

The second variable is the level of further integration with Russia, ranging from no significant new steps within the Union State framework or even a degree of 'disintegration', all the way to full incorporation into the Russian Federation. Apart from the two most extreme variants of 'disintegration' and 'de jure incorporation', the participants also identified scenarios that they deemed to be more plausible, resulting in the scenario framework as presented in figure 6.



**Figure 6 Six possible scenarios for Belarus in 2023**



During the workshop four out of six scenarios were elaborated in detail, taking into account the scenario framework as well as the earlier identified influencing factors. The more 'moderate' and more 'radical' scenarios in the bottom-left and bottom-right quadrants were merged into a more middle-ground scenario. A brief summary of the 2023 situation for each of these scenarios follows below. When reading these scenarios, the timing of the scenario exercise, i.e., 15 April 2021, should be taken into account. Events taking place in Belarus after this date – such as Ryanair flight 4978 that was forcibly rerouted from Vilnius to Minsk – are not reflected in the scenarios.

### Scenario 1: Muddle Through

In the 'Muddle Through' scenario the pattern of the past 25 years continues. The Lukashenko regime manages to 'wait out' the current crisis, stays in power and is able to continue its 'multi-vector' independent course. Integration into the Union State largely remains a paper exercise, with the Belarusian government implementing 'low hanging fruit' arrangements but not making significant concessions that infringe on its sovereignty. These include a minor degree of privatisation of state enterprises and continued military cooperation with the armed forces of the Russian Federation, albeit without new permanent Russian bases being established in Belarus.

Some domestic constitutional amendments are implemented following a referendum, gradually leading to a less repressive climate in the country. Domestic threats to

Lukashenko decrease as the opposition is increasingly divided, the most critical voices have been silenced or left the country, and some factions are co-opted by the authorities. Lukashenko makes minor concessions in response to EU concerns; demonstrations are allowed up to a certain level, and some of the more moderate political prisoners are released or put under house arrest. The West maintains its policy of non-recognition but eventually reluctantly re-engages with the Lukashenko regime, if only because it remains occupied by more pressing crises elsewhere. In exchange for a few concessions Russia subsidizes Belarus just enough to allow it to service its foreign debt, avoiding a major macro-economic crisis but sharply reducing its energy subsidies. Russia remains the primary trading partner of Belarus and Belarusian exports through Russia are on the rise, but Lukashenko also secures access to other markets. Remaining Western sanctions fail to significantly influence Lukashenko's calculations and some are eventually lifted.

## **Scenario 2: Reluctant Integration**

In the 'Reluctant Integration' scenario, the Lukashenko regime formally remains in power but gradually integrates further into the Union State in exchange for continued Russian support. While he manages to preserve Belarusian sovereignty and avoid a full-scale takeover, behind the scenes Lukashenko is forced to make a steady stream of concessions which leads to more standoffs between the regime and the Belarusian population, primarily those segments which remain staunchly opposed to the *de facto* loss of sovereignty to the Russian Federation.

Popular discontent is aggravated by economic factors. Some of Russia's support comes in exchange for the privatisation of Belarusian state-owned enterprises which end up in the hands of Russian oligarchs. Belarus remains dependent on Russian energy subsidies or direct lending, while its tax and monetary policies are integrated with those of Russia. Major economic sectors are further integrated with those of the Russian Federation. Belarus continues to export to the EU, including petroleum products, but the trade levels between the two decrease significantly both due to sanctions and due to the reorientation of the economy towards the Russian Federation.

On the geopolitical stage Lukashenko escalates his anti-Western rhetoric and squarely sides with the Russian Federation in most matters. He shies away from formally recognizing Russian sovereignty over Crimea in order not to aggravate bilateral relations with Ukraine, which remains an important lifeline for Belarusian trade. The EU practically ceases all forms of cooperation with the Lukashenko regime and instead invests in people-to-people contacts and the Belarusian opposition in exile. A parallel legal reality develops where the EU does not recognize the Belarusian-Russian agreements.

### Scenario 3: Change of Course

In the 'Change of Course' scenario, the Lukashenko government is toppled by sustained domestic protests and paralysing strikes in state-owned enterprises. An interim government is formed by moderate opposition forces that are joined by part of the former political elite. While the Union State treaties continue to exist, the new leadership blocks further integration in the Union State and makes overtures towards the EU. Russia withdraws its financial support to the country and demands that Belarus repays its vast debts. The EU tries to cushion the blow through economic assistance but fails to stave off a recession. What follows is a painful economic transition marked by high inflation and unemployment. State companies are privatised, potentially leading to a more oligarchic economic system. The ensuing rationalisation in the production capacities of state companies leads to mass layoffs. Formal trade with the EU decreases while illicit trafficking receives an uptick. The brain drain phenomenon is not yet reversed, though there is a potential for further stabilisation which may lead diaspora to return in the future.

As a result of the economic situation, the new government is under immense pressure to show positive results. Despite infighting within the opposition and occasional street protests the government enjoys much higher legitimacy and more trust than the Lukashenko regime. Economic and societal pressures on the new government amplify the differences within the former opposition, of which only the moderate part has joined the government. Further opposition is formed by a more conservative part of society, which enjoyed a steady income and pensions under the former regime. Relatively free elections take place, but a fully functioning rule of law is not yet in place. The country moves towards a more democratic form of government, but state capture elements remain. It proves difficult to free institutions from clientelism and corruption and the question of the 'lustration' of public officials who served the Lukashenko regime divides the country.

The Russian Federation recognizes the new Belarusian leadership but actively undermines its efforts to build better relations with the EU. Russia eventually imposes sanctions when Belarus does not comply with the Union State agreements signed by Lukashenko. Relations between the two strongly deteriorate. Poland and Lithuania initiate an EU "Marshall plan" that partially offsets the loss of Russian subsidies, although the absorption capacity of Belarus remains low due to governance and rule of law challenges. The IMF, EBRD and other international financial institutions step in to stabilize the Belarusian economy but demand far-reaching structural reforms that prove difficult for the new leadership to implement.

## Scenario 4: Incorporation

In the 'Incorporation' scenario, significant changes take place in the Belarusian leadership as Lukashenko and his regime are replaced by a pro-Russian political force following a tightly managed election. The country sees far-reaching integration with the Union State, losing its independence in all but name. The security forces and civil service have switched their allegiance to the new president and are integrated in Russian structures; those who disagree are replaced. High levels of repression continue and even intensify; the state retains the monopoly on the use of force. There is no room for divergent political opinions.

The regime is backed only by a minority of the population and has very little internal legitimacy left. The opposition has no real opportunity to participate in the political process. Any alternative views are only expressed through social media channels, as all media channels are brought under full state control. Certain underground groups begin a sporadic, guerrilla-like resistance against the authorities but do not succeed in significantly changing the status quo. Trade unions largely fall in line as well.

While cosmetic constitutional reforms are carried out, they do not make a marked difference as the Kremlin establishes control. Society largely opposes far-reaching integration into the Russian Federation but has no opportunity to halt the process. Emigration, especially amongst businesses and young talent, sharply increases. These developments spur a return of political apathy amongst citizens. Economically, Belarus becomes much more impoverished and is on Russian lifeline support. The more profitable state enterprises are taken over by Russian entrepreneurs. The others are liquidated, leading to socio-economic problems.

Geopolitically, the former multi-vector diplomacy of Belarus ceases to exist. The country becomes a de facto satellite state of the Russian Federation, recognizes Russian sovereignty over Crimea and breaks off diplomatic relations with Ukraine. The EU and the US do not recognize the outcome of the elections nor the new government. As a result, Belarus becomes even more isolated and enjoys only limited external legitimacy. Russia fully integrates Belarus into its military structures and establishes permanent military bases on its territory. This triggers more NATO deployments in Poland and the Baltic States, which in turn leads to a further build-up of Russian forces.

## Implications and preferred scenarios for the different actors

As 'potential futures' these scenarios can be used to think strategically about possible implications for specific actors and by linking them to their objectives as outlined in previous chapters.

- The **'Muddle Through'** scenario is both the preferred scenario of Lukashenko himself and best reflects the pattern of interaction between Belarus, the EU and the Russian Federation over the last 25 years. However, it is doubtful whether both the EU and the Russian Federation will be content to eventually go back to 'business as usual'; Russia will want to 'cash in' on Lukashenko's relative weakness, while the EU would have to compromise significantly on its stated policies of upholding European values if it would re-engage with the current regime.
- The **'Reluctant Integration'** scenario is arguably the most compatible with the interests of two out of the three key actors, given Lukashenko's desire to stay in power either upfront or behind the scenes, and Moscow's reluctance to force through a regime change. The EU clearly does not prefer this scenario but lacks the leverage to avoid it from materialising, and still sees it as more palatable than a de facto incorporation of Belarus into the Russian Federation.
- The **'Change of Course'** scenario, whereby a more moderate government comes to power through relatively free and fair elections and pursues a more balanced foreign policy, is the preferred scenario of the European Union. This would not only meet the EU's stated aim of ensuring that the Belarusian people can choose their own government; it would also allow the EU much more engagement with Belarus than before. For Lukashenko this is obviously the least desired scenario, and one he will go to great lengths to avoid. The same applies to the Russian Federation, especially if the authorities pursue a much more pro-Western course than their predecessor.
- The **'Incorporation'** scenario, while in principle desirable for the Russian Federation from a zero-sum geopolitical perspective, sharply goes against the interests of both the Lukashenko regime and the EU. Both will work to prevent this scenario. It could also prove costly for Russia to prop up the struggling Belarusian economy and would lead to a further deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, especially if the latter begins to align its sanction regimes against both countries.

**Table 1 Summary of the consequences of the different scenarios**

Scenario	Muddle Through	Reluctant Integration	Change of Course	Incorporation
Regime stability and degree of integration with the RF	Lukashenko regime remains in power and makes 'just enough' concessions, largely in the military domain, but keeps the option open to backtrack at a later date.	Lukashenko regime makes far-reaching concessions in order to stay in power, including in the economic dimension; integration becomes largely irreversible.	New, moderate authorities try to pull out of some Union State commitments	New pro-Russian authorities sign away most of Belarus' sovereignty
Geopolitical	Regime makes largely symbolic human rights concessions. EU eventually "critically re-engages" and lifts most sanctions. RF keeps on the pressure and Minsk-Moscow relations sour once again	Lukashenko escalates anti-Western rhetoric and policies, leading to further isolation and alignment with Russian foreign and security policy. EU largely breaks off relations.	New authorities try to rebalance their foreign policy; EU engages & supports, RF actively obstructs	Belarus for all practical purposes becomes a satellite state of the RF, with no independent foreign policy.
Security	Belarus-Russia close security cooperation will continue, largely within the current institutional frameworks. Belarus will not sever formal links to NATO and the EU.	Belarus will sign up to a joint State Union military doctrine, and existing cooperation levels will increase. NATO and EU effectively sidelined.	New opportunities for developing cooperation with NATO and the EU, although conservative elements in Belarus' security establishment and Russian pressure will limit its scope.	Belarus becomes a fully-fledged extension of Russia's Western Military District, including permanent stationing of RF troops and military infrastructure.
Economic	Lukashenko will remain economically dependent on RF, relying on energy contracts to sustain the Belarusian economy.	Lukashenko remains economically dependent on energy contracts with RF. Lukashenko is forced to liberalise parts of the market to increase Russian ownership.	The new authorities liberalise the Belarusian market. The transition to a market economy is accompanied by a temporary but serious recession.	The Belarusian economy is merged with the RF. Belarus' weak economic performance destabilises the Russian market.
Actor preference	Preferred by Lukashenko, acceptable to the RF, problematic for the EU	Acceptable to the RF and Lukashenko, problematic for the EU	Preferred by the EU, unacceptable to the RF and Lukashenko	Preferred by (parts of) the RF, unacceptable for Lukashenko and the EU

## 7 Conclusions and recommendations

The policy of the Netherlands towards Belarus is largely implemented through the EU and NATO, which is why this chapter focuses exclusively on these two organizations. The **European Union** has only limited leverage due to a pattern of over 25 years of, at best, selective engagement with Belarus. The EU has alternated between isolating Lukashenko and reaching out to him, including by imposing and subsequently lifting sanctions. Brussels has hitherto largely been unsuccessful in achieving any of its strategic objectives: Lukashenko has only resorted to more repression to preserve power, and he has become more dependent on the Russian Federation than ever. The EU has so far avoided entering into a new geopolitical confrontation with the Russian Federation over Belarus, but the longer Lukashenko's repressive policies continue, and the more Belarus integrates with the Russian Federation, the more difficult this becomes.

**NATO** has even fewer possibilities than the European Union to influence the situation within Belarus and finds itself in a classic security dilemma. It has to respond to the legitimate security concerns of neighbouring allies such as Poland and Lithuania. But if NATO reinforces its military presence in the vicinity of the Belarusian border, the Russian Federation will reciprocate by building up its own military presence within the framework of the Union State and other bilateral military agreements. Furthermore, increased NATO involvement in the region only plays into Lukashenko's hand by reinforcing his narrative towards the Kremlin that "Belarus and Russia are both under threat from NATO". This security dilemma significantly limits the Alliance's room for manoeuvre.

However, this does not mean that the EU and NATO have no options at all at their disposal, both to nudge the outcome towards a preferred 'change of course' scenario or to mitigate the negative geopolitical, economic and security consequences of the other three scenarios. The following steps could be considered in this regard:

1. The EU should **stop compromising on its values for geopolitical purposes** by opportunistically lifting sanctions whenever Lukashenko gets into an argument with Russia and makes token concessions in the field of human rights. Instead, the EU should follow a firm course of action where sanctions are only eased if meaningful concessions are made. Despite Western tendencies to 'personalize' such crises by over-emphasizing the fate of a few high-profile individuals, the problems of autocratic governance in Belarus are systemic and should be addressed as such;

it is not sufficient to release one prominent activist from house arrest while hundreds of political prisoners continue to languish in Belarusian prisons and critical news outlets are silenced.

2. Consequently, the EU should decisively conclude that **there is no quick fix** and should instead **play the long game** by offering Belarus and especially its population a longer-term perspective of economic growth and support for the country's democratic movement. The more the EU stands by its own values and the more the Kremlin backs up a repressive autocrat, the more the Belarusian population will shift their generally positive view of Russia westwards.
3. The EU should also **carefully consider if and when it would recognize a new leadership even if Lukashenko steps down**, as future elections or referenda in Belarus are unlikely to be completely free and democratic. In the meantime the EU should formally preserve Belarus' membership within the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership, despite Lukashenko's decision to suspend his country's participation, in order to keep the option on the table for future Governments to return to a dialogue with the EU.
4. The EU should **scale up measures that mitigate the effects of repression on the Belarusian people**, such as granting visas, scholarships and other opportunities for Belarusian activists, students and entrepreneurs who have to temporarily leave the country. Supporting efforts such as documenting human rights abuses and the pursuit of international justice reinforces the EU's value-driven approach, even if the short-term impact is likely to be limited. The EU should also offer non-state economic actors in Belarus a perspective through loans and market access to *privately* owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
5. The EU should emphasize its principled position that **any decisions regarding the further integration of Belarus with the Russian Federation should be taken in a transparent and inclusive manner**. The populations of both countries should be consulted and allowed to express their positions through democratic means, in accordance with the OSCE commitments undertaken by both the Russian Federation and Belarus.
6. In the field of security policy, the Netherlands and other Western countries should realise that under the current circumstances their capacity to shape security policy developments in Belarus is limited. They should therefore **proceed from a 'do no harm' basis** and be cognizant of the fact that in Russian and Belarusian narratives 'the West' and NATO play negative roles vis-à-vis Belarus. NATO should stay firm on



principles<sup>75</sup> and keep investing in a robust deterrence posture on its eastern borders to reassure allied nations. Lines of communication with Minsk should remain as open as possible, including within the OSCE framework. Moreover, Belarus should also be a topic for discussion in the framework of the NATO-Russia Council. With regard to Ukraine, Western countries should continue their efforts to resolve this crisis, as it is closely interlinked with Belarus in Moscow's strategic calculations.

7. NATO should particularly call on Russia and Belarus to provide maximum transparency in the run-up to, as well as during, the upcoming **Zapad 2021 military exercises** as required by the 2011 Vienna Document on CSBMs in the OSCE, and it should lead by example by being transparent about its own exercises and military deployments in the region. NATO and individual allies should try to assess Zapad 2021 as professionally as possible, without resorting to undue alarmism that would play into Moscow's and Minsk's hands.
8. Despite their shortcomings, economic sanctions remain one of the few sources of significant EU leverage over both Belarus and the Russian Federation. The EU should be mindful of the interlinkages between the economies of the two countries within the framework of the two integration projects: the Union State and the Eurasian Economic Union. In order to reduce the risk of sanction-busting and increase the effectiveness of the measures the **sanction regimes against Belarus and Russia, although designed separately, should be as congruent as possible** and the specificities of individual sectors – such as the Belarusian and Russian potash exports – should be taken into account. The EU should also strive to co-ordinate its sanction policy closely with the United States and the United Kingdom.
9. However, EU member states ought to remember that negative conditionality – that is, reinforcement by punishment rather than reward – has rarely been a successful strategy on its own. Not only do sanctions reinforce a 'bunker mentality' that allows elites to divert domestic criticism of economic tribulations towards external actors, they also carry a real risk of forcing countries to 'band together', as is presently the case with Belarus and the Russian Federation. The EU should therefore **complement its punitive approach with a longer-term strategy of positive economic reinforcement towards Belarus**, to be deployed in the case of a change in course by the current regime or future governments.

---

75 Such as those enshrined in the [1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act](#), the 2002 Rome Declaration ([NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality](#)) and various OSCE documents.

# Annex 1    How to Build a Union: View of Societies and Elites in Russia and Belarus

*Artyom Shraibman*<sup>76</sup>

**Since the beginning of 2019, Minsk and Moscow have been discussing how to deepen the integration between the two countries. Negotiations are yet to produce any tangible progress, however. The goals of the two autocrats, Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko, are opposite, but public opinion on the topic of integration is surprisingly similar in both countries.**

After another round of disputes between Belarus and Russia over the terms of oil and gas supplies in 2018, Dmitry Medvedev, the then Russian Prime Minister, offered Lukashenko a simple choice, which was later referred to as the “Medvedev’s ultimatum”. He said that Moscow can maintain energy subsidies for Minsk but only in exchange for intensified integration based on the long-forgotten Union State Treaty of 1999.

Lukashenko agreed to discuss this matter, but the negotiations reached a deadlock and were halted in 2020 when Belarus’ domestic politics suddenly became turbulent. With a new degree of isolation from the West, Lukashenko was forced to revive the dialogue on integration with Russia in 2021. But no consensus has so far been reached.

The problem that prevented Belarus and Russia from achieving closer integration 20 years ago is the same as that which stands in the way today, that is the fundamental divergence in their goals. Minsk sees integration as a way to obtain trade preferences from Russia. Lukashenko’s perfect model of a union is an open Russian market for Belarusian goods, prices for oil and gas being equal to what the Russian regions have to pay and, at the same time, full sovereignty when it comes to ruling Belarus.

---

<sup>76</sup> Artyom Shraibman is a political analyst. He focuses on Belarus-related developments, including domestic politics and foreign policy. He is a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center and the founder of Sense Analytics, a political consultancy.

The Kremlin wishes to expand its political influence in Belarus while allocating only minimum subsidies. For that purpose, Moscow insists on institutionalized integration, which includes supranational bodies, a common currency, and unified tax and customs systems.

Since it is impossible to build a parity-based alliance of two states that are so different when it comes to their respective weight, any transfer of power to the supranational level is a loss of sovereignty for Minsk. Lukashenko is known for his craving for absolute power, and this concerns a rejection not only of internal checks, but of external restrictions as well. Supranational bodies controlled by Moscow are incompatible with the notion of absolute power.

However, it would be wrong to simplify the Belarusian regime's motivation; it is not only an obsession with power. Lukashenko, his family, leading officials and businesses close to them have become beneficiaries of Belarus' independence. If Russian state-affiliated or oligarchic capital arrives, it would compromise the Belarusian ruling elite's interests. As the Belarusian regime is personalistic in nature, there are no clearly defined elite groups and clans within it, and the mood of the bureaucracy is poorly understood. This gives rise to widespread speculation that the Belarusian security forces and the military are more conducive towards the alliance with Russia than other groups. This hypothesis cannot be verified or refuted without in-depth research which is almost impossible to conduct. However, it is worth noting that there are almost no generals left among the leadership of the security agencies who built their careers during the USSR period or in Russia. Lukashenko launched an opposite effort – to replace Russia-educated generals with graduates from Belarusian military training institutions.

The Belarusian bureaucracy is also not isolated from the changing society. In recent years, the public has developed something close to a national consensus on the issue of independence. All polls provide similar results: the majority of Belarusians support the current level of integration with Russia and do not want to either reverse or intensify it. According to a poll by the Belarusian Academy of Sciences (in June 2020)<sup>77</sup>, 62% of Belarusians want to preserve relations between Belarus and Russia as two independent states, 25% are in favour of an alliance between two equal nations with supranational bodies, and only 7% support incorporation into Russia. Polls by the independent centre "Belarusian Analytical Workshop" in August<sup>78</sup> and December 2019<sup>79</sup> showed that a total of 16% of Belarusians support either joining Russia or uniting into a single new state,

---

77 IS NAN Belarusi, "[Dinamika ocenok vneshnepoliticheskikh vektorov Belarusi \(po dannym monitoringovykh issledovaniy Instituta sociologii NAN Belarusi\)](#)," 13 August 2020.

78 Dominik Istrate, "[Majority of Belarusians support union state with Russia](#)," *Emerging Europe*, 3 October 2019.

79 Belsat, "[Number of Belarus-Russia union supporters falls by third – poll](#)," 5 February 2020.

while 75-76% wish to keep integration at the current stage – with open borders and a common market, without a political merger.

The pandemic and post-election repression in Belarus in 2020 made it impossible to conduct face-to-face polls which provide the most representative results. However, online surveys, in accordance with all the sampling rules, which were held among the residents of Belarusian cities (that is, more than 75% of the country's population) show that there is still a consensus on independence. Thus, the poll commissioned by the ZOiS Institute<sup>80</sup> (in Berlin) in March 2021 showed that 7% of respondents want to unite with Russia in one state. Another 11% would like to see a closer union than today – with a single currency and a unified foreign and security policy. But the overwhelming majority still support different formats of free trade or a common market without political integration.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but the public opinion of Russians on unification with Belarus does not differ much from the views of Belarusians. First, both Belarusians and Russians perceive each other as the closest peoples – this is a constant in all available polls over the past few decades. At the same time, according to the polls held by the Levada Center<sup>81</sup> in December 2019 and August 2020, only 23-24% of Russians spoke in favour of intensified political integration. Only half of them wish to see Belarus as a Russian region. Russians, like Belarusians, prefer to either leave relations at their current level (about 30% of respondents according to the Levada Center's polls), or to develop economic cooperation (more than 40% of respondents).

The Russian state-run VCIOM Institute provides just slightly different results. According to their polls in April 2019<sup>82</sup> and September 2020<sup>83</sup>, only one in six respondents would like to see Belarus becoming part of Russia. Around the same number of respondents agree on an equality-based union. Some 43-48% are of the opinion that there is no need for further unification. Russian sociologists, who conducted in-depth research through focus groups<sup>84</sup> in 2018, believe that it was then – after the events in Crimea, Donbass and Syria – that the Russian public began to wish that the Kremlin would put an end to its foreign escapades and to spend more resources on internal needs instead of diverting them externally.

---

80 Gwendolyn Sasse, Nadja Douglas, Regina Elsner, Félix Krawatzek, and Julia Langbein, "[Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change](#)," *Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien*, 25 March 2021.

81 Levada Tsentr, "[Pochti chetvert grazhdan podderzhivajut ideju obedinenija s belorussiej](#)," 17 September 2020.

82 Vciom Novosti, "[Rossija i Belorussija: novyj format integracii?](#)," 2 April 2019.

83 Vciom Novosti, "[Belorussija, Rossija. Cojuznoe gosudarstvo](#)," 9 September 2020.

84 Vladimir Dergachev, "[U rossijan vznikli novye zaprosy](#)," *RBC*, 24 December 2018.

The most important takeaway from this data is that there is no desire in Russian society to incorporate Belarus, which the Kremlin could use to distract people from internal problems, as it did in 2014 with Crimea. This makes the forced incorporation of Belarus a dubious undertaking for the Russian authorities. Such actions would predictably have international repercussions, including new Western sanctions. The costs of suppressing discontent among Belarusians and maintaining the increasingly isolated economy of Belarus will also be high. Yet, there are no significant political bonuses to be gained within Russia.

This explains the rather restrained position of Moscow in the dialogue on integration. These negotiations often seem like a veiled attempt by the Kremlin to offer Minsk *a priori* unrealistic terms for integration and to provide Russia with a legitimate reason to cut economic support when Lukashenko not unexpectedly refuses. That is why, despite the seeming renaissance of the Belarusian-Russian friendship after Minsk was submitted to new Western sanctions in 2020, Moscow does not make significant financial concessions to Lukashenko. The tax manoeuvre in the oil sector, which gradually reduces bonuses to Belarus from duty-free supplies of Russian oil every year, is progressing according to schedule. Moscow also refuses to cut the gas prices requested by Minsk. In fact, the only area where some support continues is the provision of new loans to pay off old ones.

At the same time, the Russian elite are not homogeneous in their attitude towards Lukashenko and integration with Belarus. There are at least three overlapping interest groups here. The first one is **the hawks**, primarily represented by the *siloviki*. They look upon Belarus, the same as Eastern Europe in its entirety, as an arena of geopolitical confrontation with the West. They are ready to support an ally, but they also demand more disciplined adherence to Russian military interests. When Minsk engaged in a more intensive dialogue with the West and Ukraine after 2014, Lukashenko then became less trusted. As a result, the FSB strengthened control over the Belarusian-Russian border, while the Ministry of Defence built up military infrastructure near this border (including the deployment of new troops in the Smolensk and Bryansk regions in 2016). Thus, Moscow signalled that it can no longer fully trust Minsk to protect its western flank.

The second camp includes some **Russian oligarchs and affiliated government officials**, who approach Belarus based on the interests of their companies. This segment of the Russian leadership is the most hostile to Lukashenko. These persons are lobbying to restrict the admission of Belarusian goods to the Russian market (first and foremost, agricultural products), accusing Minsk of subsidizing their production, and, as a result, of unfair competition. On the other hand, it is the representatives of this group within the Russian elite who advocate the more active privatization of Belarusian state assets in favour of Russian capital. Lukashenko's refusal to enter into these deals is a source of constant conflict with large Russian state-affiliated businesses.

Finally, the third group consists of more **pragmatic monetarists**, represented by the financial and economic bloc of the changing Russian governments. These persons are less interested in geopolitics or a common history, and, accordingly, they do not insist on Lukashenko's maximum level of loyalty. But they do profess a financial approach to relations, which means transparent and market-based cooperation, without subsidies and benefits for Belarus. It is no coincidence that the period of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008-2012) was one of the most conflicting in relations between Minsk and Moscow.

Vladimir Putin serves as an arbiter among different factions of the Russian elite. He deals with problematic relations when Lukashenko elevates them to the presidential level after lower departments have failed to resolve them. As Putin wants to appear to be the creator of post-Soviet alliances, not their destroyer, Lukashenko often succeeds in persuading him to adopt a moderate position between the interests of different camps. Knowing Putin's conservatism, Lukashenko skilfully plays on the lack of pro-Russian alternatives for him in Belarus and on the fact that drastic changes in Russia's policy could destabilize Belarus. This makes it possible to smooth over both the military-related claims of the Russian hawks and the economic pressure from the oligarchs or the government technocrats. When Moscow's approach shifts to any of the extremes, new conflicts with Minsk then emerge.

The broader geopolitical context is also a factor here. The more strained the Russia-West relationship becomes, the easier it is for Minsk to earn Putin's loyalty without major concessions. During such times, Lukashenko actively promotes himself as the most anti-Western ruler of Belarus that is possible, and this convinces the Kremlin to soften its approach. When relations between the West and Russia are stable or are de-escalating, Lukashenko's anti-Western rhetoric and actions cease to be an asset, and the Kremlin's interest in lessening conflicts in bilateral relations evaporates. At such times, the interests of various Russian elite groups enter the arena. None of them trusts Lukashenko – each for its own reasons. Therefore, Lukashenko is interested in maintaining the escalation of tension between Moscow and the West. The better their contacts are, the more likely Putin and Western leaders can discuss the fate of the Belarusian regime behind Lukashenko's back. This is his worst nightmare.

Given all these complex interests within the Russian elite and society vis-à-vis Belarus, forced incorporation against the will of Minsk and most Belarusians seems unlikely. This forecast however works as long as the Kremlin perceives the situation in Minsk to be manageable. If the Belarusian political crisis in 2020 had led to Ukraine-like protests – with the seizure of administrative buildings, armed clashes with the police and a real threat of a street revolution – all of the nuanced calculations of Moscow would most likely have given way to the logic that led to the 2014 Crimea annexation. Thoughts about economic and other costs become secondary in Russia when there is even an illusory risk of losing Belarus through what the Kremlin perceives as a pro-Western “colour revolution”.

## Annex 2 Key economic dependencies of Belarus

*Dr. Kateryna Bornukova<sup>85</sup>*

Belarus is a small open economy with a trade openness of 133% as of 2019<sup>86</sup>. In 2017, exports of goods and services contributed 45% in value to GDP, playing a particularly significant role in manufacturing, transportation, and IT services<sup>87</sup>. Entering new markets or venturing into trading in new goods was difficult for Belarus, with only a 24% export growth in 2004–2018 associated with new goods or markets, and the degree of penetration into new markets remained low<sup>88</sup>. Exports of petrochemicals and potash fertilizers contributed 15.8% and 8.4% respectively to the total exports of goods in 2019. The global competitiveness of Belarusian exports, aside from petrochemicals and potash, is concentrated in agriculture and food processing, while more advanced industrial exports can only compete on traditional CIS markets<sup>89</sup>.

Russia has been a major trading partner for Belarus since the country gained independence. Belarus quickly restored its access to the Russian market after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Belarus was often referred to as the “assembly shop” of the USSR, and restoring economic ties with Russia was key in the quick rebound of the Belarusian economy at the end of the 1990s<sup>90</sup>. The share of the Russian market for Belarusian exports of goods remained relatively constant at 45% from 1995 to 2020,

---

85 Dr. Kateryna Bornukova is the Academic Director of the Belarus Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC).

86 World Bank, “[World development indicators 2021](#),” 20 June 2021.

87 Irina Tochitskaya, “[Ocenka dobavlennoj stoimosti v jeksporte Belarusi](#),” Bankovskiy Vestnik, April 2020.

88 Irina Tochitskaya, “[Jeksport Belarusi: jekstensivnye i intensivnye faktory rosta i slozhnost](#),” Bankovskiy Vestnik, March 2020.

89 Amat Adarov, Peter Havlik, Gabor Hunya, and Olg Pindyuk, “3. Trade and international economic relations,” *The Belarus Economy: The Challenges of Stalled Reforms* (2016): 75.

90 Dobrinsky, Rumen, “Belarus’ unorthodox political and economic transformation,” *The Belarus Economy: The Challenges of Stalled Reforms* (2016): 3.

temporarily becoming less in the 2000s due to higher oil and petrochemical prices<sup>91</sup>. Imports from Russia are also critical and are concentrated in energy goods.

Russia is a natural destination for Belarusian exports – trade in goods is largely unrestricted as the countries are in an economic union, a long history of economic ties and common tastes and culture make marketing easier, while a relatively small distance and good logistics lower costs. All of these factors determine Russia's major role, aided by political preferences. However, several factors have pressured Belarus to diversify away from Russia. First, the dependence on the Russian market has ceased to deliver growth as the Russian economy is stagnating. Moreover, the volatility of oil prices also implies the volatility of the Belarusian economy through the Russian trade channel. For example, in 2015 the Russian economic crisis resulted in a significant export decline which cost Belarus at least 2.4% of GDP<sup>92</sup>. Second, Russia has often used trade as a political instrument. Minor trade wars were common, with Russia using food safety concerns as a pretext for temporarily banning Belarusian food exports. In 2020 failed integration talks culminated in a cut in oil supplies from Russia during the first quarter<sup>93</sup>.

These issues and tensions resulted in Belarus adopting a 30/30/30 export strategy aiming to diversify exports equally between Russia, the EU, and other markets, mostly Asia. While the EU is another natural trading partner for Belarus geographically, several impediments exist when it comes to successfully increasing exports. One is the low efficiency of Belarusian state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that dominate the manufacturing industry. These SOEs also have very low incentives to diversify away from the comfortable Russian market. Another reason is the existence of significant trade barriers. While Belarusian agriculture and food processing could potentially be competitive on the EU markets, access is restricted by EU trade protection measures. Finally, the ongoing political crisis and the possibility of EU sanctions are new impediments.

Belarusian exports to Russia are fairly diversified, ranging from food to textiles to electronics, machinery, and transport equipment. In contrast, exports to the EU are more concentrated in certain groups of goods: oil and petrochemicals (over 60% of exports to the EU countries in 2019), timber, and metals. These goods also have lower added value. Belarus imports more advanced goods from the EU, like chemical products, machinery, and transport equipment.

---

91 Most of the trade figures in this chapter come from the [National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus](#) if not stated otherwise.

92 Kateryna Bornukova and Igor Livshits, "The impact of Russian crisis on Belarusian economy: The trade channel," in [The Russian Economy under Putin](#), ed. Torbjörn Becker and Susanne Oxenstierna (New York: Routledge, 2018).

93 Oxford Analytica, "[Belarus under severe pressure as Russian oil flow ends](#)," 3 January 2020.



Belarus is quickly developing its exports of services, and here the EU and the US are important destinations. Due to its geographic position between the EU and Russia, Belarus is a net exporter of transportation services, exporting USD 4 billion and importing USD 1.9 billion in 2019. ICT exports have grown quickly with the creation of the High-Tech Park special economic zone in 2006 and amounted to USD 2.4 billion in 2019. The share of the EU in the exports of services from Belarus was 45% in 2019, another 11% (mostly in ICT) went to the US<sup>94</sup>.

Belarusian exports transit through EU territory. In 2019, Belarus exported USD 440 million worth of petrochemicals to the Netherlands or 8.5% of its total petrochemical exports. Most of these exports are destined for further re-exports through the Port of Rotterdam. Belarus also relied heavily on Baltic ports, for example, on Klaipeda (Lithuania). Belarus co-owns a specialized potash terminal in the Port of Klaipeda. While Belarus redirected part of its petrochemical exports to Russian ports in 2020 during the political crisis, Klaipeda remains a major port for potash fertilizers which are mostly exported to India, China, and Brazil. Redirecting potash exports to Russian ports would not be an easy task as the ports do not have specialized container terminals.

As part of its diversification efforts, Belarus is actively developing trade ties with China. Imports from China (USD 3.8 billion in 2019) are significantly higher than exports (USD 0.67 billion in 2019). While Belarusian exports to China are rapidly increasing (to USD 0.75 billion in 2020), they are concentrated on several goods: poultry, dried milk powder, whey, timber, and cellulose. The large distance together with the unfamiliarity of Belarusian producers and their low competitiveness remain as obstacles when it comes to a significant growth in exports to China.

Despite the recent efforts to diversify, Belarusian trade remains largely concentrated, with 37% of goods and services being exported to Russia and 30% to the EU. Most of the success in diversification has come from the trade in services. However, those gains in diversification are now under threat as the political crisis threatens Belarusian transit, and the IT sector might relocate due to repression<sup>95</sup>.

---

94 The National Bank of the Republic of Belarus, "[Balance of Payments of the Republic of Belarus for 2000–2020](#)."

95 Dzmitry Kruk and Lev Lvovskiy, "[Does political illegitimacy in Belarus imply new economic risks?](#)," *FREE policy briefs*, 2 October 2020.

## Energy ties and dependencies

62% of energy in Belarus in 2019 was produced from imported natural gas, 28% from oil<sup>96</sup>. Belarus is highly dependent on Russian supplies of oil and natural gas. Oil supplies could be diversified to some extent if necessary – in 2020, Belarus imported only 90% of mineral fuels from Russia because of the oil supply conflict during the first quarter. Diversifying the supplies of natural gas would be more problematic, as the only supply route is the Gazprom-owned pipeline, and 100% of natural gas supplies come from Russia.

Energy dependence has often become a source of conflict and has led to several gas and oil wars. In 2004, Russia cut the gas supply for one day; in 2020 it cut oil supplies almost completely for three months. However, it is not easy for Belarus to diversify away from this dependency both due to technical supply issues, and also because Russia subsidizes Belarus through energy price discounts, as outlined in chapters 3 and 5.

In 2011 Belarus signed a USD 10 billion loan agreement with Russia to secure funding for the construction of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant (NPP). The first energy block was launched in 2020 at 40% of its full capacity of 1200 Mw. The NPP was supposed to lessen Belarus' dependency on Russian energy imports. However, Belarus needs significant infrastructure investment – around USD 3 billion, according to the State Programme on Energy Security – to switch from oil and gas-based energy and heat production to electricity. EBRD and EIB were ready to provide part of the funding that was necessary, but the situation changed with the political crisis.

The perspectives for exporting Belarusian electricity are bleak. Belarus viewed Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine as major export markets once the NPP has been launched. Lithuania was sceptical about the idea from the start, fearing the environmental implications of the NPP built very close to the Lithuanian border. After the start of the political crisis in August 2020, the Baltic countries decided to halt any electricity imports from Belarus. Ukraine is also reluctant, and Belarus lacks the necessary infrastructure to export to Poland<sup>97</sup>. Once the first energy block reaches full capacity, and especially when the second block is launched, Belarus is likely to face a surplus of electricity. The energy dependence on Russian supplies of oil and gas is likely to remain for the next few years until Belarus rebuilds its energy infrastructure.

---

96 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "[Valovoe potreblenie toplivno-jenergeticheskikh resursov v 2019 godu](#)," 2020,

97 Tatsiana Manenok, "[BelJAES: poka bez shansov na jeksport jelektroenergii](#)," Nashe Mnenie, 10 November 2021.

## Foreign Direct Investment flows

Belarus has never attracted large flows of foreign direct investment (FDI), mostly due to the absence of large-scale privatization in the 1990s and the poor protection of property rights. In the 2010s, when Belarus set on a path of private sector liberalization, FDI inflows fluctuated from USD 1.3 to 2 billion per year. Since 2016, most of the FDI inflows have come into finance, ICT, the wholesale trade, transportation, and the timber sectors. Aside from ICT, most of the FDI in those sectors goes into greenfield investment.

Russia is the largest source of FDI, contributing 33.9% of total inflows during 2011–2020. Russian ownership extends from several large banks to a gas pipeline to a major brewery. Unlike other investors, Russian investors do not focus exclusively on greenfield projects. Cyprus is the second major source with 14.9% of FDI, often used as a jurisdiction for Russian capital.

Several EU countries – the Netherlands, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia – contribute 1–3% of FDI inflows each. Dutch investments are in food processing, the pharma industry, IT, textiles, and logistics. The US, Switzerland, and the UK also have comparable contributions. While Austria is less important in terms of volume, it has several signature investments – Prior Bank as part of the Raiffeisen group, and A1, one of the two major cell phone providers in Belarus. Austrian banks, along with the Russian banks, are the major providers of short-term liquidity loans to Belarusian banks.

FDI flows from China contributed 2.8% of total FDI over the last ten years. Chinese FDI peaked in 2018–2019 with several large investment projects, including those connected to the Great Stone Industrial Park, a special economic zone with tax preferences designed to lure Chinese industrial tech companies. China viewed the Great Stone Park as part of its Belt and Road Initiative<sup>98</sup>. Chinese projects in Belarus were often not FDI-based. Chinese state banks opened a USD 14 billion credit line for Belarus in 2014, but most of the funding remained unused as the parties could not find suitable projects. Several large loan-financed Belarus-China projects were successfully realized, with the most prominent being the automobile manufacturer BelGee assembling Geely cars. Several Chinese projects, however, were deemed to be a failure, as Chinese contractors were not able to meet the technical standards, as in the case of the cellulose factory in Svetlogorsk<sup>99</sup>. To avoid the Chinese debt trap, Belarus chose the strategy of maximizing

---

98 Zhigao Liu, Michael Dunford, and Weidong Liu, "Coupling national geo-political economic strategies and the Belt and Road Initiative: The China-Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park," *Political Geography*, no. 84 (2021): 102296.

99 Katsiaryna Zaitsava, "Sotrudnichestvo Respubliki Belarus' i KNR v investicionnoj sfere," *Bankovskiy Vestnik*, August 2019.

the FDI-based financing from China<sup>100</sup>. By the end of 2019, the Great Stone Industrial Park had attracted more than USD 520 million FDI and planned to increase this figure to USD 1.5 bn in 2020. But after the political crisis erupted in the second half of 2020, the FDI flows from China stopped.

## Financing of the public debt and infrastructure projects

The Belarusian public debt has grown significantly since 2010 when it was at only 19% of GDP. As of 1 January 2021, public debt amounted to 37.3% of GDP. As the financial markets are underdeveloped in Belarus, a large proportion of the public debt is external, with 30.9% of GDP or USD 18.6 billion in external public debt. A significant share of the internal public debt is denominated in US dollars, and only 2.4% of the total public debt is denominated in Belarusian rubles<sup>101</sup>. This classic original sin dilemma makes Belarus vulnerable to exchange rate devaluations. Belarus will have to repay around USD 3 billion annually in the coming years, and securing external funding for 50-75% of these payments will be critical to avoid default.

Russia has often played the role of the funder of last resort for Belarus, both directly through government loans, and indirectly through Eurasian integration institutions like the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development (EFSD). Belarus owes around USD 8.3 billion to Russia and USD 2.5 billion to the EFSD. Hence, Belarus owes over 50% of its external public debt to Russia and associated institutions. Russia also pledged USD 1.5 billion in loans at the height of the political crisis in the autumn of 2020, thereby helping Belarus to stabilize its currency market.

Chinese loans constitute USD 4.8 billion or 24% of Belarus' external public debt. While most of these loans were investment loans guaranteed by the state, Belarus also secured a USD 500 million Chinese government loan at the end of 2019<sup>102</sup>, amid the heated integration talks with Russia. While the Belarusian government has often mentioned China as a potential source of funding to finance the public debt in 2020-2021, no official talks are ongoing.

Belarus has also developed relationships with international financial institutions like IMF and EBRD. The USD 2.5 billion programme with the IMF started in 2009 after the financial crisis. However, the programme ended with Belarus not following IMF advice

---

100 Kiryl Rudy, "[Belarus-China: Avoiding the 'Debt Trap'](#)," in *Global Market and Global Trade*, ed. Muhammad Mohiuddin and Jingbin Wang, IntechOpen, 2021.

101 Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, "[O sostojanii gosudarstvennogo dolga Respubliki Belarus](#)," 2021.

102 Associated Press, "[Belarus gets \\$500-million loan from China](#)," 16 December 2019.

and collapsing into a currency crisis in 2011. The talks on a new programme in 2015-2016 were not successful as the Belarusian government could not commit itself to economic reforms<sup>103</sup>. In 2020, Belarus failed to secure COVID-19 relief funding through the Rapid Financing Instrument as the country has not followed the WHO recommendations on the COVID-19 response<sup>104</sup>. EBRD cooperation was more successful, with EBRD agreeing to work with state-owned enterprises in Belarus. While the current portfolio of EBRD projects in Belarus is almost EUR 1 billion, the political crisis has made further cooperation with the government impossible, putting the financing of multiple infrastructure projects at risk.

## Conclusions on Belarus' key economic dependencies

Belarus has multiple economic ties with Russia and it depends on the Russian market as the major destination for its exports, on Russian gas supplies for energy security, and on Russian funding for public debt sustainability. Russia also remains committed to economic support for Belarus amidst the ongoing political crisis, while at the same time exploring the opportunities for its economic gains. The EU is also a major economic partner with significant roles in trade and FDI, but the further development of economic ties is hindered by the political crisis. While the economic ties with China were rapidly developing, China's role is currently only significant in debt financing. Moreover, China is likely to reconsider the role of Belarus in the Belt and Road Initiative as a transit point between Russia and the EU if the relationship with the EU continues to deteriorate.

---

103 Alexander Chubrik, "[Reforms in Belarus After the Cancelled IMF Programme: Totem and Taboo](#)," IPM Research Centre Commentary 2 (2017).

104 "[Transcript of IMF Press Briefing](#)," International Monetary Fund, 10 September 2020.

# Annex 3 The role of Belarus in Russian military planning and strategy

*Michael Kofman*<sup>105</sup>

Belarus plays an integral part in Russian military thinking and organization when it comes to the defence of the country's Western borders, specifically the Western strategic direction, and what is sometimes referred to as the 'Smolensk Gate' to the Moscow oblast. The country is a buffer state, part of a Russian strategy of extended defence. It is also the locus of Russian military concerns, where a realistic road to war scenario exists which could bring Russia into conflict with NATO. Today, Moscow seeks to retain a degree of permanent military presence in Belarus, and to establish the ability to coordinate with a Belarusian regional combat grouping of forces (RGF). In the event of conflict, these can serve as an operational grouping within a broader military effort led by the Western Military District's Joint Strategic Command (JSC).

For years Belarus has played a two-level game, positioning itself as a reluctant ally, seeking to extract rents without giving up too much of its sovereignty in exchange. There are numerous agreements governing military cooperation between the two states, from the use of a radar facility in southwestern Belarus, to a joint regional air defence system (2009), to special arrangements for collaboration during a time of imminent threat (or a threatened period of war). These of course have been subject to the endless machinations and two-level games between Minsk and Moscow. However, Russia conducts regular exercises with Belarusian forces, and hosts their officers in Russian military academies. The most prominent of these had been Union Shield, alternating between Russia and Belarus, and the Zapad series of strategic command staff exercises. There are also Trilateral exercises, such as Slavic Brotherhood which includes Serbia, and events under the auspices of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

---

<sup>105</sup> Michael Kofman serves as the Director of the Russia Studies Program at the CNA Corporation and a Fellow at the Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, D.C.

## Changes to the state of play

Since the political crisis in Belarus, the Lukashenko regime has few options or partners besides Moscow, and is in regime survival mode. Russia has often used the back and forth haggling with Lukashenko to try and extract a military base, even though it appeared to have access to Baranvichy airbase, and in the past had stored aircraft there. However, the dance over whether Moscow will get an airbase in Belarus has been overcome by certain events. Russia and Belarus now regularly hold joint tactical drills, for example the March 2021 drills at Osipovichsky and Ulyanovsk. These feature paratroopers and Belarusian special forces. The unit selection is unsurprising, since Russia's Airborne troops are in the lead and are the most likely to intervene in Belarus first. Some exercises have begun to test combined Russian-Belarusian battalions, demonstrating further plans for integration at the tactical level.

A significant number of Belarusian units have been rotating through Russian training ranges for exercises, suggesting that Russia is investing much more intensely in supporting Belarusian levels of readiness, and interoperability with those forces. Russia has also agreed with Belarus to establish three permanent joint training centres, two of them in Russia (Kaliningrad, Nizhny Novgorod), and one in Grodno, Belarus. The latter is significant, since it will permit a more permanent Russian presence in Belarus, on the Polish border, and the ability to rotate forces through the country. Such agreements create the legal basis for Russian military presence, rotation, and upload capacity, which can prove significant in a crisis (as was demonstrated in Crimea in February 2014). The main thrust of these efforts is to establish a small deterrent force in Belarus, develop practical interoperability with Belarusian forces at tactical levels which would allow Russian units to reinforce them in a crisis, and further integrate a regional grouping of forces (Belarusian military) into the Western Military District's planning.

**Figure 7 Disposition of Russian forces in the Western Military District.<sup>106</sup>**



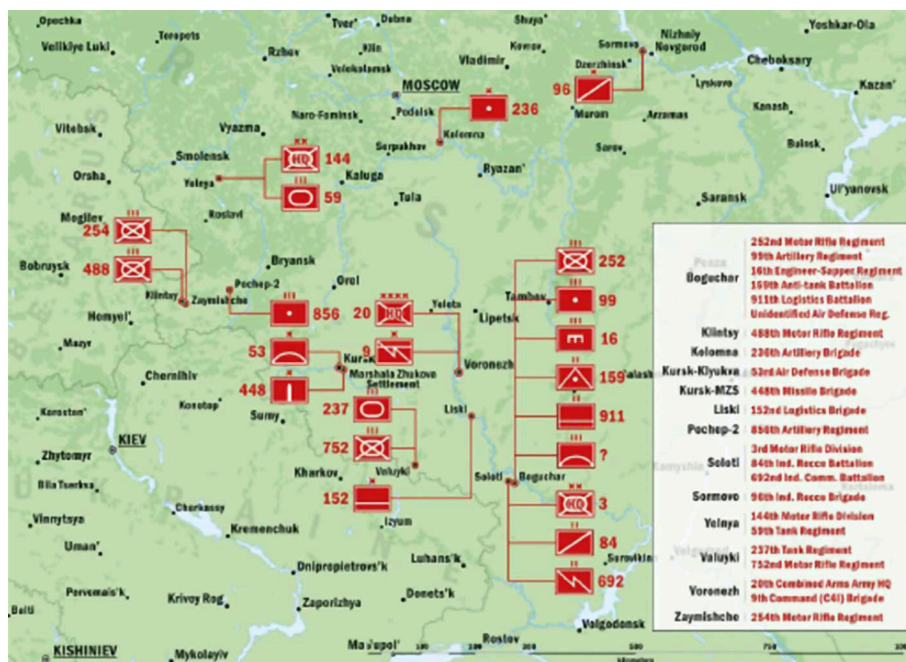
106 Konrad Muzyka and Rochan Consulting, "Russian Forces in the Western Military District," CNA, June 2021.



At the Russian end of the equation, force structure continues to expand in the Western Military District, with conversions from brigades to divisions taking place both north and south (see figure 7). The 11<sup>th</sup> Army Corps in Kaliningrad now fields a restored 18<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Division. This unit will take a while to man; converting from a brigade (~3500 men) to a division of 8,500 is not a quick process. Yet the overall force expansion will feature going from fielding six motor rifle battalions to ten, and from the currently deployed two tank battalions to six in total. There will also be a substantial addition of artillery to fill out the division's manoeuvre battalions, and artillery regiment. Kaliningrad has been receiving major upgrades since 2013 to air defence, tactical aviation, the missile brigade, rocket artillery units, and coastal defence cruise missile batteries.

Supporting on the other side of Belarus, Russia has continued to expand the 20<sup>th</sup> Combined Arms Army (CAA). The 144<sup>th</sup> Division (part of the 20<sup>th</sup> CAA) is substantially under strength, but is growing. This division is headquartered near the Belarusian border in Yelnya, with two regiments positioned further south in Klintzy/Zaymishche. They are positioned to move into Belarus or northern Ukraine at short notice, backing them is the much larger firepower of the First Guards Tank Army. Associated units include Spetsnaz brigades and VDV airborne units, which once again feature armored battalions, and increased artillery support. Thus, Russia has the military power to quickly deploy into Belarus and hold ground lines of communication for follow-on forces.

Figure 8 Disposition of the 20th Combined Arms Army<sup>107</sup>



## Strategy, doctrine, and operations

Russian military doctrine has historically been divided into a socio-political and military-technical component. Hence there can be some confusion when Russian leaders reference the doctrine as containing a defensive character, but they are correct in terms of its political orientation. The military-technical elements are a different story. Russia's current military strategy is called 'active defence,' although it is in fact an evolved and refined version of the late Soviet military's strategy by the same name. There are several pillars worth discussing.

First, the strategy is characterized as defensive because it does not feature a strategic offensive in the initial period of war, and because conceptually the Russian military does not believe territory to be the centre of gravity in the fight. This is a perspective inherited from deliberations in the latter years of the Cold War, when the USSR adopted

107 Ibid.

a defensive military doctrine, and the Soviet General Staff began to adapt operational concepts, missions, and tasks. In Russian military thinking, the war is principally to be fought from Russian or allied (Belarus) territory, and strikes to be conducted from territory already held. This is a significant departure, because during much of the Cold War, the strategy called for displacing the conflict into an opponent's territory. That said, Russian operational concepts are both offensive and defensive in nature, and there is a consensus that no such distinction exists any longer in strategic operational concepts. For example, the strategic aerospace operation involves an offensive strike component, suppressing and disorganizing the strike, and deflecting an opponent's aerospace attack. The preferential Russian terms are parry and deflect, not defend.

There are two elements to the term 'active.' The first is a set of preventive measures that Russian forces intend to take to neutralize an emerging threat, and manage escalation. For example, in the event of hostilities between Belarus and its neighbour, Russian forces will deploy to deter other countries from entering the conflict and seek to prevent it from escalating. Such steps range from raising forces on alert, deploying ready formations, testing advanced weapons, conducting visible exercises to intimidate an opponent and demonstrate that they would suffer unacceptable consequences in a military conflict. The first phase consists of demonstrative acts and threats.

Moving further along the conflict spiral, Russia's concept of deterrence through the limited use of force involves calibrated forms of escalation, namely single or grouped strikes with conventional weapons against an adversary's critically important objects. This is intended to be iterative, and have a stunning effect, by inflicting 'deterrent damage' to the opponent (a subjective level of damage). These are escalation management approaches, but essential in Russian thinking to avoid surprise, and to give the military a clear role during a period of heightened confrontation or undeclared war.

The second element deals with actual warfighting in the theatre of military operations. Here the term 'active' indicates the sustained engagement of an opponent through operational depths and across the theatre. Since military capabilities can engage critically important objects in depth from the outset of a war, the initial period is decisive, and there is no reason why the conflict would be artificially constrained to the geographical boundaries within which it arose. Indeed, this is what the strategic command-staff exercise "Zapad" simulates. The Russian military spends the first three days conducting defensive manoeuvres, deflecting an aerospace attack, and deploying quick reaction forces to blunt an opponent. The scenario is typically a coalition intervention in Belarus, led by Poland and Lithuania, but backed by the United States. The conflagration escalates from a local to a regional war. The second half of the exercise involves a substantial counter-attack, degrading the opponent with firepower and strikes, then restoring the status quo antebellum (or pursuing follow-on political objectives). Belarus is the centrepiece of these exercises, in which Russian airborne and other elite infantry deploy to blunt a supposed intervention in the country, and

hold the flanks, while the rest of the Russian military force generates to move into the battlespace.

**Figure 9** Map of the 2017 Zapad scenario from the official presentation by Major-General Oleg Belokonev.<sup>108</sup>



Looking at the general tenets of Russia's approach to war, there is an assumption that conflicts are not won by fighting over territory, but by the successful destruction of an opponent's ability or will to sustain the fight at the operational and strategic levels. The logic is therefore to emphasize destroying critically important objects from the outset of the war, and disorganizing an opponent's campaign. This devalues the land domain, and positional defence, in favour of a fluid battlefield, manoeuvre warfare, firepower and strikes. Thus, there is no strategy premised on the denial prowess of Anti-Access/ Area Denial (A2/AD), or other forms of positional defence, instead featuring manoeuvre, and sustained counter-attack. Belarus offers that space for a meeting engagement with a NATO member coalition, the ability to conduct defensive manoeuvre and counter-attack without allowing enemy forces onto Russian territory. In many respects it is

108 As retrieved from Dzianis Melyantsoul, "[ZAPAD-2017 : THE CASE OF "VEYSHNORIA"](#)," SciencesPo, September 2017.

Russia's version of a preferred war with NATO, originating on a third party's territory, with available allied forces, and the ability to deploy Russian forces on both sides of the conflict space.

**Figure 10** Map illustrating rotary aviation and strike support in a hypothetical scenario with Russian forces deployed on either side of the Suwalki gap. Source: V.V. Aristov et al.<sup>109</sup>



Looking more narrowly at specific operational directions or sectors, the Russian military can use Belarus to interdict force flow into the Baltics, and retain substantial freedom of manoeuvre, without having to heavily occupy the Suwalki gap. Reconnaissance or airborne units are sufficient, with artillery and strike support. Interestingly, Grodno would be an anchor point here. Although this is not indicative of Russian plans for an offensive, recalling that in Russian military constructs they are the defending side, responding to a NATO coalition intervening in Belarus. Nonetheless, a Belarusian regional grouping of forces, if integrated into the Western Military District's joint command structures, would provide a useful operational level formation in support, and could pin NATO coalition forces. Naturally, they would be far more useful if tactical formations were reinforced by

109 V.V. Aristov, V.I. Kovalev, V.V. Belonozhkin, and S.V. Mitrofanova, "[Metodika ocenki jeffektivnosti vypolnenija ognevnyh zadach podrazdelenijami armejskoj aviicii v temnoe vremja sutok s ucheto meteorologicheskikh uslovij](#)," *Vozdushno-kosmicheskie sily. Teorija i praktika*, no. 12 (December 2019): 11-19.

Russian units, and command-control could be directly aligned in that manner. Therefore, the Russian end goal would be to further develop Belarus as an integral element of its planning around the Western strategic direction.