



# THE UNION STATE OF BELARUS AND RUSSIA

## Myths and Realities of Political-Military Integration

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THE UNION STATE OF BELARUS AND RUSSIA. MYTHS AND REALITIES OF POLITICAL-MILITARY INTEGRATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Twenty years after the formal launch of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the (re-)integration between the two countries has seemed to accelerate throughout 2019. Although this development appeared to announce a paradigm change, and gave way to much speculation on the threat it poses to Belarus as a sovereign state, most of these alarmist forecasts depart from assumptions which are grounded in myths rather than in realities.

For the past decade Russia has been reconsidering the so-called “oil for kisses” deal that prevailed since the mid-1990s, whereby it granted Belarus generous subsidies in retribution for its geopolitical loyalty. Yet Belarus refused to side with Russia in its ongoing confrontation with Ukraine and the West, citing the neutrality pledge enshrined in its Constitution. Dissatisfied with its junior partner’s failing loyalty, since 2015 Russia has been cutting subsidies, making the resumption of financial support contingent upon the Belarusian leadership committing to deeper economic, political and military integration within the Union State. So went the anthem.

While stepping up pressure to “coerce” Belarus into accepting this “deeper integration” agenda, Russia has also displayed a more assertive tone with regards to their common EU and NATO neighbours. This sparked concern throughout the region that subjugating Belarus might be but the first stage of a Russian Grand Plan meant to redraw the geostrategic map of north-Eastern Europe. The Baltic States in particular have become wary of the consequences, for their own security, of a possible Russian absorption of Belarus: not only would it give them a

lengthier border with a mightier Eastern neighbour; it would also make them more vulnerable to being territorially cut from the rest of NATO, should Russia attempt to reconnect the Kaliningrad exclave to the Russian mainland by “bridging” the Suwałki gap.<sup>1</sup> This scenario, and any subsequent land aggression against Poland and/or Lithuania, would have to use Belarusian territory as a bridgehead, given that the roads and railroads that lead to Kaliningrad all run through Belarusian territory. It would therefore require that Russia fully trusted in, or was able to forcefully guarantee, Belarus’ cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

How instrumental would the Union State of Belarus and Russia be for that purpose? Whereas further integration between the two polities now appears as an unlikely prospect, does it mean that their military alliance does not pose a security threat for the region? The objective of this paper is to provide a sober assessment of the politico-military union between Belarus and Russia as it stands now, with a focus on the myths that ought to be debunked regarding the level and effectiveness of integration reached between the two allies in the military, defence and security fields so far.

The paper is articulated as follows. First, it recalls the recent reactivation of negotiations over the future of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, and their subsequent failure to result in deeper integration. Given that the Belarusian leadership has uncompromisingly declined the Russian demand to grant the Union State supranational institutions and prerogatives, the most likely outcome for years to come might well be a continuation of previous policies – albeit with much less exceptions and subsidies for Belarus. Short of a full-fledged economic embargo or a military aggression, there is not much Russia

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<sup>1</sup><https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belaruss-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

could do to force a still sovereign state into supporting its geopolitical ambitions. Whether Vladimir Putin hosts such bellicose intentions at all remains an open question.

Secondly, the paper analyses a triptych of widely spread myths regarding the integration process. In a nutshell, these myths mistakenly assume that a) Belarus is Russia's closest military ally; b) the Belarusian army is already part of the Russian army and c) Belarus is on the verge of losing its sovereignty. Whereas NATO strategists have long adhered to these assumptions, over the past years they came to acknowledge that most of them were invalid, and misleading.

The third section overviews the circumstances that make regional security volatile, notably due to a) Belarus' vulnerabilities to a forceful (re-)integration with Russia, b) Russia's possible intentions for that matter and c) NATO's weaknesses and dilemmas on its North-Eastern flank. The final section wraps up our main findings regarding the Union State's might and viability and concludes with policy recommendations for neighbouring countries.

### THE UNION STATE AT TWENTY

The 1999 Treaty establishing the Union State of Belarus and Russia proclaimed as its main purpose the unification of the peoples of both countries "in a democratic law-ruled State", with the aim of guaranteeing peace, democracy, friendship, welfare, prosperity and security to both countries. On paper, the Treaty also foresaw the establishment of a single economic, social and legal space, a joint budget, as well as closer coordination of foreign and defence policies. It projected the creation of joint management institutions (including a single currency emission centre), a single Constitution, flag and hymn, as

well as supranational governing bodies, including a bicameral Parliament. None of these institutions have come to light, however.

This is because the format foreseen remained that of an inter-governmental union of equal sovereign states, in which presidents retained their respective prerogatives. Over the years, bilateral cooperation intensified and integration "deepened" only in some consensual fields, while stalling in most others. Where the harmonisation of national rules and procedures was easy and mutually beneficial, a unification of sorts has indeed taken shape, and these spheres have recently "integrated" further. Businesses in the industrial, transport and agricultural fields that rely on traditional connections between the two countries see an advantage in this process. The free movement of people, equal treatment of workers, students, patients, pensioners, and museum visitors are among the most visible achievements of the Union State in the eyes of citizens.

Among the elites, there is a wide consensus that the most "integrated" spheres are to be found in the security and defence fields. As early as 1998 the Supreme Council of the Union State – the highest policy-making body, composed of heads of states, prime ministers and the speakers of national parliaments – adopted a Concept of Common Defence Policy and a Security Concept. The following year, in response to NATO's new strategic concept, Defence Ministers signed several additional agreements, including on joint military research and arms procurements.<sup>3</sup> Since 2001 the establishments of Belarus and Russia have been operating under a Joint Military Doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

On its website the Belarusian Ministry of Defence lists the following fields as the "key lines of military cooperation with Russia": legal and

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/01-03/szyszlo.pdf>, cf. p. 23-25.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/01-03/szyszlo.pdf>, p. 25.

regulatory harmonisation, support of the Regional Group of Forces, cooperation in the field of air defence, joint military-scientific activities, cooperation in the field of arms control obligations, and the training of Belarusian service members in military schools of the Russian Defence Ministry.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas most experts consider that military cooperation was always immune to political and trade disputes, even this aspect of the relationship has been a source of mutual frustration, bargaining, and trade-offs however.<sup>6</sup>

### A dead-born vanity project

Soon after it was launched, the unification project lost traction in the eyes of Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who had been its most vocal advocate up until then. In the meantime, Boris Yeltsin had resigned and handed the keys of the Kremlin over to Vladimir Putin. Once the latter made it clear, in 2002, that the only way the Union State could integrate further would be for the constitutive regions of the Republic of Belarus to merge into the Russian Federation following the German reunification model, Aliaksandr Lukashenka did his utmost to delay and obstruct the process. Hither on, the implementation of the Treaty and the institutionalisation of the Union State into a polity with supranational features were virtually frozen.

The two countries re-established customs controls as early as 2001, *de facto* suspending the planned creation of a Customs Union. The latter came into being in 2010 only, as a result of a trilateral integration (together with Kazakhstan) of customs control and management within the Single Eurasian Economic Space. The

introduction of a single currency, once a founding stone of the Union State project, soon became its main steppingstone.<sup>7</sup> Twenty years on, the monetary unification stage remains the main bone of contention. Others appeared in the course of the latest negotiation rounds however, on fiscal issues notably. As a result, in 2020 the Union State still looks like an empty shell with little prospect for consensual institutionalisation: harmonisation of national legislations would imply mutual concessions which the partners are unwilling to make.

### Irreconcilable views

Russian and Belarusian views on the purpose and outlook of an integrated Union State diverge to an extent that makes them almost irreconcilable. Russia wishes the Union State to become a geopolitical actor, with supranational management bodies that it could dominate, and integrated capacities in all possible fields. Such a neo-imperialistic endeavour would serve as an incubator for the further re-integration of the former Soviet space, or even a potential All-Slavic Union: the idea has floated that the Union State could include new members from non-contiguous areas, such as Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, or self-proclaimed republics (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Donetsk and Luhansk, etc.). Belarus has no interest in such an enlargement, which would make the Union State redundant with other multilateral organisations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, thereby limiting the privileged status that Belarus currently enjoys on par with Russia within the Union State.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.mil.by/en/military\\_policy/cooperation\\_RF/#pvo](https://www.mil.by/en/military_policy/cooperation_RF/#pvo)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/2013-04-29/trading-sovereignty-outcome-belaruss-integration->

[russia-security-and-defence](#)

<sup>7</sup> <http://lfpr.lt/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/LFPR-15-16-Zulys.pdf>

What Minsk and Moscow agree on, however, is that the Union State should serve as a deterrent against NATO enlargement. In fact, integration proceeded in an incremental way: the process slowed down or accelerated depending on the level of perceived threat stemming from NATO's own actions in the region. Following the "loss" of Ukraine in 2014, showcasing the Union State as a foreign policy success became all the more vital for Putin's domestic rating: while Russia was isolated and bashed by Western sanctions, Belarus appeared as its sole remaining ally in the region.

The Belarusian side holds almost diametrically opposite views about the objectives of integration. Minsk wishes the Union State to first integrate economically, which is a convenient way to postpone political integration – and the concessions that go with it. Even though Lukashenka did sign legally binding agreements that entailed a transfer of part of Belarusian sovereignty to the Union State, he never intended to honour them. In fact, praising the Belarusian-Russian brotherhood and Union State was a way for him to pay lip service to Russia's integrationist project, so as to avoid implementing it in practice. Apparent support aimed at consolidating the image of Belarus as Russia's strategic buffer in Europe, to extract benefits in rewards for contributing to Russia's security.

The Belarusian leadership claims that it has long fulfilled its political-military obligations by being an exemplary ally and never considering any alternative to its Russia orientation.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Lukashenka blames Russia for failing to deliver on integration promises, since Moscow keeps adjourning the establishment of a single energy market. Lukashenka demands that Russian gas and oil be sold to Belarus at Russian domestic prices (plus transport costs from the

border). His Russian interlocutors reply that this could be envisaged only once political integration is fulfilled and the joint managing bodies of the Union State are entitled to make and implement such a decision.

Apart from diverging views as to whether economic or political integration should come first, Belarus and Russia disagree on the institutional outlook and functioning of the Union State. Citing article 3 of the 1999 Treaty, Belarus claims the Union State is a union of *equals*, and sees the equality principle as determining for further unification. The Union State should thus guarantee Belarusian business entities equal access to the Russian market, without exceptions or non-tariff barriers preventing them from competing with Russian business on an equal footing.

Lukashenka's claim for parity was and remains unacceptable for Putin, since it would amount to granting the Belarusian president veto rights over Union State decisions, and thus potentially over Russia's own policy priorities too.<sup>9</sup> Should the proportionality principle prevail instead, asymmetry would result in significant concessions from Belarus in terms of prerogatives and autonomy. This, in turn, is unacceptable for Belarus: Lukashenka has repeatedly claimed that sovereignty is "sacred" and that it is not for sale.

Faced with this deadlock, a gradual but incomplete harmonisation of legal, technical and regulatory conditions for bilateral cooperation has been taking place. Meanwhile, diplomatic relations have been marred by trade disputes (gas wars, milk wars, and a potash war). The "multilateralization" of integration dynamics within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has offered a platform since 2015 for solving some of them – thanks notably to the EEU Court –

<sup>8</sup><https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2014.899769>; p. 568

<sup>9</sup><https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79876>



thereby relieving Belarusian exporters from Russian business pressure and abusive State control limitations against Belarusian products. Yet many trade issues remain unsolved. For the past five years, there have been recurrent disputes over Belarus circumventing the Russian embargo on Western food products and over the terms of supplies of Russian hydrocarbons and credit assistance to Belarus.

Lastly, political tensions have been growing due to the activation of Russian “soft power” projection inside Belarus proper. Pro-Kremlin (dis)information is very influential in Belarus, where TV channels are dominated by Russian content.<sup>10</sup> As elsewhere in the “contested neighbourhood”<sup>11</sup>, a multitude of Russian governmental and quasi-governmental NGOs have mushroomed in recent years, including non-indigenous Cossack communities. The Russian Orthodox Church has become more influential too, especially in the regions.<sup>12</sup> This all contributes to disseminating Russophile worldviews and narratives, which Lukashenka has turned less fond of since the Russian aggression on Ukraine.

The simultaneous rise of Russian soft power, and Belarusian nationalism, sparked a war of words on symbolic issues, for example after Belarus “nationalised” (in its red-green colours) the Saint-George ribbon memorialising the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War<sup>13</sup>, or after Lukashenka banned Immortal Regiment marches in Belarus. Disputes over the extent of Belarusian cultural autonomy from the Russian World are epitomised by the mutual enmity reported to characterise inter-personal relations between Putin and Lukashenka themselves.

They were further exacerbated during the posting of Mikhail Babich as Russia’s ambassador to Minsk (from August 2018 to April 2019), where this former presidential envoy to the Volga region turned diplomat was accused of treating Belarus like a mere subject of the Russian Federation.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of all these disagreements, the Union State came to be seen as a dead-born vanity project and an institutionally empty shell. **For almost two decades this state of affairs appeared to be in the interests of both parties. Sporadic reminders about integration supposedly unfolding under the auspices of the Union State was a convenient way for Belarus to continue extracting a rent from its Russian partners, and for the Kremlin to appear as able to retain Belarus in its sphere of influence.** In 2019 this deceitful bargain hit a wall however.

### From stalemate to ultimatum... and back to square one

For twenty years Russo-Belarusian relations developed in a sinusoidal way, with periods when pragmatism prevailed, albeit with economic frictions, followed by periods when trade disputes gave way to trade-offs, and rhetorical calls for more integration and institutionalisation of the Union State.<sup>15</sup> This changed in 2018-2019 however, when Russia decided to shake the status quo.

Ironically, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka himself started the scandal that prompted Russia to step up pressure. After Russia introduced

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<sup>10</sup><http://east-center.org/information-security-belarus-challenges/>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighbourhood>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/civil-society-under-russias-threat-building-resilience-ukraine-belarus-and-moldova>

<sup>13</sup>[https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-bans-st-](https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-bans-st-georges-ribbons-at-v-day-celebrations/)

[georges-ribbons-at-v-day-celebrations/](https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-bans-st-georges-ribbons-at-v-day-celebrations/)

<sup>14</sup><https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/05/02/russian-government-recalls-ambassador-to-belarus-after-misnk-officials-complained-he-treated-the-country-like-a-federal-subject>

<sup>15</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/four-scenarios-for-belarus-in-2025-2030/>

a new taxation system for its oil exports<sup>16</sup>, Lukashenka requested compensation for the losses this “tax manoeuvre” entailed for the Belarusian oil-processing industry. On 13 December 2018, while on a visit in Brest, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev replied by issuing an ultimatum: for Belarus to be eligible to compensation, and further economic support, it should first implement past agreements regarding the Union State.<sup>17</sup>

In his speech, Medvedev outlined two possible futures for the Union State: a continuation of the status quo, with inert integration implying the necessary “marketization” of Russia’s relations with Belarus, or deeper integration under the auspices of unified supranational bodies, presented as the only option guaranteeing Belarus further economic benefits.

Russian demands did not come out of the blue. For several years Russian voices had been claiming that Belarus was acting as a “parasite” (living on Russian subsidies) and a “traitor” (refusing to side with Moscow against Kyiv, and instead engaging in a rapprochement with the West). The Medvedev ultimatum signalled that Russia would tolerate no more flirting with the EU, the US and NATO, and no more delaying of the integration process: Belarus had to start delivering on earlier commitments, and this change would have to be irreversible.

Negotiations intensified in 2019, including at top ministerial and presidential levels, with 8 December, marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty establishing the Union State, as a target date for signing official documents during a planned Summit. This never happened however.

The two presidents met almost once a month, but the most they could agree on, in Sochi in September, was an action programme and a list of roadmaps covering technical and regulatory aspects of “deeper” cooperation and harmonisation in some 30 spheres, ranging from sanitary rules in the agro-industrial field to tariffs for mobile phone roaming.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of intense bargaining and arguing, and whereas contradictory announcements had shed doubts over what was indeed being discussed, by December 2019 it appeared that no consensus could be found on three of the roadmaps, on oil, gas, and taxes respectively. Russia insisted on a package deal, asking that all the roadmaps be enshrined in law before Russia even considered granting Belarus loans or compensations. Belarus for its part refused to even discuss the 31<sup>st</sup> roadmap which allegedly provided for the establishment of supranational bodies (a fiscal administration and single currency emission centre). Answering the questions of journalists on 17 November, the Belarusian president complained about the fact that Moscow had been adding, year after year, new conditions for conducting integration talks. “I won’t endorse or sign a document if it contradicts the Constitution and fundamental principles of our society. The most important principles are sovereignty and independence”, he added.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, there was not much to celebrate on the Treaty’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The last round of talks on 7 December failed to deliver any breakthrough.<sup>20</sup> The next day Vladimir Semashko, Belarus’s ambassador to Russia, said that the issue of compensating Belarus for losses from

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<sup>16</sup>Known as *peretamozhka* in Russian, this manoeuvre consisted in transferring the burden of taxation from exporters (customs duties levied upon crossing the Russian border) to producers at the source (tax on oil extraction). As a result, purchasing Russian oil became more costly for Belarus. Its refineries also suffered serious loss in competitiveness since Russian own crude oil processing factories received compensation from the Russian budget, whereas

Belarusian ones did not. The financial loss has been estimated to 9-10 billion dollars for Belarus over a decade.

<sup>17</sup><https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/12/belarus-russia-from-a-strategic-deal-to-an-integration-ultimatum/>

<sup>18</sup><https://news.tut.by/economics/666171.html>

<sup>19</sup><https://vpk-news.ru/articles/53964>

<sup>20</sup><https://eurasia.expert/pochemu-belarus-i-rossiya-ne-podpisali-dorozhnye-karty-integratsii/>

the tax maneuver would not be resolved in 2020-2021. On 25 December, a Russian government official admitted that discussions on the 31<sup>st</sup> roadmap were postponed at least until 2023, meaning that the Union State would not evolve into a politically integrated, supranational organism, before 2024 at best.<sup>21</sup> By then Russia is expected to deliver on its own promises for a single Eurasian energy market.

In Belarus the negotiation process received very little publicity. In fact, the government justified the lack of transparency by stating that what was being discussed was too technical to interest the population, and that leaks would cause unnecessary panic. This alarmed the experts' community, which for lack of information could only speculate about the goal and outcome of the process. **The fact that negotiations unfolded in almost absolute secrecy fuelled suspicions that Russia had decided to use all the levers at its disposal to pressure Belarus into adhering to Putin's vision of integration, meaning that Lukashenka would have to surrender. This sparked fears that the days of Belarus as a sovereign state were counted.**

### DEBUNKING THREE BROTHERHOOD MYTHS

Experts contend that integration between Belarus and Russia in the security, military and defence fields has always been the most advanced, since it was the least vulnerable to diplomatic tensions. Cooperation in these fields is vital for both parties, which depend on one another for their security. Since political integration appears to have been durably put on hold again, the question arises whether this setback will affect future relations in the military and security fields. Before addressing this issue, it is worth assessing the current state of integration

achieved in these areas. This implies debunking three sets of myths.

#### Myth #1. "Belarus is Russia's closest military ally"

Belarus' strategic alignment with Russia predates the establishment of the Union State. Since the early 1990s, Belarus and Russia have been sharing the view that bilateral cooperation was necessary in order to deter the common NATO enemy. Hence the two countries are widely recognised as two of the closest allies in post-Soviet Eurasia.

#### Brothers in arms

Belarus and Russia traditionally regard military cooperation as a major element of their national security. They have also been indefectibly supportive of one another on the diplomatic scene for over a decade (1992-2008). In line with the 1997 Charter of the Union State (art. 8 para. 2), joint measures and tight coordination allowed to "formulate common positions on international issues of mutual interest", as illustrated by their similar voting patterns at the UN General Assembly.

The 1999 Treaty underlines the necessity for close cooperation in the military field, but does not mention integration as such. It listed the following spheres as belonging to the joint competence of the Union State and its members (article 18): joint defence policy, coordination of action in the field of military construction, development of the armed forces of the state parties, joint use of military infrastructure, and adoption of other measures in support of the defence capabilities of the Union State. Policy coordination in the field of international cooperation on military and border issues, including the implemen-

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<sup>21</sup><https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/12/2019/5e01e55a9a7947dc19f6ca1f>

tation of international treaties on arms reduction and arms limitation signed by the state parties, is also foreseen.

A legacy of the common Soviet past, the Russian-Belarusian alliance appears as natural and necessary. Already before the Union State was proclaimed, according to Alena Vysotskaya bilateral relations were characterised by functioning military cooperation, intra-alliance unity (coherence), and a high level of coordination of national foreign and security policies.<sup>22</sup> Since 2001, the military establishments have operated under the umbrella of a Union State Military Doctrine, an updated version of which has been adopted in 2018. This document, and the way the Ministers of Defence of both countries praise it, would tend to prove that the parties have no disagreements on security matters.<sup>23</sup>

The Union State indeed provided a solid frame for consolidating their strategic alliance. Belarus has been the main beneficiary however: for lack of resources, and for lack of alternatives, it can only rely on Russia to provide it with security guarantees. Russia's military doctrines have consistently stated Russia's defence commitment to its Belarusian ally. Russia regards an armed attack on a Union State member or any actions involving the use of military force against Belarus as an act of aggression against the Union State as a whole, which would expose the aggressor to retaliatory measures.

In turn, Belarus is endowed with the responsibility to protect Russia against an aggression from the West. To fulfil this duty, it has received financial compensations, and the possibility to acquire Russian military equipment at discount prices or even free of charge. **Russia's generos-**

**ity has been contingent upon the level of perceived support for its own foreign policy objectives, and this has changed in the 2010s. Even if Belarus had no choice but to remain *strategically aligned* with Russia, it defaulted on *political loyalty*. In fact, a characteristic feature of Belarusian foreign policy since 2015 is its gradual but steady autonomisation.**

### Cracks in the façade

The first signs of a crack in the political alliance appeared following the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and Minsk's refusal to recognise the subsequent independence of breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Minsk resisted Russian pressures and opted for distancing itself from Moscow, citing Belarus' respect for Georgia's territorial integrity and other international law principles (non-interference in domestic affairs and peaceful conflict-management). The same principles were evoked for refusing to side with Russia against Ukraine since 2014.

In 2014 for example Lukashenka adopted a position compliant with Belarus' neutrality pledge. He refused to endorse the annexation of Crimea *de jure*, but he recognised it as being part of Russia *de facto*. He publicly called Russia to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and showed Kyiv support in attending President Poroshenko's inauguration ceremony. This was an affront for Putin, and so was the way Lukashenka ridiculed Russian justification for the annexation, when he argued that Mongolia could just as easily lay claim to parts of Russian territory<sup>24</sup>, or Belarus – to Smolensk.

When war erupted in Eastern Ukraine, Lukashenka carved out a neutral stance, saying he

<sup>22</sup><https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2014.899769>; p. 560

<sup>23</sup><https://www.belvpo.com/101752.html/>,  
<https://www.sonar2050.org/publications/drujit->

<armiyami/>

<sup>24</sup><https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/belarus/union.htm>

would never allow Belarusian territory to be used to attack another state. Criminal liability was introduced against Belarusian mercenaries fighting on either side. Three years later the Belarusian President publicly stated that “right now fraternal Ukraine is fighting for its independence. We cannot afford to fight. We are a peace-loving people”.<sup>25</sup> This, of course, contradicts the Russian official storyline that the conflict in Donbass is a civil war in which Russia is not involved. It also damages the image of the Union State as an effective military alliance.

Belarus’ independent stance regarding the situation in and around Ukraine was an unpleasant surprise for the Kremlin, especially when Lukashenka added insult to injury by denying Novorossiia any legitimacy, or when he criticised Moscow’s attempts at imposing Russian World on Belarus.<sup>26</sup> In so doing, however, Lukashenka slowly laid the ground for the lifting of Western sanctions against his own regime, starting in 2015. Not only Ukrainians appreciated Belarus’ apparent neutrality; EU and US diplomats praised Lukashenka’s personal efforts at turning Minsk into a mediation platform for conducting the peace talks that led to the adoption of the Minsk 1 and 2 agreements.<sup>27</sup> Building on this diplomatic success, in May 2018 Lukashenka even offered to host a “Helsinki-2” conference for discussing, in Minsk, the future of the European security architecture.<sup>28</sup>

Lukashenka’s freeriding ambitions and reluctance to support Putin’s foreign policy adventurism have exacerbated the Kremlin’s fear of losing control over its unpredictable neighbour.

This phobia was a key factor explaining the recent attempts at reinvigorating the Union State. **Yet even if Russia cannot consider Belarus as an indefectible ally anymore, it is reassured by the fact that Belarus’ situational neutrality is not sustainable, and lacks credibility: in the eyes of NATO adversaries, Belarus is usually seen as a mere extension of the Russian strategic space.**

### Belarus’ security dilemma and entrapment

Although it is commonly assumed that the strategic alliance between Minsk and Moscow is impermeable to bilateral disputes, several of the recent disagreements over foreign policy priorities have included an explicit military dimension as well. This was particularly visible in 2009, when Lukashenka boycotted the June summit of the CSTO, which he was supposed to chair and where member states planned to formalise the establishment of a Collective Operative Reaction Force (CORF). This has been seen as an attempt to blackmail Russia into solving the milk war sparked by a ban preventing Belarus to export its dairy products to Russia at the time. As Alena Vysotskaya put it, “By linking the cessation of the milk war and the resolution of an issue falling within the remit of military integration, the Belarusian leadership was (re-)introducing the military–economy trade-off into the relationship. At the same time, the whole Belarusian position was presented as a case of entrapment regarding the CSTO.”<sup>29</sup>

The notion of entrapment characterises well the position Belarus is in. According to this notion, too much commitment to an ally creates a dilemma, since it might imply participating in a

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<sup>25</sup><https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/01/27/brother-ukraine-is-fighting-for-its-independence-lukashenko-a56954>

<sup>26</sup><https://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenka-russia-won-t-swallow-belarus-further-integration/29797813.html>

<sup>27</sup>[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from\\_sanctions\\_to\\_summits\\_belarus\\_after\\_the\\_ukraine\\_crisis3016](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from_sanctions_to_summits_belarus_after_the_ukraine_crisis3016)

<sup>28</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/successful-international-security-gathering-in-belarus-brings-together-east-and-west/>

<sup>29</sup><https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2014.899769>

conflict one prefers to avoid. Given the suffering they endured during WWII, what Belarusians fear the most is being dragged into an armed conflict, getting trapped “in someone else’s wars”, as Lukashenka put it in 2019. On the other hand, too little commitment to the military alliance might result in being abandoned in case hostilities with an adversary break out.<sup>30</sup>

Lukashenka has turned this security dilemma into an asset for blackmailing Russia for almost two decades: constructing an entrapment mechanism, he threatened to defect (by exiting the CSTO for example), unless the Russian ally became more supportive (read: more tolerant of Belarus’ autonomy, or more generous). “This was seen as a means of activating the intra-alliance security dilemma, and prompting a reaction from Moscow. Under pressure to hold the alliance together, it was reasoned that the Russian leadership would seek to accommodate the most pressing Belarusian concerns by increasing economic support”.<sup>31</sup>

This blackmailing strategy was again obvious in 2016-17, when Lukashenka indicated that Belarus’ collective defence obligations towards CSTO member states (article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty) extended only to the Western region (meaning: Russia) – in other words, that he did not feel compelled to provide Belarusian troops to defend CSTO allies in Central Asia or the South Caucasus. Whereas this was compliant with Belarus’ long tradition of not sending its soldiers to fight abroad, Lukashenka’s principled refusal to help fellow autocrats crackdown on “terrorist”-labelled popular uprisings in Central Asia or Armenia contravened Russian ambitions regarding the CSTO’s future role in the region.

The Union State requirement that Belarus and Russia coordinate their foreign policies was

also breached when Minsk displayed support for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Lukashenka’s refusal to align with Russia’s pro-Armenian position – in a bid to court Turkey too – implied that Belarus gradually lost its status as Russia’s “closest ally” in the post-Soviet realm: since it joined the Eurasian Economic Union in 2013, Armenia could equally claim the title, and is already enjoying the privileges that come with it, for example in the field of arms procurements.

### Disputes over armaments

CIS and CSTO agreements on military-technical cooperation entitle member states to trade armaments and defence equipment for the same price they charge their own armed forces; for most post-Soviet countries it means purchasing Russian military equipment at a discount price, in barter schemes or with less bureaucratic hurdles. **Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia is not what it used to be however. Given that Belarus now strives to achieve more independence and self-sufficiency in the defence sphere, Russia’s previously generous material support is much harder to come by.**<sup>32</sup>

Belarus has not benefited from significant discounts on the bill (600 million USD) for the 12 SU-30SM aircrafts that it bought from Russia in June 2016 to replace its Soviet-times MiG-29. Siarhei Bohdan, a respected Belarusian military expert, interpreted it as meaning that “the Kremlin is in no haste to arm Minsk; Belarus must purchase arms like any other country. (...) Minsk paid Russia [170 million USD] even for second-hand S-300PS – despite the fact that the Kremlin could hardly have sold them at a decent

<sup>30</sup><https://mwi.usma.edu/strategic-enabler-point-vulnerability-role-belarus-russias-military-plans/>

<sup>31</sup><https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668>

[136.2014.899769](https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-new-russian-arms-what-minsk-has-given-in-exchange/); p. 569

<sup>32</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-new-russian-arms-what-minsk-has-given-in-exchange/>

price anywhere.”<sup>33</sup> By relying exclusively on cooperation with the Russian military-industrial complex (*voenno-promyshlenny kompleks*, VPK in Russian), Belarusian producers have also deprived themselves of an opportunity to acquire advanced technologies from outside of Russia.

There is a wide consensus among the Belarusian military expert community that, instead of providing their country with modern aircrafts and surface-to-air missile systems (at discount prices), Russia has knowingly let its ally’s air forces and air defence capacities decay in order to coerce it into accepting the opening in Belarus of a Russian airbase (under Russian command) instead. Whereas Belarus’ air defence system is unable to sustain an attack of more than two blows, Russia has indeed stopped helping Belarus to mend it.

Russia refused for a long time to sell Belarus S-400 air defence missile systems, preferring to deploy its own to Kaliningrad. The two divisions that were eventually sent to Belarus in 2016 are said to be unarmed: Belarus has no funds to purchase the missiles. Armenia on the other hand could purchase Iskander at a friendlier price than the standard international market price of half a billion USD (which is slightly less than the Belarusian yearly military budget).<sup>34</sup> Belarus has been asking for Iskander for several years, but Russia is not willing to subsidise the purchase. On 7 October 2016, President Lukashenka complained about Russia’s uncompromising stance on the price tag for these tactical ballistic missile systems, saying “So it turns out that in order to

protect you, I must ... buy a gun from you? Is that normal?”<sup>35</sup>

In the end, Belarus is paying the high price for its willingness to break free from Russia. The sudden urge to appear as neutral forced Minsk to diversify its portfolio of international partnerships.<sup>36</sup> Back in 2010, when Russia reduced its oil deliveries – in a move interpreted as meant to push Belarus to open the capital of its refineries to Russian investors – President Hugo Chavez came to the rescue, shipping some Venezuelan crude oil to Belarus via Odessa. The personal friendship between Lukashenka and Chavez also helped Belarus position itself within the Non-Aligned Movement, a strategy which still serves Belarus’ interests in coalition-building within the UN system for example. Inside the post-Soviet bloc, Belarus has increased military and defence cooperation with Ukraine and Kazakhstan, with which it holds joint military exercises. Another vector is the MENA region, where military cooperation with the United Arab Emirates in particular has intensified over the past decade.<sup>37</sup>

The most significant step towards a truly multi-vector foreign and security policy, however, stems from Belarus’ quickly evolving relations with China, now the main “third player” in Belarus.<sup>38</sup> In 2013 Belarus signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with China. Even though it is clearly not bringing as much dividends as Lukashenka hoped and claimed it would<sup>39</sup>, defence cooperation with China allowed Belarus to acquire, within only two years, the tactical missile technology that Russia refused to supply it with.<sup>40</sup> As a result of advanced

<sup>33</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/new-arms-for-belarus-and-russias-military-plans-in-the-region/>

<sup>34</sup>[https://sputnik.by/de-fense\\_safety/20191028/1043077015/Krepkiy-oreshek-chem-otvetit-Belarus-na-ugrozy-NATO.html](https://sputnik.by/de-fense_safety/20191028/1043077015/Krepkiy-oreshek-chem-otvetit-Belarus-na-ugrozy-NATO.html)

<sup>35</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/new-arms-for-belarus-and-russias-military-plans-in-the-region/>

<sup>36</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/ostrogorski-centre-belarus-becomes-neutral-to-survive/>

<sup>37</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-is-strengthening-military-cooperation-with-uae/>

<sup>38</sup>[https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17442.11?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17442.11?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

<sup>39</sup><https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>

<sup>40</sup><https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-li-fri/russieneivisions/minsk-beijing-what-kind-strategic->

industrial cooperation with Chinese arms-makers, in 2015 Belarus was able to present its first multiple-launch rocket system, named Polonez.<sup>41</sup> Initially, Ukraine signalled an interest in purchasing this weapon, but so far only Azerbaijan bought it, in 2018. This closer military cooperation with both China and Azerbaijan causes Russia much displeasure.

### Diverging diplomatic priorities

Last but not least, the Belarusian-Russian alliance in the political-military field is being challenged by the allies' divergent attitudes towards the West. Whereas Moscow's relations with the EU and the US significantly deteriorated since the annexation of Crimea, Minsk has consistently sought to achieve a normalisation of its own relations with Brussels and Washington.

This strategy started bearing fruits, if only in terms of regime-survival in the face of Western sanctions: since 2015-2016, Lukashenka is not seen as, and punished for, being "the last dictator in Europe" – Putin is. In fact, Belarus' status in the eyes of Western diplomats radically changed. Prior to a visit to Minsk, in October 2018 US Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell argued that "Today it is the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of frontier states like Ukraine, Georgia, and even Belarus, that offer the surest bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism."<sup>42</sup> Such an evolution in Washington's approach explains why the normalisation of US-Belarus relations has accelerated in recent years, culminating with Mike Pompeo's

January 2020 visit to Minsk, and the appointment of an US ambassador after a 12 year break.

Belarus' rapprochement with the EU is poisoning its bilateral relationship with Russia too. Moscow did not appreciate Minsk's February 2017 initiative to unilaterally grant visa-free regime for the short stay in Belarus of citizens of 80 countries, including the US and all of the EU member states.<sup>43</sup> In response, Russia reintroduced border controls at its land border with Belarus, claiming that its partner's lax visa policy could facilitate the illegal entry of potentially dangerous foreigners on Russian soil.<sup>44</sup>

In general, since 2008 and especially since 2014 the political alliance between Minsk and Moscow has suffered from growing mutual distrust. Russia's encroachments on Ukrainian territorial integrity, and undeclared war in Donbass, have raised concerns that Belarus could be next on the list of neighbouring territories where Russia might want to intervene. The feeling that no brotherly alliance could protect Belarusians from an invasion has spread among the elite and the wider public, with a rally-around-the flag effect in defence of Belarusian sovereignty.<sup>45</sup> This arguably served Lukashenka's regime-survival interests too.

This changing geopolitical environment also encouraged Belarus to review its own Military Doctrine. The new version, adopted in 2016, acknowledges the emergence of new, "asymmetric" threats to security (hybrid threats, in a Western jargon) – without specifying where they would come from. The 2016 Military Doctrine mostly reiterates Belarus' traditional priorities, and remains defensive in nature.<sup>46</sup> Yet

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partnership, p. 17-18.

<sup>41</sup><http://www.military-today.com/artillery/polonez.htm>

<sup>42</sup><https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/state-department-official-sounds-warning-on-russian-chinese-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

<sup>43</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/visa-free-travel-belarus-dawn-new-era-disinformation-wars/>

<sup>44</sup><https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>

<sup>45</sup>[https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/9/1/article-p27\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/9/1/article-p27_3.xml)

<sup>46</sup>[https://www.academia.edu/30212426/Friends\\_Will\\_Be\\_Friends\\_The\\_New\\_Military\\_Doctrine\\_of\\_Belarus](https://www.academia.edu/30212426/Friends_Will_Be_Friends_The_New_Military_Doctrine_of_Belarus)



some analysts consider that the letter and spirit of the text clearly depart from previously held assumptions that a military threat could only come from the Western vector (NATO).<sup>47</sup> In fact, Belarus started to make military preparations which appear more relevant in the event of a conflict with Russia than with a NATO member state.<sup>48</sup>

President Lukashenka even hinted that Russia might pose a threat to Belarus' security when he urged, in May 2015, the Belarusian army to build-up its strength so as to be capable of "being thrown from Brest to Vitebsk in half a night to strike a blow".<sup>49</sup> Armed forces development priorities for the period to 2020, which were announced in February 2018, included the enhanced capacity to respond to hybrid threats and information warfare, with "selective" rearmament oriented towards developing special operations forces, territorial defence and missile defence capacities, according to Dzianis Melyantsou.<sup>50</sup> This too would illustrate a new understanding in Belarus that an aggression from Russia cannot be excluded.

In a December 2019 interview to *Ekho Moskvy*, Lukashenka even expressed confidence that NATO would not let Russia violate Belarus' sovereignty: "if such threat arises from Russia, the global community will get drawn into a war. NATO countries won't allow it, because they will consider it as a threat to them".<sup>51</sup> This might be wishful thinking, but it is nonetheless a useful reminder that the Belarusian-Russian political-mil-

itary alliance should not be taken for granted either. In fact, some Western security advisers started calling NATO planners to pay more attention to the role the "Belarus factor" could play for bridging dividing lines in Europe<sup>52</sup>, and to stop assuming that Belarus would merely be implementing Russia's military plans in the event of an armed conflict on NATO's north-eastern flank.<sup>53</sup> The third section of this paper will come back to this issue.

## Myth #2. "Belarus is already an integral part of the Russian army"

The conventional wisdom holds that, Belarus being a subordinated ally of Russia, its army would already be integrated in Russia's neighbouring Western Military District. The belief that the Belarusian armed forces are merely an extension of the Russian army, and that "no independent thought or action should be expected" from it, is particularly strong in Poland and Lithuania.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the State security (KGB) or police, the Belarusian army is believed to display limited loyalty to Lukashenka personally<sup>55</sup>, meaning that, faced with the influx of Russian "little green men", it might swap allegiance and welcome a Russian military takeover of the country.

While this possibility cannot be excluded, such a scenario builds on misleading assumptions about the extent of Belarus' military integration with Russia. The relation between the two armies is not equivalent to the one that prevails for example in the case of South Ossetia,

<sup>47</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-prepares-to-adopt-new-military-doctrine/>

<sup>48</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belaruss-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

<sup>49</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/ostrogorski-centre-belarus-becomes-neutral-to-survive/>

<sup>50</sup>[www.liia.lv/en/publications/security-of-the-baltic-sea-region-revisited-amid-the-baltic-centenary-the-riga-conference-papers-2018-741](http://www.liia.lv/en/publications/security-of-the-baltic-sea-region-revisited-amid-the-baltic-centenary-the-riga-conference-papers-2018-741), p. 181-2.

<sup>51</sup><https://echo.msk.ru/news/2559701-echo.html>

<sup>52</sup>[https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Report\\_The\\_Belarus\\_factor.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Report_The_Belarus_factor.pdf)

<sup>53</sup><http://www.alexlanoszka.com/LanoszkaParameters2018.pdf>

<sup>54</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belaruss-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

<sup>55</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/papers/belarusianarmy.pdf>; p. 8.

which signed an agreement in 2015 permitting the full integration of its army into the Russian Armed Forces. Despite a high level of mutual understanding and military interoperability, acquired thanks to numerous joint exercises, the armies of Belarus and Russia should not be seen as fully “integrated” however.

### Socialisation

The Belarusian army and Ministry of Defence are considered to be pro-Russian because most Belarusian militaries have been socialised and educated in Russian military academies, where they were permeable to Red Army narratives and Russophile views about the world and the historical mission the Russian empire played in it. However, Belarusian experts now contend that Lukashenka has improved military education in the national universities and specialised institutions so that less officers will need to go to Russia for training, and fall under the spell of “Russian World” ideology.<sup>56</sup>

It is true that due to the small size of its army (60,000 men, of which 12,000 in civilian duties), and to its limited defence budget (USD 715 mln in 2018), Belarus cannot deliver quality education and training for highly specialised military competences. On average, it sends some 70-100 young specialists each year to Russian military education facilities. Military expert Andrei Parotnikau sees it as a potential security breach, since the low level of basic education of these young, easy to influence recruits makes them vulnerable to indoctrination, or to recruitment by Russian military intelligence services.<sup>57</sup>

Higher ranking officers regularly visit Russia for upgrade training. Since 2006 however, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence has strived to

narrow this scheme to those officers who had the least chance of ever becoming generals. In a similar effort to better control its military elites, Belarus, like Kazakhstan, has established its own General Staff school. Whereas air force and air defence engineers must undergo initial and continuous training in Russian military academies and faculties, since 1995 all Belarusian pilots have been trained in Belarus proper, with some of them going to Russia only for upgrading their technological competences following the acquisition of new Russian aircrafts. Lukashenka has also “reportedly begun purging Belarus's security apparatus of suspected fifth columnists who showed excessive enthusiasm for the Kremlin's imperial projects”.<sup>58</sup>

Another example of Belarus' efforts at limiting the socialisation of its military staff in Russia is that Belarus recently set up its own national cryptographic school, as part of a considerable effort to provide the State with a secured government communications system. This step has been welcomed as one that minimizes dependence on external partners – read: Russia – in communications security.<sup>59</sup> **These efforts all illustrate the commitment of the Belarusian leadership to “Belarusianise” its army and make it less vulnerable to Russian influence. This is still a work in progress, the most visible effects of which are limited to the highest and most strategic echelons of military power.**

### The Regional Group of Forces

Following the adoption of a Concept of Common Defence Policy in 1998, Belarus and Russia signed an Agreement on the joint provision of regional security in the military sphere, which detailed the composition and functioning of a

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<sup>56</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/the-belarusian-army-scaled-down-but-better-trained-and-autonomous/>

<sup>57</sup>Interview with Andrei Parotnikau, Warsaw, 30 January 2020.

<sup>58</sup><https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/belarus/union.htm>

<sup>59</sup><https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2019/en/index.html>, p. 31

joint contingent, the Regional Group of Forces (RGF), to be established as a regional component of the CSTO.

On paper, the RGF is composed of 10 divisions on permanent alert: the Belarusian armed forces are entirely involved, alongside the 20<sup>th</sup> army of the Russian Western military district – minus nuclear forces. Decisions regarding the functioning and command of the RGF belong to the exclusive competence of the Union State (article 17 of the 1999 Treaty), meaning they require a consensus between the leadership of the two countries.<sup>60</sup> This, of course, opens the door for bargaining, but it does not guarantee that the Russian voice will necessarily have the last word.

For now, the RGF remains a virtual creation however, because article 2 of the above-mentioned Agreement places the RGF under a joint governing body *only in wartime*, and it specifically mentions wartime “for both sides”. As Andrei Parotnikau underlined, “What is considered wartime for one country is not necessarily such for the other”.<sup>61</sup> This implies in practice that, for Belarus to lose its exclusive authority over the troops that it seconds to the RGF, Belarus itself would have to be at war with the same enemy as Russia. Whereas the solidarity clause exists in the framework of the CSTO, there is none at Union State level that would compel Belarus to come to Russia’s rescue in case of an armed aggression, not to mention the obligation of military solidarity with Russia, should the latter be the one starting hostilities.

The formalisation of the existence of the Regional Group of Forces has been a long and difficult process, marked with bilateral disputes, setbacks and scandals. Whereas the RGF existed in

theory, and troops were regularly called to exercise under single operative command, it took years for Belarus and Russia to negotiate and sign background agreements on the joint use of military infrastructure (airfields, communication lines, arsenals, maintenance workshops, etc.), and the sharing of the burden of providing it with logistical support (2004) and military supplies (2011). It is only on 30 October 2017 that Russia ratified the main founding document of the RGF<sup>62</sup>. Experts contend that the build-up of NATO’s presence in the region, and the Europeans’ project of establishing a “military Schengen”, incentivised the acceleration of the unification process, however.

### Joint military exercises

Apart from the joint strategic exercises Zapad (“West”), which were held in USSR since the 1970s and resumed with Belarusian participation in 2009, the two countries routinely organise Shchit Soyuz (‘‘Union Shield’’) exercises and a multitude of smaller snap exercises together. The scale of Zapad exercises has boosted the image of the Russian-Belarusian military union. The last editions held on Belarusian soil, in 2013 and 2017, illustrated the high mobility of the Russian armed forces, on long distances and at fast speed, as well as their high level of interoperability with their Belarusian counterparts. The scenarios were designed to raise concern in neighbouring countries – and they succeeded in spreading panic too. Zapad 2013 – the biggest joint exercise to date, with 22,000 participants, of which 10,000 from the armed forces of Belarus – simulated an incursion in Belarus of foreign-backed “terrorist” groups from the Baltic States; rumour has it that the exercise ended with a mock nuclear strike on Warsaw.

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<sup>60</sup><https://bsblog.info/voennoe-sotrudnichestvo-belarusi-s-rossiej/>

<sup>61</sup><http://www.sn-plus.com/ru/page/politics/9139/>

<sup>62</sup>[https://sputnik.by/defense\\_safety/20171101/1031694915/dlya-chego-minsku-i-moskve-soglashenie-o-sovmestnoj-vojskovej-gruppirovke.html](https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20171101/1031694915/dlya-chego-minsku-i-moskve-soglashenie-o-sovmestnoj-vojskovej-gruppirovke.html)

As for Zapad 2017, it was implicitly designed to train both armies for a hypothetical conflict with NATO. The exercise formally mobilised “only” 12,700 troops, of which, for the part that unfolded on Belarusian soil, 5,500 soldiers from Belarus and 3,000 from Russia – a number that Belarus had curtailed in order to respect its CFE obligations, in spite of Moscow’s last minute demand to bring in more forces (an entire tank formation).<sup>63</sup> It is believed however that this STRATEX was part of a much larger operation to test coordination, control and command, since three additional tactical-operational exercises took place almost simultaneously in Russia (in Murmansk, the Southern and Central military districts respectively), totalling an estimated 60-70,000 participating troops.<sup>64</sup>

Specific aspects of preparations for the 2017 exercise have alarmed analysts in Belarus, who thought the military movements could lay the groundwork for Russia taking action against Belarus itself, or remaining in the country at the end of the exercise – as happened in 2008 and 2014 when Russia held exercises near the Georgian and Ukrainian borders.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, Belarus strove to make Zapad 2017 as open and transparent as possible.

Lukashenka irritated Putin by announcing Belarus would abide by the 2011 Vienna Document of the OSCE on Confidence and Security Building Measures<sup>66</sup>, and it indeed sent a timely invitation to military observers from five neighbouring NATO countries – much to the Russian general staff’s discontent. Unlike in 2013, the two presidents watched the exercises sepa-

rately, and Russian forces boycotted the customary dinner held after the exercise – something Glen E. Howard underlined was unheard of in Belarus-Russian defence cooperation. This distancing, in his view, “could be a turning point in ties that shows the limitations of Moscow’s ability to bully and intimidate Belarus”<sup>67</sup>. Not only did it prove crucial for Belarus’ effort to stay away from Russia’s confrontation with NATO powers, thereby sparing Belarus the damage of Western sanctions: it also improved Belarus’ image as a reliable contributor to regional security and stability.<sup>68</sup>

### Russia’s military presence in Belarus

Another caveat when it comes to assessing the level of integration between the two armies concerns territorial presence. The Constitution of Belarus forbids the permanent stationing of foreign combat units on its territory. Unlike Armenia, Belarus does not host any Russian military base. So far, it resists Moscow’s pressure for the establishment of a *permanent* Russian airbase on its territory. True, on 12 March 2014, Lukashenka asked Russia to deploy military aircrafts to Belarus, as a response to NATO’s expected military build-up near its borders. The next day 6 Su-27SM3 fighter jets and three military transport aircraft were redeployed to the Babruysk airfield, and on 15 March 2014 a long-

<sup>63</sup><https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Howard-Why-Belarus-Matters-web.pdf?x54374>

<sup>64</sup><https://www.cairn.info/revue-strategique-2019-1-page-213.htm?contenu=resume>

<sup>65</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/will-russia-occupy-belarus-in-2017/>

<sup>66</sup><https://www.osce.org/international-impact/publications/witness-zapad>

<sup>67</sup><https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Howard-Why-Belarus-Matters-web.pdf?x54374>

<sup>68</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belarus-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

range radar detection aircraft arrived at the Baranovichi airfield.<sup>69</sup> These aircrafts stayed in Belarus on a 3 months rotation base, but within a year they had all been sent back to Russia.<sup>70</sup>

Russian non-armed staff is present in the two military facilities that Belarus has been leasing (free of charge) to Russia pursuant of an agreement signed in 1995 and which is due to be renegotiated by mid-2020. One is the Volga early-warning radar station (in Hantsavichi, near Baranovichi in the Brest oblast'), which the Russian army uses since 1964 for tracking intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) launched from the north-Atlantic area. This facility became less vital for Russia's air defence since the completion in 2011 of an equivalent radar station in Pionerski (Kaliningrad oblast'). The other leased facility is the 43<sup>rd</sup> communication centre of the Russian Navy, situated in Vileyka (near the Lithuanian border), which hosts a very low frequency transmitter (VLFT) for secure communication between the General Staff of the Russian fleet and nuclear submarines on duty in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans.<sup>71</sup> These facilities employ about 1200 and 250 specialists respectively, some of which are citizens of Belarus, and a majority – without uniforms or weapons.

### The Joint Air Defence System

Even if Belarusian and Russian Air Defence Forces are indeed integrated under the single umbrella of a Joint Air Defence System (JADS), cooperation in this field is far from satisfactory. In its capacity as the military outpost of the Union State on the Western front, Belarus is expected to protect the air space of the Union

State from potential aircraft or missile incursions from NATO countries. Its own air defence capacity being limited or outdated (in 2012 Belarus withdrew from service almost its entire fleet of Su-24 and Su-27 planes) this is a task that the Belarusian army fulfils mostly thanks to Russian support – which has been assessed as minimum however.<sup>72</sup>

Russian–Belarusian cooperation in the area of air defence *de facto* pre-existed the signing of a Joint Air Defence agreement in February 2009, but it suffered from the fact that this treaty took long to adopt, and even longer to ratify: the Belarusian president withheld the signature of a decree approving ratification until February 2012. This delay was caused by a long-lasting dispute as to who would be nominated as the Commander of the JADS: Lukashenka insisted that it should be a General from the Belarusian air force, a demand that Russia agreed to in 2016 only. Pursuant of the agreement, and even though Putin asked the Russian Parliament to try and amend this provision, “Officials in Moscow do not have the final say in whether Belarusian air defence reacts and fires on a foreign intruder; Minsk simply consults with Moscow”.<sup>73</sup>

The JADS of Belarus and Russia was meant to be a prototype for the establishment of regional defence systems at CSTO level (in Central Asia, and the Caucasus). Yet it could hardly be claimed to serve that purpose, given the constant bargaining surrounding the issue. For years Moscow has refused to give Minsk sophisticated weapons such as the Su-30, whereas Belarus did not have the means to purchase these costly aircrafts from its own budget.<sup>74</sup> As the Soviet-era

<sup>69</sup><https://www.sn-plus.com/ru/page/politics/9722/>

<sup>70</sup><https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/12/27/russian-airbase-belarus-remains-limbo/>

<sup>71</sup>[https://sputnik.by/defense\\_safety/20171101/1031694915/dlya-chego-minsku-i-moskve-soglashenie-o-sovmestnoj-vojskovoju-gruppirovke.html](https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20171101/1031694915/dlya-chego-minsku-i-moskve-soglashenie-o-sovmestnoj-vojskovoju-gruppirovke.html)

<sup>72</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/does-the-single-air-defence-system-bring-belarus-closer-to-russia/>

<sup>73</sup><https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Howard-Why-Belarus-Matters-web.pdf?x54374>, p. 15.

<sup>74</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/second-hand-arms-from-russia-massive-belarusian-army-exercises-belarus->

fighter jets of the Belarusian fleet were becoming obsolete, a growing hole emerged in the regional air defence system – which, as Siarhei Bohdan argued, should have been filled with sophisticated weaponry from Russia, had Belarus been valued as a military ally. “Speculating on this danger, Moscow tried to stop relying on the Belarusian air force altogether”<sup>75</sup>: it reactivated the 689<sup>th</sup> aviation regiment in Kaliningrad to enhance Russia’s forward air defence against NATO. In parallel, the Kremlin refused to rearm the Belarusian air force at Russian taxpayers’ expenses, and put pressure on Minsk to accept hosting a Russian air base in Belarus instead.

### Airbase, what airbase?

The way this pressure was exerted, and Belarus’ resistance to it, challenges mainstream perceptions of Belarus as an extension of Russia’s military territory. In April 2013, Russia announced that it will establish an air base in Belarus in 2015, claiming that this had been agreed with the Belarusian leadership. A few days later, President Lukashenka presented a watered down version of the agreement, arguing that it mainly concerned the delivery of Russian Su-27P aircrafts... In the following years, Russian media regularly reverted to the topic, while Russian officials were making ever more insistent claims that Belarus had no choice but to agree.

Yet the Belarusian leadership consistently declined the offer, asking Russia to finance the modernisation of the Belarusian air forces instead. Notwithstanding statements about loyalty to Russia, Belarusian leaders have been unwilling to host forward-deployed Russian forces,

and according to Alexander Lanoszka “This reluctance persists despite how Belarus has seen an expanding NATO presence on its Western borders since the 2016 Warsaw Summit”.<sup>76</sup> Against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the argument was also that Belarus did not want to serve as a rear base for a potential airborne attack on Kyiv.<sup>77</sup> Peaceful good-neighbourhood being the backbone of Belarus’ neutrality pledge and of its foreign policy, Belarus must avoid provoking its neighbours. From a Belarusian standpoint there is no need for such a base, as it doesn’t make “practical, political or military sense”, as Foreign Minister Vladimir Mahey bluntly put it recently.<sup>78</sup>

Chatham House expert Keir Giles has argued that the standoff over the Russian airbase was part of a consistent pattern of Russia announcing “joint” defence initiatives which had in fact not been endorsed by Minsk. In 2016 for example Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the creation of a “joint military organization of the Union State”, including notional unification of the two countries’ armed forces. This unilateral statement was not even commented on by Belarus. Other examples include Russia repeatedly stating its intention to deploy missile systems on Belarusian territory, as a more or less routine response to US and NATO initiatives. “But yet again, despite Russia presenting this move as a joint initiative, it is firmly resisted by Belarus”.<sup>79</sup>

The same goes for the military-industrial and defence fields: in spite of the tight connection and interdependence between the military-industrial complexes of Belarus and Russia, for now the former retains a sovereign control over

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[security-digest/](#)

<sup>75</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-new-russian-arms-what-minsk-has-given-in-exchange/>

<sup>76</sup><http://www.alexlanoszka.com/LanoszkaParameters2018.pdf>; p. 81.

<sup>77</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/thwarting-plans-for-a->

[russian-airbase-minsk-strengthens-its-air-force/](#)

<sup>78</sup><https://vpk-news.ru/articles/53964>

<sup>79</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belarus-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

its strategic assets, and the latter has to acknowledge that integration could hardly proceed any further, at least under the current Belarusian leadership.

### Myth #3. “Belarus is about to lose its sovereignty”

Over the past 25 years, the threat of a Russian absorption of Belarus has recurrently been waived by the Belarusian authorities to justify their request for Western concessions with as few democratic conditions attached as possible. Each time Russia decided to limit its economic or political support for the Belarusian government, as is the case in the current phase, rumours of an imminent takeover have resurfaced. The fear of such a scenario became particularly palpable when mass media disseminated sensational forecasts according to which the famously unsustainable economic system of Belarus would be on the brink of collapse, as in 2011 for example. It re-emerged in 2019 under the backdrop of opaque bilateral negotiations over “deeper integration”: most analysts came to speculate on Belarus’ vulnerability to Russian encroachments on its sovereignty. Rumours of this kind fuelled conspiracy theories that can be classified in four complementary categories.

#### The Belarusian military-industrial complex (VPK) – an easy prey for Russian investors?

Factories, companies and repair plants of the Belarusian military-industrial complex (VPK) have been tightly interlocked with the Russian VPK ever since the Soviet times. Russia is Belarus’ main provider of defence products, which it has long been supplying at preferential terms, pursuant of a bilateral agreement on advancing military-technological cooperation dating back

to 1995. Belarus for its part produces several of the high tech components (optics, electronics, telecommunications) used for manufacturing, repairing or upgrading Soviet- or Russian-made military equipment, including tanks, aircrafts and radars.

The Belarusian VPK is extremely dependent not only on Russian state procurement orders for such products: as a sub-supplier, it also depends on Rosoboronexport, the Russian state intermediary agency for VPK exports, to provide spare parts and services for traditional third country customers of Soviet-Russian technology.<sup>80</sup> Entering the world market as a segment of the Russian VPK, Belarusian defence enterprises do not receive direct payments from them in hard currency: barter exchanges of raw material and services remain widespread among the VPK enterprises of the Union State. The potential to modernise and diversify the Belarusian VPK by developing direct military cooperation with new customers beyond the CIS is limited to some niche products in which Belarus has developed a competitive advantage, such as the manufacturing of strike drones<sup>81</sup>, pointer-tracker optonics technology, war games simulators and software, as well as special textiles to equip the soldier of the future. The main customers are MENA countries (the UAE, Qatar, Syria), Azerbaijan and Ukraine, as well as some “friendly” countries in Latin America (Venezuela, Bolivia) and Asia.

Dependence is a reciprocal relation, however. Russia fully depends on Belarus for providing its own VPK and army with chassis for mobile missile complexes such as Topol-M, Iskander, S-300 and S-400, as well as the multiple launch rocket system Uragan. This makes the Belarus-

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<sup>80</sup><https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/2013-04-29/trading-sovereignty-outcome-belaruss-integration-russia-security-and-defence>

<sup>81</sup><https://sputnik.by/columnists/20180302/1033990072/kuda-poletyat-belorusskie-drony-kamikadze.html>

ian dual-use factories that produce these chassis – the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and the Minsk Tractor Wheel Plant (MZKT) – particularly vulnerable to Russian appetites. In fact, the Russian VPK has ambitioned to “re-integrate” these jewels of the Soviet crown into the Russian defence production chain for quite some years.<sup>82</sup>

Alongside three other dual-use companies of the Belarusian VPK (Grodno Azot, Peleng and Integral), these chassis manufacturers have been the object of an “integration bargaining” for over a decade: while Belarus demands that they’d be granted the same bidding rights as their Russian competitors to all Russian government tenders, including defence procurements, Russia has offered instead a fusion-acquisition scheme for their privatisation and their vertical integration in its own VPK. Yet in that event Russia’s aim would be to repatriate the technologies to Russia, rather than investing in the modernisation of these companies, especially in the least productive state-owned enterprises (SOE). For the Belarusian regime, this scenario would imply high social costs: these plants employ dozens of thousands of workers who would either lose their jobs or emigrate to Russia, thereby accelerating an already worrying brain drain. This, in turn, would negatively impact Lukashenka’s electoral rating, since blue collars and employees of SOEs form part of his traditional support base.

Up until now, Lukashenka has successfully resisted Russian pressure to open the capital of these and other strategic companies to foreign investors, favouring instead the pursuit of programme-based cooperation. In fact, Belarus has not sold any of the companies that Russia was interested in buying, save for the gas pipeline operator Beltransgas (in 2011). Experts contend

however that pressure could intensify in the near future regarding the “integration” (read: absorption) of MZKT<sup>83</sup>, due to the alleged failure of Russia’s own Platforma-O programme.<sup>84</sup> Should Lukashenka “trade-off” the privatisation of MZKT in exchange for the resumption of Russian subsidies, or sell the Mozyr oil refinery to refill state budgetary reserves, this would surely be seen as relinquishing part of Belarusian economic sovereignty. For now, nothing of the sort is happening, however.

### **Zapad military exercises: positioning troops to occupy Belarus?**

Starting in 2015, several observers have become wary of the alleged risk that Belarus might fall victim of a Russian military invasion along the lines of a Crimean scenario (blitz occupation and managed referendum on “reunification”). Most Belarusian experts consider that this is a very unlikely scenario however, because Russia might not actually need to occupy Belarus militarily to subjugate it politically.

Yet the recent reorganisation and beefing up of the Russian Western military district, where the number of operational-level headquarters has grown from four to six armies<sup>85</sup>, and two new motorized regiments were deployed near the Belarusian border (at Yelnia and Klinty), denote a revision of the functional logic of the Regional Group of Forces, and a change of attitude of the Russian leadership towards Belarus as a strategic ally.<sup>86</sup> Going further, Arseni Sivitski and Yuri Tsarik from the Minsk-based Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (CSFPS) triggered a panic movement in early 2017 when they alleged that Russia might intend to leave troops behind on Belarusian territory following

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<sup>82</sup><https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/2013-04-29/trading-sovereignty-outcome-belaruss-integration-russia-security-and-defence>

<sup>83</sup><https://naviny.by/article/20191215/1576391301-mzkt-mozhet-stat-zhertvoy-uglublennoy-integracii>

<sup>84</sup><https://naviny.by/article/20191105/1572931859-belarus-pomogla-kitayu-obognat-rossiyu>

<sup>85</sup><https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russian-ground-forces-posture-towards-west>

<sup>86</sup><http://csfps.by/en/node/349>



the September 2017 Zapad exercises, as it had done in 2008 and 2014 when Russian troops mobilised for military drills were used for attacking Georgia and Ukraine soon after.<sup>87</sup>

Their allegation built on the observation that the Russian Transport Ministry had received from the Ministry of Defence a request for providing it with over 4000 coaches for the transport of troops and material to Belarus for holding these exercises – that is 20 times more coaches than for the Zapad 2013 exercises.<sup>88</sup> This sparked concern in neighbouring countries that Zapad 2017 could provide cover for preparing another Russian military adventure<sup>89</sup>, including a possible attack on neighbouring NATO member states.<sup>90</sup> This fear was overblown, and never materialised: however impressive, such numbers could hardly permit the deployment of enough forces to invade Belarus and sustain a long-term occupation of the country too.<sup>91</sup> **This said, the scenario evoked by Sivitski and Tsarik in 2017 could well become more topical in the coming months, should Russia overreact to NATO’s own Defender Europe 2020 exercises. Due to take place near Belarusian borders in Spring 2020, in mid-March Defender Europe exercises were scaled down and NATO cancelled linked exercises in the region due to the Covid-19 pandemic however.**<sup>92</sup>

### Absorbing Belarus: a solution to Putin’s 2024 succession problem?

In 2018, another narrative erupted according to which the Kremlin would be considering using a refurbished Union State as an instrument for solving Putin’s so-called “2024 succession problem”.<sup>93</sup> In both countries, analysts argued that Vladimir Putin, whom the Russian Constitution forbids to run for a third consecutive term at the end of his current presidential term in March 2024, could overcome this limitation by running for a similar position, but in a different capacity – that is to say, as President of the Union State of Belarus and Russia.<sup>94</sup> This prospect was raised to explain why the Russian side was so eager to intensify negotiations with Belarus on stepping up and deepening “integration” throughout 2019, and fuelled the fear that Belarus would lose its sovereignty in the process.

This did not happen however, as Putin announced on 15 January 2020 the launch of a constitutional reform instead, meant to allow him to stay in control after the formal end of his current presidential term.<sup>95</sup> As Belarusian analyst Artyom Shraibman argued, this development is only partly a relief for Belarus, which will have to “pay” Moscow back for its political autonomy at some point anyway.<sup>96</sup>

By demanding “deeper integration” within the Union State, Vladimir Putin made Belarus an offer he knew Aliaksandr Lukashenka would not

<sup>87</sup><https://nationalinterest.org/feature/zapad-2017-nato-should-be-keeping-eye-russias-training-20540>

<sup>88</sup><http://csfps.by/en/node/341>

<sup>89</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/rekindled-train-wagon-debate-calls-question-planned-size-zapad-2017-exercise/>

<sup>90</sup><https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/25/russia-hit-multiple-targets-with-zapad-2017-pub-75278>

<sup>91</sup>[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/so\\_close\\_to\\_russia\\_belarus\\_and\\_the\\_zapad\\_military\\_exercise\\_7221](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/so_close_to_russia_belarus_and_the_zapad_military_exercise_7221)

<sup>92</sup><https://shape.nato.int/defender-europe/defender/newsroom/exercise-defendereurope-20-announcement-covid19-implications>

<sup>93</sup><https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/11/belarus-president-wont-go-without-a-fight-lukashenko-putin/>

<sup>94</sup><https://belsat.eu/en/news/putin-wrestling-with-the-year-2024-problem-khodorkovsky/>

<sup>95</sup><https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2020-03-13/everlasting-putin-and-reform-russian-constitution>

<sup>96</sup><https://euroradio.fm/en/shraibman-after-putins-state-ment-belarus-can-relax-some-sense>

accept. The outcome of Belarus' refusal to further integrate is that Russia might well reach in a seemingly polite manner the goal which probably was its priority from the onset: finalising the "marketization" of Russian-Belarusian relations, in order to relieve the Russian budget from the burden of supporting Belarus economically.

Even though political integration seems postponed for now, the Kremlin has not abandoned its ambition to coerce the Belarusian leadership into delivering more in terms of geopolitical loyalty. As president Lukashenka will be seeking reelection in 2020 – first round is set on 9 August – he is now again particularly vulnerable to Russian influence or possibly interference during the campaign. Whereas the Kremlin's spin doctors are unlikely to support an opposition candidate against the acting president, they might still try and destabilise "Batka" Lukashenka by activating, as they did in 2010, their (dis)information warfare arsenal against him. This threat should be measured against the yardstick of Russia's renewed efforts at winning the hearts and minds of Belarusians, a tactic which is part of a wider soft power strategy meant to foster pro-Russian opinions in Belarus.

### **Not a myth: Belarus is extremely vulnerable to Russia's 'sharp power' offensive**

Much has been said about the level of integration that exists between the peoples of Belarus and Russia in socio-cultural terms: their close historical ties, linguistic proximity and the fact that Belarusians are inextricably integrated in the Russian information space<sup>97</sup> justify claims that the two nations would actually be one, artificially divided among two states since 1991. The activation of the narrative according to which

Belarus belongs to the Russian World dates back to 2015-2016, and it has been widely documented since then.<sup>98</sup> Russophile media and numerous commentators close to the Kremlin keep issuing unveiled warnings against a "Ukraine 2.0" scenario in Belarus – drowning into a so-called civil war, thereby prompting a Russian intervention – should Lukashenka fail to prevent a Colour Revolution or a pro-Western plot.

These statements multiplied in response to a grassroots process, labelled "soft Belarusianisation", which erupted in Belarusian society in the 2010s and accelerated after the annexation of Crimea. Vadzim Mazhejka has conceptualised soft Belarusianisation as referring to "the gradual, purposeful expansion of the use of Belarusian language, support for the development and dissemination of Belarusian culture, and the preservation and promotion of the Belarusian historical and cultural heritage".<sup>99</sup> Russian authorities interpret this national awakening as a Russophobic type of nationalism – and, therefore, as an illegitimate and dangerous trend.<sup>100</sup>

Lukashenka's eccentric understanding of his alliance obligations, and the fact that he tried to exploit the rally-around-the-flag potential of soft Belarusianisation for regime-legitimation purposes, have convinced the Kremlin that an offensive on the information front was necessary to prevent the drifting of Belarus further away from Russia's sphere of influence. This is where Russian neo-imperialist, authoritarian "soft power" tactics – aka "sharp power"<sup>101</sup> – came into play.

Intel about the level of penetration of Russian soft power into Belarusian civil society has given

<sup>97</sup><http://east-center.org/information-security-belarus-challenges/>

<sup>98</sup><https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2016-11-07/end-myth-a-brot-herly-belarus-russian-soft-power-belarus-after>

<sup>99</sup><https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/6584.html>

<sup>100</sup>[https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/9/1/article-p27\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/9/1/article-p27_3.xml)

<sup>101</sup><https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/forget-hearts-and-minds-sharp-power/>

rise to alarmist scenarios about Russia’s “creeping assault” on the sovereignty of Belarus.<sup>102</sup> In an eponymous report, Belarusian experts from the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS) detailed the channels of Russian influence that readily operate in Belarus. They evidenced how Russian foundations, GONGOS (such as CIS-EMO) and internet platforms (Regnum, Sputnik) advocate support for integration, and spread pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Belarus. As elsewhere, they rely on connections with the Russian Orthodox Church, defenders of “West Russism” as well as right-wing youth (such as Rumol) and paramilitary groups (including Cossacks).<sup>103</sup>

Due to a weak national self-identity, and after two decades of Lukashenka’s “creole nationalism”<sup>104</sup>, Belarusian public opinion is extremely vulnerable to Russophile and integrationist narratives. The capacity of Belarusian civil society to resist Russian assaults on its cultural sovereignty is still limited, in spite of the benevolent *laissez*

*faire* of the authorities with regards to this emerging nationalism.<sup>105</sup>

Running counter to previous assessments presenting Belarusians as apathetically pro-Russian, in recent years the issue of safeguarding Belarusian sovereignty against Russian encroachments has become an increasingly popular endeavour. Soft Belarusianisation is not circumscribed to the pro-European, pro-democratic, young, or urbanised middle class. In fact, concern for the future of Belarus as an independent, neutral country has become quite trendy, and this of course impacted the self-perception of Belarusians as part of the Union State.

Public opinion polls show that most Belarusians does not favour the prospect of “deeper integration”. Asked what format Belarus’ relationship with Russia should take, in August 2019 more than 75% opted for “independent and friendly” relations, whereas 15.6% preferred integration within the Union State, and only 1.4% that Belarus become part of the Russian Federation (see Fig.1).<sup>106</sup>

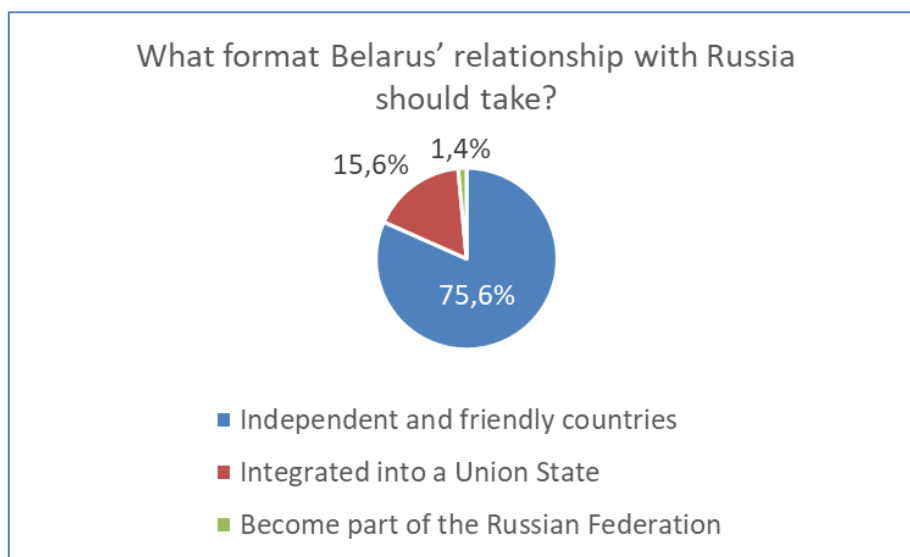


Figure 1. The format of relationship between Belarus’ and Russia

<sup>102</sup>[https://isans.org/wp-content/docs/Belarus\\_report\\_eng\\_iSANS\\_10.03.2019\\_BRIEF\\_VERSION.pdf](https://isans.org/wp-content/docs/Belarus_report_eng_iSANS_10.03.2019_BRIEF_VERSION.pdf)

<sup>103</sup><https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/civil-society-under-russias-threat-building-resilience-ukraine-belarus-and-moldova>

<sup>104</sup><https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/088832540>

<sup>105</sup>[7299790](https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/9/1/article-p27_3.xml)

<sup>105</sup>[https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/9/1/article-p27\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/9/1/article-p27_3.xml)

<sup>106</sup><https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/7015.html?fbclid=IwAR1O9FxONAmc3FiGKtv6u6KbqpDYIEw78ixzBfXfXEzqnTteaCuz7OH-U3g>

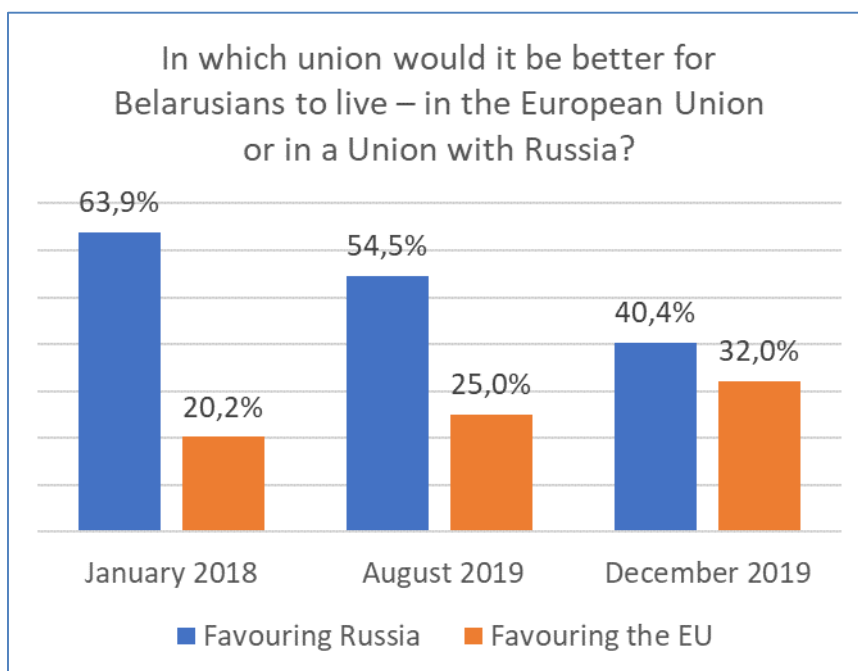


Figure 2. The choice between two Unions

Confronted with a binary choice (“in which union would it be better for Belarusians to live – in the European Union or in a Union with Russia?”), the share of respondents favouring Russia has decreased from 63.9% in January 2018 to 54.5% in August 2019, and it was down to 40.4% in December 2019 (only 8 percentage points above the answers favouring the EU, which rose from 20.2% to 32% during the same period)<sup>107</sup> (see Fig.2).

Uniting with the EU now has the preference of a majority of people aged below 35, and support for this option rockets to 46.2% among 18-24 year old Belarusians. Analysing this data, politologist Valeria Kostyugova noted that among the factors that weighed in favour of a union with the EU, security considerations (“The EU will make life safer” or “Together with Europe, we’ll be more protected in defence terms”) received quite high scores. This is con-

sistent with the trend, identified in 2018 by Eurobarometer, that 61% of Belarusians consider peace, security and stability as the most important values, a preference that inspires them growing distrust in Russia-led integration projects for that matter.<sup>108</sup>

As this section evidenced, mutual distrust is but one of the elements which shed doubt on the viability of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Having debunked various myths regarding the Russian-Belarusian alliance, the paper now moves on to highlight how it might evolve and interact with its regional geopolitical environment.

### REALITIES: THE WORST IS NEVER CERTAIN

In 2016 the RAND Corporation conducted wargames in the Baltic Sea Region<sup>109</sup> which led to conclude that NATO was “hopelessly out-

<sup>107</sup><https://nmnby.eu/news/analyt-ics/7015.html?fbclid=IwAR1O9FxONAmc3FiGKtv6u6KbqgDYIEw78ixzBfxfxEzqnTteaCuz7OH-U3g>

<sup>108</sup><https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2018-belarus>

<sup>109</sup>[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html)

matched and perilously exposed to a Russian invasion (...) and, in the best case scenario, unable to prevent a Russian *fait accompli* seizure of the Baltic States in a short-notice conflict”.<sup>110</sup> The issue of what the Russian-Belarusian alliance will become is therefore a source of legitimate concern for neighbouring states, and it recently became part of NATO’s so-called collective “North-eastern flank” problem.<sup>111</sup>

Experts highlighted the pivotal role that Belarusian territory, in providing Russia with strategic depth, would play in the event of a conventional conflict in the region. Few questioned, however, the assumption that the Belarusian leadership would necessarily side with the Kremlin, and implement whole-heartedly the measures which Zapad exercises have prepared the Belarusian army for.

Yet and as the reality check conducted in this paper tried to evidence, these days the Russian-Belarusian union does not guarantee a fully functional military alliance however. Due to its numerous vulnerabilities, Belarus could, in theory, be absorbed by Russia. Yet whether Russia harbours any intention to annex it is a question worth addressing too. A third determining factor affecting mid-term scenarios for the region is the volatility of Russia-NATO relations: the current mutual threat perceptions create security dilemmas for the various players, thereby raising the probability of conflict-escalation too. From this acknowledgement derive a number of recommendations which decision-makers should keep in mind when designing their foreign and neighbourhood policies towards Belarus and Russia.

### Belarusian vulnerabilities

Now that Russia is apparently willing and able to constrain Belarus more than ever before, the question arises whether Belarus has the capabilities to resist Russia’s “coercion to integrate”.<sup>112</sup> Even though an outright absorption of Belarus seems unlikely, Belarus remains vulnerable to Russian pressures for further political-military integration for at least two reasons. Firstly, Belarus is and will continue to be economically dependent on Russia. Secondly, in spite of its formal resistance to “Russian World” narratives, Belarusian civil society is and will continue to be an easy target for Russian integrationist pressures. This, in turn, increases the probability that Russia will continue favouring “non-linear” (hybrid) tactics in order to reach its strategic goal of controlling Belarus.

Since 2014, Belarus has started repositioning itself strategically by emphasizing its added value as a mediator and bridge-builder in Europe, and strives to strengthen Belarusian national identity in the face of Russian “soft power” projection in the country. This owed Belarus considerable animosity from its Russian neighbour, and fuelled fears that a Crimean or Donbas scenario should not be excluded *a priori*. In terms of identity and military might, **Belarus would not be strong enough to wage a war against Russia, should the latter attack it.**<sup>113</sup> **Yet Belarus would not withstand a Russian takeover either if it was to proceed by way of hybrid measures only.**

The process is actually already under way, according to many Belarusian experts who factor in the societal and informational dimensions of

<sup>110</sup><https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/outnumbered-outraged-and-outgunned-how-russia-defeats-nato/>

<sup>111</sup><https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/fixing-nato-deterrence-in-the-east-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-natos-crushing-defeat-by-russia/>

<sup>112</sup><https://isans.org/en/isans-publishes-a-brief-version->

<of-the-report-coercion-to-integration-russias-creeping-assault-on-the-sovereignty-of-belarus/>

<sup>113</sup><https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-inter-est/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>

Russian interference in their analysis. The activation of Russian soft (or “sharp”) power in Belarus raised concerns in NATO countries too, notably in the Baltic States where Russian hybrid warfare is an all too familiar phenomenon.<sup>114</sup> Among those experts providing policy-analysis for US strategy-makers, Alexander Lanoszka for example highlighted that as a result of this vulnerability, Belarus may face Russian provocations at the sub-conventional level<sup>115</sup>, and become “self-deterred from responding forcefully out of a desire to avoid militarily confronting a superior foe in Russia” – a logical consequence of its alliance entrapment dilemma.<sup>116</sup>

Belarus does not wish to go to war with Russia, but it would not want to go to war *for* Russia either. Unlike its NATO neighbours, Belarus is lacking the financial means necessary for the modernisation of its military equipment. Belarusian military expenditure, at 715 million USD in 2018 (1.3% of GDP)<sup>117</sup>, is extremely modest, and clearly insufficient for covering the needs of the Belarusian armed forces in terms of investments (for upgrading or replacing ageing equipment). According to the IISS Military Balance, Belarus spends twice less on its military than Lithuania does, despite having a population over three times the size of Lithuania’s.<sup>118</sup> Hence **Belarus is likely to continue its strategy of war-avoidance, which for the past years has proved successful and delivered some benefits, thanks to the efficiency of president Lukashenka’s “dictaplomatic bargaining” (with the West) and “entrapment blackmailing” (vis-à-vis Russia).**<sup>119</sup>

The problem for Belarus is that its alleged neutrality is not credible enough to be respected. Belarus is integrated in the Union State, CIS and CSTO security architecture to such an extent that it could hardly uphold its neutrality pledge, should Russia step up pressure in order to extract concessions in the political-military field. Hosting a Russian airbase, air defence systems, or even more so ground troops – which probably remains an objective of Moscow’s policy towards Belarus – “would undermine Belarusian aspirations for neutrality, by presenting both a potential source of hostile activity against Western neighbours and a target for counter-measures”.<sup>120</sup>

Lukashenka traditionally exaggerates the danger of the Russian threat in the eyes of the Western public, so as to demand the lifting of conditionality principles towards his regime. Yet this might not be sustainable in the long run, should Western partners stick to their own values and demand that the government of Belarus deliver more in terms of democratic reforms and respect for human rights. For lack of a clear willingness to comply, EU economic support is likely to remain low.

At the close of the 2019 integration marathon, the new *status quo* within the Union State is undeniably negative for Minsk. Lukashenka can present his successful opposition to deeper integration as a personal diplomatic victory, but in economic terms Russia is clearly winning. Negotiations are not over, and they will remain tough. 2020 is a challenging year for Lukashenka, who seeks re-election amid unprecedented domestic pressure. The outbreak of the Covid-

<sup>114</sup>[https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/NATO\\_AT\\_70\\_and\\_Baltics.pdf](https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/NATO_AT_70_and_Baltics.pdf), p. 306.

<sup>115</sup><https://www.stratcomcoe.org/alanoszka-russian-hybrid-warfare-and-extended-deterrence-eastern-europe>

<sup>116</sup><http://www.alexlanoszka.com/LanoszkaParameters2018.pdf>

<sup>117</sup><https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

<sup>118</sup><https://mwi.usma.edu/strategic-enabler-point-vulnerability-role-belarus-russias-military-plans/>

<sup>119</sup><https://fliptml5.com/thbs/sojv/basic>

<sup>120</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belaruss-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

19 epidemic aggravated economic recession, and the way it has been (mis)managed sparked popular protests. Serious challengers unexpectedly emerged in the wake of the campaign. Unwilling or unable to let elections proceed unmanaged, the regime reverted to pre-emptive authoritarian measures, arresting hundreds throughout May. This tense situation opens up avenues for Russian interference, increasing Belarus' vulnerability to hybrid influence and integrationist pressure, and putting Lukashenka's personal survival under stress.<sup>121</sup>

Back in January 2020 Belarusian political analyst Andrei Liakhovich was still ruling out Belarusian concessions to Russia, at least in 2020. Russian pressure, he claimed, "will not be an obstacle to Lukashenka's victory in the presidential "election" to be held in 2020."<sup>122</sup> In the same vein, Liakhovich considered that even the termination of Russian energy subsidies will not amount to an economic catastrophe for Belarus.<sup>123</sup> Yet Minsk's ability to counterweight this prospect depends on the continuing diversification of its foreign and energy policy.

Energy dependence is a two-way relationship: Russia too is dependent on Belarus, for the transit of its gas exports, which makes Moscow interested in a trouble-free relationship with Minsk. The situation appears as less favorable for Belarus when it comes to oil.<sup>124</sup> Nonetheless, it can threaten to close its pipelines for Russian exports, and dedicate them instead to importing oil from alternative sources, at least as a bargaining chip. On 31 December 2019, Lukashenka made a statement along those lines, and two weeks later his government announced that it

had indeed turned to third countries – Ukraine, Poland, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and the Baltic States – with trade offers which Latvia, Lithuania and Azerbaijan positively replied to. The Prime ministers of Poland and Lithuania have also been discussing how to help Belarus increase its energy security. This is crucial for Ukraine as well, since over a third of the oil it imports comes from Belarusian refineries.

The United States unpredictably sent a strong signal to Minsk – and Moscow – on 1 February 2020 when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the US was willing and able to supply Belarus "with 100% of the oil it needs, at competitive price", in order to "help it achieve the independence and sovereignty it seeks".<sup>125</sup> Should words turn into deeds, this would relieve Belarus from Gazprom-diplomacy pressure for a while. If not, then Belarus' struggle for energy autonomy might lack leverage, and incur higher costs.<sup>126</sup>

On a separate note, the problem remains that Minsk's efforts at mending relations with the West might hit a wall. In the event of mass protests, the Lukashenka regime would probably return to its old practices of mass repression. This, in turn, would justify the reintroduction of Western sanctions and opprobrium, pushing Belarus back into Russia's embrace. This should be expected in case the government violently repressed street protests, for example against electoral fraud or following the likely degradation of the economic situation, as happened in 2011 when price hikes on car fuel led to street protests known as the "clapping" (aka "silent") revolution<sup>127</sup>. Even the ruling elite might hold

<sup>121</sup><https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/belarusians-left-facing-covid-19-alone>

<sup>122</sup>Andrei Liakhovich, Development of the Situation in Belarus in the Second Half of November 2019 - the First Half of January 2020, newsletter, January 2020.

<sup>123</sup><https://thinktanks.by/publication/2019/03/19/andrey-lyahovich-rossiya-ne-sposobna-poglotit-belarus-i-ne-budet-pytatsya-eto-sdelat.html>

<sup>124</sup><https://eurasia.expert/u-belarusi-ne-ostalos-rychagov-neftyanogo-davleniya-na-rossiyu/>

<sup>125</sup><https://time.com/5775904/us-belarus-oil/>

<sup>126</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-struggles-to-find-alternative-oil-supplies-as-standoff-with-russia-lingers/>

<sup>127</sup><https://www.theatlantic.com/international/ar->

President Lukashenka personally responsible for mismanaging the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>128</sup> These possible developments are all highly susceptible to Russian provocation and propaganda.

**For now, Minsk seems capable of continuing its balancing game between Russia and the West: it can resist Russian demands for concessions on deeper integration. How long this may last mostly depends on the level of Moscow’s own ambitions regarding Belarus.**

### Russian intentions

Since 2016 the possibility of a Russian military operation against Belarus is taken seriously in Western capitals.<sup>129</sup> Several experts have forecasted a Russian takeover and the subsequent “de-sovereignization” of Belarus, whose role as a buffer and potentially as a springboard is crucial for Russia. Yet the likelihood of such scenarios might be overrated. For now, Russia is mostly interested in limiting the foreign policy autonomy of Belarus. Full Finlandization goes hand in hand with vassalization, which could be achieved thanks to non-conventional and subversive means any Kremlinologist is familiar with. This would exclude the scenario of an outright aggression.

For one, Russia is not interested in forcefully absorbing Belarus: it knows it lacks the capabilities to do so<sup>130</sup>: this would be a costly endeavour in a short and mid-term perspective, with limited long-term gains in return. The Belarusian population would not welcome absorption with the same enthusiasm as Crimeans allegedly did. With the “freezing” of the Crimean territorial issue and the Donbas conflict, it appears that

Western sanctions are here to stay, and they would probably be expanded if Russia annexed Belarus. This might act as a disincentive.

Secondly, Russia doesn’t need force or even “little green men” to integrate Belarus to the extent that it needs, that is to say merely as a territory where to install a military base and air defence missiles. This would be enough for Russia to expand its strategic depth and complete the military encirclement of Ukraine, while also holding at bay those NATO states that it perceives as the most “anti-Russian” (the Baltic States, and Poland).

Moscow’s end goal is not a forceful absorption or occupation of Belarus: it only needs to influence the domestic situation enough to force Belarusian authorities to make strategic concessions that guarantee Russian interests.<sup>131</sup> Throughout 2019 it was thought that a more integrated and institutionalised Union State would fulfil that purpose, but Lukashenka resisted the move. Russia seems back to square one, with one advantage though – sustaining Belarus and the Russian-Belarusian alliance will cost Russian taxpayers much less in the coming years.

Ending subsidies is but one channel Russia can use to coerce Belarus into complying with its other demands, notably regarding the airbase. Russian hybrid warfare and “sharp power” projection strategy include other subversive tactics that Russia masters well: interference in domestic politics, supporting opposition parties, meddling in electoral campaigns, using *agent provocateurs* to ignite mass riots, or helping to foment a coup during a succession crisis, are but a few of the available tools.<sup>132</sup> As long as they are deniable, these measures could help Russia fulfil its

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[chive/2011/07/in-belarus-clapping-can-be-subversive/242271/](https://chive/2011/07/in-belarus-clapping-can-be-subversive/242271/)

<sup>128</sup><https://nmbny.eu/news/analytics/7079.html>

<sup>129</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belarus-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

<sup>130</sup><https://thinktanks.by/publication/2019/03/19/andrey-lyahovich-rossiya-ne-sposobna-poglotit-belarus-i-ne-budet-pytatsya-eto-sdelat.html>

<sup>131</sup><https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp3-sivitsky.pdf>

<sup>132</sup><https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468>



aspiration to take over portions of Belarus’s capability for self-defence, or for prestige-related purposes at home.

Thirdly, Belarus is indispensable for the European facet of Russia’s Eurasian integration projects. Given that the Kremlin repeatedly presented the Union State of Belarus and Russia as a model and a locomotive for the reintegration of the post-Soviet space, coercing Belarus to deeper integration would amount to Moscow admitting that Eurasian integration as a whole is nothing but an imperialistic project, and that Putin failed to achieve it by way of attraction.<sup>133</sup>

Should Russia openly destabilise or attack Belarus, other post-Soviet partners would conclude that it became a rogue country, and a threat to their own independence – after all, the CIS and CSTO treaties stipulate that member states must refrain from the use or the threat of force against one another. A Russian aggression against Belarus would likely lead to a paralysis or even the implosion of these multilateral regional organisations, with cascading negative consequences for Russia’s aspirations to control them and to showcase them as functional on the international arena.<sup>134</sup> In fact, Belarus might well use its 2020 chairmanship of both the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union for building coalitions with Central Asian and South-Caucasian members in order to deter Russia from stepping up pressure against their sovereignty.

### NATO’s dilemmas

The Russian-Belarusian alliance is developing in a very fluid and uncertain geopolitical environment. The Baltic Sea area, where latent tensions between Russia and NATO – and specifically its Baltic members – have escalated over the past decade, came to be seen as a hotspot and potential field for confrontation. While assessing the risk of a conventional attack as the most dangerous and highest priority scenario, most stakeholders consider that a more likely scenario would be that Russia combined it with subversive means (interference in domestic affairs, cyber-attacks and other “non-conventional” warfare) to try and change the regional power balance to its advantage, without risking a nuclear Armageddon.<sup>135</sup>

Geography and the imbalance of conventional forces locally are clearly to Russia’s advantage. Wargames conducted in 2015 concluded that Russia could conquer Riga and Tallinn unhampered in 30 to 60 hours.<sup>136</sup> At the early phases of a Russian aggression, for lack of warning and rapid reaction, NATO would be unable to defend its Baltic allies. In an anticipation novel published in 2016, retired British General and DSACEUR Richard Shirreff popularised the idea that the Third World war could be ignited by a Russian hybrid attack against its Baltic neighbours.<sup>137</sup> Building on NATO wargames, it tended to show that the potential for destabilising NATO would stem from Russia’s efforts to demonstrate alliance helplessness. This too argues in favour of a hybrid scenario.

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[-2346.12509](#)

<sup>133</sup><https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>

<sup>134</sup><https://thinktanks.by/publication/2019/03/19/andrey-lyahovich-rossiya-ne-sposobna-poglotit-belarus-i-ne-budet-pytatsya-eto-sdelat.html>

<sup>135</sup><https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/up->

[loads/2019/12/Mickus-and-Kuusik-The-Baltic-Risk-Landscape.pdf;https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1500/RR1577/RAND\\_RR1577.pdf](#)

<sup>136</sup>[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html)

<sup>137</sup>General Sir Richard Shirreff, 2017: *War With Russia: An Urgent Warning* from Senior Military Command, London: Coronet books, 2016.

Russia is readily using sub-conventional “active measures” against its NATO neighbours as a cheap alternative able to spark divisions within the Alliance. Any hybrid (cyber for example) attack, as long as it stays below the radar of Article 5 solidarity procedures, could give Russia time to launch a *fait accompli* seizure of small pieces of contested territory (Narva for example, or Belarus for that matter).<sup>138</sup> Pursuant of the new Russian nuclear doctrine (small nuclear strikes as a de-escalation measure), Russian strategists believe they can deter NATO from reacting, and the annexed territories would *de facto* remain under Russian control.<sup>139</sup>

If Russia intended to bridge the Suwałki gap, as several NATO scenarios have postulated, the potential justification for a military intervention would be “demanding – or establishing by subterfuge or ‘humanitarian convoys’ – a land corridor to Kaliningrad”. As Keir Giles argued, this would only happen “if [Russia] could predict, or manage, the NATO response or lack of it”.<sup>140</sup> Yet the Kremlin would also need to trust in Belarus’ cooperation. If Belarus decided, or was persuaded, to host advanced Russian air defence systems, this would greatly extend their range into NATO airspace, adding to the Kaliningrad A2/AD bubble effect<sup>141</sup> by deepening still further the isolation of the Baltic states from the NATO “mainland”.

NATO has met its Baltic members’ need for reassurance and shown resolve however: it responded to the annexation of Crimea by boosting its deterrence posture, notably in the Baltic Sea region with the deployment and rotation of

an Enhanced Forward Presence – four multinational battalions in Poland and the Baltic States. According to Lithuania’s ambassador at large for hybrid threats, Eitvydas Bajarūnas, apart from strategic decisions, NATO Crisis Management Exercises (CMX) also began to include hybrid scenarios, comprising disinformation, threats to critical infrastructure, and “grey zone” situations.<sup>142</sup> In that sense, NATO appears as preparing for all possible scenarios.

The Catch-22 problem is that Russia may “perceive actions taken by NATO as not intended to strengthen deterrence but rather to intimidate or coerce it. If [NATO] pursues an alternate policy of leaving the Baltic States visibly undefended, it might trigger war because Russia may see this as a sign of weakness and a gap to be exploited.”<sup>143</sup> In fact, as Michael Kofman put it back in 2016, “deterrence is a difficult mistress to court”, and the focus should not be “solely on those scenarios that proponents of more forces in the Baltics would prefer to deter”.<sup>144</sup> In his view “Moscow can handily demonstrate the alliance’s weakness without invasion and occupation. NATO’s problem is not the scenario RAND presented, and their prescriptions won’t fix it either”, he claimed.

Going further, one could argue that since the role of the NATO European Command has moved from reassurance to (territorial) deterrence, distrust and hostility have in fact, increased.<sup>145</sup> From a Belarusian standpoint rising military expenditure in neighbouring NATO countries is a matter of concern, as is the idea floated by Europeans of establishing a military

<sup>138</sup><http://www.alexlanoszka.com/lanoszkahunzекerssi.pdf>

<sup>139</sup><https://icds.ee/closing-natos-baltic-gap/>

<sup>140</sup><https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2017/belaruss-balancing-act-continues-minsk-fends-off-the-ukraine-option-again>

<sup>141</sup><https://sjms.nu/articles/10.31374/sjms.20/>

<sup>142</sup>[https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/NATO\\_AT\\_70\\_and\\_Baltics.pdf](https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/NATO_AT_70_and_Baltics.pdf); p. 306.

<sup>143</sup><https://securityanddefence.pl/NATO-S-DEFENCE-POLICY-DILEMMA-nIN-THE-BALTIC-STATES,103196,0,2.html>

<sup>144</sup><https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/fixing-nato-deterrence-in-the-east-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-natos-crushing-defeat-by-russia/>

<sup>145</sup>[https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_belarus\\_and\\_ukraine\\_fort\\_trump\\_accidental\\_victims](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_belarus_and_ukraine_fort_trump_accidental_victims)

Schengen, or the prospect that NATO's Defender Europe 2020 exercises will mobilise an unprecedented number of troops, over a long period (altogether, manoeuvres should spread over 6 months), nearby Belarusian borders.<sup>146</sup> These exercises undeniably give rise to nervousness in Belarus, especially under the backdrop of previous and planned US military deployments in Poland (where president Andrzej Duda dreams of a "Fort Trump"), and in Lithuania with the positioning of Abrams tanks in Pabradė.

The military activation on the Western flank of the Union State is an unpleasant surprise for Belarus, as it forces Minsk to demand more from its Russian ally in terms of security guarantees.<sup>147</sup> Lukashenka theatrically promised an "asymmetric reply", reminding quite sarcastically, that 30 tanks and 30 armoured vehicles are "a joke", compared with the Belarusian army, which counts some 1,300 T-72 tanks, of which 400 allegedly ready for modern combat. In October 2019 Lukashenka suggested that Russia and Belarus design a strong response to Defender Europe 2020 exercises. Even though Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov characterised NATO's plans as a direct breach of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, to date Moscow has left Lukashenka's appeal unanswered.<sup>148</sup>

Several Russian experts, such as Professor Alexander Tikhanskij, consider that the most welcome "joint reply" would be a reactivation of Russian plans to open a military base in Belarus<sup>149</sup>, a prospect which is taken seriously by Bel-

arusian experts, too.<sup>150</sup> Andrey Fedorov for example hypothesised that Putin offered to reply by increasing Russian military presence on Belarusian territory – and Lukashenka would again have declined.<sup>151</sup> Lukashenka's statement on 28 October 2019 that "there's no need to urge the whole world to stand up for Belarus; we can defend ourselves alone", was obviously aimed at Putin. Military expert Alexander Alesin for his part suspected that Russia could respond to Defender Europe 2020 by moving forward the Zapad 2021 exercises to the Fall 2020.<sup>152</sup> The downscaling or postponement of NATO's 2020 exercises due to the Covid-19 epidemic, make this prospect less likely however.

To picture the dilemma fully, it is worth reminding that Belarus' own posture towards NATO is an ambiguous one. Even though Lukashenka has traditionally capitalised on anti-NATO discourses, cooperation with the Alliance is up and running. Belarus was even compared to a "silent partner" for NATO within the Northern Distribution Network providing logistical support for NATO forces in Afghanistan.<sup>153</sup> Since Belarus joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1995, it has regularly participated in exchanges and training of military personnel with various NATO member states including the UK and Germany. According to Andrei Parotnikau "Belarus retains a heightened interest in multifaceted dialogues (Belarus-Poland-Ukraine-Lithuania and Belarus-Poland-USA-Ukraine), which are treated as platforms for discussing ur-

<sup>146</sup>[https://sputnik.by/defense\\_safety/20191014/1042970834/Belarus-i-Rossiya-gotovyatsya-k-neponyatnym-ucheniym-NATO.html](https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20191014/1042970834/Belarus-i-Rossiya-gotovyatsya-k-neponyatnym-ucheniym-NATO.html)

<sup>147</sup><https://www.sonar2050.org/publications/zashchitnik-ne-dlya-vseh/>

<sup>148</sup><https://bsblog.info/on-the-belarusian-russian-response-to-nato/>

<sup>149</sup><https://naviny.by/article/20191026/1572074786-amerikanskije-tanki-u-granicy-belarusi-chem-otvetit-minsk>

<sup>150</sup><https://naviny.by/article/20181116/1542391261-rossiyskoy-voennoy-bazy-v-belarusi-ne-budet-poka>

<sup>151</sup><https://naviny.by/article/20191028/1572272563-kakoy-monstr-opasnee-moskva-mozhet-vzvat-belarusi-bez-tankov>

<sup>152</sup><https://naviny.by/article/20180523/1527054699-minsk-torguetsya-za-status-zapadnogo-forposta-rossii>

<sup>153</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/silent-partner-belarus-in-natos-northern-distribution-network/>

gent regional security matters and a trust-building instrument among the parties.”<sup>154</sup> The problem, however, is that Belarus was prevented from signing an Agreement on the Security of Information with NATO, a *sine qua non* for formalising bilateral relations.

Cooperation with NATO is meant to counter-balance Belarus’ dependence on Russia, but it also serves as a reminder that Moscow should praise Minsk’s loyalty: a reorientation towards NATO, following the Ukrainian model, would add to Russia’s geostrategic and reputational dismay in the region. In this bargaining game, Lukashenka cleverly exacerbates Putin’s imperial syndrome. On 24 December 2019, in an interview to *Echo Moskvy*, the Belarusian President even said that “If Russia attempts to violate our sovereignty – you know how the world community will react. They will turn up involved in a war. The West and NATO will react because they will consider it as a threat to them, as well.”<sup>155</sup> So much so for the Russian-Belarusian alliance...

## CONCLUSIONS

The above-said calls Western decision-makers to take the Union State for no more than what it is: a very loose political union, the military dimension of which is now subject to intense bargaining too. For Minsk the Union State, as an incremental integration process, facilitated the extraction of economic benefits (Russian subsidies), but not to the extent that Lukashenka had hoped for. For Moscow, as a neo-imperialistic project, it allowed showcasing Belarus as a geopolitical ally, but Putin still expects more loyalty from Lukashenka in return for economic support.

**The Belarusian-Russian brotherhood is thus rather a fool’s deal. The notions that Belarus**

**and Russia are close strategic allies, that the Belarusian army is but an extension of the Russian Western Military district, or that Russia has already bitten off parts of Belarusian sovereignty, are in part myths which ought to be debunked.**

Belarus does not share Russia’s bellicose ambitions towards Ukraine and it succeeded in remaining neutral in the current conflict opposing Moscow and the West. Although regular exercises maintain a high level of interoperability between the two armies, and in spite of Belarus’ “alliance entrapment”, Minsk retains enough autonomy to avoid being dragged into one of Russia’s wars. In the same vein, up until now Lukashenka has resisted Russian pressure to “trade off” Belarus’ sovereignty: he declined Russia’s ultimatum to grant the Union State supranational prerogatives; Belarusian industrial assets, such as the dual-use companies that Russia ambitions to reintegrate into its own military-industrial complex, have not been sold out in exchange for credits or discounts on military equipment; as for Russia’s ambition to get a permanent military foothold on Belarusian territory, for lack of an airbase it still seems compromised – at least for now.

As long as Belarus remains independent, its leadership can refuse such security-outsourcing. Belarus has its own national security interests and military doctrine, which are incompatible with Russia’s: Belarus has not abandoned its pledge to remain a neutral, nuclear-free country, and it consistently strives to stay away from the “new Cold War” between Russia and the West. Its capacity to do so, however, is reliant on its ability to remain independent from Russia.

Marred by recurring trade wars, diplomatic scandals and mutual distrust, the Union State

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<sup>154</sup><https://belarusinfofocus.info/security-issues/minsk-aspires-expand-military-political-cooperation-europe>

<sup>155</sup><https://belsat.eu/ru/news/lukashenko-schitaet-cto->

[nato-i-zapad-zashhityat-belarus-esli-rossiya-narushit-suverenitet/](https://belsat.eu/ru/news/lukashenko-schitaet-cto-nato-i-zapad-zashhityat-belarus-esli-rossiya-narushit-suverenitet/)

project virtually hit a wall in 2019. Irreconcilable views as to the purpose and outlook of reintegration – a confederation of equals vs. a Russian absorption – should imply a further marketization of bilateral relations. Belarus' effort to resist Finlandization might not be sustainable in the long run. For lack of reforms, the country is unlikely to get credits from alternative Western sources. The diversification of its foreign economic relations, including in the field of military cooperation (with China for example), can hardly counter-balance Belarus' dependence on Russia. The economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in early 2020 will probably aggravate this vulnerability.

**Caught between a rock and a hard place – saving his “social contract” with the Belarusian people, or Belarus' sovereignty – Lukashenka, being an autocratic leader, is likely to choose the first option, which offers better chances of regime-survival.** A determining variable that should be factored in, however, is whether Belarusian civil society, which has grown more supportive of Belarusian statehood, but remains susceptible to Russian soft power influence, will be resilient enough to not succumb to “Russian World” propaganda, in case Moscow intensifies its hybrid war tactics to try and subjugate it. The evolution of Putin's appetites in the region will, in turn, depend at least partly on NATO's capacity to deter Russia from launching a “Ukraine 2.0” type of attack on Belarus.

In geostrategic terms, Russia is not interested in annexing Belarus however: as this paper reminded, Russia mostly needs Belarus as a buffer territory and possibly as a military outpost. Hence Russia will rather try to “keep the Lukashenko regime on a shorter leash and

strengthen its influence through economic dominance and the promotion of well-heeled civil society organizations.”<sup>156</sup> This choice is also dictated by the bare reality that “Russia critically depends on Belarus strategically”, as Siarhei Bohdan reminded, not only because Belarus is protecting the Russian core (Moscow and neighbouring regions), but also because “as one of Moscow's few allies, [Belarus] helps the Kremlin keep the remnants of its imperial prestige by participating in demonstrative shows of Russian strength”.<sup>157</sup> This, however, does not guarantee alliance solidarity in war times.

The very scenario that Russia and Belarus have been dreading materialised ten years ago already: the expansion and military build-up of NATO right across their borders has occurred, and the process is continuing. Running against intuitive predictions, this has not fostered greater cohesion within the Russian-Belarusian alliance however. Were Russia to launch a conventional attack on its neighbours in order to “bridge the Suwałki gap” – an option which is rather unlikely, but still dangerous enough to not be excluded *a priori* – the military alliance of Belarus and Russia would probably not overcome the intrinsic limitations that this paper has identified.

Even if Belarus and Russia demonstrate a high degree of alliance compatibility in peacetime, Alexander Lanoszka for example doubts that such policy convergence would “survive the duress of war”. What is more, he claims, “any foot-dragging shown by Lukashenka that hinders Russian military preparations can buy NATO more time”.<sup>158</sup>

Considering Belarus as an extension of Russia might be a useful assumption for NATO plann-

<sup>156</sup><https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>

<sup>157</sup><https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-new-russian->

[arms-what-minsk-has-given-in-exchange/](https://mwi.usma.edu/strategic-enabler-point-vulnerability-role-belarus-russias-military-plans/)

<sup>158</sup><https://mwi.usma.edu/strategic-enabler-point-vulnerability-role-belarus-russias-military-plans/>

ers, but this approach “risks overlooking potential opportunities” that could, in fact, benefit NATO.<sup>159</sup> Lanoszka listed these benefits in a March 2019 US Army War College publication co-authored with Michael Hunzecker. In the unlikely scenario in which Russia is preparing a large-scale conventional attack on NATO’s north-eastern flank, they posit, Belarus could “inadvertently provide early warning to NATO”, since any invasion of Lithuania or Poland would see Russian forces traverse Belarusian territory. During such a crisis Belarus could well assert its desire for neutrality, by withholding diplomatic support or delaying efforts to enhance interoperability or provide Russia with supporting forces. Although Minsk “might not derail the Kremlin’s regional ambitions”, Lanoszka argued in another policy paper, “it could still frustrate them to NATO’s benefit”.<sup>160</sup>

For this to happen, however, the Belarusian leadership – be it Lukashenka or his successor – would have to retain enough sovereign power to resist Russian attempts at vassalizing it, whether by ruse or by force. **As this paper evidenced, Belarusian statehood currently remains extremely vulnerable to both a conventional and non-linear (hybrid) type of aggression on the part of Russia. This implies that Belarus, and the institutional framework of the Union State, can still be used as a springboard for Russian expansionism in the Baltic Sea region, should the Kremlin consider this as a viable plan.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this section is to advocate a holistic, foreign policy driven and diplomatically sound approach towards Russian-Belarusian integration, which decision-makers within NATO/

EU structures and member states (notably those neighbouring on the Union State of Belarus and Russia), could readily implement for the sake of preserving peace and stability in the region.

### Recommendations for NATO neighbours

- **Incorporate Belarus in the strategic approach to regional security**

In recent years NATO has taken stock of the crucial role that Belarus would play in the event of a Russian attack targeting its “soft underbelly” in North-Eastern Europe. Since 2018, US strategists started incorporating Belarus in their scenarios, for the purpose of “signalling to Putin that the US is no longer going to ignore Belarus”<sup>161</sup>: rather than considering Belarus as a mere extension of Russia’s Western military district, they praise the role that a neutral Belarus could play for “buffering” the Baltic States and Poland against a conventional Russian attack.

A comprehensive approach to regional security should incorporate Belarus in the picture and encourage NATO to intensify contacts and cooperation with Belarus – something which Turkey and Lithuania allegedly opposed up until now. Taking into account the concerns of Baltic neighbours, the upgrading of NATO’s relations with Belarus should be done in a way that does not push Russia to respond in kind and upgrade its own military presence in, or pressure on, Belarus.

While arguably the most dangerous scenario, a frontal Russian military attack on the Baltic States – or Belarus for that matter – is also the least likely, compared with other options that Russia would probably favour (a non-conventional aggression), should tensions escalate or

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<sup>159</sup><http://www.alexlanoszka.com/lanoszkahunzeckerssi.pdf>, p. 31.

<sup>160</sup><http://www.alexlanoszka.com/LanoszkaParameters2018.pdf>; p. 84.

<sup>161</sup><https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Howard-Why-Belarus-Matters-web.pdf?x54374>, p. 23

opportunities arise.<sup>162</sup> Bearing in mind that Russia has already activated its “sharp power” capacity to try and subjugate Belarus, it would make sense for NATO to also incorporate Belarus in its strategic approach to Russian hybrid warfare.

With the establishment of a NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (in Riga) and of a joint EU/NATO European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (in Helsinki), NATO has considerably improved its capacity to assess, report and address hybrid threats in the region. A lot more can be learned from monitoring the situation in Belarus more closely. Since the Baltic States are particularly knowledgeable about Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation, they should be encouraged to systematically exchange expertise and best practices with selected Belarusian experts and stakeholders.

- **Adopt a force posture oriented towards strategic flexibility, not entrenchment**

NATO’s dilemma boils down to the fact that in beefing up its presence to contain the Russian threat and to “bridge the Baltic gap”, it unwillingly fuels Russia’s fear and narratives about an alleged NATO encirclement. This arithmetically increases Belarus’ reliance on, and commitments to, its military alliance with Russia. Given the evolution of the Russian doctrine regarding nuclear weapons – since 2000 Russia considers using limited nuclear strikes as a de-escalatory measure – one of the best strategies is to make decisions that afford the most opportunities for managing escalation dynamics. “Place too many units in the Baltics and NATO creates a vulnerability that Russian leaders will be forced to redress”, Michael Kofman warned back in 2016.<sup>163</sup> Hence his recommendation to favour strategic

flexibility, and avoid entrenchment when addressing NATO’s north-Eastern flank dilemmas.

Adjusting NATO’s crisis management system to the realities of the Russian-Belarusian “alliance” means preparing for a conflict-escalation in which Russia would malignly use Belarus as a proxy. Therefore, it is crucially important for Baltic neighbours and Poland to review and update the agreements on confidence and security-building measures that they have signed with Belarus in the early 2000s. This would buy time in the event of an incident that Belarus is not responsible for.

If Russia were to move to attack the Baltic countries using Belarus as an outpost, then NATO should be prepared to escalate horizontally by striking military targets within Belarus. However if Russia is clearly *forcing* Belarus to align and coercing it to play the role of a wartime partner, “then such horizontal escalation might not be as diplomatically palatable as before”: according to Alexander Lanoszka, NATO could even “exploit such friction so as to divide the two allies and to impose further costs on Russia”.<sup>164</sup> A flexible and agile NATO should also display internal cohesion on such issues.

- **Defend the independence of Belarus as a sovereign nation-state**

For the sake of credibility, Western diplomats should readily make it clear that any coercive limitation of Belarusian sovereignty would amount to an act of aggression in the eyes of the international community. This would send a strong signal to President Lukashenka, who has indirectly been calling for such help. NATO neighbours of Belarus should be advised to use all possible diplomatic channels, including Belarus’ probable accession to the WTO in the near future, to enhance the country’s resilience

<sup>162</sup><http://www.alexlanoszka.com/lanoszkahunze-kerssi.pdf>, p. 66.

<sup>163</sup><https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/fixing-nato-deterrence-in-the-east-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying->

<and-love-natos-crushing-defeat-by-russia/>

<sup>164</sup><https://mwi.usma.edu/strategic-enabler-point-vulnerability-role-belarus-russias-military-plans/>

against Russian encroachments on its sovereignty.

Supporting Belarus' international actorness is not void of risks, however. Russia's resistance and counter-reaction to such moves are guaranteed. Another, ethical problem is that unconditionally supporting Belarus' statehood risks granting Lukashenka's authoritarian regime undue external legitimisation. Geopolitical concerns and pragmatic approaches fare ill with the promotion of democratic values unfortunately. Considering Lukashenka as the guarantor of Belarusian independence should not downplay the fact that he is also a recidivist human rights violator.

In recent years Belarus has upgraded its level of cooperation with UN human rights review mechanisms and it even hinted that it might adopt a moratorium on death penalty, a step which would open the door to the Council of Europe, and greatly improve Belarus' chances of normalising and formalising its relations with the EU. While Western diplomats should be advised to show caution and stick to principles before engaging with Lukashenka, they should acknowledge and encourage whatever progress on the road to liberalisation that the Belarusian authorities will embark on. Even though distributing promises of reforms that he never holds is a trademark of Lukashenka's "dictaploacy", there are people within the elite and the State administration who know that building support for Belarus' sovereignty cannot afford the economy of genuine reforms.

- **Support Belarusian aspirations to neutrality**

Vladimir Socor was among the first to stress, back in 2015, the shared interest of Belarus and its Western neighbours to "uphold Belarus's *de*

*facto* neutrality against any further erosion".<sup>165</sup> Whereas NATO is not in a position to provide Belarus reassurance measures, Belarus shares with neighbouring NATO members similar goals – preserving peace on the European continent, while also defending their territorial integrity against Russian revisionist ambitions.

This inspired Glen E. Howard a comparison: in his view, Lukashenka could become another Tito, making Belarus play for the region a role similar to that of Yugoslavia during the Cold War. In its effort to balance its relations with Russia and the West, the Belarusian leadership is walking a tightrope, however. "Belarus will not take the Baltic nationalist path and go for a clean break in relations with Moscow", Howard admitted: it will adhere to a "distinct Belarusian path in its ties to Russia unless Putin forces the issue and demands that Minsk accept an 'either you are with us or against us' approach."<sup>166</sup>

Escaping this ultimatum requires that Belarus' neutrality gained international recognition and support. For now, Belarus' neutrality appears as situational, and thus lacks credibility. Western partners should encourage Belarus to upholding the neutrality pledge enshrined in its Constitution, and continue acknowledging Belarusian efforts at remaining neutral in the ongoing Ukrainian conflict. Finland, another formally neutral neighbour of Russia, could share with Belarus its own experience of "deterrence by cooperation", which illustrates how good-neighbourly relations with Russia and neutrality can accommodate closer cooperation with NATO.<sup>167</sup>

- **Support Belarus' ambitions as a bridge-builder in Europe**

Conflict-avoidance is a clear and deeply-rooted priority of Belarusian foreign policy, and Belarus has consistently demonstrated its desire to

<sup>165</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/bringing-belarus-back-in-from-the-cold-part-three/>

<sup>166</sup><https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Howard-Why-Belarus-Matters->

<web.pdf?x54374>, p. 19

<sup>167</sup><https://www.cairn.info/revue-strategique-2019-1-page-329.htm>



stay away from “others’ wars”. This has not been an easy task, given Russia’s own demands for alignment. The international community can assist Belarus in taking Lukashenka to his word, and encourage more active neutrality and good offices initiatives from Minsk.

This can take two complementary directions: firstly, responding positively to Minsk’s 2018 initiative to host “Helsinki-2” talks over the future of security and cooperation in Europe. Supporting Belarus’ aspirations to act as a bridge-builder in the region could well consolidate the country’s independence, while also offering a platform for Russia and the West to address and hopefully solve some of their disagreements. Secondly, as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Belarus is also a legitimate broker in future arms control negotiations. Several of the treaties limiting armaments have recently expired, were suspended (INF Treaty) or will expire soon (new START), creating a situation prone to a new arms race between the United States and Russia. The deployment of conventional or nuclear forces in Belarus would not only violate its CFE treaty obligations: it would augment the risk of a military escalation in the region.<sup>168</sup>

### **Recommendation for the EU’s Eastern Partnership instruments**

- **Stick with democratic principles while (re-)engaging with Belarus and Russia**

Several voices have been heard over the past decade that advocated adopting a more pragmatic approach towards the EU’s Eastern Partners and Russia. In the process, however, the risk has grown for the European Union and its member states to downgrade a number of

founding principles and democratic norms expected to guide their foreign and neighbourhood policies. While awareness has risen about the authoritarian features and “rogueness” of these countries in international affairs, some free-riders in the West have nonetheless argued in favour of more tolerance towards these regimes. Staying true to its own democratic values, the EU should, in fact, stick with a principled approach when dealing with them. The unique might of the EU’s normative power in international affairs lies in its willingness and capacity to promote democratic reforms, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and to contribute to good-neighbourhood relations and peaceful conflict-resolution. Democratic conditionality should remain a cornerstone of its international policies, and cooperation with neighbouring countries be geared towards sustaining democratic peace.

- **Encourage structural economic reforms in Belarus**

Whereas Putin’s Russia appears as impermeable to European democratising influence, in the case of Belarus the EU’s Eastern Partnership policies still have a potential to encourage positive change in order for the country to embrace European values – possibly once it enters a post-Lukashenka era however. Belarus has been the source of much frustration for Western democracy-promoters in general, and for the EU in particular, over the past 25 years. Yet neither the Lukashenka regime nor Belarusian society is as monolithic as is customarily assumed. In fact, drawn into an impasse and recession, the Belarusian economy now seems ripe for reforms. Many Belarusians, including within the bureau-

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<sup>168</sup>[https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieeurope/81209?utm\\_source=rssemail&utm\\_medium=email&mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiT1RZeU5XSTRa-VEU1TTJVdylsInQiOiI4dWxGNUlmlUl-REa1h0YnArK05RQW9LejRpZjJZKytkSzITTE9XNnVvR2p5Z](https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieeurope/81209?utm_source=rssemail&utm_medium=email&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiT1RZeU5XSTRa-VEU1TTJVdylsInQiOiI4dWxGNUlmlUl-REa1h0YnArK05RQW9LejRpZjJZKytkSzITTE9XNnVvR2p5Z)

[VJIS3NcL1wvaUZi-ajB5N2dLejVWYXRvV1VFS1RtcFZqWUJmVDQ3d21tRG1yYUNNTIlvQitaWkRncWl-RRUlpVjdhbzVtOGRpUE1NNm1yaEhIQkJLbUo3In0%3D](https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieeurope/81209?utm_source=rssemail&utm_medium=email&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiT1RZeU5XSTRa-VEU1TTJVdylsInQiOiI4dWxGNUlmlUl-REa1h0YnArK05RQW9LejRpZjJZKytkSzITTE9XNnVvR2p5Z)

cracy, start to believe that liberalising the economy is the only way to immunise Belarus against the threat of a Russian absorption (whether forceful, or by way of ruse, as could happen if Russia offered to “rescue” Belarus from bankrupt for example). The EU should stand ready to provide technical and financial support for structural economic reforms as soon as a genuine intention to implement them emerges. Relaunching the negotiation of a framework bilateral agreement (Belarus has no Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU) could incentivise reforms; so could the prospect of opening up much needed access to Western credits and markets for Belarus, and of helping private business develop in and with the country.

- **Beef up and share the EU’s self-defence instruments against Russian disinformation**

The EU has adequately beefed up its capacity to identify and debunk Russian disinformation, notably since the EEAS established an East Strat-Com Task Force, the flagship project of which, EUvsDisinfo, has contributed since 2015 to raise awareness of the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns which affect the EU, its member states, and their neighbours. Increasing the outreach of its Disinformation Review in Eastern Partnership countries would contribute to shielding them from the malign influence of Russian propaganda and fake news. This would be extremely useful in Belarus, where analysts and journalists who have knowledge about Russian disinformation still have a limited capacity to reach out to potential audiences. While continuing support for alternative TV and internet TV channels such as Poland-based BelSat, the EU should invest in funding initiatives that enhance the resilience and impact of independent journalists in Belarus proper. The Baltic and Nordic States

could contribute by including Belarus more systematically in their own monitoring system of Russian hybrid threats, and sharing their expertise and methodology in the fight against disinformation.

- **Building resilience of Belarusian civil society: focus on media-awareness**

Hybrid strategies traditionally focus on societal vulnerabilities, which points to the importance of civilian resilience for deterring a hybrid Russian attack. Hence efforts should be targeted on building resilience of Belarusian civil society too, including by investing in enhancing civil consciousness and media-awareness.

This can be done at various levels, relying on low-key, symbolic measures (e. g. supporting “soft Belarusianisation”) to taking more proactive steps aimed at ensuring that pro-Western views gain a foothold in the information sphere. This implies supporting independent journalists and bloggers more, and reacting faster when the Belarusian authorities resume harassing them and limits their freedom of expression. In light of the intensification of Russian disinformation warfare, Western efforts should be oriented towards “new” and Belarophilic media. Since Russia started integrating Belarus in a hybrid manner, attention should turn to cyber-space and social media to create a lasting impact, notably on youth.<sup>169</sup>

- **Aim at a reconciliation between Lithuania and Belarus**

In the absence of a “reset” between Vilnius and Minsk, several of the steps recommended above will remain impossible to undertake.

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<sup>169</sup><https://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/12/05/the-renaissance-of-russia-belarus-relations/>

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As a Belarus expert, over the past decade Dr. Marin cooperated with several European think tanks, notably the Helsinki-based Finnish Institute of International Affairs (2011-2014), the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW, Warsaw), the Estonian Centre for Eastern Partnership (Tallinn) and the EU Institute for Security Studies (ISS, Paris). She has published extensively on Belarusian foreign and domestic policies, on Eurasian integration as well as on the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood policies. She also contributed policy papers and recommendations for various European governments and institutions, such as the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament (AFET) and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. Since November 2018 she holds the *pro bono* mandate of UN Special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

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